Culture, Migration, and Sport: A Bi-National Investigation of Southern Mexican Migrant Communities in Oaxaca, Mexico and Los Angeles, California

Dissertation

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Abstract

My dissertation focuses on the relationship of sport and community building. In Los Angeles, CA and Oaxaca, Mexico the cultural practice of basketball is a productive social tool that is used to enhance community relationships. This research starts with individual identity (micro) and the cultural motivations that relate to communities in Los Angeles and Oaxaca. I begin with an individual perspective to discuss the impact of prime cultural motivations on larger social processes (transnational, migration, globalization, etc). I used traditional anthropological methods (ethnography, participant observation, visual data collection) to examine the sport of Oaxacan basketball in Los Angeles and Oaxaca. Through an iterative process data was collected from 2007-2011 to develop an ethnographic account of Oaxacan basketball in Los Angeles and Oaxaca. Results from the data show that basketball in Oaxaca is a rich cultural tradition that has a significant history that pre-dates the “modern” explosion of sport during the last 25 years. I will discuss ethnographic and visual data to support my conclusion that Oaxacan basketball is a cultural sport with transnational and global outcomes. This research contributes to theoretical models of migration, sport, and identity by focusing on cultural practices. Keywords: Sports, Community, Oaxaca, California, Identity.
Dedication

This is for my parents:

Anselmo “Sam” Rios Jr. and Maria Christina Ramirez Rios.
Acknowledgments

I want to thank my parents for their support and dedication to my education. They put my education before anything else and for that I am forever grateful. Olivia and Tony inspire me every day and I love them dearly. I never would have made it this far without the motivational push from Dr. Ramona Perez. She is the best. I also would like to thank Dr. Jeffrey Cohen for taking me under his wing and dedicating his time to help me become a scholar. Thank you to my committee Dr. Reanne Frank, Dr. Morgan Liu, and Dr. Anna Willow for your time and guidance. I want to thank my colleague A. Russell Jerry for looking over portions of this paper. Thank you LeRoi, Big D, Mike, Wolf Pack, Garbiel, Jill, Robin, Kellee, Karla, Aldo, Cesar, Luna’s, and everyone else who helped me on this journey. O-H-I-O
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Chapter 1: Basketból Oaxaqueño

**Introduction**

This story is about basketball in Los Angeles, California and Oaxaca, Mexico. It’s about watching basketball, playing basketball, visiting basketball courts, and talking with basketball players and fans. I have studied basketball in Los Angeles and Oaxaca since 2004 and through the years I have developed close relationships with community organizers, journalists, players and their families. These relationships enable me to write about cultural themes that extend beyond the basketball court. This dissertation will take the reader on an anthropological journey through sports and my research on the place of basketball for Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles. I begin with the development of my research project and my interactions with Oaxaqueños and it end with a depiction of Oaxacan basketball from an observational and personal perspective. I use the terms “Oaxaqueño” and “Oaxacan” for specific reasons. When I refer to Oaxaqueño I am talking about people and players in the moment and as the makers of their cultural identity. Oaxacan, on the other hand, defines a population, place and a style of play. In other words, I am defining Oaxacan basketball versus Oaxaqueños, who are basketball players. I’ve chosen to write in a narrative style that mimics the journey I have taken through this project. I will incorporate theory and my research methods to provide you with a critical understanding of Oaxacan basketball in Los Angeles, California and Oaxaca, Mexico.
In this dissertation I describe how sports can be used as a research tool to describe culture. I argue that focusing on the individual in the identity creation process provides insight into cultural practices. In this case I use sports as a central focus to examine how Oaxacans create themselves and their identities. Leisure activities including basketball have received little attention in anthropology. My work shows the advantages when we combine a discussion of sports with traditional anthropological theories and methods. In anthropology the cultural analysis of social phenomena like religion, politics, and even food have received a lot of attention (for example, see Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Mintz 1985, 1986). Some anthropologists have discussed the role of “games” and “play” in culture (Geertz, 1972; Sutton-Smith, 2001; Turner, 1986), but few have captured the impact leisure activities such as sports have on cultural systems (Dyck, 2000; Sands, 2002). The dissertation builds on sports research and contributes to anthropological theory and methods.

**Organization**

Chapter 1 is an account of basketball in the sierra region of Oaxaca, Mexico and my experience as I entered my field sites for the first time. Chapter 2 describes the history of sports in North American and the impact sports like basketball have on development Mexico and Latin America. I also explore how sport fits in anthropology as a discipline. Chapter 3 explains my thoughts and struggles with the ethnographic process; and explains my journey with Oaxacan basketball and the individuals that made it possible. Chapter 4 is a critical analysis of Oaxacan basketball from a researcher and participant observational perspective; as a former player and aspiring researcher the complexities that resulted from participant observation are beneficial to understanding
my research. Chapter 5 revisits questions about culture, migration, and transnational processes. I use this chapter as an opportunity to use my research and build on theoretical discussions surrounding sports research and transnational studies.

**Lola y Eliana Feliz**

In the summer of 2009, I was conducting fieldwork in Los Angeles, CA. I was helping my friend Gabriel Martinez with the audio equipment for Oaxacan basketball tournaments. In Los Angeles, February to October is basketball tournament season. Different communities from the central valley and sierra regions of Oaxaca organize basketball tournaments in Los Angeles at several locations on the weekends. Each community establishes a committee similar to a home town association (Migration Policy Institute, 2007). These committees organize the basketball tournament and other fundraisers. Basketball tournaments are only played on the weekends, so one tournament can span 2-4 weeks depending on the number of teams participating. Gabriel was helping the tournament organizers with the “play by play” during games at Toberman Park (see Figure 1). Toberman Park is located in central Los Angeles near the 101 and 10 freeways.

I was helping Gabriel and the other tournament organizers load and unload audio equipment. For most of the summer I was a “roadie” for the basketball tournaments. I assisted with any technical problems and gathered game statistics for Gabriel to use during the games. We were not paid for the work but the organizers fed us a meal every Sunday, it was enough to satisfy my hungry nature. Toward the end of the summer I met one of the tournament players, a young woman named Lola Feliz, and she became my good friend and “family.”
On one Sunday while I helped Gabriel, I was asked to assist with a small project. When I returned Gabriel was talking to Lola Feliz. Lola attended California State University Long Beach where she majored in journalism. Gabriel had worked as a freelance journalist for years and one of the tournament organizers suggested that he and Lola meet. Gabriel talked about the business of journalism and the obstacles he experienced. He explained that journalism was a difficult business to get into, but suggested she maintain a high work ethic and made friends with the right people. I arrived in the middle of the conversation and listened. Turning to Lola and I, Gabriel asked if we had met before and introduced me. This was the start of our friendship and while Lola might not remember our first encounter, I recall it very well.

*Figure 1. Toberman Park in Los Angeles, California 2009.*

Lola meet. Gabriel talked about the business of journalism and the obstacles he experienced. He explained that journalism was a difficult business to get into, but suggested she maintain a high work ethic and made friends with the right people. I arrived in the middle of the conversation and listened. Turning to Lola and I, Gabriel asked if we had met before and introduced me. This was the start of our friendship and while Lola might not remember our first encounter, I recall it very well.
Gabriel and Lola were speaking in Spanish and he introduced me and explained that I was studying Oaxacan basketball in Los Angeles, CA. Lola and I spoke with each other for a short while and went through the typical student conversation: Where do you go to school? What do you study? When are you graduating? I asked Lola if we could speak English saying “Hablo en Espanol, pero feo” (I speak Spanish, but its ugly). Lola had a good laugh and told me “I spoke well enough to understand.” We talked about life and where she was from in Los Angeles. I soon discovered that many of the sierra Oaxaqueño families lived in the Pasadena, Arcadia, Monrovia, and El Monte areas of Los Angeles. I explained to Lola that my sister lived close to her in South Pasadena and she attended graduate school at California State University Los Angeles. I lived with my sister for the summer so we exchanged contact information and decided to stay in contact.

Over the next few weeks Lola and I talked over the phone. I asked her a lot of questions about life, basketball and school. I asked her if I could interview her for my project and she agreed. Lola invited me to her house and we planned on going to a nearby coffee shop to talk. Lola lived near my sister’s house so we decided to meet during the week in the early evening. I arrived at Lola’s house and met her mother and father. We sat in their living room and I explained my research to her parents. Lola’s parents were warm and charming and they were genuinely interested in my work. We talked about Oaxaca and I explained to them that I had visited many parts of Oaxaca but not the sierra region. Lola’s parents were shocked when I told them I studied Mixteco, an indigenous Oaxacan language. I asked them if they spoke Zapoteco in addition to Spanish and they told me that while they could understand the language they not good speakers. I joked
with them saying “Como, cuando hablando en espanol?” and we all had a good laugh.

Lola, her parents and I talked for a good hour about Oaxaca, school, and life in Los Angeles. They seemed very interested in my studies and her father was very interested in my intentions with his daughter. The one questions I always get from subjects when discussing my work is “por que Oaxaca?” (Why Oaxaca?) My response is usually a lengthy narrative about books and visits I have made to Oaxaca, Lola’s parents were fascinated about my knowledge of their culture and home state. Later in the evening Lola asked her father if we could go to a nearby coffee shop and he agreed but with the promise would not return late. I assured her father that we were going to conduct some school-work and Lola was helping me, but I knew you can only convince a father so much even if it’s the truth.

On the way to the coffee shop I told Lola that I needed her help with questions for an interview with a magazine in Chicago. I had been contacted by a journalist in Chicago who discovered my work and wanted to know more about the Oaxacan tournaments in Los Angeles. Lola was glad to help even though she was a little shocked that some person in Chicago wanted to know about Oaxacans and basketball in Los Angeles. We talked about her involvement with basketball and the team she played on with her cousins. Lola was not the greatest basketball player but her cousins and uncle encouraged her to play. Lola told me that basketball was not her favorite sport but it was something to do with her extended family and it was good exercise. Later we answered the questions from the journalist. We left the coffee shop and I dropped Lola off at her house and we agreed to get coffee again and complete the interview we had planned. For the remainder of the summer Lola and I spent time at coffee shops, farmers markets, basketball
tournaments, and various places in Long Beach, CA where she went to school. Lola invited me to family parties; celebrations and I frequently attended community functions.

I began going to the park with Lola to watch her team practice. Her uncle Andres Sol was the coach of her team and her cousins all played on the team. Andres’ two daughters Celia and Loren were very good athletes and they were some of the better players on the team. I attended many practices with Lola and she introduced me to her teammates and extended family. Eventually I started to play with Lola and her cousins in pick-up games at the park. Andres noticed my basketball skills and asked me to play with him on the men’s team. I played basketball in High School and assist my brothers who are both High School coaches in my hometown, so my skills and knowledge of the game caught Andres’ attention. Andres, his brother and other members from his community called Comogocho all played on the same team. Comogocho is a small town in the sierra region of Oaxaca with a total population of 575 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [INEGI], 2010a, 2010b). I started to play twice a week with Andres and my new team to prepare for one of the upcoming tournaments. The only problem was that I had to visit Oaxaca before returning to Columbus for the fall term. I arranged to travel in the spring and could not change my travel plans but I was able to play my first tournament game. Before I left on my trip to Oaxaca I talked to Lola and asked her if it would possible to visit her mother and uncle’s town of Comogocho. Lola talked to her mom and arranged for me to stay with her aunt Eliana in Comogocho. After my travel plans were set I had my last basketball practice with the team. I told Lola and her extended family that I could take things to Oaxaca for them. Andres joked and asked if I could take a bag full of money for him. I told them that I would stop by Lola’s house the
following morning and pick up any cards, letters or small packages that they would like
to send. They all thanked me for the offer and I told Andres that I would be back the
following spring and summer to play. The next morning I stopped by Lola’s house and
her mother gave me a bundle of cards to give to various family members in Comogocho.
I told her that I would guard the cards with my life and I would make sure they would get
to their rightful owners. Lola gave me a letter to give to her grandfather and she told me
that she missed him a lot and to make sure he received it, so I assured her that he would
get the letter and everything it contained. I left Lola’s house with a handful of letters and
I felt like it was a mission or a chance to prove to Lola and her family that I was serious
about my work and my dedication to the larger Oaxacan community.

Bank Shot

I approached this research project with a unique focus that follows Oaxacan
basketball from Los Angeles, California to Comogocho, Oaxaca. Many studies that
examine Oaxacan culture focus on the transmission of culture from sending communities
in Mexico to destinations in the US (Kearney, 2000; Norget, 2006; R. Smith, 2006;
Stephen, 2007; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Qin-Hilliard, 2005). I build on these
previous studies by examining the transmission of culture in the opposite direction;
following the cultural production of Oaxacan basketball in Los Angeles, California to the
sierra region of Oaxaca, Mexico. Like a bank shot in the sport of basketball this research
approach is not typical for Oaxacan studies, but it builds on previous research that
examine transnational migration and culture (Basch, Szanton Blanc, & Schiller, 2006;
Cohen, Gijón-Cruz, Reyes-Morales, & Chick, 2003; Cohen, Rios, & Byers, 2009; Faist,
2000a; Levitt, 2002; Massey, Goldring, & Durand, 1994; Vertovec, 1999). I focus on
basketball in Los Angeles to determine its use by community members as a social tool to
maintain cohesiveness in the group, but my research was interested in how basketball
creates culture locally and produces cultural change internationally.

In Streets, Bedrooms, and Patios: The Ordinariness of Diversity in Urban Oaxaca, Higgins and Coe (2000) met with their informants in public and private settings to follow their dynamic construction of social settings and develop a sense of how the urban poor create identity. Another Oaxacan scholar Michael Kearney (1996) described his interactions with informants as a personal process; much of his interactions with informants occurred around his kitchen table as he explored the creation of identity. Using Higgins and Kearney’s approach as a foundation I started my ethnographic research and found many of my informants on public basketball courts in Los Angeles, California; Comogocho, Oaxaca; and Brookstone, New Jersey. From the courts we moved our conversations and interviews onto patios and into households and around kitchen tables. These conversations and interviews were central to my research and the analysis of transnational social networks. My relationship with Lola Feliz and her family provided me with the necessary social network to carry out this research project. Lola and her extended family love the sport of basketball and some travel to Comogocho to play in big tournaments. Most traditional ethnographies in anthropology follow a protocol where researchers head to a small rural town and establish subjects to work with, but I chose to establish a working relationship with Lola and her extended family through basketball and follow their family’s migration experience back to Comogocho. I established a close relationship with Lola and her extended family in Los Angeles and followed basketball to
Comogocho. The direction of my research provided me with the opportunity to visit Comogocho and experience a sending community from a different viewpoint.

There is no single model that defines the transnational relationships of people and goods. Some scholars discussed transnational relationships as a social network that span borders and spaces (Honda-gneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Kearney, 2000; Ortiz, 2005; Stephen, 2007); others have examined it from a micro-level (Smith, 2005a, 2006) or meso-level (Faist, 2010). My research can be applied to transnationalism in its many forms, as I cover the cultural production of basketball and its role in identity creation for Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles, California. I started with basketball in Los Angeles, California and followed its cultural outcomes to Comogocho, Oaxaca. I received permission to visit the town of Comogocho from Lola’s mother. Lola nor her mother had been to Comogocho for over ten years, so Lola made arrangements for me to stay with a family friend during my visit. Although I had spent a significant amount of time in Oaxaca before my trip to Comogocho the sierra region was uncharted territory for me. My research was systematic and I used the ethnographic method to follow the cultural production of basketball and its outcomes. I test the production of culture through basketball to show how sports can be used in an anthropological framework. Similar to some scholars (Cohen, 2004; Cohen & Sirkeci, 2011; Paerregaard, 2008) I show how culture is created in a migrant setting and why there are transnational outcomes.

The culture of Oaxacan basketball is a place where identity is produced and reproduced, so I followed these cultural outcomes starting with parks in Los Angeles to community courts in Oaxaca. I systematically kept basketball as a central focal point throughout my research and let the cultural outcomes provide data for future research.
questions. My research questions grew and became more detailed as the research grew in Los Angeles and Comogocho, but the central focus of basketball and cultural transmissions from Los Angeles to Comogocho remained constant. I thought I had everything figured out when I packed my bags for Comogocho, but part of fieldwork is the unexpected.

A Ride Up the Mountain

In the summer of 2009 I took my first trip to the sierra region of Oaxaca. Two mountain ranges called the sierra Juárez and the sierra Madre divide the sierra norte region of Oaxaca. I was excited to visit the sierra Juárez region and I looked forward to new experiences in Comogocho. I did not make any intense fieldwork preparation, nothing more than looking at some maps and I regretted that decision. After spending time with some friends in Oaxaca City I decided the bus was the best possible form of travel to the sierra. In Oaxaca I had traveled first class, second class, and “pray for me” class buses since 2005. I decided the first class bus (ADO) was the best choice and I headed to the first class bus station. I entered the air-conditioned station and after waiting patiently in line the ticket agent said to me “No hay un autobus porque los maestros” (There were no buses today because of the teachers). Teachers from Oaxaca gather in the city every year to protest against injustice in education. How did I not plan for this? As anthropologists we continuously visit our field-site and learn the subtleties of life in a specific area. After five years of research in Oaxaca I thought I was prepared for almost

1 I use the term “pray for me” loosely. It describes the bus with elaborate religious items inside and sometimes small alters near the driver.

2 Autobuses de Oriente (ADO) is Mexico’s primer bus system and is usually frequented by tourists and middle to upper class Mexicanos.
anything. How was I this naïve? From previous experiences in Oaxaca I knew that the teacher unions strike, march and create traffic blocks in the city during the summer\(^3\). This time I was not prepared for the *bloqueo* (blockade). I asked the ticket agent if there was another route to any of the nearby sierra towns and she did not have an answer. I was supposed to meet Lola’s aunt in Comogocho the same day. I had never been to the sierra region of Oaxaca and I had no idea if there were other alternative transportation. I slowly walked out of the first class bus station, my mind racing and searching for an alternative. I was confused and had the anxious feelings of unknown territory that quickly turned into fear. I thought about calling Lola’s aunt but only had the number to the town’s *municipio* (government building). I was almost ready to give up on my trip when a man called to me “*Oye joven necesitas un taxi?*” (Hey kid do you need a taxi?). At first I declined the offer to the taxi driver because I had no idea where I was going (at that point Comogocho was just a dot on a map to me). I thought about what I was going to do because I had told Lola’s aunt I would be there in the afternoon. Eventually I mustered up the courage to just go to Comogocho in a taxi. I grabbed the taxi driver’s attention and asked him how much it would cost to the sierra town of Ixtlan. After bargaining we settled on 400 pesos. I marched down the street to the nearest bank and pulled out a wad of cash and quickly returned to the taxi and said *vamos jefe* (let’s go boss). He opened the trunk for me and I threw in my bags then jumped in the back seat. Before we left I overheard the driver talking to another taxis driver on possible routes to get around the *bloqueo* and that made

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\(^3\) During my summer research in 2006 the teachers’ strikes escalated to malicious acts of violence. The political, economic, and social effects were lasted long after the strikes and marches ended (Cohen 2007).
me even more nervous. My 400 pesos was either going to get me a ride to Ixtlan or a night spent outside in Sierra Juarez. But I was committed to my research and fully engrossed, so I took my chances with only a little hesitation.

The taxi took around an hour to make it to highway 175, the two lane road that leads up and into the Sierra. The highway through the mountains is a horrible road full of curves and bends. Leaving the city we drove through the mountains and the sun was bright and the light painted the mountains and valleys for miles. During the ride I saw exit signs for towns that I recognized from Los Angeles. The taxi driver and I talked about the city of Oaxaca and I explained to him my research and reasons on visiting the Sierra region.

The taxi driver asked why I wanted to visit the Sierra. I explained that my research involved Oaxacan communities in Los Angeles and their villages in the Sierra and the driver simply stated “Si pero hay gimnasios aya en el centro, mas bonito y mas cosas…” (Yes, but there’s gyms in the city, much better). As we approached Ixtlan the taxi driver asked for directions to the collectivos that would take me to Comogocho. He asked me if I would like to continue on to the town for an extra charge so I didn’t have to wait. I agreed and we settled on a price, but before we continued to the town the driver wanted to change the brakes on his car. He suggested that I eat something and meet him at the nearby auto place. I was interested in his ideas of the Sierra and wanted to know more about his perceptions. I suggested that I would just wait with him and go to the car repair shop. We arrived at the repair shop and the mechanics and driver negotiated a price for the job. The driver and mechanics chatted for a bit about the weather and difference between the Oaxaca city and the Sierra. The mechanic eventually asked the city taxi
driver why he was up in the sierra because he usually doesn’t see taxis from the city in the sierra. The driver said “El joven quiere pasar un pueblito se llama Comogocho, y los pinche maestros tienen un bloque en el centro…” (The kid wants to go by a town called Comogocho and the fucking teachers have a strike in the city). The conversation quickly turned to work and how difficult it was to make money in the current political climate. I used the conversation as an opportunity to talk about Comogocho. I wanted to get an idea of the social dynamics that existed between the Oaxaqueños from the city and those from the sierra.

I asked the taxi driver if the teacher strikes affected his work, and what he thought about the teachers. The driver said the teachers strike every year and they cost the city money; they take up the streets and nobody wants to visit or use the taxis; they ask for more money every year but they are never satisfied. We talked about the quality of education in the city versus the rural regions in Oaxaca. We approached the small town and turned into the village’s entrance. Comogocho is on the side of a steep hill; the driver started cursing about the road, the hill, and why anyone would want to live on the side of a mountain. He continued, “Hay dios mio, este es pobre no?” (My god, this is sad, right?). I replied that I didn’t think it was sad but it was just another way of life. We drove slowly down the mountain until we arrived at the basketball courts. The driver dropped me off, unloaded my bags and wished me luck. I paid the driver, we shook hands and he looked relieved to be leaving the sierra and said “Nos vemos en el centro” (See you around the City) and I replied “Si nos vemos, gracias” (Yes, see you around, thank you). I had experienced social inequality between Oaxacans from the city and sierra (Murphy & Stepick, 1991). My hours spent with the taxi driver provided a lesson on the
regional difference between the city and sierra. This was my first visit to Comogocho and my first impression of the town was influenced by the conversation in the taxi. I asked myself “why do some people leave while others stay?” The experience of traveling to Comogocho effected my interpretations and frameworks for understanding migration. The taxi driver left and I walked across the basketball court. I smiled and imagined myself playing in front of the town and I even took an imaginary game winning three points shot and mumbled to myself “for three… and it’s good!” As I approached the municipio (government building) to introduce myself to the presidente (president) I was nervous, not only was I coming from the city (everyone saw the taxi driving through town and it blew my cover) but I was also a Chicano from California with no familial ties to the town and I was an anthropologist with a research agenda.

**Arriving in Comogocho, Oaxaca**

I had visited numerous towns in the Mixteco region of Oaxaca before my trip to Comogocho. I knew that the correct thing to do when entering a town for the first time is to visit the municipio and introduce yourself. I had arrived in the late afternoon and walked up the stairs to the governmental offices where I saw some men standing. I introduced myself and asked if the president was inside. The men responded with curious looks, they said he was not in and if I had a specific question to ask. I explained to the men that I was there to visit the town, play some basketball and take some pictures. The three men looked very confused and asked me again whom I knew in the town, who I

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4 I took a summer course in Oaxaca to study the indigenous language Mixteco. We visited many towns in the Mixteco region and our teacher explained to us that when visiting a town for the first time you should always visit the municipio, introduce yourself and explain your reasons for visiting, and ask the president for permission to visit. Typically we conducted this activity in mixteco which was part of our intense language training.
was related to and who told me to visit. This was a nerve racking experience. I was in the middle of nowhere and it was late in the afternoon. If I was asked to leave I had no idea where to go or how to get back to Ixtlan where there might have been a hotel. I was nervous, my Spanish skills diminished and I felt like I was under interrogation, but I learned that the men were really interested about my visit. I mentioned Lola’s aunt Eliana and they were interested in my relationship to the family. I explained to the men that I had not met her before and that it was my first time in the town, but they repeatedly asked this question *Si, pero si no conoces alguien aca porque llegas?* (Yes, but you don’t know anybody here, why are you here?). I repeatedly tried to explain why I was in the village, but it was difficult. I decided to explain my social network in Los Angeles as a way to show my reasons for being in the village. I used my connections to Lola and hopes of meeting Eliana to give the men an idea about why I was in their town and my interest in Oaxacan basketball.

I explained that I was a student, an anthropologist and studied the sport of basketball. I told the men I had watched the tournaments in Los Angeles since 2004 and was working with my friend Gabriel Martinez on various projects about Oaxacan basketball. Then, I explained how I met Lola and her family in Los Angeles. I told the men Lola’s parents were from Comogocho and said her full name “Maria Flor Feliz.” An older man named Pedro smiled at me with a surprised look on his face and said “ehhh, *Lola! Se conoce Lola.*” I mentioned Lola’s uncle Jesus Flor who still lived in the town and the men all nodded. The lines of a mental kinship chart were coming together. Then I mentioned the señoras name again “Eliana” and explained that she was Lola’s aunt and I was supposed to stay with her. Pedro spoke again “ah huh, *porque Eliana vivió con Lola*
en Los Angeles.” All the men seemed convinced that I had some sort of established relationship with somebody in town and they listened as Pablo and I engaged in a short conversation about Los Angeles:

- Pedro: si ok, adonde llegaste?
- Me: Me llegue a California, Los Angeles
- Pedro: Y vives en Los Angeles, no?
- Me: No, vivo en Ohio ahora, pero trabajando con las comunidades de Oaxaqueños en Los Angeles.
- Pedro: Si ok, pero conoces Los Angeles? Porque vivi en Rosemead hace cuatro años, en los departamentos de Lola.
- Me: Ah si! Los departamentos a calle Huntington? Atras del Mercado?
- Pedro: Si si, exacto. Vivi en un departamento sube de Lola. Conoce ella!
- Me: (I laughed in agreement) Si si, conoce lugar.

After my short conversation with Pedro the men seemed more relaxed and we talked about Los Angeles, Utah, and New Jersey. I discovered that these three cities where the most common destinations for emigration in Comogocho. Some of the men practiced their English and asked me questions about basketball tournaments in Los Angeles. The men began to joke that I was crazy for traveling all the way up the mountain without a guide to show me how to get Comogocho, and then they began to heckle me about the taxi I took from the city. I explained to the men that I wanted to take the bus but there was a bloqueo de maestros (teachers strike and blockade). The men laughed at me and joked about the price I paid for a city taxi. The jokes were funny and everyone shared a laugh and shortly after we all shared a drink, this specific drink is native to Oaxaca, and for those that like to drink it can be dangerous.
We chatted about the US and Pedro went into the president’s office and returned with a bottle of *mezcal*⁵ and a few cups. *Conoces mezcal? Quieres probar?* (Do you know about mezcal, want to try some?) Pedro said to me as he sat down. I knew about the strong liquor all too well from my previous visits to Oaxaca. I quickly replied *Sí, conoce mezcal, una copita por favor* (Yes, I know mezcal, a small shot please). Pedro poured himself a hefty portion and a bigger one for me and some of the other men partook in the welcoming cultural ritual. I lifted my glass and said *Salud, gracias por su hospitalidad ustedes* (Cheers, thank you for your hospitality). The men toasted me and welcomed me to the town. We had a few more cups and I knew that if I didn’t get Eliana’s house soon I could possibly be there a long time drinking (it was a Friday). My cup of mezcal was refilled before it was finished and the men and I chatted about basketball, Oaxaca, and their traveling experiences. One of the men mentioned that if I liked basketball they were going to play later that evening. At dusk the Eliana approached the *municipio* plaza looking for me. Maybe she was tipped off that the men were toasting me with mezcal, but I was happy she arrived to “rescue” me. Eliana and I greeted each other and she told me she started to get worried when I had not arrived. We walked across the basketball courts and I picked up my bags and felt like the anthropologist I had been trained to become.

**Entering the Household**

We walked through the small entrance to her home and into the kitchen where I smelled fresh tortillas. I was hungry and the mezcal had made my appetite a little

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⁵ “Merriam-Webster dictionary (2011) defines *Mezcal* (me-skal) as: a usually colorless Mexican liquor distilled especially from the central leaves of maguey plants.” *Mezcal* is a strong liquor and comes in numerous varieties, some of it is hallucinogenic if its not filtered well.
stronger. Eliana asked me about my trip and I explained to her my travel experience to the town and how the men had joked with me. We talked about Lola and she was interested in my story and how I knew Lola and her family. I explained that I had met Lola at a basketball tournament in Los Angeles and told the story of how we became friends. I told her Lola’s mother gave me some letter for her family in Comogocho and I pulled them out of my backpack. Eliana looked at the names on the letters and explained each letter was for and how they were related to Lola.

She asked me if I liked Oaxacan food and I quickly replied si si, claro que si! (yes, of course!). She proceeded to stir the pot of black beans that were cooking on the fire. Then Eliana grabbed masa from a small plastic bucket and hand pressed a few large tortillas. She cleaned the comal with a small brush and placed it over the wooden fire near the beans. My mouth began to water because I knew the food was going to be good, there is nothing like a freshly made warm tortilla, nothing. Eliana felt the comal with the back of her hand and laid the fattened round masa over her forearm, and with one gentle motion she laid the masa on the comal.

Eliana showed me to my room and I put my things away. The room was small with concrete walls and a tin roof. One light bulb hung from the wooden roof joint through the center of the room. I put my things on a small table and sat on the bed. It was late and I told Eliana I was going to check the basketball court. I had heard there was a game. I went to the courts but it was dark and empty so I returned back to the house.

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6 Merriam-Webster defines masa as: a dough used in Mexican cuisine (as for tortillas and tamales) that is made from ground corn soaked in a lime and water solution

7 A comal is a flat grill that tortillas are cooked on; typically it is made from clay or another type of pottery.
arrived in the kitchen where Eliana and an older woman were inside. Eliana said to me no juegan? Ah, es possible mañana, ellos juegan todavía. (They’re not playing? Maybe tomorrow, they are always playing). Then she introduced me to the grandmother of Lola’s cousins. I had brought a card for the grandmother so I was introduced as Lola’s friend. The grandmother smiled and asked about her family in Los Angeles. Eliana assisted the grandmother with medication she had received earlier that day. A short while later an older man came to the kitchen door, it was Lola’s grandfather. I introduced myself and gave him his card. We chatted and I watched as he opened his card from Lola. In soft broken Spanish he mumbled the words on the page, held the photo Lola inserted close to his face and gently rubbed her face with his thumb as if he was right there stroking her hair. He mentioned to me how fast Lola grew up, and she was already a woman. He thanked me for the card but asked me why there was no money in it and I told him I didn’t know. Eliana explained that she had some of the money for him but that the card was just from Lola. Eliana asked me if I wanted coffee so we all shared a cup, listened to the radio and talked some more. The grandfather stayed a while and eventually thanked me for the card and left. Eliana told me the grandfather was over 80 years old and he lived at the very top of the town. She told me he walked up and down the hill every day and I admired his strength. My first day in Comogocho had drained me so I told Eliana I was going to rest and I would see her in the morning. I thought my night was over, but there was another game about to begin.

Playing for the First Time in Comogocho

It was cold, unprepared I sat in the bed with a cobija (blanket) wrapped tight around me. The elevation in Comogocho is 2,100 meters and the town is on a hill shaded
by mountains. Jeans, university sweater and beanie were layers of protection but did little in the cold sierra air. I didn’t think it was going to be cold in the middle of July, but I was warned before arriving and did not listen. When I arrived in town it was hot, but when the sun went down it quickly turned cold. I read a book then decided to turn the light off and go to sleep. I was relaxed after a long day and I shut my eyes and listened to the sounds of the sierras. I had just fallen asleep when I heard a familiar sound, but not one from nature; it was from a sport I love.

I sat up in my bed; through the cracked wooden walls I thought I heard the faint sound of a bouncing basketball. I smiled and thought to myself “ah shit, this is why I’m here, gotta go check it out.” Anthropologists work through exploration, and trial and error; and this situation was no different. I had found the basketball court so the next step was finding a game. The echoing sound of the bouncing rubber ball was familiar but I was still unsure that it was a basketball. It was late in the evening, almost ten o’clock, and I thought that it was too late to play. The sound was faint as if someone was walking through the dark basketball court with a ball. I decided to check out the sound that was coming from near the courts. I was lucky because Eliana’s house was just steps from the basketball court. I could see the courts from the front gate of the house, and the lights were on! I was excited. Eliana was awake and cleaning the kitchen. I told her I was going to check the courts for a game. I walked to the courts and saw a young man bouncing a ball by himself, jogging and shooting free-throw shots.

I ran back to the house and yelled into the kitchen ellos juegan, voy a jugar (they are playing, I’m going to play). I looked like a child asking a parent if they could go play outside with a neighborhood friend because the señora chuckled at me and told me she
would leave the gate open for me. I went to my room and grabbed some shorts, my basketball shoes and a long sleeve shirt. I put my shorts on and stretched in my room because I didn’t want to look silly in front of strangers. I heard more players arrive and they began playing while I was stretching in the room. After one last good stretch I headed to the courts and found ten to 15 men playing. A game had just ended and I cautiously walked onto the court. A young man asked me if wanted to join the next game so I accepted the invitation. The young man pointed out the team I was on and asked me to play abajo (down low) for defense. I quickly jogged over the bleachers, tied my shoes and took off my university sweater; this was it, it was game time.

The young man introduced himself as Andy and I told him my name. We started a fast paced game; the style mirrored the play in Los Angeles. We ran up and down the court a few times and I passed the ball afraid to shoot. After a few minutes I felt extremely weak and couldn’t catch my breath. I was in shape and had been practicing with my friend Lola all summer but this was a different environment. What I hadn’t realized was that I made an additional climb in elevation to the sierra. The thin air made it painful to breathe and I was sweating profusely. It was almost midnight before the men decided to quit playing. Some of them wanted to continue playing and they tried to coerce their friends to stay for one more game. Most declined saying “No, trabajando en la mañana” (No, I have to work in the morning).

I sat on the bleachers and the players asked me where I was from because they did not recognize me. I explained to them that I studied basketball, I was an anthropologist, and that I played too. The guys were impressed by my skills during and they thought I was a coach or a traveling player from the US. There are many tournaments in the sierra
during the holidays (December to April). There are players from the US that tour the various tournaments in the sierra for their cash purses. Some players can live the whole year off their winnings. I assured them that I was not a professional and I explained that I wanted to visit my friend’s town, play some basketball and learn why basketball is important.

The men began to tell me about all the fiestas and basketball tournaments during the holiday season. They explained that there were a lot of tournaments in the sierra and a lot of money to be made. I talked to them about the tournaments in Los Angeles and I mentioned the towns and teams I knew. The men were funny and Andy asked me how long I was going to stay in Comogocho. When I told him I was just visiting and I only planned to stay for a week he was disappointed. He told me that if I could stay for a few months the tournaments would begin and that we could make some good money “ganamos mucho dinero!” He continued and said that if we practiced for a few weeks before they started we could make a lot of money; enough to buy a ticket back to Los Angeles and then some. I laughed and told the men I couldn’t stay but that I wanted to come back for the fiesta in December. They told me that if I came back to play with them during the fiesta we would have a really good chance at winning the tournament. I told Andy I would visit again for the fiesta in December. We shook hands and I walked back towards the house.

I played basketball with players from Los Angeles that had familial ties to Comogocho but this was my first time playing in Oaxaca. The chance to play on the court in Comogocho was exciting and I was eager to meet other people from the town during my stay. Anthropology is a process and I didn’t know how long it would take to meet
some of the players in Comogocho. I met people from the municipio and played basketball on my first day. This was my first visit to Comogocho but it was not my last. My ethnography grew as did my visits to Comogocho.

**Fiesta Time, Game Time**

December 3rd, 2009. It was a cold brisk morning in Comogocho, Oaxaca (see Figure 2). I left Columbus, Ohio a few days before (elevation 200 m) and arrived in the sierra region of Oaxaca (elevation 2,000 m). The elevation in the sierra makes it difficult to breath so my lungs were not adjusted to the rapid change in elevation.

*Figure 2. Comogocho, Oaxaca in the sierra region.*
I used my asthma inhaler, I was breathing harder than normal during my typical pre-game basketball routine. I had gone through the same routine for most of my competitive athletic career. I was bent over on the bench in deep concentration, an almost meditative state. I focused on the things I needed to do as a player to help my team win. I tied my shoes and secured my weak ankles with braces. A voice next to me broke my concentration and said “Tienes miedo, Memo?” (You’re scared Memo?). It was my teammate Dan and I quickly replied “Miedo? No manches, soy listo, quiero jugar” (Scared? no way, I’m ready, I want to play). My nickname “Memo Ochoa” was derived from an afternoon pickup soccer game with a couple kids during my first visit to Comogocho, as anyone who works in a Latino community knows you have no control over your nickname, you just accept it, and once you have a nickname you are a special part of something. I took a deep breath and leaped off the bench in excitement. I was about to play in my first tournament. I jogged onto the court for the pregame warm-ups. We passed the ball around and formed a lay-up line.

I still get a little nervous before every game I play, my former graduate advisor Dr. Ramona Peréz once told me “…if you don’t get butterflies before a speech you didn’t prepare well enough” and I think sports are the same. I didn’t have a numbered jersey so I borrowed one from an older player. The jersey was white, orange and blue, and Comogocho was stitched across the front with the number seven on the back (see Figure 3).

I was a little more nervous for this game than others for several reasons. First, from a scholastic standpoint, my research had finally come full circle, for I wasn’t just observing basketball I was participating in it. Second, I had practiced with my teammates
during the week so they knew my capability and I wanted to showcase my ability to the whole town. I saw all of the men I had met in the municipio during my first visit sitting in the bleachers; I climbed through the bleachers and greeted each of them with a handshake. I saw Lola’s uncle, aunt and cousins and greeted them and thanked them for the meal they provided me early that morning. Señora Eliana stood by one of the baskets to watch me play and I stopped to talk to her:

Señora Eliana: vas a jugar Bernardo? (Are you going to play?).

Me: Si, pero bien, no se, vamos a ver! (Yes, but well, I don’t know, we will see).

Señora: con quien juegos? (Who are you playing with?).

Figure 3. Warming up with red shorts and white jersey, Comogocho 2009.
Me (With a big smile on my face): Oh, por Comogocho, con Andy (Oh, for Comogocho, with Andy).

Andy ran by and greeted Eliana. Then he said to me “Memo, vamos, corre corre” (Memo, let’s go, start running). For my teammates this was just another game in a torneo (tournament). They are competitors and we wanted to win. The referee blew the whistle to alert both teams that there were three minutes left in warm-ups. I high-fived my teammates and a boy named Cory (one of the boys who gave me my nickname) shouted to me “Memo!” so I gave him a high-five too. The referee blew the final whistle and alerted both teams that the game was about to start. The time had come, I needed to make a good impression and live up to the expectations of my teammates. I was nervous; I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself. I walked toward our team bench and took one last good stretch. Andy yelled at me from the team bench “Memo! Corre!” (Memo! run!), it was my second warning to hustle and the game hadn’t even started yet.

We huddled up in a small circle and our team captain Andy instructed us on our game plan and elected the starting five players and their positions. Andy started me down low and said, “juega fuerte Memo, rebotes” (play strong Memo, rebound). I was the tallest player on my team, at 5’10” this has rarely been the case during my competitive basketball career, but here in the sierra I am above average height. Andy elected me to jump for the tip-off, I shook hands with all the opponents and wished them luck. I quickly glanced at Andy and said, “vamos!” (let’s go!). Both teams settled into positions for the tip-off and I stared down my opponents, I was ready, the whistle blew, the referee threw the ball. It paused for a second in mid-air, and I jumped as high as I could. See Figure 4.
I wanted to visit the towns in the sierra where basketball is the main sport to understand why it has played a significant cultural role in Los Angeles. I was in Comogocho with a purpose and it served as an example. First, I wanted to see basketball, this was my main objective, an essential part of my research on sport and culture. Second, I was in Comogocho to explore the social and cultural role of basketball and how basketball becomes a space for the production of identity.

Figure 4. The harmony of church (left) and basketball (right), Comogocho 2009.

Through basketball I was able to examine numerous cultural activities. As a researcher the sport of basketball has provided me with the data needed to test my research questions. Specifically the value of basketball in the production of culture for Oaxacan
communities in Los Angeles, and the outcomes of transnational social formations that coexist with other traditional cultural practices for Oaxacan movers and non-movers. As a participant in basketball I have developed a strong network of personal relationships. In my research these objectives fold into each other.

My project followed basketball from the courts in Los Angeles to the courts in Comogocho. I started a friendship with Lola in Los Angeles and then visited her family in Comogocho. I practiced and played basketball with Lola and her extended family in Los Angeles and then played in a tournament with Andy and his brothers in Comogocho. Most transnational research focuses on sending communities (Oaxaca); their experience in host countries (US) and the relationships they have with their hometowns (Oaxaca). I focused on movers and non-movers from receiving communities (Los Angeles) and followed their relationships to movers and non-movers in sending communities (Oaxaca). My research builds on the existing literature and research on transnational migration by essentially following the connections through the complex migration process. Retracing the patterns of movers and non-movers in Los Angeles then Oaxaca provides a unique opportunity to analyze possible patterns of transnational movement. In this case basketball constructs culture in Los Angeles and Oaxaca, so sport is more than a social tool in culture because deorte es cultura (sport is culture).
Chapter 2: The Game Plan

Sports in Anthropology and Society

This chapter explains my contribution to the discipline of anthropology. I start with the individual to understand how they shape meaning and understanding in their life. Anthropology is a holistic discipline that includes numerous methodologies and theoretical approaches. Many disciplines conduct sports research, but few anthropologists have included sports as a significant piece of their research projects. In anthropology, sports have been described as social mechanisms that maintain and reproduce social structure and many sociologists describe sports as a functional piece of society (Birrell, 1981; Bramham & Wagg, 2009; Giulianotti, 2004; Maguire, Jarvie, Mansfield, & Bradley, 2002; McPherson, Curtis, & Loy, 1989; Tomlinson, 2005). This is an important contribution to the cultural analysis of society because sports are a reflection of society. In each area sports express cultured benefits and reflect society. Sports are trapped in traditional sociological models that tend to emphasis functionalism and sports role as reflective of social structure. My research moves beyond functional interpretations to view basketball as a space or setting where cultural and social identity, knowledge, and so forth are manufactured (not only reflected) and contested by different members of the Oaxaqueños. In this chapter I discuss previous work on sport and society and build on this literature for my research on Oaxacan basketball in Los Angeles. I will describe some of the theoretical approaches in the anthropology of sport. Then I discuss socio-
political approach where sports are examined with a modern social lens to show how they are reflective of a changing global urban/sub-urban environment. Finally, I discuss sport as a cultured activity and describe how communities have used modern sport to create a sense of identity even as the state uses sport to build itself.

**Anthropology of Sport**

My research uses sport to examine the cultural practices of Oaxaqueño migrants and their children and basketball’s impact on the production of identity in Los Angeles. In the discipline of anthropology the use of sport in research has received little attention (Sands 2002). However, international scholars and other disciplines in the social sciences have used sports to analyze social institutions (see Mangan 2002; Maguire 2002). Sport is viewed as a leisure activity in anthropology and it is rarely used to analyze culture. Sports are functional and they show how society maintains itself, but sports are much more as well. They are filled with cultured habits and traditions that shape individual and collective identities.

Oaxacan basketball is part of a cultural representation of communities in Los Angeles, but it also a setting for the production of culture by individuals and used to create and negotiate identity. In Oaxaqueño communities sports are used to create culture and manufacture identity. Sports provide a social avenue for communication between sierra sending communities and receiving communities in the US. Following Oaxaqueños and Oaxacan basketball in the sierra and the US contributes and builds upon the study of sports by focusing on the relationships that define sport and society.

Sports have received little recognition in the discipline of anthropology and few researchers have explored its impact on cultural practices. (Blanchard, 1995; Bolin &
Granskog, 2003; Geertz, 1972; Kleszynski & Rios, 2011; Sands, 2002; Sutton-Smith, 2001). However, the activity, development and participation in sports contain significant contributions to the evaluation of cultural development. Media coverage of sports in the US and amateur participation contribute to the cultural perception of sport as a reflection of society. This perception of sports translates to fieldwork where “leisure activities” such as art, music, or sport are functional symbols for society.

In this study I move beyond functional models and focus on the ways in which the individual and society construct identity and define cultural knowledge and belonging. As an anthropologist I propose we analyze sports as more than a functional symbol that reflects social structure and cultural identity. Accepting sport as a reflection of society and as a foundation for the production of culture identity allows us to use multiple methodologies and to discover why sports are important. Oaxacan basketball produces culture and tournaments provide a social platform for Oaxaqueños to create and negotiate their identity. Using this type of approach to analyze sport offers the discipline of anthropology a unique analysis of cultural production and identity creation. By situating the discipline of anthropology and sport at multiple levels of observation (individual, communal, social) I describe how sports capture patterns of cultural production that manifest into identity.

Leisure Activities

One of the ways anthropology can contribute to social research is to begin to think of sports not just as a mundane part of everyday life but sport as a piece of symbolism that assists in constructing identity. In Oaxacan basketball identity is an outcome of cultural practices established by households and communities in Los Angeles. Leisure
activities are a common piece of daily activity for immigrants in new destinations and basketball provides a social space for the creation of identity. Through sports and other leisure activities immigrant communities establish social institutions that allow members to acculturate and redefine themselves in new environments. On the surface basketball is a functional activity; a stem valve that operates as a social mechanism to combat with the physical and social pressures of living and adapting to an environment (Gluckman, 1965). Understanding how Oaxaqueños build cultural identity through their game and how that game is associated with space in Los Angeles provides a framework for understanding the development of culture in a transnational setting (and see Paerregaard 2008; Vertovec 1999).

Sports scholars who examine the construction of identity often focus on the distribution of power. In the discipline of anthropology leisure activities are typically viewed as things people in society do to waste time. My research shows that sports are not just leisure activities. Peter Bramham and Stephen Wagg (2009) describe sport as a leisure activity and place it in local, national and international contexts. They argue leisure sport culture has a specific history that is strongly tied to colonial culture. During the colonial period sports were leisure activities that British elitists used to pass the time. The English played soccer during their free time in Africa and India during colonial expansion. US settlements played baseball and basketball during their free time in the Caribbean and Philippines (Arbena, 1993, 2002). There is a history of sports being a leisure activity for elite individuals in stratified social structures. Sports were used as assimilation tools to coerce the indigenous population into dominant cultural norms. Music, art, baseball and basketball were some of the things used as assimilation tools by
inhabitants to assimilate local indigenous populations. My research moves beyond the understanding of sport as a functional piece of society; I focus on how individuals in Los Angeles use basketball to build a cultural framework and I examine the dynamic identities that develop as Oaxaqueños play.

Social politics, the consumption of sports on multiple social levels, and sport as a leisure activity for the working class all fill a specific history. During the twentieth century sports were viewed as a socialization mechanism by elites that other social strata used to “fit in” (Arbena, 1995; Bourdieu, 1991; Eitzen, 2009; Mangan, 2002). Basketball in Oaxaca is a cultural expression of identity. Basketball is an adopted practice used to “fit in”, but its rich history and the way it has become “Oaxacan” makes it a central piece in the puzzle that Oaxaqueños construct to identify themselves.

Baseball in the Caribbean, soccer in Africa, or basketball in Oaxaca shows how sports can define a community and create identity over time. Leisure activities are social tools that are used by groups tied to a specific environment to deal with the physical and social pressures of living. Basketball is an exercise Oaxacans can use to alleviate the pressures of living in a stressful environment, but it is also a sport that defines a community and creates avenues for individuals to create and negotiate identity. People use specific spaces to practice leisure activities and the way they use and identify with the space is valuable.

The socialization of sports has changed since the colonial period and although basketball was adopted by communities in Mexico and brought to the US it is not the US game.. Oaxacan basketball is unique. It embeds Oaxaqueños in Mexican society, but also allows Oaxaqueños to define themselves and create community in Mexico and the US.
In the discipline of anthropology sports need to be recognized as a viable place where culture is created. “Sport and leisure cultures have been transformed, particularly in the last quarter of the twentieth century, in ways that have increased their profile in everyday life and their importance as social, cultural, political, and economic presences, sometimes even forces” (Bramham & Wagg, 2009, p. 39).

My research contributes to sports studies. It moves beyond the functional analysis of sports and examines cultural outcomes that influence identity creation. Sports are not just leisure activities and Oaxacan basketball is more than a reflection of community. Sports research in anthropology can contribute to the analysis of cultural processes such as migration, economics, politics, kinship, etc. This is a key contribution to anthropology because sports deserve more attention and recognition. Sports are also used as a social tool by governments to create social and cultural cohesiveness between groups. In the development of national and state identities sports were used in assimilation practices.

**Sport in the US**

In Los Angeles the historical and political experience of national building traveled with migration flows. Mexican migrants used the cultural practice of community building to establish local communities in Los Angeles. If you’re in the Los Angeles area you will see restaurants, cars, local shops, bakeries, and numerous other retailers with names replicating states, cities, and communities in Mexico. This is also true for Oaxaqueños living in Los Angeles area. During the summer of 2010, I had lunch with my friend Gabriel Martinez who is from the San Marcos Tlapazola, Oaxaca. Gabriel asked me to join him at one of his favorite restaurants in Venice called “Tlapazola Grill.” Gabriel and I have eaten many lunches at this grill when I was in the Los Angeles and we shared a
few *copitas* (shots) of mezcal on quite a few occasions. This particular afternoon Gabriel
called me to join him for lunch because a journalist from National Public Radio\(^8\) was
going to interview him about his culture and language. Gabriel speaks *Zapoteco* and I
assisted him with an introductory language course at San Diego State University. The
journalist Ana Tintocalis wanted to interview Gabriel about topics such as migration,
language and culture. Gabriel asked me to join him because he was nervous about the
interview and needed my support during the interview. Gabriel is the first person I met
during my research in 2004 and since we have become good friends so I had no hesitation
in joining him for lunch on his “rock-star” debut. Gabriel introduced Ana to the owner of
the restaurant and she recorded the men as they spoke in their native language. Ana
followed us and listened as Gabriel talked with his *paisanos* (countrymen) from Oaxaca.
As we ate delicious food from the region Ana asked Gabriel about the Oaxacan migration
experience and Gabriel explained how his understanding of Oaxacan and Zapotec culture
created strong community relationships in Los Angeles. Many Oaxaqueños like Gabriel
migrate to Los Angeles and other US cities with a rich and cultured history that helps as
they build new communities. Building new communities is founded in historical,
political, economic and cultural practices that are themselves rooted in the historical
practice of community building in Latin America.

Kevin Simpson (2009) uses a functional approach to describe basketball in Native
American society and how sport is viewed as a negative and positive in the community..

The colonial introduction of sport is intertwined with the social construction of nation,

\(^8\) NPR affiliate in San Diego KPBR has the radio and transcript of the interview available on its
society, city, community, household and individual. Basketball on a Native American reservation in the US is a major part of the society on the reservation, but few athletes sought out the “opportunity” of upward mobility. “Every year, all over the western US, promising Native American athletes excel in high school sports only to abandon dreams of college, return to economically depressed reservations…” (Simpson, 2009, p. 66). On some Native Reservations basketball is ingrained with the social economy so good players have social capital and obtain respect and possibly more access to resources. The socialization of basketball on the reservation also comes with consequences. Although some Native American players have the talent to play basketball at the collegiate level they do not receive the same amount of prestige in the college environment as they do on the reservation. In turn most players that come from the reservation either do not fulfill their college requirements and eventually drop out or some do not show up at all. One coach was quoted as saying “For Indians to succeed in white society terms, they have to give up some cultural ethnicity” (Simpson, 2009, p. 67). I do not believe that Native American athletes need to give up their cultural ethnicity to be successful in sports and I do not offer any solution. But this shows how sport and society can have positive and negative effects on the social mobility of communities and ‘sovereign nations.’ Simpson’s expose is useful in bringing attention to the cultural outcomes of sports in marginalized societies but it lacks components of Native American culture that promote success and the cultural outcomes that are beneficial to Native American communities.

Keith Kleszynski (2006) researched the role soccer played in societies with heavy migration. In San Diego, California futból alleviates some of the anxiety and alienation some Latino feel and the sport is a natural social mechanism that works toward a
cohesive working community (Kleszynski, 2006, p. 9). This functional analysis focuses on sport as a social mechanism that creates social cohesion. “Playing futból also allows for cultural performance among Mexicano migrant men in San Diego County; in this performance Mexicano migrants bolster their sense of cultural identity while living so far away from home. This in turn, strengthens the Mexicano migrant communities these men live in” (Kleszynski, 2006, p. 60). Sport is a powerful resource in society and it can be historically, politically, economically or culturally engaging. Sports can be used as a resource to confront the chaos of the immigrant daily-lived experience. For the migrants without legal documentation sports create a community that they can participate in that eases the legal consequences of living in the US illegally.

My research moves beyond these functional explanations. Basketball is a social mechanism used by the Oaxacan community to build social cohesion, but it is also much more. Basketball plays a significant role in the development of identity, mediation of disputes and the construction of a sense of being and belonging.

The public participation of any event is not always safe for migrants (legal and illegal) living in highly xenophobic environments because the reality of police detention or deportation is always a possibility. Research on sport and case studies that emphasize participation in sports should be evaluated and considered strong contributions in anthropology. I examined the value of sports for Oaxacan migrants in to bring meaning to the chaotic daily-lives they experience. Sports research with an anthropological focus provides an insight into the culture of sport and its social mechanisms. In anthropology we focus on society and the cultural functions that contribute to the makeup and function of a ‘homogenous’ group of people. Sports can contribute to the anthropological analysis
of culture if the discipline can regard sport as a major influential piece of culture, like religion, politics, and economics, the examination of sport has the ability to provide valuable information on functions of society.

**Sports development in Latin America and Mexico**

Basketball is a popular sport in southern Mexico. It’s quite apparent that futbol is the most popular sport in the world and countries in Latin America are no different. The professional futbol league in Mexico has many rich traditions and although Oaxaca does not have any recognizable team their support of sport is apparent everywhere in the city. In Oaxaca City there are three consecutive stores that sell merchandise dedicated to each of the most popular teams in the Mexican premier leagues (Chivas, America, and Puma). The state of Oaxaca does not have a professional basketball team or soccer team. Baseball is the only professional sport in Oaxaca City and its stadium and nearby McDonalds dominates the physical scenery of one of the busiest street. The baseball stadium in Oaxaca City (Guerreros) and the youth baseball academy in San Bartolo Coyotepec\(^9\) are symbols of the sports dominance in the city and surrounding communities. Futbol has been described as a sport for the poor because of the minimal equipment requirements to play, and basketball has been associated with words like “inner-city” and “urban” that contains similar connotations. Baseball requires expensive equipment and is a social status symbol in the city for the elite. However, the baseball stadium and its visible Banamex bank and other corporate sponsorships is not the only

\(^9\) The *Academia de Beisbol* was founded by Alfredo Harp Helú in 2009. He is the majority owner of the professional team Oaxaca Guerreros who play in the first division *Liga Mexicano de Beisbol*. The baseball academy is the first development center for youth in the country and supports more than 60 students ages 12-17.
sports complex in the state that has the ability to transpose ideas of modernity and social capital. In the sierra region of Oaxaca the sport of basketball is a part of life and communities invest a lot of time, money, and energy in developing the sport.

Joseph L. Arbena (1995) examines the political influence of western sport in Latin America and its colonial tendencies in socializing and later nationalizing the local populations. Arbena discusses the history of sport in Latin America and describes it as one that is tied particularly close with the building of ‘nations’. In the successful development of ‘nation-states’ Arbena argues that sports must fulfill three different functions:

(1) Building identity.

(2) Creating a sense of pride and shared needs and feelings from citizens.

(3) Creating a negative sense of foreigners and establish the ‘us’ and ‘them’ ideology into cultural functions.

The culture of Oaxacan basketball parallels these functional characteristics. (1) Basketball provides a setting for the cultural construction of identity and community in Los Angeles and Oaxaca. (2) At the individual level players compete and express themselves in a way that is socially acceptable. The community views basketball as culturally productive and that enhancing community relations locally and abroad. (3) Specifically, in Los Angeles basketball creates an opportunity for migrants and their children to reinforce, renegotiate or create identity. Third, fourth and fifth generation Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles create identity through basketball that contest traditional Oaxacan associations with culture and identity.
The strengthening of nationalism was a project for many ‘developing’ countries in Latin America because of the diverse ethnic populations and indigenous belief systems. Many countries in Latin America thought sport could be used as a form of social control and investing in it would help citizens adopt nationalistic ideology. For example, the president of Mexico, Porfirio Diaz (1877-1911), used sports as a social mechanism to reinforce the values and culture associated with the ‘modernization’ of Mexico and the US (Arbena, 1995, p. 9). During the early twentieth century secretaries of sports for nations (Argentina, Chile, Peru, Mexico, etc.) were influential in public policy concerning the nation state building agenda.

Sports were thought to be a powerful social tool that could be used to help assimilate diverse ethnic regions to adopt new (modern) values and culture of the nation. Developing Latin American nation states employed Eurocentric cultural forms through sport and other social activities with the intention to build a strong a nation-state with a more homogenous nationalistic society (Arbena, 1995). Latin American countries hoped these actions would create a strong nationalistic country with rich sense of history and identity that would clearly differentiate Latin America from Europe. In Latin America sports and society are a composite of the historical, political, economic and cultural structures of the nation-state. Sports have a profound effect on society and the participation in sports on all levels by its citizens.

In the early stage of the Mexican revolution there were many rural development projects. The modernist movement pushed the government in Mexico to participate in large development projects such as the failed railroad system. President Lazaro Cardenas (1934-40) increased the number of rural schools and teachers and allocated more than
45 million acres of land back to the peasantry (Britton, 1973). Cardenas formed the “Ministry of Education” that directed the numerous re-development projects in the state; “The four Ministers of Education in the period (José Manuel Puig Casauranc, 1931; Narciso Bassols, 1931-34; Ignacio García Téllez, 1935; and Gonzalo Vázquez Vela, 1935-40) consistently advocated expansion and reform of urban secondary and technical schools” (Britton, 1973, p. 44). With the new allowance of funds many rural areas began to see the construction of basketball courts in their communities. For the southern states of Mexico, Guerrero, Puebla, Chiapas, and Oaxaca, whose rugged topography prevented large soccer fields, basketball courts were constructed even in the most isolated places. The game of basketball was a tool used in the national development process to improve a national identity. Other sports including basketball have remained a stable part of a growing national identity; however, rural communities transformed basketball into a distinguishable sport illustrated by community and culture. This representation can be seen through migration and transmigration patterns where basketball is used as an instrument to promote, enhance, and re-establish Oaxaqueño identity.

In the late 1980s, many political leaders who had before favored populist policies began to support radical reforms that included fiscal discipline, the opening of international trade, financial liberalization, and privatization (Edwards, 1999). This neo-liberal approach to economics by the regions political leaders was a risk worth taking considering the damaging effects of previous populist agendas; however, many of these leaders tried to emulate systems similar to that of the growing East Asia market. Nevertheless these new approaches to economic sovereignty parallel similar past approaches with main focuses on strong market-based reforms, privatization, and heavy
government intervention. Bearing in mind the global economic market struggles during the late 1970s Latin American countries evident pitfalls did not reach the surface until the late 1980s and early 1990s. In regards to Mexico, the country was witness to a steady decline in wages and a weakening in infrastructure all the way up to president elected Carlos Salinas de Gortari in 1988. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, an emerging view focused on a secure state committed to make available social programs for less advantaged, increase and manage human capital, and pay special attention to vital programs devoted to infrastructure (Edwards, 1999).

Following the global debt crisis in the late 1970s and leading into the steady problems during the decade of the 1980s many individuals decided to migrate out of Mexico to the United States of America. During the middle and late 1980s there was an excessive amount of individuals migrating north in search of a better life. During this surge many Oaxaqueños migrated north into the southern California regions of San Diego and Los Angeles counties. These economic contacts assembled in the United States of America created a stable basis for home communities back in Mexico.

President Salinas De Gatori revamped rural development projects in Mexico. Money was literally thrown into rural communities and numerous clinics, schools and basketball courts were constructed throughout rural Mexico including Oaxaca. Basketball courts were viewed as a place where men could find the opportunity to play and to develop their connections with others and with the state. While, most government projects were rather weak and many failed basketball courts remained and migrants and their children continued to play. The problem with the implementation of these or similar policies is the eventual hyperinflation in currency. More importantly the ideology of neo-
liberal practices and privatization comes with the high risk of policy corruption creating an unstable market. Once the national market becomes dilapidated the production of more currency is the quick fix, but eventually individuals are incapable of financing the high cost of living. As previously mentioned the global recession of the late 1970s sparked new economic agendas throughout the world and especially Mexico. New populist preparation produced an evolving decline in all parts of production and social stability until its ultimate fall in 1988. Shortly after Carlos Salinas de Gortari put into operation new economic policy, the country hit its hardest pitfall in 1994 resulting in the need for international aid (typically provided by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, or other international assistant programs) to assist in reconstruction.

**Middle East and Europe**

Yair Galily (2003) discusses the history of ‘Western’ sport in the Middle East and how politics and culture influenced the future of sport and its relationship with national identity and global economy. Basketball has influenced the state identity of Oaxaca, but football continues to define identity on the national level in Mexico. Galily (2003) describes sports in Palestine as having a historical link to political culture and national ideology. “From the early 1920s football clubs were incorporated into nation-wide sport associations that were affiliated to a specific political organization” (Galily, 2003, p. 2). Sports leagues were so ingrained in politics in Palestine during the early twentieth century that is sometimes stood in the way of developing a homogenous national sports organization. The egotistic political control of basketball leagues during the 1930s and 1940s prevented Palestine from have a national organization or national basketball team. Although the sport of basketball was not popular during the early twentieth century the
region has received recent recognition as a competitive region. The politically tied sports club “Maccabi Tel Aviv” has won five European Club Championships since 1977.\(^\text{10}\) “The development of Israeli basketball in its early years has to be seen as interdependent with the broader political economy of what later became Israel and in conjunction with the close relationship between the developing sport organizations and the development of an Israeli state” (Galily, 2003, p. 5). The development of basketball in Israel and Palestine shows how sport can be intermingled with politics and public policy. Major sports organizations can have a major influence on the ideology of sports in society and how members relate sports with national identity. The history of sport should always be considered an important piece of research when examining sports relationship to political policy and national development. In Mexico, sports such as futbol have a political relationship with society. Club America, Cruz Azul, Chivas and Pumas are the most popular soccer clubs in Mexico and each have a strong following that parallel political interest parties. Therefore, sports have an effect on social interest and sometimes the political interest from citizens is tied to historical constructions of racial class division.

Paul Gilroy (2001) states that militarization is almost synonymous with sports because it contains intense levels of competition. Gilroy examines the colonial history of sports in Britain to shed light on the possible connection sports have on the social division of race and class in Europe. Gilroy argues that sports are tied to historical notions of difference that are visible through sport on the national and local level. Politically sports mimic the pain and agony of war whereby it “becomes a valuable

means through which to consider the bewildering effects of England’s post-colonial melancholia even where they have been intermittently offset by the compensations of the country’s rare but nonetheless significant sporting successes” (Gilroy, 2001, p. xi). In Britain this political uproar can be seen in through the sport of soccer and individuals can practice their loyalty to a city or neighborhood or their affiliation with national pride through spectatorship and ‘hooliganism.’ Football becomes an expression through which racial friction and action are allowed to take place. In this sense sport and society collide and become cultural practices of extremism. This type of violence or ‘play’ “promotes an understanding of the relationship between ‘race’, nationalism and politics that shows the centrality of football without becoming football-centered” (Gilroy, 2001, p. xv). The role of sports in society is powerful and the practice of sport can be a major factor in the cultural economy of race and nation (Gilroy, 2001).

**Sport and State**

In my previous research project (Rios, 2008) I examined Oaxacan basketball to discover how the sport influenced the Oaxacan community. I saw passion from players, organizers and spectators. On my second day of observation a small fight broke out. Sports and violence have similar characteristics on the surface. This symbolizes Paul Gilroy’s (2001) interpretation of sports in Britain and its relationship to war. Both players argued over a foul, they exchanged words, and then words turned into punches. They wrestled on the court and eventually pinned themselves near a tree. Teammates and family members watched from the sidelines and some tried to pull the two men apart. They were separated by their teammates but still yelled and threw punches wildly in the air. They were suspended for the remainder of the game, but after the game was over the
same men exchanged handshakes and talked. The passion players show for basketball transfers to their feelings of family, household and community. Oaxacan basketball in Los Angeles shows the relationship of sport and society because it involves the multiple facets of everyday living. Most of these individuals are vulnerable in their social environments and the xenophobia from surrounding communities does not improve their situation. Los Angeles is home to two NBA basketball teams, the LA Lakers and the LA Clippers. A majority of supporters and fans include the Latino population. LA Laker player Kobe Bryant has been referred to as king of Los Angeles, but every Sunday numerous Oaxaqueños play basketball in hopes they too will become king for the day. The support for professional teams in Los Angeles and desire to be “king for a day” frames the cultural impact of local culture on the identities of migrants and their children. Basketball is an important part of the Oaxacan community in Los Angeles and it is a visual representation of culture and identity. During my research I discovered basketball was a social product in the Oaxacan community and it carried social capital inside the community. Maguire et al. argue that sports are a social product carried out through the practice of a sporting activity; sports are habitual and they contain habitus, so an “athletes performance involves a blend of the learned and the unlearned” (2002, p. 111). In the Oaxacan community knowledge about basketball, the playing of basketball, the viewing of basketball or attending tournaments at times becomes second nature. This “habitus” is reaffirmed through practice or participation in any of these cultural forms.

In Oaxaca, the establishment of nation and state identity has profoundly affected indigenous identity. Various ethnic and cultural populations have interpreted the concepts of Mexicano, Oaxaqueño, or Zapoteco in their own ways. However, there is a universal
understanding of state building or a common belief that all people in Oaxaca share a unique history. The state of Oaxaca builds on its perceived regional history with government sponsored events like the Guelaguetza.11 Oaxacan migrants bring with them their understanding of culture, identity, and community building to the US. Bi-national organizations like Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB) are committed to assisting various Oaxacan communities in California. This encompasses a communal understanding of what it means to be Mexicano, Oaxacan, Oaxaqueño, Zapoteco, Mixteco, Chinanteco, Mixe, Costeño, etc. In Los Angeles, the Oaxacan community has embraced a similar understanding of culture and identity by working together. Basketball is a social mechanism used by the community to create cultural outcomes that assist with the development of their community at the individual and social level. Cohen describes the Guelaguetza as a celebration that reinforces community actions. “Santañeros describe guelaguetza as a community tradition. They practice guelaguetza because “that is what Santa Ana does” (1999: 90). The community in Los Angeles engages in this cultural practice and forms of community and cooperation continue to frame the Oaxacan way of life.

Field of Play

This project focuses on members of the Oaxacan community in Los Angeles that participate in basketball tournaments. I also followed basketball from Los Angeles to the sierra region of Oaxaca and met many individuals that have familial ties to Los Angeles,

11 The Guelaguetza celebration in Oaxaca City is typically a two week events held in July. The festivities include music and dance performances at the Guelaguetza stadium or “fiestas del los lunes del cerro.”
New Jersey and Utah. Basketball plays a strong role in the development of community and ethnic identity in both places. During the migration period of the 1990s some scholars investigated the ethnic identity among Oaxaqueños in California (Kearney, 1995, 2000; Leal, 2001; Ortiz, 2005). Michael Kearney (1995) examined frequent migration among Mixtecos in Oaxaca and how the dual environments affected their perceptions of identity. Kearney proposed the term Oaxacalifornia to describe the emergence of a Mixtec identity in transnational migration networks. The sport of basketball influences ethnic identity and individuals engage with the sport in local settings that have transnational outcomes. However, in order to understand if Oaxacalifornia has any influence on the sierra Oaxacan community in Los Angeles I discuss the history of basketball.

The history of sport in North America reflects influential political time periods and moments of cultural assimilation. Sports were influenced by politics in socialization projects in the US and Latin America. In Latin America sports were used as leisure activities for European migrants, but later were political mechanisms for social assimilation. In Mexico, certain sports were renowned for their ability to socialize men with various beliefs into a working cohesive unit, and this was the case for basketball. My project moves beyond this functional interpretation of sport as a socializing force and focus on identities that develop out of the cultural practice of Oaxacan basketball. Basketball has a rich history that involves community politics and development projects.

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12 The term Oaxacalifornia emerged from several works and films on the migration patterns between Oaxaca and California. Michael Kearney first developed the term to refer to Oaxacan migration networks in California.
Numerous communities participate in basketball to accomplish their political and social goals. Migrants from Oaxaca brought their sport of basketball along with other cultural practices to the US. However, the sport of basketball is a historical process in a national framework, so I will describe sports in the US and Latin America. Placing the history of sport in this context emphasizes the significance of basketball in Oaxacalifornia communities. Through basketball I will show how sport captures culture, people and a region that is influenced by nationality.

**Ethnohistory**

Older Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles and Oaxaca described the sport of basketball as activities men did together. Lola’s father said men used to play basketball on a dirt court in Comogocho, and they would often gamble on games against neighboring towns. I asked a middle-aged man in Los Angeles named Luis Carlos when people first played basketball in Oaxaca. He dated it back four generations and my calculations placed the sport in Mexico before it was invented! In his imagination and memory the sport of basketball has always been a part of Oaxacan culture and identity. Oaxacans took the sport and conceptualized its advantages as a social practice, and then renegotiated it in their own terms. They created a cultural practice that creates culture that they identify with. Migrants and their children play basketball because their parents and extended family play. Community members of Comogocho in Oaxaca practice the same culture and habits. The elders talk about basketball with a nostalgia that incorporates family and community. Their kids and extended family play because they played. I liked talking to the elders in Comogocho about basketball because they tied it to community and culture. Through narrative these memories are extracted, analyzed, and placed in transference of
time; however, the constructions of time and memory are eluded to a specific point in the past. Time and memory can be collected in various research performances, but the production of memory analyzed in its context. I wanted to place basketball in a framework that developed a more complete construction and interpretation of my research data. The memory of Oaxacan players could be viewed in terms of “nostalgic” responses. Kathleen Stewart (1992) regards nostalgia, “like the economy it runs with, is everywhere. But it is a cultural practice, not a given content; its forms, meanings, and effects shift with the content – it depends on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present” (p. 245). Therefore, the responses of Oaxacan player’s regarding the past may have an effect on my interpretations of basketball in the present. “History is spatialized and space itself is a rationalized, universalized surface” (Stewart, 1992, p. 258). Migrants and their children in the Oaxacan community share a certain experience in basketball that is nostalgic, for regarding the occurrence of basketball the way it was before in Oaxaca, before it solidified into a pictured memory, and how the sport creates culture that their children can use to create their own identity is satisfying and place themselves in a mark of perfection (Stewart, 1992).

The incorporation of basketball in Mexico follows cultural institutions like religion that provide meaning to people’s lives. There is little work on the history of basketball in Mexico, but my previous research suggests that Catholic missionaries used basketball as a social tool to assimilate people and build the Mexican nation state (Rios, 2008). In previous research I have correlated basketball and its use of a ball and hoop goal with the ancient ball game played throughout Mesoamerica during the Classic period (2,000 BCE-1697 CE). In addition similar ball games like ullama and pelota mixteca are
still played today and require a rubber ball. The correlation between basketball and Mesoamerican ball games is still under question, but my future investigations will evaluate the relationship between basketball and other Mesoamerican ball games.

Basketball made an impact on Mexico, especially in the southern states where the sport became embedded in the cultural practices. It is common to see a basketball court near or very close to the cathedral or municipal center in most towns. Basketball is a team sport that requires cooperation between team members to gain a tactical advantage over the opposition. To coerce Men to work together early 20th century politicians saw the social advantages of basketball and thought it could be promoted in small towns. The national agenda of providing a uniformed identity of Mexicano was problematic in southern states like Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Chiapas. These states contained diverse indigenous populations with numerous languages and cultures, but more importantly these regions are highly diverse ecologically and access throughout the region has been difficult since the colonization period (Vinson, 2001). Therefore, national ethnic identity in Oaxaca consists of private, familial, and public expressions. These national identities are negotiated at the political level where the power of policy may dictate a financial advantage for a specified ethnic group.

Indigenous groups in Oaxaca and their relationship with the state and nation have a significant impact on political, social or economic capital for specific groups. For example, Costeños on the Pacific coast of La Costa Chica in Oaxaca have historically been marginalized by the state and nation and they currently battle multiple ethnic identities that are affected by the political agenda of the state and nation (Jerry, 2006).

The sport of basketball provided the sierra region of Oaxaca with an opportunity to
express individual and communal identity in a public space. First, at the local level basketball paralleled cultural practices like *cooperacion* and *cargo*. These socioeconomic and political practices work as leveling mechanism that encouraged community members to actively participate in activities that benefit the community. Oaxaqueños took the sport of basketball and made it a distinctive part of other cultural celebrations.

European sports in Latin America displayed cultural characteristics that nations assigned cultural value to. This is conveyed in the beliefs of some Latin American politicians and policy makers that imported sports as a method of assimilation. Sports were viewed as a social mechanism that could assist in the advancement and modernization of society. Amateur sports were preferred over professional forms because they could become symbols. These symbols meant the selected groups were achieving new levels of sophistication and status (Arbena, 20002). The relationship of sport as a tool for behavioral modification was not new, twentieth century Spanish efforts to suppress Mesoamerican ball games was a result of the games tie to cultural values. Joseph L. Arbena (2002) has argued that “The North American influence on sports and physical culture in Latin America can be understood only in this wider context of an already ongoing process of dissemination, assimilation and adaptation that had its origins to a large extent in Britain and its empire” (p. 53).

The North American sport that historically has had the greatest impact on Latin America is baseball. The game of baseball is derived from British stick ball games, and the sport grew during the mid-19th century. However, it was not until the late 19th and early 20th century that the game of baseball gained wide spread recognition in Latin America. The impact of baseball is best illustrated in Cuba where the sport became a
symbol to differentiate native Cubans from Spanish. Baseball and cultural heritage was meant to admire the political, technological, and economic advancements of the United States. In 1997, 201 players from Latin America played for teams in Major League Baseball (MLB): 89 Dominicans, 42 Puerto Ricans, 39 Venezuelans, five Cubans, and others from numerous Caribbean islands. The 2000 major league season began with Latinos accounting for over 20 percent of the rosters (MLB, 1998). The adoption of baseball in Latin America is more an expression of cultural diffusion rather than cultural imperialism or colonialism. Professional baseball players from the MLB still travel and play in leagues during the off season in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Venezuela. The style of the game in the Caribbean is different and players have diffused their own style of power and speed into the traditional technical style of American baseball. Therefore, North American sports like baseball and basketball have been diffused in Latin America. Basketball in Oaxaca is a cultural practice that has transformed parts of the game that effect style of play.

The evolution of sport in Latin America has been culturally intertwined with European and American influence. In Latin America and around the globe soccer has a history of European influence. In fact, the World Cup soccer championship is held every four years and remains the only professional sports competition that yields a true world champion. The World Cup was held in Mexico in 1986 and is symbolic of the nation’s incorporation in a global sport. The introduction of soccer was an early European influence and the launch of baseball was purely a North American objective, but another sport that has continued to gain recognition in Latin America is basketball. The continued exposure of basketball across the globe has influenced many countries to begin basketball
traditions. In fact, as of the 2004 season, the National Basketball League (NBA, 2004) contained 81 players from 34 countries. With the continued growth of basketball it has gained wide interest in other parts of the world. However, only one player in the NBA hails from Mexico, Eduardo Najera who plays for the Charlotte Bobcats (NBA, 2009). Najera was born in Meoqui, Chihuahua, Mexico, and played collegiate basketball at the University of Oklahoma. Basketball is endorsed at the professional level in Mexico and has been a large part of the reconstruction of sports ideology and national identity in Mexico.

On March 11, 2000 the *La Liga Nacional de Baloncesto Professional* (LNBP) was established in Durango, Mexico. This is the first and only professional basketball organization to operate in Mexico and as of 2011 the league consisted of 12 teams. Financial investors that reside in the northern or gulf states in Mexico sponsor most of the LNBP professional teams. In March of 2010, I met players from the US who played internationally for teams in Monterey and Veracruz. I met them at a tournament in Ixtlan, Oaxaca. One of the players named Anton was from my hometown in California and played competitively against my younger brother during high school. We quickly became friends and talked about basketball. Anton and some of his teammates told me that the LNBP was in a bad financial situation. The teams were struggling to make payments to their players and the travel and sleeping accommodations were non-existent at times. The league plays a limited tournament schedule for a four-month period from August to November. Many teams have players from the US and other countries in Latin America. Although the league is backed by international organizations (FMB, COPABA, FIBA) it is not considered a strong league in comparison to some leagues in South America.
(Argentina and Brazil). Since the US and Mexico share a border and the NBA is the most recognized league in the world it would seem natural for Mexico to have one of the most competitive leagues in Latin America but this is not the case. The history of basketball in Mexico has a specific history tied to modernization, politics, and religion. Therefore, the sport of basketball contains a special history in Mexico and the state of Oaxaca.

The development of basketball in the US is a combination of amateur sport and religion. The history of basketball is closely tied to the Catholic Church and their educational schools and colleges. For example, Julie Byrne (2003) conducted an ethnohistory of Women’s basketball at a Catholic college named Immaculata. Byrne researched the 1970s women’s basketball team and their accomplishments. The city of Philadelphia was home to many Catholic immigrants in the early twentieth century. In order to find religious solidarity for their children many immigrants attended Catholic high schools and colleges that lied outside the urban dwellings. The “Mighty Mackie’s” of Immaculata honed religious faith in an educational setting, but also relinquished their deeds in sporting activities, namely basketball. Although there were no structured institutions for women’s sports in the early twentieth century, the women’s institution provided the field from which women and sports could excel. The college atmosphere provided the bridging of athletics, religion, and community. In the early twentieth century Philadelphia had multiple factors that provided the city with a working identity. Many immigrant communities settled in Philadelphia and other big cities (New York, Boston, and Chicago). They practiced social activities that associated with an ethnic or cultural identity. A majority of immigrants (Irish, German, Italian, and Polish) found support in Philadelphia using religious networks. These Catholic institutions provided communities
support that was obsolete in other desolate areas of the country. In the urban dwellings of Philadelphia basketball became a source of identity for many immigrant youth because it was an activity that united multiple representations of Catholicism (Byrne, 2003). The sport of basketball was a lower/middle class sport, and ethnic groups in other major cities utilized sport to make the cultural transition easier on first generation immigrant youth. For example, the original Boston Celtics were Jewish youth that played in New York amateur basketball leagues (Nelson, 1998). Catholics in Philadelphia utilized basketball as a social tool to unify communities, but forms of identity are created through sport. In a functional sense basketball builds a shared identity for communities. The nation of Mexico was interested in the same outcomes. However, I focus on the individual perspective in Los Angeles to understand how identity is formed out of the game.

**Movers and Non-Movers**

Many Oaxacan migrants in Los Angeles live in complex world of migrant mentalities with immigrant realities. The history of movers and non-movers has created a culture of migration that is influenced by social and economic patterns. Cohen and Sirkeci (2011) use the terms “movers” and “non-movers” to describe internal and international migration patterns. The authors contrast human mobility and terminology (migrant, indigenous, illegal, etc.) using multiple examples from around the globe. They develop a critical understanding of why individuals and or households decide to migrate (movers) and why some stay (non-movers). Changing macro and micro processes have affected migration in the Oaxacan community. My research focused on the development of identity in migrant social fields defined by socioeconomic contexts. For example, when a young 4th generation Oaxacan basketball player was asked what it felt like to
play for a community in Oaxaca he responded, “Oh it’s cool.” Although he has never been to Oaxaca he defines himself as Oaxaqueño and not Latino, Hispanic, Chicano, or Mexican. Although the term Oaxaqueño describes a state with numerous regional and indigenous identities new generations of Oaxaqueños are faced with all-encompassing forms of indigenous individuality.

Oaxacan identity is locally defined in Los Angeles. First, migrants and their children are motivated by cultural experiences in their household environment. Second, the daily experiences with family and extended family shape this cultural environment. Therefore, cultural practices like basketball create a specific social environment for daily experiences and identity creation. Generations of Oaxacan children participate in basketball because the sport is cultural and identity develops from participation. For some of the younger generation this extends to nothing more than being Oaxaqueño and listening to parents in Los Angeles, but for others it means much more. They frequently visit their family’s town in Oaxaca to participate in cultural functions. Oaxacan identity is locally defined and not motivated by a force of transnational migration networks. Identity for Oaxaqueño migrants and their children is developed and created through the process of daily experiences in the US. These experiences are shaped by spatial and physical boundaries, but I argue identity is an outcome of these cultural experiences.

Changing US policies have further hindered physical and social flows across United States’ borders. Senate bill 1070 in Arizona and bill 56 in Alabama have increased negative perceptions of migrants and elevated risks of migration between national and regional borders. The heightened awareness for migrants and their children is balanced between opportunity and high-risk actions. While modern technological
advancements have allowed for the digital flow of culture and capital, the stalling of physical movement between spaces has increased migrant’s own focuses on the “local.” Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles have developed a community that reinforces culture and creates emotional comfort (migrant mentalities), but there are real consequences to living in the US without legal documentation (immigrant realities). This became apparent one evening when my team practiced at the California courts. We were waiting for a court to become available when Andres received a phone call, and from the tone in his voice I knew it was unpleasant news. Andres turned to me and said his younger brother Esteban was stopped at an “identification checkpoint” by the El Monterey police. These “valid driver license” checkpoints are common in California and the surrounding states. I could tell Andres was upset and worried. His brother was in danger of being thrown in jail or worse. If he was detained and deported he would be leaving behind his wife, two daughters and newborn in Los Angeles. A routine drive to the basketball courts after a hard day of work quickly turned into an “immigrant reality” for Andres. Andres’ car was towed and he was unable to ever retrieve it, but he showed up later at the park to practice. He played with a chip on his shoulder that evening. These are the local daily experiences that shape identity in Los Angeles.

Oaxacan ethnic identification in Los Angeles speaks to nurtured regional ties between migrants/immigrants and their communities of origin. These regional ties establish a broadly defined and somewhat defused indigenous identity in the Los Angeles that marks most people hailing from southern Mexico, but the expression of ethnic identity is motivated by the development of community. Local, national, and transnational influences lead to the existence of multiple authenticities in transnational
communities. While the imagining of indigeneity in home communities may depend on territorially based understandings of ethnicity and tradition, a modern expression of indigeneity in Los Angeles’ Oaxacan community is shaped by local transformations of traditional cultural practices such as basketball. Rather than shedding tradition, in the context of the local, in this case Los Angeles, the idea of traditional finds new life and expression in the younger generations. Basketball is a co-development of indigeneity and modernity that is tied to perceptual histories of the old and young. The cultural foundation of basketball has changed over time with migration, political and economic change. I’m interested in how generations of Oaxacans in Los Angeles associate with these cultural practices and outcomes of identity.

In Los Angeles the cooperation of community is indigenous in a traditional sense but basketball provides individuals an avenue to re-think traditional forms of indigenous identity in a modern urban context. In the Oaxacan community basketball has been used as a vehicle to transmit traditional senses of indigeneity in modern social contexts; furthermore, these forms of identity emphasize the traditional scope of indigenous identity, while working in various urban forms of identity.

When movement between spatial boundaries is hindered by global policies we are left with communities working through new forms of cultural associations and identity development. The Oaxacan community in Los Angeles is coping with changing times but maintaining its indigenous Oaxaqueño continuity through basketball tournaments. To borrow Paul Gilroy’s (1993) terms, basketball becomes a “route” through which indigeneity, perhaps re-imagined as Oaxaqueño, is transmitted or “re-rooted” within a new local space. In this way indigeneity becomes an expression of identity for younger
generations through basketball and community. For some members of the Oaxacan community they are actors performing on a new stage of being Oaxacan in Los Angeles. There are transnational outcomes that have encompassed the group during a global moment. However, these are outcomes of cultural practices that are motivated by the lived experiences of migrants in a specific socioeconomic environment. I understand and consent that there are social relationships that span across borders, seemingly these relationships of individuals and communities still exist; however, I contend that this relationship previously thought to develop from transnational processes is not static or independent of the macro and micro processes that create changes to the development of cultural identity within communities.

Oaxacan basketball has allowed for transmission of identity from one locale to another, in effect transplanting the local. I argue that the Oaxaqueño community is a space in Los Angeles where Oaxacan indigeneity is imagined and realized. For example, in Karsten Paerregaard’s (2008) work with global Peruvian migration he discovers that Peruvian communities in the US establish local religious brotherhoods that define new regulations on participation in cultural practices including religious processions. These new regulations, like women participation in specific parts of the procession, depend on the interactions of individuals in the local community. The Lord of Miracles religious procession is a process that creates culture for the local social environment in the US, and in some cases there are outcomes of this cultural event that are transnational, but the event is motivated by local practice (Paerregaard, 2008). Therefore, in some cases these cultural outcomes are transnational but they are not exclusively dependent on transnational relationships. While a transnational framework has been sufficient to
theorize flows between locales, Los Angeles’ Oaxacan community has moved beyond this model, and while becoming in a sense diaspora, micro processes have become important to prominent indigenous identities. Indigenous identities have been re-imagined, adding local experiences to traditional memories, in effect re-creating indigeneity. As one young man explained “I am Zapotec.” Although informed by the imagination of some distant homeland, the realities of this Zapotec identity are encompassed by the daily, lived experiences of Urban Los Angeles. In this sense an indigenous identity is a process of local daily-lived experiences from past and current situations. Historically in Mexico and Latin America indigeneity has been a mark of rural-ness, as cultural politics have centered on issues of tradition and communal rights to territory, as well as conceptions of folk cultural elements.

While transnational models have illuminated the effects of global flows on specific locales, these transnational models have not focused on the ability of local populations to re-imagine tradition and identity in the context of specific local experiences. The re-imagining of traditional cultural elements has allowed Los Angeles’ Oaxacan community to create themselves in an urban landscape. This space re-shapes the past, or at the very least places the past in a context of culture, and allows for the imagining of a present indigeneity in a local context. For Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles indigeneity is rooted in community, and basketball becomes one of the routes through which identity is re-imagined and expressed in urban settings, and becomes a representation of “Oaxaqueño-ness.” My research on identity in Los Angeles is integrated in identity studies and ethnography. I established working relationships with long-term informants to capture how identity is imagined for players and their families. This
ethnography follows basketball from Los Angeles to Oaxaca and examines identity creation out of this cultural practice. My research on Oaxacan basketball is continuous and provides a unique analysis of identity creation.
Chapter 3: Exploratory Ethnography

**Ethnographic Narrative**

This chapter follows my ethnographic process from researcher to player. I began following one of the Oaxacan basketball leagues in 2004. In 2004 there were a few community leaders that organized basketball tournaments in Los Angeles. On the west side of Los Angeles Zeus Garcia organized basketball tournaments for Oaxacan teams from the central valley of Oaxaca. In the mid-city Los Angeles, Don Otomil and Luis Carlos ran another league that consisted of mostly teams from the sierra region of Oaxaca. During 2005-2007 I followed *Union de Communidades Serranas Oaxaqueñas* (UCSO) and conducted my research for Master’s thesis. Following the completion of my master’s research I continued to work closely with Luis Carlos and other members of this organization. Both leagues are competitive and the leaders of each organization work together on some occasions but very few teams participate in both leagues. The *Orginacion Regional de Oaxaca* (ORO) and the *Union de Communidades Serranas Oaxaqueñas* (UCSO) work closely together to organize a seasonal league for the sierra region teams that play from February through March. This league runs for most of the year and it only takes breaks during the more popular religious celebrations and fiestas in Oaxaca.

From 2009 to 2011 I followed the *Liga Oaxaqueño* directed by individuals from ORO and UCSO. I decided to follow this league because I worked with Don Otomil, Luis...
Carlos and had conversations with other members in past research. I decided to follow this league because Lola and I participated and played in the tournaments. These tournaments were opportunities for communities to come together and provide a positive experience for their children and larger Latino community. However, these tournaments are not easy operations because they involve a lot of time and commitment. There are three tournament days, they only played on Sunday, so each tournament last three weeks. Many members of the community and directors from organizations spend most of their free time assisting with the tournament.

The physical set up for an Oaxacan basketball tournament is complex. A typical tournament day lasts 12 hours and starts at 6 o’clock in the morning. Volunteers and tournament organizers arrive at the park early in the morning to start food preparation, basketball operations, and prepare tables and the gym. The park is a descent size for its location but it accommodates a lot of activities on the weekends. The park is located along the 10 and 101 freeways in LA and has a baseball diamond that doubles as a soccer field, two outdoor basketball courts (no lights), a small gymnasium, a playground and separate swing area (see Figure 1). The early arrival at the park is necessary because games usually start at 8 o’clock in the morning. There are a lot of games to play so everything must be set up before the first game. In addition to the tournament there are usually soccer games on the field next to the courts that attract more people to the small park. There is a small gazebo at the park where the community sells food and drinks. The kids and veterans games usually consume most of the first day of tournaments (first Sunday). The men’s games usually start at 8 o’clock sharp on the second tournament day (second Sunday) and the host must arrive early and set up hours before the day begins.
Busy tournament days are sometimes 13 or 14 hour work days for some organizers. This work is all voluntary and organizers do not receive any compensation for their work. Some positions in the organization are permanent. These positions carry social and political power in the community so UCSO (*Unidos Sierra Communidades de Oaxaca*) and the sports commission board sometimes provide small compensation for these positions (Rios, 2008). However, most volunteers and organizers do not receive any monetary compensation. Organizing the games takes a lot of effort and although there is no direct monetary compensation individuals sometimes feel that their reward is the betterment of their community in Los Angeles and Oaxaca.

The basketball tournaments are only possible with the help from numerous members of the community. Jimmy is one of the volunteer members. He is one of the hardest working members of the community and he volunteers numerous hours on the weekend to make these tournaments possible. Jimmy creates the tournament brackets for all of the tournaments hosted by ORO and UCSO. Jimmy is in his twenties and his parents are from two separate towns in Oaxaca. Jimmy has created the tournaments brackets and scheduled games for the past five years. This is a difficult job because the number of teams that compete in each tournament is inconsistent, so new brackets must be completed for every tournament day. They are often adjusted each week according to which teams show up and which teams join the tournament late. Jimmy creates separate tournaments for each level of play so if there are a lot teams participating at each level of play the brackets take a long time to complete. First, Jimmy counts the number of teams and makes sure their tournament applications are complete with the necessary information. Next, Jimmy draws out the tournament bracket by hand on a normal sheet of
paper and assigns the first game a number rank. Then the captains of each team are called together for a meeting by one of the organizers of the tournament. Numbers that represent the number rank for the first game are scribbled on a small piece of paper, crumpled up and put into a hat for a lottery selection. The captains take turns pulling a number and they are assigned that number rank for the tournament bracket. In this system the lottery number selection is important because the games are ranked blind; meaning the lowest number correlates to the highest ranked team and therefore the tournament bracket path favors higher ranked teams. Jimmy fills in the tournament bracket after each captain draws a number and then he writes out the order of games to be played and schedules which court they are played on. After the tournament brackets and game schedules are completed they are posted on the side of the gymnasium wall for players and spectators. This is a major part of the success of a tournament and Jimmy donates a lot of his time to assist with the tournaments.

Many community members volunteer or participate in the tournament for numerous reasons. Cooperation is a part of Oaxacan culture. Participation and cooperation are expected as a part of what defines citizenship and belonging (Cohen 1999). Oaxaqueños will assist with fundraisers whenever they are needed with little need for coercion. Basketball in Los Angeles incorporates many traditions and values that are brought from Oaxaca. Political traditions are customary actions practiced by Oaxacans in the US (Cohen et al., 2009; Kearney, 1995; Mountz & Wright, 1996; Pérez, 2003; Stephen, 2005). The volunteer work called *tequío* is administered to adult males who take turns workings on projects that assist their community. Typically this can range from building roads, painting the local cathedral or digging trenches for plumbing. As a
member of the community individuals must participate in this volunteer work or risk the possibility of alienation. These tournaments are complex cultural activities, but they are also a sports competition.

The Oaxacan basketball games played in Los Angeles are competitive environments for most athletes. Tournament Sundays are opportunities for players to display their talents in a public arena. Games are intense and since most teams compete against each other on a regular basis small rivalries have developed between some of the better teams. One player from a team called Xoxa (pronounced "Ho-ha") told me winning tournaments is bragging rights. Rivalries in sports contain a rich history between nations, universities and amateur sports clubs. USA and Mexico national soccer matches challenge national identity and loyalty for many Mexican-Americans/Latinos/Chicanos. University of California Berkley and University of Stanford football games inspire students at each university to honor and protect their university by any means necessary. Sometimes amateur soccer league matches in Southern California between teams lead to brawls that draw blood (Kleszynski, 2006). My first experience watching a tournament reaffirmed that sports are a means for athletes to compete. In the fall of 2004, I attended a holiday tournament in Los Angeles. During one of the games an argument erupted between two of the players. The score was close and the game was decided in the last few possessions. The two players argued over a referees call and a shoving match followed. The argument quickly turned into a wrestling match and both men rolled around the park grass. These players are athletes and they train for basketball tournaments during their spare time. There is an assumption that most Oaxacan men are drinkers and perhaps even alcoholics, however, I witnessed men drinking alcohol on very few occasions at the
basketball tournaments and most players reject drinking as they are at the tournament to
compete at a high level. From 2004-2011, I have seen numerous arguments, shoving
matches and a few fights at the basketball tournaments. However, most of these
occurrences are strictly sports based and are reactionary responses to a highly competitive
match. I do not argue that the competitive nature in sports requires violence or makes
people violent. Paul Gilroy (2001) has compared highly competitive sports matches to
war like activities. I believe the competitive nature of the sport translates to positive
experiences that players and members of the Oaxacan community use to excel.

In sports there are winners and losers; victory is sweet and joyful, and defeat is
bitter and painful. The Oaxacan basketball league in Los Angeles plays almost every
weekend during the year, so the players constantly deal with these emotional and both
mental and physical ups and downs. During my observations I have witnessed tears of
joy and tears of grief. I have seen players fight each other with fists and embrace one
another with hugs and high fives. I have seen mothers kiss their child in congratulations
or comfort them with besitos (little kisses) and words of encouragement. There are boy’s
teams that play in the level varonil infantile (boys under 13 years of age). Three teams
(San Miguel Albejilló, San Pedro Macuillá, and Zatchilló el Alto) typically compete for
the top spot in each tournament, and the games produce some of the most entertaining
sports action. My love for the sport of basketball was rekindled after watching either of
these teams play close games. However, one very special moment has stood out amongst
the rest in terms of the emotional highs and lows player’s show in this competitive sport.
San Miguel Albejilló played San Pedro Matajuillá in the championship game of a very
important tournament. Both teams had good players and one superstar. San Miguel
Albejilló and San Pedro Matajuillá both had a superior player on the floor and they both wore the number ten. It is a common tradition in futbol for the best player on the team to wear the number ten; I’m not sure if this was the intention of the young players or their coaches, but it did make me ponder the correlation to soccer. The game was close and the teams exchanged the leads. With seconds remaining San Miguel Albejilló took the lead, then the superstar player for San Pedro Matajuillá missed a last second shot to win the game. The family members of San Miguel Albejilló erupted in cheers and ran to hug their players but I couldn’t let my eyes drift from the San Pedro Matajuillá superstar. With his back to me, he stood there for a moment as the crowd rushed passed him to congratulate his opponents. Then he made a slight turn toward me in the direction of his coach and other teammates and walked slowly with his shoulders shrugged like he had the pressure of the world was on top of him. He came closer and I saw the emotion set in, the tears building inside him, but they had not reached the surface of his eyes just yet. His father gave him a pat on the head in comfort and congratulated him on his productive play. A few minutes passed and the young boy had still not let the tears inside free. San Pedro Matajuillá headed toward the exit and they exchange handshakes with the winning San Miguel Albejilló team. Both teams walked toward the exit, the superstar from the winning San Miguel Albejilló team ran up to the superstar from San Pedro Matajuillá and put his arm around his losing opponents shrugged shoulders. The boy finally let his tears out and a few rolled down his eye. The two players slowly walked with their arms around each other’s shoulders and made their way for the exit. This moment reemphasized the statement made to me that the sport of basketball is about family (Rios, 2008). Competition is fierce and players not only play for themselves, but also for their family.
and towns they represent on the front of their jerseys. These two kids symbolized family in its purest sense because although they compete on a weekly basis there is still a mutual respect for the game and each other. This symbolizes new identities that are created out of the cultural practice of basketball. There is an association with Oaxaca, the sierra norte region, and the ethnic relationship of Zapotec. But these are cultural connections established in Los Angeles between the player and his family or community.

There are many cultural factors that contribute to the development of a team. Most teams are family related, so players are sometimes siblings, cousins, or other family members. They begin to play at an early age so they develop a lot of chemistry over time and teams and family are close. However, social and political disputes can get in the way of typical basketball operations. My friend Juan is good player but he has a few options when it comes to choosing a team to play for. Juan’s parents are from two different towns in the sierra so he can choose between both teams. Juan has an extremely difficult time deciding which team to play for in big tournaments. Juan’s mother is from Comogocho and his father is from a nearby town in the sierra. As a teenager Juan played for his father’s town with his cousins and other close relatives. He played in major tournaments in Oaxaca and Los Angeles and became a champion for his father’s town. Juan is 20 years old now and he doesn’t take basketball as seriously anymore. He still loves to play, but he turned most of his attention to coaching basketball. Juan received an offer to coach at his High School alma mater. He coaches the boy’s freshman basketball team and assists with the varsity team. Juan helps out at the Oaxacan tournaments when he attends and participates in them. However, Juan doesn’t count on the sport to help him achieve his life-long goals and aspirations. Juan hopes to finish his college degree, then teach and
coach at his former High School, but Juan was born in Oaxaca so he hopes legislation like the Dream Act\textsuperscript{13} can assist him in the future. When Juan was 15 he played in a tournament during my first fieldwork experience. Juan played for the men’s team and started at the point guard position for the annual Thanksgiving Day tournament. The winning team of this tournament receives a turkey in addition to prize money. Juan played for his father’s town and his team won the tournament. After the game a local Spanish journalist interviewed Juan. The journalist was my friend Gabriel Martinez, but we did not know each other at the time. A few years later Juan’s cousin named Larry convinced him to switch teams and play with his Mother’s town, Comogocho. Larry’s mother is from Comogocho but his father is from Guatemala, so he only has one family and one team to play basketball with. Juan and Larry decided to play together on the same team and invite some of their family members as well. Andres was asked to coach the team and in 2009 he asked me if I wanted to play with the team. The team already consisted of 10-12 players so I decided not to play at the time, but it was good to see old friends like Juan and Larry. In 2009, Larry and Juan had graduated high school and playing basketball was just a family thing to do, so playing together on the same team made it more special for them. Juan and Larry both played competitively in high school and they love the sport as much as any basketball junkie. This reinforces that basketball is closely tied to family and for many Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles the sport is cultural. The sport also reflects the cultural conflicts younger generations of Oaxacan in Los Angeles face. Basketball is a setting where identity is contested and where traditional cultural

\textsuperscript{13} Senate Bill S.952 is described as the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act. http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d112:S.952.
practice vie with their modern interpretations. The result is identity and one that is formed through sport, and it may engage the transnational but it is an outcome of local motivations (and see Paerregaard 2008).

I have studied Oaxacan basketball from 2004-2012 and my understanding of the rules grows with every new tournament year. However, there are some consistent rules that relate to the structure of the game in both Oaxaca and Los Angeles. First, the games consist of two 15-minute periods and the clock only stops during timeouts. Each team receives one timeout per period. If there is a tie at the end of the game an extra 5-minute period is played. The team rosters are filled out with names before team captains draw numbers for the tournaments brackets. It takes a minimum of five players to compete in a game, but each team consists of 5-12 players. Every player must have a jersey with a number between 1 and 15. Teams can only make substitutions during a stoppage in play (foul committed or out of bounds). Each team is required to referee the game following theirs, so teams volunteer one of their players to referee. If a team does not provide a referee the rules stipulate that the team will be fined, or they must forfeit a specified point total that is applied to their next game. For example, if a team does not provide a referee for a game they may be fined a monetary fee or they might start their next game with a point deficit. Players receive a maximum of five fouls, and after players exceed the foul limit they are disqualified from the remainder of the game. At most tournaments there are no scoreboards that display the time or score, so a lot of screaming and yelling during the game is information for the players. At Toberman Park the tournaments sometimes resemble organized chaos, and from a distance they appear to be unstructured. There is
structure to the tournament and it is hard to observe as an outsider, but there is a method to the madness.

The style of play in Oaxacan basketball is different than the fundamental style taught in many sports organization in the US. Basketball style is different between regions in the US, and the cultural style of basketball is different in urban and suburban neighborhoods. Basketball is a physical sport and the best “street” parks in the US require mental toughness, superior physical and athletic ability (Boyd & Shropshire, 2000). In my opinion the style of Oaxacan basketball parallels the speed and toughness of hockey more than any other sport. Players are given five personal fouls in a game and it is not uncommon for players to exceed the foul limit. This is due to the physicality of the game and the contact in Oaxacan basketball is consistent in Los Angeles, Oaxaca, and New Jersey. The physical contact between players is viewed and widely conceded. I have always played in physical games at parks and in high school gymnasiums. However, playing the Oaxacan basketball game was difficult for me because the style was different. I didn’t know how to play physical and not commit a foul against my opponent. Andres and the veterans on my team would tell me over and over again to play big and play strong “Juega Ben! Juega fuerte!” But I found it very difficult to play because I was not accustomed to the style of play in the Oaxacan league. I have adjusted my game to the style of play, but I learned that the game is about speed, angels, and shooting in the Oaxacan league.

The games are short in tournament play and the clock only stops for timeouts. Each team can substitute on any stoppage of play or made basket. The running clock, speed of the game, and style make playing the game a chaotic experience. During the
game players are not required to give the ball to the referee before passing the ball inbounds or after made shots. Therefore, a player cannot hesitate or assume play will be stopped during the game. This is a quick lesson I learned during my first game when the ball went off my fingertips out of bounds and the opposing player chased the ball down near the food benches, he then threw it inbounds across the court over my head to his teammate and scored. I looked around pondering the play because I assumed the player would have to give the ball to the referee before putting the ball in play, but I was wrong. Andres shouted at me “Ben? Que haces?” (Ben, what are doing?) I eventually figured out that there are no breaks in this style of play, and if a player assumes something even for a second they will be taken advantage of.

The eligibility of players is a common topic before tournaments. Organizers and coaches discuss the divisions players are allowed to play in, the teams they are allowed to play for, and the tournaments they can play in. Before every tournament there is always a discussion between coaches of the youth divisions to determine the age and eligibility of players. I have seen this discussion debated for minutes and sometimes hours. It is symbolic of the sociopolitical culture Oaxaqueños represent in Los Angeles and their hometowns in Oaxaca. These teams play each other on a weekly basis so it is always interesting to listen to the same discussion every week because the men provide interesting points. I have learned that the discussion is not completely about the eligibility of players, for it is a chance for the men to showcase their sociopolitical power in a cultural setting. Additionally, if coaches and towns have a good team it provides them with more sociopolitical power inside the community. Coaches, teams and players
receive respect on and off the court. I have never seen the men fight or disrespect one another and they always come to a resolution.

A sierra community hosts most Oaxacan basketball tournaments in Los Angeles. They work in conjunction with UCSO to raise money for their hometown organization, but basketball tournaments are not the only fundraising source for communities. Most tournament hosts sponsor a *baile* (dance) in addition to the basketball tournament. The dance is another opportunity for fundraising, but it also serves as social gathering that creates cohesion between members of the Oaxaqueño community. These dances are scheduled after the tournament is completed or when there is a break in the tournament schedule. Dances occur on Friday or Saturday night and they are typically held at a venue that the community has built a relationship with such as a church hall, community center, or veteran’s hall. Each dance brings local and sometimes international bands as entertainment, and they typically sell food and drinks in addition to the entertainment. The dances are an opportunity for family and friends to see each other, and for some young Oaxaqueños the dances provide an opportunity for romance. At dances I have been asked (sometimes forced) to dance with mothers, daughters, nieces, aunts, sister-in laws, etc. The teenage and young adults use the dances as an opportunity to spend time the person they are dating or potential partners. The basketball tournaments provide the same social environment but in a different way. At *bailes* I saw young couples dancing, falling in love, and older couples still in love. The social complexity of dances increases because the awards (trophies and cash prizes) for basketball tournament are presented at dances. Typically there are two bands that perform at dances, and between the first and second band there is a small intermission. Committee members from the host town usually take a
moment to address their community. First, they thank all volunteers and other members of the community for donating their time and energy to make the tournament and baile possible. Then they make general statements about the organization and its significance to the community in Los Angeles and Oaxaca. Next, they introduce the winners (1st-4th place) of the tournament and if a representative of the team is in attendance they shake the hand of the speaker and receive a trophy or cash prize. This is an interesting process because people applaud but sometimes it is apparent that some of the players are still affected by defeat. Chisme (gossip) is common practice at dances, so it was a good social setting to learn how social complexity works in the Oaxaqueño community.

Family is one common parallel in basketball tournaments, dances, parties, and other community fundraisers. These are family events and members not only donate time and energy into making these events possible, but they do it in reciprocal fashion. The interactions between community’s parallels the cultural practice of cooperacion (cooperation) in Oaxaca and members become reliant on one another to maintain cohesiveness in the group. This cohesiveness benefits the operations of the community on a larger scale and provides a positive image to the members and their children. Family remains at the center of these events, and it is cultural practice that generations of Oaxaqueños participate in. The Luz and Sol family graciously let me experience this wonderful feeling of family during my research.

My research is traditional ethnography, but the process in developing methodology and a systematic research agenda was difficult. My study took me down a path of discovering identity in subjects, the community, and myself before my ethnography began. It is this unique process of becoming part of the community that
made my research special to me. Many anthropologists have described approaches to ethnography, participant observation and the collection of field notes (Agar, 1980a; Burgess, 1984; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Small, 2009; Spradley, 1980). In my own research I have discovered that each piece of the ethnographic process is different. Certainly there is a specific viewpoint of the researcher (Marcus, 1992), a methodological approach that contributes to scientific inquiry (Agar, 1980a; Burgess, 1984), and numerous adjustments with research plans and relationships with subjects. My subjects ultimately defined my investigation of Oaxacan basketball. My ethnography is systematic and I had specific questions for my subjects. The data contained repetitive cultural themes that connected my project goals, developed outlines of formal and informal interview questions, and created a research approach that framed project themes. I used an iterative approach to the phenomenon of basketból Oaxaqueño that focused on basketball and allowed for cultural repetitions. I exhausted my research questions when the data and response to interview questions became repetitious (Small, 2009), and my focus on basketball and its relation to culture in Los Angeles and Oaxaca allowed my subjects to explain their culture through sport.

When I entered the field in Los Angeles or Oaxaca it was always a different experience. I entered the field as a researcher, photographer, player, family member, community member and friend. I had established relationships in the field during my previous research (2004-2007) so maintaining rapport with my main subjects was central to my research. I created a professional and social network in Los Angeles and Oaxaca that will allow me to build on my previous work. I will continue to work on future research projects concerning Oaxaqueños in the US and Mexico. This research follows
the sport of basketball from Los Angeles to Oaxaca. The daily lived experience of migrants and their children in Los Angeles framed my interpretation of my field site in Oaxaca. Therefore, my research project is holistic in its interpretation of fieldwork, methodology and the ethnographic narrative (Agar, 1980b, 1982, 1986). It is my intention that explaining my social and physical place in basketball and its relationship to constructing identity for migrants and their children crates an objective interpretation for the reader.

**Ethnographic Traditions**

I have never read or heard of a research plan that was conducted without flaws in fieldwork. My expectation of basketball in Los Angeles was overzealous in comparison to basketball I saw in Oaxaca City. I initially thought this research would allow for traditional participant observation approach; I would use participant observation alongside ethnography to examine the relationship of basketball tournaments in Los Angeles and Oaxaca City. During my research in Los Angeles I was fascinated by the unification of community and the cultural settings that allowed for the creation of identity. Most research projects use ethnography to develop narratives over time. My research is systematic so my research about Oaxaqueño culture and its ties to basketball led to more research questions about Oaxaqueño identity. My research changed as data collection provided additional means worth examining. I agree with Emile Durkheim and Lukes (1982) that research on social phenomena is not just an observation, but an interpretation of cultural mechanics by a person with a particular set of ideas and values. “Social phenomena must therefore be considered in themselves, detached from the conscious beings that form their own mental representations of them. They must be
studied from the outside, as external things, because it is in this guise that they present themselves to us” (Durkheim & Lukes, 1982, p. 70). My research is not entirely objective nor is it a first-person subjective analysis of sport and culture. My research developed through participation and cultural experiences, and this ethnography is a representation of basketball and culture. My research is a traditional ethnography of Oaxacan basketball and culture, but it also contributes to the constant interpretations of how anthropologists do research and write about it. Although my initial expectations of the study remained the same in interpretations of community and identity, research always takes unexpected twists and turns because research is a process of constant creation.

**Participant Observation**

My expectation of conducting traditional participant observation was altered during the first couple field days of observation. My first trip to my field site in Los Angeles was in the fall of 2004 during Thanksgiving weekend. I had carefully prepared a research plan and arrived in the field armed with interview questions and short surveys for subjects to complete. I imagined a highly structured and organized tournament with basic tournament amenities like hired officials, bleachers, a game clock, seats for players, bleachers for spectators, official jerseys for players, etc. However, when I arrived and saw the family members and local Oaxaqueños standing on the outer edges of the court, it quickly reminded me of my initial observations of a tournament I attended in San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca in the summer of 2005. The physical layout of the court and the physical arrangement of spectators were similar in both settings due to similar circumstances. First, both of these tournaments were held outside on outdoor basketball courts. Second, there is no designated area for spectators to sit during the game. There is
always a close relationship with players and the spectators because most of the time there is no coach.

This type of setting was beneficial for participant observation, but it was difficult to become involved as a researcher. If there were bleacher style seating for the outdoor tournaments, as a researcher, it would be easier to blend in with the other spectators and start short conversations. However, in an outdoor setting it is important to acknowledge the use of space in and around the court. These small clusters of groups are families, business owners, fellow paisanos, recent migrants, community organizers, non-Oaxaqueños, and curious ethnographers. It is more difficult to enter into a social community that has multiple dynamics that maintains a unified social identity. As an outside researcher, I was not able to mix in with the crowd and it took consecutive visits to Oaxacan tournaments and writing field notes before my presence at the tournaments was acknowledged. It took nearly a year until I felt my place in the community. My research required me to be passionate about my work, patient with my research plan, and persistence with repetitive visits and commitment to the basketball tournaments. Later, I received permission from lead community organizers and tournament directors to research Oaxacan basketball in Los Angeles and produce a documentary film Crossing Over: Basketball on the Border of Community with the data I collected (Rios, 2008).

Meta-Narrative

My study examines basketball, culture and identity among the Oaxaqueño communities in Los Angeles, California. I used traditional methods in anthropology to conduct my research. My ethnography is an interpretation of basketball, identity and community, but it also shows the process of research. Participant observation is a popular
method of ethnography, so my constructive interviews were positive experiences for my subject and I. I am an anthropologist twenty-four hours a day and I do not practice anthropology as a partial project. This representation of Oaxacan basketball is a product of my commitment as player and researcher. The process of doing ethnography is embedded in my work with Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles and Oaxaca. Robert J. Thornton (1992) describes the “wholeness” of ethnography and the difficulties obtained when trying to “represent” something to its fullest potential:

The fundamental and motivating problem of ethnography is how to use writing to bring the “everyday” into relation with “history” and “environment.” Since writing is a work of the imagination, it is in the imagination that the crucial synthesis between the microcosm and the macrocosm takes place. Unlike the zoologist who describes the mollusk before him, the ethnographer must imagine the “whole” that is society, and convey this imagination of wholeness to his reader along with the descriptions of places seen, speech heard, persons met. The description of wholes, however, is “description without place … a slight indifferent to the eye” (Thornton, 1992, p. 29).

I worked extensively as an anthropologist and researcher to develop an ethnography that represented basketball and Oaxacan culture. I used a combination of participant observation, video and photography to record the basketball. I believe the visual representation and my field notes create a vivid picture for the reader that represents the culture of basketball.
Explorative

I build on the long-term research (Cohen, 1999, 2004; Higgins & Coe, 2000; Kearney, 1996; Pérez, 1997; Stephen, 2007) to examine the development of identity for Oaxaqueños living in Los Angeles and Comogocho. My research has an ethnographic focus and my exposure to various forms of research has enabled me to develop a systematic analysis of Oaxaqueño identity. My ethnography is systematic because I developed a specific set of probing questions for interviews and established repetitive participation in cultural functions that centered on basketball. I used participant observation to discuss basketball as a producer of culture and sport as a foundational framework to analyze migration networks. Additionally, I build on the interpretations of community and household to describe basketball as culture and how it changes over time. I have discussed Latin American ethnography from the explanation of peasant communities as functional systems (objects of social order) to the process of peasant communities in social structure (subjects of social order). My ethnography is a systematic analysis of basketball and culture. I expanded on my previous research of basketball and transnational communities to examine basketball as cultural production and identity creation. I developed an interpretation of the Oaxacan basketball and community in Los Angeles during my previous research. My field work from 2009-2011 integrated my participation in basketball as a researcher and player to develop an understanding of how basketball creates culture for migrants and their children in Los Angeles. The interactions between scholar and teammate are an influential process and it was beneficial in describing what basketball means to Oaxaqueños at an individual and communal level.
In *Cooperation and Community* Jeffrey Cohen (1999) researches the community obligations placed on individuals in Santa Ana de la Valle, Oaxaca. The ideas of culture and exchange are applied to a traditional artisan community that has struggled with modern change. In Cohen’s analysis, the villagers in Santa Ana reinterpret and reinvent alternative modes of reciprocity, exchange, and production to fit the progressive change in social and economic markets. The cultural practice of gifting maintains the symbolic representation in the traditional sense, but the social and economic dynamics between households allows for the development of new identities of reciprocity. Cohen examined socioeconomic exchanges between households and the obligations of households to the community. *Tequio, cooperacion, servicio,* and *cargo* were all social systems of community work. Cancian (1965) recorded the cargo system in the Maya community of Zinacantan and described the social and economic inequalities that exist in the social system. On the other hand, Cohen’s work exemplifies how communal work and social service is embedded in traditional roles that must develop new socioeconomic identities as the traditional systems cope with modern impacts of capital market change. Other anthropologists describe the modern capital system and its effect on peasant community’s production of wealth (Kearney, 1996).

In *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry* Michael Kearney (1996) examines Mixteco peasant communities in Oaxaca to raise concerns on the global value placed on labor and the effects global markets have on emigration from small indigenous communities in Oaxaca. Kearney discusses past and future trends in anthropology’s description of peasant communities. Kearney’s interpretation of peasantry was one of the first major works that addressed concepts of representation; the way anthropologists represent
indigenous communities in their work, but also how indigenous communities dealt with representation to outsiders. García Canclini (1993) analyzes the transition of fiestas, public events, and artisan products from traditional purposes to a sole production to outsiders, but Kearney builds on this idea to discuss how the communities and individuals represent themselves in this system and how it can be seen as a type of social and cultural resistance. Kearney devotes time to the concepts of value, power, and class. His conceptions of value and power in the peasant community express the historical contributions (pre and post-colonial) that structure the social difference in indigenous communities.

Individuals in indigenous communities express difference through the multiple social symbolic forms of resistance; historical processes that influence modern negotiations of cultural change shape meaning, individuals, households, and community. “These identities assume cultural-specific forms as genders, ethnicities, races, and so forth, as shaped by specific historical configurations of the distribution of value-power; and indeed, one of the de facto functions of such refractions of class is to occult the primacy of class in the structuring of difference, a primacy it is the task of theory and ethnography to recover.” (Kearney, 1996, p. 163)

I think this excerpt captures the change in ethnography from communities and individuals as objects of local constructions of social systems to the subjects of human stratification in a global system of exploitation and indifference. Other ethnographic approaches have taken the concepts of inequality to examine the modern changing in

June Nash (2001) conducted fieldwork in small peasant communities surrounding the city of San Cristobal, Chiapas. She was a student of Sol Tax (1937, 1953) and examined globalization and the strategies imposed by capitalist systems in indigenous Maya communities. Nash does not stop at the capitalist market; she analyzes the effects of capitalism on the social mobility of indigenous groups and situates the social struggle and the reaction of political resistance imposed by indigenous groups against their state and nation. “Our theoretical premises must recognize both the structural imperatives of colonial and postcolonial systems in which indigenous peoples were encapsulated and the indigenous search for a cultural base from which to defend themselves and generate collective action” (Nash, 2001, p. 39). The political agenda in ethnography was absent in previous research in Mesoamerican and I have seen ethnographic discourse change in the last 15 years in anthropology. Through this type of political approach anthropologists transitioned the concepts of resistance, reinvention, struggle, and indigenous identity to relationships with the state, nation, and empire. The mobilization of social groups and civil disobedience to state and national forces became interest of research for many anthropologists during this time because the indigenous demand for equality is a historical struggle. Other anthropologists discuss indigenous land rights and concepts of ownership from the viewpoint of the state, nation, community, and peasant owner (Pérez, 2003).

Land rights and ownership have been a constant social, economic, and political struggle for peasant communities since the colonial era. Ramona Pérez (2003) discussed
the impact of article 27 on indigenous land rights in Atzompa, Oaxaca. The demands of
tending of the land by the community, state, and nation in terms of *ejido* lands
(communal property) are stressful situations for indigenous households. When we factor in
the modern concepts of production tangled with traditional values the “ownership” of land is
further tangled in old historical ties and new changes in global markets. Any arguments over
land titles with community members and the state instantly becomes a political issue. Ethnography
has the capability to explain the internal struggles between community households and the
political issues with state and nation government. I think ethnography is Mesoamerican
maintains a slow process of cultural change and other anthropologists have researched the
cultural change that occurs in indigenous households when they become part of the international
market (Stephen, 2005, 2007).

dynamics in migrant households. With transnational households ethnography becomes a
multi-national discussion based around traditional culture. The personal relationship to “home”
and the psychological effects of migration, living abroad, and maintaining community and
household relationships is a powerful story, and these ethnographic accounts should be
recorded by anthropologists to determine the factors that arise out of these social and personal
decisions. However, some ethnography does not maintain focus on the individual decisions that
affect household and international relationships. These ethnographic accounts fall short in
explaining the internal social relationships between members of the household and between
households in the community, but Stephen’s research on households involved in international
relationships is imperative to the future of ethnographic research in anthropology.
These research projects in Oaxaca have framed my understanding of identity and indigeneity in Oaxaca. The researchers have moved beyond the interpretation of rural Oaxacan communities as either open or closed systems. In a closed system community identity is coordinated through shared experiences and cultural practices; Eric Wolf assumes that once a community engages in an open system coordinated identity would not occur. I build on Wolf’s assumption by examining identity in the Oaxaqueño community in Los Angeles. Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles build identity through an open system, so their sense of self is a contestation of traditional and modern cultural practices. Michael Kearney discussed the dynamics of ethnicity and indigeneity amongst Mixtecos in California. Kearney followed Oaxaqueño social networks from Mexico to the US and used the term “Oaxacalifornia” to describe how these networks contribute to the development of identity; and identity that thrives in an open system where individuals interact with many different communities (or to paraphrase Kearney, many different network highways). I follow identity creation from Los Angeles to Oaxaca and build on social network theory by detailing the transnational moments that develop out of this process. Lynn Stephens described the local and international movement of goods, services and culture. My research builds on this framework by focusing on the individual player to understand the impact basketball has on identity creation.
This chapter explains how Oaxacans in Los Angeles, California create culture that provides meaning to their life. It was a cool summer evening at the canches California (California courts) in Monrovia, California. I received a call from Andres Sol a day earlier about playing basketball in the upcoming tournament. I spent the summer in Los Angeles conducting fieldwork at the basketball tournaments held at Toberman Park. I liked interacting with the players and spectators (families) but as an athlete I desperately wanted to play in one of the tournaments. Andres invited me to practice with his team. He said practice would begin around seven o’clock at night and if I could arrive early it would help because the park had lights and the courts fill up after the sun goes down. I arrived at the park around seven knowing that the team would show up shortly after. After an hour of waiting I played a pick-up game on a nearby court. I thought maybe Andres had cancelled practice but then I saw Andres, his brother Esteban and brother in law Victor. We greeted each other and Andres said “Que paso Ben, estas aqui” (Whats up Ben, you’re here). I greeted Andres’ and told him that I arrived at seven but I didn’t see them. Andres explained that they were waiting for Esteban to get off of work so they could arrive together. Andres introduced his brother Esteban and his brother in law Victor and explained to them that I was going to play on the team. We began practice by shooting around and stretching. Andres, Esteban, and Victor talked about various life
topics (family, jobs, driving, kids, etc.) as we shot around and they constantly made jokes as we passed the time. We spent 30 to forty-five minutes warming up and joking around.

The guys teased me about Lola and asked me if I had a romantic interest toward her, but I assured them we were just friends. We started a drill and our jogs turned into sprints. We were running as another teammate arrived. Andres yelled to the player “Nacho, corre, vamos” (Nacho, run, let’s go). I introduced myself to Nacho and learned he lived with Victor’s family and was a close friend of the Sol family. There were a total of six players on the team. Most of us were over the age of 30 so most of our practice consisted of conditioning drills. I wanted to make a good impression to my new teammates, so I ran hard and played my best. Andres and the other players were impressed with my basketball skills. We did not finish until ten o’clock at night and I was fatigued, my body ached in pain. I did not want to show any signs of weakness to my new teammates so I held in the pain. We finished practice and planned on practicing later in the week. I did not plan on my new teammates becoming good friends because I just wanted to play in a tournament, but I became invested in my research. The Sol family and other members of the Oaxacan community became more than research subjects. I had not just finished my first basketball practice; I started another game that stretched beyond the boundaries of the basketball court and into homes.

**The Beginning**

Basketball is more than a sport for the Sol family. A lot of Oaxacan families with roots to the sierra region participate in basketball either as a player, coach, spectator, organizer, etc. I was a researcher and spectator, but I wanted to be a researcher and player. I met Andres Sol and his family through the sport of basketball. Lola invited me
to one of her basketball practices and introduced me to her uncle Andreas Sol, so the first time we were introduced to each other we played basketball. My relationship with the Sol family is centered on the sport of basketball. At the time I met Andres he was coaching Lola’s team. Lola played with her cousins that included Andres’ two older daughters Celia and Loren. Andres and I helped the ladies practice drills and then we played a game. Andres saw that I played basketball really well and noticed the good advice I gave Lola about basketball. We played until the sun went down and couldn’t see anymore.

After practice Lola and I chatted about daily life activities and we decided to go to a local coffee shop. Andres asked me if I was going to be around the LA area for a while because he wanted me to play on his team in the tournaments. I told Andres that I was actually headed to Oaxaca for a few weeks but would be around for a month or so afterwards. The Sol family, Lola’s parents and I stood in a semi-circle in the parking lot and talked about basketball. Lola’s mother mentioned to the Sol family that I was planning on visiting Comogocho in a few days. I told everyone I was excited to visit their town and explained that I could take letters or small packages to their families if they wanted. Andres jokingly asked me if I could take a briefcase full of money and everyone laughed. I assured everyone that I could take letters and I would not “accidently” lose them like the postal service in Mexico.\(^\text{14}\) Andres said that when I returned to LA I needed to get in contact with him so I could practice with the team. I said goodbye to everyone and told Andres I would contact him as soon as I returned to LA. Lola and I left to the

\(^{14}\) I have personal experience with the postal service in Mexico. I once received a letter in Oaxaca from my mother in California. She just wanted to send her wishes and let me know that my family missed me. The letter was 15 months old. She sent it during my first year in the summer program and I received it during my second year in the summer program.
coffee shop to enjoy our traditional after practice lemonade. A few days later I went to Lola’s house to pick up cards from her family to take to Comogocho. Lola’s mother made me breakfast and told me about the letters and whom they were supposed to be delivered to. I spent the morning with Lola and her family and we talked about my living arrangements in Comogocho and my plans for returning to LA. Basketball brought me to Lola, the Sol family and to Comogocho. Basketball is more than a sport, its family.

**Homemade meal**

There are five members of the Sol family. Andres and Anabel are both from Comogocho. They have three children; Celia is the oldest daughter, Loren is the middle daughter and a year younger than Celia, Nick is a few years younger than his sisters and the only son. Lola played on the same team with Celia and Loren. I met Celia and Loren before I met their parents. Since I played on the same team with their father and uncle we became close. The Sol family is close and they are involved in each other’s lives. They live in a small one-bedroom apartment in East Los Angeles. The living room is beautifully decorated with basketball trophies, family pictures, small trinkets that carry huge sentimental value, a sofa and a fully size mattress where Andres and Anabel sleep. The kitchen has a small table where the family gathers to eat and adjacent is small area where Anabel cooks. The Luna family invited me over for a meal soon after I began to play with the team. I arrived at the Sol house in the early evening, and then Nick and I played a few video games as we waited for his mother to finish dinner. Andres was out with his daughters gathering some last minute food items. It was a warm summer evening
so Anabel offered me some *Jamaica*\(^{15}\) and Nick and I filled our cups with ice and the sweet drink. Andres arrived with Celia and Loren and the remaining ingredients for dinner. Celia and Loren said “Hey Ben!” and Andres followed “*Ben! Que Paso?*” (Ben! What’s Up?) I greeted Andres and his daughters and told them I was relaxing and teaching Nick how to play the video game (It was a joke because Nick was very confident in his basketball video game skills and challenged me numerous times before we actually had the chance to play). Nick and I finished our game and I joined Andres at the dinner table and we talked until dinner was served. The kids gathered in the living room while Andres and I chatted about sports, food, and daily living in Los Angeles. Anabel was finishing the meal and joined our conversation during certain parts. Andres and I talked about the N.B.A. and discussed his passion for the LA Lakers and I tried to defend my loyalty for the Phoenix Suns. Anabel asked me if I was all right eating spicy food and I told her that I loved spicy food. I told Andres and Anabel stories about my travel experiences to the different regions in Oaxaca. I explained how the food is different in every region. We talked about food for an hour and Andres jokingly asked his wife when the food was going to be ready because I was making him hungry with all my food stories. Andres offered me a beer so we drank a few and discussed life in Los Angeles while the meal was being served. Andres explained to me that he met Anabel in Comogocho and they moved to Los Angeles in the early 1990s. Celia, Loren and Nick were born in Los Angeles but when the kids were old enough they moved back to Comogocho. After a few years they returned back to Los Angeles to enroll the kids in

\(^{15}\) *Jamaica* is sweet drink made from hibiscus leaves and sugar.
school. The conversation was interesting and although the research part of my brain was turned on I could not turn my attention away from the pollo amarillo y arroz (chicken with yellow sauce and rice). I commented on the food and told Anabel that the food smelled delicious. She quickly asked for my bowl and put a portion of chicken in it and told me to eat. The subject turned back into food and I told Andres and Anabel that I loved Oaxacan food and most food. I told them of all the meals Eliana cooked me in Comogocho during my first trip there. I told them how she fed me queso Comogocho (Comogocho cheese). They both sighed as if a nostalgic taste of the cheese just hit the back of their tongue. Andres asked if I liked the cheese and I quickly replied that I loved it! My favorite meal during my visit was a quesadilla with Comogocho cheese and Zuchini flower. Andres and Anabel both approved of my food choice and commented that there was nothing like a fresh tortilla hot off the comal. I ate about three bowls of food and Anabel tried to feed me more but I couldn’t. Andres and I finished off our meal with a few more beers while the rest of the Sol family enjoyed some desert. Food is cultural and the process that goes into the purchase, preparation and consumption of food is tied to cultural norms. The Sol family worked in a similar fashion like many households I had visited in Oaxaca. For a moment during the meal I felt like I was in Oaxaca sharing a meal with a family and it was a comforting feeling. I continued to visit the Sol household for meals and other cultural celebrations. The Sol family became my second household in LA and I spent a lot of time at their house. Eating and relaxing with the Sol family seemed natural and I really felt like part of the family unit. Food brings people closer together and I believe the meals we shared strengthened our relationship.
Lobos

Oaxacan basketball has a lot to do with family. Most teams are made up of family members, *paisanos* or people from the same town in Oaxaca. The team I played on was no different. We played basketball together, but we also shared meals and drank many beers together. Andres, his brother Esteban, his brother in law Victor, their close friend Nacho, Damien, Luis, Jaime and I made up our team called “Lobos.” Damien was married to Celia and Loren’s cousin Kasandra. Kasandra’s parents were from Comogocho and their three daughters played basketball with Celia and Loren. Luis’ father was from Comogocho and Jaime’s mother was from Comogocho. Everyone on the team was from Comogocho or had parents that were from the town. I was the only player that had no family in Oaxaca or Comogocho. Basketball is family oriented and I was part of the family. Andres did not play much in the games because he was the coach/player for the Lobos. He was the oldest on the team followed by Victor. Esteban and I were nearly the same age but the rest of our team was significantly younger. Nacho, Damien, and Luis were in their late teens and Jaime was still in High School. We had a unique mix of old and young playing for the Lobos, so it was difficult to build chemistry. We practiced two times a week but our schedules did not always match. Many times we would have only four of our players show up for practice, so Nick would have to play with us in order to have enough players to practice. Celia, Loren and her cousins always came to the park to practice, but they always talked and gossiped while we practiced. They also cared for Damien and Kasandra’s daughter Kim while we practiced. Lola’s cousins are mostly girls and the Sol family and their extended family has a lot of girls too. Naturally the girls always spend their free time together and they play on the same
team. Our team was good but we lacked height. At 5’10” I was the tallest member on the team so I played underneath the basket. The style of play underneath the basket is rough and my team depended on me to rebound and play good defense. This was a difficult task because I played the point guard position my whole life in competitive basketball situations. I was always interested in developing my footwork for basketball. In high school our coach made us attend a “dance class” that the cheerleaders conducted to work on our footwork. At the time the guys on the team thought it was a complete joke but it actually helped. Since I was the tallest player on the Lobos I had to position myself on the floor in spots where I was not comfortable. Our clave (key) or plan (plan) to the offense started with me receiving the ball first; then making a pass to another player or shooting the ball. Playing with the Lobos was stressful because for the first time I was the most versatile player on a team. I was used to playing with good basketball players my whole life and I typically was not the best player on the team, but playing with the Lobos was different. A few times a week we practiced on our offensive strategy, conditioning, and shooting at the California courts. We had a good mix of youth and experience (the nice way to say old) on our team. We were very competitive in the tournaments and we played well. In addition to practicing a few times a week some of the men would gather at the park on Friday night to play for money.

**Respect and Dinero**

Sports are competitive. We practiced during the week and on Friday nights we played for money. Men from Oaxaca and other Latinos gathered at the park to gamble. Friday nights were interesting because of the social dynamics of men, women and children. Most wives and children watched the basketball games and conversed amongst
themselves. Andres told me about the Friday night money games during our second week of practice. After practice one evening I ran to the store to buy some beer and we talked over some choice drinks. My team wanted to know more about me, so I explained how I met Lola and my research on basketball. Andres told me that there were *partidos banca* (money games) on Friday nights. I told Andres that I would play with them because I needed extra money to support our other sport of “drinking beer.” The team laughed and Nacho said that we better win a lot of games! I showed up to play but the rest of the Lobos were not there, so I waited for the rest of my teammates to arrive. I showed up with twenty dollars not knowing what to expect in terms of the gambling. Nick explained to me that every game you play with two dollars in your pocket. If you lose then someone from the other team will ask you for the two dollars. If you win you must ask one of the players from the other team for the money. After winning one of the games I was resting with Andres and Nick and I forgot to ask for the two dollars. Nick asked if I received my winnings but I said that I had forgot to ask for it. I told Nick that I didn’t care because it was only two dollars. Nick told me that I had to ask for the money because if I didn’t they would never pay again. Nick’s comment made me curious so I asked him to clarify his statement. He said that if I didn’t ask for the money then they won’t respect me, and if they don’t respect me they won’t pay me. Andres agreed and added that I have to ask for the money even if they didn’t have it because I need to be recognized *con respecto* (with respect). Men in the community value respect and believe it is the basis for building trust. If I declined to engage in this practice I lose respect from the men, but I also would lose trust. I sat up off of the comfortable grass and asked Nick and Andres who had not paid their two dollars yet and they pointed out an older man sitting underneath the basket. I
started to walk to the other side of the court and thought about what I was going to say to the man. I didn’t know what to say because I didn’t want to be disrespectful, but I didn’t want to come off like a little kid that was afraid to ask for his money. I approached the older gentleman who was sitting on the floor surrounded by his team. I asked the man “Desculpe Senor, ud tiene los billes?” (Excuse me Sir, do you have the dollar bills?) The man looked at me and replied “Si Cuatos” (Yes, how much?) I looked at him and the rest of the men and said “Um, creo dos, no?” (Um, I think two right?) The rest of the men looked at me and nodded in agreement. He reached in his pocket and handed me two dollar bills rolled together. He told me that I played very good, so I told them that I get lucky on the basketball court sometimes. I walked back to Nick and Andres and showed them my two dollar winnings and Andres smiled and nodded in approval. The game of basketball for Oaxaqueños is more than just a sport. The sport develops scenarios where cultural lessons can be explained, practiced and reinforced. The respect I needed to get was not only from the men of the losing team but from my own team. Andres and Nick would have not respected me as a teammate if I did not ask for my money and the other team would have not respected me either. Friday night basketball was played for money, respect, and sometimes getting respect meant more than the few dollar bills.

Los Lakers

The first time Andres and I met we talked about the NBA basketball and the sport is a common topic of our discussions. Andres is a big Los Angeles Lakers basketball fan and his favorite player is Lamar Odom. Andres and I have different opinions on basketball players and strategies, but that is typical in any sports discussion. I think Kobe Bryant is the best player on the LA Lakers and the best player in the NBA. However,
Andres thinks Kobe Bryant is a very good basketball player but doesn’t like the selfishness in his style of game. My favorite basketball team is the Phoenix Suns and Andres always makes a joke about my taste in professional basketball teams. One of his favorite lines to say to me is “Phoenix va a jugar en playoffs?” (Phoenix is going to make the playoffs?) He knows the Suns have not been a competitive team in a few years and the Lakers are always a contender. Andres and I discuss a lot of basketball. When we watch basketball at his house the whole family gets involved in the game and the kids always ask me questions about the sport. Many members of the Oaxacan community in Los Angeles follow professional basketball and the NBA. Most of the community supports the local team (LA Lakers) and it is easier to support a team with a successful history. The Sol household supports the Lakers and they always watch the games at their house or Nacho’s apartment. Nick has a Lakers jersey and there is Lakers memorabilia scattered around their apartment. Nobody in the Sol family has ever watched the Lakers live at the downtown arena, but they still feel that they are a part of the team and city. They even will go out their way to watch Laker games when they travel to Oaxaca.

During a fiesta in Comogocho I ran into Lola’s cousin Griselda. She played on Lola’s team in Los Angeles. First I recognized Griselda’s mother and she said Griselda was in town for the fiesta too. Later that evening I saw Griselda at the basketball courts with some of her family and we talked. She said her uncles and a few others were going to watch the LA Lakers play the Chicago Bulls at her house. I knew her uncle Dominic from Los Angeles, so we met and wandered off. During my fieldwork it was difficult to turn down a drink. It’s not just the drink, but the conversation that comes with the beverage is important. Dominic and I shared a beer and talked about the fiesta. I knew
him from Los Angeles because his son Luis played on the Lobos with me. We chatted and shared a few more beers and then other men from the town joined in. Dominic introduced me to the men and explained to them that I was a student researching basketball in Oaxaca. We discussed sports, basketball, and the intricacies of manhood (much like bar topics in the US). After a few drinks one of the men suggested we drink some mescal, and offered to serve some at his house so we could watch “Los Lakers.”

We went to one of the few houses with a satellite dish, drank a few copitas (small cups) of mezcal and watched the LA Lakers. We shared our thoughts on the chances of the Lakers to win the championship. I had traveled to Comogocho to enjoy the fiesta and I typically enjoy not having access to my electronic devices. However, it was surreal to watch the Lakers on television in Comogocho with people from Los Angeles and other who lived in Comogocho. The Lakers are more than just a team; the Lakers represent a culture of basketball that Comogocho follows. For many members of the community in Comogocho the Lakers are an extension to their families and loved ones in the US and it is something that they can share. The Lakers do more than win championships; they help bring families together through a common interest. Through satellite television we were able to experience Los Lakers y Los Bulls.

**Kobe Jordan Reyes**

Basketball Oaxaqueño is cultural. In most societies sport is cultural because it represents a collective cultural interest of individuals and allows those individuals to express their shared behavior with each other. For Oaxaqueños living in Los Angeles basketball is a part of their culture. Individuals are exposed to basketball at an early age and most have participated or watched one of their family members play basketball.
Some Oaxaqueños love basketball and some could care less, but almost all have watched a game and cheered for a family member or their respective towns. Basketball is a cultural tradition that was brought to the US from Oaxaca, so the sport of basketball is incorporated in other cultural traditions. Some individuals love basketball, they love the NBA, they love watching or playing basketball, and they feel their children are part of a rich cultural tradition. For example, during the annual celebration in Comogocho I met a man named Nomar. Nomar was visiting from Los Angeles and his two brothers were visiting from Park City, Utah. They built their mother a beautiful house in Comogocho. The house was a perfect blend of traditional and modern. There were exposed wooden beams running the length of the house and the kitchen had a high ceiling with an exhaust to catch smoke from the large cooking area. The kitchen had a modern stove, refrigerator, and area for wood burning. The mother chose to cook more in the wood burning area with the *comal*. I met Nomar’s family and he introduced me to his brother’s wife and kids. Nomar asked me who I was related to and I explained to him my purpose for visiting the town and my research. Shortly after explaining my research on *basketból Oaxaqueño* Nomar’s brother offered me a cold beer and told me “Me encanta basket!” (I love basketball!). He yelled to his wife in the back to bring out their newest member of the family. The small baby rolled out from the back of the house with a Michael Jordan beanie, a tiny puffy jacket with the famous Michael Jordan logo and infant sized Nike sneakers. Then he introduced me to his youngest son named Kobe Jordan Reyes. I spent a few minutes with Nomar and his brothers trying to find out if it was the baby’s real name, but they ultimately convinced me that it was his name. We shared more drinks and talked about basketball in Oaxaca and Los Angeles. I’m sure when Kobe Jordan is old enough
he will play basketball. Because basketball is more than a sport for some Oaxaqueños, it is something that helps define their identity and provides meaning to their lives.

Basketball

The term *Oaxacalifornia* refers to the areas where Oaxaqueños reside in California; it’s an imaginative creation that is part of a process with complicated movements of people and things. Basketball is one of the many activities Oaxacans in Los Angeles participate in that has transnational outcomes; basketball is a piece of what makes *Oaxacalifornia* function and it’s a piece of history and culture. Cultural traditions including basketball move between the border of US and Mexico. These movements of basketball operate in *Oaxacalifornia* and the sport has an impact on creating identity for Oaxacans in Los Angeles. Basketball is played in *Oaxacalifornia* and it is a sport bounded by a city’s urban landscape. Oaxacan basketball is a sport that can be interpreted as a cultural practice that enables individuals to find a sense of comfort and belonging. However, at times basketball is just a physical activity and an opportunity to releases some of the stress that occurs in daily life.

For many Oaxaqueños in the US sport is a piece of their identity. When they decided to leave their homes and towns in the sierra region and take huge risks in the US they brought basketball with them. They brought a style and play of basketball that is unique to the sierra region and indicative of their sport of basketball. You can find Oaxaqueños and other *Mexicanos* from southern states playing basketball together at local parks in Los Angeles. They play at parks with lights so they can play after work and bring their families. The sport of basketball may seem like an adopted cultural trait used by Oaxacans to “blend” in better with the larger society, but the historical roots of
basketball in Oaxaca are evident. In Los Angeles most Oaxaquéños from the central valley and sierra regions of Oaxaca have participated in the sport of basketball at some point in their lives. Therefore, the sport of basketball is an opportunity for Oaxaquéños to share a cultural experience that is unique to their identity. This basketball experience incorporates some bi-national perspectives that give the appearance that individuals and communities are engaging in a transnational process. The sport of basketball developed into a specific cultural practice for Oaxacans and it is a sport that contains deep structure and meaning. Oaxacan basketball is a cultural practice and in Oaxacalifornia it is a sport that represents many rich cultural symbols.

**Sierra Norte**

From Oaxaca City you take the carretera (freeway) and follow the signs that read *Ixtlan de Juarez*. The highway winds in and out of the regions known as the *sierra Juarez* and *sierra Madre*. There are countless signs that direct travelers to small roads that lead to small towns. In most of these towns you will find a basketball court, usually near the government or municipal building. In most cases the basketball court is a central piece to the infrastructure of the town and serves as a central point for social gatherings. *Ixtlan de Juarez* has the largest population in the sierra region and is host to numerous basketball tournaments throughout the year. Although a nearby town called *San Pablo Guelatao* may have more basketball tradition. *Guelatao* is host to the annual Benito Juárez tournament that attracts thousands of spectators and players from the sierra region (see Figure 5). This tournament is held in honor of the first indigenous president of Mexico. He held the presidency in Mexico from 1858-1872 and contributed to the development of the constitution in 1857. The traditions of independence, honor, and fortitude extend
beyond the boundaries of the sierra. The spirit of Benito Juárez lives in every community in the sierra region and is also a respected symbol by Oxaqueños in the US. These tournaments in Mexico and the US symbolize community and cooperation.

**Cooperation and Community**

The development of the Oaxaqueño community living in Los Angeles is represented by group cooperation. This cooperation is illustrated through the myriad of ways many of the migrants living in Los Angeles support their home family, household,

*Figure 5. Copa Benito Juárez in San Pablo Guelatao 2009.*

and the community back in Mexico while continuing to actively participate in village society while working and living abroad (Cohen, 1999). The motivation of participating
in communal activities is based in cultural practices. Community members in Los Angeles and Oaxaca choose to participate in these cultural practices. The cultured history of Oaxaca emphasizes working together in a community and sometimes between communities. The weekly markets in the Central Valley, Sierra, Costa, Mixteca, Cañada, Istmo and Mixe regions in Oaxaca are evidence of communities working together to create central markets for economic, cultural trade and business. The introduction of basketball in the early twentieth century and the construction of numerous basketball courts paved the way for cultural practices to flourish in small rural communities. Historical and cultural representations of basketball and the socializing of individuals has provided a cultural foundation for Oaxacans to re-create communities in the US and Mexico. In Los Angeles, many members have lived in small rural towns of Oaxaca and share socioeconomic experiences. The re-invention of community by the community leaders in Los Angeles is significant in maintaining a unified community. It has been noted that the connection to a specific place often exceeds the boundaries of the space that provides a sense of cultural attachment among its residents (Cohen, 1999; Davis, 2000; Low, 2000; Pérez, 2003). Additionally, scholars have noted that communities from rural parts of southern Mexico have a connection to personal and community land because it is one of the main factors in the development of personal identity. This development of identity is a cultural outcome that depends not on the actual birthplace of the individual, but the sociopolitical contributions individuals give to their community. (Cohen, 1999; Pérez, 2003). Therefore, the communal support by Oaxaqueños living in Los Angeles is reflective of the re-creation of community through a communal space and basketball courts are the physical and social setting.
As Cohen (1999) notes, cooperative relationships play an important role in self-defense and self-definition as a community makes and remakes itself as a social entity over time. Henri Lefebvre (1991) discusses the social transformations of labor in Venice, Italy and states that social space contains a great diversity of objects, both natural and social; this includes the networks and pathways that facilitate the exchange of material things and information. Additionally, scholars like Bhabha (1994), suggest that subjects located in the betwixt and between space of a kind of liminal time of transition between being in one stage of life and another can be used to understand the “inbetween” or subjects position who refuse to give in to hegemonic narratives of race or nation that operate in places where the reinvention and participation in the constant creation of the nation take place (Mitchell, 1997). To obtain a conceptual representation of the elastic space that the Oaxaqueño community in Los Angeles has occupied, Edward Soja (1989, 1996) in his depiction of landscape, development, architecture, and other cultural symbols in Los Angeles denotes that the “inbetweeness” or “betwixed” space (Bhabha, 1994).

The use of public space is difficult for many migrants from Oaxaca living in Los Angeles because there is no plaza or central space for cultural practices to take place. The physical representation of a community plaza and other structures such as government buildings, gardens, fields, or a decorative central gazebo provide cultural space, expression, and individual comfort. In the absence of these physical structures Oaxacan migrants living in Los Angeles have recreated space by incorporating traditional cultural practices at basketball tournaments. Basketball tournaments are usually held at public parks, so although the Oaxacan community does not own the public space nor do they
feel tied to the space, the courts themselves are used by members of the community to continue traditional cultural practices. The basketball court is a physical piece of public space that is utilized and perceived metaphorically as a representation of a central plaza in a rural Oaxacan town. It symbolizes community and provides an official space for governance, recreation, and socialization. The questions of identity that are developed through the migratory process and emerge in the formation of community in Los Angeles are captured in this space. Oaxaqueños that I interviewed and worked with in Oaxaca and Los Angeles demonstrated this space as being vital to their identity, and basketball was embedded in it. A majority of research on Latin American migration emphasize on cultural networks and their effect on local institutions of identity creation. I have approached this work on basketball and Oaxacan identity creation with a similar approach to other migration studies that focus on the following questions: How cultural prime movers motivate movers and non-movers? How does the meso-level of migration interact with transnational processes? How do local cultural practices affect transnational relationships? (Cohen & Sirkeci, 2011; Faist, 2010; Paerregaard, 2008). Basketball is a cultural product based on history and practice. I build on Cohen, Sirkeci, Faist and Paerregaard’s work by contributing an example of cultural practice and migration using a rarely discussed topic, sport. Some individuals choose to play basketball and other do not (movers and non-movers) and these choices are affected by cultural traditions and daily-lived experiences.

The sport of basketball has social capital, meaning the sport itself and the players who play have social capital that moves across and between borders (meso-level), but this movement is derived and created locally. Basketball creates culture. This continuous
practice has profound effects on other aspects of social engagement at the local, international and transnational level, but “local processes” drive these effects. Building on Paerregaard’s (2008) work, basketball is similar to the religious precessions held by Peruvian migrants in the US. Basketball and religious practices were brought with migrants to the US, but transnational networks are not the prime movers of these cultural practices. The motivations to play or participate in cultural practices are driven by local migrants in the US who are motivated by their daily-lives. Therefore, at times the cultural practices engage in transnational networks, but they are an outcome of local cultural practices.
Chapter 5: Crossing Over

Torneos

This chapter describes the cultural outcomes of identity creation. There are over 40 basketball tournaments each year in Los Angeles. They are played only on Sunday over three consecutive weekends. Most tournaments are played in Los Angeles at Toberman Park, but a few tournaments are held in Serrano, Santa Monica and Venice.

ORO (Orginacion Regional de Oaxaca) and UCSO (Union de Communidades Serranas Oaxaqueñas) oversee most of the tournaments at Toberman Park. The teams, ORO and UCSO have created a cohesive community that provides a positive image to the children and Los Angeles’ society. The basketball season occupies most the of calendar year, but there are other tournaments in Los Angeles, Mexico, and New Jersey that have major cultural connections. These major tournaments have specific historical connections to Oaxaca. I describe each tournament, its significance to the local population, and the structure of each tournament. Each tournament is unique because location, timing, and participation play a key role in creating a cultural function.

Copa Oaxaca (LA)

La Copa Juárez in Los Angeles is a big tournament for players that participate in the tournaments. In addition to la Copa Juárez there is another tournament organized by UCSO and ORO that provides an opportunity for teams not from the sierra region to compete. This tournament is called la Copa Oaxaca and it incorporates all Oaxacan
teams in the greater Los Angeles area. *La Copa Oaxaca* has many similar rules as the *la Copa Juárez* but the player eligibility is always subjective. *La Copa Oaxaca* and *la Copa Juárez* were played simultaneously over two consecutive weekends at the Marshal Arts High School in central Los Angeles in 2009 and 2010. In 2011 there were insufficient funds to create both *la Copa Juárez* and *la Copa Oaxaca*. First, I will describe *La Copa Oaxaca* and its purpose and then I will explain *la Copa Oaxaca* as a social function. See Figure 6.

In 2009 and 2010 over 40 teams participated in *la Copa Oaxaca* and two tournament brackets were created. The tournament followed a double elimination model. Teams were ranked in relation to their past performances and put into the A or B group. There was a winners and losers bracket, so the top teams from the winners bracket played for the championship and the top teams from the losers bracket played for third and fourth place.

*La Copa Oaxaca* was established so that Oaxacan players that were not from communities in the sierra region of Oaxaca could participate in a major tournament. *La Copa Juárez* is unique to the sierra region so organizers of the tournaments wanted another tournament that would incorporate more communities from the state of Oaxaca. Teams from the central valley, city center, and cañada region of Oaxaca participated in the *La Copa Oaxaca*. However, participation in the tournament was unique because it was inclusive to players that had a specific familial tie to the region of Oaxaca.

The tournament organizers, community leaders, and members of UCSO strictly enforce player eligibility rules. This process is very political because basketball is a family sport for Oaxaqueños. Occasionally
Figure 6. Poster for La Copa Oaxaca, Los Angeles 2009.
there are disputes about a player’s eligibility or what team a player is eligible to play with. This can become a debatable subject since many players are now 4th and 5th generation Oaxaqueños in the US. The debates over player eligibility are similar to town meetings in Oaxaca where decisions are made. Tournament organizers meet and they present their opinion to the tournament host. Then there is a final consensus amongst the members of the community. Tournaments are competitive and every team wants to win. The tournament winner is a symbolic political statement to the rest of the community that the winning community is strong and they have the best players in Los Angeles.

In 2009 and 2010 there was a lot of competition but the final game in 2009 was an instant classic because it ended in controversy. The gym was packed on both sides of the bleachers. The teams in the final game were from Xoxa and Campos. Xoxa and Campos are towns in the sierra norte region of Oaxaca. The teams are made up of third, fourth and fifth generation Oaxacans from Los Angeles. These teams have earned a reputation in the community as some of the best. They made it through a grueling tournament beating over 40 teams to reserve a spot in the final game. The gymnasium was full with spectators and supporters. They brought noisemakers, signs, and anything else that produced an annoying noise. The gymnasium was at full capacity so people had to stand against the wall and even sit near the court to watch the game. My friend Gabriel was the announcer for the game and I spent the first half at the scores table with him. I have training in refereeing and scorekeeping basketball so I kept some statistics of the game and helped Gabriel with statistics to announce. During half time I helped Gabriel hand out some of his literature he had written on basketball Oaxaqueño. See Figure 7.
Gabriel offered some trivia question to the crowd about basketball and the winners in the crowd received an autograph copy of his short fictional story on Oaxacan basketball. The crowd cheered for the young spectators that were chosen. During this time the referees blew the whistle and signaled for the start of the second half. Both teams tucked in their jerseys and quickly scampered onto the floor. The referee blew the whistle and the ball was put into play. The energy in the gymnasium was more enhanced because of the close score.

Both Xoxa and Campos began the second half exchanging leads and the score increased at a fast pace. The speed of the game increased and players didn’t waste any
time shooting the ball, if a player was unsuccessful with a shot attempt the opposing team raced down the floor in counter-attack. The game slowed down for a moment when a lengthy session of fouls was committed due to the visible fatigue of both teams. It was a tough game and the men hung their heads, rested, and tried to catch their breath during free throw attempts. The game was played at a high pace for a long period of time. Time expired and neither team could pull away with a comfortable lead, so the game was decided on the last few possessions. With under a minute to play Xoxa converted on consecutive three point shots, which was enough to secure the championship. They won La Copa Oaxaca, but more importantly they had bragging rights for the remainder of the year. In addition, they won the championship on mother’s day, so the day ended with proud mothers celebrating with their sons. See Figures 8 and 9.
Figure 8. An excited coach and players, Copa Oaxaca, Los Angeles 2009.
Winning *La Copa Oaxaca* is a big accomplishment and many players will come out of “retirement” to play in the big game. John (yellow undershirt far-right) has played basketball his whole life and likes playing with his cousins for Xoxa. During the months leading up to the Copa tournaments John was bored of basketball so he decided to concentrate on work and play less basketball. I did not see John for most of the tournament year, but then he showed up for the Copa tournament. During one of the tournament days I saw John and said to him “I see you came out of retirement, where have you been at?” John smiled, laughed and responded, “Yea, I’ve been working so I don’t come to the tournaments, but I had to play in this one, took the day off and
everything.” The big tournaments are important for the players and the community. The tournament is one of the biggest fund-raisers of the year, but it also is a chance for players and teams to showcase their team to the entire community.

**Copa Juárez (Los Angeles)**

I had just returned from Oaxaca. “Fuiste a la Copa Ben?” (You went to the Cup Ben?) was the question when I told people in Los Angeles where I was. *La Copa Benito Juárez* (The Benito Juárez Cup) is the biggest basketball tournament in Oaxaca and perhaps the biggest amateur basketball tournament in Mexico. In Los Angeles, New Jersey, and Park City, Utah Oaxaqueños developed a tournament that parallels the big event in Oaxaca. Comogocho has three major destination areas: Los Angeles, southern New Jersey, and Park City. Although there is a Benito Juarez tournament in each of these areas they operate independently and have different formats and rules for participation. I attended *La Copa Juárez* in Los Angeles in 2006, 2007, and 2009-2010. I also attended and played in *La Copa Juárez* in New Jersey in 2011. First I will describe the significance of the Benito Juarez tournament in the US. Next, I will describe how basketball produces culture for members of the Oaxacan community and use my ethnographic data from *La Copa* in Los Angeles and New Jersey. Last, I will use excerpts from an interview with two players that represent the cultural value of basketball and *La Copa Juárez*.

The Benito Juárez tournament in Los Angeles provides a cultural history to the Oaxacan community. Benito Juárez is a cultural symbol for Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles because he was Mexico’s first indigenous president and he was from the sierra Oaxaca. The sierra community in Los Angeles thinks highly of Benito Juárez and his
contributions. Therefore, it is important for parents and adults to continue teaching the
closest. Thus, it is important for parents and adults to continue teaching the
value of Benito Juárez’s legacy to their children in Los Angeles. Some of the young
players have played in the annual Benito Juárez tournament in Oaxaca but tournament
organizers needed a similar tournament in Los Angeles. Organizers decided to conduct an
annual Benito Juárez tournament in the month of May. The tournament is delayed a few
months after March to allow players to play in the annual tournament in Oaxaca. La Copa
Juárez and La Copa Oaxaca are both played at the same location and weekend in Los
Angeles. This tournament is a classic double feature for spectators and players to
compete at high levels. La Copa Benito Juárez or “La Copa” for short is a big
tournament because Benito Juárez is a big part of Oaxacan culture. The tournament is a
symbolic reminder of nation, state, and community for Oaxaqueño migrants and their
children. Benito Juárez symbolizes Mexico, Oaxaca, and the sierra norte region where
most of the first generation Oaxacans migrated. For parents, children, and community
members the Benito Juárez tournament provides an opportunity to share specific culture
experiences that are unique to Oaxaca and the sierra region.

In 2009 and 2010 La Copa in Los Angeles was a spectacular event with over
60 teams competing in all levels of competition. However, in 2011 there were insufficient
funds to sponsor La Copa, but UCSO has every intention to bring the tournament back to
the Los Angeles community in 2012. In 2010 the Men’s final game was a suspenseful
competition between two great teams San Pedro Matajuillá and San Juan Quitoñec. The
Men’s final game was close and since I played with some of the players on San Pedro
Matajuillá I felt especially close to the game. My friend Juan played for San Pedro
Matajuillá and although he was one of the youngest members of the team he had
experience like a veteran. Juan had first played for the Men’s team of San Pedro Matajuillá at the age of 15, so at the age of 22 he was used to the competitiveness of *La Copa Juárez* in Los Angeles and Oaxaca. Juan is a very good basketball player, but it was not easy for him to choose which team he played for.

Some professional athletes are devoted to the loyalty of their team, but this is far and few in modern sports. The college their parents went to, or the high school in their neighborhood drives some competitive athletes. For many Oaxacan players basketball is more than a sport, the sport defines a large part of who they are as a person and member of their community. Juan was born in Comogocho and he has not been able to visit his town often. His mother is from Comogocho and his father from a nearby town in the sierra. Therefore, Juan has two options when deciding which team to play for in tournaments and both *Copas*. When Juan described his first memory of basketball to me it was a simple scenario. Juan remembers a little basket at his home he used to play on as a kid, it was a plastic hoop that attached to a door with a small foam ball, nothing spectacular. He didn’t start playing a lot until he was three or four years old. Juan and his friend would play on a small court with a self-made basket constructed of wood, they couldn’t play on the regulation size baskets because they were too small and not strong enough to throw the ball the height of the basket. When Juan was older he would hang around the basketball court and watch the older men until they invited him to play. He quickly developed basketball skills and now his decision to play for San Pedro Matajuillá is a political and social decision. *La Copa* is not just a basketball tournament; it is a display of community and political status.
Before the championship game I watched Juan and the other team warm up as the
crowd filled the gymnasium with noisemakers and food. A younger child sat next to me
with a paleta (popsicle) and I laughed as the paleta dripped down his arm. He wanted to
watch the final game and it didn’t matter if he finished his popsicle. This final game was
unique because in order for San Juan Quitoñec to win the championship they had to win
twice. It was a double elimination tournament so in this case San Pedro Matajuillá
entered the final game unbeaten. I saw coaches from both teams discussing strategy just
before the referee blew the whistle to begin the game. Juan approached the coach and
provided his opinion on the team’s strategy. Gabriel announced both teams to the crowd
and each team ran around the court in opposite directions and met in the middle of the
court to shake hands. I stood against the wall near the corner of the court near the San
Pedro Matajuillá bench because I wanted to take good photos of the game and my friend
Juan. Unfortunately, I was too occupied with the game that I forgot to take a good
amount of pictures. The game was just too good and it was fun to watch.

The game began and both teams played nervous at the beginning. San Juan
Quitoñec played very fast and did not take time to shoot the ball, their strategy of running
fast and playing a fast paced game worked throughout the tournament. San Pedro
Matajuillá had the size advantage and they wanted to set up their bigger players close to
the basket, but the speed of San Juan Quitoñec posed problems for San Pedro Matajuillá
early in the game. Juan commanded attention on the floor and his teammates relied on his
control of the game. However, San Juan Quitoñec was a very good team and they had
very athletic players. In the 4th quarter the game was close and some of the San Pedro
Matajuillá players were frustrated with the lack of effort from their teammates. San Juan
Quitoñec pulled out a small lead in the end of the game and a few three point baskets sealed the game for San Juan Quitoñec. Juan was very frustrated with his team and said to his coach and the rest of the team that they needed to run, “corre!” (run) Juan said. Although San Juan Quitoñec won the first game they needed to win another game to be crowned champions. Juan walked toward me near the exit to take a break outside. As he walked by I told him “You need to speed it up, the big guys will get rebounds.” Juan looked straight at me and said, “I know, that’s what I told them.” I saw the look of frustration in his eyes but he also had a look of determination. As an athlete I know the feeling that overwhelms a player, because it’s a feeling that transforms a player. The determination factor overtakes a player, for they look different, they walk different, they talk different, and most importantly they play better. Juan had “the look” and when he entered the gym I knew they had already won.

The second game started quickly with no opportunity for either team to rest. Before the second game started Juan gathered his team together and he affirmed his expectations. The referee blew the whistle and signaled for both teams to take the floor. The ball was put in play and San Juan Quitoñec began running up and down the floor continuing their previous strategy of wearing down the defense, but this time Juan and his team were prepared for the surge. In the previous game Juan walked the ball up the floor after an opposing basket, but this time he pushed the ball up the floor in a quick counter attack. Juan protected the ball and created numerous opportunities for his team and they maintained a small lead throughout the first half of the game. When San Juan Quitoñec would make a three-point basket San Pedro Matauillá raced back down the floor and attacked the basket for a quick score or shooting foul. The shooting fouls stopped the
tempo of the game and disrupted any momentum San Juan Quitoñec built with the run and attack style offense. The tempo of any basketball game begins with the point guard position. Juan played the point guard position, but he also had experience and the look of determination, so he dictated the tempo. San Pedro Matajuillá had a small lead at half time and San Juan Quitoñec looked fatigued and frustrated.

During half-time people scattered in and out of the gymnasium to grab food or change their seat for a better view of the game. The half-time period was shorter than normal, because the tournament was running behind schedule. The referee blew the whistle, put the ball on the sideline and signaled possession. San Juan Quitoñec started the second half with quick shots and battled their way right back into the game. But Juan’s perseverance and patience superseded San Juan Quitoñec’s momentum. San Pedro Matajuillá did not panic and they used their counter attack to balance out the quick scoring of San Juan Quitoñec. Eventually San Juan Quitoñec could not continue the pace of play that had previously worked for them throughout the tournament. San Pedro Matajuillá slowly built a commanding lead. With limited time remaining in the 4th quarter Juan patiently controlled the ball and led his team to victory. As the referee blew the final whistle the coaches of San Pedro Matajuillá and the players family rushed the floor to congratulate their family. Spectators and other community members of San Pedro Matajuillá congratulated their players on the floor and the gymnasium was filled with joy. See Figure 10. Shortly after the game I asked Juan and his teammate a few questions:

Me: Juan! Good game, how do you feel?

Juan: Thanks man, I feel good, good.
Me: I know you couldn’t pull it off last year, but how does it feel now to win this one?

Juan: It feels great, I’ve won before but it always feels good to win la copa.

Me: I know a lot of your family is here, how do they feel?

Juan: Ah, they are happy, they like to see us win and they are always supportive.

Me: Thanks man, you’re lucky I didn’t play!

Juan: Haha, maybe next year!

La Copa Benito Juárez in Los Angeles is the biggest tournament of the year because it provides status to the winning players and community. The tournament is a traditional cultural practice in an urban landscape. To win La Copa symbolizes commitment and success to the community in Los Angeles and Oaxaca. For some players this is
the only *copia* they play in for personal reasons. I asked another player for San Pedro Matajuillá to comment on his win:

*Me:* Big victory, how do you feel?

*Player:* I feel great, you know its bragging rights for the rest of the year!

*Me:* I know you didn’t get a chance to play in Oaxaca, so how does it feel to win out here in LA?

*Player:* Yea, I don’t really get along with some of the guys out there so that’s why I didn’t play, but you know it cool, I got a cup here so I can’t complain, I’m happy and my family is happy for me.

The game extends beyond the boundaries of the court because it is a family game.

Most of the players love basketball and their families love basketball. Some of the
players visit San Pedro Matajuillá in Oaxaca and they play in tournaments. However, for other players the only opportunity to win a cup is in Los Angeles. The tournament provides players and communities a space to socially assert their power. Some players may have bi-national social power, but some have limited networks. Therefore, basketball symbolizes the multiple decisions and operations that occur between Los Angeles and Oaxaca. This is critical because this process does not always occur smoothly. Migrants and their children engage in sociopolitical debates that contest their association with traditional and modern cultural practices. The route in which identity is formed is complex and for many Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles it is a complex and sometimes contested journey. At times these decisions have transnational moments, but their decisions are local. The fluid bi-national network that is described as transnational is an outcome of these decisions.

In the examination of La Copa Juárez in Los Angeles I determined that the tournament is a cultural practice. The Oaxaca community in Los Angeles has established social events that provide the youth a cultured experience. For players like Juan, La Copa is a cultural event; meaning, the tournament is learned behavior and it also has influence on his decisions to play and participate in other cultural functions. In the Oaxacan community basketball is cultural, La Copa functions as an opportunity to practice culture, and identity is a cultural outcome. Many players practice basketball in Los Angeles and some decide to travel to Oaxaca to play in tournaments, but other players choose not to. In this case the community in Los Angeles defines La Copa locally. La Copa has cultural traditions in Oaxaca, but it is a cultural practice defined locally in Los Angeles.
**Copa Juárez (New Jersey)**

During my first few trips to Comogocho I met my friend Miguel during a pick-up basketball game. During our first encounter we were waiting for another teammate in his jeep and began to chat about school. I didn’t know Miguel lived in the US and he caught me off guard when he asked me about my university sweater. I told him about my studies and we talked about his education in New Jersey. We became friends and spent time with each other whenever we were in Comogocho at the same time. We only saw each other in Comogocho during holidays, big cultural events or tournaments. During *La Copa Juárez* in Oaxaca Miguel informed me that they also have a Benito Juárez tournament in his hometown in New Jersey. He said the *Copa* in New Jersey was not as big as the one in Oaxaca but everyone in the community played. Miguel knew from our previous discussions that I played and liked basketball a lot. I think most people in Comogocho think I like basketball because I told them I study the sport, but some misinterpret it and think I train to play. In the spring of 2011 I was in Ohio and Miguel informed me that the *Copa* was going to take place in New Jersey during the month of June. I wanted to go because it was a good fieldsite to compare the *Copas*. My research and fieldwork became more interesting when Miguel said I could play in the tournament. I double and triple checked with Miguel to make sure I could play in the *Copa* because in Los Angeles and in Oaxaca there are very strict rules on who is allowed to play. Miguel assured me that I could play in the *Copa* and I made plans to go to New Jersey. Miguel and I communicated for a few months and I updated him on my travel plans. He said I could stay with his family for the duration of the *Copa* and I knew it was a unique opportunity to learn more about migrant destinations and households. I planned on staying ten days in
New Jersey to play in the *Copa*, which was held on two consecutive Sundays. This was my chance to play in the *Copa* and win and I wanted to seize this opportunity.

Early in the morning I left Los Angeles and flew to Philadelphia. Miguel is from a small town called Brownstone. The nearest airports are Philadelphia and Atlantic City. It was a long day of travel but I finally made it from California sunshine to humid Brownstone, New Jersey. Brownstone was hotter than California and I told Miguel in a sarcastic tone that I was delighted by the regional climate. I didn’t know what to expect in Brownstone because it was just a figure of my imagination. It was a destination for families from Comogocho but I did not know what families were there. Miguel and his cousins picked me up from the airport. I introduced myself to my new teammates and we went to a nearby mall to get shorts for our team uniform. We spent the afternoon at the mall before driving an hour south to Brownstone. When we arrived in Brownstone my teammates wanted to take me out so we planned on going to Atlantic City later that evening. I was extremely exhausted from my travel but I couldn’t say no. Miguel and I arrived at his house to drop my things off and he introduced me to his parents and aunt. Miguel’s parents were very kind and they welcomed me with open arms and showed me to a nice bedroom they had setup for me in the basement. Miguel’s mother assured me that anything in the house was mine. They worked most days so I was to help myself to anything in the house. I graciously thanked Miguel and his parents for the hospitality during my stay. Miguel told his mom that we were going to Atlantic City for the evening to celebrate my arrival. She told us to be very careful and not to stay out too late because the tournament started the following day. She said a prayer for us to have a safe journey and warned us again to be careful.
Miguel and I met some more men from Comogocho at a teammates house. We packed into a suburban and headed to Atlantic City. It was a one-hour drives so we bought some *chelas* (beer) and had a few drinks along the way. We spent a few hours in Atlantic City and arrived back in Brownstone around 3 am. I was exhausted and went to sleep hoping my body would be ready for the *Copa* the following day.

I didn’t wake up until noon. The long day of travel and Atlantic City team retreat left my body and mind exhausted. I thought I woke up late so I rushed up the stairs from the basement. I saw Miguel in the living room watching television. He was just about to wake me up because it was time to leave. He left to pick up his cousins and said he would be back in 20 minutes. I jumped in the shower and gathered my basketball things and took my necessary pain medication. Miguel arrived at the house with his cousins and we left to the *Copa*. Miguel’s parents left at 5 am to help set up the food booths for the *Copa*. We arrived at the park in the afternoon and community members were sitting in the shade and relaxing. The park was in a big recreation center complete with soccer, baseball, and basketball courts. The blacktop was radiating the sun and I was sweating constantly. I walked through the park and headed toward the basketball court and I recognized some people from Comogocho. I heard someone call my name “*Aye Memo!*” and I quickly recognized some players from Comogocho. I saw familiar faces and greeted numerous people that I had met in Comogocho. I made my way to the director’s table for the tournament and recognized a player from Los Angeles named Isla. I knew many people in New Jersey and I instantly felt more comfortable with the new environment. Miguel introduced me to local guys from Bridgestone that play at the park and some other individuals who help out with the tournaments. There were not as many people at the
tournament compared to a typical tournament day in Los Angeles, but it was expected because the community in Brownstone is smaller. We hung out most of the day and I watched some of the women’s games. I ate some sopes, tamales, and tortas from the food table and Miguel’s mom made sure I was never hungry. I spent most of the day trying to find shade, watch basketball and mingle with friends and my new teammates. We finally got to play in our game and I spent a good amount of time taping my knee, finger, and ankle. I am old, so whenever I play I must take precaution.

Our team prepared for our first game and we were excited to play. The game started and I decided to come off the bench as a substitute. I didn’t want to intrude on the first game, so I planned to play only if a teammate needed a break. Our first game was easy and we took a large lead, the crowd cheered for us and we controlled the game. Miguel decided he needed a break so I subbed in. I scored my first basket a few possessions later. I played the rest of the game and we won by 15 points. Everyone was happy with our performance, but I had some critiques I addressed to the players after the game. We waited to see if we had to play a second game, but it the sun set and they announced the tournament would continue the following Sunday. We had the first game starting at 7am! All of us erupted with “Ahhh man” and some of my teammates hoped they would wake up in time for the game. Miguel and I walked around and decided to eat some Chinese food for dinner. We checked with Miguel’s mom and asked her if she needed any help, but she sent us to go eat because she saw we were hungry. They had to pack up the food station, count the tickets and money. They had arrived at 5am and it was almost 9pm by the time we planned on eating Chinese food. Miguel’s parents worked a
15-hour day and they were exhausted by the time we got home and had dinner. They
turned right around and left at 5am for work the following day.

Miguel’s parents work every day at an agriculture green house on the edge of
town. His mom passed by the house during the lunch-hour to check on me. I spent most
of the week working on schoolwork and exercising in the evening. One day my friend
Isla picked me up to explore Brownstone. I knew Isla from Los Angeles so we decided
drive to the beach and asked Miguel for directions but we ended up at the southern tip of
New Jersey. We had a good day exploring and joked with Miguel about his geography.
During our exploration we saw a sunken concrete ship that was made during the First
World War, a lighthouse, and visited an old beach town that looked like a popular
vacation destination for wealthy families. Isla and I were the only Latinos we saw the
whole day. We had lunch and decided to drive back to Brownstone. In the evening
Miguel and I went to the park to shoot saw some guys I had met the previous Sunday.
Miguel and I played a really intense game, which was really fun, and we played until we
couldn’t see anymore.

Another day I headed out with Miguel to drop a woman off he was helping.
Miguel helped this woman and her daughter with some medical services by taking her to
the doctor and translating. Miguel stopped by the house and asked me if I wanted to see
the fields where people work. We drove for 20 minutes to the edge of the town with lots
of fields. We pulled up to a house and Miguel said to me “that’s where the boss lives”
and it was the home of the farmer or owner of the field. The workers apartments were
right next to the boss’ house and they reminded me of old footage from the farmworkers
strikes in in California during the 1970s. The building was probably in better living
condition 30 years ago, but it did not look like extravagant housing by any means. The workers’ building was a single story unit and the apartment units were separated into small one bedroom or studio units. There were dirty boots in front of all the houses. Miguel explained the forms to the woman and while he was talking to her I saw another young woman run outside her apartment to greet her daughters as they came off the school bus. It made me realize that these typical living conditions do not define a lot of the people. Their family, health and friends are very important to them. They struggle, they work hard, and they always are joyful and welcoming.

Miguel and I went to Atlantic City to shop, gamble, and enjoy the weather at the beach. We arrived back in Brownstone in the early evening and wanted to practice. However, there were early evening showers and the warm rain was very uncomfortable. We played only one game and then the showers quickly turned into hard rainfall we all scattered to find shelter. We decided to leave and go to a nearby town to eat. We returned early and watched television with the family and I ended up going to sleep early.

The day before our game I planned on shooting baskets and going to bed early because our first game was at 7:00 am. Miguel arrived home late and he was too tired to play because he worked with his uncle all day. His uncle did landscaping so Miguel and his cousin helped their uncle with the mulch. Miguel and his little cousin stopped by the house after they were finished and they both looked really tired. I laughed at both of them and joked with his little cousin about what kind of work he did. I even asked to see if his nails were dirty because I wanted proof he worked a full day. I went with Miguel to drop off his little cousin at his house. On the way to his house I joked with him about working and told him “See, when you’re in class and you don’t want to read, write, or do your
homework, think about what it was like to work today. You can both do well in school and sit in a nice office with air conditioning or you can work like you did today, every day.” The young kid laughed and I told Miguel that my hands were delicate; they weren’t made for work like that. I told him I flipped pages for a living and that’s what I liked to do. We all laughed.

We planned on leaving at 6:30 am to get to the park in time for our game. I woke up early and packed a lot of my things. I said good morning to Miguel and he asked me if I was ready to play, I told him “Of course! But what about you?” He said he was tired and his back hurt from working. We ate a couple pieces of fruit and heading to the park. We arrived at the park 15 minutes before game time. They were setting up the scoring tables but most of the food station was already active with café and pan. We walked over to the food area and greeted Miguel’s parents and then went to meet our team. We ended up not playing the first game because the other team did not show up on time. This was good because we only needed one more victory to place 1, 2, 3, or 4 in the tournament. We waited a few more hours to play. Our second game was about to start and people were there on the sidelines ready to watch. Isla and Miguel’s girlfriend Lulu and some family friends were there to watch us too. We had to play a good team.

This time I decided to start the game but it was a bad decision because I committed four fouls during first few minutes of the game. I even managed to get a technical foul for standing on the out of bounds line during a throw in. I was really upset and the game had some awful refereeing and our team complained. We ended up losing in a really close game. At the end of the game one of our player’s named Danny had two free throw attempts but they did not matter because we were still down by three points.
After his first free throw a player from the other team ran up to him while he was on the free throw line, patted him on the behind and mocked him. Danny was angry and so were some of our other teammates. Danny quickly shot the second free throw and started to walk over to the man to confront him. Everybody jumped up and a fight almost broke out. Miguel was at the other end of the court and didn’t see what happened. I walked over there with my team to try and break up the madness. One of our players was yelling at the opposing player and telling him how disrespectful his actions were. Eventually the crowd settled and Danny and the rest of our team gathered at some bleachers. The team was discussing the actions of the other team but that didn’t concern me. Our team was young; most of my teammates were still in High School. Older members from the community came over and offered their opinions on how to appropriately handle situations. They told us to be smart and that good teams will try to get in your head. I offered my opinion and said that we didn’t play well. I explained to my team that it was only our first loss of the tournament and we still had another game to play. We needed to focus on the next game and forget about what happened because if we took our frustration into the next game we were not going to play well.

We could not lose the next game or we would be out of the tournament. We played a very good team and Miguel mentioned to me that he wanted me to start the next game again but I declined. I wanted the team to start with everyone who had been playing together before I arrived. I wanted to come off of the bench and substitute. I really inserted myself into a leadership role and got the young kids fired up and made them focus on simple things that could help us win the game. I felt like almost like a player coach. I told our tallest player Dougie “I need you to box out and rebound, use your
hips.” I told Danny “Don’t be afraid to shoot, don’t think about it, if you’re open, shoot it.” I told Eddy “Make smart passes and if you see an opening, attack strong” I didn’t need to tell Miguel anything because he was the oldest on the team and he knew he had to play well. We started the game and it was close the whole time. I thought our team was not playing with a lot of energy and I yelled at them during halftime. “Why are we playing lazy? Why are we playing like we are tired and just played three games in a row? They are the ones who just played three games in a row! They are the ones who are tired! We have to play hard every single second of this game!” The team responded and played much better the second half.

I entered the game for the first time in the second half after Danny had trouble making baskets. It was a close game and a player on the other team was heckling Miguel. I felt the need to enter the conversation. After some of my witty remarks the player didn’t want to talk to me anymore. The game was tied with under a minute left and Eddy went to the free throw line and gave us a one-point lead. After a timeout the other team shot and Dougie got an easy rebound. Miguel dribbled down the court and I ran to the right side of the floor in front of our bench. Miguel dribbled up top and moved to his right; I followed his movement and slid down to the corner behind the three-point line behind the defender. There was under twenty seconds left in the game. Miguel drove and passed me the ball; I was wide open in the corner. I didn’t hesitate; I shot the ball without thinking twice. As the ball was in the air I heard Miguel “Ah, no Memo.” He wanted the ball, we had the lead, and we didn’t need a three point shot. The ball came down through the hoop, nothing but net, we lead by four points with seconds left, I sealed the victory. The opposing team ran down and fired a long three pointer that missed and we won the game.
Miguel came up to me and gave me a big high five and said “Tsa, pinche Memo!” (Ah, fucking Memo!) He was scared I took the shot, but he was happy I made it. We had a chance at the *Copa* and we needed just one more win to reach the finals.

Our next game faced another Comogocho team with a player named Freddy. I met him during my first trip to the sierra and I played with him my first night. We spent some time together in Comogocho during the fiestas and tournaments. He played with men from Comogocho and his cousin Bobby who was related to my teammates in Los Angeles. We started the game and it was a tough match and even most of the way. I played most of the game and played really well. We ended up losing by one point and we did not have a chance at winning the *Copa*. After the game people congratulated me on my play and told me that I was a good player. It felt good getting recognized as a good player.

We finished with 4th place in the tournament and I was happy that we received a trophy. They started a ceremony and the organizers spoke to the crowd and thanked people for their support and explained to the crowd that this was a good thing for the community in New Jersey. They announced 4th through 1st place teams, so we took our spot in front of the tournament committee and lined up for our 4th place trophy. We were happy. Dougie said “Damn, we did good, 4th out of 37 teams, that’s like… 30 something teams we did better than!” we all started laughing and made fun of his math skills. It was a good moment and I felt fortunate to play in a *Copa*, but I felt even more grateful that I experienced it with great people. A man from Comogocho named Todd ended up giving prize money out to the winning teams. We won $200 so we split it up ten ways. We
settled down and planned on celebrating later at Danny’s house. Before we left Miguel and I helped clean up the trash at the park. See Figure 11.

Before we left Miguel told his parents that we were going to Danny’s. His parents had to work the following morning so she didn’t know if they were going to see me again before my plane flight. Miguel, his parents, aunt, and uncle and few other members gathered around and Miguel’s mom told me how wonderful it was having me at the

![Figure 11. Team Comogocho with our 4th place trophy, New Jersey 2011.](image)

house. She said she was grateful Miguel had someone to talk to about life other than his parents and girlfriend. She said she was sorry that she couldn’t be more hospitable and I assured her that I was very pleased with my visit and I wanted to visit again in the future.
Miguel’s uncle told me that I was a good person to have around and that his son (Miguel’s cousin) had told him what I said after they arrived to the house from a long day of work. Everyone seemed to admire my accomplishments in life and respected my work as a person and educator. They encouraged me to visit again and Miguel’s aunt said that if I didn’t make it back to New Jersey they would take care of me in Comogocho. I thanked all of them and shook their hands. Miguel and I headed home and planned on picking up some beers before heading over to Danny’s house. The fun was just about to start.

We had a great time celebrating and arrived home late. We had to wake up early and drive to the Philadelphia airport. Miguel and I chatted on the way to the airport and I expressed my gratitude to him and his family. Participating in the Copa helped me understand the importance of family and community. The team played basketball together, celebrated holidays and birthdays together, and some of them even worked together. For one week I was part of a family on and off the court. It was an amazing feeling and something I will never forget. As a researcher I moved from the sidelines as a spectator to a player on the court. This was a significant move because it provided me with a dynamic perspective of basketball, family and La Copa.

Fiestas and Basketball

I made my second trip to Comogocho in December of 2009. I ran to my connecting flight in Houston and barely made my flight to Oaxaca. I sat next to a man from a small town called Noxitan de Diaz in the Mixteca region of Oaxaca. I was talking to him about my studies of Mixteco and I impressed him with my knowledge of the culture language. He was from Minnesota and said he worked most of the year but in the
winter he heads down to Oaxaca. He said he had spent most of his time in the US and he never was taught *Mixteco*. We talked about what kinds of foods we were going to eat when we got to Oaxaca and we both got hungry on the plane. There were younger kids on the plane and most were going to Oaxaca for the holidays. We arrived to Oaxaca City early in the morning. I’m always amazed when I see families reuniting at the airport for the first time in months or maybe years. There was this young teenage girl hugging onto her mother and crying and crying. It’s those moments of human behavior that make me realize this is not just research; these moments are people’s lives and it’s the humanistic moments that I look for as an anthropologist. I took a taxi to a park called *parquet llano* (flat park) and was going to stay in a nearby hostel but I decided to check my friend’s house before. My friend was home and he invited me out to lunch and we drank a few beers and conversed through the evening. I got little sleep that evening and left for Comogocho the following morning.

I tried to contact Eliana before she left to Oaxaca city. She was going to the city for a few days. I was under the impression that I would be able to get in contact with somebody at Eliana’s house. Lola had told me I could get the key to Eliana’s house and stay there while she was away in the city. I took a taxi to the geographic marker called *el monumento* (Benito Juárez mural) and waited to catch a *collectivo* (shared taxi) to Ixtlan. I estimated that I would arrive in Comogocho in the early afternoon. I arrived in Ixtlan and waited a while for the *collectivo* to Comogocho. I arrived in Comogocho at the taxi stop, but I still had to walk down the hill to Eliana’s house. I dragged my rolling suitcase down the side of the hill and was thinking to myself “only fucking gringos have rolling suitcases.” I arrived at Eliana’s house and nobody was home, the gate was locked with
padlock. I didn’t know what to do, so I set my things down and thought for a moment. I heard church in session and thought maybe Eliana was in church so I waited until the end of mass to see if she walked out. I waited for mass to end and I was nervous because I didn’t know what to do if Eliana wasn’t there. I sat for 30 minutes and watched as the sun began to set behind the mountain range in Comogocho. I knew I was going to be in trouble if I had to return to Oaxaca. Church was over and people began to pour out the doors and I was hoping “praying” that Eliana would pass by. People passed I gave them saludos (greetings) but I did not see Eliana. There was hardly anyone left in the church so and I asked a señora if she knew where Eliana was. She said Eliana had left to Oaxaca and she was not going to be back for some time. In my head I said “shit, what the fuck am I going to do now.” I told the senora that I was supposed to stay with Eliana and she said I should talk with the taxi drivers because they would know how to get back to Oaxaca City. I thanked the woman and sunk my head in my hands; I arrived in Comogocho with nowhere to stay.

Instead of going back to Oaxaca city I decided to pass by the municipio and ask for the presidente (president) of the town. I thought he might be able to help me with my predicament. I thought he could get in contact with Lola’s relatives so I could stay with them or get a key to Eliana’s house. I arrived at the municipio and saw Pedro. He recognized me and yelled out “compa” from above as I approached the building. I greeted Pedro, the president, and other men. I explained my predicament to whoever would listen. The president told me to sit down and hang out. He assured me everything was going to be fine and I would have a place to stay. The other men began to quiz me to find out whom I knew in town and what I was doing there. Finally, after I passed enough
Comogocho quizzes one of the men named Pito said he had an extra room I could stay in. I didn’t have to go back to Oaxaca City! The president invited me to a religious ceremony the following day in *el monte* but I didn’t know what to expect.

I woke up early, washed my face, and went to the basketball court to spend my day. I ended up hanging out at the *municipio* until around noon. The president invited me to eat with him at his house, so we walked up the hill and to eat some bread and hot chocolate. I felt privileged to eat breakfast with the president of Comogocho and I was flattered when he introduced me to his wife. We ate and I told him how grateful I was for the food. We headed toward the *municipio* and I jumped in the back of the Comogocho police truck and we started driving up the *carretera*. The town bus followed us and it was packed with lots of people. We were going up the mountain to *el monte* on a hour-long truck drive through the cool sierra mountains. We eventually pulled off onto a dirt road and drove another twenty minutes until we arrived at a fork in the road that was rarely traveled on.

We stopped and everyone hopped out of the truck so I followed the crowd from the bus. We walked down a grassy trail until it ended and then followed another trail. We walked and eventually came to a tiny church alter and main gathering place with benches in the middle of the mountains. There was a small stream running through the center. The father started mass and everyone participated. When mass was over the celebration began. They started handing out soda, bread, cookies, *atole* (rice milk), tamales, and all kinds of food. During the food gathering I saw a few religious customs take place. One man with a machete pulled a beer out of his bag, began to dig a hole underneath a rock, then poured the beer into it. The president poured an orange soda in the hole and then
someone put some bread in it. They covered the hole and placed the rock on top. I saw people filling up cups of the water from the stream and drinking from it. I asked a lady what the significance of the water was and she said el monte was a place for growth and the water was the provider. The stream runs from the mountains down to Comogocho that connects multiple water reservoirs scattered through town. The president’s wife invited me to the alter to meet the priest. We exchanged greetings and shared a plate of food. Afterwards I helped pick up trash I carried a heavy load of soda back to the police truck. This experience was wonderful and it set the tone for the rest of the week’s fiesta activities. See Figure 12.

Figure 12. Members of Comogocho placing items in the hole at El Monte, 2009.
The next day I saw Cellia, Loren and their cousin Maria. I gave them all a hug even if they didn’t want one because I was excited to see people I knew from Los Angeles. I told Cellia my story about arriving and staying over at Pito’s house. She laughed at me and told me I was crazy. Cellia mentioned there was a procession later that night where the town marched around the pueblo with a band played all night. Together we went the town plaza and listened to music and watched cultural performances. All of a sudden a young kid approached me and asked if I was Bernardo. I said yes and he grabbed me by the hand and pulled me over to his parents Jesus and Tonia Flor. It was Lola’s aunt and uncle and the young boy who grabbed me by the hand was Lola’s cousin Antoni. I was glad to see them again. I told them that I had arrived a few days ago and they started laughing. They said they heard from Lola’s mother that I was going to arrive later so they didn’t expect me to be there. They said they must have received some bad information. I told them I went to el monte for mass and they couldn’t believe I made it to the mountain. They asked how I got there and I told them I rode in the police truck and they started laughing again. They invited me over for a meal so we planned a meal later in the week.

The music and dance ended and an announcement over the loud-speaker said that there was going to be a bus that would pick everybody up and drive them to the top of the pueblo for the procession. Cellia, Loren, Maria and I decided to wait. The bus finally came and everybody rushed the bus, and it was funny watching sober and non-sober people pile into the bus. We finally got to the top and Mari and I joked that we were thankful to be alive. The band started playing and they were just passing out beers like it was water so I decided to have a few before the walking started. All the kids were
lighting off fireworks too so it was a big party. The marching started and people were
dancing and having a joyful time. We walked to the next house, then to the next house
and people would dance when the band would play. At every house people would hand
out beer, cookies, soda, shots, and candy. As the procession continued the girls were
getting tired and they wanted to leave a couple times but I kept egging them on that they
only have this opportunity once a year. The procession finally ended at the
mayordomo’s\textsuperscript{16} house which was the usual custom, but it was especially cool for me
because I got this cool photo of a make shift basketball hoop too. The procession ended
early in the morning around four o’clock. The tournament started the next day so there
were little breaks between festivities and basketball. See Figure 13.

\textsuperscript{16} The Mayordomo is a social, religious, economic and political position given to someone in the
community. This person hosts the fiesta and contributes many resources to it.
I made plans to play with a young man named Beto. Cellia introduced me to Beto; he was from Los Angeles but we never met before. I explained to him that I studied the sport of basketball and I really wanted to play in the tournament. He invited me to play with him in the tournament, so I admirably accepted his offer. Beto said we had to check in with the tournament officials at the *municipio*. Every team gathered together in divisions and marched to the courts. See Figure 14.
Then the secretary for sports and president said some encouraging words. Freddy (from New Jersey) recited a code of conduct that players would follow, and then we saluted and said we would play fair. Then the president shot his honorary free throws! He missed the first, but the referee blew the whistle and said he received one more and he sunk it. See Figure 15.
After the ceremony Beto and I waited for the tournament brackets to fill and received word when our game was scheduled. I watched a few games to size up our competition and when our game was next I became nervous. I taped up the ankle and started taking some deep breathes. Our game was next so I ran to our bench and recognized a couple of guys I played with from my first trip Comogocho. The team decided I would start the game and play underneath the basket, my same role in Los Angeles. The game started and I was out of shape. I committed two quick fouls and I even fell down a couple times. A few of kids were yelling my name “Memo Ochoa” and
letting me how crappy I was doing. It was a very close game that eventually went into triple overtime and we ended up losing but it was a good game and wonderful experience.

I woke up early the next day because I had a whole day of basketball planned. Our team played a lot of games this day and it was a long tournament. I was exhausted from all the dances, processions and other cultural events. As one game started I didn’t have a jersey so I couldn’t even enter the game. Later in the day I was sleeping on the bench and almost missed a game! One lesson I learned from playing basketball in Comogocho is that I have to be in descent physical condition. It was a long tournament day and we ended up making it to the championship, but we had to play a really strong team that we had lost to earlier in the day. Since it was a double elimination tournament we had to beat our opponent twice, and it was difficult because we had played a lot of games that day. We eventually lost the game but received second place in the tournament. The tournament ended and the Beto told me the ceremony would be held later at the baile (dance).

I was at the dance for a few hours with Cellia, Loren, Nick and Maria. After a few bands had performed the director of sports interrupted for a moment to announce all the winners for the torneo (tournament). The director of sports had a handful of envelopes stuffed with money. Eventually they announced Comogocho and our second place finish, our team captain Andy received the envelope and we cheered and clapped. After the ceremony I saw Andy and we talked about the tournament. Andy opened the winning envelope and I gave him a high-five. Another player joined us and they talked about the money. They figured out how much money each player was going to receive. Our team had received 7,000 pesos (roughly $700 dollars) for second place, and 7,000 pesos is a
good income for a weekends work. Andy and the other player divided up the money and then Andy tried to give me 500 pesos (roughly $50 US dollars)! I was stunned and I wanted to take the money, but I told him that I could not accept it. Andy was kind of shocked and looked at me like I was crazy. I explained to him my ethics as an anthropologist and I couldn’t accept the money. I told him I wanted to play basketball and that it was its own reward. I told Andy gracias compa pero puedo aceptarlo, compartilo con nuestra equipo (Thanks but I can’t accept the money, share it with the rest of the team). Eventually he was obliged by my offer and found it respectable that I would do something like that. I told him that if we ever play again all I want to do is play. He told me that from that point on I had to play on his team every time I visited, and I had no problem accepting his offer. It was a perfect ending to a full day of basketball. My first tournament in Comogocho was complete and I started to feel more comfortable with the people in town. See Figure 16.

**Oaxacalifornia Hoops**

Migration studies offer insights into the factors that lead an individual to migrate. These cultural factors of migrating effect the formations of communities in host countries. The socioeconomic reasons to migrate are cultural formations that are played out in communities in the US. It is difficult to negotiate an understanding of both migration and transnational migration without incorporating micro, meso, and macro social and economic perspectives. In doing so, it is difficult to understand what it means to be a part of a transnational community. Some researchers that focus on Oaxacan identity view identity formation as a transnational community characteristic (Cohen et al., 2009; Kearney, 2000; Mountz & Wright, 1996; Ortiz, 2005; Stephen, 2007; Suárez-
Figure 16. Los Lobos Team, Comogocho 2010.

Orozco et al., 2005). My investigation of Oaxacan basketball builds on these works by focusing on sport and how Oaxaqueños and their children define themselves in Los Angeles.

Transnational studies pay close attention to receiving communities, but do not focus enough on how the process of transnational networks begins. In my research Transnationalism is an outcome of basketball. Basketball is the route in which individuals engage in cultural practices that impact identity creation. Social, economic and political networks whether transnational or local are outcomes of this process. Alternatively, migration studies focused on home communities neglect the construction of transnational
relationships experiences of transnational migration. Jeffrey H. Cohen (2004) maintains that the strength in anthropology comes from the ability to understand complex processes; Cohen advocates that place remains a central focus of anthropology by taking it out of its physical framework. Devoting intense focus on place and why it is socially meaningful provides insight on how fourth and fifth generation Oaxacans are able to create identity in Los Angeles. This type of spatial understanding is positive for social research and I engage this overview in my multifaceted processes of examining basketball. My ethnography on basketball and identity adds to previous models that represent the many characteristics and analysis of migration. The expansion and development of migration and transnational studies has benefited from ethnography. My research will create other avenues of research with Oaxaqueño transnational identity and the meaning of basketball as symbolic representation.

More than a Game

Before the start of the 2008-2009 National Basketball Association (NBA) season teams revealed new marketing slogans to the public (Sports Business Daily, 2008). The marketing slogans fit the description of basketball, but they also had many correlation for the meaning of basketball in southern Mexico. The slogans emphasized the difference between the game and the cultural sport southern Mexican migrants brought with them to the US. For example, the New Jersey Nets slogan “More than a game” parallels what basketball means to many individuals from Oaxaca. The cultural components of basketball in southern Mexico define how the sport is carried across national borders and transplanted in new local spaces.
Basketball has been a part of cultural evolution in southern Mexico since the early part of the twentieth century. In the state of Oaxaca, basketball tournaments are incorporated into various cultural practices, and through the processes of migration Oaxacans have brought their game of basketball to the US. Basketball is included in almost every religious celebration in the sierra region of Oaxaca and almost every town has a basketball court in their main plaza (Rios, 2008). For Oaxaqueños, the game of basketball is natural; it is a cultural practice that has been passed down from generation to generation since the early parts of the twentieth century. Therefore, basketball naturally became an identity symbol for first-generation migrants searching for better lives in the US. They brought the game with them when they ventured on dangerous expeditions of migration in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Oaxacan game contains the same rules and regulations as any other basketball game played in the US but there is difference in the historical and cultural meaning. Basketbol de Oaxaqueño is not your typical basketball game, it’s “more than a game” (Rios, 2008).

What did first generation Oaxacan migrants do with the game that makes it so different from everyday pick-up games anyone would find in a public park? The difference is not where they play or how they play, but why they play basketball, so for the average Oaxacan basketball player they “play the right way” (Rios, 2008). Basketball is a family affair that travels from communities in Los Angeles to Oaxaca. Oaxacan basketball participants are involved in various community functions. The game of basketball traveled with migrants from southern Mexico to the US, and basketball tournaments became symbol of cultural and ethnic identity in Los Angeles. Basketball tournaments unite individuals together to provide a united sense of identity. Basketball is
a social outlet for some players because they can release the frustrations of migrant life and cultural contestations of identity.

Migration in southern Mexico has been described as a cultural practice that does not occur in a vacuum; rather migration involves the evaluation of risks, benefits, and resources (Cohen, 2004). First generation Oaxaqueños that moved to Los Angeles in the 1970s brought basketball with them and used it as a cultural resource. Basketball became a benefit for the community in Los Angeles because it provided a cultural resource for the community and their children. The children of Oaxacan migrants play basketball because it is a cultural display of identity, so basketball is a product of cultural migration.

In this research I examined cultural and ethnic identity in a local Oaxacan community in Los Angeles. Using basketball as a cultural lens, I argue that identities are locally constructed and some of the outcomes in this process have transnational characteristics. Sports are powerful social tools that provide the opportunity to examine cultural constructions of identity from different viewpoints. Sports play different roles in the Oaxacan community and the game of basketball is used as a cultural tool for social competition, leisure activity, and the creation of identity. Through ethnographic accounts, I have demonstrated how cultural constructions of Oaxacan identity transpire through basketball and local perceptions of community. I described the creation of Oaxacan basketball in Los Angeles and the process that evolves from the multiple conversations inside the culture of migration. Therefore I argue that Oaxacan basketball creates Oaxacan identity for the community and their children, so basketball is a symbol of cultural migration. The sport of basketball has transnational characteristics but it is an outcome of cultural formations of identity in Los Angeles.
My intention to focus on local creations of identity contributes to popular descriptions of Oaxaqueños in transnational settings (Appadurai, 1991; Cano, 2007; Faist 2000b; Goldring, 2001; Guarnizo, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Mahler, n.d.; Massey et al., 1994; Smith, 1998; Vertovec, 1999) My focus on local creations of identity emphasize that transnational characteristics of Oaxacan basketball are an outcome of identity creation and not a driving force. Documenting local creations of identity through sport creates new avenues for transnational research. Historical impacts, socioeconomic processes, and their global connections are important to migration research. Turning attention away from transnational social networks as a central driving force of cultural practices to transnational connections as an outcome of social adaptation provides researchers with new insights.

**Local Players**

In 1972, Don Otomil, along with other early arrivals of Oaxaqueños, developed the community board of ORO. All of the directors on this board were representatives of their communities in Oaxaca. The community members to economically support the communities in Oaxaca and push forth any cultural and historical traditions that existed put this original board into action informally. ORO was intended to aid in the repairing of schools, churches, main roads, city halls, and numerous other infrastructure needs of the communities in Mexico. Henceforth, representatives from Oaxacan communities were focused on maintaining the projects of infrastructure in Oaxaca and used remittances to aid in this process. Thirty years later, the community has grown and organizations have been created and dismantled. However, the underlining principles have been maintained in the objectives of the political community. The political actors of organizations and the
community along with the powerful traits of basketball have proven to be a strong force in building and supporting community infrastructure.

In Los Angeles, basketball remains an influential part of the larger Oaxacan community and community organizations recognized this phenomenon and incorporated their love for the sport into the numerous obligations and structures needed to prosper as a diverse, yet bonded community. Don Otomil Rodriguez is currently the president of the Indigenous Oaxacan Federation (Federación Indígena Oaxaqueña, FIO). Previously Don Otomil was the President and one of the original founders of the Regional Organization of Oaxaca (Organización Regional Oaxaca, ORO). ORO has since changed names (Federación Organisación Regional de Oaxaca, FORO) and has elected new board members. Don Otomil left ORO and started FIO because of political differences within the group. Personal politics and social inequalities have rich traditions in Oaxaca and in some cases it is just as apparent in the United States. Despite these political differences, the larger Oaxacan community remains strong and comes together over larger issues that require a united front.

For Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles, basketball tournaments provide assistance in various other aspects of Oaxacan life and culture. Because basketball has always served as a social tool in Oaxacan culture for networking with surrounding communities, the tournaments have maintained their traditional importance, but have been renegotiated in regard to the current needs and concerns of the Oaxacan community in Los Angeles.

There are other social aspects that tournaments bring to the community; they provide a meeting ground for social politics and other political endeavors. For example, at a tournament I witnessed in Marina Park in Santa Monica, there was a meeting by
approximately seven elders at a park bench in the gazebo next to the courts where the tournament was taking place. Gabriel Martinez later told me that a lot of decisions by community organizations were made at these tournaments. It is the one chance in the week that they can all meet and discuss important topics, since it is usually a Sunday. This reinforces the typical six-day workweek for many Oaxaqueños whose only free day may be a Sunday. Also, the tournaments are a great place to find work if someone has recently arrived to Los Angeles from Oaxaca. Don Otomil stated that some new arrivals go the tournaments to network for work, and others who have run into legal or social problems come to the tournaments because it is the best way to find people who can assist them with their problems. In addition to the politics, work, and gossip, basketball tournaments also serve as a romantic meeting ground for the youth. As one young player told me, the basketball tournaments are a chance to see your boyfriend/girlfriend. Basketball provides a place to meet new people who do not go to the same school or live in different neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles. The romantic activity of the youth was very evident at the tournaments where I witnessed youth hanging out and talking before, during, and after games. Plazas throughout Mexico have served as places where young people meet each other and also court each other. In the absence of such places in a huge city like LA, the basketball tournaments serve as a substitute.

Location, space, place, and “trans,” all describe a subject occupied, but these are limited to the description of people in the process of creating identity. Proponents of transnational research have modeled the relationships of space to describe cultural characteristics that supersede a boundless space, but this model lacks the solidarity to recognize the development of boundaries of by localized processes (Gupta & Ferguson,
Transnationalism is a good description of the past processes of movement by local groups such as the Oaxacan community in Los Angeles, but it does not represent change over time or the new creations of space and identity. I describe power within these localized communities and the macro-processes that inhibit new creations of identity, space, and cultural practice.

Scholars have continuously linked the creations of social processes and issues of power and meaning (Bourdieu, 1977, 1980; Foucault, 1980; Wolf, 2001). Few scholars have dealt substantially with issues of power and transnational studies. Recent methodological approaches to transnational studies and its link to power come from interpretations of globalization’s impact on social fields (Murray, 2005; Schiller, 2005; Smith, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Stoller, 1997). The basic dilemma for bridging transnational studies and globalization is in the multiple approaches to define nationalism (Schiller, 2005). Using Bourdieu’s interpretation of social fields, Nina Schiller (2005) defines transnational social fields as networks of larger networks extended across borders of nation-states. Implementing interpretations of “social fields” to transnational interpretation reduces locality to a metaphor for history. This approach ignores the structured power of global and social change and its impact on transnational community development. I offer an approach with more emphasis on local structures of power that influence the social creations of meaning identity, culture, and space. Working within descriptions of globalization and transnational as “sets of processes,” I filter out local creations of identity enforced by structures of power. Together ethnography and sports function as a powerful tool to examine the Oaxacan migrant community as a local group. For example, working with Mexican migrant communities in California sheds light on
movement and multiple transnational spectacles. But focusing on the local creates a
different understanding of movement and creation of space, identity, and culture.
Therefore, this research with a particular Oaxaqueño community in Los Angeles that has
had moments of transnationalization in the past currently shows trends in structures of
power moved by local processes that create identity in a modern atmosphere.

The fluidity of transnational movement has stalled with new US policies affecting
micro and macro structures facilitating the sets of processes we know as transnational.
Transnational political, economic, cultural, and religious exchange is dependent on larger
processes outside the scope of transnationalism. Ultimately, basketball in Oaxaca has
become an identity marker for the people of Oaxaca, such an important part of their
identity that they carry it with them in the migration process. Through this process,
political actors in the community have maintained new affirmations of indigeneity for
Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles, and they negotiate the balance of indigenous identity and
modernity. Through the spectacle of sport, indigenous identities are transmitted through
the generations and therefore become re-imagined within the context of modernity itself.
Basketball tournaments in Los Angeles provide the opportunity and resources for
community members to participate and renegotiate issues of Oaxacan culture, identity,
indigeneity, and modernity.

Oaxacan basketball in Los Angeles has been a vital part of the migration process
and the development of community. For Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles, the parallel to
indigenous identities that mark the group or individuals as bodies tied to locality provoke
serious debates over ideas of the “new immigrant.” In Oaxaca, basketball continues to be
an intricate part of the indigenous culture centered on religious festivals. Additionally,
basketball in Los Angeles maintains the rich atmosphere of Oaxacan culture and identity, but basketball is also engaged with new generations developing identities contrasted in modernity. Furthermore, the Oaxacan community and its leaders are faced with new agendas and political decisions that affect the future of community’s bi-nationally. However, the political actors within the Oaxacan community in Los Angeles are faced with a new game. Therefore, Oaxacan political local conceptions of Oaxacan political, economic, cultural and religious exchange have changed under larger processes outside the scope of “transnationalism.”
Conclusion:

This paper makes a significant contribution to the discipline of anthropology. My research is dynamic and the following highlights its significance:

1. The use of sport as a research method and critical analysis of culture and identity in Anthropology.
2. The Oaxacan construction of identity in space with transnational outcomes.
3. The descriptions of how migrant communities create itself over time and space.
4. The examination of how migrants and their children engage with cultural conflicts that effect their identity.
5. The cultural, social, political, and economic meaning of basketball and its significance in the Oaxacan community.

The use of sport in anthropology has gained little recognition. My research contributes to the field of anthropology by highlighting sport as a research tool and method. I have used sport to follow Oaxacan basketball from Los Angeles to the sierra norte region of Oaxaca. This process was iterative and my ethnography described how sports can be used to examine identity. The creation of Oaxacan identity is formed through basketball and other cultural practices. This process has transnational
occurrences, but they are an outcome of how individuals associate and identify with each other. In Los Angeles, Oaxacan have created individual and communal over time and space. This process is not smooth and there are significant cultural conflicts individuals and communities must deal with in the development of identity. Basketball provides a space for identity to develop and there are various transnational, political, economic, and sociocultural outcomes. Oaxacan basketball provides individuals and the community with a sense of self and it is a rich cultural tradition that has many positive outcomes.

This dissertation contributes to the discipline of anthropology by using sports as a central research study. My work also builds on research studies that focus on Oaxacan migration and culture by examining cultural flows from the U.S. to Mexico. I conclude that examining individual identity provides information on cultural outcomes like basketball, migration, politics, religion, economics, etc. In my future research I will look at other cultural outcomes of Oaxaqueño identity creation to further understand how it changes over time and space.
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