

The Virgin of Guadalupe in My Backyard



An adorned truck carries a painting of La Morena.

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In recent years, Latin Americans have increasingly immigrated to the rural southeastern United States seeking blue collar jobs, particularly within agricultural industries. This photo series examines a community of documented and undocumented Latin Americans in rural Mississippi as they celebrate the Feast Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe. A traditional Mexican celebration grounded in the ideal of equality, the Virgin's Feast Day takes on new significance among this diverse group of recent migrants as they struggle to get by in the small Mississippi town of Forest, where many locals—who are predominantly white and Protestant—exclude them as “outsiders.”

In its new form, the Virgin's Feast Day unites a multinational Catholic community of migrant laborers who are primarily from Mexico, Guatemala and Peru, but also include Argentinians, Brazilians, Cubans, Nicaraguans, Panamanians and Salvadorians. Participants in the Virgin's Feast Day procession display flags from their home countries and the US, as well as an iconic image of the Virgin of Guadalupe as she appeared on the *tilma* (cloak) of Juan Diego.

As overtly public displays of solidarity, the vibrant colors and call-and-response cries of “¡Viva Guadalupe!” associated with the Virgin's Feast Day procession are in striking contrast to the low-key and reserved religious expressions more traditional to this small southern town. The Virgin's Feast Day procession begins at the courthouse square and winds its way through Forest's quiet, nearly deserted streets for a mile, before ending at St Michael's, the Catholic Church on the edge of town.

Once the Virgin's Feast Day procession arrives at St Michael's, it is met by a large group of parishioners led by the priest. A band plays traditional songs dedicated to *La Morena* (the Virgin of Guadalupe) as the priest prepares to celebrate an outdoor Mass. Guests of honor at this public religious display include the adolescent girl who represents the Virgin of Guadalupe during the procession and the adolescent and young men who represent Juan Diego. Inside the church, an elaborately decorated altar to the Virgin is an additional reminder of *La Morena's* message of equality, particularly meaningful for these Latin American transnational migrants making a new home in rural Mississippi.



Parade participants carry flags representing countries of origin.

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Jayson Ming Triplett, MFA candidate at Mississippi State University, took the photos appearing in this essay. ☒



Community members of all ages participate.



The procession ends at St Michael's where parishioners and the priest greet the participants.



La Morena's message of equality is key to the Virgin's Feast Day.