THE TRANSNATIONAL LIVES OF
MEXICAN IMMIGRANT RESTAURANT WORKERS

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Abstract

Undocumented Mexican immigrants provide cheap labor for U.S. restaurants. In this paper, I deliver an ethnographic description of Mexican immigrant restaurant workers currently living clandestinely in the San Francisco Bay Area. Based on a sample of 29 informants (each arriving less than ten years ago), I explore the economic and social dynamics of Mexico-to-California immigration through: open-ended interviews, participant observation in work and social settings, a focus group discussion, and a two-year case study of remittances to Mexico.

This paper looks at the push and pull factors in transnational migration and the initial process of cross-border migration and settlement in the host society. It is also an exploration of how access to U.S. labor is acquired and maintained, how social networks function, and how identity is negotiated in a diasporic community. The major findings from this study suggest that repeat migration is inevitable, and thus support the circular migration theory. These findings are: 1) The earnings of immigrant restaurant employees working in the U.S. are at least double than their earning potential in Mexico. 2) Immigrant social status in Mexican households is positively affected by U.S. earnings remitted to Mexico. 3) Social networks absorb financial and work responsibilities for members who plan to visit Mexico and re-enter the U.S.
Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1 - Project Background

This research project directly encompasses over 11 restaurants in the San Francisco Bay Area, the homes of the restaurant employees, and the public and private places where we would gather socially. Indirectly, it also includes the homes in Mexico where immigrants are visitors to family and friends via telephone, video, and photograph. During a four-year period, I have worked as a restaurant server in five different establishments and have found in every case the primary resource for staffing kitchens is undocumented immigrant labor. Beginning in the fall of 1999, I have worked alongside Mexican and other Latin American immigrants working as dishwashers, prep cooks, busboys, servers, and chefs. Thus, entrée into the domain was an occupational choice and a natural process. With many of these workers, I have forged close, long-term friendships and have had several conversations about what it means to be an immigrant working abroad. Many of the perceptions I discuss here have been formed by my informants' interpretations of their own experiences.

My informants and I worked in restaurants in coveted neighborhoods that sharply contrasted with the low-income and high-crime neighborhoods where we lived. Typical housing for a recently arrived immigrant to this area is a single-room or one-bedroom, block-style apartment. As co-worker, friend, and anthropologist, I have been invited to these modest homes where I witnessed up to a dozen immigrant boarders sharing single-family housing. During these visits, it was my impression as a native encultured into the American value of individual space that they lacked privacy and were uncomfortably cramped into tight quarters. These observations within work and home environments led me to pursue the themes central to this thesis.
The assumptions I had going into the project were chipped away after months in the field. I assumed that low-paid, recently arrived immigrants were sacrificing more than they were gaining and that the U.S.'s vicinity to Mexico allowed workers only a temporary place to live and work. These assumptions were discredited in two ways: First, the majority of my informants do not consider their place in immigrant labor as a "sacrifice" nor do they weigh the outcome as a net "loss." Second, those who I believed to be temporary immigrants had themselves not considered returning to Mexico permanently - if at all. In fact, many of my informants are self-proclaimed circular migrants. That is, if a visit to Mexico was made, a return trip to the U.S. also followed in order to continue the improved standard of living provided by American wages. I wondered at what point U.S. employment would become profitable enough that immigrants could return to their home country and live off their savings. A new understanding unfolded of the various economic and social factors that bring the study population to the U.S. and why one might choose to remain living here indefinitely. It became clear that I could only understand elements of immigrant sacrifices as they are experienced by individuals.

Drawing from common writing styles within anthropology, the following thesis falls into two genres: specialized ethnography and personal narrative. The former allows me to speak about the ethnic unity of the study population (including cultural norms, traditions, and expectations). The latter describes events or behaviors witnessed over the years while I have been acquainted with these informants. In addition, because I am considered a friend - someone whom my informants can trust beyond this temporary relationship of interviewer/interviewee - I inevitably question my possible role as
colonizer, oppressor, and competitor during the process. Thus, there are elements of a hermeneutic approach as I weigh my own impact on the study population.

The sample for this study is composed of restaurant workers, many of whom were my friends before they were my informants, and thus, not randomly selected. As with any job, it is common for restaurant workers to get to know each other and plan social events outside of work. In a restaurant setting, natural discourse between employees is ongoing, sometimes for eight hours at a time with few interruptions if business is slow. Passing the time with conversation led to arranging to meet the spouses, family, and friends of my co-workers. I was introduced to more than half of my informants through this form of sampling. Snowball sampling occurs when introductions are made with friends, family, and acquaintances of informants already involved in the project and these new contacts then become informants in the study. One key informant can lead to several other possible informants through social connections or networks.

Incorporating informants through snowball sampling was a benefit in my study for two reasons. First, it reduced bias in the sample. For instance, in some ways, snowball sampling reduces bias by including people from various places of employment. In other ways, it introduces bias by pulling from the same social networks, families, and place of origin in Mexico. A second reason snowball sampling was beneficial to my study was that I able to gather the stories of extremely short-term migrants (less than six months of stay), whom I otherwise might not have encountered as a result of their brief stay in the local social and work communities.
**Primary Informants**

When I began this research, it was not apparent that such large numbers of restaurant workers live and work clandestinely in California. Of the 29 primary informants who make up this study, only one has begun the process to obtain the official resident papers that will allow her to live in the United States as a legal immigrant.

Informant selection was contingent upon an individual’s immigration occurring less than ten years ago, their employment in the restaurant industry, and their accessibility. Maintaining a low profile, this clandestine immigrant population makes frequent changes in place of residence and employment. Further complicating informant tracking, return trips to Mexico interrupted my communication with informants. Thus, there are limitations in long-term tracking of informants under these special circumstances.

Each informant listed below was present in at least one phase of the project. In Phase I, I worked with a sample of eleven informants.

**PHASE I INFORMANTS**

(Ages as of spring 2002)

1. Blanca, 19, single female, native to Guadalajara, Jalisco
2. Diosa, 24, married female, native to Guadalajara, Jalisco
3. Mario, 18, single male, native to Tepatitlan, Jalisco
4. Pitufa, 17, single female, native to Oaxaca
5. Esmeralda, 25, single female, native to Oaxaca
6. José, 18, single male, native to Oaxaca
7. Beto, 26, single male, native to Iztapalapa, Mexico City
8. Manuel, 25, single male, native to Durango
9. Pedro, 33, married male, native to Durango
10. Chon, 27, single male, native to León, Guanajuato
11. Jesse, 19, single male, native to León, Guanajuato

Further contacts made through snowball sampling contribute to the fifteen primary informants added in Phase II:
PHASE II INFORMANTS  
(Ages as of spring 2003)

12. Pelon, 33, married male, native to León, Guanajuato
13. Piojo, 19, single male, native to León, Guanajuato
14. Offis, 28, single male, native to León, Guanajuato
15. Pitacio, 24, single male, native to León, Guanajuato
16. Daniel, 18, single male, native to León, Guanajuato
17. Alejandro, 19, single male, native to León, Guanajuato
18. Chuy, 18, single male, native to León, Guanajuato
19. Lionel, 35, married male, native to León, Guanajuato
20. David, 29, single male, native to Michoacán
21. Ignacio, 22, single male, native to Michoacán
22. Gordo, 28, single male, native to Michoacán
23. Chapa, 39, married male, native to Mexico City
24. Osso, 28, married male, native to Mexico City
25. Juan, 26, married male, native to Mexico City
26. Pappas, 28, single male, native to Mexico City

The third phase, marked by my employment at a new establishment, brought three more informants that are important to the project:

PHASE III INFORMANTS  
(Ages as of fall 2003)

27. Paco, 31, married male, native to Mexico City
28. Raton, 30, married male, native to Oaxaca
29. Señor, 41, married male, native to Vera Cruz

Risks and Benefits of Study

In participating in this study, informants risk possible psychological, emotional, and legal ramifications because of their participation. Some interview content asks informants to recall painful memories of crossing the international border, of leaving loved ones behind, of general loneliness, and/or of encounters with the police. In answering these types of questions, there is a risk of evoking emotions that may be
difficult to control. Legal risks are the most severe including the possible loss of employment or deportation. To minimize these legal risks I have taken measures to secure the safety of the participating informants by substituting names and work places with pseudonyms and masking any other markers of identification.

The study has practical value in helping address the problems and policies associated with Latin-American migrants. This report provides statistical and ethnographic data that contribute to policy recommendations concerning illegal border crossings, U.S. immigration policies, illegal workers’ rights, and the ethical operation of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and Border Patrol. In addition, documentation of people’s experiences, and their perceptions of migration from Mexico to the U.S., can impart valuable insight to educators, social workers, unions, health care providers, law enforcement, and other service professionals.

**Explanation of Methods**

The advantage of local community-based and workplace-based studies is their *micro* design. Described in the following pages is a research design that encapsulates a distinct group of Mexican immigrants: those who have immigrated to a certain geographical area and into a specific type of employment. The information gained “from such micro-studies is crucial to bridging the gap” between theory and concrete situations (Cornelius 1981:32).

I incorporated multiple methods of data collection, or triangulation, in the three-phase research design, including participant-observation, natural discourse, open-ended
primary informant interviews, artifact collection, quantitative data collection from a case study, and a semi-structured focus group. In total, I conducted six open-ended interviews, one social network interview, and one focus group with five informants as participants. Over the duration of the entire project (a period of eighteen months), the regularity with which I communicated with each informant was contingent upon (both my and their) place of employment. As a restaurant server, I logged approximately twenty hours per week of participant-observation in the work environments of my informants, for a total of 240 hours per phase.

**Phase I: Overview of Methods**

For the first three-month period (Phase I) of this study, I implemented a pilot research design consisting of a mix of structured and unstructured periods of participant observation, three semi-structured informant interviews, and natural discourse. Periods of participant observation at my own workplace were not controlled, but were more of a continuous development. I observed employee responsibilities, schedules, environment, customer interaction, general attitude toward the service industry, use of shared space, and the extent of and problems caused by the language barrier. Observations took place in two spheres other than work: during social events and in the homes of my informants. The total number of hours of social event observations is an estimated 25 hours. I was participant-observer at four social events: a baptism, a *fiesta*, a salsa music concert, and a Cinco de Mayo celebration. During these events, I observed social interaction patterns,
leisure activities, language barrier dynamics, religious and other traditional behaviors, and the extent of American acculturation.

While in private and public spheres, I sometimes acted purely as an observer and other times I was more of a participant. Unobtrusive observations include behaviors such as but not limited to time management, alcohol consumption, spending habits, hospitality, length and subjects of phone calls to Mexico, living space utilization, content of photo albums, and dealings with police or other authority figures.

Three informants were interviewed in Phase I: Mario, Beto, and Manuel. Mario responded to a pilot interview protocol lasting one hour. A key informant, Beto, and I spent tens of hours together talking about the issues he faces as an immigrant. From these dialogues, many details of Beto’s life surfaced. On two occasions, I felt that the content of our interview-style dialogue was pertinent to this study and requested he allow me to begin taping our conversations. Manuel was never formally interviewed with a tape recorder running. Two incidents of natural discourse and one phone conversation were recorded on paper from memory.

**Phase II: Overview of Methods**

In the second phase, I interviewed eight informants, conducting three semi-structured interviews, one social network interview, and a focus group. Other ethnographic field methods such as participant observation, social artifact collection, and natural discourse were also used during this period.
Both structured and unstructured periods of participant observation cover social and work-related events. In three types of social events I acted as participant-observer: a museum opening, a *Quinceñera* (a girl’s fifteenth birthday celebration), and various informal gatherings. During labeled events, I noted the traditions and rituals carried from Mexico to American venues and the extent of American acculturation as exhibited in bilingualism, food, decoration, and dress. At unlabeled events, my observational themes were social interaction, drug and alcohol consumption and code switching behaviors.

While visiting the satellite residence, I observed the functions of a social network, kinship ties, nicknames, household rules, personal and social space boundaries, Mexican memorabilia, communal meals, controlled substance consumption and abuse, and conversation topics. Periods of participant observation were also situated in restaurants. They reveal worker interactions with customers and co-workers, including language barriers, responsibility delegation by management, and hierarchy in the workplace.

With my close relationship with Beto, an immigrant from Mexico City, I am given the unique opportunity to document a range of his personal experiences as an in-depth case study. Tracking the number and length of phone calls via telephone bills and the quantity of phone cards used in one month, I examine the amount of time he talks with family and friends in Mexico. Beto sends remittances through *Dolex Dollar Express*, a company that wires money. For over two years, he has stored *Dolex* receipts in a manila folder in the closet or folded up in his personal dresser drawer. This record shows how Beto regularly sends money to Mexico *cada quincena* (every fifteen days). Analysis of his remittance patterns highlights one immigrant’s social and monetary participation in a Mexican household located thousands of miles away.
Social artifacts and their significance gathered during this phase e.g. letters, photographs, home videos, phone calls, and money grams have been informative aspects of the research. These forms of communication illustrate the extent of U.S.-Mexico connection and the maintenance of social ties.

**Phase III: Overview of Methods**

During the twelve weeks of the third and final phase of fieldwork, I followed up on informants to verify dates, figures and locations, and confirm biographical information such as age, place of birth and marital status. There were no interviews given during this phase. Natural discourse and participant observation did however play a large part in clarifying some key conceptions. Periods of observation continued at the workplace, at social gatherings, and on several occasions at the home of primary informants.
Chapter 2 – Mexico-U.S. Immigration: History and Demography

Contextual data relevant to the themes in this study validate the importance of micro-level research within a Mexican immigrant population. To situate the study population in a larger context, I gathered statistical data from demographic, economic, and historic sources. I also examined theoretical assertions about undocumented immigrants in light of direct ethnographic data. The resources range in form from empirical statistics published by the U.S. Census Bureau to narrative ethnography gathered in Mexico. This chapter outlines the relevant themes, debates, and historic events within Mexico-U.S. immigration studies, which provide the backdrop to this ethnography. I also integrate pertinent contextual data in Chapters 3 and 4 to develop further the themes that have surfaced in my own research.

In the first section of this chapter, I assess the current demography of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. and particularly in California. Chapter 3 expands on these trends including other demographic markers e.g. origin, age, status. Macro-level statistics are powerful illustrations of a phenomenon, yet they do not delineate between the subtleties of each subpopulation. Thus, I cite the language used by anthropologist Wayne Cornelius (1982) here, in order to define the subgroup of Mexican immigrants to which this paper is focused.

The second section of this chapter follows the footpaths of Mexican immigrant laborers from the turn of last century to the present. It covers the U.S. industries that have historically utilized immigrant labor, the wages and conditions of such labor, and the mobility of Mexican immigrants to respond to labor demands. In all, this section
outlines how the agriculture and service industries came to be industries with the highest representation of Mexican immigrant workers.

The third section looks at how recent economic circumstances in Mexico, international agreements, and U.S. policies have affected Mexico-to-U.S. immigration. It illustrates how popular reactions in the political arena to immigration-related problems have done little to eliminate the cause of undocumented immigration and furthermore, how the institutional strengthening of the U.S.-Mexico border has created heightened danger and dependence on organized border crime. The effects of border control on individual migrations are examined more thoroughly with a case-study example in Chapter 4.

Lastly, I introduce the controversial debate around positive or negative ramifications on the U.S. national economy of undocumented Mexican immigrant workers versus settled workers. This theme resonates with the discussion on push and pull factors in Chapter 3 and remittances in Chapter 4.

Demographic Trends in U.S. Immigration

A report from The Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) analyzes U.S. Census figures to delineate the origins of immigrant populations in this country (Camarota 1999). The findings (limited to full-time immigrant workers age 16 and over) conclude that Mexico sends the highest proportion of immigrants residing in the United States. Twenty-seven percent of all immigrants nationwide claim Mexico as their country of
origin. In real numbers, 7.1 million people who were living in the U.S. in 1998 emigrated out of that one country alone - a number larger than any other sending country in the world (Camarota 1999:5).

California receives more immigrants from all countries than any other state. The nearly 8 million immigrants in California account for 30.3% of the nation’s total immigrant population, followed by New York (13.8%), Florida (8.8%), and Texas (8.8%) (Camarota 1999:4). More than a third of the U.S.’s unauthorized immigrant population resides in California. Combining INS and U.S. Census figures, making an allowance for those missed in these counts, the Current Population Survey projected that in March 2002 the U.S. had an undocumented population of 9.3 million. Mexico is, by far, the largest source country for immigration having sent 30% of the foreign-born residents - 5.3 million of which entered the U.S. unauthorized. The mutually dependent relationship between Mexican worker and American employer fortifies long-term interests in labor trade for both parties: U.S. employers tap into a source of cheap labor while unauthorized Mexican workers earn high wages relative to those they have earned in Mexico.

In the early 1980s, there were about 85,000 employed illegal Mexican immigrants living in the nine counties that make up the Bay Area (Cornelius 1982:1). Mexican migrants are an “extremely heterogeneous” population. Cornelius identifies four sub-populations summarized here: The sample in this study is largely made of what he terms the illegal lone circular migrants. Coming “mostly from rural communities and small towns located in the western portion of Mexico’s Central Plateau” these migrants are typically unmarried males with an average age of 27 who normally seek work in
unskilled, entry-level positions to fulfill either “short-term economic necessity and/or to accumulate capital for a home or some other investment in Mexico" (Cornelius 1982:10-11). Their family base remains in Mexico, while the circular migrants make return trips to the U.S. only long enough to meet their economic needs.

Second, the **legal circular migrants**, or “green-carders,” are those who have attained legal permanent-resident alien status. Spending eight or more months a year in the U.S., these migrants can cross the border freely, unlike their illegal counterparts who risk apprehension. They are typically older married men from the Central Plateau or border regions who come to the U.S. to work in agriculture. They “maintain a higher standard of living than would be possible on the basis of income-earning opportunities in their home community” (1982:11-12). The third and fourth subgroups are **legal and illegal family settlers**. Some wives and/or working-age children reunite with their circular migrant husbands and/or fathers in the U.S. Those who stay longer than five years are “the most educated and have the strongest ties to the labor market, and thus the least likely to require public services when they are eligible”, writes policy analyst Belinda Reyes (1997: xiii).

**The History of Mexican Immigrant Labor in California**

A historic approach to U.S.-Mexico immigration tells how a temporary source of migrant labor has become a permanent problem of undocumented settlers. In the early 1900s, the labor of Mexican immigrants, especially in the Southwest, was preferred over other immigrant groups. With the distressed American economy and need for cheap labor on the rise, U.S. employers recruited low-skill labor in Mexico while the
immigration laws of 1921 and 1924 “severely restricted the immigration of southern and eastern Europeans” (Chavez 1998:9-10). Without Mexican labor, the development of agriculture, mining, and construction in the Southwest would not have taken effect as quickly and economically as it had. The technological advances to transportation and communication, stemming from the Industrial Revolution, established the Southwest as a viable economic resource to the Union. The proximity of Mexico to the Southwest encouraged capitalistic farmers to exploit Mexican laborers, thus Mexico “became key to the region’s development” (Acuña 1988:142). Employing Mexicans over Europeans, employers had more control matching worker supply to their labor demands.

In the early part of the century, employment in the agricultural sector opened doors for immigrant workers; it served as a stepping-stone, propelling temporary, seasonal laborers to hunt for new work opportunities in U.S. cities. Among immigrants, particularly among those who arrived as farmers and farm laborers, there was a tendency to abandon these occupations and to enter unskilled or semiskilled trades (California Department of Industrial Relations 1930: 117). The labor-intensive service sector received massive numbers of city-bound Mexican immigrants before the Depression. In the 1920s, nearly half (40%) of Mexican immigrants lived in urban centers (Acuña 1988: 143).

According to a report given by the U.S. Census Bureau measuring resident population, between 1910 and 1920 U.S. urban areas accrued a population growth of 28.9% (an increase of 12,189,000 individuals). Contemporaneously, migration of the foreign-born into California’s cities occurred in astounding numbers. The influx of Mexican immigrants moving out of rural areas and into urban ones is highlighted with
respect to the San Francisco Bay Area in a 1930 report given by California’s Department of Industrial Relations. Spanning a period of thirty years, the report tracks the increase of persons of Mexican origin residing in the Bay Area. It gauges that between 1910 and 1920, California experienced a 312% increase in the number of persons born in Mexico residing in the state. The same trend is visible in the statistics for other cities: Santa Barbara (493%), Sacramento (369%), and Stockton (289%) (1930:58).

Those employed in the hotel and restaurant industry in 1928 received some of the lowest wage rates. Out of a sample of 824 Mexicans who were privately employed in California, 301 (37%) worked in restaurants (1930:117). From a sample of 169 workers, busboys and dishwashers received an average weekly wage of approximately $16. Data from 7,837 laborers (averaging a weekly wage of $17.60) confirms that laborers earned more than dishwashers or busboys (1930:117). However, it was considerably more profitable for immigrants to hold cook positions in restaurants during the late 1920s. The average weekly wage for cooks was about $20. Compared to averages in the same year (1928), the weekly earnings for non-farm worker residents was $28.65 (calculated from average annual earnings) (Lebergott 1993).

It was not dissatisfaction with their weekly income (albeit at least $8 less than U.S. residents), nor frustration with job mobility that influenced the hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants to return to their homeland during this transformative period of U.S. history. With the massive shutdown of the service industry and a severe lack of work countrywide, during the years known as the Great Depression many immigrants returned to Mexico voluntarily, and close to 500,000 were repatriated (Chavez 1998:10).
After the historic crash of the stock market in 1929, worker security was teetering along a downward slope. Competition between farm laborers heightened, and landowners typically opted to employ their fellow countrymen over the Mexican immigrants they had relied on for cheap labor in the past (Acuña 1988: 198). Texas, because of its vicinity, was an exception and continued its historic reliance on Mexican labor. Migration to the cities intensified, once again, as jobs were scarce in rural America. By this time, those who had immigrated at the turn of the century had been living here for a generation. For families that had rooted themselves to their communities, returning to Mexico was not an option.

Not until the U.S. engaged in World War II overseas, did American industries experience another demand for labor. None was as urgent as the need for agricultural labor to pick the crops before they would rot. In 1942, preliminary agreement to the Emergency Labor Program (later to be called the Bracero Program) was made between the U.S. and Mexican governments. Under the auspices of fair wages, living arrangements, and worker treatment, it funneled 220,000 braceros (day laborers) from 1942 to 1947 (Acuña 1988: 262). Initial participants were under contract to return to their homeland when the demand for agricultural labor declined. The program, in its infancy, imported workers from Mexico and placed them in the hands of U.S. agriculturalists. Soon thereafter, the border was flooded and unregulated by either government.

Mexican authorities contested the agreement from the beginning, insisting that the protection of worker’s rights be written into the contract. Because of the southern state’s history of racism against the Mexican population, Mexican authorities refused permits to
Texas in 1943 (Acuña 1988: 263). They held farmers accountable to adhere to the contract agreement, and in 1948, “Mexican officials finally took a hard line, refusing to sign bracero contracts if workers were not paid $3.00 per hundred pounds for picked cotton rather than the $2.00 offered by Anglo-Americans” (Acuña 1988: 264).

Despite Mexico’s attempts to control migration of laborers and secure reasonable conditions for its workers, a total of 4,646,216 braceros were imported between 1942 and 1964 (Grebler, Moore and Guzmán 1970 qtd. in Acuña 1988: 265). At the end of 1964, the bracero contract lapsed.

Three decades later, in 1999, Mexican immigrants were most likely to work either in the agricultural and service sectors (Camarota 1999: 8). Within the service sector, 44% of immigrants worked in private households and 19% in public service jobs. Agriculture and private service occupations each accounted for one percent of the total U.S. workforce in 1998. Public service occupations, that is, service jobs outside of private households such as the food service industry, accounted for 11% of the workforce. The average annual income for non-managerial agricultural employees was $16,885, private service employees averaged $13,206, and public service employees earned an average of $19,480 annually (Camarota 1999: 8). Therefore, restaurant employees in the public service sector are, on average, higher earners than other service professions in which immigrants have been historically employed. But, there is a high risk that accompanies this relatively high income. Public service employees are hard hit in times of recession and represent a dispensable division of the work force with low-level job security.

(H)igh immigrant occupations have a much higher unemployment rate than low-immigrant occupations, 8.7% compared to 3.1%. This does not
necessarily mean that immigrants have lowered the wages or increased unemployment in these occupations. What it does mean, however, is that immigration’s effect on the jobs and wages of natives will likely fall on the 25 million native-born workers who already have the lowest wages and the highest unemployment. ... Studies that attempt to estimate the wage effects of immigration by assuming that each additional immigrant will have the same impact, regardless of the occupation he is employed in, may fail to capture the varying conditions prevailing in different segments of the labor market. [Camarota 1999:8-9]

The U.S. has historically had interests in connecting Mexico to its larger, more powerful northern neighbor with international railroad lines, employer campaigns in Mexican communities, and guest worker programs. “The use of Mexican labor in the United States and the supply of this labor from Mexico means that for all practical purposes the two ostensible separate territories are linked into one international labor market” (Bustamante 1983 quoted in Chavez 1998:3). Thus, the immigrant experience and American society have long been part of “the same reality.”

They are both part of a system created by European expansion and the advent of capitalism, and that system connects the economically and technologically advanced countries to those less developed. For anthropologists, this concept represents a move away from a view of societies as completely separate units to a view, which stresses the interconnectedness between social groups. [Wolf 1982 summarized in Chavez 1998:3]

The vicinity of Mexico to the U.S. offered U.S. employers a convenient supply of labor beginning in the period of the Industrial Revolution and arguably even before this period. The demand for this labor was dictated by national and international affairs over the following decades. For example, during the Great Depression in the 1930s, there was a period of national economic instability and job attrition; during the 1940s, marked by the war in Europe, recruitment from the immigrant labor pool was a solution to the lack of working-age men available to fill industrial and agriculture positions; in the 1950s,
soldiers returned to their homeland filtering back into the U.S. labor pool and displacing immigrant laborers.

**Contemporary Circumstances in Mexico-to-U.S. Migration**

The need for international migration is best explained with a local, national, and global perspective. In 1986, due to the fall in petroleum prices, for the first time in three decades Mexico "suffered negative economic growth and 3-digit inflation" (Rees 2002:2). The crisis lowered wages, restructured salaries, and worsened the substandard social subsidy programs of the Mexican government. Conditions in the U.S. economy were also changing; much of the industrial sector moved to international sites, wages fell, and the labor market turned increasingly service-oriented, initiating a high demand for cheap and low-skilled labor (Rees 2002:2).

Other international economic factors also influence migration. Changes made in the Mexican Constitution, particularly in Article 27, allow the sale of ejido (community) lands, which directly affect small-scale agriculturists. In a 1995 multilocal ethnography, a Mexican farmer interviewed by ethnographer Ann Kingsolver responded to the amendment: "Our president tells us that he is going to help the community with the change in Article 27 and in the currency.... [Without agricultural land] how will the parents survive? If everybody goes away, are the parents supposed to eat air?" (1996:10). They, of course, cannot eat air nor can they farm land sold from under them. This farmer reveals the dire situation concerning sustenance and survival felt by rural Mexicans in the recent past. The effects are drastic to Mexican peasant farmers in the corn-growing industry because they are unable to compete with agribusinesses who dupe small farms in favor of organized profiteering (Greider 2003:14). The U.S.-based
agricultural industry (a sector that employs largely from the immigrant base) is also negatively affected. For example, Kingsolver documents how Kentucky cattle production is undercut by other cattle-producing regions (particularly the U.S.-Mexican border) because of changes facilitated by NAFTA (1996:19). Regionalization within agriculture not only squeezes growers and herders out of business, but also forces the upcoming generation of workers to seek work away from home, in sectors with a demand for their labor.

Drawing from interviews in rural Morelos, Mexico City, rural Kentucky, and Northern California, Kingsolver documents the effects of The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on national identity. NAFTA is “an open market-oriented agreement” that hinges on the strategic regionalization of the global economy (Delgado 1997:4). The agreement is in response to a public aim made by Mexico’s former president, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, “‘to push Mexico to the 21st century no matter what’” (quoted in Delgado 1997:4). The “push” for Mexico to perform alongside other industrial nations means Mexico stepping up its participation in the global market.

Kingsolver found that the implications of NAFTA have initiated increased talk of national identity and multinational activity (1996:20). The younger generation (under 25 years old) interviewed by Kingsolver expressed their anxiety toward policies like NAFTA. An 18-year old student said that Mexican national identity could be harmed if “we started valuing foreign things over Mexican things...because there are high-quality Mexican goods that we don’t appreciate, because we would rather buy foreign goods even if they are of lower quality” [Kingsolver’s translation] (1996:8). This is especially true of migrants who return to Mexico fully clad with American ideals of consumption
and dress. Variables such as labor, goods, and manufacture are being mobilized under North American interdependence. One unexpected outcome is the renegotiation of regional and national identities in the U.S. and Mexico.

Could Mexico independently bear its current economic strain if the current strategy of outsourcing labor was to end? Cornelius proclaims the Mexican government would have to “invigorate” the economy and effect compensation programs to heed the fiscal imbalance. “But only when Mexico’s shrinking labor pool forces Mexican employers to raise wages are we likely to see the real wage and family income gaps to begin to narrow appreciably” (Cornelius 2000:24). Internal economic restructuring in Mexico could do more to curb unauthorized migration than any anti-immigration tactics employed by the U.S.

What can the U.S. do to keep the number of undocumented immigrants to a minimum? Border control is an expensive, yet undeviating tactic in deterring illegal aliens. U.S. negotiators of national security have lobbied repeatedly for increased security on the southern border to curb illegal immigration from Mexico. Attempts to secure the boundary between Mexico and the U.S. have been employed at numerous high-frequency passage points along the border. Operation Gatekeeper controls the area of San Diego. Operation Hold-the-Line maintains the border city of El Paso in Texas. Operation Safeguard monitors central Arizona and Operation Rio Grande serves the Texas Valley region. “The theory underlying the concentrated border enforcement strategy was that raising the cost, the physical risk, and the probability of apprehension on each entry attempt would eventually discourage the migrant and cause him to return to his point of origin” (Cornelius 2000:17). The series of militant border operations do not
pose a substantial deterrent to immigrants entering at the border (Cornelius 2000:18). If it did, we would see a decline in the rate at which the undocumented enter (or attempt to enter) U.S. soil.

The U.S. implemented an experimental “prevention-through-deterrence” border control plan under the Clinton Administration, a plan that for the fiscal year of 2001 budgeted $4.3 billion for the INS (Cornelius 2003: 2-3). That is triple what the administration spent when they entered the White House. Clinton-appointed executors were “to concentrate the new resources it was providing for border control along a small number of relatively short segments of the border - the corridors that traditionally have been most heavily used by would-be illegal entrants” (Cornelius 2000:3). The Clinton Administration’s agenda to deter illegal crossings used the following high-cost strategies:

1. Increase of border agents
2. Stadium lighting
3. Ten-foot high steel fencing
4. Underground motion detectors
5. Infrared night scopes (a.k.a. thermal-imaging devices)
6. Increase mobilization of Border Patrol with new road construction
7. IDENT (a computerized biometric scanning system that documents an entrant’s photograph, fingerprint and other biographical data)

[Cornelius 2000: 4-6]

The events surrounding the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001 greatly affected the process of illegal immigrants entering the U.S., but not the sheer number of illegal entrants, as America pumped up its national security. “There was a significant drop in apprehension at the Mexico-U.S. border, down 54% in October 2001 from October 2000 levels...undoubtedly intensified by the increased supervision and the deepening recession after September 11th” (quoted in Leiken 2002:11). The four-month
period of October 2001 and January 2002 represented the lowest figure of apprehensions in 17 years (2002:11).

What can border apprehension statistics measure in real terms? Gauging success in such enterprises is a difficult pursuit. Apprehension figures calculate the number of events, not the number of persons (Leiken 2002:11). Therefore, to report on the effect apprehension has on the rate of immigration in any given year, it would be imperative to factor multiple apprehensions of single individuals. In addition, low numbers of apprehensions could reflect a poorly maintained border and/or a decline in the number of attempted crossings. Apprehension figures alone do not inform on the success or failure of deterrence strategies. Interestingly, they show significant numbers of attempted crossings in regions known to have heightened border security despite the strategies to counter these illegal crossings.

Yet the supply-demand relationship between the two nations proves more powerful than the concrete enforced border that separates them. Robert S. Leiken, an immigration analyst, writes that the situation calls for, “transforming Mexican migration from the chaotic, dangerous, habitual, and illegal to the regulated, safe, selective, and legal” (2002:5). Leiken proposes four solutions to illegal immigration. The first is a new guest worker program, although he admits that these have proven costly in the past. Introducing a guest worker program, such as the Bracero Program (1942-64), might only create a temporary flow of legal immigrant workers. It could create “permanent residents and stimulate rather than deter illegal migration through chain reaction migration” (Leiken 2002:19). His second suggested solution is to augment Mexican visas temporarily, an option that currently (Spring 2004) is on the table at U.S.-Mexico
immigration reform talks. Third, he questions why employer sanctions mandated by the 1986 amnesty act are not regularly enforced to hold law offenders accountable. And last, drawing on the U.S.'s history of governing the economic development of other countries, he suggests an investment in job creation that encourages “infrastructure and education” in the Mexican states that routinely contribute illegal immigrants to the U.S. economy (Leiken 2002).

**The Temporal Debate: Short vs. Long-Term Immigration**

Are tax-paying temporary, yet, undocumented immigrant workers, who utilize little to no social services afforded to American citizens, more or less of an economic burden than settled immigrant families? Findings from workplace studies and economic analysis of the phenomenon challenge the popular belief that temporary immigrant workers are unfairly milking wages and services from the American system. Some findings even suggest that long-term employment of this subpopulation actually feeds the U.S. economy through tax revenues rather than takes from it.

Combining U.S. earnings with the purchasing power of Mexico’s economy, temporary migration is a feasible strategy for Mexicans who need to “catch up” or “get ahead.” Peter Brownell writes, “in a system of ‘temporary’ labor migration, only the individual migrants are temporary. The system itself and the structural demand for low-wage labor that such a system addresses are much longer-lived” (2002:3-4). Low-wage work is not a deterrent for Mexican immigrants who plan to send part of their wages back
Brownell explains the benefit of spending large amounts of wages in the sending country:

This finding supports the theoretical conclusion that a migrant intending to spend at least part of his foreign earnings in his home country might be motivated to migrate to a country like the U.S. at a nominal wage lower than the wage which would be required to make permanent migration an economically rational thing to do. [Brownell 2002:17]

Temporary migration is more profitable for the receiving country than settled migration because there is no cost to produce the worker and no cost to support the families who remain in their home country.

Will government subsidized housing, education, and health care systems afford to provide social service accommodations to future generations at the extent that they currently provide for the American public? Undocumented immigrants are not eligible to receive any social services other than emergency medical services under the Medicaid program. But families of the undocumented can “qualify for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Medicaid, food stamps, and other programs only if their children are citizens” (Reyes 1997:73). Based on a sample of immigrants from western Mexico, only a small fraction of the parents (9.5%) had U.S. born children. Thus, less than one in every ten immigrant families have children who are citizens and eligible for social service benefits (1997:74).

Settled migrants are more likely to utilize tax-supplemented social services than temporary migrants are. Migrant workers not filing taxes, who would otherwise receive reimbursements, by default, create a surplus in U.S. government funds for that year. Cornelius and co-authors reported that Mexican-born migrants living in the San Francisco Bay Area pay adequate taxes “consistent with their earnings levels” but seldom
profit from the government services that their taxes support (Cornelius et al. 1982:43). The data collected by the U.S. Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy indicate that partial sub-samples of illegal immigrants "show no large amounts of utilization of taxpayer-financed services" (quoted 1980 in Cornelius et al. 1982:43). This government statement affirms that taxpaying illegal immigrants contribute to national tax revenues. In a similar study, conducted among 826 Hispanic workers in the garment and restaurant industries of Los Angeles examines whether or not employed immigrants file tax returns at the year's end after consistently paying into the system via deductions in their paychecks. Eighty-six percent of the 327 undocumented restaurant workers in his 1980 survey reported that taxes were deducted from their wages, but only about one-third (39%) reported filing federal tax forms (Maram 1980:113). The community-based study conducted by anthropologist Sheldon Maram (1980) is evidence for support of surplus revenues created by immigrant labor.

In addition to the perceived "robbery" of social services as a negative consequence of immigrant labor on the U.S. economy, gateway cities\(^1\) with a high number of immigrant workers in a given occupation show a reduction (by 1-10%) in the wages and employment rates of low-skilled natives (Card 2001). U.S.-born workers would rather their job competition be rooted than just passing by temporarily. Brownell's assertion that immigrant workers who settle in the U.S. will seek wages that exceed temporary migrants' exposes the socio-economic difference between the two sub-populations. Nationally, settled migrants are more likely to secure higher paying jobs than temporary migrants are. Controlling for a number of variables that affect migrants'...
wages e.g. age, marital status, migration-related human and social capital, predicted wages of settled migrants are 17.6% higher than temporary migrants (Brownell 2002:13). Settled immigrants pose less of a threat to the job security of U.S. workers than temporary migrants because they generally cannot accept the low wages their counterparts will due to their semi-permanent residence and therefore their need for higher wages. In terms of native citizens’ protection from competition by immigrant workers, Brownell argues, “U.S. workers can expect to benefit from programs which settle and integrate immigrants” rather than those that encourage short-term stays (Brownell 2002:17).

Additionally, Maram found that undocumented immigrants were vastly more likely than citizens were to be employed in the two lower status positions (bus person and dishwasher) in restaurants (1980:117). Violations of the minimum wage and overtime requirements occurred quite often according to respondents (1980:113, 117).

Furthermore, his findings and those of Cornelius in the same domain suggest it is more likely for undocumented Hispanic immigrants to be employed by a small-scale workplace with less than 50 employees than to be employed by a large-scale workplace with more than 50 employees (Maram 1980, Cornelius 1982). Cornelius writes, “The small enterprises employing Mexican labor tend to have a high proportion of manual, unskilled or semi-skilled, fast-paced, low-paying jobs – jobs that are increasingly difficult to fill with U.S.-born workers, at least at the level of the legal minimum wage, and often even at wages substantially above the legal minimum” (1982:25). In summary, exploitative, entry-level, low-wage positions in small (usually privately-owned) businesses are typical of Mexican immigrant labor.
Chapter Summary

In the beginning of the twentieth century, Mexico-to-California migrants secured manual labor positions in industry and agriculture. In the latter half of the last century, this subpopulation filled the niche in the urban, labor-intensive American service sector as well as continuing to work in agriculture. Those who take up these year-round employment opportunities tend to stay for longer increments than their predecessors who made seasonal trips to work as farm laborers. Like those in the early part of the century, positions filled by immigrant workers continue to be low-skill, unstable, and dispensable.

Due to the clandestine status and mobility of informants, the recent heightened security, and the multiple avenues for crossing, U.S.-Mexico border studies are essential to understanding the immigrant experience, yet difficult to administer. Ethnographic studies in host and sending communities have been integral in documenting border culture (Cornelius 2000), forming analyses of the labor markets in Mexican localities (Kingsolver 1996), and comparing tax contribution (Maram 1980) to social service utilization by immigrant workers in the service sector (Reyes 1997, Cornelius et al 1982).

In ending this chapter, I offer one more example to contextualize the complex phenomenon of international migration: Mexican cultural commentaries. Through the analysis of a unique sample of 124 retablos (votive paintings) created by migrants or the family members of migrants, anthropologists Jorge Durand and Douglas M. Massey (1995) document the different ways individuals are personally affected by international migration. These sacred images reveal the disappointments, the hardships, and the
important role religion plays in a migrant’s journey (not usually expressed in interviews). They serve as a “tangible and compelling view of the complex phenomenon of international migration.” Through the religious pleas made by retablo authors, the actual events and their stories of sadness, fear, and apprehension are revealed (Durand and Massey 1995:120). The content of the retablos expresses their wishes, desires, and gratitude. The most common plea (24%) evaluated in the paintings asks for help with a medical problem. The next most common theme is the fear that accompanies migration: getting by in the U.S. (21.8%), the safe homecoming of a migrant worker (17.7%), legal problems (14.6%), making the trip over the border (14.5%), and finding one’s way in the host country (4%). The frequency with which the theme of migration appears attests to the importance of this experience and the relationship between faith and a safe migration in the minds of retablo artists.
Chapter 3 – Factors in Migration

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the findings to come out of the three phases of my ethnographic fieldwork. I relate these findings to those of professional anthropologists, economists and other social scientists where most appropriate. My analysis covers the following themes: factors in migration, immigrant experiences in the process of migration and settlement, securing work in the host society, identity within a diasporic community, maintaining homeland ties, and return migration.

Demographics in Emigrant Selection

Emigrant selection theories, such as positive or negative selection theories, that hinge on Mexican-based income, skill and/or education level can be counter-productive in explaining who emigrates and why. Relying on quantitative data, decisive factors in emigration are ignored i.e. the intricacies of birth order, marriage status, circumstance, and individual will. This study suggests that emigrant selection is intermediate, or circumstantial.

The demographic composition of the sample population considers place of origin, age, and marital status. The typical immigrant comes from areas where there is little opportunity for work. The illegal Mexican immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area workforce are more likely to have come from western states in Mexico than any other area of Mexico. Over half of California’s Mexican immigrants originated from six Western Mexican states: Durango, Zacatecas, Nayarit, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Michoacán.

\(^{2}\) see Appendix A: Origin of Individuals in Sample
(Reyes 1997). “Surveys indicate that between half and three-quarters of all Mexican migrants come from these states and between a quarter and a half come from Michoacán and Jalisco alone” (Jones 1984 quoted in Massey et. al 1987). According to the Public Policy Institute of California, six states in western Mexico with large rural populations have historically sent the most immigrants to the U.S. Seventeen of the 29 informants in this study’s sample (59%) emigrated out of four of six western states. The remaining 12 informants come from three other states: six emigrated out of Mexico’s Federal District, four from Oaxaca, and one from Vera Cruz.

The second and third demographic markers considered here are age and marital status. From the sample presented in this study, a typical recently arrived and undocumented immigrant from Mexico has an average age of 26 and is unmarried. Primarily young people migrate, most between the ages of 19 and 29 (Chavez 1998:128).
Spanning almost thirty years, my informants' ages fall between 17 and 45 years old. As shown in the pie graph above measuring age distribution of 29 informants (ages from primary informant list given in chapter one), nine informants fall between the ages of 16 to 20. Five are 21 to 25 years old; ten are 26 to 30; three are 31 to 35; and only one informant falls in each of the 36 to 40 and 41 to 45 age ranges. Looking at each phase as a separate data set, differences in age are striking: the average age in Phase I is 21; the average age in Phase II is 26 years old; and the average age in Phase III is 34 years old.

Married immigrants represent a third of the sample and are slightly older on average at 31 years of age. After returning to Mexico and beginning a family, the pull of high U.S. wages continues to play as a factor in survival. For men and women meeting new familial responsibilities, the temptation is felt as much as, if not more than, their lone migrant counterparts. Ten of the 29 informants in the sample were married before their last emigration. Diosa and Ratón married while living in the U.S. Never legally or ceremoniously married, Pappas and David retain their single status although they fathered children in Mexico and are bound to their families under this union.

Most Mexican immigrants had some work experience prior to their arrival in the U.S. and come from the low to middle socio-economic rungs of Mexico’s population. If U.S.-Mexico migration “cannot be attributed to an absence of employment in Mexico” then workers are leaving one low-prospects job for another (quoted Bustamante et al.1988 in Leiken 2002:16). With unexpected drops in Mexico’s birthrate, by 2015, there will be a steady reduction in the number of new job seekers entering the Mexican labor market.

Analysts are not saying that the shifting population trend will stop Mexican emigration. . . . As long as the wage for an hour’s manual
labor in the United States roughly equals that for a day's work here [Mexico], the Mexican tradition of going north to seek a better life will continue. [quoted Jordan 2001 in Leiken 2002:25]

Although this forecast suggests a drop in the Mexican unemployment rate, it does not promise that fewer immigrants will be looking for work in the U.S. since there is no guarantee that the quality of available work in Mexico can compete with that in the U.S.

Findings from this study only partially support the negative selection theory, which maintains that emigrants are “chosen from the lower tail of the income distribution in the country of origin” (Borjas 1987:52). While low-wage immigrant workers might be more likely to come from a Mexican household of low socio-economic status, the informants in this study, as individuals, represent a mix of skill and education levels. Those who completed secondary education ambitiously embarked on adult careers before emigrating out of Mexico: Juan owned a small media design business, Chon earned supervisor position at a local shoe factory, and Diosa studied at the state university in Guadalajara. Others had to take jobs with little or no room for promotion: Ratón worked in a series of small variety stores, Lionel, Piojo, and Pablito manned an assembly line, and Beto was both a seasonal fruit picker and cab driver.

In terms of candidacy for emigration, preparedness goes beyond income, education, and skill level. Experience, temperament, and network connections play increasingly important roles in selection as border culture becomes more threatening and expensive. One factor that complicates selection is the capacity to obtain coyote fees through lending networks. The low wages earned by the working class are not sufficient by themselves to afford the high price to be smuggled into the U.S. With the efforts of
social networks (family members, fictive kin, friends), a low-wage earner is able to collect the needed funds to illegally emigrate.

Incentive to Migrate

Once a short-term means of pursuing modest goals, today migration is a source of long-term employment and is considered a permanent part of the Mexican village economy, society, and culture (Fletcher 1999:1). The villages that have had a long history of sending their men to the U.S. in search of work show depleted numbers of working-age men. Those who leave their home to provide for their families are role models for upcoming generations. One of the youngest immigrants I interviewed, an 18 year-old from León, Guanajuato, shared with me what he boasted to his friends as a child. Daniel remembers how boys on his street claimed their eagerness to head north and follow in the footsteps of their fathers and other countrymen.

Daniel:  
Yo me voy a ir Norte. Yo me voy a ir Norte. Yo voy a hacer esto. Yo voy a hacer el otro.

(translation) I’m going north. I’m going north. I’m gonna to do this. I’m gonna do that.

He had made the decision to continue in the tradition of seeking work al Norte.3. Previously, older members of his patrilineage had made the trip, including Daniel’s four uncles who continue to live in the U.S. It was only after leaving his parents and five younger siblings, searching out a coyote (person smuggler), and illegally crossing the border that he seriously thought about the implications. All of the talk and exaggerations

3 translates literally to “to the North” but a more accurate translation captures the move across Mexico-U.S. national boundary
were to be played out in front of him and he admitted that his fear mixed with excitement felt more like anxiety about what was to come.

Social scientists use the terms “push” and “pull” to describe the situational factors that influence a person’s decision to leave one country and enter another one, respectively. The majority of Mexicans immigrating to California respond to both push and pull factors. While employment is scarce, temporary, and unreliable in their native country, it is abundant, year-round, and more secure in the American service industry. Earning double or triple what they can earn in Mexico, earning possibilities in the U.S. pull immigrants here.

What are the motivations to move out of a homeland and into a host society?

Speaking from personal experience, Daniel had this to say about his incentives:

Daniel: Como todos los que vienen aquí: El Sueño Americano - así se dice - hacer dinero, mas que nada.

(translation) Like everyone who comes here: The American Dream – that’s what they say – to make money, nothing more.

The American Dream stirs up images of a decent-sized house with a two-car garage for most U.S. natives. A significant factor in bringing Beto to the U.S. was an opportunity to earn wages that could afford him and his Mexico-based girlfriend the money to buy a home of their own in Mexico. After they had purchased a piece of land and a construction crew began to lay the foundation of the house, neither of them could withstand the pressures of a long-distance relationship and their plans for the house of their dreams were cancelled after one year. The financial investment was a loss to Beto. With this change, the American dollars he invested in a future with his girlfriend remained on the Mexican side of the border in her hands. He was comfortable with the
idea of imparting his savings to her and her three children (by another man) as a gift.

Shortly after, he began to redefine his motivations for living in California as a Mexican immigrant worker and played with the idea of financing alternative investments, for example: purchasing a fruit truck, his own taxicab, or a small restaurant.

Ethnographer Peri L. Fletcher followed families, living in Mexican villages that have routinely sent their sons, brothers, and husbands north for work to finance a new house in their Mexican villages. The ethnographic account, *La Casa de Mis Sueños* (The House of My Dreams) (1999), captures how the community of Napízaro in the state of Michoacán has kept up with a new standard of living situated within a transnational context. Fletcher resonates with the concept that social space is “recreated” by the ideas that transnational migrants and families of migrants have of modernity and, furthermore, the cash economy that makes modern living possible.

The modern homes of emigrants from Napízaro stand out against the traditional homes around them. They emulate American material, design, and function and therefore change the everyday lives of the people who live in them (Fletcher 1999:63). A comparison of the materials used in house construction for migrant versus nonmigrant households signals “a break in the relationship between house and environment” (Fletcher 1999:66). In 1989, fifty-two percent of migrant homes were constructed with some brick or concrete and there were no cases of nonmigrant homes constructed with brick or concrete; they are made of only stone and adobe, which are natural insulators against extreme weather (Fletcher 1999: 66). The most notable changes in the use of physical space are design features: the presence of two-story houses, the doubling of the average number of rooms per home, the insurgence of metal privacy gates and garages,
the absence of rafters used for maize storage, and the lack of an open-air patio (or corredor) characteristic of traditional Mexican homes (Fletcher 1999:66-80). The corredor plays an important role in everyday life, and without it, the interior of a house takes on new functions that disrupt normative behavior. “Normally, the only time that unrelated men and women visit is on the patio or corredor … In the new homes, men and women are less segregated” (Fletcher 1999:76). Departing from cultural norms, guests to migrant’s homes are now invited inside and entertained in the main portion of the house mixing all company in one common area and thus, desegregating unrelated men and women. Another change in the function of social space is brought about by indoor, low-ceiling kitchens in the new homes. Families with new-style homes maintain two kitchens. Straying from their subsistence-based diet of beans and tortillas, cash remittances allow families to eat more breads and other prepared foods (Fletcher 1999:75). The gas stoves on which nontraditional meals are prepared rely on a cash economy because to operate them, one has to purchase the gas outside of the village. Separated from the house, traditional wood-burning stoves remain outside in adobe and stone kitchens so the smoke can seep out from in between the cracks in the ceiling. Primarily reserved for the preparation of beans and tortillas, traditional kitchens continue to function because the flavor they produced cannot be reproduced with gas stoves (Fletcher 1999:74-75). The above example of Napízaro home construction financed by family member’s remittances from the U.S. examines how traditional house design and function has been interrupted by American values of space and medium.

A symbol of a migrant’s hope to return, Fletcher saw many of the houses standing for years as skeletons, only partially built (Fletcher 1999:5-6). Having left the fields they
once tended by the wayside to engage in the transnational market, migrants no longer engage in traditional subsistence patterns. Members of transnational households participating in the global economy have assimilated to a reliance on cash economy and are thus, coerced to remain migrant workers. This raises a question about place and sacrifice: “Why do migrants, many of whom spend less than two weeks (a year) in the village, continue to work double shifts and live in cramped, tiny apartments in California to save money to build a house in Mexico in which they may never live?” (Fletcher 1999:6).

Economic push and pull factors weigh heavily in the decision to migrate. The need for “extra” money propels migrants to circle through the international border for years on end by pull factors, e.g. financial freedom, superfluous spending, enticing wages, and by push factors, e.g. familial pressures and ascribing to new standards of living. Economic benefits to Mexico reaped from temporary U.S. labor come in the form of cash remittances: single families or even whole communities fund structural improvements, medical services, and household provisions. For the masses that fall below poverty level, hosting ceremonial occasions, e.g. rites of passage, is a financial balancing act. In lieu of a historical reliance on U.S.-based labor, individuals achieve an elevated home and village status by surrendering a steady cash supply to their families and communities.
Economic Push Factors: Improved Standard of Living

The single most significant factor bringing the 7 million Mexican immigrants who currently live here is financial need. Born in Mexico City, Beto is the middle of five siblings raised by a single, working mother who separated from their father while the children were still in grade school. In our third open-ended interview, I asked him to describe a typical Mexican emigrant:

Beto: Las personas que necesitaban dinero; el inmigrante típico en los Estados Unidos son las personas que viven donde hay un poco trabajo.

(translation) The people who needed money; the typical immigrants to the United States are those people who live [in Mexico] where there is little work.

Traditional sending states in Mexico have been largely rural. From the description given by Beto, he is not a typical immigrant because he emigrated from an urban area and not a rural one. Rather, he is representative of a new trend in migration from larger Mexican cities to the U.S. Drawing from field studies conducted between 1982 and 1989, Cornelius and colleagues point to the “increasing importance of the Mexico City metropolitan area…as a source for unauthorized migration” (1999:6). They argue that long-term depletion of wages has led nontraditional sending communities to have an interest in migration. A “new immigration” pattern has developed streaming from Mexico’s metropolitan areas to the U.S. For over twenty years of Mexico’s economic crisis, real wages for most Mexicans have been reduced by forty to fifty percent (Cornelius 1999:7-11). Communities without a long history of U.S.-bound migration, such as large cities that for some time before the economic crisis of the 1980s had been
heavily subsidized by government employment, are now conforming to U.S.-bound migration as a solution to the downfall of the Mexican economy.

With himself and his brothers out of work and an absent father, Beto had always realized the need for an extra cash resource. He knew that with American wages, he would be able to send money home to his mother; this encouraged him to emigrate. Beto expresses the importance of immigrant earners to send remittances to family members in Mexico and how that commitment diminishes the longer they live in the host country:

Beto: *Algumas a lo mejor mucho, algunas a lo mejor poco. Pero yo pienso que de igual manera todos ayudan a su familia. Y yo pienso es...es bueno para muchas personas como, como nosotros. La gente necesita ayuda: un tío, un primo.*

(translation) Some probably help them a lot; some probably help a little. But I think that in equal ways they help their family. And I think it is...it is good for many people like, like us. The people need help: an uncle, a cousin.

Beto: *Cuando, cuando las personas llegan por primera vez es cuando, cuando mas ayudan a su familia. Cuando están más tiempo, hay muchas personas piensan que no es importante. Aydan o no ayudan.*

(translation) When, when the people arrive for the first time it’s when, when they help their family more. Once they are here for more time, there are many people who think it’s not important. They help or they don’t help.

Necessities are covered, for the most part, by Mexican wages. But special events like rite of passage ceremonies, home improvements, medical attention, and splitting of the nuclear family into separate households require funds outside of regular earnings.

The wages earned here, although some of the lowest among the American workforce, allow for a higher standard of living both for Beto and for his family in Mexico City.

Beto was tired of coming up short, counting every *peso* and having to prioritize financial
responsibilities with insufficient funds. I get the impression that he is able to spend with less reserve here for the first time in his life. One day (following payday), he purchased name-brand *Nike Jordan* tennis shoes and said to me in Spanish, “These are very expensive in Mexico. People really like them there.” There is no doubt *Nike* shoes are a status symbol. Few people can afford the brand new styles that run eighty to a hundred dollars. After growing up poor, sometimes without any shoes at all, he is finally able to enjoy this type of indulgence. There is a tinge of guilt when Beto spends lavishly on himself:

Beto: *Porque pienso que con el tiempo, la gente cambia aquí. Pienso que, que la gente piensa que con el dinero que ganan o con lo que tienen...que, que piensan que es todo y no es verdad. Porque hay gente en otro lugar que los está esperando y que lo necesitan.*

(translation) Because I think with time, people change here. I think that, that the people think that with the money that they make or that they have... that, that they think it is everything and it’s not true. Because there are people in other places that are waiting and they need it.

Beto’s remittances directly affect the livelihood of his loved ones: new home stereo system for his mother, a computer for his brother, structural improvements to their home, financing of special events and expenses (bachelor’s party, wedding, baptism, birthday and holiday parties, condominium security deposit, border crossing). As an earner in America, Beto can provide for his family in a capacity he has never before.

Another push factor related to the economy and work is exemplified by Piojo’s story of disappointment and immobility as a factory worker. The city of León, Guanajuato is renowned for its *talleres* (workshops, sweatshops, small factories) that assemble a variety of shoes e.g. sandals, boots. My informants from León brag that Mexico’s current president, Vicente Fox, came to their hometown to purchase several
pairs of cowboy boots. The industry employs thousands of locals. Piojo felt less successful than his older brother was working in the shoe factories.

Piojo: *Es diferente lo que pasa...El sabe como manejar las maquinas. El sabe hacer los zapatos.*

(translation) It’s different for him...He knows how to run the machines...He knows how to make shoes.

Piojo’s lack of skill in the local industry pushed him northward to the American low-skill service sector. In his mind, if he can hold a job in the U.S. then he is a successful worker – something he wants to prove to himself and his family. Under the surface of financial factors, there is a personal dilemma in almost every immigrant story. For Piojo, he is hunting for his own self worth within a society that merits cash and commodity.

Economic need is an undeniable factor for all immigration. For Mexicans, the opportunity to American dollars just over the north border is incredibly enticing especially when the wages earned from Mexican labor barely cover the household’s expenses. I am told that it would require months of a middle class Mexican worker’s earnings to save for a modest home stereo. With the American practice of gross consumerism in close vicinity, regions of Mexico are responding and playing catch-up.

**Economic Pull Factors: American Wages**

Low wages “push” emigrants out of Mexico while salaries twice as large “pull” immigrants to Californian cities. The events of September 11 were a direct blow to Mexico’s service sector. “No industry was hit harder than hospitality, where Mexican restaurant and hotel workers had thronged” (Leiken 2002:8). The U.S. Bureau of Labor
Statistics established that in 2000 average manufacturing wages in Mexico were at $2.12 per hour, equivalent to only 11% of U.S. wages in a comparable occupation (Wise and Waters 2001:5). Immigrants come to earn U.S. dollars and ultimately spend a portion of their wages in Mexico. Dollars buy more in Mexico; they are the preferred currency. Pelón exaggerated his American wages when he asserted that he could earn in one month here what it takes him a year to earn in Mexico:

Pelón: *Aquí te ganas en un mes la que ganas en un año alla.*

(translation) Here you earn in one week what you earn in one year there.

Pelón added that in Mexico they pay you every week - four hundred dollars in a month. Agreeing with Pelón, Beto estimated the Mexican weekly wage at about a hundred dollars (or a thousand pesos).

Beto: *Es cien dólares. Es nada por semana.*

(translation) Its a hundred dollars. It’s nothing per week.

The current carrying hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants to California annually leads them to a pay rate that indisputably surmounts Mexico’s rate for the same work. Pelón asserts that wages for a typical immigrant are double potential earnings in Mexico. An even more drastic comparison, Beto claims that many undocumented workers here earn three, four or five times as much in a biweekly check.

Beto: *Como ochocientos, como mil dólares.*

(translation) Like eight hundred, like a thousand dollars.

Even with the less than full time employment (30 hours a week) earning California’s minimum wage ($6.75 an hour) one can bring in twice as much in a week provided Beto and Pelón’s estimate of Mexican earnings is accurate. And although two
hundred dollars a week is not much to live on in the Bay Area, small sacrifices are benevolently allocated in the form of cash remittances. Beto has worked as a fruit picker in Michoacán and as a taxi driver in Mexico City. The wages come out to be the same when all said and done for both jobs - not much to live on. Even under the slumping post-9-11 U.S. economy, Beto and Pelón concluded low-wage employment here is more desirable than an even more depressed market in Mexico. They also discussed the impediments to their upward movement on the Mexican socio-economic ladder and claimed that when they return to the Mexican system they will not work. Knowing that work is available in America with at least double the wages that are offered in Mexico (and the social network members willing to assist them), there is a “pull” to work in the north away from the homeland.

Accounting for the difference of the cost of living in Mexico, Beto explained the discrepancy of wages in real terms:

Beto: \[ \text{Siempre venimos con esta imaginación guey, que es doble. Tu, con diez pesos, guey, tu vas a Mexico y tu compras un carton de cervezas, guey! Es como, es nada, guey. Es un dollar, guey...pero con tiempo es el mismo.} \]

(translation) We always come with the imagination, man, that it’s double. You, with ten pesos, man, you go to Mexico and buy a box of beers, man! It’s like, it’s nothing, man. It’s one dollar, man…but over time it is the same.

To confirm the numbers, I crosschecked Mexican earnings with Piojo who, like Pelón, is from León, Guanajuato. He estimated that one earns only $120 in two weeks and with such little money, one might as well go north. As if he had made a discovery, Piojo let out with a shout:

Piojo: \[ \text{¡Por eso a todo les gusta California! Asi es a mi ver. A mi eso me gusta aqui.} \]
That’s why everyone likes California! That’s how it looks to me. That is what I like about it here.

For Piojo, he is here because he cannot do in Mexico what he can do here. With his lifestyle, being able to earn American wages translates to living like a king and working less than forty hours a week as a dishwasher. Piojo would have liked to work in the town where he was born. With the current arrangement, he feels like he is off at some kind of work camp. Even with his dishwasher wages that he keeps for himself and does not remit, he can still afford to live the party lifestyle while here. If he did send regular remittances of a like percentage of his income such that his peers send (estimated at 25% of their income) he would have to pinch funds and/or time from the lifestyle to which he has now grown accustomed. Besides, he can afford to hold onto his wages because he is not married or have children who rely on his remittances to survive and his parents have three other sons working here remitting some of their wages.

Piojo:  

_Aca haces una feria. Y alla vives tranquilo._

(translation)  Here you make money. There you live a more relaxed life.

Until drastic changes in the Mexican economy are implemented, the inconsistency of immigrant earnings and contributions to the Mexican household as a worker in their own country will be outstripped by the opportunities available across the border.

**Economic Push Factors: Medical Services**

Manuel, 25, arrived from Mexico over six years ago and his brother, Pedro, 33, arrived over ten years ago. They have an older sister and brother who have settled in
Chicago (both with American-born children) and additional older siblings still living in Mexico. As the youngest in his family, Manuel’s immigration to the U.S. was arranged so that he may earn the money needed for his father’s stomach operation. But in the past six years, his mother’s health has also deteriorated. Since he left his homeland, Manuel has returned only once for a period of two months to visit his sick mother. I met the two brothers at the same time, while we were co-workers at a local diner. Pedro has been employed at this establishment for nine years and Manuel for six. They have a unique loyalty to the restaurant owner who permits them to take on extra hours or borrow money when a medical emergency arises in Mexico. Aside for these emergencies when they send much more, Manuel and Pedro send remittances of a few hundred dollars each month to help take the burden from their siblings who remain at their parent’s side. U.S.-earned wages have indirectly maintained the health of their aging mother and father by subsidizing the medicines and healthcare they require.

For the most part, the elderly in Mexico do not go to live in retirement homes when they reach a ripe age. Instead, one or more of their children care for them often in the homes in which they were raised. The need for constant care means a child or other relative of working age cannot work outside of the home. An alternative arrangement is staggering shifts between household members. The opportunity cost of having one member of the household to provide at-home medical care instead of earning in the market is a significant blow to the financial security of a household. There is a shared responsibility by siblings in Mexico to care for their parents in their old age. Diosa and Blanca, the youngest siblings of a large family have also taken on partial responsibility to care financially for their aging parents. Prescription drugs and other costly medication,
surgery, physical therapy, and basic care for elder family members are anticipated. U.S. labor is one method to alleviate some of the financial burden of medical care and services.

Political and Legal Push Factors

Mario, 18, came here to work two years ago at the end of May 2001 from the Mexican state of Jalisco. He is the middle child of eleven, five of whom are married. He is the only one of them to immigrate to America. What were the factors that influenced his emigration from Mexico and his siblings decision to stay home? What made his situation different? When I framed these types of questions to Mario, I anticipated he would tell me about the economic factors in Mexico that pushed him toward U.S. labor. He did speak of the Mexican job market as a factor leading to his emigration, but further into the interview additional reasons as to why he left Mexico were revealed. In other words, Mario’s migration like many Mexican migrants was a response to multiple push factors as well as pull factors.

In a semi-structured, open-ended interview, I asked Mario if, hypothetically, the same job that he has now was offered in Mexico with the same rate of pay, would he return.

Mario: *Me gusta regresar ahora, pero me gustaría regresar America porque la vida es muy diferente en Mexico.*

(translation) I would like to go back now but I also would like to return to America because life is very different in Mexico.

Ethnographer: [*¿Irias a venire al Norte?*]
[Would you have ever come here?]

¿Antes? Quizas no huvira venido nunca si huvira ganado bien. No venido para acá. Me gusataria ir a Mexico para visitar a mi familia y regressar para trabajar aqui.

Before? Maybe I would have never come if I were making it there financially. I would not have come here. I would like to go to Mexico to visit my family and return here to work.

From this portion of our interview, I determined that Mario’s lack of work was a push factor affecting his decision to emigrate. Mario could not find enough work in Mexico to make a good living there. And now, after two years living in the U.S. he works two jobs; by day, he is a barista at a café and by night, he is a janitor in office buildings. From the wages he earns here, he is able to remit money to his family while enjoying a new life in a new place.

Another unanticipated factor leading Mario to emigrate from Mexico was the escalating conflict between him and the local police. With a large portion of young workers unemployed, many locals take to the street at day and night with literally nothing to do. Groups of young men wandering though town make local law enforcement officers nervous and suspicious. Mario informed me that once he acquired the negative attention of the officers, they began to look for and harass him at night only to charge him with minor violations. He had several run-ins with the law and became increasingly frustrated with these unavoidable incidents that he felt some sort of escape was necessary to curb the frustration. Thus, police harassment was an additional push factor in Mario’s emigration.
Goals in the U.S.

Immigrants who come to the U.S. to work share a concrete set of short-term goals powered by their basic necessities. Anthropologist Leo Chavez creates a list of sequential goals based on over twenty years of research of the Mexican immigrant experience. Goals are met consecutively; goals toward the bottom of the list are sought as the length of stay in the U.S. increases. He writes, “generally the relative emphasis given each goal proceeds in the order presented here” (1998:134):

1. Find someplace to stay, if only temporary
2. Work
3. Live cheaply
4. Survive economically
5. Send money back home
6. Reduce loneliness and boredom
7. Live more comfortably, with space, fewer people, and less crowding
8. Satisfy domestic needs: care for children, socialize children; cook and do other domestic chores
9. Minimize disruption caused by apprehension
10. Assist in migrating

[Chavez 1998:134]

For some newcomers participating in American immigrant labor, getting by financially both here and in Mexico is enough to worry about. Depending on the individual, they also harbor long-term goals. Identifying the sequential steps to achieve long-terms goals and having the knowledge of the follow thru required to complete each step lies out of the reach of many temporary migrants.

Piojo: Voy a conseguir aqui. Voy a tratar de... quiero aprender ingles pero por andar de pinche loco aca, borracho aca, siempre ando bien pachecote.

(translation) I’m going to achieve something here. I’ll try to...I want to learn English but by doing crazy things here, being drunk here, I always find myself real out of it.
In the above quote, Piojo explains that he will eventually attain what he set out for; he wants to get something in return from his immigrant experience. If he continues to live in a drunken daze, the likelihood of his learning English and becoming a success here is slim. There are a number of distractions for Piojo living far from his parent’s home. Out from under their immediate supervision, he becomes sidetracked by the party lifestyle and struggles to focus on any long-term goals.

The following anecdotal description of Chon, the second eldest son in a family of seven children, illustrates how he plans to meet personal long-term goals. As Beto and I pulled up to Chon’s restaurant, we saw him outside buying movies at a sidewalk sale. He greeted us smiling as usual. On the drive home, he sang in a low voice while looking out the window. He had completed the morning shift and was looking forward to the entire evening ahead. He requested that I drop him off outside of Mi Tierra, a local Mexican grocery market. While thinking aloud about what he was going to buy in the market that day, he began to talk freely about his plans to open his own store in León where he and his family live. Because Chon prefers to go home directly after work, drinks little alcohol, and is paid $18 an hour as kitchen manager, he was able to save $2,000 in the months of March and April 2003 for the down payment on his future business. With this level of commitment to his future, all the while supporting his parents with $200 biweekly remittances, Chon has earned a reputation as an ambitious and successful immigrant. Proud of his accomplishments, he told me in an immodest tone:

Chon: Yo estoy aqui para tratar de: ser mi propio, propio patron, juntar el dinero que uno quiería juntar hacer una pequena emprea - un pequena comercio - y no depender de nadie.
(translation) I’m here to try: to be my own, own boss, to get the money together that one would want to save to have a little business - a small shop - and not to depend on anyone.

When he finds himself in Mexico again long-term, he will not look for a job, because he hopes to own one. Chon will no longer be employed, or worry about employment. He hopes not to have to depend on someone else for his livelihood because someday he will be signing paychecks himself.
Chapter 4 – Immigrant Experience

From an album by Manu Chao (1998) dedicated to the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional), or the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, the lyrics to the song *Clandestino* describe the plight of an illegal immigrant.

I was with Beto when I first heard this song. We bought the album that same night and played it for Piojo. He and Beto appreciate Chao’s portrayal of how living clandestinely is criminalized by the State. Born into a refugee family to a Galician father and a Basque mother, Chao himself lived “lost in the heart” as “a ghost in the city” while residing in France. In lines 12 and 13, Chao compares the dangers of early sailors entering the Atlantic Ocean to the dangers of crossing *La Frontera* at the international U.S.-Mexico boundary. His reference to the Straits of Gibraltar implies that immigrants who risk their lives at the border to work for modern-day currency are as fearless as the Phoenicians were almost three thousand years ago when they braved violent waters and sailed to England to trade their goods for tin.
In this chapter, I present the experiences of undocumented Mexican immigrants and explore the significances of these. Some, in the likes of what Chao writes about, are unique to this sub-population of migrant workers living clandestinely.

**The Process of Migration**

Migration is analogous to a rite of passage. In Arnold van Gennep’s theory, rites of passage have three major phases (quoted 1960 in Chavez 1998). The first phase is a separation from social groups, from community, and from familiarity. Migration is not only a process of physical separation. International migrants, who cross physical and imaginary borders, also negotiate psychological, cultural, and social “separations.” Van Gennep’s second major phase in rites of passage is the process of transition. This is the liminal phase of accustoming oneself to new ways of living. The third phase is incorporation into the new society (Chavez 1998: 4). These phases are discussed further in relation to my informants’ experiences leaving home, crossing the border, and living as an immigrant in American society.

Migration is movement across borders. The following section discusses the process of moving across national borders. It also describes the process through which an immigrant traverses the stages of settlement such as connecting with social network members, satellite networks, and sending for other family members to join them.
La Frontera

Mexico and the United States share a 2,000-mile border\(^4\). As a response to new border security enforcements put into effect first by the Clinton Administration and strengthened by the Bush Administration, there is a “rechanneling” of illegal crossers to areas with less border control but more severe environmental conditions. While from 1994 to 2000\(^5\), the number of apprehensions decreased in California and Texas by single-digit percentage points (California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation and U.S. Border Patrol Headquarters quoted in Cornelius 2000: 8), the number of apprehensions in Arizona increased by 351% during the same period (Cornelius 2000: 9). These figures paint a conflicting picture in terms of the successfulness of these new measures to control the border. With specific locales receiving much of the increased security, more border hoppers are increasingly opting to cross into remote areas of Arizona. For those who pay for “assisted” crossing, the risk of apprehension is diminished.

During the period of concentrated border enforcement (January 1, 1995 – mid-November) the “officially verified death toll, border wide...is 1,437” (Cornelius 2000: 12), yet the real number of border-related deaths is much higher. Numbers tallied by U.S. Border Patrol “show a sixty percent increase in migrant deaths, border wide, from 231 in 1999 to 369 in 2000” (U.S. Border Patrol National Headquarters quoted in Cornelius 2000:13). During the same period, the Border Patrol recorded 2,454 near-death migrant crossers who had become lost or stranded (2000:13). Deaths of border migrants are undercounted because many bodies are lost in the terrain, never to be

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\(^4\) see Appendix B: U.S.-Mexico Border Region

\(^5\) Data in Cornelius’ study (2000) are counted in fiscal years not calendar years.
recovered. To relate statistics to real-life border experiences, Señor, Beto, Juan, and Chon each witnessed human skeletal remains that lay in the desert near the border.

Deaths in border regions are caused by (in the order of frequency): prolonged exposure to harsh environment (such as hypothermia, dehydration, and heat stroke), drowning, and accidents. “The continuous spatial redistribution of illegal entry attempts since 1994 is an impressive demonstration of the Border Patrol’s capacity to herd unauthorized border crossers into increasingly inhospitable and dangerous areas” (Cornelius 2000:16). Traditional crossing locations, especially along the Arizona-Mexico border, lead migrants through remote mountainous or desert areas. Several days of hiking in the mountains with sub-freezing temperatures in the winter, or a two-day trek through the desert in 120° summer weather are the conditions migrants endure in their journey al Norte. To compound the risks, it is not physically possible to carry enough water to prevent dehydration while crossing through the desert that lies between Mexico and Arizona (Cornelius 2000: 17).

Fees charged by human smugglers “have more than tripled during the implementation of concentrated border enforcement operation” (Cornelius 2000:10). Before Operation Gatekeeper, the going rate for crossings into San Diego and continued transportation to the Los Angeles area was about $300. Raton left Mexico for the first time in 1991 paying $250 to his coyotes to pass the border. The median fee had risen to $700 by 1996 and continues to rise into the present years (Cornelius 2000:10-11).

Ethnographic study samples from 1985-96 suggest that coyote fees had been rising for several years before border operations intensified, but new border strengthening strategies reinforced fee increase (Cornelius 2000: 11).
Mario quoted the cost of a coyote fee to re-enter the U.S. at $2700 (more than three months of wages for a minimum wage earner) although he did hear of someone who might be able to smuggle him for only $1100. The legal and life-threatening dangers that illegal immigrants face to come work in this country were painstakingly drawn from his response to my question about border-related deaths:

Ethnographer: [¿Piensas que muchas personas mueren al cruzar?]
(translation) [Do you think many people die when they try to cross?]

Mario: Yo no pensé en la muerte porque yo me viné en la cajuela con dos personas más ... por dos horas y no podíamos respirar. Queríamos que habriera la tapa pero no querían.

(translation) I didn’t think about death because me and two others were in the trunk of a car ... for two hours and we couldn’t breath. We wanted them to open the trunk but they didn’t.

He explained that friends help in whatever capacity they can to assist each other in crossing. His friends gave him money for the road for water and food but he ran out by the time he was stationed at a guesthouse (This is place where immigrants stay overnight or for a few days while waiting to change coyotes).

Mario: Cuando yo cruze de Tijuana a San Isidro yo llegé a la casa de otros coyotes. Eran dos mujeres no nos dieron de comer porque eramos hombres y ellas eran lesbianas. No agua, no nada por dos días. Pero mi amigo el que me prestó el dinero se enojó. Coyotes tratan mal.

(translation) When I crossed at Tijuana at San Isidro I was brought to the house of other coyotes. There were two women that did not give us food because we are men and they are lesbians. No water, not anything for two days. But my friend who had loaned me money was angry about this. Coyotes are similar to slave owners.

Despite his struggle and to my surprise, Mario said he would go through the experience of crossing the border illegally not for the wages, but for the adventure.
There is now a higher rate of permanent settlement in the U.S. due to high coyote fees. Cornelius argues that the effort to keep immigrants out of the U.S. had led to an increase in length of stay and ultimately an increase of settlement. He claims by increasing the expense of entering illegally, “the U.S. government has strengthened the incentives for permanent settlement in the United States. It is therefore quite possible that the current strategy of border enforcement is keeping more unauthorized migrants in the United States than is keeping out” (Cornelius 2000:12). Rather than return periodically to Mexico, immigrants who were married when they emigrated might opt to send for their wives to join them and only pay the expensive coyote fee one time.

Of grave concern is the transport of female family members over the border in the hands of shady, mistrusted coyotes. Pedro, exercising caution to cross his wife and nine-year-old daughter over the border, paid $2500 each when he made arrangements with honest, trusted human smugglers. The person he contacted for this transaction is a relative of the chef where he works. Señor, dishwasher at the same restaurant, chose to do business with a stranger and paid the same rate ($2500) to pass his wife through Phoenix and to Los Angeles. His decision to hire someone who was not recommended generated his worst fear. When nearly ten phone calls came to him to the restaurant one night, he believed that the polleros (literally chicken herders) were dangling the security of his wife as a threat. Señor and the rest of us who answered the phone believed that the caller was the coyote who worked for the smugglers hired to bring his wife to the San Francisco Bay Area. The caller demanded the sum of the fees up front while cursing and threatening that something horrible would happen if he did not receive the rest of the money that night. Fortunately, the caller was not affiliated with the people Señor had
hired, but instead came from a con artist who watched his wife dial the phone number of the restaurant days earlier when she used a payphone outside of Phoenix. He redialed those digits taking advantage of the desperation he knew he would find on the other end of the line. Señor did not send any money thanks to the counseling he took from others familiar with this sort of heinous fraud.

When I interviewed Daniel, he had arrived in the States only two months prior, crossing with his uncle (Chon), a neighborhood friend (Chuy), a few more friends from León, and several others who were grouped with them by the coyotes. When I asked Daniel to describe his feelings at the border, he explained that he could not find the words to describe the emotion he felt when arriving at the invisible line, and crossing into the U.S. In creating a hypothetical scenario, I asked Daniel to imagine that we were standing at the national border and to describe the process of how a coyote passes migrants across the border. He described this scene based on his own experience in the spring of 2003:

Daniel: *Ya lo que llega uno en La Frontera es llegar directamente con el guía. Nos va a llevar por el camino donde vamos a cruzar. Ya sea - por el desierto por donde sea o sea nada mas vamos a llegar directamente con el y el sabia como nos va a pasar y ya vamos a hacer todo lo que el nos diga.*

(translation) One arrives at the border with the coyote already guiding you there. He will bring us to a car in which we will cross. Wherever he wants – through the desert or wherever. Just that we get to that point with him and he (the coyote) would know what we wish to accomplish and we would just do everything he said.

Chon, who has illegally crossed the Mexican-American border five times, stated that if he were to do it again he would use only one coyote, crossing in a vehicle the entire way. When multiple exchanges of coyotes are made during border transit, the migration process becomes more complicated and the safety of those migrating lies in a
number of hands. Immigrants are forced to wait in locations for several days until the next coyote arrives, the risk of apprehension is increased.

A Case Study of Border Crossing

Human smuggling is a controlled, organized business with multiple posts running northward throughout Mexico and the U.S. The following section describes one immigrant’s journey across the U.S.-Mexico border and how the group he traveled with was treated as goods being smuggled across international lines. Late one night and into the morning, Beto described every detail of his border crossing experience that took place more than three years ago. The trip lasted nearly a week with several changes of hand. Beto and the group he traveled with changed coyotes at least five times. With each change, they awaited a new mode of transportation. This made it harder for them to be tracked by La Migra (migration officers).

It all began in Mexico City when Beto made a phone call to a woman working for an underground operation of coyotes. When she lined up eight individuals from the area requesting smuggling service, the plan was set in motion. She collected half of the fee up front, arranged the specifics of travel, and bought their plane tickets to Piedras Negras (a city near the El Paso section of the border). On the morning of their departure, the contact woman wrote down the physical description of her clients for identification at the plane. The party consisted of a married couple, a woman and her two small child and three men, including Beto and Juan. Once the plane landed, the second wing of the coyote ring identified the group in the terminal by the description that was phoned to him. From that point, the pollos (term for illegal immigrants being passed over the border)
soberly followed each order given to them by their smugglers. The pollero (term for human smuggler; it literally means someone who works with chickens) delivered his clients hundreds of miles by car like a delivery person transferring goods.

They were taken to what looked like a hotel. According to Beto, it did not appear to be open to the general public but rather a holding place for separate emigrating groups to unite. Only select groups to travel the following night piled four or five to a taxi and rode into the night until they came to a spot in the desert just a few miles from the national border. The fifteen or so pollos (literally chickens) who arrived in the entourage of taxis were instructed to walk in a single-file line.

The hours that led up to the moment when they actually crossed La Frontera were "como una película (like a movie)," said Beto. Playing follow the leader, they crept through the desert for four hours until six o'clock in the morning. At one point, they hid from the lights of a patrol car and at another they ran away from barking dogs. Near some railroad tracks that lie directly before the border in the town of Agua Prieta, the group strategically stopped for a 20-minute rest. Beto was so exhausted that he fell asleep despite the cold until the polleros found it safe enough to direct the group over the fence that runs along the border.

They had entered U.S. soil but the passage was not nearly complete. They walked for eight hours through the desert until they reached the location where three cars with the fourth wing of coyotes transferred them to a house in Tucson, Arizona. There were already about twenty immigrants and several attendants at the house when Beto's group arrived. The next day a van showed up. The driver held a list of the names of the eight pollos whose travel had been arranged by the woman in Mexico City (Beto's fist
contact). He was only permitted to take those whose name appeared on the list (the couple, the woman and her two children and three male adults). These drivers are called “Raiteros.” They “transport migrants whose coyotes have deposited them on the U.S. side of the border in remote parts of Arizona or the Calexico/El Central area of California to urban destinations in Southern California” (Cornelius 2000:10-11). The eight pollos piled into the van and it drove them to another house where they joined three more border hoppers. They all remained locked in the house with the raitero for three days until they got word via cell phone to begin their drive to Los Angeles.

Rolling into urban Los Angeles in the van, Beto thought to himself, “This is the United States? It’s so dirty and ugly.” They arrived at yet another house and were passed to the fifth and last string of coyotes (not including the raitero). These coyotes posed more of a danger than any of the others: they flaunted guns, had bad attitudes, and were dressed in expensive American clothing. Each of their clients was expected to have already prepared for a friend or relative to meet them at the house with the remaining half of the fee. Beto and Juan’s friend arrived with the money and they were released to him. After days subsiding on little food and water, he took them directly to a Denny’s restaurant where they ate a huge meal and then to his home where they showered for the first time in over a week.

The next day, Beto and Juan boarded a plane for a one-way flight to Oakland where a Osso (Juan’s brother) met and brought them immediately to his place of employment to meet their new employer. Walking into the restaurant, Beto had feelings of déjà vu, as if he had been there before in a dream. He had successfully completed the
journey and felt his anxiety settle because he had obtained both a place to stay and work in the first hours of arriving to his destination.

**Dynamics and Function of Immigrant Social Networks**

Unlike Beto and Juan, Piojo could not find work for six weeks before he was hired at the restaurant where I worked was working as a server at the time. When I heard of a dishwasher position opening, I called his brother, Jesse who declined the offer. But he informed me that his little brother who had arrived a few weeks previously was still looking for work. I gave Jesse the directions to the restaurant and Piojo started soon thereafter.

Social networks provide emotional support, access to work, homes, and other resources. Out of the 143 Mexicans responding to Leo Chavez’ 1986 survey in San Diego, “39.2% were helped upon arrival by a relative and 48.3% by a friend the first time they migrated to the United States. Only 9.8% said they did not use a social contact for assistance” (1998:137). According to Chavez’ survey results, only a small fraction of Mexican immigrants made their first successful migration with no prospect for living or work arrangements once they arrived.

Those who are only temporarily living in Mexico with plans to return to the U.S. can also offer assistance to members of their social network who are embarking on their first migration. Daniel arranged to follow his uncle back to the States during Chon’s last visit to Mexico. Knowing that he was to head north, Daniel wanted an experienced border hopper who could look after him and who could bring him safely to the border.
Daniel cited two advantages for living with family here: they help you find a job and distract you from thinking about Mexico. Three of Daniel’s uncles (Chon’s brothers) financed his coyote fees and immediate necessities upon his arrival in 2003. During a social network interview, Pitacio explained that the household works collectively in times of financial need. He went on to say that out of familial responsibility, Daniel’s uncles helped their nephew in a greater capacity than other housemates. Pitacio arrived in the same year as Daniel when his brother (Pelón) had already secured a job for him so that Pitacio would not have to take to the street in search of work. As new additions to their León household, Daniel and Pitacio arrived with the social and financial security of an established social network.

From my observations, it appeared that the immigrants in this study originating from León, Guanajuato belong to a dense, decentralized social network. To test my assumption, I created a matrix⁶ including everyone in the household and the names of two friends who often visit the house. I asked Pitacio to determine, based on the scale I created, how well each person knows each other person in the group. This exercise further demonstrated the density of the network, as all members know each other on some level and most of them know each other very well. From what I concluded based on the social network interview and from Pitacio’s repeated emphasis on the household’s egalitarian structure, I was further convinced that the León social network is highly dense and decentralized.

However, it is clear that Chon is a central figure in their social network because he has more experience living away from home, has the last word on major household

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⁶ see Appendix C: Social Network Matrix
decisions, collects rent money, and sometimes acts as parent to his housemates. Also, since his name is on the apartment lease, Chon is ultimately responsible for what transpires on the premises. As the eldest of his brothers in the household, Chon holds authority over his two younger brothers. I witnessed how Chon tried exercise his authority over the group as a whole and was unsuccessful. Because he was tired of listening to the late-night noise, he applied a new house rule: no drinking of alcohol inside the apartment. Chon’s housemates abided for less than a week until soon drinking in the house became normal behavior again.

Social network members living in the U.S. draw other members who are prospective migrants to their location. Settled immigrants who have secured an apartment and regular work reduce the risk for recent immigrants by supplying the social structures and network that ease the transition (Cornelius 1976, Lomnitz 1977 quoted in Reyes 1997:15). Immigrants who already live and work in the host society are somewhat familiar with their new surroundings e.g. transportation systems, state and national laws, and location of business districts where restaurants are situated and thus guide newcomers through the initial transition. In fact, the knowledge gained from prolonged residence is transferred to those recently arrived. This “crash-course” strategy is effective in preparing for a new lifestyle. “[I]ndependent of economic outcomes, social networks improve the chances that immigrants will stay for longer periods” and assimilate at a rate quicker than migrants without a social network (Reyes 1997:67).
Satellite Residences: An Invitation for Migration

Connections to a social network enhance the likelihood of immigrating in the first place. The immediate goal upon an immigrant’s arrival is finding a place to live. Friends, neighbors, and/or family members who have already secured a place to live invite others coming across the border to stay with them. For example, each of the ten people who share José’s apartment is native to the Mexican state of Oaxaca. In only six months, one of his younger brothers returned to Mexico and three others came to take his place. The revolving door that routinely welcomes and returns migrants exemplifies how networks and their residences play a major role in the ease at which network members migrate between countries. Of the 29 informants, at least twenty relied on a satellite residence upon first (and any following) arrival. Each of the nine people (at the height of its occupancy) who lived in Chon’s two-bedroom apartment grew up within blocks of each other in Mexico. He informed me that another Guanajuato house located nearby also acts as a satellite residence for another group from the same neighborhood in León. They live just a few blocks over from Chon and his housemates both in the U.S. and in Mexico.

In a third example, the community of Tepatitlan, Jalisco also has a sending tradition in Mexico-to-U.S. migration. Network members reside in satellite locations. Parents and other family members of prospective migrants network with the families of those who have immigrated to the U.S. According to Mario, arrangements for U.S.-based work and housing are negotiated from these relationships. The apartment he shared and a

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7 see Appendix D: Apartment Layout of León, Guanajuato Satellite Residence
full-time job were secured through arrangements made by his and his housemate’s families. They are virtually strangers aside from a common origin.

The move out of a satellite residence and into an apartment of one’s own is symbolic of an individual’s social independence and financial security. Chon’s household splintered into two separate locations when one group of brothers and extended kin broke out of their dependence on Chon. They had managed to secure and save enough money for a rental deposit. It was not long after Beto arrived that he, too, broke from the overcrowded apartment where he lived for the first few months and started to rent a spare bedroom in a single family home. As Beto’s financial and social independence developed, he began to share an apartment with a co-worker.

Satellite residences that actively recruit new immigrants are hectic places to live. The occupancy of a household fluctuates with different boarders moving in and moving out. Those who travel across the border in small groups of two or three arrive at the same destination in need of assistance and throw off the financial and social balance of the household. Portions of the rent and bills are recalculated. Sleeping arrangements are reordered, etc. The inconsistency in the living situation persuades some to break off from their initial residence and move into their own apartments or single-family homes creating new spaces to receive incoming friends and relatives. Hence, satellite residences transform and are reestablished over time.

Social Reproduction Theory

Meillassoux’s social reproduction theory (1981) suggests that a man who works in a host country will send for his wife and children to join him only when his American
salary are sufficient enough to support the additional household members living on his earnings. This study shows supports for the social reproduction theory.

Ethnographer Martha Rees conducted a study of immigrant women in Atlanta, Georgia that opposes the social reproduction theory. Her findings emphasize the historical, local, national, and global circumstances that have led women to seek employment in American arenas. Leaving their husbands and children in Mexico and reacting to the household’s demand for another wage earner, women independently leave their Mexican home for U.S. work opportunities (Rees 2002). Within the last several decades, as the social movement for women’s rights and independence has swept larger metropolitan areas and pueblos of Mexico, there has been a high visibility of female Mexican immigrants in the labor market both in Mexico and in the U.S. In numbers comparable to their male immigrant counterparts, women are responding to a demand for cheap undocumented labor (Massey et. al 1987:94).

Of the ten informants that were married before they immigrated, only two of these have arranged for their wives to immigrate from Mexico, each of whom was employed by two restaurants (working over 50 hours a week) upon the arrival of their spouses. Three additional informants met their partners here and five more are married to women still living in Mexico. When I hear talk of sending for families in Mexico there soon follows a look of disappointment and helplessness. “Un día,” they mumble. To afford living expenses in the San Francisco Bay Area demands more than full-time employment at minimum wage. When the five informants with wives remaining in Mexico secure more work and/or higher wages and can absorb the increase in expenses, they will send for their loved ones and reunite their families.
Securing Work in the Host Society

Dependable and steady work is a necessity for an undocumented immigrant who seeks financial success and a long stay in America. Several migrants, like Daniel, initially overestimated the probability of securing a steady job upon arrival in the U.S.

Daniel:  
*Yo tambien venia con la illusion de encontrar trabajo rapido.*

(translation)  
I also came here with the illusion that I would find work quickly.

The story of Chuy is an example of the importance of encountering work quickly. A crowd-stopping singer, Chuy belted out a Mexican ballad outside of the rented building where a *Quinceñera* was held a few days before he left. He was full of life that night, partly relieved that he was soon to be back in Mexico and partly frustrated with not finding a job in the U.S. We enjoyed his singing voice for a couple of weeks before he left to try his luck in Sacramento where his cousins live. Securing only two days of work a week in Sacramento, seventeen-year-old Chuy left by plane for León, Guanajuato less than two months after his first migration.

Others, who arrive at their destination and find work but are unsatisfied with the conditions and/or the salary will likely seek better offers in a different company, industry or even in a different city. Chon has changed employment for all of the above reasons. His friends from León encouraged his crossing with the promise of work on California’s fruit farms. His few months in the fruit fields were extremely difficult; they were physically demanding and the pay was poor. One job might have been manageable, but with the low wages, Chon signed on for two jobs to justify his presence in a foreign field in a foreign country: one from six in the morning until two in the afternoon and another, under a different *dueño* (business owner), from two in the afternoon until eight in the
evening. With these same friends, Chon left for the San Francisco Bay Area to look for better conditions and pay. Here, Chon landed a better paying job on a construction site that proved to be as physically demanding as farm labor. Starting at the bottom, there was little job security. After Chon became skilled at this trade he learned yet another in the service industry as a cook.

As Chon’s employment history demonstrates, immigrant labor is mobile, resourceful, and flexible. The inherent flexibility of immigrant labor should be understood as a profitable characteristic both for employer and for employee. Employers value immigrants as employees for their “ability to mobilize and demobilize family and ethnic networks in response to fluctuating labor demands” (Wells 1996 quoted in Zlolniski 2003:40). Calling upon a reserve of stand-by workers when a demand for labor arises, permits employers great freedoms in times of economic pressure. Likewise, when work is sparse or seasonal, management can capitalize on the fluidity of immigrant labor pools. Immigrant labor is profitable if utilized in an organized manner; the advantage of social and cultural resources generates profit and organizes control and discipline in the workplace (Zlolniski 2003:40). For example, employers may use fear tactics (such as prompting an INS raid) to send workers back to their home country until called upon again when the demand for cheap labor increases. Or they may exploit immigrant employee’s powerlessness as undocumented workers by breaking labor laws.

Immigrants themselves also reap benefits from the flexibility of their labor. Immigrant workers, who belong to an accessible network of similarly abled persons, are in some ways more marketable to potential employers because of their likely link to a supply of workers from which to recruit. Findings from this sample point to a propensity
for members of the same household or social network to work in the same restaurant. A diagram for members of five households illustrates how their workplace contacts led to jobs for other household members⁸. In restaurants C, D, E, F, H, and L, two or more employees live and work together. Lilia encouraged the owner of Restaurant D to hire her sister, Diosa. Pedro encouraged the owner of Restaurant F to employ his brother, Manuel. Chon encouraged the owner of Restaurants G and H to hire Jesse, Piojo, and Daniel. Those who have secured employment can grandfather members of the same social network into open positions. Thus, employment is propositioned by members of similar social networks.

In the Kitchen

Boys in Mexico are not socialized from childhood to cook. Not many men are employed washing dishes or cooking in restaurants in Mexico due to the stigma of kitchen work.

Beto:  

_Hombres no son cocineros ni lavaplatos en Mexico._

(translation)  

Men are not cooks or dishwashers in Mexico.

It is reserved for women and scorned by men. However, temporary immigrants routinely fall into dishwasher positions in California’s Bay Area. These types of jobs are informally reserved for immigrants, male or female, young or old. They spend their work hours in kitchens. Especially in border towns and major U.S. cities, more restaurant workers are from Mexico than any other place.

⁸ see Appendix E: Employment Place and Household
Food, in many ways, plays a central role in these immigrants’ lives once they are here. Since Beto left his mother’s house to come north, he had to learn for the first time in his life how to prepare his favorite food the way his mother does. He admits that had he not left Mexico, he would have never learned how to cook. Instead, he would depend on his mother to prepare his meals, as his brothers have until they married (and to some extent still do). After a few phone calls, he had scrawled down her recipes for torta de papa, torta de carne, tinga de pollo, and caldo de tlapeño (for which he is becoming increasingly known). Piojo was so impressed with the authenticity of Beto’s caldo de tlapeño that he has craved the chicken soup made with vegetables and chipotle (a smoky-flavored pepper) at least four times in the three weeks since he first tasted it. One evening, sitting on his patio, Piojo began to describe the flavors telling everyone that Beto has a knack for blending them all together:


(translation) Chipotle. Chicken. And his vegetables, man. He knows. He knows how to cook them.

It was this kind of reaction that has bestowed upon Beto, from everyone in the León house, the nickname *Tlapeno*. Now, Beto loves to cook and is proud of his recipes passed down from his mother.

Beto considers the hours he puts in at work cooking in U.S. restaurants more demanding than those he spent in the taxicab hauling customers around Mexico City.
Beto: *Trabajo es muy diferente in Mexico – mas facile.*

(translation) Work is very different in Mexico – easier.

For over a year, he worked double shifts for little over minimum wage - an average of ten hours a day for five (to six) days a week - in a small kitchen measuring about twenty square feet. On a typical day, he would begin at nine in the morning and complete all of his duties by midnight (on nights with lower volume he could leave by eleven). For the hour when the restaurant closes between lunch and dinner, Beto says he is too busy with preparation for the next shift to stop working. Usually, he works throughout the day, without sitting down or even eating a meal himself. The owner, out of an attempt to show his consideration for his employee’s exhausting schedule, purchased a cot and placed it in the storage area for the two chefs to nap on between shifts. This small gesture masked his exploitation with unconvincing compassion (on the part of his employees). The ethnographer Peri L. Fletcher worked in Berkeley restaurants while attending school and he noticed similarly demanding schedules. Of his experience, he writes, “I was struck with how time had become a commodity in the United States, as migrants learned to operate within North American standards of work, time, and leisure” (1999:18).

The owner of this restaurant routinely profits from employing illegal aliens. In 2002, he employed five undocumented workers at this location and at least as many at two other locations in which he has a partnership. Four of the five illegal employees in one establishment log over eight hours a day and/or forty hours in a week. Overtime hours are undocumented and paid to the employee under the table in cash. Sometimes the cash amount may include, as Beto says, *un poco mas dinero* but not the time-and-a-
half that is federally mandated. Through further inquiry, I found that the normal procedure is to pay a regular hourly wage for any hours that exceed eighty in a two-week pay period. The employer profits when his employees accept their wages as undocumented cash amounts. Beto and other immigrant workers like him are financially punished for their flexibility in working overtime, in the rate of pay they will accept, and in the form of which they receive their wages.

But what can they do? Blanca tells me, “You can get another job, I can’t.” Blanca’s attitude toward her boss is influenced by a dependency relationship between immigrant and immigrant employer. There is a dependency in the worker-employer relationship among immigrant labor that negates normative behavior in the workplace. Variability in terms of hours and income per day is the nature of the restaurant business. In trying to save money, management requests that any unneeded workers clock out when business is slow. Food service workers knowingly take this risk.

Employers who are aware of the illegality of their workers can act as sponsor. For some immigrants sponsored by management, the financial risk is diminished. For example, the owner specifically told me that he will allow only Blanca to work extra hours because “she is planning to bring her mother up” to visit. In allowing Blanca to remain on the clock during those slow business hours when the rest of his workers are asked to clock out, the owner showed preferential treatment because of her circumstances. Dependent on her employer’s sponsorship, Blanca accepts the special treatment because she is here to earn money not to fight for justice in the workplace. As shown above, immigrant sponsorship by employers is both advantageous and disadvantageous to a worker’s potential earnings.
Strategies to Obscure Legality

Undocumented workers use strategies to conceal their illegal status. One such strategy, obtaining false identification, is crucial to secure U.S. employment.

Ethnographer: [¿Creas que todos que viven en la casa con Chon tienen las tarjetas de Social Seguridad?]

(translation) [Do you think that all of the guys who live in the house with Chon have fake social security cards?]

Beto: (Beto nods emphatically.) Si, todos tienen. Necesitan por trabajar.

(translation) Yes, they all have them. They need them in order to work.

Ethnographer: [¿Y Daniel? Solamente tiene dos meses aqui.]

(translation) [And what about Daniel? He’s only been here for two months.]

Beto: Si. Creo que si porque está trabajando, no?

(translation) Yes. I believe so since he is working, right?

Government-issued identification is a requirement for legal employment in the U.S. and is also necessary to cash a paycheck. A common strategy to circumvent the law is to obtain false identification. Fake identification cards are so prevalent that one can purchase them, literally, on the street. Beto told me that most immigrants know where to go to buy them, usually in small shops or fruit stands in Latino neighborhoods. We were dining at a local Mexican restaurant when Beto pointed out the fruit vendor across the street where he bought his identification. Shortly after he arrived to the Bay Area, one of Beto’s best friends directed to him to this location to obtain a $50 social security card. Thousands of I.D.s are sold annually by the scant few underground operations that sell them.
The nine numbers on a social security card (whether certified or not) prove to be a necessity in landing a job. California law instructs management to request and document all new employee’s social security card numbers. After a job interview, Beto did not worry about the ramifications of misrepresenting his illegal status because almost everyone he knows has false identification in order to work. And fortunately for them, management who employ these undocumented immigrants collect identification cards as a formality but do little to confirm or refute their legitimacy. Since the passing of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, employers face fines and other penalties if they knowingly hire illegal immigrants. But, “enforcement of these ‘employer sanctions’ has never risen above token level” and INS workplace inspections have “virtually ceased” since 1990 (Cornelius 2000:21).

Another strategy exercised by some immigrants to avert their illegal status is to marry an American citizen. Manuel and I were en route to a check-cashing place because he needed the cash to retrieve his car from police holding when he began to tell me how he planned to put a stop to the confiscation of his car.

Manuel:  I'm going to fix that.

Ethnographer: [How?]

Manuel:  I'm going with a girl.

Ethnographer: [That girl at your work?]

Manuel:  Yeah ... she wants to help me. We gonna get married. She gonna look 'bout the papers for us.

Ethnographer: [But then you'll have to wait two or three years, no?]

Manuel:  Yeah ... but after I'll be good.
Don, who immigrated twenty years ago from a small ranch in Guanajuato, married an American woman, began a family, and settled here. But Don’s marriage was not initiated by the need to become a legal citizen because he immigrated in the early 1980s and was granted amnesty in 1986. Manuel’s attempt to legalize his status through marriage was futile. Gaining U.S. citizenship through these types of marriages is a gamble due to the thorough and lengthy investigations of their pretenses.

**Acculturation and the Host Society**

Subscribing to an American standard of living removes the immediacy of returning to Mexico. Mexican families, for forty years, have been tuning in to U.S. radio and television, eating McDonald’s hamburgers, wearing Nikes and Levi’s, and laboring in local American-owned industry. But even with U.S.-imported goods and services available in Mexico, American-style consumerism is a luxury that only certain classes can afford.

Informants in this study identify assimilative behaviors as a recipe for success in the U.S. labor market. In the host society, as they seek the financial means to pursue happiness, immigrants are actors in the capitalist market abiding by American standards of work, consumption, and play. After a long work week, they reward themselves by spending a portion of their wages on what many Americans regard as basic amenities to modern living e.g. fast-food, brand-name clothing, cellular phones, and private apartments. Assimilation is "the process by which a subordinate individual or group takes on the characteristics of the dominant group and is eventually accepted as part of
their group” (Schaeffer 1979 quoted in Delgado 1997:5). American spending habits are enculturated into the daily lives of the informants in this study.

Biculturalism or pluralism, on the other hand, is considered by Guillermo Delgado (1997) as a form of resistance to the dominant culture. It is the act of successfully retaining and practicing one’s own culture while participating in the dominant society. Most first-generation immigrant families living in a host society retain certain social and cultural customs and values, and try to protect these from the dominant culture. Thus, recently arrived immigrants select aspects of American culture to incorporate into their transnational lives.

Identity in a Diasporic Community

Migration does not merely mean a shift from one environment to another, but creates a new type of transnational social space where identities are renegotiated and pieced together. It pulls accumulated cultural, economic, and political identities together to be experienced as one. Renegotiation of physical place “allows individuals to redefine their roles – as household and community members, as sons and daughters, and as men and women” (Fletcher 1999:15).

Mexican migrants leave their nests to establish new lives: first, as a foreigner in American society; and second, as a returnee in Mexican society. Unable to secure a full livelihood either in Mexico or in the United States, migrants extend their families and their households across the border creating transnational communities and transnational households (Fletcher 1999:1). Immigrants adapt to the different standards, expectations,
values, and language of the dominant population, while also maintaining the connection to their homeland.

Diaspora is the phenomenon of living in multiple places at the same time. Historically, the term refers to the dispersion of Jews from Jerusalem, but also has been used to describe the dispersion of immigrant groups who experience their lives as both members of the sending and receiving communities. Diaspora theorists attempt "to retheorize the culture practices of people who inhabit a transnational space located between their homeland and the places they resettle" (Fletcher 1999:10). Suzan Ilcan (2002) approaches diaspora as a process of unsettlement brought on by movement. She argues that diaspora does not develop, nor is it a property. Instead, she claims that diaspora is a combination of "the process of migration and 'othering'" (Ilcan 2002:7).

The process of migration, particularly the fluidity of circular migration marked by a high frequency of movement, casts doubt on a migrant's sense of belonging — either to the homeland or to the host community. Ilcan proposes that belonging is a categorical identity characterized by otherness (2002:2). If, in the case of a transnational migrant, identity is constructed partially by "other" and partially by "home," they never fully belong to either community.

An important question asked by Ilcan is: How do diasporic groups "make sense of their changing lives" (2002: 5)? I have thought about this question often and have yet to encounter a concise response to it. Within the scope of my research, lone migrants who come to the U.S. to earn American wages are successful at "making sense" of their situation by perceiving their stay as temporary. Many are of second or third generations who leave Mexico in search of work. They have little choice in the matter. Several of
my informants who are living in the U.S. temporarily are constantly reminding themselves and others around them that their displacement is finite; that they will eventually return to their homeland.

The most significant lifestyle difference of a temporary Mexican immigrant working in the U.S. is the amount of time one spends at work. In many ways, work becomes an overwhelming part of their identity. To illustrate this point, I describe a scene that appears not out of the ordinary for most Americans (who by the rest of the world’s standards are workaholics) but is for my informants, new and characterizes their place in this new land. When being introduced to someone, it is standard to exchange names. As the introduction lingers, some offer more information, like: their birthplace or their current residence. Many Americans will inquire about workplace as well. According to Beto and several other of my informants, it is not customary to inquire about one’s profession in Mexico on first meeting them. It is preferred to pass the time with small talk or, better yet, inquire about their families. But in the U.S., when I introduce two Mexican immigrants the exchange follows with little exception: name, birthplace, workplace(s). Where someone works is an integral piece of their identity because so much of their “American” time passes within those walls.

Language: An Identity Marker

Language acquisition is a slow, yet rewarding process. Greetings, salutations, and the commands heard at work are understood but are rarely verbalized by recently arrived immigrant workers. For example, Chon had to adapt to the English language as a construction worker. With about a ten percent understanding of English, he explained, it
is important with high-wage employment to understand the commands given by the supervisor or else look for new work.

Only two (Manuel and Pappas) of the 29 informants have strong enough command of the English language to carry a short conversation with native English speakers. And still, they revert to Spanish in order to communicate more complex thoughts even to their English-speaking listeners. Hall writes, "'To speak a language is not only to express our innermost, original thoughts, it is also to activate the vast range of meanings which are already embedded in our language and cultural systems'" (Hall 1992 quoted in Delgado 1997:2). Embedded meanings are lost in simple translation without a careful and artful transfer to secondary languages.

A conversation between two of my informants is transcribed below to illustrate how embedded meanings emerge with careful translation. Piojo criticized Offis for speaking English during a focus group, claiming that the paisanisimos (referring to fellow Mexicans but specifically and most importantly those who are monolingual and thus, "real Mexicans") would be incapable of understanding what Offis is saying:

Offis: Somebody I, I like it me. Tengo muchos amigos y yo no se. I dunno porque.

(translation) [Some people like me.] I have many [American] friends and I don’t know. I dunno why.

Piojo: ¡Hijo de La! ¡Los dos idiomas!

(translation) Son of the! Both languages!

Offis: Porque I dunno. Les gusta. I like it my forma de sea. I like it somebody. I dunno why! Borracho y tranquilo, pero... Anyway, como sea. You know?
Because I dunno. They like me. [They] like my character. [Some people like me.] I dunno why! Drunk yet keeping my cool but… Anyway, whatever. You know?

Piojo: Hey Michelle, te explicaba en ingles. La entrevista es en Espanol, Offis. (to Offis) A ti no van a entenderte los paisanisimos. ¿Que van a estar oyendido? No van a entenderte paisanisimos, guey. Van a decir, “Y ese hombre que dijo?”

Hey Michelle, he’s explaining to you in English. (to Offis) The interview is in Spanish, Offis. The real Mexicans are not going to understand you. What are they going to hear? The real Mexicans aren’t going to understand you, man. They’re going to say, “And this guy, what did he say?”

Offis’ dialogue is also an example of code switching. In his banter, Offis selected English to communicate his perceived social acceptance by Americans perhaps with the belief that his command of the English language would add even more persuasion to his rather unconvincing argument. But, he reverted to his native Spanish when he described himself: his self-characterization and his actions. His social posturing emphasized Offis’ acceptance by English-speaking Americans over his monolingual Mexican-national peers.

In the California population, "the increasing number of Spanish speakers have surpassed the 20 million [mark] in the U.S. In California alone the state's Department of Finance has projected that by the year 2020, the state will have 14.9 million Hispanics or 37.6% of the population" (Delgado 1997:9). Spanish continues to be "a functional language with a strong written historical and literary presence" and is projected to reign as the one language (of over a hundred spoken in the U.S.) to threaten the homogenous population of monolingual (English speaking) Americans (1997:9). Spanish “poses a challenge to the orthodox image of one nation, one-language phenomena” (1997:11).
Delgado, a linguist, claims that there is a "racialized reaction" to the rising numbers of Spanish speakers in the country. He presents an alternative understanding to the "threat" perceived by some natives in his analysis of popular media in the Spanish-speaking community. Delgado asserts that population displacement, a twentieth century phenomena, is creating new spaces where people negotiate linguistic interactions (Delgado 1997:10). The conservative television programming enterprise, *Univision*, is “patterned on English language programs, but the message comes out in Spanish. This twist has been labeled 'American posturing', but it does not negotiate Spanish” (1997:13). Aired in the Spanish language and intended for immigrant viewers, conservative television programming reinforces a bilingual nation while it promotes American ideals of entertainment.

**A Case of Multi-Level Group Membership**

For many people of Mexican descent, Cinco de Mayo is an expression of nationalism and ethnic pride. Oakland’s Fruitvale District (also known as *Little Mexico*) annually celebrates this holiday with a parade and street festival. In 2002, groups of people gathered two to three blocks west of the partitioned location of the celebration congregating on both sides of the road in common areas used for socializing on weekends and afternoons. Gathering near taco trucks and in empty parking lots, these crowds separated themselves from the organized festivities by staking a position outside the boundaries of the event. The groups were comprised mostly of young men either standing near or leaning against their shiny vehicles that were parked in all directions. The scene resembled an informal car show. Displayed on almost every vehicle in these
two parking lots, by tucking the edges under the hood or taping it onto the rear windshield, were the red, green, and white stripes of the Mexican national flag. Popular music from Mexico played loudly from one car stereo while disc jockeys announced the local news in Spanish from another and hip-hop jammed from yet another set of speakers. Mexican nationalism and ethnic pride was externalized by their behavior. But by stationing themselves next to their belongings, outside of the main events of the Cinco de Mayo celebration, these external groups were only spectators in the day’s events and did not completely participate with the local community.

In the following personal narrative, I explore events in Manuel’s life around national and regional identity. During the four years Manuel and I have known each other, we have been co-workers and close friends in which he comes to me for counseling or emotional support. Although he is very settled here, living in his brother’s home, Manuel still identifies with Mexico more than he does with American home. Manuel is loosely associated with the Latino gang, Los Sureños. The group name literally translates to “The Southerners” but historically refers to Mexican-Americans in living in southern California. To Manuel, what it means to be a Sureño offers yet a third definition of the term: those born in Mexico (“south” of the border). The identifying color of the Sureños is blue. One afternoon, he showed me his new tattoo that runs down the outside of his forearm that reads: DURANGO. Durango is the name of the Mexican state where he was born and where his family lives.

Manuel: That’s why I pu’ it right here so everyone can look at it while I’m drivin’.

Ethnographer: [Is it in blue to tell people you are a Sureño?]
Manuel: Yeah...people think that all the peoples from Durango are...are crazy or somethin’. They’re scared of ‘em. (laughter)

Ethnographer: [Why would they be scared?]

Manuel: Because there is a bad reputation. There were a lot of murders and bad stuff in the past.

Manuel enjoys identifying with Durango’s bad reputation. He wants everyone to know who he is. During a phone conversation, Manuel told me of an encounter he had in the Richmond City jail on the night of Cinco de Mayo, 2002. There was a heated discussion with members of an opposing Latino gang, Los Nortenos. Members of this gang are typically American-born Mexicans and are distinguished by red apparel.

Manuel: They put me in there with all Nortenos. One of them said to me from across the bars, “What do you claim? You are wearing all blue.” So I said, “If I was a Sureño what’d you gonna do?”

No one was lured into a fight with Manuel’s provocative remark even though Manuel was sure he would pay for being the only Sureño in a large group of Nortenos held that night. After Manuel was released, he walked out of the jail cell calling:

Manuel: Sureños for life!

Ethnographer: [So you waited until you were outta there before you said anything?]

Manuel: If I wouldda told them when I was in there...WHEW! (He exhaled with an airy whistle.)

Apparently, he would have put himself in danger if he outwardly identified with the Sureños. Depending on the social situation, he either proudly displays his identity or chooses not to disclose it. During a separate conversation in the car, after I heard about the jail encounter, I asked:

Ethnographer: [Do Nortenos speak Spanish to you?]
Manuel: No, they don’t talk like that to you. They don’t like it when you use Spanish to them.

Ethnographer: [So how does one decide to be a Norteño versus a Sureño?]

Manuel: It’s... it’s wha chou are.

Ethnographer: [So, if you’re born here you are a Norteño? And born in Mexico a Sureño?]

Manuel: Yeah... yeah. I mean it doesn’t have to be like that. If you are a Norteño, you have been here for a long time. You’re an American.

Four days after Cinco de Mayo, Manuel and I went to retrieve his car from the impound. I waited for Manuel to return in his home as Pedro entertained me in the living room with talk about his family and about Mexico. He handed me the framed pictures, one after another, that line the shelves of their entertainment center. The majority were of women, many in gowns (either bridal or Quinceñera) posed with other women all of whom were relatives: sisters, sisters-in-law, and one of his mother and father together. The picture that sticks in my mind and is also Pedro’s favorite was of him during his first months in America. In the photograph, he stands alone on a small bridge wearing a cowboy hat, jeans, and boots. He wears a huge smile as bright as his belt buckle that shone white from the sun. We both marveled at the expression he wears in the photograph, one of hope and opportunity, and youth.

Enduring the responsibility of caring for his younger brother, Manuel, after six years Pedro’s face does not show the same look hope and opportunity with which he arrived. Manuel’s run-ins with the police, Los Sureños, and other gang members have brought trouble to their home. As a response, Pedro goes through bouts of heavy drinking but for the most part keeps to himself, goes to work, and stays out of the way of the police.
According to Manuel and Pedro, the streets of Richmond were filled with police cars and paddy wagons on the night of Cinco de Mayo, 2002. With a limited command of the English language, he makes an extra effort to use what English he does know when he talks with me by inserting words here and there embedded within his more natural Spanish dialogue. In the following quote, Pedro explains the scene as he saw it on that night:

Pedro: [Manuel] no home for dos noches. I think “¿Donde esta [Manuel]?” Me no duermé. Me no duermé. Mucha policia on da, on da street...over here, over there (pointing up and down the block). I go to da store. I walk, you know, porque todos caros en da street. Y yo, I come back (motioning with hands to assist my understanding) and policia me dijo, me dijo, “Come on, in here, in da truck.” (He whistles and shakes his head). Nooooo. I tell la policia “No for me, no para me ghuey.”

The afternoon of Cinco de Mayo, Manuel’s car had five flags fastened on it, one large flag on the hood, one hanging from the antenna, another dangled from the rear-view mirror, and a large flag was taped onto the trunk. A fifth flag rested on the dashboard where it has lived for as long as I have known Manuel (over four years). During our ride to the impound, he satisfyingly showed me the donut marks on the street he and friends made on the night of Cinco de Mayo when he was arrested. When I asked him why he was arrested he replied that the actual charges were for trespassing, resisting arrest, and public drunkenness, although he had only been drinking a soda. The arresting officer (with whom Manuel had had previous alterations) at the last minute began to add a further charge of driving without a license, but Manuel was not driving. He and his friends were parked (on private property) just as many people were that afternoon.

Manuel: We was showing our pride, you know. We are Mexican!
As we drove down the dusty back road and entered through the gates of an inconveniently located Richmond impound, there sat Manuel’s flag-covered car parked out front. The soda he was drinking on the night of the arrest sat on the seat with only one sip taken from it. He made it a point to remove all the flags from his car – all but the one on his dashboard – before starting the engine. When I asked him why, he said that Cinco de Mayo is over and he does not want any further trouble with the police. He systematically checked his car, interior and exterior, for anything missing all the while suspicious that someone who had handled the car in the past four days had taken something. I looked surprised by his rampant search. Manuel told me that he has been harassed enough to know what to look for. And come to find out, the car registration was missing. We had to return to the police station where the clerk again gave us disapproving looks and tried to shuffle us around until I demanded that a message be delivered to the appropriate person about Manuel’s missing car registration.

Many Latinos were taken into custody that night. While we were at the impound Manuel recognized several cars that belonged to his friends. He looked around and muttered that these cars will probably stay here in the custody of the State and not be returned to their owners for various financial or legal reasons.

Manuel: There’s (so-and-so’s) car. He ain’t gonna come get that. Noooo way.

A fair number of cars belonging to his friends will not be retrieved because the vehicles are not legally registered and/or the drivers were unable to obtain California drivers licenses, both of which are required to release a car from impound.

Before we left, he once again satisfyingly pointed out the tire residue left smeared on the rear of his vehicle from the donuts he skidded on the asphalt in celebration of
Cinco de Mayo. Manuel repeatedly craves attention. I find that as Manuel aggressively exhibited property ownership and social membership with guns, stolen goods, and gang-affiliated tattoos he is substituting a sense of power where he once had a sense of home.

Cultural Patterns in Leisure and Alcohol Use

Piojo was out front having a smoke when Beto and I pulled up to La Chela, a local bar and restaurant. He always looked the same when we would visit him at work, wearing a red work shirt with the establishment’s logo on front, a white half-apron, red work shoes, his signature middle-of-the-back ponytail, and a wooden cross flopping around on his chest. He motioned for us to pull into the alley where he knew of some prime (and private) parking spots. I greeted Piojo with the handshake he and the other members of the León crew had taught me, a side-ways open-hand slap, dragged out with a slight snap of our interlocking fingers followed by a forceful punch of our fists. “Te extrañe,” I admitted. I had missed him since the last time we saw each other. “Yo también. Yo también,” he told me. Piojo felt the same way. He held the door open and directed us inside to the warmth and noise of a packed bar. We were instantaneously greeted with the same handshake by others (Piojo’s brother, his cousin, and two friends), a gesture I associated with an unspoken bond between a tight-knit group of friends.

Offis: Cuando somos nosotros tenemos un idioma casi. Espanol y este... (translation) When it is just us, we almost have own our language. Spanish and this...

Ethnographer: [Calle?] (translation) [Street?]

Piojo: (laughs)

Offis: ¡No calle!
Ethnographer: ¿De León?
(translation) [From León?]

Piojo: De León, Guanajuato.
(translation) From León, Guanajuato.

Offis: No, no. Pudemos hablar una palabra este... con respeto, con respeto.
(translation) No, no. We can speak in a certain... with respect, with respect.

Piojo: Y muchas respuestas.
(translation) And a lot of comebacks.

The León group shares common childhood memories, origin, accent, and street vocabulary, but as the evening rolls around and intoxication levels are at their highest, even best friends find differences. We left from Chon’s apartment in the middle of an altercation late one night. Well, more correctly, I was asked to leave when a verbal fight between two members of different families became dangerously physical. As a woman, they felt obligated to protect me. Beto, on the other hand, experienced with late-night brawls, saw it through to the end. Daniél was the only person I was able to say good-bye to as he, too, remained on the periphery of the living room out of the way of the scuffle. As the verbal fight escalated to a slap dished out by Offis to Piojo, Chon ran into the living room from his bedroom where he was talking on the phone with a girl in Mexico. Daniél stood behind the front wall in an attempt to stay out of the way.

The situation was temporarily controlled as Beto, Chon and Pitacio physically restrained Offis and Piojo but it escalated again shortly afterward. I was stunned in a helpless fright. Pelon asked me why I hadn’t left yet and directed me to the patio, which was the closest exit in the room. Pitacio directed me to the front door. Everyone else seemed acquainted with this type of situation and reacted quickly. Chon backed Piojo
into the kitchen, while two or three others grabbed Offis, pushing him in the opposite direction. But the situation was not cooling down fast enough and I was sent downstairs to wait for Beto in the car.

Thinking back, the carefree mood of a few friends gathering for an evening quickly became tainted by a violent, drunken confrontation. Less than ten minutes earlier, Offis had been singing and dancing, then swaying from his drunkenness. Soon he was cursing and pointing his finger in Piojo's face. In a matter of a few minutes, he was flailing against the men who tried to restrain him. When I left, he was crying and being physically calmed by Beto whose grip secured Piojo's arms down close to his body.

When Beto finally came downstairs to my car, we discussed if we should invite Piojo to stay at my apartment for the night to create some distance between him and Offis. We decided it best that we leave and phone in a while after they had cooled off. When we called thirty minutes later, I was relieved to hear that the two men had already made up and were eating together. Beto explained that from his experience in Mexico when friends drink together harsh words may escalate to physicality but the conflict is brushed off as the alcohol wears off. Beto was surprised that I was surprised by the violence between Piojo and Offis. Four of the men, including Piojo and Offis apologized to me for what had happened the next time we saw each other. They were apologizing that I had seen it, not that it had occurred altogether.

The León group of friends, family, and fictive kin are intimately connected. They live in close quarters sharing beds, combining laundry and scheduling bathroom and phone time. Apart from organizing their space and time, the group uses their vicinity to their benefit. Their obligation to each other comes in the form of protection and favors.
They cover shifts for each other when someone cannot go in to work. They lend and borrow money with ease. As Offis has said, the group is connected by a mutual respect.

Chon stands out from the group. He is somewhat compliant with the mode in which the group interacts socially but desires something more or something different in his personal life. He would rather live his life more conservatively than how members of his high-risk social circle live.

His younger brother, Piojo, on the other hand, is more of a risk taker. On a Saturday afternoon, when I arrived home from work, Piojo and Beto (who I left at my apartment in the morning) were gone. The remnants of breakfast were visible: scrambled eggs with chorizo, corn tortillas, and salsa. I figured they were on a beer run to cure their hangover (or *cruda*), since the night before lasted into the early morning. When they returned with the *chelas* (beers), they soaked up some sun while chatting and changing the tire on my car. Of the twelve beers they had, Piojo drank seven and Beto five. Piojo had to be to work in less than two hours after the beer was consumed, so he showered, borrowed some clothes and we piled into the car to take him to work. Beto teased him saying that he had not been home in three days to change his clothes and that that is why he has been given the nickname *piojo* (lice). Without a doubt, on this day, Piojo arrived to work intoxicated. But because he works as a dishwasher at a restaurant with a bar, he can mask his inebriation under the dim light and blend in with the patrons. He was not reprimanded for arriving drunk because Chon is the kitchen manager and the owner is rarely there. He could perform his duties while under the influence and began to drink again towards the end of the night when the bartender poured him some complimentary pints of beer.
Corona beer in longneck bottles is the most popular drink at the León house. On some nights, the empty twelve-pack boxes are stacked high along the walls of the kitchen. A neighbor boy, the ten year-old son of a Mexican immigrant, periodically comes around pulling a wagon. He picks up the empty beer bottles and later refunds them for a nickel each. On one holiday weekend, we were gathered on Chon’s porch breathing some fresh air after dancing to two or three cumbia numbers in the living room. The boy approached. Had he hit the jackpot! I helped him stack the boxes on his wagon. With shame and disgrace in my voice, I joked how a single stop at this apartment filled his wagon to the brim. There was a pang of guilt inside me as I thought about our excessive consumption while we loaded all of the empty beer bottles onto his wagon. We indirectly supplemented his family’s meager income. I felt that we were contributing to this young boy’s understanding of what it means to be an adult, an immigrant, and a Mexican in the U.S.

Maintaining Homeland Ties

The León household has a phone schedule with designated times for each resident to call their families in Mexico. Members of the same family make calls home during their individually designated times instead of sharing the same phone call. Phone cards are preferred for these long distance calls. Certain brands of cards are preferred due to a reputation for more minutes of talk time. In this sample, there is great disparity in the levels of contact immigrants have with their families in Mexico. Most of them call home
once a week, some talk with family more often, others call less frequently, and still others
do not call at all.

Telephone calls made to Mexico by these informants almost always travel in one
direction. They are dialed here and received there, except for the irregular or emergency
calls. Beto consistently calls home three to four times a week; the calls are primarily to
his mother. Other calls are made to his father, his friends, or to his siblings and cousins
once in a while. His mother is the main gateway to their doings and whereabouts,
therefore he can stay informed about his family through her. When Beto hears that his
family has made arrangements to be together for an event in Mexico he feels even more
detached from them than usual. During one phone call, she reminded him that his
father’s birthday was coming up and that the whole family was going to be present at the
big birthday celebration. He felt like an outsider. In another phone call, his mother
informed Beto of a friend who needs help paying the coyote fee to cross the national
border. With this information, Beto was able to arrange the necessary funds for his
friend, Juan, to cross the border. Juan now rooms with Beto in the San Francisco Bay
Area.

Frequent monetary requests are made of Beto through the telephone calls to
Mexico. Sometimes his mother asks for money for a family member or friend who needs
Beto’s help. In one month alone, financial requests include: help with a $3,000 car
purchase for his brother, one month’s rent for another brother to help him get back on his
feet again, and $300 to go toward Juan’s coyote fee.

Beto: No soy rico.

(translation) I’m not rich.
But many Mexicans who still believe the popular myth that America has streets paved in gold; they also might believe that anyone living here has pockets filled with it. This frustrates Beto and leads him to think that they do not appreciate the sacrifices he had made to provide for them.

Beto responds diplomatically to the pleas. I have witnessed enough of these phone calls to understand the variation in requests. His mother relies on his remittances to assist with general house bills, clothes, and food. Needs of this kind, for his mother, he modestly provides. He realizes that she has had to work full-time most of his life to provide for their family and now she houses three of his four brothers, their live-in spouses, and her four grandchildren. Beto’s mother still provides food and shelter to the entire household, with ten mouths to feed. Other working adults in the home do not earn enough to provide for their families completely without the help of their emigrant brother. Other requests, like the one to help finance a new car, Beto has pushed aside, asking that other avenues be explored. He said to me after the phone call, “I don’t even have a car.” The truth is that he had a car, but without a valid state driver’s license the police took his car after stopping him for a traffic violation.

One morning, Beto made a call to Mexico. This call attested to the extent he is still involved in the decision making of his Mexican household. I was in the room and witnessed how the event affected him through his facial expressions. After chatting with his brother and finding out that his mother was not at home, he hung up. I could tell by the wrinkles on his face that he was all worked up and wanted to talk about the problems he is having with the household in Mexico. I have translated the gist of what Beto told me that afternoon:
(translation) I want to help them, not because I want them to think “Oooh, -----, -----” (says his name with mocking tone) but because I FEEL that I want to help. My brothers work. They have their own responsibilities, but my mom still gives them the money I send. I don’t have anything here. No car, no apartment. They want all new things. I’m really mad because the money I send is supposed to be for my mom…I told my mom that I wanted her to move the washing machine upstairs to free up the space in her room. Now, when I called to talk with my mom, my brother answered and was angry with me. He has the entire upstairs to himself with his wife and their son and he’s mad that I asked for the washing machine to be moved into his space. He’s not the owner of the house, my mom is.

Beto finances most of the major expenses in his Mexican household. With this responsibility, he presumes that he, too, deserves the authority to allocate where remittances are spent. Through extensive phone contact with Mexico, Beto maintains a strong relationship with his mother and monitors his family’s expenditures.

**Phone Time: A Case Study**

A year ago, Beto tried out different types of phone cards to test which card was the most economical. I see the remnants of these tear-off phone cards along the busy street near my home, all crumpled up. They are the evidence of connections maintained between an immigrant and his/her home country. Based on Beto’s consumer comparison, the *Latino* brand of phone card is the most competitive. A busboy, Paco, is of the same opinion: one night, a customer asked his advice about which phone card he should buy to call home to Guadalajara. Paco assured him that *Latino* was the best deal with the most number of minutes per dollar. Beto often buys several, five-dollar
Latino cards as opposed to a fewer number of cards that cost ten or twenty dollars because of the good reputation of the five-dollar cards.

Calls made with this type of card do not appear on the telephone bill, and, thus, are quantified in the following case study as an estimated number of minutes per month in my calculations. To get an accurate look at the amount of time he spent talking to Mexico, I asked Beto to estimate on average how many phone cards he purchases and uses to their full capacity monthly. He estimated that he buys five cards per month talking for about 120 minutes with each card. The total is thus about 600 minutes per month. Alternative long-distance carriers are also marketed to immigrant populations who place calls outside the country. Phone calls of this sort are made by dialing a seven-digit code prior to the country and area code and phone number. These alternative carriers tend to offer a better rate for international calls than their competitors, the major long-distance carriers.

The bar graph⁹ on the following page charts the estimated number of minutes of talk time per month. Seven different households were phones over the six month sample (November 2002 – April 2003), with his mother receiving most of the calls. Referencing monthly phone bills, I calculated Beto’s rate of talk time per month and added the additional minutes he estimated were made via phone card. The data shows a consistent monthly talk time to Mexico of 16 to 21 ½ hours per month for a six-month duration. Beto’s interest in his Mexican household is emulated by the average length of phone calls (41 minutes), an average of a half an hour a day talking on the phone to Mexico, and cost of communicating by phone with personal contacts in Mexico.

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⁹ see Appendix F: A Case Study: Phone Call Duration to Mexico
Beto spends an exorbitant amount of time on the phone to Mexico. Phone communication maintains his position in the household. It maintains strong personal bonds with family members and also keep Beto involved in household decisions, especially economic decisions.

Remittances: A Case Study

Many Mexican communities rely on American-earned wage remittances. In the last decade, these have ranked among Mexico’s largest sources of income. For the six years following NAFTA, between 1994 and 1999, wage remittances totaled $28.2 billion, while U.S. federal direct investment totaled $33.7 billion (Urrutia 2000 quoted in Wise and Waters 2001:6). More recently, during the first six months of 2003, recorded
remittances ($6.3 billion) actually exceeded the amount of U.S. direct foreign investment ($5.2 billion) and income from tourism ($4.9 billion) (Stevenson 2003).

Money orders are a popular method for remitting U.S. dollars to Mexico - more popular than cash transfers (Stevenson 2003). Recipients of money orders, usually a family member, write down the transaction number as it is given over the phone by their expatriate relative. Then, either the same or the following day, remittances are picked up at a local money-wiring service provider. Dolex Dollar Express, the service Beto uses, exchanges U.S. dollars to Mexican pesos. He is charged $10 for transactions less than or equal to $300, $15 for transactions up to $600, and $20 for transactions up to $900.

CASE STUDY OF REMITTANCES OVER 25 MONTHS

Small remittances sent regularly by the ten-to-fifteen million Mexican citizens living in the U.S. not only finance infrastructure and home improvements, but also fund traditional celebrations. Beto has collected the receipts in a manila folder for almost
every biweekly remittance sent in over two years. Shortly after he arrived in the States and immediately after he received his first paycheck, Beto sent his first remittance (May 2001). In the bar graph above, Beto’s biweekly cash remittances are plotted over a 25-month period. Cash remittances amounted to a biweekly average of 233 dollars. A leveling of the graph, occurring over the summer of 2002, corresponds to the several weeks when Beto was out of work and could only send small amounts to assist his mother with house expenses. After leaving a second job and moving into an apartment for which he paid $250 monthly rent, Beto struggled to send remittances as large as during the first year of his stay.

Large cash remittances often coincide with rites of passage celebrations held in Mexico such as: a baptism, a presentación (the party held for a 3rd birthday), a Quinceñera (a party held for the 15th birthday), a wedding, and a funeral. It is a Latino tradition to nominate a family member or friend as padrino or madrina to sponsor these special events. Outliers in the data set can be explained by event sponsorship. For example, the first and most prominent peak in the graph, at 800 dollars, correlates with his role as padrino of a baptism. The second rise, at 700 dollars followed by another 500 dollars, corresponds to Beto’s contributions as padrino of his brother’s wedding reception. And the third peak in this graph represents the 350 dollars sent for the expenses of a funeral.

Beto has other ways of providing money to his family such as when he participated in a tanda. A tanda is an organized, short-term, interest-free money lending system (a social lending circle). To begin, borrowers are given a number. On the week

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10 see Appendix G: A Case Study: Remittances Over 25 Months
in which their number is chosen the sum of the pot is given to the number holder. Beto called Mexico to find out that the *tanda* he participated in from the U.S. has called his number. His sister had been giving thirty dollars (three hundred pesos) a week of Beto’s remittances to the *tanda* over seven weeks. A *tanda* that plays with seven numbers lasts seven weeks, five numbers for five weeks and so on. The most common *tanda* has ten numbers, lasting for ten weeks. With this type of *tanda*, a participant pays a hundred pesos each week for ten weeks. To play, a participant designates a week to claim the pot (a week in which he expects to need the money) and asks for that number. At the beginning of the designated week, the informal lender pays a thousand pesos (no matter how much money has been contributed so far) and the borrower continues to pay for the remaining weeks.

When Beto’s number (or week) came around, and his sister received his 2100 pesos, he telephoned his sister asking where the money was. She said she had passed his loan amount to their mother who apparently spent the majority of it on one of their brothers. With this news, Beto was enraged. He told his mother (and I have heard him tell her this before) that the money he sends is supposed to be for her, *not* for his brothers or their spouses. Beto believes his siblings should carry out their own responsibilities to provide for their families and not rely on the money he sends. He suggested that his mother get a bank account where she can save a hundred dollars from each of his remittances. In trying to convince her he explained that when cash is at her fingertips she feels obligated to share it with her children when they ask for it. In his view, it would be better that she put it out of sight; in that way, she could begin to save for a time when Beto is out of work.
The recent U.S. recession, and in particular the contraction of the San Francisco Bay Area economy, has negatively affected Beto’s job security. Many restaurants suffered and/or folded from the unanticipated shift in the economy. His hours were cut by 25% when the restaurant he worked at changed ownership. Earning less than full-time employment wages per pay period puts a strain on Beto’s ability to care for his mother financially. In numerous telephone conversations between Beto and his mother as he paces the kitchen floor, I have overheard him urging his mother to realize the less than perfect opportunities he is given here, to spend the money he sends more wisely, and to save some of it.

**Status on the Other Side**

Immigrant remittances and household status have a causal relationship. If cash remittances are transmitted regularly, they nearly always positively affect migrant status in the Mexican household. I have not explicitly raised the topic of status in the household in discussion with my informants. Rather, it sits beneath the surface. I conclude that an indirect factor pulling migrants toward America is the elevated social status Mexican households and communities attribute to high income earners. In determining the social significance of transnational migration, it seems that a series of status changes characterize an individual’s process of migration. However, status among Mexican communities is not always a reflection of real earnings.

Although he might not admit it, status is of great importance to Beto: he knows the power it brings in social circles. The following story illustrates how the household and community status of immigrants who are American earners is perceived on the
Mexican side of the border. The neighborhood markets in Mexico are very small, but offer more of a variety than the Mom and Pop markets here in the States. They also serve as meeting places for locals to share news. Beto’s block in Itzalapapa has three markets along about a two-hundred yard stretch. One market is located across the street from his mother’s home, so she hears about local happenings from the market’s owner and from a neighbor who spends much of her time there. These two women are known for spreading rumors about other families on the block. Beto grew up with the neighbor’s son, Gregardo, who immigrated to Wisconsin in winter 2002. According to his mother, Gregardo found work right away. Beto learned from his mother that their neighbor had been bragging in the market about the great job in a large building her son had landed. He had been in the U.S. a year and a half when Beto took a phone call from him and discovered that Gregardo’s mother had been exaggerating her son’s success since the day he left Mexico.

During this phone conversation, the first time the old friends have talked since parting, Gregardo did not put on airs. He told of his first two months in Wisconsin without work. He told of the employer that he has been working for since. And he told of the minimum wage he earns from nine in the morning to ten in the evening, five days a week. Gregardo might have lied to his mother, she may be blowing the story out of proportion, or she may genuinely believe an average-sized Chinese restaurant is a large building and $5.15 an hour for 81 hours a week is a great job. But this anecdotal crisscross of information attests to the social value of having someone near to you that “makes it” in the U.S. Her son’s success afforded Gregardo’s mother bragging rights on her block with her peers.
No one in his family would have made Beto a video while he was still living in Mexico. But because he has been living several hundred miles away in another country he is singled out and three home videos have been sent to him in his honor. I highlight the content of one video to demonstrate how his absence is perceived and treated by his family and how his role and status are elevated by migration. Beto's family in Mexico created a six-hour recording of their lives during December and January 2002. This is an extraordinary time of the year saturated with religious overtones. With long vacations from work, families reunite for several weeks to celebrate.

As he watches the video, Beto is a spectator at important social events he is unable to attend physically but supports monetarily. He viewed it repeatedly during the first few days after receiving it, watching it all the way through at least four times in one week. The several segments pieced together show his mother, sister, brothers and their wives, nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, cousins, a god son, neighbors, friends, and other fictive kin filmed at several social events. The labeled events include his brother's wedding reception, a regional soccer match played by his relatives, a New Year's Eve party, and a party celebrating the baptism of his niece. Running about one hour, the wedding reception is one of the longer segments. As we viewed the video together, Beto called out some of the names of guests sitting at the tables or dancing, as the camera scanned the room. Prepared by Beto's mother, a plate of the food served at the celebration is shown at close range and described by the narrator (one of his brothers). Shortly after, customary speeches are given where the groom dedicated a toast and a song to Beto, thanking his older brother for contributing a large sum of money to cover the reception expenses.
Three camera tours were included in the video. The first one toured the rooms in Beto’s house slowly panning over the music posters in his nephew’s bedroom, the wedding photographs in his brother’s bedroom, the Virgin de Guadalupe hanging on the living room wall, and the modest entertainment center purchased with Beto’s remittances. The second tour takes the viewer through the condominium recently purchased by one of his older brothers with the help of cash remittances made by Beto. The third, while his mother had control of the camera, toured the pages of her family photo albums from beginning to end while one of her favorite songs played loudly in the background.

Other segments are unlabeled events capturing conversations between his mother and his uncle around the patio table, an older brother fixing a car, and a younger brother retiling the living room floor with the tiles for which Beto paid. A series of about fifteen to twenty speeches given around the room by his relatives were the most dramatic segments in the video. The content of the speeches ranges from prayers for his good health to numerous playful requests for money. His eldest nephew asked for some new tennis shoes pointing to his worn out Nikes. The mother of his godson also requested new shoes for her son while holding up his tiny slippered feet. Many asked that he return quickly, take care of himself, and again, send money. Several people were too emotional to speak. One of his nieces began to cry uncontrollably and dug her head into her mother’s chest. His mother was seen crying in almost every segment blotting her tears with tissue and peering into the camera as if she was looking directly at her son.

The sheer length and quantity of home videos sent to Beto from his family in Mexico reveal the degree in which a family is affected by immigration. Sending a family member to the U.S. is a sacrifice with lasting reverberations. Holidays and other special
events are times when an emigrant is missed most by his loved ones and an immigrant feels farthest away from home.

Return Migration

One reason to leave U.S. employment and return to Mexico is meeting a financial goal such as accumulating adequate savings from which to live on in Mexico or completing a large project (usually the construction of a home). Temporary immigrants cannot afford overspending on expensive lifestyle choices. Even occasional splurges take from sums set aside for cash remittances and in turn affect the livelihood of Mexico-based recipients. Ultimately, extra expenses lengthen one’s stay if a migrant has a concrete financial goal to attain before return migration.

Chon decided to return to Mexico December 2004. For nine years, he has saved a portion of his U.S. wages rather than squandering them and time away with an expensive lifestyle. Piojo, in contrast, would rather live here permanently than to return to Mexico at this point in his life. Therefore, future finances and time management are not of importance to him - everyday is a holiday.

A second reason to return to Mexico is to reunite with family and friends. The loneliness that lulls in the heart of an immigrant plays a significant role in the decision to return home.

Daniel: A veces, derrepente me quiero regresar a México.

(translation) Sometimes, I suddenly want to go back to Mexico.
A third cause of return migration is a lack of work. Daniel confided in me that he was willing, if things do not work out here, to return to Mexico. He would try coming back in the future, if he had to. The disappointment theory maintains that return migration is prompted by a migrant’s failure to secure adequate employment at their target location (Herzog and Schottman 1982 quoted in Reyes 1997). Support for the disappointment theory would look like higher instances of return migration to Mexico for those with low wages or no formal employment than those who have secured high-wage employment (Reyes 1997:13). Daniel migrated at a time when the U.S. as a whole was experiencing high levels of unemployment. Even with help from those in his social network, his desperation became so overwhelming that Daniel returned to Mexico in June 2003. It had been less than three months since he arrived and one month since our interview.

A second example of disappointment in the job market as cause for return is the case of Señor’s wife. She arrived in November 2003 - her second immigration here - and was received by her husband, brother, and cuñado (brother-in-law). Six months since her arrival, she returned to her native Vera Cruz after little luck in our depressed market. Aggressive in her search for employment, she visited a previous employer at a car wash but he no longer employs females because a large portion of his employees became pregnant, could not physically fulfill the physical duties of the job, and asked for extended leaves of absence. She sought work in restaurants and with maid services. In the last month here, she was caring for a three-year old on the weekends while her own children in Mexico missed her and awaited her return. With plans to return to Mexico City and work as live-in chef for a wealthy couple – hours on bus from where she and her
family live – she can be home in Vera Cruz in a matter of hours if an emergency arises with her children. If she had remained in the U.S., she could do little to meet their immediate needs. This was also a factor in her decision to return. At the airport, her husband and brother accompanied her to the security checkpoint and watched until she disappeared into the corridor leading to the gate.

The Mexican Migration Project (MMP) is particularly useful in tracking return migration. Illegal lone circular migrants from western Mexico cross the border multiple times when they first immigrate, leave to return to their Mexican homes, and then re-enter U.S. territory. The MMP interviewed 5,652 Mexican households and 410 U.S. households estimating that over two million (2,139,810) undocumented immigrants from Western Mexico entered California between 1980 and 1990 (Reyes 1997: 71). The total number of migrants from that region, including documented and undocumented, was 3,264,947. After ten years, return migration was sought by 70% of all of the immigrants in the study sample (1997:xi). The figures demonstrate that “undocumented immigrants return faster than documented immigrants; ... [F]rom the communities in the sample who entered California in a typical year in the 1980s, only 57,646 (27 percent) will stay in the United States for longer than 10 years” (1997:72). Thus, almost three-quarters of those who immigrated to California between 1980 and 1989 from the six western states of Mexico returned to their homeland within ten years.

Circular (Repeat) Migration

Piojo tells me that, yes, he would like a chance to visit Mexico. But his older brother, Chon, has seniority and the financial means so he returns more often. Piojo does
not want to think about how he would re-enter the U.S., should he return home. He
shakes his head thinking about the handful of options for border hoppers.

Piojo: \textit{Si yo mi regresa, no quiero pensar en como va a ser. ¡A lo que salga!}

(translation) If I come back, I don’t want to think about how it will be. Whatever happens, happens!

Only one brother of Chon, Piojo, Jesse, and Lionel has remained in Mexico to earn a
living in his native country. He manages a shoe assembly line and is successful in what
his brothers consider a prestigious job. There are plans for him to marry this Christmas.
For months, I have heard talk about the party and I was hoping Piojo would decide to
return for this special occasion.

Ethnographer: \textit{[Te vayas?]}

(translation) [Are you going?]

Piojo: \textit{Huh? No. ¡Cinco años o más! si me gusta, más.}

(translation) Huh? No. Five years or more! If I like, more. (He whistles.)

Only one of the four brothers of the groom will attend the wedding. There is not enough
money for them all to go to the wedding because each will be expected to pitch in to pay
coyote fees for Jesse (who has seniority). Jesse has not returned to Mexico in four years,
but December 2003 the yearning to see his mother again and to be in León will finally be
fulfilled. Piojo, on the other hand, does not care to be in Mexico now or in the near
future. For as long as he can manage he will continue calling California home. I expect
that Piojo will continue along his current path for four or five more years before going
back, if he returns at all.

Piojo \textit{No, te digo cinco años. Pon unos cuatro o así. Ya que o la mejor
cinco, o la mejor seis o más.}
(translation) No, I'll say five years. Put four or something like that. Since it will probably be five, or probably six or more.

He could see me jotting down the numbers as he thought about his planned length of stay and wanted to give me a more realistic estimation than what he thinks he should say.

Piojo is well aware that he will remain here for several years without returning for even a visit.

Due to the expense of crossing the border and recent historical events that have increased national security at the borders, there is a trend toward longer stays in order to afford the trip back. Beto wants nothing more than to see his mother's face. He has waited two and a half years to take that trip home and has continued to put it off because of his fears and uncertainties about reentering the U.S. He had plans to go home for Christmas in December 2003, and return to U.S. after a few weeks. But with a switch in employment in the fall, after being out of work for a month, he doesn't think a visit to Mexico is affordable. With no family here, and only a few friends from his home town to rely on, Beto cannot secure the coyote fee for return migration. Those, like Jesse, who have a dependable and large social network to assist with the financial burden of border crossing, can absorb the costs.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, findings from my ethnographic fieldwork among Mexican restaurant workers are presented. Informant experiences of illegal U.S. entry demonstrate the risks taken in order to work in the U.S. Social networks help to diminish the social and economic burdens of living clandestinely in a foreign country. Their undocumented
status, lack of a command of the English language, and fixed social networks are factors in the type of work accessible to illegal Mexican immigrants. Thus, the earning potential of this subpopulation has a ceiling that further impacts their ability to save money and/or remit large amounts to Mexico. By supplying family members in Mexico with the capital to improve their standard of living, host social events, and make infrastructural improvements, an individual’s status in the household (and at times in the community) is enhanced. A national focus on U.S. homeland security and a rise in coyote fees are factors in deterring new entries and re-entries. There is a trend for longer stays with those who have already secured steady employment and reliable social networks. Over time, immigrants can become distracted by their new surroundings, by a newly discovered identity, or by the temptation of drink and falter their connections to the homeland. Others, committed to returning home, continue their interest in the Mexican household.
Chapter 5 – Discussion and Conclusions

In this ethnographic description of undocumented Mexican immigrants, I assessed the personal, social, and economic impact of Mexico-to-U.S. migration on workers, on their Mexican households, and to some extent on the U.S. economy. The findings from this research bear on several theoretical inquiries made by social scientists e.g. immigrant selection (push and pull factors), social reproduction, social networks, social status and mobility, return migration, and circular (repeat) migration. In addition, this chapter presents brief discussion of policy implications and recommendations for follow-up research.

I draw three major conclusions: first, social networks are integral to immigrant survival, especially for undocumented immigrants, in the U.S. Second, cash remittances made by expatriate family members positively affect the social status of Mexico-to-U.S. immigrants in their Mexican households. And third, due to an economic dependence on U.S. earnings by Mexican households, combined with the immigrants’ desire to visit back home periodically, there is a very strong tendency toward repeat migrations for temporary immigrants.

From the sample presented in this study, a typical undocumented immigrant from Mexico is between 26 and 30 years old, unmarried, and travels to the U.S. with the assistance of social network members. Married immigrants represent a third of the sample and are slightly older (31 years old on average). As discussed on pages 67 and 68, this study shows some support for the social reproduction theory (Meillassoux) which proposes that men send for their wives and children only when able to absorb the extra cost.
The typical immigrant in this study comes from areas where there is little opportunity for work. States in western Mexico with a large rural population have historically sent the most immigrants to the U.S. Seventeen of the 29 informants in this study's sample (59%) emigrated from the western states of Mexico. These figures are consistent with other area studies (Massey et. al 1987, Reyes 1997). But a “new immigration” pattern coming from Mexico’s urban cities (or non-traditional sending communities), are changing the face of the Mexican immigrant population working in the U.S. There are more immigrants from Mexico’s three metropolitan cities (Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey) in current immigrant labor than in previous decades, attesting to the severity of Mexico’s depressed economy (Cornelius 1999). My findings also lend support to a “new immigration” pattern among the recently arrived population with more than a quarter of my informants (27.5%) originating from two of Mexico’s high-industry cities (Guadalajara, Mexico City).

The economic slowdown in Mexico over the last two decades is attributed to the 1995 crash of the peso and NAFTA’s regionalization of industrial and agricultural markets. These events have displaced tens of thousands of Mexican workers. The findings in this study lend support to an intermediate, or situational, emigrant selection: the typical candidate for emigration from Mexico represents neither the most skilled nor the least skilled segment of the population. Represented in this sample are farmers, landowners, factory workers, engineers, artists, and university students who come from different socioeconomic ranks and various skill levels.

One important research aim was to identify the push and pull factors in migration. Economic need is an undeniable factor. Because of financial need, push and pull factors
are interrelated. Low salaries "push" emigrants out of Mexico while relatively high salaries "pull" immigrants to California cities. The most significant push factors given by all five participants in a focus group discussion were low weekly wages and unreliable, inconsistent employment. The average weekly wage earned in Mexico given by respondents is (equivalent to) approximately 60 to 100 dollars. The most common pull factor given was an opportunity to earn American wages. These respondents reported earning an average U.S. weekly wage of between 200 and 400 dollars.

While economic determinants were the most frequent factors in migration, other personal, social, and legal factors played into their decision to head al Norte. Some of the reasons for migration given by respondents were unanticipated: Mario’s immigration to the U.S. was initiated as an escape from police harassment; Daniel left Mexico to experience the American way of life; Piojo wanted to feel more of a success at work and seek out his own personal freedom; Chon wanted to raise the capital to start his own business in Mexico; and Beto, Diosa, Lilia, Pedro, and Pelón used this opportunity to turn American wages into cash remittances in order to provide for their families in Mexico.

Assisted border crossings are expensive, dangerous, and physically demanding. The economic benefits of U.S. employment are so great that Mexicans pay a substantial price and risk death to cross the international border. According to my informants, the current rate for assisted migration from Mexico to Los Angeles is about twenty-five hundred dollars per individual. Even before the events of 9-11, the government had been financing projects that implement infrastructure and patrol officers at the U.S.-Mexico border to heighten national security. These efforts have not significantly reduced the number of undocumented passing through the U.S.-Mexico border annually (Cornelius
What these efforts have done is increased the danger faced by border hoppers by funneling them toward remote areas in order to avoid apprehension. Smuggling illegal immigrants is a complex, highly organized operation with multiple posts located between Mexican and U.S. cities. There is a trend toward longer stays in the U.S. because of the dread of another expensive and risky journey across the border.

Eight informants were married prior to their immigration to the U.S. Each of them were lone migrants, leaving their wives in Mexico. Only two of the eight have arranged for their wives to join them in the U.S. after securing steady employment. This study shows support of the social reproduction theory, which proposes that men send for their wives only when they are monetarily able to support dependents in the U.S.

Without a network of people to whom one can turn in times of emotional or economic hardship, the immigrant lifestyle is a lonely and perilous one. Ethnographic studies on social networks of immigrant populations agree on the importance of social networks to immigrant survival especially during the initial stages of migration. The findings from my study coincide with previous documentation in this area. Social networks provide exclusive opportunities to members such as money lending, housing, assistance finding work, and emotional and other financial means of support. At least 20 of my informants, two-thirds of the sample, relied on satellite residences provided by members in their social network upon arrival in the U.S. These households are purposely overcrowded in an attempt to reduce the rent for each boarder. One satellite residence, a modest two-bedroom apartment, housed nine of my informants at one time. Satellite residences are structured to accommodate the transient migrant. For instance, with fluctuations in occupancy, portions of bills are recalculated and sleeping arrangements
are reordered. The change in household size and composition directly affects the 
finances of its residents. Immigrant labor and residence are both flexible, with the ability 
to mobilize and demobilize to meet labor and social network demands.

Once they arrive, their circumstances are precarious. The service industry is in a 
constant state of flux, periodically stricken with high levels of unemployment and low-
paid employment. Mexican immigrants and employers in U.S. restaurants are coupled in 
a relationship of mutual dependency. California metropolitan area restaurants are heavily 
manpowered by Latino immigrants under the age of forty (Sassen and Smith 1992; 
Maram 1980). Immigrant restaurant workers are likely to be overqualified for the entry-
level, low-skill employment they attain in the U.S., but seldom move beyond these 
positions. A lack of the English language and an undocumented status are the most 
severe impediments to mobility at the workplace. In some of the restaurants I have 
observed, management has taken advantage of the illegality of workers by breaking labor 
laws and understaffing kitchens. The proclivity of unauthorized immigrants working in 
California restaurants attests to employer dependence on their undocumented laborers. 
The persistence and loyalty of immigrant workers, despite these conditions, attest to the 
employee dependence on restaurant employers who hire such labor.

Members of social networks share job information, and sometimes actually share 
jobs by covering shifts for each other, especially when someone is visiting home in 
Mexico. This has proved an important strategy to maintain employment by protecting 
jobs and funnelling network members into available positions. Assistance of this sort is 
essential for securing employment in a market with little job security, especially with the 
current post-911 unemployment rate and competition for low-wage, semi-skilled labor.
Social networks also organize and sponsor return trips. Thus, visits to Mexico are more manageable among members of social networks than among those who do not have this resource on which to rely.

Turning to social status at home, this study clearly shows that the social status of a migrant worker is positively influenced by the cash gifts they send to Mexico. Earning U.S. wages, immigrants often are the top (or only) earners in their Mexican households. Expatriate family members, provided they remit at least some of their paychecks, are honored for their contributions through roles of social status, such as a padrino.

Portions of U.S.-earned wages are potential cash remittances sent home in order to provide capital for their families in Mexico. Remittances sustain Mexican households by subsidizing food and housing expenses. One informant’s remittances were used for home improvements and two additional informants have completed the construction of new homes where they plan to return and live. According to interview responses, remittances also finance medical care, property investment, and other business endeavors. One case study shows that remittances amount to $233 on average sent every 15 days. Large sums remitted often coincide with special events held in Mexico.

The reasons given for return migration are valuable to the scope of this research. Findings in this study partially support the disappointment theory, which proposes that a migrant will return to Mexico if he or she cannot secure adequate employment. I interpret “return migration” as movement that is semi-permanent to permanent. Only two informants (Chuy and Daniel) have semi-permanently returned to Mexico after a disappointment in the U.S. labor market. They have been living in Mexico over nine months since their return with no attempt at re-entry. An additional 13 return migrations
were made by informants. But these all were followed by re-entries within a few weeks to a few months.

Support for the circular migration theory is the most compelling finding to surface in this ethnography. Thirteen of my informants (nearly half of the sample) left the U.S. to return to Mexico and then re-entered the U.S. These workers interrupt periods of American labor to visit family in Mexico. They then reclaimed their employment (or similar jobs) upon re-entry into the U.S. They visit with family members in Mexico with no intention to return there permanently because of two factors: a continued dependence on U.S. wages and a lack of adequate employment in Mexico. The circular migration theory maintains that the above circumstances have created a growing subpopulation of temporary and repeat migrants (Cornelius 2000, Reyes 1997, Massey et. al 1987).

Conclusions Summary

Mexico and the United States are interdependent parts of an informal labor trade system. Despite enforced border security and U.S. national unemployment levels at the highest they have been in decades, my findings suggest that the rate of Mexico-to-U.S. migration will not slow in the near future.

Three major findings from this study suggest an inevitability to repeat migration, thus supporting the circular migration theory: First, pre-existing social networks alleviate the pressures of undocumented Mexican migrant entry and re-entry into the host country. Mexican immigrants living clandestinely in the U.S. rely on social networks to attain immediate and subsequent goals. It is conclusive that social networks play a central caretaker role in immigrant survival and foster an environment where circular migrants
can traverse with less resistance. Social networks also help immigrants make return trips home and re-enter the U.S. by absorbing financial and work responsibilities. They do this by providing border passage fees, satellite residences and worker substitution.

Second, social status is elevated in their Mexican households through their financial contributions to family members. The families of immigrants living in Mexico have specific needs. However, Mexican households are only temporarily subsidized by remittances and the economic demands are constant. Mexican households rely on and budget for the cash remittances sent to them by their expatriate family members. The wages of immigrant restaurant workers, although some of the lowest among the American workforce, are two to six times the wages earned in Mexico.

Third, recently arrived immigrants make periodic return trips to their homeland to spend time with their families. My informants desire, on the one hand, to serve the needs of their families, but on the other, they want to be near them. For many, this internal conflict is a catalyst that fuels a transnational migration cycle: They cement social networks to lend coyote fees, provide satellite residence and secure employment, remit a portion of their wages, eventually return to their homeland for a visit, and then repeat the cycle.

The findings in this research make circular migration a strong pattern among undocumented Mexican immigrant restaurant workers in the U.S. Unfortunately, this exposes them to repeated risks and expenses associated with unauthorized border crossings. In conclusion, this study lends support to a trend in circular migration between Mexico and the U.S. – a trend, powered by a high earning potential in the north and familial responsibility in the south.
Practical and Policy Implications

In fall of 2004, America is facing one of the most important presidential elections in its history. There is talk of a possible renegotiation of the 10-year-old NAFTA treaty and a new guest worker program between Mexico and the U.S. In the recent California gubernatorial election, granting driver’s licenses to undocumented immigrants was a major point of debate. Candidates are bringing issues to the table that deserve in-depth analysis of the benefits, costs, and problems created by illegal Mexican immigration into the U.S.

Ethnographic documentation of individual perceptions and experiences of immigration contributes to understanding around Mexico-U.S. migration policies and their impact. Marcus and Fischer (1986) note the importance of ethnography to describe transnational migration at the individual level: “Without ethnography, one can only imagine what is happening to real actors caught up in complex macro processes. Ethnography is thus a sensitive register of change at the level of experience” (quoted in Chavez 1998:3).

Anti-immigration supporters want to close the border to undocumented immigrants who come to work jobs that could be held by unemployed American citizens. However, as this study shows, employing undocumented immigrants is profitable for both the American and Mexican economies. The money earned by Mexican immigrants is circulated through into the American economy through everyday expenditures and through federal and state tax deductions from their wages. My preliminary findings are consistent with those of other studies (Maram 1980, Cornelius 1978) which have shown a high reported rate of tax payments by undocumented immigrant workers and a low
reported rate of filing for returns and social program benefits. Large cash remittances to Mexico boost the homeland economy. By sending massive capital back to Mexico, workers are actually contributing to decentralized, grassroots economic development in Mexico e.g. building/supporting small businesses, infrastructure (roads, houses). They thus contribute to a long-term solution to the problem of high illegal immigration rates from Mexico.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

A longitudinal study of 5-10 years with the same sample would offer conclusive evidence for long-term patterns among temporary Mexican immigrants. Because this sample is comprised of immigrants who have arrived recently (less than ten years ago with most arriving less than five years ago), a longitudinal study would document how the role of social networks transform, how employment opportunities change, and how remittance patterns are affected after the initial settlement period. Tracking informants long-term will also provide alternative explanations for return migration and count incidents of repeat migration.

This study is useful in documenting the experiences of temporary, lone Mexican migrants. But an explanation of the impact of long-term settlement on immigrants and their families who make the U.S. a permanent home lies outside of the scope of this study. A second area for further research would examine the effects immigrant families settling in the U.S. have on the family unit and the host community. Do their migration patterns mimic those of the lone migrants in this study or do families mainly immigrate to
the U.S. on a permanent basis? Furthermore, what are the economic, social, and political impacts of undocumented immigrants bearing children (who are natural citizens) in this country?

In addition, this research also should be taken south of the border to observe how Mexican households spend cash remittances, perceive American-based work, and adjust to the impacts of expatriate contributions and status. With a research plan based only in the U.S., there is a lack of direct information regarding the sending communities. I have received invitations from informants to return with them to document the lives of their family members in Mexico. Ethnography in Mexican households that send workers to the U.S. should explore the following research questions: What would have to change at the national and the household level to curb Mexico-to-U.S. immigration? What kinds of coping strategies do single-parent families engage in when spouses and/or fathers are away for long periods? How do communities, families, and individuals who participate in transnational migration make decisions about their economic future?

This research has shown that an ethnographic approach is essential to understand fully the Mexican immigrant workers experience. It identifies the impacts of illegal status on migration, housing, and work opportunities afforded to Mexican immigrants. From this and prior research, it is conclusive that social networks play a central role in immigrant survival. Informants in this study have depended on social networks to provide border smuggling fees, housing, employment, a resource for substitute workers, and emotional and other financial means of support. With the burden of economic survival absorbed by social network members, individuals can optimize cash remittances
to their Mexican households. These remittances to Mexico enhance social status in Mexican households.

An ethnographic description of Mexican immigration to the U.S. communicates the unique viewpoint of the actors within a contentious international debate. This study further supports prior research that proposes a trend in circular transnational migration between Mexico and the U.S. powered by relatively low U.S. wages in the north and familial responsibility in the south. In conclusion, Mexican immigrants living clandestinely in the U.S. rely on social networks to attain immediate goals in the receiving country that in turn provides the framework to achieve subsequent goals in the host country.
Works Cited


Reyes, Belinda I. Dynamics of Immigration: Return Migration to Western Mexico. San Francisco, SF: Public Policy Institute of California.


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Appendix A

Origin of Individuals in Sample by Mexican State

Key of States:  
1 Guanajuato  
2 Mexico City  
3 Oaxaca  
4 Jalisco  
5 Michoacán  
6 Durango  
7 Vera Cruz

Number in Sample:  
10  
6  
4  
3  
3  
2  
1

Source: http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/namerica/mxstates.htm  
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Appendix B

U.S.-Mexico Border Region

Appendix C

Social Network Matrix

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**KEY:**

5 = *Son familia.*
4 = *Los conocen muy bien.*
3 = *Los conocen bien.*
2 = *Los conocen mas o menos.*
1 = *No los conocen.*

**TRANSLATION:**

5 = They are family.
4 = They know each other very well.
3 = They know each other well.
2 = They know each other.
1 = They do not know each other.
Appendix D

Apartment Layout of León, Guanajuato Satellite Residence
(Occupancy: 9)

Diagram Key:
A - Bunkbed
B - Sleeping bag
Appendix E

Employment Place and Household

Diagram Key:

Each box refers to a restaurant.
Numbers refer to common household.
Appendix F

A Case Study: Phone Call Duration to Mexico

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Appendix G

A Case Study: Remittances Over 25 Months Data Set

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