

# SPIRITUALITY AMONG MEXICAN TRANSNATIONAL TEACHING YOUTH: TOWARDS DECOLONIALIZATION AND HUMANIZATION OF RESEARCH

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## **ABSTRACT**

The ultimate purpose of this study is to illustrate the transnational journey of Mexican populations in terms of their spirituality. With this goal, I designed this study based on decolonial and humanizing principles of testimonios epistemologies (Calderón-Berumen et al. 2022) to describe the spiritual trajectories of Mexican transnational returnees pursuing a teaching degree in Tlaxcala, Mexico. Based on interviews, written questionnaires, and the teaching journal of the author, I suggest that transnationals understand that spiritual and religious development is different for Mexican communities on both sides of the border. Mexican transnationals used online interactions to promote spiritual healing among those “left” in the north side of the border. Because spirituality has been traditionally ignored by most U.S. academia, this article supports the importance of humanizing scholarly research to understand the complexity of Mexican transnational populations.

## **KEYWORDS:**

Mexican transnationals, spirituality, religiosity, pre-service language teachers, returnees, decoloniality

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“...pláticas and testimonio can be crucial epistemological and methodological tools when doing critical educational research working with and for—rather than on—communities of colour”  
(Calderón-Berumen, Espinosa-Dulanto, and O'Donald, 2022, p.4)

I am a male scholar of color. I am an immigrant, a Mexican transnational. I come from a Mexican middle-class family who struggled to make a living during the several economic crises that Mexico experienced during the 20th century. I am part of the last generation of Mexicans who attended non-neoliberal schooling. While I have always rebelled against the status quo and social disparities, my epistemologies are limited to, mostly, western knowledge. That is, I have almost always been exposed to western and positivist perspectives which, in many cases, dehumanize research.

I did not want to leave home Mexico. But I had to. I have had privileges that most of Mexican transnationals don't have. But I have experienced structural, academic, linguistic, and personal discrimination on both sides of the border. I have dealt with loneliness, helplessness, and sorrow because we, migrants, have many homes and yet, no home at all. Because of my grandma's consejo, I turned to spirituality to cope with loneliness, sickness, and difficulties during my transnational journey. My own spiritual trajectory as an immigrant, along with decolonizing principles of testimonios and pláticas, motivated me to examine how spirituality is an important factor in the development of Mexican transnationals.

The present article embraces some epistemologies embedded in testimonios-pláticas: I attempted to create humanized research with and for communities of color (Calderón-Berumen, Espinosa-Dulanto, and O'Donald, 2022, 4). Particularly, this article aims to illustrate the religious and spiritual development of Mexican transnationals by bridging spiritual ontologies we, transnationals, have in “el norte” and “el sur” as distinct yet united communities. In this way, this article aims to contribute to the understanding of transnational Mexicanas who returned to Mexico as part of a voluntary or forced migration. By emphasizing the importance of spirituality and religiosity, I highlight the relevance of healing and solidarity in transnational communities.

### **SITUATING THE STUDY**

In the last decade, Mexican transnationals, or Mexican origin communities who move across nations, have returned to Mexico due to the lack of jobs, the increase of anti-Mexican policies, and xenophobia in the United States (Martinez-Prieto 2021, 126). Thus, many Mexican transnationals of first and second generation voluntarily or forcedly migrated (back) to central Mexico after the 2008 economic crisis.

Tlaxcala is the smallest state in Mexico and is located only 120 kilometers away from Mexico City. Tlaxcalans, or people from the state of Tlaxcala, played an important role during the colonization of the New Spain after the fall of Mexico-Tenochtitlan in 1521 (Calderón Morillón

2004, 58). However, because Tlaxcalans' alliance with the Spanish conquerors, their importance in the history of Mexico has been relegated or even ignored by many scholars in Mexico and the United States. On both sides of the border, some Mexican communities refer to Tlaxcalans as *los traidores* (the traitors) and this stigma has permeated scholarly work across the Mexican-U.S. border (Martinez-Prieto 2022, 67).

Along with the rest of Mexico, Tlaxcala has also received large numbers of Mexican transnationals who have decided to go (back) to Mexico with their families in recent times (Flores-Hernández, Cuatpotzo-Flores and Espejel-Rodríguez 2014, 261). Because many transnationals are already bilingual, many of them decide to take advantage of their English proficiency and enroll in Mexican public universities to pursue English Teaching degrees (Christiansen, et al. 2018, 80). Higher education is a way to achieve social mobility for transnationals in Tlaxcala, as it is in other states of northern Mexico (Martínez Prieto, 2020, 158). Because of the ancestral Spanish-Tlaxcalan alliance, Catholicism is rooted in Tlaxcalan communities. Spirituality has been extensively examined among scholars based at Mexican institutions, especially as it played an essential role in the (de)colonization and creation of the current Mexican identity (Lafaye 2015, 30). Different from researchers based in Mexican institutions, some scholars (i.e. Figueroa 2014, 33; Pérez 2014, 24) have highlighted that the spirituality of Mexican-origin individuals living in the United States has been traditionally ignored by academia, for which they called for a decolonial approach (meaning less positivistic and patriarchal) to understanding individuals' identities and journeys. For this reason, the present work contributes to two main areas of current academic discussion: 1) it examines the relevance of spirituality and religiosity of Mexican transnationals after they go (back) to Mexico to continue with their professional development which, to this day, is an area of opportunity for scholarly work, and 2) it emphasizes the need of decolonizing research perspectives to analyze transnational populations.

The findings of this study help contextualize the particular situation of the participants and should not be understood as generalizable. However, the present work can serve as a point of departure to comprehend the influence of spirituality among transnational pre-service teaching youth and, more importantly, to humanize research with/for transnational (returnee) migrants.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DECOLONIZING EPISTEMOLOGIES IN RESEARCH**

“Testimonios” originated in the Global South with the purpose of emancipating those who are marginalized and oppressed. Reyes and Rodriguez (2012, 526) stated that testimonios aim to resist imperialism in the Global South, mainly in Latin America, where local elites, along with U.S. interventions, caused death and desolation among many (Martinez-Prieto 2023, 14). Huante-Tzintzun (2016, 44) pointed out that, when the epistemologies of testimonios were adopted by U.S. scholars, they extended to include a call for action in educational contexts. *Pláticas*, in a similar vein, aim to bridge the individualistic conceptions of testimonios to community actions. For Espino, Muñoz, and Marquez, *pláticas* are a “collaborative process comprised of sharing stories, building community, and acknowledging multiple realities and vulnerabilities in an effort to enforce strong bonds among the members of that social network” (2010, 805).

The foundations of this research are based on the emancipatory epistemologies of testimonios and pláticas. In this regard, the ideological principles that support this investigation are based on Espinosa-Dulanto and Calderón-Berumen's statements about testimonios epistemologies (2020, 1-3). I subscribe to the idea that testimonios and pláticas should:

- 1) foster the humanization of research, emphasizing healing practices,
- 2) bridge “north” and “south” knowledges and experiences, and
- 3) move from a western “I” to a collective “we.”

As a reaction to most western research, the decolonizing principles of testimonios and pláticas allow me to find epistemological spaces to investigate the impact that spirituality has among us, Mexican transnationals.

### **SPIRITUALITY, RELIGIOSITY, AND DECOLONIZATION**

This research is guided by the concepts of spirituality and religiosity. Although both concepts are relegated to secondary discussions in U.S. academia due to neocolonial and western perspectives, scholars have pointed out their importance for human development. In this regard, Lopez et al. (2011, 1299) emphasized the difference between spirituality and religiosity in the development of humans. Religiosity, on the one hand, relates the commitment of an individual to institutional religious practices. Spirituality, on the other hand, relates to the individual interpretation of the relationship of a person with a higher power. In a similar vein, other scholars (i.e. Saucier and Skrzypinska 2006, 1255) have stated that traditional concepts of religion do not equal subjective conceptions of spirituality or vice versa: Individuals can be religious but not develop notions of spirituality, or they can be spiritual without having any religious affiliation.

Recently, academia has also concentrated on the development of spirituality among transnational populations. For example, Gómez Carrillo (2012, 61) defined spirituality as a process in which transnationals find dignity and socialization. Because transnational communities usually experience processes of dispossession (of dignity, land, and people) in their new home countries, Gómez Carrillo (2012, 62) explained that spirituality provides spaces in which transnational populations can make meaning of their own existence.

This article is highly influenced by Anzaldúan notions of spirituality. Anzaldúa's ideas have guided scholarly work about the spirituality of Mexican-origin transnational communities in the United States (i.e. Delgado 2011, 111; Schaeffer 2018, 1006). For Anzaldúa, spirituality, as an indivisible part of human nature, is essential to understanding human identity from a decolonial perspective of perpetual oppression (2010, 94). In addition, Anzaldúa considers that spirituality regulates different conceptions of reality by providing meaning to material and immaterial experiences of people (95).

As explained by Tirres (2019, 128), a pertinent claim about Anzaldúa's decolonial notions of spirituality relates to the fact it creates a positive impact in people's existence. This claim is common among the scholars who have examined spirituality from Anzaldúan or other lenses (i.e. Lamb et al. 2021, 5; Lopez et al. 2011, 1299; Vázquez Palacios 2001 615; Twenge et al. 2016, 1720; Yañez-Castillo et al. 2018, 5).

## **SPIRITUALITY AS PART MEXICAN (TRANS)NATIONAL IDENTITIES**

The concept of spirituality is essential to understand Mexicanidad or being Mexican. Lafaye (2015, 30) explained spirituality as one of tenets of Mexican identity. After the fall of Mexico-Tenochtitlan in 1521, the Spanish conquerors used the spirituality of indigenous communities to impose the Catholic religion among the subjugated populations. The imposition of Catholic beliefs along with the spiritual resistance of Mesoamerican communities created syncretic deities, such as the veneration of Guadalupe-Tonantzin.

Ironically, as mentioned by León-Portilla (2014, 21), the symbol of Guadalupe-Tonantzin was used and adopted by criollos, or Spanish-origin individuals who were born in America (the continent), to keep their privileges in the new continent after Mexico's independence war (1810-1821). The current number of Catholics/Christians in Mexico can be explained by the syncretism of Spanish oppression and indigenous resistance during more than 300 years of Spanish colonization. Despite the gradual acceptance of Catholicism in Mexico, post-revolutionary administrations promoted the secular orientation of Mexican State during the 20th century, which caused tensions between the Catholic church and Mexican administrations. Such tensions caused the Guerra Cristera (1926-1930) in which some campesinos (farmers), supported by the Catholic church, fought against the Mexican army to counter the impositions of a secular State in western and central Mexico (Parada 2015, 67). According to Levinson (2001, 94), some Mexican institutions are still strongly influenced by the secularity of the Mexican State.

Some rural and indigenous communities in Mexico have rejected the imposition of Catholic and secular perspectives on their spiritual practices for centuries. For this reason, some Mexican scholars (i.e. Toledo 2003) have examined the spirituality of indigenous nations in Mexico as sustainable alternatives to western notions of wellbeing. In the Mexican state of Tlaxcala, where this research took place, investigations about spirituality have mainly concentrated on the relationships between gender, agriculture, syncretism, and the spiritual development of rural communities. For example, Manzanares (2004, 15) analyzed the rituals that Tlaxcalan women carry out in agricultural activities in the town of San Miguel del Milagro, where Catholicism and indigenous practices become mutually involved.

Research about spirituality has also analyzed individuals pursuing degrees in Mexican universities. For example, Yañez-Castillo et al. (2018, 5) analyzed the association between spirituality and the use of drugs and alcohol among Mexican university students. Different from youth in other countries, college populations in Mexico reported to be highly spiritual despite their religious affiliations, which was not associated with the use of drugs or alcohol.

## **WHEN IN EL NORTE: SPIRITUALITY AS REACTION TOWARDS COLONIALISM**

The impact of spiritual practices in Mexican populations living in the United States has been addressed by Chicana feminist scholars, who are scholars of—mainly—Mexican origin living in the United States. Usually based on the decolonial work of Gloria Anzaldúa (2010), Chicana feminist scholars have highlighted the importance of spiritual development in Mexican-origin

populations during their transnational journeys in the U.S. In general terms, Chicana feminist scholars propose a more indigenous-oriented spirituality in which white male institutions and symbols are replaced with indigenous deities (Cantú 2014, 205; Encino 2014, 138; Lara and Facio 2014, 4; Hernández 2014; Tellez 2014). For instance, Lara and Facio (2014, 4) proposed that spiritual development can be a way of decolonizing identities of transnationals. Similarly, Elenes (2014, 57) and Espín (2014, 103) created new interpretations of Catholic symbols, such as the Virgen de Guadalupe and Saints, in a way that challenged spiritual male-centered practices. Also from a Chicana feminist point of view, Pérez (2014, 25) and Figueroa (2014, 33) claimed that spirituality is an important part of humans that has been ignored in academic practices in the United States. This lack of importance of spirituality in scholarly work, according to Elenes (2014, 57), represents a way of subjugating female transnational narratives. While Chicana feminists' holistic ideas about identity and spirituality can be applied to different social groups in both sides of the Mexican-U.S. order, their statements have concentrated on Mexican transnational populations who live in the United States and not in Mexico.

In short, the spirituality of Mexican populations in Mexico and the United States has received different degrees of scholarly attention. Because spirituality is essential to understanding the current and historical situation of Mexico, especially regarding the relationship between spirituality and various social movements in this country, its relevance has been extensively addressed by scholars based in Mexican institutions. In contrast, the spirituality of Mexicans in the United States has not been as widely examined. In this way, most scholars who have focused on the spirituality of Mexican-origin populations in the U.S. have stated its importance towards achieving more indigenous oriented and less patriarchal perspectives. At this point, I did not find studies that analyzed the impact of spirituality among Mexican transnationals when they go (back) to Mexico to continue with their professional growth. To fill this gap in literature, the present work aims to examine the influence of spirituality in the well-being and identities of transnational Mexicanas once they are in Mexico.

## **METHODOLOGY**

I acknowledge that spirituality and religiosity should not be confined under a specific methodology—in fact, selecting a methodology seems to resemble western and colonial patterns of research. However, I subscribe to Fierros and Delgado Bernal's (2016, 101) conceptions regarding the meaningfulness of developing decolonizing research practices by navigating already-existing methodological constructs. This article follows a qualitative approach to understand the spirituality of Mexican transnational pre-service language teacher Mexicanas and was guided by two overarching questions:

- 1) How do notions of spirituality and religiosity impact the development of identity of Tlaxcalan transnational pre-service language teachers?
- 2) What factors influence the spiritual development of Tlaxcalan transnational pre-service language teachers?

## **CONTEXT OF RESEARCH**

Although the number of Tlaxcalan transnationals coming (back) to Mexico has not been exactly calculated and it might not seem as large as it is in other Mexican states—for example, Tlaxcala's return migrations rank 29th out of 32 Mexican states—it has called the attention of local and federal governments as it has grown dramatically in the last years. For this reason, in 2016, the Tlaxcalan government received federal funds to support the incorporation of transnational returnees to local economic activities, especially in the municipalities of San Lucas Tecopilco, Lázaro Cárdenas, Hueyotlipan, Zacaulpan, Ayometla, Tenancigo y Terrenate (Gobierno del Estado de Tlaxcala 2016). This governmental support for transnational returnee communities in Tlaxcala is only fair, as migrants contribute to the local economy with remittances that ranged from 187-225 million dollars (BANXICO 2018).

Regardless of the remittances of Tlaxcalan migrants and an apparent economic prosperity, Tlaxcala is a state in which gender violence is latent, especially in terms of human trafficking and prostitution. The municipality of Tenancingo, in this context, is known for *la trata* (or human trafficking) of women for illegal sexual exploitation to the states of New York and New Jersey (Ordoñez León 2015, 84). Human trafficking in this zone of Tlaxcala is such that in 2015, Mexican and U.S. authorities carried out an operation to capture some of the leaders of this criminal organization (Ponce de León 2015).

## **PARTICIPANTS**

The three participants of this study were pre-service teachers at an English-Teaching degree in a university in Tlaxcala, México. They were studying the last semesters of their degree. At the time of the research, they were 21-23 years old. I decided to ask Valentina, Laura, and Jessica (pseudonyms) to take part in this research because, as I will explain later, we developed mutual *confianza*, or confidence, during our concurrence in the program. Valentina, Laura, and Jessica have similar transnational trajectories, as all of them returned to Mexico after living in New York.

Valentina lived in New York for 8 years and returned to Tlaxcala to finish high school, where she was required to repeat one year of schooling before graduating. During her off time, Valentina was working as a language teacher and English tutor. Laura was enrolled at the Language-Teaching program, but she decided to take a year off to work and live with her father in Mexico City. Laura lived in New York for 12 years, and then moved to Tlaxcala to continue her education. Jessica is the only participant who is a US citizen, for which she had traveled to New York at different times. Her family, however, moved permanently to Tlaxcala when she was only 10 years old.

I was the participants' instructor during the first semesters of their teacher training program (2014-15), when we developed a connection during my time there. Even after I left their program to pursue my doctoral degree in the United States, we kept communication via social media.

## **INSTRUMENTS AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES**

This qualitative research took place at three different momentums. First, during 2014-15, when as an instructor, I collected data using my teaching journal. Later, in 2017-18, I applied questionnaires and interviewed participants. In 2020, amidst the pandemic of COVID-19, participants read and approved the interpretations I'm sharing in this article.

When I taught in Tlaxcala (2014-15), I did not plan on focusing on researching the spiritual identity of pre-service teachers; however, my teaching journal was meaningful for the goals of this study. This is because the academic interaction in Mexican universities is different to the ones in the United States or other western countries, so my participants and I became friends when I was teaching there. For this reason, not only did we share classes, but also social and recreational events. My teaching journal, therefore, was useful as it provided insights not only to the academic trajectory of my participants in my classes, but also, to social and cultural aspects of this region and its strong devotion to Catholicism.

In 2017-18, based on the research of Christiansen (2015, 440), I decided to approach the spirituality/religiosity of participants by analyzing off-line and on-line interactions, as the combination of these two can provide a more comprehensive idea of the way individuals conceive their spiritual identities in physical and digital environments. In terms of face-to-face interactions, I conducted 3 in-depth interviews, which lasted from 50-90 minutes, in which I asked pre-service teachers about the importance of spirituality in their academic and non-academic development. As my participants and I had developed a close relationship, one-to-one interactions (such as interviews) were useful because, as suggested by Brown (2001, 16), participants felt more confident and open to answer. For the online interactions, participants were asked to answer a written questionnaire. As part of the questionnaire, I asked Valentina, Jessica, and Laura to find and copy-paste the digital interactions in their social media which they believed were meaningful in terms of their own spiritual perspectives. In April 2020, I contacted participants so they could verify that my own interpretation of data reflected their own perspectives. Participants approved my findings and suggested some modifications to the present manuscript.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

To get familiar with the data, I initially open coded, as suggested by Saldaña (2009, 88). Later, I coded according to the thematic themes and sub-themes I found in my initial coding. This process is called "axial coding" (Seidman 2006, 122).

To avoid that my own interpretations and positionality took over my participants' perceptions, once my axial coding was finished, I asked Valentina, Jessica and Laura to member-check if my findings aligned with their personal views after I finished with the coding process. When I asked participants to member-check my data analysis (2020), none of them were enrolled in the English-Teaching degree, which probably helped in terms of the transparency in the interpretation of data—meaning we did not have an unequal power relationship anymore, at least in academic terms.



## **FINDINGS.**

### **MEXICAN PUBLIC EDUCATION AND THE APPARENT LACK OF SPIRITUALITY**

According to my teaching journal, transnational pre-service teachers barely showed any spiritual inclination during my classes. However, transnationals follow traditional celebrations in their communities which are highly related to Catholic tradition. As Tlaxcala's population density is high, there are several communities that are geographically close. Each community, as part of the Tlaxcalan culture, celebrates a Catholic saint on a determined date of the year. Families, according to tradition, get together to prepare el mole, a traditional Mesoamerican dish. During that day, most members of the community go to mass.

It is accustomed that people invite guests from different Tlaxcalan communities to celebrate and eat mole with their families. Many Tlaxcalans take pride on invitations, and sometimes get offended when people do not attend their celebrations. While Laura was enrolled in one of my classes, she invited me to eat mole with her community, and to attend the religious celebration. In two years of constant interaction, that was the only kind of religious interaction I had with any of the participants. This almost null demonstration of spirituality or religiosity in academic spaces is explained by some of the answers of participants in the questionnaires and interviews, in which they stated that spirituality is not useful to interact with their national pre-service teacher fellows:

Well, my friends don't really care about spirituality, they don't really care about it.

When you are a teenager, you don't want to hear about those things, so here...with my classmates... I don't think it affects my identity that much. (Laura)

Laura, in alignment with my personal observations, claimed that spirituality is not important during the development of transnationals, or any pre-service teacher, during their training in Mexico. The fact that transnational pre-service teachers did not show any major spiritual behavior can be explained by many factors. The first one is that transnationals want to fit in into the university environment, so they modify their behaviors to be socially accepted (Sueda 2014, 146). The lack of a spiritual orientation can also be explained by the influence of the secular role of public education in Mexico, where religion and spirituality have been clearly separated from instruction since the nineteenth century (Levison 2004, 201).

In spite of the secular orientation of Mexican higher education, the three participants mentioned that spirituality is relevant for them, and that their spiritual identities have been influenced by the rejection or acceptance of their transnational families' religious values. For example,

Spirituality is something that makes you feel good with yourself. I was not spiritual before, it was my auntie who introduced me to this group... The first sessions, it was so weird, I was like 'these people are just crazy.' But then I realized how important the Bible is in your life, and how you can do everything with the help of God... People sometimes asked me to be the 'Valentina' they knew [before attending this religious meetings], we want 'Valentina' back, so it was a little difficult to socialize with others.... Oh, I forgot to tell, I was in the United States when I joined this Catholic group. (Valentina)

Valentina was introduced to a Catholic religious group when she was in the United States, which guided her spiritual development in Mexico as well. In Valentina's perspective, the Catholic conception of God has been important for her. Her spirituality, however, has made it hard to socialize with others. Valentina's experience does not align with other studies (i.e. Yañez-Castillo et al. 2018, 5) about Mexican university students, who claimed to have moved away from institutional affiliations of religiosity. Valentina's experience suggests her spirituality is intertwined with her religiosity. That is, she has adapted Catholic traditions to understand her spiritual identity.

Different from Valentina, Jessica has opted to create her own spiritual identity, which is different from the one her family inculcated on her while they lived in the United States:

Well, it has definitely changed. In the United States, I was more young [sic] so I was influenced by family. They told me what to believe in and what not to believe. Whereas in Mexico I am older, and I choose what I want to do and what to believe in. (Jessica)

Jessica moved away from the spiritual conceptions her family promoted while she was younger and in the United States. Because Jessica is older now, she decides on her own spirituality. Interestingly, when I asked how people see spirituality on both sides of the border, participants equated religiosity to spirituality. In this way, participants mentioned people in the United States are more open to other religions:

Well, I think people in the United States are more open minded in terms of respect to different religions. There are different religions and people respect them. People in the States are more liberal. In Mexico, in my town, people are not as open-minded about religion, and they are more strict (sic) in terms of traditions and values. (Laura)

Laura believes that Mexicans in the United States are more tolerant of other religious practices compared to her community in Mexico. In addition, as in former studies (i.e. Yañez-Castillo et al. (2018, 5), Laura's answer emphasizes that transnational communities become tolerant of other religious conceptions when they are in a new national context. In Tlaxcala, however, probably due to the lack of religious diversity, Mexican communities are stricter in terms of following Catholic traditions and values.

### **THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL HEALING AMONG MEXICANS IN THE US**

When I inquired why people were more open in the United States than in Tlaxcala regarding religious orientations, participants stated that probably their friends and family living in the United States needed more spiritual comfort. For the participants of this study, the development of spirituality is related to having different lifestyles in both countries. In this vein, participants pointed out that, differently from the situation in Mexico, in which families have constant socialization and immediate family support, Mexican migrants in the United States work intensely, which limits them from having human interactions outside their workplaces:

Yes, you know, in the [United] States people work 24/7. They do not have time to hang out as we do in Mexico. Mexicans [in Mexico] just go out every Friday and have fun, but people in the States take their job more seriously. In Mexico, people are like ‘I can have a 4-hour job’ and whatever, that’s ok. So, I think spirituality gives them hope and helps them have a good life...So, spirituality helps them people to have more hope in that country [the United States]. (Valentina)

For Valentina, spirituality is more necessary in the United States because people are far from their families, so they cannot socialize and receive community support. For Valentina, Mexican migrants experience an overwhelming workload which impedes them from socializing. Because of their lack of socialization, Mexican communities in the United States turn to spirituality to maintain emotional balance and hope. Jessica, in a similar way, added that spirituality is more necessary in the U.S. because it connects Mexican transnationals with their families and friends in the south side of the border:

...they [people in the United States] care about feeling good, feeling connected with their families and the ones they love back here [in Mexico] ...I guess it [life] is more difficult for them and they need it more... (Jessica).

For Jessica, Mexican communities in the United States turn to spirituality to connect with their home communities in Mexico. The perspectives of Jessica and Valentina extend on previous literature about spirituality among Mexican-origin communities and self-healing (Perez 2007, 102). In this way, the participants’ answers suggest that spirituality not only serves for emotional healing, but spirituality is also used as a way to emotionally connect with their home communities and as a strategy to cope with adversity in the United States.

### **TRANSNATIONAL SPIRITUAL SUPPORT THROUGH ONLINE INTERACTIONS**

In terms of online interactions and the spiritual identity of transnationals, participants expressed heterogenous perspectives on their questionnaires’ answers. While Jessica mentioned that she did not like to express her spiritual beliefs via social media as she perceived this kind of posts could be controversial, Valentina and Laura did use Facebook to share their spiritual beliefs. Laura stated that she shares her spiritual beliefs but not so frequently and she tries that her posts did not relate with any religion:

...I sometimes share something that has to do with part of my beliefs or spirituality, but I know that most of the things I share have to do with the universe and it doesn’t get into any religion. (Laura)

Laura shares posts that relate to the “universe” but tries not to attach her spirituality to religiosity. That is, Laura’s answer suggests that she distinguishes spirituality and religiosity. For her, spirituality should not be attached to religion, so she uses social media to express her individual notions of spirituality without religious labels. Different from Laura, Valentina was explicit about the objective of her spiritual posts on Facebook:

...Most people who like my social media live in the U.S...people suffer more in U.S. in many ways; they work more than 8 hours per day, some of them are away from their family and country, they don't have many relatives in the U.S., they have to deal with racism and different styles of living. Therefore, these people find hope in spiritual life, so when they see these types of messages in social media, they feel relief. In Mexico, in the other hand [sic], they don't deal with these problems every day...They have a more regular life. (Valentina)

Valentina, because of her transnational experience, is aware of the difficulties Mexican suffer in the United States. These difficulties relate to disadvantaged labor, racism, isolation, and nostalgia for their home country. By posting on Facebook, Valentina tries to provide spiritual healing to those living in the United States. That is, Valentina is aware that spirituality is more necessary in the United States for people who, like her family before returning to Mexico, migrated looking for better economic opportunities.

As part of the questionnaire, I asked participants to copy-paste any social media post they would like to share with me. Laura and Jessica did not copy-paste any interaction. In contrast, Valentina copy-pasted online interactions in which she used religious passages to provide comfort, support, and encouragement to their compatriots in the north side of the border. Valentina shared a message in Spanish. She took the original post from a Catholic webpage. The message, which translates into "It's being hard, but don't worry, God is working in your favor, and you will be victorious at the end!" supports Valentina's purposes of trying to support her friends and family in the United States. She shared the post with a couple of emoticons: a "heart" and two "clapping hands." I did not ask permission to share the comments to her post, but most of the people who commented bilingually to her post and said things like "thank you," "regards from NY," and "We miss you."

In a second sharing, Valentina wrote a phrase in Spanish which translates as "Don't tell God how big a problem is; tell the problem how big God is." She used the hashtag "another day," in English. Valentina explained that she wrote this post herself and, as in the previous post, people from the United States interacted with her in English and Spanish. When I asked about the purpose of this post, Valentina, explained that she tried to provide emotional support for those in the north side of the border. Valentina's posts show that transnational communities take advantage of technology to maintain their emotional bonds with communities on both sides of the border. However, different from other studies, (i.e. Christiansen, 2015, 12) the south-to-north online interactions of Valentina suggest that transnationals aim to contribute to the emotional healing and wellbeing of those "left" in the United States.

## **DISCUSSION:**

### **DECOLONIZATION, SPIRITUAL HEALING, AND HUMANIZING RESEARCH**

The findings of this study contribute to the analysis of Mexican transnationals at different levels. To recall, the *raison d'etre* of this article was, based on testimonios and pláticas' epistemologies (Espinosa-Dulanto and Calderón-Berumen 2020, 1-3), to create scholarly work

“for” and “with” the transnational communities towards disrupting dehumanizing academic perspectives. That is, this research was guided on the decolonial premise that spirituality is essential in the development of transnational populations, and that it should bridge communities who have been dislocated from their (new) home communities.

In an attempt to decolonize and humanize my research, I operated from notions of spirituality that clearly separated “spirituality” and “religiosity” (Lopez et al. 2011, 1299), and the subjective interpretation of these two concepts (Saucier and Skrzypinska 2006, 1255). Spirituality, besides commitment to a superior power, was also defined as a source of dignification and comfort for transnational populations (Gómez Carrillo 2012, 62) and an essential notion to understand reality and achieve a more egalitarian conception of traditionally excluded populations (Anzaldúa 2010). Regardless of different approaches to spirituality, most authors supported the idea that spirituality can positively impact people’s existence (Lamb et al. 2021, 5; Lopez et al. 2011, 1299; Vázquez Palacios 2001, 615; Twenge et al. 1721, 2016; Yañez-Castillo et al. 2015, 5).

The findings of this research exemplify that most transnationals sometimes differentiate between spirituality from religiosity, but sometimes they associate them as one single construct. For example, when they described the different religious practices in the United States to the Catholic traditions of the state of Tlaxcala, sometimes participants equated religiosity to spirituality. However, Laura’s and Jessica’s answers explicitly distinguished spirituality from religiosity. Research about spirituality has suggested that spiritual development tends to disappear during youth in the US (Twenge et al. 2016, 1721; Lamb et al. 2021, 5). Recent research also claims that spirituality is salient among Mexican university students who, nonetheless, reject religiosity (Yañez-Castillo et al. 2018, 5). The perspectives of the participants of this research partially align with (or reject) former studies: while all of them declared that spirituality is relevant in their journeys, the distinction between religiosity and spirituality was not always clearly defined.

The relevance of the spirituality for Mexican populations in the United States and Mexico relates to the historical relevance of spirituality in the creation and development of Mexicanidad, or being Mexican. In other words, spirituality appears to be an essential part of Mexican identity regardless of age. Despite the importance of spirituality for the transnational participants of this study, the secular orientation of Mexican institutions limited any sort of spiritual or religious interactions among them.

Particularly for Valentina and Laura, who are not able to return to the United States, spirituality becomes important when interacting with their loved ones in New York. The participants of this study have experienced first-hand the difficulties that Mexican communities in the United States face, so they are aware of the importance of spirituality as a healing tool to cope with isolation, sorrow, and discrimination that migrants encounter in a new country. For the participants of this study, spiritual support is more needed for Mexican communities in the United States because of the lack of social support and overwhelming working conditions.

Findings of this study suggest that spirituality is pivotal for transnational communities to function. Because Mexican transnationals located in Mexico understand the difficulties that Mexican communities experience in the United States, social media has become a south-to-north

vehicle for spiritual support among transnationals. In this vein, while current research has emphasized the importance of spirituality as a healing practice for Mexicans in the United States (i.e. Cantú 2014, 206), the present research illustrates the spiritual solidaric exchange Mexican transnational communities have on both sides of the border—from Mexico, in this case.

This article empirically supports the need to consider spirituality and religiosity as essential in the development of transnational (returnee) communities not only at the individual level, but in terms of social functioning. Former research about transnationals going (back) to Mexico to pursue language teaching degrees has mainly focused on other factors— such rejection of their home culture (Mora et al. 2014, 182), governmental policies (Martinez-Prieto and Lindahl 2020, 10; 2022,126), and curricular ideologies (Martinez-Prieto 2020, 22; 2023, 1). In this way, the present study contributes to the current discussion by examining of the impact of spirituality among Mexican transnationals returning to Mexico, and the spiritual acknowledgment and behaviors of Mexicanas towards their US-based beloved ones.

Testimonios and pláticas epistemologies were meaningful as they allowed scholarly spaces to research spiritual practices that Mexican communities have del sur al norte (from south to north). Findings of this research contribute to the notion that Testimonio-pláticas epistemologies help scholarly work move away from a western “I” to a collective “we” (Espinosa-Dulanto and Calderón-Berumen 2020, 1-3), where populations in the Global South act as agents of healing among their U.S.-located counterparts.

Finally, I would like to point out that the present study relates to the intersections of decolonization, spirituality, and humanization of research. That is, it would not have been achieved if analyzed from colonial, western, and positivist approaches, where spirituality has little space in academic discussions. In general terms, this work supports the imperious need for decolonial and humanized perspectives in US academia to understand the complexity and multilayered journey of transnational youth.

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