Crossings: *Mexicana* Remittance Couriers and the Borders of Patriarchy and Nation

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the gendered processes of transnational remittance networks and the role of Mexican courier women in Los Angeles. In countries such as Mexico, remittances from the U.S. have become one of the primary sources of revenue, not only for individual households, but also for long-term state infrastructure projects such as roads, hospitals and schools. However, as many emigrant-sending states reclaim transmigrants as part of new forms of nation-state building projects, very little has been said about the gendered dimensions of such processes. On this score, my paper explores the ways in which attending to gender can bring a more nuanced and differentiated perspective on transnational remittance networks; and specifically examines how the gendered processes of migrant remittances fit within a constellation of neo-liberal state economic and social policies in the U.S. and in Mexico. By drawing upon a series of interviews with remittance couriers, I illustrate how migrant women negotiate such constellations by simultaneously disrupting and reproducing certain gendered norms, hierarchies and tensions.
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I especially thank Elvin K. Wyly, my Supervisor, for encouraging and supporting my efforts throughout this project. I am lost without his guidance and intellectual comradeship. Geraldine Pratt has been a mentor since the beginning stages of this research. Her work inspires me, and it is she who keeps me persistent with gender. Ananya Roy provided encouragement, friendship and laughter every step of the way. I am particularly grateful to Francis Calpotura and TIGRA, and the individuals in my cohort at the University of British Columbia, Geography Department, who allowed me to share ideas during the data analysis and writing stages of this project.

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Introduction

When I was young, I remember routinely taking the 38 Geary Bus to Korea Bank with my mother in San Francisco. It was usually around the 15th or the last day of the month, or “pay day” as it is more popularly referred. We would go once a month, or sometimes once every two months, to the bank teller, and my mother would send money back to my aunts and uncle in Seoul, Korea. It was not just my mother; I had an aunt in San Francisco, my mom’s older sister, and she would send money as well. Looking back, we were not well off. My mother was single at the time and she performed a variety of jobs, mostly getting paid under the table. She was employed as a homecare assistant for several years, working for an elderly white woman who would occasionally give me sweets (which my mother never allowed me to eat). Money was usually tight, but she would try to send something every month without fail. Perhaps I was too young to ask why or how much my mother was sending to Korea. The entire process seemed almost ritual-like; a practice so sacred that only she could participate. No one ever asked her about it and she certainly never told. All I knew was that when the 15th or the 30th rolled around, we were on the 38 Geary.

This story only now begins to unfold for me some two decades later. It was not until I came to graduate school that I gave remittances much thought. Remitting, in the form of money and goods, was something that my mother just did, almost like a daily performance of going to the market or school or to sleep. When I graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in 2001, and started working for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1877, otherwise known as the Justice for Janitors Union in Los Angeles, I again paid little attention to the fact that close to 99.7% of the janitors sent las remesas or remittances back to their families
and friends in their countries of origin.\(^1\) As a majority of the janitors were from various states throughout Mexico, I never thought to question when, why, or how low-wage service workers living in Los Angeles would (or could) routinely send an average of $200-$400 once or twice a month to their family and friends abroad. Little did I know that in 2005, the janitors and countless other migrant workers contributed to a worldwide remittance market of $232 billion.\(^2\) In 2005, Mexico alone received $18.1 billion in remittances, only trailing behind India ($21.7B) and China ($21.3B).\(^3\)

These figures alone were enough to garner my attention. I grew even more interested when I was later notified that a group of \textit{mexicana}, or Mexican female janitors, at the union had started a remittance collective. It was a collective in the sense that the women operated as a cohesive unit. For a small fee, those who were permanent residents or with “legal” documentation in the United States would travel monthly between the U.S. and Mexico as \textit{viajeras} or couriers, hand-delivering remittances, gifts, packages and goods to their families and friends in various states throughout Mexico. The collective was quite informal when it was initially established, and its purpose was two fold: first, to help defray the high and hidden costs of transaction fees—an average of 12-15\% in surcharges depending on the carrier—that come with remitting through wire transfer agencies such as Western Union, Money Gram, or Dolex. And second, as many of the recipients in Mexico are forced to travel long distances to the larger towns and storefronts to receive their overseas remittances, the couriers have come to provide a certain level of ease and security by delivering their goods door-to-door.

\(^1\) This statistic was given to me by the SEIU Local 1877 Payroll/Dues Department in Los Angeles based on past informal studies done by various union officials.
\(^2\) Transnational Institute for Grassroots Research and Action Newsletter, January 2006.
\(^3\) Transnational Institute for Grassroots Research and Action Newsletter, January 2006.
My interest piqued, and I had a series of questions. First, if remittances are a vital component to the migration experience as a whole, is it important that the couriers are predominantly women? Second, as the couriers seem to have stepped in quite literally as a service delivery system between the U.S. and Mexico, what exactly is their relationship to the nation-state? The main argument in this thesis runs along the following lines: I am interested in examining the ways in which attending to gender can bring a more nuanced and differentiated perspective on transnational remittance networks, and moreover, how the gendered processes of migrant remittances fit within a constellation of neo-liberal state economic and social policies both in the U.S. and Mexico.

Gender is a fundamental category of analysis for developing theories of transmigration, remittance networks and the broader global economy in these neoliberal times. Though courier women are the focus of this project, this paper is not solely about women. Rather, it is an examination of how the social relations of gender affect transmigrant men and women in unique and different ways, but also, how their lives are affected in relation to each other. In addition, the theoretical frames that interest me most—those relating to transnationalism, neo-liberalism, and gender—are not literatures that are customarily put into dialogue with one another. Over the last decade, there has been growing scholarship around issues of transnationalism and gender, for instance, the work of Mahler (1999), Mahler and Pessar (2001), Pratt (various), and Fouron and Glick-Schiller (2001). I would like to build upon their work by focusing on the ways in which gender not only supplements, but is a necessary component to both transnational and neoliberal state formations. It is my hope to foster a close dialogue between feminist theory and the empirical analyses of migrant workers, including the every day, concrete and practical matters of their lives. As this project is transnational rather than national in scope, this analysis can be
stretched to consider how neoliberalism transcends boundaries and operates at different scales. More specifically, I would like a better understanding of how and why the processes of neoliberalism actually works.

This project is divided into three chapters. In Chapter 1, I begin my inquiry into the constitution of gender by situating the migrant workers within a political framework that explains their formation from the gendered lens of the global economy (Parrenas, 2005, p. 10). I address the reasons why people in Mexico turn to labor migration as a strategy of household maintenance. In other words, I do not seek to explain how migrants leave, but rather, why they leave their hometowns in Mexico. There are larger socio-political and economic forces that dictate the access to resources of the working class, middle class, or struggling landowners in Mexico that control the decision of migrants. This is not to deny the agency of those who seek transnational migration, but it is by unraveling the historical context that we begin to see the larger global restructuring at play. In this chapter, I also build upon Jennifer Wolch (1990) and Katharyne Mitchell’s (2001) theorizations of the shadow state by extending their frame of analysis beyond the nation-state and elite transnationals.

It should be noted that much of the theoretical framework of this project is drawn from the works of Michael Peter Smith (2001); as well as Geraldine Pratt (2002, 2004), Rhacel Parrenas (2001, 2005), and Katherine Gibson, et al (2001), and their extensive research with Filipina domestic workers. This comparison is not intended to homogenize the experiences and lives of Filipina and mexicana migrant workers. Rather, I utilize the case studies of various Filipina narratives because they have been useful theoretical tools to shed light on the interconnected histories of conquest, paternalism, and structural adjustment by the U.S.
In Chapter 2, I introduce the lives of 8 *mexicana* remittance couriers. Here, I grapple with what it *actually* means to “do” feminist research and my struggles to concretely engage in feminist theory and practice “on the ground” as it applies to real people in real times and places. My brief introduction into their lives is intended to show the varied textures and nuances of transnational migration experiences. This chapter is an attempt to illustrate how the courier women have individually as well as collectively responded to their transnationality in often complex and contradictory ways.

In Chapter 3, I focus around the hero/heroine theme and the ways that courier women are reworking their economic relations. Using the works of Gibson et al (2001), I problematize the hero/victim dichotomy as it relates to migrant women, and encourage the need to look beyond their lives as merely heroes or victims of the global capitalist economy. I describe how courier women have utilized existing social networks—like the janitorial union—to acquire organizing tools and skills locally, and how such locally acquired skills and tools have been transferred and put to work transnationally. I am interested in examining not only the diverse economic activities that migrant women are engaged in at home and abroad, but also the organizing tools and skills that workers have acquired through the union to attend to such activities of production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor in innovative ways. Moreover, I explore the *concrete* ways by which existing social, political and economic networks such as the union, have assisted in the (collective) formation of workers’ multiple and variegated economic identities. Then, in the latter sections of the chapter, I propose a series of questions about migration in light of the most recent immigration debates in the U.S.
Methodology

This project is based on interviews that I conducted with thirty mexicana remittance couriers in Los Angeles during the summer months of May to August 2005. I had known several of the women prior to the interviews in various capacities—as shop stewards, strike leaders and rank-and-file union members. We had been introduced while I was a Research Analyst and later Organizer for Local 1877 from September 2001-2004. The research site for this project took place in two different locations—the Local 1877 union office in Downtown LA, where the individual interviews were conducted; as well as the home of Valeria, a courier, where one focus group meeting was held. I chose these locations partly because they were convenient, but also because it was where I came to know and work with a majority of the women. More specifically, it was a space that had become familiar and intimate for us. Los Angeles, given its history and close proximity to the Mexico border, has a unique geography, which may help to explain why so many of the remittance couriers live, work and operate in and around the Los Angeles region (I explore Mexican transmigration to LA in further detail in Chapter 1).

For my primary data, I conducted one- to one and a half-hour in-depth and open-ended tape-recorded interviews with the courier women. As a guide, I had prepared multiple questions, ranging from general to specific, about various aspects of the women’s jobs, families, travels and lives as remittance couriers as well as janitors. I identified most of the participants in this study with the help and cooperation of Local 1877 union organizers in Los Angeles. Announcements of the study were made at weekly union hall meetings, accompanied work-site visits, and flyers were also distributed and posted inside and around the union office. Once the initial

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4 I would first like to thank Elvin Wyly for his guidance and support in formulating many of the research questions for the interviews. Some of the interview questions were taken from a Community Remittances Audit (CRA) put forth by The Transnational Institute for Grassroots Research and Action (TIGRA). Over the past two years, TIGRA has been engaged in organizing around remittances throughout the U.S. Please see Appendix I, for a copy of the CRA.
announcements had been made, I was also able to collect an unsystematic sample of research participants by using snowball and chain referrals. Participatory action research provided a gateway to the community as well as collaboration with local union officials, union members and activists.

Working with an activist labor organization quickly reworked my politics of location and positionality (see Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Rose, 1997). I thought considerably about my own genealogy at the union: first as an employee of Local 1877; leaving the organization to attend graduate school; only to return as a researcher. This participatory methodology itself helped to bridge feminist theory with practice. I attended organizing and campaign meetings at the union hall, a few quinceanera\(^5\) parties and several picket-line demonstrations during my stay in L.A. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, which I later transcribed and translated into English. Though I have tried my best to produce the most accurate translations, I am responsible for all miscommunications.

The interviews were conducted in a private and quiet meeting room at the union office. To protect the anonymity of the research subjects, I have used pseudonyms for all interviewees. Almost all of the interviews took place on a one-on-one basis, although one participant chose to have her husband present during the interview.

To get a better feel for the remittance network(ing) process and how the women organized trips “back home,” I observed a focus group discussion comprised of six couriers who were planning their next trip to Mexico. As an observer, I was able to witness the actual planning of how, when, and where remittance networks were organized. To supplement the interviews, I utilized a variety of secondary research materials in Los Angeles—census reports released by

\(^5\) A quinceanera marks the 15\(^{th}\) birthday of a woman’s life and her introduction into society. There are no quinceanera celebrations for men.
various government and non-governmental agencies such as the Mexican Consulate, the World Bank, the Pew Hispanic Center, Inter-American Dialogue; surveys and data put forth by community based organizations such as The Transnational Institute for Grassroots Research and Action (TIGRA); as well as media reports and news articles.

I have remained in close phone contact with some of the couriers whom I have known for a longer period of time. Both the couriers and union organizers have been accessible via phone and email for any clarification and further questions regarding the research project. The following is a complete list of research participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year of Departure</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Remittance $/Month</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lucia</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$350</td>
<td>Michoacan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irma</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$400</td>
<td>Guadalajara</td>
</tr>
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<td>Susana</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$350</td>
<td>Zacatecas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anita</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$600</td>
<td>Zacatecas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$200</td>
<td>Guadalajara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$200</td>
<td>Guadalajara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$500</td>
<td>Jalisco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilia</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$600</td>
<td>Jalisco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anabel</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$150</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marisol</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$200</td>
<td>Michoacan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lora</td>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$175</td>
<td>Guanajuato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabel</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$300</td>
<td>Jalisco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$275</td>
<td>Guadalajara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maritza</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$400</td>
<td>Guanajuato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$350</td>
<td>Michoacan</td>
</tr>
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<td>Daisy</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$450</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Beatriz</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$220</td>
<td>Guadalajara</td>
</tr>
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<td>1976</td>
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<td>$120</td>
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<td>Janitor</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosalina</td>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$175</td>
<td>Jalisco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Age Group</td>
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<td>--------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$275</td>
<td>Michoacan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teresa</td>
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<td>Janitor</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Gabriela</td>
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<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$300</td>
<td>Jalisco</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$150</td>
<td>Michoacan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brisa</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$275</td>
<td>Guanajuato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blanca</td>
<td>late 1970s</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$200</td>
<td>Guadalajara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>$350</td>
<td>Michoacan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1.1** List of Remittance Courier Women

**Characteristics of Sample**

There are several distinguishing and common characteristics of my research sample. The differences include: regional origin; immigration status; median age; and arrival dates to the U.S. To start, all interviewees originated from the 5 largest Mexican states of Zacatecas, Jalisco, Michoacan, Guadalajara, or Guanajuato. Second, of the thirty women interviewed, twenty-one were permanent residents or citizens of the U.S, which granted them “legal” rights to work and live in the United States.

Almost all of my interviewees were documented as a result of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) passed in 1986. Under the amnesty provision, undocumented migrants who lived continuously in the United States since January 1, 1982 were granted legal residence. The remaining nine couriers are undocumented. Though the ages of the courier women vary, the majority of them are in their mid- to late forties and many of the women have children back in their hometowns. Lastly, the arrival dates and years of entry into the U.S. vary between the migrant women, the average year ranging from the late 1970s into the early 1980s. The historical significance of the arrival dates is discussed in further detail in Chapter 1.

The most common characteristic of my research subjects, aside from their work as janitors, is that almost all of the women had prior connections or relationships with the union through various family members or friends. The women had an existing network of connections...
that introduced them into the workings and knowledge of labor unions. This network base created a certain level of ease for the courier women in adjusting to their lives in the U.S. Though the couriers come from different pasts and histories, they encompass a wide range of experiences and characteristics in order for us to gain better knowledge and understanding of remittance networks.
CHAPTER 1

The History of Mexican Transmigration to Los Angeles

"The historical movement of Mexican workers to the United States has been characterized by an 'ebb and flow' or 'revolving door' pattern of labor migration, one often calibrated by seasonal agricultural labor demands, economic recessions, and mass deportations" (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994: 20). Mexicans began migrating to work in U.S. agriculture, mining, and railroading during the late nineteenth century, when post-Civil War U.S. industrial expansion generated new demands for the Southwest's primary products. Previously, a predominantly male Asian immigrant labor force had helped in developing the West, but the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan restricted these sources of labor. As the railroads were extended into Western Mexico in the late nineteenth century, enganchistas (labor recruiters) sought Mexican workers to build and maintain the railroad lines, and then to work in U.S. mines and agriculture.

Mexican migration to the U.S. entails a rich and elaborate history, and I restrict my focus to the historical antecedents of contemporary Mexican transmigration to Los Angeles. I draw attention in particular to a number of governmental policies that have directly and indirectly produced this transmigration. One of the more recent dimensions of Mexican migration to Los Angeles is rooted in the operation of a facet of U.S. state policy, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 (Smith, 2001: 76). IRCA had been debated in Congress since the 1970s and was intended to curb Mexican undocumented migration by imposing sanctions (both civil and criminal penalties) on employers who knowingly hire undocumented migrant workers. The legislation also included provisions for a) an amnesty-legalization program for
undocumented migrants who could prove continuous residence in the U.S. since January 1, 1982; and b) for those who could prove they had worked in U.S. agriculture for ninety days during specific periods (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994: 26). For those who qualified for legalization, it presented an overwhelming “paperchase” of having to prove legality (with notarized letters, proof of rent payments, utility stubs, etc.) for a population that had always been considered “illegal.”

While the media portrayed IRCA as a generous and liberal immigration law because of legalization provisions, it is important to note that the primary impulse behind IRCA was in fact immigration restriction. For instance, “as a ‘balance’ to the amnesty clause, IRCA also included several provisions designed to:

- strengthen the enforcement of immigration laws (including sanctions for employers who knowingly hire undocumented migrants);
- increase border control and surveillance; and
- create a program to verify the immigration status of those applying for certain welfare benefits.”

Ironically, though IRCA was restrictionist in intent, 2.3 million undocumented Mexican migrants applied for legal status under one of IRCA’s programs, which resulted in several unintended consequences in regards to gender composition and urban migration. First, though a significant number of migrant women were already present in the U.S., many of the hundreds of thousands of newly legalized male workers who had been living in transnational households chose to bring their wives and children to live with them in the United States. Family members

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6 (http://uscis.gov/graphics/aboutus/history/sanctions.htm). Ideologically, however, these provisions far exceeded the bounds of legislation. Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) argues that many of the various bills leading to IRCA highlighted penalties for employers who knowingly hired unauthorized migrant workers, “reflected the xenophobia of the 1970 and the 1980s” (p. xv). For instance, during the recession of the early 1980s, politicians and newspaper editorials conveniently scapegoated immigrants for causing a lagging economy, stealing jobs, and depressing wage levels. With anti-immigrant hysteria on the rise, little thought was given to migrant workers who did the work that no one else would. IRCA, in other words, codified and masked this xenophobia. The legacies of such racist spirit set the stage for future legislation such as Proposition 187.
of many newly legalized men came out of fear that the “door was closing,” with the hope that they too would qualify for legalization (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994: xvi).

Second, low wages in the agricultural sector drove many male farm workers who had brought additional household members from Mexico to California to move to cities like Los Angeles in search of higher-paying urban service and manufacturing jobs. In California’s then still vibrant metropolitan economy, many Mexican women entered the labor force mostly as domestic workers in search of higher wages as well. Dual wage earnings into the labor market signified (and soon solidified) a long(er) term settlement for Mexican families brought forth by the IRCA provisions.

The most recent period of Mexican transmigration to Los Angeles starting in the late 1980s through the 1990s can be attributed to other policy initiatives. Three notable and interrelated initiatives include: (a) the policies of transnational institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and more recently, the World Trade Organization (WTO) that actively pursue a neoliberal agenda; (b) the persistent initiation and support for neoliberalism by U.S. Treasury Department and the Mexican government, through such transnational policy initiatives as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); and (c) the institutional responses of the Partido Revolutionario Institucional (PRI)-dominated Mexican state, which relentlessly pursued austerity policies domestically while brokering NAFTA transnationally (Smith, 2001: 77).

Starting in the 1970s and 1980s, an economic crisis in Mexico ensued as a result of growing trade imbalances, a declining peasant economy, government budget deficits, and the world economic recession of the mid-1970s. This event culminated in 1976 in International Monetary Fund (IMF) pressure to substantially devalue the peso. After years of maintaining a
stable currency, the Mexican government devalued the peso by nearly 100 percent, causing capital flight, declines in private investment, and high unemployment along the border maquiladores and in the interior. Since 1982, when inflation reached nearly 100 percent, Mexico has undergone one of the world’s most severe and prolonged economic crises.

The combination of the austerity plans of the World Bank, inflation, unemployment, and the conscious decision of Mexico’s ruling political elites to “alleviate” these crises with export-oriented neoliberal economic policies made it difficult for many households in Mexico to survive on the income they could generate within its borders. Prior to the passing of IRCA, Mexican migration was strongly gendered in that male migrants came to the U.S. to work for a short- to medium-term, before returning to their families in Mexico. In the post-IRCA period, however, the hardening of the borders in conjunction with the amnesty provision has led to a wave of claims, as migrants were now restricted in travel. As a result, many migrants made the choice to live permanently in the U.S. and to bring their families in later.

This led to various intended and unintended consequences for women “back home.” Meager remittances and the prolonged absences of migrant husbands, starting during the Bracero program (1942-1964)\(^7\) and continuing in recent decades, often accelerated women’s entry into the labor force in occupations previously defined as male. Structural-adjustment policies (SAPs) enacted in the 1980s through the 1990s channeled more women into the labor market and altered the characteristics of women workers. Women found themselves in newly created feminized occupations where labor was exclusively or primarily constructed as female, such as jobs in

\(^7\) The Bracero Program was a binational contract labor program negotiated between the U.S. and Mexico in August 1942. The program was designed to bring a few hundred experienced Mexican agricultural laborers to harvest sugar beets in the Stockton, California area, but soon spread to cover most of the U.S. to provide much needed farm workers to the agricultural labor market (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994).
packinghouses, in *maquilas*, and in shoe, clothing, textile, manufacturing, and homework assembly.

Since the 1990s, the Mexican government has pursued monetarist policies—reducing public-sector and welfare spending in order to meet foreign debt service requirements—and has liberalized the regulation of trade and investment, much of it oriented to export development. This is exemplified by the Mexican government's strong push to enact NAFTA. This policy initiative further entrenched the declining living standards and growing income polarization within Mexico. More specifically, the Border Industrialization Program (BIP), a program designed to generate the infrastructure and legal conditions to successfully attract foreign manufacturing investment and simultaneous migrant employment along the border with the United States, laid the foundation for the myriad of sweatshop or, more diplomatically, "export-processing zones" along the U.S.-Mexico border where multi-national corporations have set up business. The decline in living standards led to the formation of ever more US-bound transnational households of both female and male transmigrants to tap into the incoming producing possibilities of large urban centers like Los Angeles and the remittances generated by the transnational social networks they have forged (Smith, 2001).

And last, in the mid-1990s, the PRI-dominated Mexican state actively promoted financial inclusion by recruiting "Mexican communities abroad." The Mexican government instituted provisions such as "dual U.S.-Mexican nationality" laws, as well as transnational voting legislation. Though liberal in its rhetorical gestures, the PRI-dominated Mexican state has used such measures to secure the $18 billion in remittances sent home by these "Mexican communities abroad." As soon will be discussed, these funds benefited not only individual households, but larger state infrastructure projects such as roads, hospitals and schools.
The historical account of Mexican transmigration to LA includes a variety of neoliberal and gendered dimensions. The importance of putting transnationalism, neoliberalism and gender in dialogue with one another is to analyze the ways in which gender (though rarely discussed) has been a necessary component to the structure of the neoliberal design and agenda (Fraser, 2005: 302). The Border Industrialization Program (BIP), to name just one example, was originally intended to target primarily male migrant workers. However, the factories in these export-processing zones employ predominantly young, single women. Fernandez-Kelley (1983) explains that this was due to employer preferences, and to the growing population of single women without the financial support of their husbands or fathers. The aim here is not to focus solely on the impact of a particular set of gender relations of migration or of transnationalims per se, but rather to examine gender relations as one example of the multiple ways that neoliberal policies can have much broader, and often unanticipated effects.

**Transnational Remittances: The New Foreign Aid?**

One of the most concrete ways that neoliberalism as material practice and ideological discourse has begun to occupy greater transnational space has been through the institutionalization of transnational remittances—of money and goods—sent by migrant workers in the U.S. to their communities of origin in various Mexican states. According to the 2000 census, Latinos became the largest minority in the U.S., with Mexican migrants and Mexican-Americans representing two-thirds of the Latino population. Latin America is the biggest single destination of remittances in a worldwide market estimated to amount to $232 billion (Calpotura, 2006).

In 2005, with approximately 12 million Mexican migrants working abroad in the U.S., Mexico received the largest sum of remittances than any other Latin American country with a
figure of $18.1 billion (Calpotura, 2006). This figure had increased from the $16.6 billion remitted in 2004, according to the statistics put forth by the Bank of Mexico. With approximately 51 million transactions last year, at an average value of $327, remittances have now become the second largest source of income for Mexico, after oil (Thompson, 2006).

Figure 1.2

![Remittances and Foreign Direct Investment to Mexico](image)

Sources of funding

Money sent home by immigrant workers exceeds global foreign aid and equals all foreign investment.

(In billions)

- Foreign direct investment*:
  - 1990:
  - 1991:
  - 1992:
  - 1993:
  - 1994:
  - 1995:
  - 1996:
  - 1997:
  - 1998:
  - 1999:
  - 2000:
  - 2001:
  - 2002:
  - 2003:
  - 2004:
  - 2005:

- Remittances:
  - 1990:
  - 1991:
  - 1992:
  - 1993:
  - 1994:
  - 1995:
  - 1996:
  - 1997:
  - 1998:
  - 1999:
  - 2000:
  - 2001:
  - 2002:
  - 2003:
  - 2004:
  - 2005:

- Foreign aid:
  - 1990:
  - 1991:
  - 1992:
  - 1993:
  - 1994:
  - 1995:
  - 1996:
  - 1997:
  - 1998:
  - 1999:
  - 2000:
  - 2001:
  - 2002:
  - 2003:
  - 2004:
  - 2005:

*Direct investments in productive assets by a company incorporated in a foreign country.
**2005 data not available on foreign direct investment and foreign aid.
Source: World Bank

Figure 1.4

Remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean from all sources
U.S. Billions 2001

- Colombia
- Peru
- Ecuador
- Brazil
- Haiti
- Cuba
- Jamaica
- Honduras
- Guatemala
- Nicaragua
- El Salvador
- Mexico

Source: Multilateral Investment Fund
These figures are even more astonishing considering that the majority of jobs held by Mexican migrants in the U.S. are in the low-wage service sector industry such as janitorial, housekeeping, gardening, and dishwashing (see Figure below). Each month, Mexican migrants in the U.S. send an average of $200-$400 “back home” (Bada, 2004). These survival funds are used primarily for basic care and livelihood resources such as health care, food, and school for dependent family members and relatives in Mexico.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profile of Latino Remitters in the U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latinos in the U.S. sending money back to their home countries tend to be on the lower economic ladder and lack formal financial relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• High School Dropouts: 59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Rent Home: 72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Speak little or no English: 54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Work in low-skilled jobs: 64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Don’t have credit cards: 55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Don’t have bank accounts: 43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source: “Billions in Motion: Latino Immigrants, Remittances and Banking,” from the Pew Hispanic Center/Multilateral Investment Fund, 2002.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1.5**

**Transnational Remittance Networks**

However, over the past several years, migrant remittances have undergone a shift—a shift moving well beyond the realm of individual and personal household strategy—to securing funds for larger state infrastructure projects such as roads, hospitals, community centers, and schools.
(Guarnizo, 1998; Levitt, 2001; Bada, 2004; Rivera-Salgado, 2004). It is no longer the private sector alone that awaits remittances, but the public sector as well. To the detriment of the families living in Mexico, the past few Mexican government regimes have given little consideration to the development of the nation's infrastructure—such as hospitals, schools, and local businesses—compared to the priority of keeping in good standing with foreign creditors. As a result, remittances have enabled the state to retreat from its social service responsibilities.

Similar to the case of the Philippines, "obtaining the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) seal of approval, which is a prerequisite for obtaining more loans from foreign lending agencies, has been of greater concern [for Mexico]" (Parrenas, 2005, p. 15). Mexico is one of the most highly indebted countries in Latin America. The foreign debt stands at more than $161 billion, 181% higher than in the early 1980s, when the country declared a moratorium on payments. The current debt is equivalent to 40.3% of the gross domestic product (GDP) of 1998, according to a report released by the Finance Secretariat (Cevallos, 2000).

**Hometown Associations**

Over the last two decades, remittance networks between the United States and Mexico have evolved into a cross-border and highly collectivized (and commodified) social, political, and economic movement (Goldring, 1998; Mahler, 1998; R. Smith, 1998; M. Smith, 2001). Through the establishment of hometown associations (HTAs), mostly low-wage migrant workers in the U.S. collectively utilize their existing social networks (i.e., jobs, family, friends, neighborhood) to raise money to support public works and social service projects in Mexico (Dresser, 1993; Gonzalez Gutierrez, 1995; Guarnizo, 1998; Glick Schiller and Fouron 1998;)

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8 It should be noted that the Mexican government was undoubtedly interested in the earlier generations of private remittances, as it fits into the neoliberal agenda of Mexican households caring for themselves and being responsible for their own welfare. However, this direct reliance on remittances for state projects is a more recent phenomenon.
Some of the projects include: fresh water wells, baseball stadiums and soccer fields, and ambulance vehicles for the smaller, more rural towns that have no access to medical services.

Just to give an idea of the scope and scale of hometown associations and their sphere of influence in and over the Mexican economy, the Mexican Consulate estimates that over 250 registered HTAs operate in the city of Los Angeles alone. Most of the members are from the West Central regions of Mexico in states such as Zacatecas, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Guadalajara, and Michoacan (Rivera-Salgado, 2004).

Under the guise of “nation-building,” the Mexican government has strategically aligned itself with these various hometown associations as to promote business development and to encourage political participation on both sides of the border. One of the most notable programmatic efforts put forth by various LA-based associations was Tres por Uno, or Three for One (3x1), a “matching funds” program started in 2000. The “Three for One” program channels community remittances from overseas into small-scale development projects in Mexico. The various LA-based hometown associations negotiated an agreement with then Mexican President, Vicente Fox, whereby every U.S.-remittance dollar sent “home” to Mexico was matched by three or more dollars from the federal, state, and now national level to fund roads, schools and other projects (Hernandez-Coss, 2005, p. 31; Thompson, 2005; see also Lowell & De La Garza, 2000).

According to statistics put forth by the World Bank, from 1993 to 2000, investments financed by the program totaled $16.2 million (Hernandez-Coss, 2005, p. 31). Typical projects have included road construction, street paving, irrigation, sewerage, and electricity. The program

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9 For more on this topic, please see Alex Rivera’s documentary The Sixth Section (2001) as he documents the story of Grupo Union, an all male hometown association established in Newburg, New York. Though Rivera fails to address the topic of gender, I find his visuals insightful in articulating the ways in which migrants use existing social networks in order to establish such organizations.
also funds works in churches, cemeteries, parks and civic squares, community centers, and athletic facilities. New investment projects include providing computers for high schools and dam and water-treatment projects (Goldring, various; Smith, 1995, 1998; cf. Levitt, 1997; Hernandez-Coss, 2005). These small-scale developments have an average cost of $56,000. Almost two-thirds of the projects have been located in small communities of less than 2,000 inhabitants. Investment decisions are made by a joint committee of local government and HTA representatives. Observers have attributed the success of this small-scale program to the strong leadership and commitment of the HTAs (Hernandez-Coss, 2005, p. 31).

The second major collaboration put forth by the various LA-based associations and the Mexican government involves efforts to regain migrants’ continued political and economic support, or “long-distance nationalisms” as referred to by Fouron and Glick Schiller (2001). The 2006 Mexican Voter Registration was the first to grant Mexicans living abroad the right to vote in the July Mexican Presidential election. This year, competition was fierce with eight political parties participating in the running, (though five of them joined forces in two different electoral coalitions). The two front-running presidential candidates: Felipe Calderon, with the conservative National Action Party (PAN) and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, with the left-of-center, Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) (now in coalition with Convergence for Democracy and the Labor Party), both had realistic chances of winning the presidency. The PAN was eager to hold on to the presidency for a second term; meanwhile, the PRD believed itself to have a good chance at victory after disappointments in the two previous elections. Some believe that the sheer timing of the so called “foreign vote” (as mediated by the incumbent PAN) betrays the fact that it was intended to dilute Obrador’s support. Though the presidential outcome
remains unknown, hometown associations played a prominent role in securing votes for desired candidates as well as asserting their space in the political process.\textsuperscript{10}

It is without a doubt that HTAs have mediated the agency of migrant workers and their rights to be included in the political process. It must also be noted, however, that hometown associations have historically been and predominantly are masculine enterprises (Goldring, 2001; Levitt, 2001). Luin Goldring (2001), in her research on U.S.-Mexican political organizations, notes that, “hometown associations have come to represent a vast and privileged arena for men’s homeland-oriented political activity” (p. 341). Peggy Levitt (2001), in her extensive ethnography of Mexican HTAs, also observes how it is common for migrants to hold open HTA meetings with the entire community, and then to hold closed sessions with mostly male entrepreneurs. In doing so, she argues that “the Mexican state [officials], for example, who visit Los Angeles, reinforce existing class [and gender] divisions [and exclusions!]” (Guarnizo, 1998, cited in Levitt, 2001, p. 209).

\textsuperscript{10} On 6 July 2006 the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) announced the final vote count in the 2006 Mexican Presidential election, resulting in a narrow margin of 0.58 percentage points of victory for his right-of-center opponent, Felipe Calderón. However, under Mexican electoral law, only the Federal Electoral Tribunal (TEPJF) can declare who will serve as the next president. The election outcome is still disputed: López Obrador and his party allege irregularities in over 30% of the country’s polling stations, and they have appealed the results of the election, which the candidate believes was tainted by fraud. He and his party demanded a national recount of the election. Mexico’s Federal Electoral Tribunal of seven judges can hear complaints and consider overturning the election, and they must declare a winner by September 6, 2006.
Interestingly, while there have been significant advances in gendering migration research (see Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994); Mahler (1999); Mahler and Pessar (2001); Fouron and Glick-Schiller (2001)), there is little work on how gender operates at the level of these organizations. It is critical to address this gap because these organizations’ activities are a form of increasingly institutionalized substantive citizenship practice (Goldring, 2001, p. 345; see also Guarnizo, 1998). I question, as other feminists have done, how exactly it is that both the state and various HTAs have included women in the political arena. In her research on gender in U.S.-Mexican transnational spaces, Goldring (2001) finds that “the activities of immigrant HTAs are frequently mediated by the Mexican state,” and thus, “its representatives hold the hegemonic notion that
citizenship is predominantly [and perhaps exclusively] a male domain” (Goldring, 2001, cited in Pessar & Mahler, 2003, p. 819; see also Ong, 1993).

Women do in fact participate in many hometown associations: they attend meetings, have a say in decisions, and also play more traditionally feminine roles in fund-raising activities such as preparing and selling food. However, carrying out the projects, or project implementation, is considered men’s business. While none of the organizations openly discourage women, the accepted fact is that positions of power are for men (Goldring, 2001: 349; see also Levitt, 2001: 209).

Following Goldring, Pessar and Mahler (2003) levy a similar critique,

Though migrant women play essential roles in the fundraising necessary to execute development projects in the hometowns, they typically are deprived access to the increased power and social capital that accrue to male HTA participants because decision-making and project implementation are perceived as male prerogatives, both by the men in the association and, more importantly, by the state that co-sponsors and shepherds the projects to fruition (p. 819).

Such practice provides transmigrant leaders with a space for performing gendered [political participation] and citizenship and a particular form of masculinity that is highly exclusionary (Levitt, 2001: 351). By building on existing forms of male-dominated organizations and not taking steps to alter women’s patterns of participation, the state’s efforts to reincorporate Mexicans living abroad offers men a version of citizenship, limited as it may be, that is largely unavailable to women (p. 352). Critics have justifiably expressed the ways in which the Mexican government has retreated in fundamental ways in providing investments in “human capital” and public infrastructure for all of its constituents while holding migrants responsible for the social and fiscal responsibilities of the state (Levitt, 2001). Though I would agree with such critiques, I would also argue, more specifically, that both the state and hometown associations (as mediated
by the state) have pro-actively retreated in its investments in women (Goldring, 2001). Women transmigrants find themselves as a “vital yet silenced [or absent] presence” (Fouron & Glick Schiller, 2001, p. 548).

Melissa Wright’s (1999a) research on *mexicana* maquila workers is relevant because she details the almost routine-like nature of devaluing and erasing *mexicana* women from the production of their labor. In her analysis, women have a unique relationship to disposability, exploitation and appropriability both in and out of the home/nation/factory/workplace.\(^{11}\) In the words of Gayatri Spivak (1996), “the state can use [women’s] labour but must keep them out of civil society” (p. 250). Interestingly, as people illuminate the “transgressive” and “grassroots” nature of HTAs (i.e., low-wage service workers “from below” collaborating with high-powered politicians “from above”), HTAs have also come to highlight the exclusionary and often hierarchical standards of this participation.

**The Shadow State**

In her seminal text, *The Shadow State: Government and Voluntary Sector in Transition*, Wolch (1990) theorizes the dialectic of state-voluntary sector interdependence. She defines the *shadow state* as “a para-state apparatus with collective service responsibilities previously shouldered by the public sector and administered outside of traditional democratic politics, yet controlled in both formal and informal ways by the state” (xvi). Wolch addresses the “complex and contradictory evolution of the *shadow state* and what it means for contemporary voluntarism” (xvi). Though writing as early as the 1980s and in the socio-political and economic context of U.K.-U.S. relations, Wolch’s analyses has been helpful in thinking about not only

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\(^{11}\) For an insightful and detailed articulation of Wright’s work, please see Pratt, 2004, p. 28.
contemporary voluntarism, but also what it means for the future of the welfare state in both the U.S. and Mexico.

My concern is that the “general effect of the rise of these shadow state voluntary institutions [like hometown associations] is to further entrench the original economic policies of neoliberalism in a hegemonic and recursive process” (Mitchell, 2001: 167). I would go as far as to argue that the primary effect of the rise of these in-between voluntary organizations (i.e. hometown associations) was a corresponding decline of direct social services provisioning from the government sector. As HTAs, for instance, grew in prestige, power and number, the state was able to either sub-contract out services and supplies to these institutions or to delimit or discontinue direct social service provisioning now covered under the auspices of the new shadow state organizations.

The Hispanic Fund is one such example: the Fund was created by the Mexican government to grant loans to small and medium-sized HTA-type ventures to stimulate investment partnerships between Latino-owned businesses in the U.S. and in Mexico (Guarnizo, 1998; Levitt, 2001). The irony here is that the very lack of government investment in local communities, which itself catalyzed the processes of migration, is now being invoked by the Mexican government to actively recruit migrant laborers to (self)invest in those very same communities. As remittance networks continue to flourish and receive legitimation for “successfully” providing social services, the state seems to equally legitimize its very own withdrawal in the welfare of its constituents. As such, much of the responsibilities of the state—its infrastructure, social services, etc—are taken on by migrant workers themselves.\(^{12}\)

\(^{12}\) Geraldine Pratt (2004), while levying a similar point in regards to the Philippines, is correct to announce that “[t]hough public funds continue to flow through such organizations, they exist beyond the transparent public accountability demanded of state institutions” (p. 77).
Through her extensive research and ethnography, Katharyne Mitchell (2001) has documented the flows of wealthy Chinese transnational migrants and their capital, and how they have been central to neoliberal (shadow) state formations. Mitchell’s project examines the friendly and non-adversarial relationships between wealthy transnational migrants and non-marginalized states such as Hong Kong and Vancouver. How does this picture change, however, in the context of friendly relationships between say non-wealthy Mexican migrants and marginalized states such as Mexico? Whereas Mitchell’s inquiry attends to wealthy capitalist transnationals, I am interested in extending the frame of analysis to poor migrant workers beyond the borders of the United States, and the ways in which they are proactively incorporated into neoliberal nation-state building projects and agendas.

Wolch’s theory, suitable for an analysis of its day, must stretch beyond the nation-state and include a transnational and gendered perspective. The bulk of recent transnational scholarship in regards to the U.S. and Mexico has focused on the movements of mostly male and poor migrant laborers. Though I agree with such scholarship, I also hope to extend our knowledge and understanding of the role of the state in the degree to which it seeks to incorporate a transnational and highly gendered citizenry into a broader national narrative and agenda (a la the Hispanic Fund and HTAs), as well as control the capital of those living and working across national borders.

The works of both Wolch (1990) and Mitchell (2001) have been fundamental in my own theorizations of the shadow state as it applies to poorly-paid migrant men and women from Mexico. I am committed to the transnational geography of this research project and therefore interested in extending the scope of our feminist analysis outside the bounds of the U.S. The following chapter is an attempt to do just that—to “force feminist theory into a dialogue with
those who originate outside of ‘the West”’ (Pratt, 2004, p. 5). How, in other words, have Mexican transmigrant women been central to such neoliberal *shadow state* formations?
CHAPTER 2

Transnational Remittance Couriers

Amidst the obstacles of existing class and gender divisions (and exclusions), it is clear from the literature that Mexican women are far from passive or politically uninvolved. Though various types of transmigrant organizations (i.e. hometown associations) have operated in conjunction with a variety of local and state actors to reproduce existing gender hierarchies, they have also created unique opportunities to push gender along new paths. Transnational courier women, or viajeras, an often-overlooked component of the remittance network, have been stepping into a new and growing entrepreneurial space, adding multiple gender and class dimensions to the existing transnational discourse and practice.

The following are stories of 8 mexicana janitors who are members of a remittance courier collective that started in 1995. Most of the women have originated from the West Central regions of Mexico such as Zacatecas, Guanajuato, Guadalajara, Jalisco, and Michoacan, rural places that share long traditions of U.S.-bound migration for Los Angeles. The collective, much like the more traditional hometown associations, utilizes existing social channels of the workplace, family and friends to maintain transnational connections abroad. However, they differ in that the collective operates more independently, without formal recognition or registration to the Mexican government or the Mexican Consulates in the United States.  

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13 I debated between the usage of the term collective and cooperative. I understood a “collective” to mean a group of people who share or are motivated by at least one common issue or interest, or work together on a specific project(s) to achieve a common objective. “Collectives” differ from cooperatives in that they are not necessarily focused upon an economic benefit or saving (but can be that as well). I continue to use the term “collective” as the couriers refer to themselves as such.

14 Furthermore, unlike the collective, HTAs maintain close contact with Mexican government officials on a monthly, if not weekly basis in regards to political campaigns and community-investment projects (Rivera-Salgado, 2004).
As relatively few Mexicans have historically enjoyed the legal status to permit them to travel freely between the adjacent borders of Mexico and the United States, the women with legal status have taken advantage of the opportunity to become couriers. Utilizing their membership through the janitors’ union as an arena for organization, their clientele base and network, women decide how, when, and where remittances of both money and goods will be hand-delivered to their hometowns in Mexico. Those without legal status are also members of the collective, though their roles within the group differ slightly.

As the following narratives will soon illustrate, the couriers travel at least once every two months, hand-delivering remittances, packages, letters, and even larger items such as televisions, microwaves and boxes full of children’s toys. As many of the couriers originated from the same neighboring towns in Mexico, the collective seemed like an efficient way to pool resources to deliver funds back to their hometowns. For their services, the couriers, as negotiated by the larger collective, charge a set fee: usually 5-10% of the money they handle and $10-11 per pound for packages. The pricing was determined based on a series of negotiations between the courier women, as well as a discussion about the competing market rate from some of the other remittance agencies. The couriers also summoned pricing advice from viajeras operating in other parts of Central America such as Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

The initial reasons behind the establishment of the collective was two fold: first, to help defray the high cost in transaction fees (an average of 12%-15% in surcharges depending on the carrier) that come with routinely remitting through wire transfer agencies such as Western Union, Money Gram and Vigo Money Transfer Services.\(^\text{15}\) And second, as many of the

\(^{15}\) Aside from the exorbitant cost in transmission fees, a bigger issue is the exchange rate used to convert the money to foreign currency—something many money-transfer agencies do not disclose. In one 1999 study, a leading researcher, Manuel Orozco, found that wire-transfer companies were offering an exchange rate of 9 Mexican pesos per U.S. dollar at a time when the benchmark rate was 10.13 pesos per dollar. The difference here meant the wire services pocketed an additional $55.80 profit on a $500 transfer, plus the fees they charged (Said, 2006).
recipients in Mexico are forced to travel long distances to the larger towns and storefronts to receive their remittances, the couriers have come to provide a certain level of ease and security by delivering their goods door-to-door.

Joining the collective is based almost entirely on trust. All couriers are members of the janitors union, and thus, their clientele network is comprised of union members. Though the exact number of deliveries vary between couriers, on average, most women are responsible for 30-35 deliveries per trip.\textsuperscript{16} The amount of remittance money that the couriers transport from the U.S. to Mexico ranges between $6,000-$7,000 per visit. Furthermore, as many formal remittance and postal agencies do not operate with much frequency in the rural areas of Mexico, the couriers have taken advantage of this untapped market-share. For those who have an interest in travel and for those who wish to earn a little extra money have agreed to participate in the collective.\textsuperscript{17} The women who do not travel assist the couriers in trip preparation such as packaging parcels and verifying addresses for delivery. As such, the couriers have come to satisfy not only the needs of their clients, but have also come to enhance their own lives (economically and collectively), as well as the lives of their family members back home.

To avoid presenting one woman's narrative as a universal exemplar of the migration experience, I introduce the 8 courier women in hopes to illustrate the complexities and the nuances involved in their transnational lives. The couriers have different pasts and histories, however, I would like to address a common theme, which interleaves throughout their narratives, namely the contradictory ways that courier women both reproduce and disrupt traditional gender relations. It is my hope to illuminate the many ways that courier women negotiate their gendered

\textsuperscript{16} Due to the consistency in remittance sending, the number of deliveries remain fairly stable for each courier.
\textsuperscript{17} The couriers are able to profit close to $600 - $700 per trip. The non-courier women, on the other hand, do not make a significant profit, however, they do not have to pay for delivery of their remittances. And though this issue was not discussed in as much detail as I would have liked, the non-courier women also receive a small wage for their labor within the collective. The percentage or the exact amount in dollars is unknown.
identities, their terms of travel, and their daily lives in complex and contradictory ways. It is by uncovering these complexities that we begin to see their transnational lives at work. Who are these women who have stepped in quite literally as one of Mexico’s primary service delivery system?

Irma

"Imaginate, una persona podia manejar las remisas a Mexico por un poco dinero que enviar. No te creo" ("Imagine, a person could potentially drive their remittances to Mexico at a lower cost than sending it through the agency. I don’t believe it").

Irma was one of the founding members of the remittance collective. She was born in Guadalajara, Mexico, is in her late-forties, and came to the U.S. with her husband, Chava, in 1977. They had initially settled in Salinas, California, working in the strawberry fields until they decided to follow a few of their co-workers south to Los Angeles. I had always been curious to know how the collective started; how long it has been in operation; and how the collective has changed or evolved over time. Rather than ask specific questions throughout the interview, I simply asked Irma to tell me the story of how this all began...

Irma: Chava y yo mandamos dinero a nuestros padres después de siete días en los Estados Unidos. Empezaba un lavaplatos y después una ninera, pero empezábamos con la unión en 1981. Ahorita, somos ciudadanos. Pues, pues, el grupo comenzaba diez o once años pasados, mas o menos. No fue difícil para establecer un grupo con mujeres porque muchas de nosotros trabajamos juntitos o somos hermanas o compañeras de la unión, me entiendes? Cada dos semanas toda la gente a la unión mandaba dinero a sus familias en México, así dos veces por cada mes, verdad? En el pasado, fue trabajando a Raytheon Center y después de recibimos nuestros cheques nosotros fuimos al Western Union o Dolex para mandar el dinero a México. Por cada operación hay una cuota, depende en el dinero, pero hay una cuota. A mi sitio de trabajo fue 12 mujeres y 8 hombres y muchas personas de la misma aldea o comunidad en México. Jose Ruiz, mi compañero, me dijo que es más económico para viajar o manejar a México y entrega el dinero o los paquetes o algo a los veinte familias. Ese comentario fue importante. Yo tenía papeles, pero no podía viajar a México cada dos meses. Uf!

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Esa noche hable con mi hermana y decidimos a hablar con los miembros de la union, nuestras familias aqui sobre sus ideas. Es todo.

Chava and I started sending money back home after working 7 days in the U.S. We started out as dishwashers and babysitters, but we joined the union in 1981. We are now both permanent residents. Well...well, the collective started roughly about 10 or 11 years ago, more or less. It was not very difficult to organize this particular group of women because we were all working together or because they were our friends or relatives, you know what I mean? Every two weeks, my co-workers and I would send money back to Mexico, so that is twice a month, right? Well, in the past, I was working at Raytheon Center and after our payday, we would all go to the Western Union or Dolex and send the money to Mexico. For every transaction there was a fee, it depended on the amount being sent, but there was a fee nonetheless. At the worksite, we had 12 female janitors and 8 men and we all happened to be from the same town or at least the same neighboring town in Mexico. Given the fees that incurred for every transaction, my co-worker, Jose Luis, jokingly mentioned that it would be very economical for someone to drive to Mexico or even fly there to deliver the money to 20 different families. Now, this statement was important. We did not have papers to travel. This meant that we needed to find someone to safely deliver our money across the border and we realized that those people may be union members like us. Geesh! That night, his comment stayed with me and I talked the idea over with my family and my friends. That is about it.

Liz: Y casi diez anos mas tarde?

And now, 10 years later?


Well, ten years later and we are still here. I had no idea that it would turn out like this. I knew we could organize because all Latinos send money back to their hometowns. Since the past, much as changed, but much has not changed. There are still high fees to send money to Mexico. When we first started back in 1994 or 1995, it was the most terrible time in California. Do you remember Proposition 187? If you were undocumented, you were always scared. We were even scared

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18 California Proposition 187 was a highly controversial 1994 ballot initiative designed to deny undocumented migrants social services, health care, and public education.
to send money back home [through remittance agencies] just in case we needed to sign papers and verify our addresses or Social Security Numbers.

Irma also emphasized the goals of the collective—para organizar y mandar—to organize and to send. She proudly mentioned the influence that the union had on organizing the collective. She states,

_Estaba con la union hasta el primero, organizando sobre Proposicion 187, y aprendimos que nosotros no tenemos papeles, pero tuvimos poder para hacer una diferencia en las vidas de nuestras familias. Yo pensaba mucho sobre esto cuando pensando sobre la colectiva. Muchos de nosotros no tenia papeles, pero unas personas si. Necesitabamos estar organizados._

I was with the union from the very beginning, organizing around Proposition 187, and we learned that even though we did not have papers, we were a powerful force and that we could make a difference in our families’ lives. I thought about this a lot when thinking about the collective. Many of us did not have papers, but some of us did. We always needed to be organized.

Just recently, Irma notified me that she would now take on a more supportive role in the collective. After a brief moment of silence, she elaborates about her decision:

_Hace muchos anos como una viajera, pero ahorita es muy dificil para estar con mi familia en Guadalajara. Despues de muchos anos, mis hermanos me expectan para estar en Mexico. Nosotros [Chava y yo] mandamos dinero y regalitos y visito dos o tres veces cada ano, pero yo se que necesito visitar mas. Yo soy la hermana mayor y Chava el mayor tambien. Debemos cuidar a nuestras familias en Mexico. Visitamos cuando podemos, pero la vida es dificil aqui tambien. Debemos hacer mas, yo se, pero es dificil._

I have been a courier for quite some time now, but lately it has been difficult to be around my family in Guadalajara. After all this time, my brothers expect me to be more present in Mexico. We [Chava and I] send money and gifts every month, and I visit a couple times a year, but I understand that that is not enough. I am the oldest daughter and Chava is the oldest son, we should be in Mexico taking care of our parents and families. We visit when we can, but life is not so easy here in LA either. We work hard and it is barely enough to survive. I should do more, I know, but it is difficult. I will try.
This short passage displays some of the contradictory ways that Irma both reproduces and disrupts traditional gender relations. Irma is an influential figure at the union and within the collective. She has thought innovatively about the ways in which workers could organize and strategize around sending money to avoid high-priced remittance agencies. She has set the precedent for future couriers to be independent and mobile. In this sense, Irma has disrupted the various assumptions about the abilities of low-skilled and poorly-paid migrant women and their capacity to survive under difficult circumstances. However, in other ways, she has simultaneously reproduced traditional gendered norms through her rationale of what she ‘should do’ and ‘try’ because she is the oldest daughter in her family. Her continuous mention of family expectations; her visits not being (good) enough; and ‘barely making enough to survive, yet feeling obligated to do more’ for her family illustrates a few of the complexities and contradictions that courier women such as Irma realize and experience through the process of transnational migration.

Daisy

“Yo venía a los Estados Unidos porque mi familia y yo queremos vivir” (“I came to the United States because my family and I wanted to live”).

I first met Daisy during one of the weekly Stewards Council meetings in the fall of 2003. I had heard her name periodically referenced, but it was not until Daisy contacted me about my research project that we were finally able to meet. She had received a flyer about the project on “remittance networks” during a worksite visit from Pedro, a union organizer, who had encouraged workers to participate in the study. During our brief phone conversation, Daisy states, “Nada más, quiero decirte que yo no tengo papeles para viajar, pero yo tengo
responsabilidades a la colectiva. Me entiendes?, or “I just wanted to mention that I do not have papers [documentation] to travel, but I am active in the collective. You know?”

Daisy came to the U.S. in 1994, leaving her daughter, husband, and mother behind in Zacatecas. In Mexico, she worked various factory jobs while her husband was employed as an albanil or bricklayer. It was difficult to survive even on a dual income, but they were able to make ends meet. In 1993, tragedy struck when Daisy’s husband fell off a construction building leaving him permanently disabled. She says, “Yo recuerdo el dia cuando necesitamos enderezar los dos piernas con los maderas. No tuvimos dinero para ir al hospital.” “I remember the day when we had to straighten both of his legs with sticks. We could not afford to go to the hospital.”

Soon thereafter, Daisy felt she had no other option but to come to the United States:

Yo fue trabajando en Mexico, pero con una hija, mi mama, y esposo, estabamos muriendo. Los Estados Unidos fue mi unica opcion. Fue los Estados Unidos o nada, pues. I was working in Mexico, but with a daughter, mother and husband, we were dying. The U.S. was my only option. It was the United States or nothing.

Though Daisy is not able to see her family on a regular basis like some of the other couriers, she is well informed and connected to them abroad. She keeps in close phone contact, cada domingo, every Sunday, with her daughter, mother and husband. Moreover, Daisy is quite intimately involved with the household decisions and how various finances and investments are utilized back in Mexico. For instance, she is currently in discussion with her husband about the purchase of several acres of farmland to cultivate crops for local sale in their hometown. She says, “Estoy aqui, pero pienso que mi esposo quiere trabajar. Va a estar muy bueno para el y para nuestra familia,” “I am here, but I think my husband wants to work. This will be good for him and the family.” It is interesting how migrants like Daisy manage to “participate in familial events from a considerable distance” (Rouse, 1991: 13) and also, “mother from a [considerable]
distance" as well. She and I spoke at length about the affordability of such an investment, but also the opportunities that emerge for her husband and family back home. I was surprised, however, to find out that she would not be returning to Mexico in the near future. Daisy states,

"Pues, yo quiero mi familia, pero yo creo que mi vida esta aquí en los EEUU. Si todos están seguro con ellos y con la granja, todos están seguro conmigo. Me entiendes? No creo que voy a regresar a Mexico."

Well, I miss my family, but I think that my life is here in the U.S. If everything is secure with them and with the farm, everything is secure with me. Do you understand? I do not think I will return to Mexico.

Daisy frequents the Vigo Money Transfer Services counter at the Plaza Olvera Market in Downtown LA and wires $450 per month to her family in Zacatecas unless the couriers have a scheduled trip to the region at that particular time. Many of Daisy’s co-workers have visited her family and she says that they have become her second family of sisters. She then smiles as she expresses sadness about being the only sister who has not been able to visit her family. As a member of the remittance collective, Daisy assists in making sure that the packages and remittance money correspond to the proper addresses for delivery.

"La union es una familia muy grande. Es importante para ayudarnos. Muchas de nuestras familias están en Mexico, así es necesario para tener familia y una comunidad aquí. Desgraciadamente, no puedo viajar a Mexico, pero yo quiero ayudar mis compañeras como ellas me ayuden."

The union is really a big family. It is important to help each other. As our families reside in Mexico, it is crucial to create families and communities here. Unfortunately, I cannot travel to Mexico, but I want to help my co-workers as they help me.

Like Irma, the contradictions in gender relations that Daisy experiences are centered around her longing for her family in Mexico (‘I miss my family’), while simultaneously exercising her firm decision to remain in the United States (‘I do not think I will return to Mexico’). Daisy enacts her gender role as a “mother” and “wife” by providing for her daughter and husband and by keeping
in close ties as if she was a daily physical presence in their lives. However, she also challenges the traditional gender role of (always present) "mother" and "wife" through her autonomous decision to live apart from her family.

Dolores

"Yo tengo un trabajo para hacer y necesito los hombres en mi familia para ayudarme" ("I have a job to do and I need the men in my family to help me do it").

Dolores started as a courier woman about 7 years ago. She came to the U.S. from Jalisco in the early 1980s. Her older sister, Eva, had previously immigrated to Los Angeles working two jobs—as a part-time union janitor and as a nanny. Over time, through Eva’s connections with the union and with the help of her employer, ABM Janitorial, Dolores was able to secure full-time employment at a large shopping center in downtown L.A. Unlike the majority of her co-workers, Dolores is a permanent resident of the U.S. and travels “back home” once every two months delivering letters, packages, remittances and noticias or news.

She charges a set fee for her services—5-10% of the money she handles and approximately $10-$11 per pound for packages and larger items. Dolores is not married and does not have children, however, she says that she is very close with her father and two brothers back home. “Yo soy una janitor, pero me encantan las experiencias como una viajera. Son trabajos diferentes,” or “I am a janitor, but I love the experiences as a courier. They are different jobs,” she exclaims. Dolores has considered being a full-time courier, and perhaps starting her own courier business with some of the experience she has acquired through the collective. However, Dolores is equally concerned about relinquishing the health care benefits offered by her employer.

19 Just to clarify, Dolores’s intention to become a full-time courier does not affect the collective. She mentioned that she would solicit an entirely separate clientele base outside of the union.
Dolores is one of the few courier women who often drive her deliveries across the U.S.-Mexico border and into the neighboring towns of Jalisco. “Si, es mas facil y mas rapido por avion, pero...” or “It is easier and faster to fly, but...” As a result, she is able to transport slightly larger goods and materials during her travels such as small television sets, microwaves, and boxes full of children’s toys. I ask what her travel experiences were like at the border, she shrugs and says that she rarely has any problems. Dolores notes that overall there is a lot of corupcion, or corruption, in Mexico and sometimes the male border patrol agents will ask to open her packages and how much money she is bringing inside the country. Soon thereafter, she says, “esto es mi responsabilidad. La meta es para entregar las remesas. Para cruzar la frontera con estrategia.” “This is my job and my responsibility. The goal is to deliver the remittances. To cross the border with strategy.” When I asked Dolores what she meant by “strategy,” she replied,

...para darles unos pesos es mejor que arreglando las cajas al frontera. Todas las cosas son legales, por supuesto, nada mas dinero o regales, el treinta or treitcinco, pero a la frontera, ellos siempre estan chequiando.

...giving him [the border patrol agent] a couple pesos here and there is less trouble than me having to repackage the boxes at the border if they decide to check every item. Everything I bring in is legal—just the 30 or 35 packages of money or gifts—but at the border, they always check.

Upon arrival, Dolores is escorted by her two brothers and an uncle in Mexico when making her door-to-door deliveries. She recollects a frightening experience in the past when a few of her goods were stolen while she was walking alone through the neighborhood (in broad daylight!). She states,

A ver, es un poco mejor con un coche. Tambien hay cosas que yo puedo hacer sola mia, y otras cosas yo necesito la ayuda de los hombres.

And see, it is slightly better with a car. Also, there are things that I can do myself, and other things which require the assistance of men.
That said, she finds it in her best interest and in the interest of her clients to be surrounded by her male family members when carrying large sums of money and goods.

On this score, I am reminded of Sarah Mahler’s (1999) ethnography on transnational courier women from El Salvador. Mahler observed that about half of the remittance couriers were women, despite the risks involved in carrying large sums of money and goods (p. 710). Mahler attributed “the success of (mostly older) women couriers, [like Dolores], in terms of traditional gendered norms [in that] older women have established relations of trust through extensive social networks of kin and friends, and can rely on former for both male protection and assistance to cover familial responsibilities” (2003, p. 163). In this sense, Dolores’s narrative brings to light the ways in which traditional gender relations are not only reproduced and disrupted, but also negotiated. Dolores plays the role of “surrogate” mother and adheres to the “assistance of men,” but it is precisely this assistance, which enables Dolores to carry out her job as a courier. Following Pratt and Yeoh (2003), what I find most fascinating about Dolores is that she negotiates her identities and gender roles, and her “transnationalism works through—not over or apart from—locally embedded and existing social relations” (p. 163).

Anita

“Steve, mi esposo, es mi angel” (“Steve, my husband, is my angel”).

I was first introduced to Anita in November 2001. Anita was a fore(wo)man at Boeing Aircraft in Los Angeles and also the spouse of one of my co-workers, Steve, at SEIU Local 1877. Anita’s career as a courier woman started under rather unfortunate circumstances. Like Daisy, Anita first arrived from Zacatecas, Mexico in 1988 with her twin brother, Manuel. Upon arrival to the U.S., they had both secured jobs as janitors through a neighborly connection in
Mexico. Though unfamiliar with life in the U.S., they adjusted fairly quickly with the help of their co-workers and through the union. However, after three years as a janitor, Manuel decided to return to Mexico. Anita expressed that he was unhappy in Los Angeles and that he was worried about their parents who were both diabetics in Zacatecas. She says,

Le dije a Manuel para regresar a Mexico para cuidar a nuestros padres. Le dije que no hay ningun razon para preocuparse porque mandaria dinero cada mes. El quiere quedarse conmigo, yo creo, pero yo le dije que yo puedo hacerlo sola. Yo puedo cuidarme la familia.

I told Manuel to go home, to go back to Mexico and take care of our parents. I told him not to worry because I would send money home every month. I think he felt like he had to stay with me, but I assured him that I could do this myself. I would take care of the family.

In 1999, through an unfortunate series of events, Maria, one of Anita’s closest friends and co-workers, passed away. She was also from Tecas (short for Zacatecas), Mexico and did not have any family or relatives in the U.S. It is customary for co-workers, friends and the union to take up a collection of money to send back to families when a death occurs. In this case, Anita decided to personally deliver the sad news along with the collection of money to Maria’s son and her parents. Anita is still deeply affected by her friend’s death, but also mentions that her life as a janitor and remittance courier is done to commemorate and to celebrate Maria.

Anita is a full-time janitor, but travels once every two months to Zacatecas, her hometown. Anita charges the same fees as the other couriers (5-10% of money handled and $10-$11 per pound for packages), although, Anita prefers handling money over larger bulk items. She notes,

Cada persona es diferente, pero prefiero las cajitas, no los grandes. Pero todavía yo entrego la misma que otras mujeres. A veces las cajas son muy grandes. Uf!

I guess each person is different, but I prefer traveling with small packages, not the big items. But still, I deliver the same amount as the other women. Those boxes can be huge. Geesh!
Prior to her departure to Mexico, Steve, her husband, tries his best to arrange the necessary accommodations for her safety and the safety of her clients' goods. Having worked with the union for the past 20 years, Steve himself has established friendships and a web of connections with people living in Mexico. Understanding the dangers that come with delivering packages, especially from the U.S., and given that Anita travels alone, he ensures that someone physically accompanies her upon arrival in Mexico. Anita mentions that Steve has accompanied her several times in the past, but he is now responsible for caring for their two children in Los Angeles while she is away on business.

Anita refers to Steve as her angel. She says that she owes a lot to him. Anita explains to me that her U.S. passport is “un boleto a todos,” or “a ticket to everything.” She later states, “Yo puedo hacer mi trabajo porque Steve esta. No puedo hacer nada sin el.” or “I can only do my job because Steve is here to support. I can’t do much without him.” At the end of our interview, Anita mentioned that she continues to send $600 to her parents and to Manuel for diabetic medication. She would like to have them move to the U.S., but she says that they are reluctant to leave Mexico.

Unlike Irma, Daisy, and Dolores, the complex ways that Anita both reproduces and disrupts traditional gendered norms is intricately tied to her marriage to Steve, a U.S. citizen. For many years, Anita has worked hard, and independently, attending to the needs of her brother, Manuel, and her parents in Mexico. However, as Anita’s life, identity, and her accomplishments are intimately tied to her marriage to Steve (‘I owe a lot to him’), Anita’s contributions to her family may be valued or perhaps even seen only in conjunction with a man; for instance, her citizenship (‘I can’t do much without [Steve]’ or ‘a ticket to everything’) (Fouron and Glick-Schiller, 2001: 549). As much as I agree with this analysis, it may be useful also to think about
the various negotiations that take place amidst the contradictions of reproduction and disruption, namely the ways in which Steve takes the role of caretaker of their two children while Anita is away on courier business. Seen in this light, we can acknowledge the contradictions present in Anita’s transnational life, while considering the ways in which she mediates such contradictions as well.

**Teresa**

"Cual es ‘no match’? Yo vivo y yo trabajo, nadie es ‘no match’" ("What is ‘no match’? I live and I work, no one is a ‘no match’").

I met Teresa during a Social Security “No Match” Letters workshop in 2002. The meeting was jointly organized by the union and the National Immigration Law Center. During this two-day workshop held at the union office in Los Angeles, researchers, organizers, workers and a few janitorial employers came together to strategize a solution towards the hundreds of “no match” letters sent by the Social Security Administration (SSA) office. The letters indicated a discrepancy between the names or Social Security Numbers of janitors listed on the employer’s W-2 tax forms and federal SSA records. To the workers, however, a “no match” actually means, “prove your legality.” Teresa articulates,

‘No match’ significa que ‘todavia no eres legal.’ Hay bastante bastante razones para recibir una notificacion de ‘no match.’ Por ejemplo, un error de la computadora, la persona entrando los numeros. Hay muchos.

‘No match’ really signifies that ‘you are not yet legal.’ There are many many reasons to receive a ‘no match’ letter. For instance, a computer error, a mistake by the person entering the social security number. Many reasons.
Teresa was one of the janitors who had received a “no match” letter and was initially fired by her employer. Her case was soon brought to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and she was reinstated with full back pay.

Teresa left Guanajuato in 1991. When she first arrived to the U.S., she was employed as a janitor at the local Laundromat near her cousin’s apartment in Orange County, California. She was introduced to the union by one of her neighbors in the area. Teresa was initially waitlisted at the union, but she secured a swing-shift position almost a year later. As a union member, she has been one of the most vocal leaders in the fight against Social Security “no matches.” “Somos aquí y somos trabajamos. Nadie es ‘no match’” or “We are here and we all work. No one is a ‘no match.’”

Teresa is a member of the remittance collective, but like Daisy, she does not travel. When I asked her if she sent remittances back home to Mexico, she appeared reluctant to speak in detail about her family or her life in Mexico. Moments later, she showed me two pictures of her twin boys in Guanajuato. She said,

_Ellos viven con mi mama. A veces, creo que es mejor que no puedo entrar y salir en Mexico; siempre dejan los ninos. Pero, que puedo hacer? Siempre siento culpable. Pero, imaginate, si yo no vivia aqui._

Sometimes, I think it is better that I cannot go back and forth to Mexico. I would have to leave my children multiple times, then. Like I was always leaving them. But, what else can I do? I always feel guilty. But could you imagine them if I did not live here?

The contradictory ways that Teresa reproduces and disrupts traditional gender relations is interesting. First, Teresa is a strong and vocal leader around the injustices of Social Security “no match letters.” Therefore, she understands the inequalities within the immigration and legal system (‘We are here and we work. No one is a ‘no match’). As an undocumented worker, Teresa has challenged the many assumptions associated with migrant women—as politically...
uninvolved and passive. At the same time, Teresa’s last words bring to light the pain of transnational mothering and the sense of guilt that she feels for not being in the live presence of her children (‘I always feel guilty’). Though Teresa is mindful and critically aware of the injustices surrounding the immigration process, she continues to feel guilty and accountable for being away. From Teresa’s sorrows, I realized that the joys of migrancy also had a dark underside as well. The “messy” emotions of simultaneous pain, guilt, joy, and happiness, was common amongst many, if not all of the courier women.

Lilia

“Ojalá que mis hijas estudian y ser maestros y enfermeras, pero los janitors no” (“I hope my daughters will study hard and become teachers and nurses, but janitors, no”).

Lilia, like many of the women interviewed, stayed in the U.S. for longer than she had originally planned. Lilia first arrived to the U.S. in June of 1981. Her husband, Salome, immigrated to the U.S. several years earlier and found a job as a non-union janitor, working the graveyard shift in a commercial office park in the downtown core of Los Angeles. Lilia joined him two and half years later, leaving their two daughters in the care of her mother in Jalisco, Mexico. According to Lilia, the adjustment period in the U.S. took longer than expected. She laments,

_Cuando llegue aquí, fue muy difícil. No conocía a nadie y estábamos durmiendo en una cuarto muy pequeña con otra familia. En serio, queria regresar a mis hijas en Mexico. Yo sabia que la vida en Los Estados Unidos no fue facil, pero se parece imposible._

When I arrived to the U.S., times were difficult. I did not know anyone and we were sleeping in a small apartment with another family. In all seriousness, I wanted to return to my daughters in Mexico. I knew that life in the U.S. was not easy, but it often seemed impossible.
Within days of arrival, Lilia was able to gain employment working alongside Salome for the same janitorial company. Though barely earning enough to survive, she sent her first remittance after five days in the U.S. She states,

Fue un milagro. En 1985, la compañía no-union junto con otra compañía union. Por lo tanto, recibimos un poco más dinero y los beneficios de salud. Entonces, tuvimos la oportunidad para mandar $300 cada dos semanas. Pero, lo más importante, podemos ir al doctor.

It was a miracle. In 1985, our non-union employer was purchased by a larger union janitorial contractor; as a result, we received slightly higher wages and health benefits. Then, we were able to send home $300 every two weeks. But most importantly, we could go to the doctors.

Salome had been working for the janitorial company for longer than Lilia, and thus he had seniority in wages. However, when asked if both she and Salome remitted the same amount of money each month, Lilia was proud to admit that she set aside un poco mas, or a little more than her husband. She said,

Si, pero, tenemos hijas y el no sabe nada sobre las maquillas, los zapatos, y los vestidos. Ojalá que mis hijas estudian mucho y ser enfermeras, pero nunca janitores. Es más fácil para comprender porque yo soy mujer.

Yes, but having only daughters, my husband does not understand teenage girls—the makeup, the dresses, and the nice shoes. I only hope that my daughters would study hard and be nurses, but never janitors. I guess it’s easier for me to understand because I am a woman.

Lilia joined the courier collective in 2003. Through the unexpected sponsorship from her employer, several years ago, she is now a permanent resident of the U.S. and travels to Jalisco approximately five times a year making her deliveries. As a member of the collective, Lilia also plays an active role in assessing small neighborhood project ideas for her hometown. Not surprisingly, Lilia is quite familiar with hometown associations or los clubes de oriundos operating in the Los Angeles area. She tells me of her neighbors who are involved in La
Federacion de Los Clubes Zacatecas or the Federation of Zacatecan Clubs, one of the largest and oldest HTA’s in the area. She goes on to critique, however, the ways in which most of their projects are catered towards funding male activities such as soccer and baseball fields. She argues, “Mira a los fotos de los clubes. Ellos siempre estan en la tele y los periodicos. Y ellos siempre son los hombres. Puro hombres. Nunca mujeres,” or “Just look at the photos of the HTAs. They are always on TV and in the newspapers. And always, they are men. Totally men. Never women.”

“ Asi, como es la diferencia entre los clubes y la collectiva?” “So, how are these hometown associations different from the collective?,” I ask. Lilia responds,

Pues, primero, somos mujeres y somos informal. Los otros clubes son famosos y bastante politicos. No tenemos fotos con los politicos. Tambien, nosotros tenemos interes en nuestras hijas. Somos mujeres y queremos participar en cosas donde todas las mujeres, las ninas pueden jugar y estan miembros de la comunidad.

Well, first, we are women and we are an informal organization. The other hometown associations are famous and really political. We do not have photos with politicians. Also, we have an interest in our daughters. As women, we want to participate in things where women and girls in the hometowns can play and be active members of the community.

Throughout the course of the interview, this notion of “political”—its meanings, its implications—seemed worthy of further exploration, or perhaps explanation. How, for example, is it that the male hometown associations are more “political?” And what makes HTAs more or less formal? Luin Goldring’s (2001) analysis on the definition of “politics” as well as doing politics in a recent volume of edited essays on gender and immigration seem rather crucial to the current enterprise:

[…] Latino men tend to focus on enhancing their status, gaining in the realm of political positions and electoral politics. Latina women may also work in electoral politics, yet their definition of “politics” is more likely to include personal consciousness-raising and neighborhood and community issues and organizations (p. 342).
In the summer of 2005, Lilia was summoned by some of the women in Jalisco about possibly allocating funds for a local textile venture for the production of various clothing accessories for local and international sale in the U.S. She seemed reluctant about the idea: “pensando una biblioteca or algo como si, pero discutimos con al grupo,” or “I was thinking more a library or something along those lines, but we’ll discuss it with the group.” And yet, she also mentioned the importance of respecting the wishes and lives of the women in Jalisco. She continues,

La idea fue para establecer proyectos sin ropa, bolsas, carteras, pero la cosa mas importante es que todas las decisiones son de las mujeres alla. Aquí estamos para facilitar en las vidas de ellas porque nosotros no estamos con ellas. Las mujeres alla sabemos mas que nosotros.

The whole idea [of the local venture] was to establish projects without textiles, without clothes, wallets, or bags, but the most important thing is that the women in the hometowns make the decisions. We are here to help the lives of women because we are not with our families in Mexico. But the women in Mexico know more about their own lives than we do.

Lilia’s concluding remark illustrates just one of the contradictory ways that she both troubles and reproduces gender relations in regards to the women in Jalisco. The other contradiction, lies in her relationship with Salome, her husband. Lilia’s analysis of her own positionality vis-à-vis the women in her hometown is quite nuanced. As a remittance courier, Lilia is entitled to making decisions about how money is distributed, how often she flies home, and how she envisions the establishment of future projects in Jalisco. As someone with extensive knowledge (and critique) of male hometown associations, Lilia is weary of establishing a highly gendered and feminized project for just women (‘The whole idea was to establish projects without textiles, without clothes, wallets, or bags’). However, she simultaneously enacts gender roles and practices by encouraging her ‘daughters to study hard and be nurses, but never janitors’ and also maintaining gendered images of ‘makeup, dresses, and nice shoes.’
The second contradiction lies in Lilia’s relationship with Salome. Lilia has worked hard attending to the needs of her daughters in Mexico, and though she earns significantly less in wages than Salome, she also sends remittances more steadily than him. What does it mean that Lilia is able to openly criticize male dominated spaces like HTAs, while continuing to carry the burden of remitting more money to her family when she earns less in wages? For me, the most profound journey throughout the interview process with Lilia and the other couriers, is coming to realization that there are no ‘absolute’ truths or even easy answers when it comes to gender relations. It is interesting how the very contradictions in gender relations enable the courier women to have control, accountability, and mobility in their lives.

Aurora

"Estoy contenta, triste, y miedo—todo al mismo tiempo" (“I am happy, sad, and scared, all at the same time”).

I first met Aurora in the summer of 2000, during the citywide janitorial strike in Los Angeles, and I was briefly able to reconnect with her again in June of 2005. Aurora has worked as a janitor for the past 11 years and has become one of the most politically active rank-and-file leaders the union has seen in quite some time. There are even photos of Aurora standing next to then Democratic Vice-President, Al Gore, on the picket-line to prove it.

That summer in 2000, Aurora played a key role in negotiating an historic union contract with wage increases and full-family health care for all janitors in the Greater Los Angeles Region. She, like many of the women described below, was from a neighboring town in

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20 In 2000, Aurora was also responsible for negotiating a historic “non-paid Leave of Absence” clause in the bargaining contract. As is the case with many “undocumented” migrants, there are many instances when workers return home to Mexico, but later have difficulties in “crossing back” into the United States. Given the difficulties in “border crossings,” many janitors would not be able to make it back in time for their work schedules. The “non-paid Leave of Absence” clause stated that janitorial workers would be given a leave of absence up to 30-days (unpaid), as long as a call was received from the union office 24-hours prior to the start of their shift.
Jalisco, Mexico. Aurora is a single-mother, in her late forties, with a teenage girl and boy who live with her sister in Mexico. She came to the U.S. in 1981 and was granted status as a permanent resident under the provisions of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. Aurora is currently in the process of applying for her U.S. citizenship. When I interviewed Aurora last June, she was planning a trip back to Jalisco for her daughter, Marisol’s *quinceanera* party.

"Liz, quieres ir a una fiesta en Mexico?" or "Liz, do you want to go to a party in Mexico?" was the first question Aurora asked at the start of our interview. "Me encantaria, pero..." or "I would love to, but..." Prior to my arrival to Los Angeles, several of the union organizers had shared minor details of Aurora’s life as a courier, but it was not until we sat down that Aurora began to uncover the simultaneous emotions of pride, pain, and joy as a mother, a janitor and a transnational remittance courier. After a brief introduction about this research project, she asked if I had known the significance of her nickname *viajera quinceanera* and proceeded to tell me of its meaning.

A couple months ago, Aurora was engaged in routine travel back to Jalisco delivering money and gifts for her clients at the union. Aurora usually travels alone once every two to three months charging the same fees negotiated by her and her co-workers. Prior to Aurora’s departure, her co-workers purchased a camcorder to videotape their friends and families during their trips back to Mexico. She states,

*Muchos de los janitors son indocumentos y ellos no pueden visitar sus familias. La camara fue algo para estar conectados, o visible entre las fronteras. Claro, la camara no es mejor, pero fue un idea y parece que funciona bien.*

Many of the janitors at the union are undocumented and they are unable to see their families. The camcorder was a way to stay connected, or even visible across borders. Of course cameras and photos are not enough, but it was an idea and it seems to work.
For that particular trip, Aurora brought the camcorder to film the *quinceanera* party of her co-worker's daughter in Jalisco. Aurora (laughing as she tells me of her mediocre recording skills) has already managed to film three *quinceanera* parties. This month she is gearing up for her own daughter's celebration, hence her title *viajera quinceanera*.

The significance of the *quinceanera* festivities, is to symbolize a women's 15th birthday, and her "introduction into society." For months, Aurora has been planning for this occasion by setting aside the necessary funds for the *mariachi* bands, the venue, the food caterers, and other miscellaneous expenses that may arise during her visit. As Aurora has had the experience of planning a variety of *quinceanera* festivities in the past, she did not seem very nervous about logistical matters. Rather, she expressed a slightly different form of nervousness. The contradictions behind Aurora's emotions slowly began to surface as she explained her guilt for not permanently residing in Mexico with her children. She stated,

> Muchas veces, yo siento mal porque mis hijos están en México y hay bastante distancia entre nosotros. Yo vivo para ellos, Liz.

> Often times, I feel terrible because my children are in Mexico and there is great distance between us. I live for them, Liz.

But, moments later, she also explained that "es la unica manera," or "it is the only way."

With the $500 in remittances she sends home to her sister every month, her daughter and son are both able to attend private schools and receive private music lessons. She says,


> Those things would be impossible [to afford] if I work in Mexico. Impossible. But, it would be an impossibility as well if they lived here [in the U.S]. To live in
two places means that one needs to make very difficult decisions. There is a great distance, but I need to stay here. For them.

That comment, since the time I recorded it, has stayed with me partly because I could see how neither of these options seemed favorable to Aurora, but more so because of how her statement challenged my own normative assumptions about parenting, family unity, and perhaps even motherhood. Rhacel Parrenas (2005) levies a similar point about Filipino migrants and the plight of those mothers and fathers who have had to migrate to provide for their children economically but who must at the same time leave these very same children behind in the Philippines (p. 5).

Aurora, nevertheless, still managed to exercise her agency, through her decision to wait before having her children immigrate to the U.S. Aurora tells me that though she has a full-time job with benefits, she is still not financially stable to have her children come live with her. She will continue to visit at least once every two to three months. As our interview came to a close, I let Aurora know that I probably could not join her in Mexico for Marisol’s party. Like a thorough organizer, she invited me to the video screening of her party, which would be held at the union hall after her return.

Blanca

"Quiero que mi hija asista una escuela privada, es todo" ("I wish my daughter to attend a private school, that’s about it").

I was first introduced to Blanca in July of 2005. I had never met her prior to the interview. She was referred through a janitor who had been notified of the research project. She has been a union member for over 12 years now. Blanca came to the U.S. from Guadalajara, Mexico in the late seventies. She has a teenage daughter who lives with her grandmother; but as a “green card” holder, Blanca is taking steps to sponsor her daughter to the United States.
After a long introduction, Blanca laughs as she mentions that she has more fun being a courier than a janitor. Though she enjoys her job as a janitor, Blanca takes every opportunity to visit her daughter and family in Guadalajara. She laments,

Por supuesto; yo soy una janitor y es mi trabajo, pero yo quiero un trabajo como una mama todo el tiempo. Yo mando dinero a ella para todas las cosas que quiere, pero yo tengo dinero aquí por cuando viene.

Of course I am a janitor and it is my job, but I want a job as a full-time mother. I send money to [Laura] for whatever she wants to buy, but I have some money here for when she arrives.

Blanca charges the same fees as a courier, and has managed to save a small amount of money to hopefully send Laura, her daughter, to a private Catholic school in Los Angeles. Blanca mentions that she is recently divorced, but hopes that her ex-husband will remain in her daughter’s life and future.

When Blanca is not traveling she voluntarily spends her free-time at the Local making phone calls to those who have not yet paid their union dues. “Yo siento una policia, pero es importante para pagar,” “I feel like a police officer, but it is important to pay the dues.” Blanca frequents the Orlandi y Valuti, money-wiring agency, and sends remittances once a month, if necessary. She mentions that she sends home whatever she can and is convinced that Orlandi charges the least in service fees. In order to stay better connected, Blanca and her daughter talk several times a week ensuring each other that they will be together soon.

My interview with Blanca was extremely helpful. It was she who gave me the “inside” information on the best and worst remittance agencies. Blanca educated me on the top money-wiring companies and how much they charged per transaction. She says,

Lo uso todas las agencies de remesas, y es importante para recordar todas las cuotas. Western Union, no, bastante caro, pero muy facil para buscar. La cuota es once por ciento por cada remesa. Money Gram es mejor. Vigo es muy popular,
pero Orlandi es lo mejor. Lo mas barato y muy seguro. Pues, todos estan seguros, yo creo, pero Orlandi es mas rapido. Nada mas ocho por ciento por cada remesa.

I have tried every single remittance agency and it is important to keep track of all of the fees so you know. Western Union, no, it is really expensive, but really easy to locate. I think the fee is like 11% per transaction. Money Gram is better. Vigo is popular, but Orlandi is the best. It is the cheapest and quite secure. Well, I guess they are all secure, but Orlandi is expedient, and they charge only 8% per transaction.

Talking to Blanca forced me to think about the need for remittance senders to play an active role in the debate on remittances, and to learn from their knowledge of the remittance industry. Why was it that so many research studies and policy briefings had failed to include the perspectives of the remittance senders themselves? I realized that a comprehensive and inclusive research process would rightfully include, policy analysts, bankers, academics, and remitters as well.

Interestingly, the contradictory ways that Blanca both troubles and reproduces traditional gendered norms and ideologies are similar to that of Aurora. Blanca, like Aurora, is an outspoken leader and remittance expert at the union and at the workplace, challenging the various assumptions about the “natural” authority and leadership of men. On the other hand, Blanca also periodically visits her family sending gifts and remittances, which enhances her status as a “caring” mother though she is not always physically present (‘I send money to [Laura] for whatever she wants to buy’). As such, the gifts, like Aurora’s quinceanera parties, potentially reinforce Blanca’s family’s sense of social superiority marked by the cultural practices of the gendered class system of Mexico. In a similar ethnography on Haitian immigrants, Fouron and Glick Schiller (2001) note:

In a contradictory process that must be understood as part and parcel of the transnational constructions of gender, women free themselves individually from the gendered constraints that the status system places on their personal activities by migrating, but often they then deploy the wealth they obtain to fulfill obligations and obtain social status back home. In so doing, these women
contribute to the values that sustain the gender and class hierarchies in [Mexico]. And these hierarchies sustain a vision of the nation that is based on male power (p. 559).

This analysis applies to almost all of the courier women mentioned above. Many of the women have exercised their transnational mobility and have ‘free[d] themselves [to a certain extent] from the gendered constraints.’ However, they have also reinforced these very ‘gendered constraints’ through their ‘deployments of wealth.’

**Comparisons**

Though these are only brief sketches, I chose the stories of the eight women because their narratives bring to the foreground the varied textures of transnational migration experiences as they are lived and situated “on the ground” (Mahler, 1999; Smith, 2001). The stories force us to consider nuances in the lives of the migrant women and the ways in which contradiction, complexity, reproduction and possibility coincide with one another. In all cases, we see the importance of the local context to each woman’s experience of transnationalism. The couriers utilize their existing social relations and networks at the local level, in ways that help to facilitate their broader transnational agenda between real places.

The lives of Irma, Aurora, Dolores, Anita, Lilia, Blanca, Teresa, and Daisy are both similar and different. They have forged their own individual and collective identities as women, as entrepreneurs, as mothers, as janitors and as couriers. The women are uniquely engaged in a wide-range of political, economic, and social activisms in efforts to mobilize their communities both in LA as well as in Mexico. In all of this, the courier women simultaneously trouble *and* reinforce certain gendered norms and ideologies.

What I have attempted to illustrate are the complexities and the “messiness” that were in tension with one another during the migration process. One can argue that “going transnational”
has enhanced the mobility of women in many ways, equalizing the gendered division of labor at
the union, the workplace and even within the household. And even prior to “going
transnational,” some would argue that the establishment of the remittance collective itself has
allowed women to control and exercise their potential as an independent and self-employed
class, through which they exercise control over when, where, how and why their labor is used
within the larger collective.

However, “going transnational” has had the reverse effect, and has actually reinforced
patriarchal norms both within and outside the household (Pratt and Yeoh, 2003: 162). Regardless
of distance or the boundaries of the nation-state, women transmigrants are indeed “mothering.”
More to the point, the processes of social reproduction are now transnationalized. As seen in
many of the courier’s lives, distance does not lessen domestic burdens or overall
workloads—physically, psychologically, or emotionally—simply because mothers are “away.”
The burden of remitting, traveling, and caring happens not only over there, but here as well, in
which case, “mothering” may predominantly be viewed as a women’s job (Parrenas, 2001, p.
370-371).

In light of both statements then, it may be useful to think about the ways that “going
transnational” can do both—challenge and reproduce certain gendered norms and hierarchies. As
such, I refrain from arguing that courier women fully transform racial, class, and gender
divisions, or even transgress the intensity of neoliberal policies both at home and abroad. In other
words, the possibilities of “new social spaces” at the local, national, state, and transnational level
are not without power or gender inequities. However, this space is precisely the place where
dialogue and the imaginings of “new spaces and new social identities” can occur (Pratt & Yeoh,
2003: 163). The lives and identities of transnational courier women are not devoid or removed
from social structures, but rather, constituted by and through already established social relations and networks. Therefore, it is essential to think about the ways in which social transformations happen in particular places, and precisely in these hegemonic spaces and not solely in imagined and often abstract spaces. The following chapter is my attempt to illustrate how these “new social spaces and identities” are in fact negotiated, organized, and lived.
CHAPTER 3

Beyond Just Heroes and Victims

La Verdadera Historia de Los Superheroes (The Real Story of the Superheroes)
San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, 2005.

It is opening night at The Galeria Kunsthaus Santa Fe in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. The feature presentation is a photo exhibition entitled La Verdadera Historia de Los Superheroes or The Real Story of the Superheroes. This exhibition, however, is not what people expect. There is no Clark Kent (before Superman) or a Master Wayne (before his transformation into Batman). In other words, this photo installation does not include the kind of action heroes that people tend to marvel over. These are 12 action figures of a different kind. The artist is Dulce Pinzon, a Mexican-born artist who now resides in Brooklyn, New York.

Pinzon’s project consists of 12 color photographs of Mexican migrant workers dressed in the costumes of popular American and Mexican superheroes. Each photo pictures the worker in their work environment, and is accompanied by a short text including the worker's name, their hometown in Mexico, the number of years they have been working in New York, and the amount of money they send home to Mexico each week. Take the first photo for example—Aquaman.
Figure 3.1  Aquaman, From Dulce Pinzon’s “The Real Story of the Superheroes.”

Juventino Rosas
from the State of Mexico
works cleaning fish in New York
sends home $400 per week

Color prints mounted on Sintra
16" x 20"
2004/2005
Aquaman is Juventino Rosas from the State of Mexico. He is properly equipped in aqua-gear as he stands beside an industrial-sized sink cleaning fish for a living. He sends $400 each week to his family back home. The next photo displays Gatubela or Catwoman, really Minerva Valencia from Puebla, also fully dressed in black feline attire as she stands in the middle of a living room caretaking two white children.
In Figure 3.3, I introduce Maria Luisa Romero, a.k.a Wonderwoman. Like Minerva, she has originated from Puebla, but works in a Laundromat and sends $150 back home every week.

Pinzon’s project is artful, creative and provocative. As the series continues in this light, one can only be moved by the irony of her display—a non-white Catwoman, Aquaman, and Wonderwoman in action as they perform their daily duties as nannies, gardeners, and dishwashers; an employment opportunity perhaps that most average Americans would not (or
never) consider. Not surprisingly, as many migrant workers do in fact labor under often severe and unusual circumstances, it may not be so far off base to revere migrant workers as our forgotten “heroes.”

I am moved by Pinzon’s work and her desire to recognize the lives of brave women and men who somehow manage, without the help of any supernatural power, to withstand extreme conditions of labor in order to help their families and communities survive and prosper. Pictured in their everyday contexts of low-paid, low-skilled labor, these images of migrant women and men contain elements that fit both hero and victim representations. However, as migrant remitters have easily fallen into this discourse of heroism, I wonder whether the “hero” metaphor further redeployed this discourse and encourages migrants to take on the burdens of the state; or whether these images entrench migrant workers as victims. I want to pursue this quandary by further disrupting and complicating the ways that we think about migrant men and women as solely (national) heroes or hapless victims of exploitation. I want to highlight the multiple economic identities and political strategies that the migration experience has engendered for them. In other words, I want to think about the ways that economic identities exist beyond the hero/victim dichotomy.\footnote{I would like to thank Katherine Gibson, et al, (2001) and Geraldine Pratt (2004) for helping me come to this point through their own work with Filipina contract migrants.}

What concerns me about the perpetual “(super)hero” discourse in particular is that it perverts power and agency. In other words, it is made to seem that one’s ability to survive the powers of globalization rests in an external force that exists outside of the survival mechanisms and negotiations that migrants create for themselves and each other on a daily basis. I often wonder whether “heroizing” migrant workers actually appropriates their agency—of control and
accountability—but more importantly, as creators of their own subject-positions. As such, I am
drawn to Gibson, et al’s (2001) proposition to
disrupt the opposing narratives of heroism and victimization with an analysis of
class becoming, and offer support for the constitution of new subject positions for
[migrant workers], outside the static constraints of the hero or victim identity (p.
366).

For this reason, the interesting research question is not how transmigrants adapt to the
contemporary problematics of transnationalism and neoliberal state formations. Rather it is how
the actions of individual (and collective) agents who negotiate the contradictory structures of late
modernity have come to consolidate and contest different logics of liberalism in these
transnational spaces (Mitchell, 2001). Recognizing the agency of migrant workers opens the way
to seeing such individuals as progressive economic activists with many capabilities and
 Capacities to enact social and economic change (Gibson, 2001: 377).

Heroes and the Shadow State

As discussed in Chapter 1, the Mexican state has legitimized its own withdrawal of social
services through ideologies of neoliberalism, and various migrant organizations that have
stepped into the void created by the poverty of public goods and services. Starting in 2000, then
Mexican President, Vicente Fox, kicked off his election campaign by openly referring to migrant
men and women as “national heroes.”22 His comment was made in light of the countless numbers
of Mexican migrants who make annual trips back home during the Christmas season in order to
bring gifts and remittances to their families and friends.

Though I would agree that migrant workers possess hero-like characteristics in the face
of adverse circumstances, I am concerned that politicians have co-opted and “cashed in” on the
usage of the term “hero.” For example, migrants are recognized as “heroes” for doing the jobs

that no one else would do; "heroes" for sending money home to their families while doing jobs that no one else will do; and "heroes" for somehow successfully crossing one of the most militarized borders between two countries not at war (Sassen, 2006), in order to do the jobs that no one else will do.

Here, nationalist discourse problematically assumes migrant women and men as the "national heroes" whose remittances will transform an "underdeveloped" national economy into a vibrant (shadow) nation of capitalist entrepreneurs (Gibson, et al., 2001: 366). Ironically, when migrant workers are situated in a nationalist discourse and seen as individual agents exercising their rights to "free" international labor mobility and contributing to the generation of foreign exchange for Mexico, it is assumed that there is little need or will to take responsibility for their diminished citizenship rights in their destination country. Nor is there a need to agitate to protect their economic, civil, and human rights (p. 381). The focus is taken away from the public accountability of the state and redirected towards the individuals who must now take on the burdens of the state. This is not to deny the agency of migrant men and women who do in fact voluntarily contribute their services for the survival of their families in Mexico. Rather, it is a call to perhaps think critically of the role of migrant workers vis-à-vis the nation and the rhetoric of heroism.

This research project and participatory observation process with *mexicana* courier women has dispelled the dominant representations of women as "heroes" of national development or "victims" of a global capitalist economy (Gibson et al., 2001 367). As we shall soon see, courier women are reworking their economic relations in ways that situate them beyond the confines of the hero/victim dichotomy. Collectively, the couriers have organized themselves using the variety of skills and techniques that they have acquired through their local labor union. This
organization has facilitated an improvement in their economic circumstances and has offered a means of critiquing and circumventing an extremely exploitative remittance industry. This is not to imply that their lives are without struggle, but rather to recognize the importance to look beyond the linear views of women as national heroes or hapless victims towards openings for other economic identities and alternatives (p. 372).

**Working Feminism**

One Saturday afternoon in June 2005, I had the opportunity to observe how the remittance collective conducted their business. These business meetings were important because they enabled me to concretely visualize and experience how feminist theory and practice applied to real people in real times and places. The meeting took place in Valeria’s home, and sitting there amongst the couriers—Dolores, Ana, Valeria, Isabel, Aurora, and Rosalina—and being surrounded by butcher paper charts, laminated maps of Mexico, and boxes full of packing envelopes, facilitated a better understanding of the agency involved in the couriers’ lives. I wanted to share a short transcription of the meeting that took place...

*Ana:* *Buenas tardes a todos. Isabel, es tu turno para facilitar hoy, sí?*

Good afternoon everyone. Isabel, it is your turn to facilitate, isn’t it?

*Isabel:* *Sí. Pues, nuestras metas para hoy es para planear el próximo viaje a Jalisco. También, es la quinceanera de nuestra princesa, Marisol. Aurora va a ir a Lisco (short for Jalisco) por cuantos días?*

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23 I borrow the phrase “Working Feminism” from the title of Geraldine Pratt’s most recent book (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2004). I find the title useful in conveying many of the concepts of feminist theory and practice, which I try to address in Chapter 3.
Yes. And our goal for today is to plan our next trip to Jalisco. Also, the 15th birthday of our princess, Marisol, is coming up. Aurora is going to Lisco for how many days?

*Aurora:* Nada más cuatro, yo creo.

No more than four (days), I believe.

*Isabel:* Ella va a recordar la fiesta, por supuesto. (Smiles) Hay preguntas? Logistico?

Okay pues (as she walks over to the butcher paper chart on the wall below, where tasks and follow-up assignments have been designated), donde estamos ahorita?

Valeria, quieres empezar?

She will be recording the festivities, of course. Are there any questions?

Logistics? So, where shall we begin... Valeria, would you like to start?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Organizadora (Organizer)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Cosas Para Hacer (Things to Do)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Promixos Pasos (Next Steps)</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valeria</td>
<td>-Pone el dinero en los paquetes (Package the money)</td>
<td>-Verificar todos los direcciones y los numeros de telefono para Aurora (Verify all of the address and telephone numbers for Aurora).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora</td>
<td>-Los mariachis</td>
<td>-Confirmar todos los planes (Confirm all arrangements).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-La comida ( prep food)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Las fotos (photos)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-La ropa (clothing)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolores</td>
<td>-Colecta los donaciones para la fiesta en general (Collect donations for the party in general)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>-Videocamara para la fiesta</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Get the videocamera for the party)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabel</td>
<td>-Los recibos de los fondos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

24 In Chapter 2, I introduced Aurora. Our interview took place in the throws of Aurora preparing for her trip to Jalisco to celebrate Marisol, her daughter’s 15th birthday. The meeting, which is taking place at Valeria’s home, is the planning meeting for this visit. I attended and observed the organizing meeting to better understand the workings of the collective.
Valeria: Si, no hay bastante paquetes para este viaje. Tal vez treinta paquetes de las remisas, pero paquetes grandes no. Nada más cinco, yo creo. Todas las direcciones están verificados, así, todo bien. Es todo. Y también, todos van a estar a la fiesta, yo creo.

Sure. There are not very many packages to prepare for this upcoming trip. Maybe thirty money envelopes, but no big packages for delivery. No more than five, I believe. All of the addresses for the deliveries have been verified, so, everything is on track. That is about it. And one more thing, I think everyone will be at the party to pick up their deliveries.

Aurora: Companeras, gracias a todos. Soy un poco nerviosa, verdad? Ustedes saben que no es mi primera quinceanera, pero es la hora para mi hija. También, este viaje va a estar más fácil porque, creo que toda la gente va a estar a la fiesta para recibir las remisas. Mi primo va a recordar la fiesta (mejor que yo, ojalá!), así, yo regreso con la fiesta! Bueno.

Ladies, thank you for everything. I am a little nervous (about the trip), you know? As you all know, this is not my first quinceanera, but this time it is for my daughter. Also, things will be easier because all recipients will be at the party to receive their remittances (rather than have to go door-to-door). Also, my cousin will be videotaping the party, hopefully much better than I can! So, I shall return with the live party on tape! Great.
Isabel: Rosalina, que mas, mija?

Rosalina, what else, my dear?

Rosalina: A ver, no hablamos sobre esto al reunion pasado, pero pienso que es importante para hablar sobre las ideas para los proyectos en Lisco. Tenemos donaciones y un poco dinero, tal vez $950, verdad? Creo que es bueno para discutir con la gente alla sobre las cosas que ellos necesitan. Que piensan, Ustedes? O hay mas ideas?

So, we tabled this discussion at the last meeting, but I think it would be important to talk about possible projects in Jalisco. We have donations and a little money, around $950, is that correct? I think it would be a good idea to discuss with those living there, what it is that they need most. What do you all think? Or are there any other ideas?

Ana: Hable con Andrew y hay muchos libros al Local. Libros para todos, no?

Well, I spoke with Andrew (the Director at Local 1877), and there are plenty of books at the Local. Books for everyone I assume, right?

Aurora: Pues, yo puedo hablar con la gente a la fiesta. Cual es lo mas importante para ellos. Tambien, podemos hablar despues de la fiesta.

Well, I can talk with the people at the party. What is most important to them? We can have a discussion after the party as well.


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25 Aside from the money that is being delivered to families in Mexico, I have been told that the collective also collects donations from union members for larger community-wide projects in their hometowns. Unlike the HTAs, the project ideas of the collective are on a much smaller scale as mentioned above.
pasado cuando hablamos sobre los clubes de oriundos y como todos los proyectos son para los hombres. Las mujeres nunca están incluidos. No es necesario para crecer un proyecto solamente para las niñas, pero un proyecto donde todos pueden participar.

Good idea. And are the books in Spanish or English? I like the idea of books because they are for everyone. We will check on this next time. (Pause). I just think that it is very important for projects to include everyone there. We discussed in the past about the hometown clubs and how they are always men and the girls are usually not included. I am not saying that the next project should solely include women, but rather, something that everyone could enjoy.

Aurora: Estoy de acuerdo. Y hablamos un rato sobre el cuarto de foto. Nosotros queremos ver fotos de Mexico, así la gente puede tomar fotos, o algo. Yo no se sobre eso porque no uso cameras, pero yo se que hay personas a la union hablando sobre eso. Pues....

You are absolutely correct. And we did talk a little bit about the photo room. We want to see more photos of our towns, so maybe we can have the people involved in taking photos and sending us the cameras? I am not so sure about this project because I do not use cameras, but I heard people at the union talking about it.

So...

Rosalina: Yo pienso que es mas facil para discutir con nuestras familias. Que piensan ellos? Ustedes creen que nosotros podemos collectar dinero para dos proyectos? Ahorita, tenemos casi $950 en dinero para un proyecto, pero depende en el proyecto, no?
I think it would be easier to talk to our families as well to see what they think. Do you think we can gather enough money for two projects? Right now we have $950, you said, but I think we can use the money depending on the project.

Aurora: *A ver. Yo hablo con la gente alla en Lisco para obtener un idea. Queremos incluir toda la gente, asi yo hablo con la gente primero. Que piensan Ustedes?*

Okay, so what about I talk to some of the people in Lisco while I am there and we can get a better idea. We want to include everyone, so maybe I can talk with the people first. What do you think about this?

Everyone: *Perfecto.*

Perfect.

**Sites of Solidarity**

And so goes an organizing meeting of the remittance collective, which takes place once every two weeks in preparation for the next trip to Mexico. I sit intently among the workers as an observer, a researcher, an acquaintance, and an audience. I am fascinated by how the meeting is meticulously organized, facilitated and conducted; mirroring (often identically!) the weekly hours-long organizing and strategy meetings held at the union office with the janitors.

The level of sophistication at which the women operate is humbling. From the rotating facilitators, to the *Para Hacer,* or To Do lists, down to the organizing charts, the union has shown itself to be more than an advocacy or service oriented organization for low-wage migrant workers. And, migrant workers have shown themselves to be capable of utilizing their labor union as more than simply a service-oriented agency as well. The union has become an integral

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26 The organizing meetings are open to all of the couriers, but those who attend on a weekly basis are usually those who are involved in upcoming trips to Mexico. Because couriers are traveling at different times and to different destinations, there are multiple meetings and agendas taking place simultaneously.
site for migrant workers in Los Angeles to learn various transnational organizing and political mobilizing tools to best suit the context and realities of their everyday lives. I would also like to acknowledge the level of consciousness that the courier women have in regards to gender relations. Initially, I had assumed that I would have to ask leading or even probing questions about the gender dynamics of the remittance collective. However, the couriers were (already) very aware of their role and positionalities, not only within the collective, but within their own households, and also in relation to the larger scope of male hometown associations operating in Los Angeles.

For instance, during these collective meetings, the site (or sight) of Valeria’s home, a domestic space, also transitions into an alternate communal space with her co-workers. I am fascinated by this transition because my analysis of “domestic” in relation to women has been (and almost always) viewed as an oppressive and hegemonic space; a space that for so long has failed to recognize women’s labor inside the household. What I did not consider, however, were the ways in which this domestic space can be transformed by and facilitate women’s political organizing. The living room, which is most often occupied by Valeria’s husband and two children is now, though temporarily, her space to conduct her business. Valeria, even if briefly, exercises her own autonomy as an organizer and member of a workers’ collective. Drawing from a previous conversation, Valeria fully acknowledges that most of her time at home is in fact spent in areas in and around the kitchen, and she is also aware that the household “business” will commence as usual once the remittance meeting is over. She states,

*Yo se que la casa no es propio mio, pero cuando tenemos una reunion, el espacio es de nosotros. Por supuesto, todo cambio despues de la reunion, pero durante la reunion, es de mio.*
I know that this house is not solely mine, but during the meetings, this space is for the women. Of course, everything changes [in the household] after the meeting, but during the meeting, it is mine.

With time, however, I have come to interpret this space as a transforming space—one that is changing and continually evolving. Courier women have pushed gender and the remittance networks along new trajectories, further illuminating the more nuanced possibilities of creating "new spaces and new social [and economic] identities for both men and women vis-à-vis each other (Pratt & Yeoh, 2003, p. 163).

**The Service Employees International Union Local 1877, Justice For Janitors**

SEIU Local 1877 has laid the groundwork for migrant workers to engage in multiple economic, social, and political aktivisms. The union has been very progressive and key on issues of collective and collaborative power, which courier women have manifested in their own work both *here* and *there*. During this research process, I thought considerably about the *mobility* of the courier collective, as well as the mobility of the union. Given the current political climate of increased security and violence at the U.S.-Mexico border, SEIU Local 1877 has established a satellite office along the border-town of San Diego, California. Despite the efforts by the U.S. to secure the border from undocumented Mexican migrant workers, the union had found that some migrant workers crossed the border daily in order to work in San Diego. Over time, the union has been actively involved in broader political activities such as organizing campaigns around INS deportations, family health benefits, as well as immigration policies that adversely affect domestic working conditions (i.e., leave of absences). It is striking the ways in which the union continues to organize outside the local political arena of LA and into other local spaces such as San Diego.
As previously mentioned, the couriers and the union have considered engaging in small-scale "joint-venture" establishments in Mexico—mini-projects such as reading centers (not yet libraries), where people can buy books; or photography centers, where pictures taken by local Mexican artists (who may be family members and friends of the couriers) can be bought and sold. In the past, the couriers have operated more independently, delivering goods and services that benefit their individual households. Recall Daisy, for instance, who is involved in remitting funds to her husband in Zacatecas in hopes of establishing a local farming venture. However, recently, the courier women have also been exploring potential project ideas that would benefit all members of their community in Mexico while utilizing the established networks in which they are already members.

As such, the strategies pursued by both the courier women and the union reflect the recognition of the multiple economic identities of migrant service workers. Janitorial workers occupy a poorly paid and exploited position in the labor market. But, as Gibson, et al. (2001) note in relation to Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, "their individual earning capacity in one national context, when collectivized and converted into another national currency, opens up economic possibilities of a substantial nature" (p. 380). The union, very specifically, has illuminated the ways in which the lives and identities of migrant women are not removed from social structures, but rather constituted, negotiated and strategized through already established social relations and networks.
Collaborating Across Difference

The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference.

--Audre Lorde (1984), Sister Outsider

In her *U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?*, Daphne Patai (1999) levies an important critique of the possibility of feminist researchers “to write about the oppressed without becoming one of the oppressors” (p. 139). There she concludes that based on the actual conditions of the real world today, such absolute ethical research is not possible. I think about Patai’s assessment in light of my own quandaries about “collaborating and researching across difference.” While I am in agreement that “in an unethical world, we cannot do truly ethical research” (p. 150), it may be disempowering for all parties, if it ends here. As a result, it may be more useful to shift the debate away from ethical possibilities and/or impossibilities and more so, on how we can further struggle to make the processes of collaboration more ethical within these unequal confines and arenas of power.27

Throughout the research process, and while conducting interviews with both documented and undocumented migrant women, I became conscious of my own positionality and the “politics of [my] location” vis-à-vis the research subjects (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994). What did I have in common with Dolores, Aurora, Anita, and the other women? And what was this “commonality” that we could all relate to in our daily lives? I needed the women for the research project, but I never thought to ask what it was that they needed from me. I believed that the only way that “true” collaboration and solidarity could and would occur was if we all had the same life experience(s) to share; and I was unsure if these experiences were present among us. I feared

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27 Some of the ideas presented here are drawn from a previous essay written for Geography 520 in the fall of 2004.
that Patai was right after all: Are U.S. Academics and Third World Women an ethical impossibility?

I too had similar concerns about forging a universal or global sisterhood (Mohanty, 1991), and having the desire to uncritically claim a united front between the courier women and myself. I believed by doing so would be an act of bad faith. However, there was something equally unsatisfying about agreeing to the "impossibilities" of common ground and solidarity as well. I was aware that our relationship was not based on an identity or a shared set of experiences, and I knew that we all shared a common distaste for remittance agencies that profited from the lives of working people. I hoped that that would be a starting point, if it could be called that. Then, I was reminded of Chandra Mohanty (2003) and her thoughts on the politics of difference and solidarity. She writes, "Rather than assum[e] an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together" (p. 7).

I believe that everyone involved in this project has chosen to "work and fight together." I want this manuscript to be a tool, like the many tools and resources that the migrant women have utilized in their transnational struggles. As remittances grow with pressures to commercialize and corporatize the activity, I want to know where it is that we all stand—as researchers, remitters, migrant workers, policy makers, and activists.

So ironically, what began as a study of being conscious of the differences that divide women—not just between myself and the couriers, but also between couriers—ended with a discussion that attempts to find common ground among women who are positioned differently in terms of race, class, nationality, and ethnicity (Pratt, 2002: 196). I am uneasy about making such an attempt, though it is precisely the discomfort that I would like to assess.
I came to this realization about collaboration and solidarity with the help of Geraldine Pratt (2002), as well as a dear friend and colleague, Francis Calpotura, the Executive Director of the Transnational Institute for Grassroots Research and Action (TIGRA). It occurred to me that the struggle to collaborate across difference was not something new, and in fact, organizations such as TIGRA have made it a priority to do exactly this. The goal of TIGRA is ambitious: to engage—and hopefully organize—immigrants at the grassroots level around the issue of remittances, using the common experience of sending money home as a way to talk about migration, exploitation, and more recently restitution in the form of reinvestment.

There is a distinct lack of consumer advocacy in the remittance market. Unlike banks, which are subject to strict federal laws, money-transfer services are regulated by states, which have looser controls (Calpotura, 2006). It is not easy for consumers to compare costs between wiring services simply because many of the costs are hidden. Aside from the remitting fees, often times the recipients are also forced to pay upon collection of the money. TIGRA is organizing across the U.S. in hopes to create an alliance amongst all migrants who send remittances abroad. The intent is not to homogenize the experiences of migrant workers, but to talk about the nuances amongst workers who share the experiences of sending money back to their hometowns.

Thus far, the conversations around remittances has been a credentialed, invite-only affair, dominated by the usual clique of academic and government specialists, who debate best practices and publish numerous reports and papers. There has been little movement, however, towards encouraging the senders themselves to play an active role in the debate or viewing remittances within an economic justice context. That said, members of TIGRA are presently on tour, visiting various migrant communities throughout the U.S. to bring awareness about remittances and how
senders themselves can hold money-transfer agencies accountable. During a remittance workshop held in New York City, with migrant taxi-drivers, janitors, and textile/garment workers, a woman raises her hand and states,

They [the wiring agencies] should charge us only 50 cents to send money. If everyone here in this room sends money home, that's a lot in fees. I have plenty of ideas on how to spend this kind of money in my hometown.  

Thus, organizing and creating alliances around the remittance industry seemed to me, a space for collaborating and strategizing across our differences—not only between individuals, but also between institutions.

Border Patrolling…Again

On May 15th, 2006, President Bush declared 6,000 National Guard Troops to the U.S.-Mexico border. In his prime-time address, he called for “control of the border and a stop to the flood of illegal immigrants.” In this very same keynote, he announced a “support” plan that would give many of the 12 million undocumented migrants living in the United States a chance at citizenship. Bush’s statement is not new or surprising, but rather part-and-parcel of the historic inequality of Mexican migration into the U.S.

What is most fascinating about Bush’s address is the sheer timing. His statement comes on the heels of the vast front-page news articles, blogs, and television coverage about “The New Foreign Aid”; “Global Remittances”; and “Migrant Power.” How must one reconcile more
border surveillance and migrant remittance power? And, how must one reconcile a more militarized border and a simultaneously friendly NAFTA agreement between the adjacent countries? Or how must one reconcile doing low-wage work that many in the United States will not consider, while being arrested (on the border) for wanting to do the necessary work that no one in the U.S. will consider? I write out of anger, fear, and frustration. What does it mean to commend the work of poor, migrant Mexican “heroes” while simultaneously closing the door on their efforts to survive?

Figure 3.5

These “Caution” signs are visible mostly along the U.S.-Mexico border. They are intended to warn drivers of the “illegal” aliens crossing the roads.

Isidro Mata, a 25-year-old McDonald’s maintenance worker, polishes a sign at one of the chain’s Los Angeles restaurants. Much of the money he earns he sends home to relatives in Mexico.

Photo: Don Bartletti, LA Times

Guadalupe Vides, 74, kisses an envelope containing a money order sent by her son in Bakersfield.

Photo: Don Bartletti, LA Times
Rethinking Migration

In light of the recent immigration debates and the further militarization of the U.S-Mexico border, I have come to think about the persistence and the inexhaustibility of migrancy. As many of the courier women have children back in their hometowns, I often wonder what migration means to them. What concerns me is the cyclical nature and the persistence of neoliberal state economic policies in the present, but also for future generations. What, for example, does the future hold for the children of undocumented migrants living in Mexico?

I propose a series of unanswerable questions above. Transnational migration has brought a constellation of varying experiences—of hope, sadness, joy, and pain. My intentions throughout this project were not to formulate “truths” or “conclusions,” but to present the nuances and details in the lives of transnational courier women. Though my thoughts on migration remain inconclusive, I remain hopeful in our desires to collaborate and speak and listen across worlds (Nagar, 2002). Working through such discomforts (of power and knowledges) may help in “creat[ing] more equitable border-crossings in academia and beyond” (Pratt & Yeoh, 2003: 164).

31 Though these are not fully formulated ideas, they are part of an ongoing discussion brought forth by Geraldine Pratt.
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Transnational Institute for Grassroots Research and Action (TIGRA) Newsletter, January 2006.


Appendix I

Community Remittances Audit
This survey is intended to gather information about the processes of economic remittance in hopes of improving the conditions for senders and receivers. The information provided will not be used for any purposes other than the TIGRA campaign. We are a non-governmental and non-profit organization.

1. How often do you send money (to another country)? (Select one)
   ☐ Once a month ☐ Twice a month ☐ Once every 3 months ☐ Once every 6 months ☐ Once a year
   ☐ Other ____________________________

2. Where do you send money to? ____________________________

3. In your most recent transaction, how much did you send?
   ☐ $50 ☐ $100 ☐ $150 ☐ $200 ☐ $250 ☐ $300 ☐ $300 to $500 ☐ $500 to $1000
   ☐ More than $1000 (Specify) $____________

4. What fee were you charged for sending? $__________________________

5. Who did you send to?
   ☐ Sibling ☐ Spouse ☐ Parent ☐ Grandparent ☐ Child ☐ Other _________________

6. What was the money used for? (Select all that apply)
   ☐ Education ☐ Food ☐ Medical ☐ Housing ☐ Utilities ☐ Other ______________________

7. Were they charged for receiving? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ If Yes, how much $____________

8. Did you also lose money on the exchange rate? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don’t Know

9. Please estimate the amount of money you’ve sent over the past 12 months:
   $__________________________

10. In your most recent transaction, which vendor did you use for sending?
    ☐ Western Union ☐ MoneyGram ☐ Citibank ☐ Bank of America
    ☐ Wells Fargo ☐ Courier/People traveling ☐ Other wire transfer service__________________

11. Please check the other services you use there:
    ☐ Check Cashing ☐ Money Order ☐ Payday Loan ☐ Bank Account
    ☐ Credit Card ☐ Home Loan ☐ Car Loan ☐ Telegram
    ☐ Notary ☐ Other (Specify) ____________________________
12. Why did you select this vendor? (Select all that apply)
- Lowest Fees
- Convenient hours/days of operation
- Location near your home
- Location near recipient home
- Referred by friend or family
- Other

13. What did you like about their service? (Select all that apply)
- Treated you with respect
- Spoke your native language
- Explained transaction well
- Employees were helpful
- Other

14. In your experience, which of these statements is most accurate:
- The cost of sending remittance is reasonable because the money arrives fast; or
- The cost is excessive because of high fees, unfair exchange rates, or hidden charges.

15. Money transfer agencies made billions of dollars from transactions such as yours. If these
businesses were to reinvest some of their profits back in your community, what kinds of services
do you want supported?
- Low-cost or free childcare
- Low-cost or free English classes
- Low-cost or free bus passes
- Low-cost or free bank accounts
- Other

16. This survey is being conducted in many communities across the country and the world. Do you
want to be part of a network of remitters trying to improve our communities here and back home for
our families?  Yes  No

We'd like to keep in touch with you during the campaign. Can I ask a few questions about you?

17. When did you arrive in the United States?

18. What factors pushed you to leave home?
- to find work
- to reunite with family
- to further education
- to escape conflict/war
- Other

19. Can you tell me a little bit more about you?

Name: ________________________________  Mr./Mrs./Ms.  First  Middle  Last

Occupation: ________________________________________________________________

Address: _________________________________________________________________

City  State  ZIP (mailing code)

Phone: ___________________________  Email: _________________________________

Thank you for participating in this survey. We look forward to bringing you new information about
opportunities for improving the remittance industry for you and your family.

Name of Interviewer: _______________________________________________________

Interview Date: ______________________/___________________/__________
Appendix II

Children of Courier Women. Photograph by Liz Lee.