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Case Studies in Contemporary Anthropology

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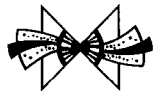
Labor *and* Legality

An Ethnography of a Mexican Immigrant Network



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45. Urbina 2009.
46. Passel and Cohn 2009.
47. De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003; Massey et al. 1994; Ngai 2004; Sassen 1988.
48. Gorman 2005.
49. Porter 2006a; see also Preston 2006.
50. Characteristics of the service economy and its workforce are not given but are continuously created through state activities and everyday interactions between workers and managers (Gray 2004; Zlolniski 2003). As Gray (2004) points out, there is nothing inherent to the service sector that renders some jobs high-paying and others low-paying. Rather, low wages in the service sector are the function of a confluence of factors, including: lack of unionization, social degradation of low-end service sector jobs, and policies that undermine organization efforts and differentiate sectors of the service labor force by race, gender, and immigration status (Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Fine 1996; Gray 2004; Heyman 2001; Kearney 2004; Stepick and Grenier 1994). Also, Zlolniski (2003, 2006) has shown that the labor flexibility of immigrant workers is not an intrinsic characteristic but is continuously negotiated and challenged in interactions between managers and workers (see also Gomberg-Muñoz 2010).
51. Passel 2006; Passel and Cohn 2009; see also Moss and Tilly 2001; Sassen-Koob 1981; Smith-Nonini 2007; Waldinger and Lichter 2003; Zlolniski 2006.
52. De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003; Kocchar 2005; Mehta et al. 2002.

CHAPTER THREE

Jumping and Adjusting To Life Under the Radar

MIGRATION: CHUY'S STORY

I had never really thought seriously about coming to the U.S. I began working with leather when I was twelve years old, and by the time I graduated high school I was making belts and boots—I can do everything but sew them together. I earned pretty good money, like 1,200 pesos [about 100 dollars] a week. My brother and some of my friends were in Chicago and they said they liked it and everything, but I was making good money too, so I didn't need to go to the U.S. like a lot of these other guys.

Then one morning, I think it was a Monday at 7:30 in the morning, my neighbor Mateo came over. He was an older guy and he was actually a U.S. citizen, and he said, "Chuy, come on, we're going to the United States!" And I was like, "What are you talking about?" And he said he was fighting with his wife because she had hid all of his legal papers and he wanted to go work in the U.S. for a while. And so I said, "All right, let's go, let's see what happens." I just decided right there. I thought I would stay for a year then come back home.

I told my mom and she asked me, "You really want to go?" I said, "Yeah, I want to go." And she said okay, then she said a prayer and made the sign of the cross over me, to bless me. That was the last time I saw my mom, nine years ago. After that, we went to the school to say goodbye to Mateo's kids. It was so surreal, so strange.

We took a plane to Tijuana and went to Mateo's uncle's house. The next day, his cousin called some *coyotes* [people smugglers] that he knew, and they came and took us to Mexicali. They brought us to a ranch where a bunch of people were waiting, like twenty-five people,

in a house. The coyotes bought us chicken and tortillas, and they sent us to go buy water and bread from the corner store to bring with us. I bought some bread and a gallon of water for me and Mateo.

At first there were men, women, and children, but then the coyotes said, "Okay, all of the women, children, and older people are going first. We're taking you in a van, so you won't have to walk as much." And the men said goodbye to their wives and children, and they left. And there were like fifteen of us left. As soon as it got dark out, another van came, and we all got in. We rode for about twenty minutes before the van dropped us off close to the border. There were no lights, but the moon was bright so we could see.

We got out of the van and the lead coyote said, "You are all going to follow me and do exactly as I say. You have to listen to me because I'm going to tell you how to do it." And we started walking along these dirt and sand paths. We walked in a single-file line, stepping in each other's footsteps, with the lead coyote in front, another coyote in the middle, and the last coyote erasing our footsteps with a branch. The lead coyote was scouting for the Border Patrol and checking the tire tracks of their vehicles. They can tell how long ago their trucks passed and he knew when they would be coming back. We walked like that until daylight, like eight or nine hours.

As we were walking, one of the guys twisted his ankle; he was like fifty years old and he couldn't go on. Mateo told me, "Go ahead, don't worry, I will catch up with you later," and he stayed with the guy. So we kept walking but Mateo and this guy stayed behind.

Mateo had the gallon of water with him, and I had the bread with me in my backpack, so by daylight I wasn't tired, but I was thirsty. As the sun was coming up, we took a break so the coyotes could scout for the Border Patrol. We sat down and I said to the guy next to me, "Do you have any water? I'm really thirsty." He thought about it and said, "You know what, I'm sorry man, but this is all I have." I told him, "It's cool, don't worry about it." Then, a couple of minutes later he told me, "Here man, have some water," and he handed me his bottle of water.

Then the coyotes came back and said that the Border Patrol was coming. They told us to hide and not to follow them if they ran. The lead coyote pointed to some trees in the distance, less than a mile away, and he said, "Wait for it to be quiet, then go to those trees and we will pick you up in a little while. If you get caught, it's okay, we will send someone to Mexicali to get you. Don't worry." Now we

could see the trucks getting closer; there were two trucks and a small plane. I hid underneath some bushes, there were four of us hiding under there. Some of the other guys ran but got caught by the Border Patrol. The patrol dogs saw us hiding, but they were leashed and the police were asking the other guys, "How many are you? How many are you?" And they told them, "No, this is all of us, except for two guys that got left behind. One of them is hurt." So they left to go get Mateo and the other guy, and they never saw us.

We ran to the trees and we waited there all day. I took out my bread, and another guy had tuna, and another guy had sweet bread, and another guy had water, so we all shared. And we told our stories, right, of where we were going and everything. One guy had a picture of his son with him, hidden underneath his shirt. I don't think that guy was from Mexico, I think he was from El Salvador, or Honduras, or something, because he didn't want to say where he was from. But we didn't ask, you know?

Early in the morning we had seen a car come by the trees, but we hid because we couldn't tell if it was a patrol car or not. But as it got late, we started to think that it was probably the coyotes, and they had already come and gone. Maybe they didn't know we were there, maybe no one was coming for us. So I told the other guys, "Okay, we have to leave." We started walking toward a highway that was close by, and we thought, "Okay, maybe immigration will find us. Hopefully, immigration will find us, and we can go back to Mexico." But of course, not one patrol car passed by.

Finally, at like eleven o'clock at night, we came across a truck and two guys, two workers from Mexicali who work legally in the fields. And I had the coyote's phone number, so one of the workers called him for us. Twenty minutes later, the coyotes came. They drove us to a house where there were a bunch of people, and the lead coyote told me that Mateo had gone back to Mexico looking for me. He thought I had gotten arrested, and now the coyotes had to cross him again! Ha ha. So Mateo arrived the next day, worried that he would have to pay the coyotes double for crossing him twice, and he is a U.S. citizen!

The coyotes took us all the way to Los Angeles, and from there Mateo and I took a bus to Chicago. When we got to Chicago, one of my friends came to get us and he took us to the apartment where my brother was living with a bunch of other guys. They bought us food and beer, and took us shopping for clothes and shoes. Then, the next day, my brother took me to Il Vino to start working as a busboy.

Life in León

One warm afternoon in León, I asked Chuy's sister to show me which homes on their block had family members in the United States. She shaded her eyes from the sun and began pointing, "This one, this one, this one..."; she turned to face me. "Actually Ruth, I think almost all the people on this block have family in the U.S." For many working-class Mexican men like the Lions, coming of age presents two main choices. The first is to find semi-skilled work in the city, usually in industry, auto repair, or the building trades, or for those who live in more rural areas, to scratch out a living on the family farm. With full-time work and subsidies from the Mexican government, it may be possible to purchase a small home and raise a family. But the Lions say that such a life offers little more than a daily struggle for subsistence, and the second option—going to the U.S. to work—is an appealing alternative.

None of the Lions was the first in his family to move in search of work; their parents or grandparents mostly migrated from the rural landscapes of Guanajuato, Michoacán, or Jalisco to work in León's leather industry. León is a large industrial city with a metropolitan population of just over one million people[1] (roughly equivalent to the size of Dallas, Texas). León's historical downtown area is surrounded on all sides by busy six-lane streets lined with restaurants, shopping malls, and billboards advertising all kinds of leather goods, as well as McDonald's and Walmart. (See Figures 3.1 and 3.2.) Like all big cities, León has richer neighborhoods and poorer neighborhoods, with most areas falling somewhere in between. The poorer neighborhoods in León share a lot of characteristics with the poorer neighborhoods near my home on the south side of Chicago, like graffiti-covered walls and litter-lined streets. But León would never be mistaken for an American city—its brightly painted houses and rutted dirt roads give it a distinctly Mexican appearance. (See Figure 3.3.)

Most of the Lions' fathers work in leather manufacturing, as tanners, shoe makers, shoebox makers, or machinists. For this they are paid an average income of no more than two hundred dollars a week for sixty hours of work. Many of the Lions' mothers and sisters work as well, but typically inside the home, selling cosmetics, stationary, or homemade food; with the little money the women make, they can help buy the family's groceries or school supplies for the children. While this working-class income will meet a family's most basic needs as long as everyone is healthy, it does not easily buy the quality-of-life items that most Americans take for granted, like new clothes, microwaves, cars, computers, or homes with multiple bedrooms. (See Figure 3.4.) More importantly, there is not enough money

FIGURE 3.1 **The Plaza Principal in downtown León.** (*Courtesy of the author*)

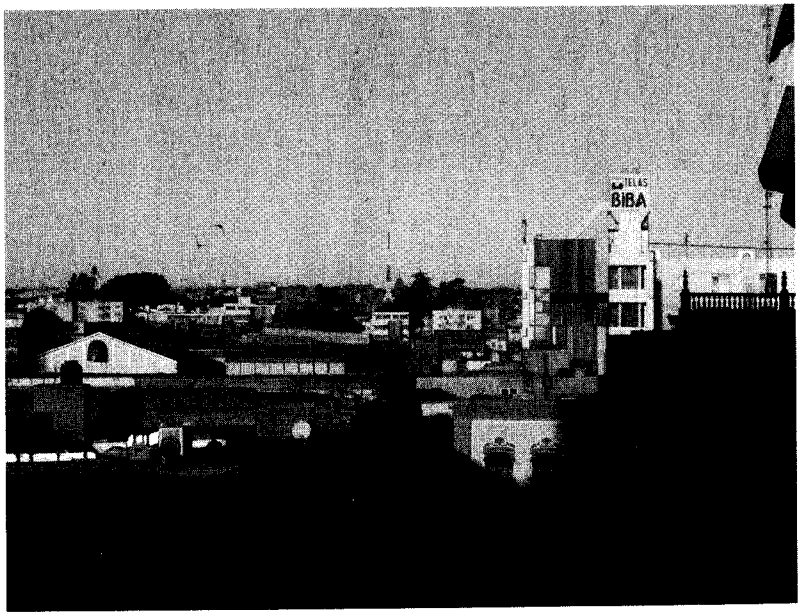

FIGURE 3.2 **Sunrise over the rooftops of historic downtown León.** (*Courtesy of the author*)

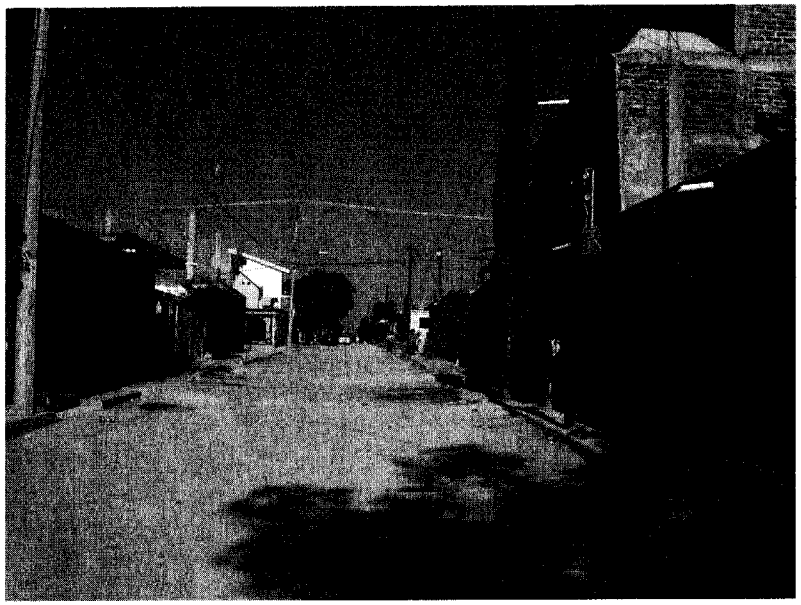

FIGURE 3.3 **An unpaved residential street in León.** (*Courtesy of the author*)

FIGURE 3.4 **A working-class home in León, improved with remittance money.** (*Courtesy of the author*)

left at the end of the week to build any savings, and working-class families in León have very little financial security. To supplement bare subsistence and attain a degree of security, Mexicans in León and throughout the *Bajío* have long relied on remittance money—money sent home from family members working abroad.

Family Strategies

Maria had mixed feelings when her sons, Rene and Chuy, told her that they wanted to go to the U.S. to work. Her own father, Papa Juan, had worked in the United States as a young man, and she remembers helping her mother look after her ten siblings those months that he was away. Now, she worries about their safety and whether she will be able to see them again. Nevertheless, she is proud of her sons, proud that they take such good care of their families and that they have been able to make lives for themselves in the U.S. The money that Rene, and later Chuy, has sent back home has paid for much more than the family's modern appliances. Maria's three daughters have all been able to attain advanced educations, financed by their brothers' remittance money. The oldest daughter is a certified accountant, the middle daughter has just finished her degree in psychology, and the youngest daughter is enrolling in an expensive hospitality program that will qualify her to manage elite hotels in Mexico's tourist zones.

At first glance, many of the Lions seem like lone rangers—young, single men off on a global adventure with only the clothes on their backs and their "willingness" to work hard. Closer inspection reveals that their families are always present—not physically, of course, but in the decisions that they make, and emotionally. The Lions emphasize their strong family ties to their parents, siblings, and wives and children in Mexico. In fact, the decision to migrate in the first place is often made by and for the family. Luis explains that,

> The money situation in Mexico is hard. How can I explain it? You earn money and if you're not married, you have to help out at home. You give money to your parents, or if you have little brothers and sisters, you have to help them. And your nieces and nephews. Everyone who works in the family has to help out, and the little money that you make doesn't go very far.

The remittance money that the Lions send back home is crucial for helping families meet their daily living expenses, purchase homes, finance the education of other children, and support working-poor parents.

Unmarried Lions typically send a substantial portion of their income back to Mexico, about half of which is to be used by the family and the other half of which is saved to be invested in a house or a small business when the worker returns. When workers get married, however, investment tends to shift toward the new nuclear family, and remittances sent to parents diminish.

Alejandro decided to come to the U.S. so that he could help his mom buy a house. He explains that:

> That was the whole plan, you know, that was the whole point. We didn't own a house, we always paid rent and it was a big thing, we always moved from house to house. It's not such a thing as contracts [in Mexico], they'd rent you the house and whenever they decide to kick you out, you had a week or two weeks to find somewhere else. The whole world comes around; the house we have right now we used to live there like in 1985, and my mom loved the house because there was like two houses in one, and we used to live in the top and my aunt used to live in the bottom. They're twins, my mom and my aunt, so they're close and that's why she loved it.

By sheer coincidence, Alejandro met the owner of his old home in Chicago. The house's owner, an undocumented immigrant himself, told Alejandro that he was trying to sell the house, and the two men made a deal. Alejandro's family would be allowed to live in the house while Alejandro made payments on it. It took him ten years to pay the house off, but Alejandro is happy that he could help his mom live securely in the home that she loves.

Alejandro's younger brother, Alberto, has made the trip to the United States three times so far, each time with a goal in mind that, once reached, would hopefully allow him to return to Mexico permanently. But financial security has been elusive for Alberto and his growing family. He explains why he decided to come back to work at Il Vino this most recent time:

> I had a job in Mexico making shoe boxes. With that job you can buy food for your kids, but if you want to go to a park or something, you have to think, I'm going to spend this money and I need it for food, or for electricity. You always live day to day, with just enough for your household bills. But if you need to buy something, like clothes for your family, it's too hard. Or if one of your kids gets sick, or if the water bill, the electric bill, and the rent all come in one week and you need that money for something else, it's too hard. And you always live day to day, under pressure. That's why you say, I'm just going to go [to the U.S.] for a little while so we can buy something, a little business, small, but just so we have something. But you need money for that. So my wife said to me, 'Maybe you should go for awhile [to the U.S.] again. Work hard and save money, because if you come back in the same situation that you left in, it's not worth it.' That's why I came back here even though I didn't want to.

Luis and Lalo also made the decision to migrate in order to support their wives and children. Luis says that when he first came to the U.S., his goal was to make money to buy nicer things for himself and his family, whom he had left in Mexico. He explains, "In Mexico, all you hear about is how people come back from the United States, and they have a car, nice clothes, they have money and everything. And I said to myself, shit, I want to go to the United States, I want to have a car, I want to have nice clothes, I want to make some money too." But the drug and alcohol addiction that plagued Luis in Mexico worsened here, as he had easy access to drugs and the money to buy them. He neglected his wife and children. Not only did he fail to send money back home, he stopped calling his wife and kept company with other women. Still, he was devastated when he learned that his wife had moved in with another man and wanted a divorce from him. Now, Luis sends money home to his mom, who uses the money to buy food and clothing for her family, and who also keeps tabs on Luis' two boys.

Lalo has managed to maintain a close relationship with his wife and two boys in Mexico in spite of long periodic absences to work in the U.S. The money that he has sent back over the years has mainly been invested in expanding their home in León—which had started out as a one-room building, and now has two floors, three bedrooms, and a modern kitchen. Now, Lalo and his wife would like to open a small restaurant—a *taquería*—in the garage of their home; they hope that the extra income generated by the *taquería*, in combination with Lalo's income as a welder, will allow them to live comfortably—and permanently—together in Mexico.[2]

During long periods in the United States, the Lions spend considerable time and money keeping in touch with their family members back in Mexico. While the telephone continues to be the preferred method of communication—and the phone card business booms in Mexican neighborhoods in Chicago—the more technology-savvy Lions are beginning to take advantage of Internet-based communications. For example, Rene and Chuy recently pooled their money to buy their family in León a computer with a webcam. While the webcam works great, the family's only Internet access is so slow and unreliable that the guys have yet to see their faces live.

Roberto and Leonardo are regulars on networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, where they can swap photos and news with family in Mexico and other parts of the United States.

Most often, workers like the Lions "jump" the border to earn more money than they can in Mexico. Oftentimes, their initial goals are concrete and temporary: to buy a house or build a nest-egg to be able to marry. Mexico lacks the credit and mortgage systems that make it possible for working people in the United States to borrow large sums of money to purchase homes and cars, but ten thousand dollars [*dólares*] can buy a nice house in Mexico—mortgage free. With another ten thousand dollars, it may be possible to attain the capital to open a small restaurant, shop, or other family business that can supplement weekly incomes and provide some financial security for a working family.

Since the value of the Mexican peso currently hovers just under one-tenth the value of the U.S. dollar, earning and sending home dollars can multiply a worker's spending power. One returned transmigrant in León explained to me that, "In Mexico, people make a thousand pesos, which is like one hundred dollars, a week. So if you're making five hundred dollars a week in the U.S., you're making five times what you would make in Mexico. And if you can live cheaply, you can send two or three hundred dollars a week home, and it's worth it." Luis says that when he first arrived in the United States he was shocked by his income as a dishwasher at Uncle Luigi's, "I was making three times what I was making in Mexico. I was like 'Wow!' And as a dishwasher! 'Wow!'" Even with only a year or two of work in the U.S., a Mexican worker can substantially increase the chances for long-term financial stability for his or her family.

Because of poor working conditions in Mexico, Mexican workers are often accustomed to long work weeks and arduous, difficult labor. Compared to working in Mexico, many transmigrant workers find that even physically demanding work in the U.S. is less onerous than the work they did back home. One important consideration is the number of work hours—even though Mexico technically has an eight-hour work day, men in León and throughout Mexico routinely work up to twelve hours a day during the week, and another six to eight hours on Saturday. One returned worker in León told me that, "The work [in the U.S.] was easy. Here in Mexico, it's hard. So you get there and you're regularly working eight hours, compared to here, where you work from sunup to sundown." The structure of work in Mexico may make the transition to working in the United States easier for undocumented workers, although, as I discuss in Chapter 5, many new immigrants still have difficulty conforming to the demanding expectations of their labor in the U.S.

Young workers in León also have social incentives to consider migration: while "illegal immigration" is vilified in the U.S., in Mexico, those who "jump" the border earn respect for taking risks to help support their families. Mauricio, a returned migrant, explains: "I think that Mexicans who have worked in the U.S. have more self-respect than Mexicans here, because they want more for themselves. They want more. The guys who stay here, they're scared. Or they're conformists. They're happy with ten dollars a day, and ten dollars the next day. But the ones who go there, they want to progress, they want to make more." As transmigrant workers send money home, they can boost their social stature in communities of origin through remittances and participation in transnational projects.[3] Thus, even though undocumented workers face profound stigmatization in the United States, jumping the border may actually increase their status in their home communities.

In addition, while undocumented migration is publicly maligned in American political discourse, there is quite a bit of ambivalence and even tacit approval of it among working people in the United States. One manager at Il Vino says that she used to look down on undocumented immigrants, but since she began working at Il Vino she has changed her mind, "Because I see how they work. I see how awesome they are, how nice they are, how they're just like anybody else." It is not surprising that many American workers who spend their days working alongside undocumented immigrants develop friendly relationships with them. Rene says that he does not feel discriminated against at work because of his illegal status. To the contrary, he says, "They try to help you more, so you can improve yourself. [The bosses] tell us, 'If you need help one day, if you need a lawyer or anything, tell us and we will get you a lawyer.' All companies want Latino workers, they don't care if you're legal or not." While most Lions can point to times in which they have been taken advantage of or otherwise treated badly by Americans, they tend to view those as isolated incidents and do not feel that they experience routine discrimination.

On a broader level, contradictory and confusing U.S. government policy toward unauthorized immigration sends mixed signals to undocumented people. The persistent failure of U.S. policy to enact effective measures to curtail undocumented migration has led immigration scholars to describe U.S. immigration policies as self-contradictory and hypocritical (Massey et al. 2002:104, 105), as it leads many undocumented people to doubt the seriousness of anti-immigrant endeavors. Lalo says that, "Either way, the bosses here need undocumented people. I thought about it—the United States is a very powerful country, if they really wanted to

keep people out, they would do it." In fact, undocumented people in the United States can legally do a host of things, including: pay taxes, have bank accounts, purchase homes and cars, and in general be active and productive members of the U.S. economy, in spite of their illegal status. In addition, most local police are prohibited from inquiring about a person's legal status and there is, in general, little risk of being deported for undocumented immigrants who stay "under the radar."

Considering the potential for long-term security, social esteem in Mexico, and the relatively low risk that undocumented work affords, it is not surprising that young men like the Lions routinely jump the border to work in the United States. In spite of the potential rewards, crossing the border without legal authorization is dangerous, and living in the United States without authorization comes at a high price.

The Price of Crossing

Those who "jump" the Mexico-U.S. border face several potential dangers, including: heat stroke, hypothermia, dehydration, armed property owners, immigration authorities, drowning, corrupt Mexican police, street gangs, American and Mexican drug smugglers, robbery, suffocation (usually in vehicles), injury, vigilante violence, sand storms, rape, car accidents, abandonment, and getting lost. Any one of these is potentially fatal.

While building fences sporadically along a 2,000 mile border may be more of a symbolic measure than a serious one, border enforcement projects have had serious implications for undocumented workers. Border militarization has resulted in scores of unnecessary deaths, a predictable outcome of policies that channel migration routes into more remote areas but fail to address the broader processes that compel migration in the first place. According to a September 2009 report issued by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), U.S. border policy has created "an international humanitarian crisis," as more than 5,000 migrants have died along the Mexico-U.S. border since the mid-1990s, on average more than one death per day.[4]

As routes become more dangerous, the cost of crossing also rises, as does immigrants' reliance on each other for aid. In 1993–1994, I worked with a group of young men from Zacatecas who annually paid about two hundred dollars to cross the border with a coyote. The low cost and low risk allowed these men to work for several months or a year in the United States, then return to their homes in Mexico for a few weeks before coming back to the U.S. to resume working. In effect, these men practiced cyclical migration that allowed them to see their parents, wives, and children at

least once a year. For most undocumented people, frequent trips across the border are no longer possible. Each time the U.S. makes unauthorized passage more dangerous, the price of crossing rises (see also Massey et al. 2002). In the spring of 2008, Roberto paid a coyote five thousand dollars for his passage back to the U.S.

Such prohibitively high prices mean that any hopeful migrant (who does not have tens of thousands of pesos stashed away) must secure a "sponsor" who is already working in the United States to help pay his passage. All of the Lions were "brought over" by someone else, usually a brother or close friend, who sent them the money to pay a coyote to smuggle them across the border; as Lalo says, "Someone helps you, then you help someone else. It's a chain." In fact, all of the Lions have sponsored the passage of at least one of their friends or family members, and Alejandro and Rene credit themselves with being particularly critical links in the chain that stretches between León and Chicago. This system of sponsorship adds an economic dimension to familial and friendship ties, as undocumented workers continuously incur and repay financial and social debts to each other.

Although most sponsors will help new immigrants secure employment, they have no guarantee that the loan will be repaid. Failure to make good on a loan can have serious social consequences, as bad debtors risk being excluded from the resources of the group. For example, Chuy paid for his friend Perro's passage and got him a job at Il Vino, but Perro was fired and moved to Iowa without repaying Chuy the two-thousand dollars that he owed him. He refused to answer Chuy's phone calls and eventually disconnected his phone altogether. Perro's transgression effectively rendered him "cut off" from the resources of this social network. Perro can no longer expect to receive any aid from Chuy or the other Lions; he is an outcast. In fact, the social repercussions of failing to repay a debt can extend all the way back to Mexico. After Perro changed his telephone number, Chuy began calling Perro's mother in Mexico. Chuy explains that Perro's mother will be embarrassed by her son's irresponsibility and will put pressure on him to pay Chuy his money. After this "bad loan," Chuy doubts that he will take the chance of sponsoring anyone else. Rene, who sponsored Chuy and three other friends, says that as the cost goes up, it is harder and harder for him to find the extra money to loan to his friends.

Life Under the Radar: Papers

With thousands of dollars on the line, it is in the interest of the sponsor to help the new immigrant secure employment as soon as possible. Much

like an indentured servant, newly arrived undocumented immigrants often spend their first few months in the United States working just to pay for their crossing. New undocumented immigrants typically get jobs through a working friend and then go "get papers" so that the employers can produce the requisite paperwork if needed. It is relatively rare for an undocumented immigrant to work completely "under the table" without documents of any kind; the majority use a social security number and pay taxes, but the social security number is typically either random or was issued to someone else.[5]

"Papers" is a catch-all term that refers to the documents that unauthorized immigrants use to secure employment and get by in the U.S. Papers usually include a social security card (either real or counterfeit, usually around $50) and, if the undocumented immigrant has lots of money to spend, may also include a legitimate Drivers' License or State ID, credit cards, health insurance cards, and anything else one typically finds in a wallet (this more expensive package can cost hundreds of dollars). Papers are not hard to get. I once went with an undocumented worker to obtain papers that he needed for a new job. We pulled into a parking lot, having made no previous contacts with anyone, and two hours and one hundred and forty dollars later, he had obtained a brand new counterfeit social security card and counterfeit driver's license with his name and picture on them.

When it comes to getting papers, undocumented immigrants have two main choices, each with its own risks and benefits. Some workers choose to purchase legitimate documents that have belonged to someone else. That is, they assume the identity of a citizen or legal resident and use his or her information to secure employment. The benefit of this strategy is that the employee's name and social security number match government records; this helps protect the immigrant from "no-match" letters. No-match letters are notices sent by the Social Security Administration (SSA) to employers that inform them when employees' social security numbers cannot be matched to SSA records. Although the SSA notes that it cannot share this information with other Federal agencies and has no enforcement authority,[6] these letters have been wielded by employers to subdue and fire undocumented workers in recent years. Thus, it is in undocumented workers' interest to avoid no-match letters, though there are also serious drawbacks to using someone else's name and social security number. If the immigrant becomes eligible to "fix" his status, there is no paperwork in his own name, no record of his employment or tax payment. More importantly, assuming someone else's name and using their social security number renders the

immigrant vulnerable to charges of identity theft, a felony crime. Lastly, real documents are significantly more expensive than counterfeit ones and have very limited utility.

The other, more popular option is for an undocumented immigrant to get papers that display his own name with a made-up social security number—counterfeit papers. The major drawback of counterfeit papers is that the worker is vulnerable to no-match letters. Also, police can detect real government IDs from counterfeit ones, so the counterfeit IDs are no good for driving, or anything else for that matter, beyond securing a job. However, this strategy does allow a worker to get a job under his own name and leave a paper trail of employment and tax payment, which may be helpful if he intends to change his legal status.

One of the Lions has acquired a TIN (Taxpayer Identification Number) under his own name. This is a legitimate government-issued number that allows a worker without a social security number to pay taxes. This worker has had to ask Il Vino to "re-hire" him under his TIN number after he had initially secured employment with a fraudulent social security number, though the TIN does not confer employment eligibility. Since getting a TIN number is the closest thing to legitimate documents that an undocumented worker can get, an increasing number of them are choosing this strategy. Even though most undocumented immigrants have to get "papers" to get a job, they rarely use their fraudulent papers in any other circumstances. Instead, most undocumented Mexican immigrants have a "*matricula consular*," a consulate ID issued by the Mexican government that identifies the holder as a Mexican national. With a *matricula* ID, immigrants can open a bank account, buy a car, verify their age, and register for adult education classes. (See Figure 3.5.) The *matricula* does not, of course, give them authorization to drive in the U.S. or to work.

Life Under the Radar: Getting Adjusted

Crossing the border is just the first challenge for undocumented workers in the U.S. At least initially, their physical movements are often severely limited by language barriers, unfamiliarity with their surroundings, and fear of capture by authorities. Omar explains that life in the U.S. is more difficult than life in Mexico because, "You come here with nothing. And it's scary to start working, because it's so different here. For example, in Mexico you know what to do, you know how to look for a job, but here, you don't know how to do anything." Self-consciousness about being different can intensify a new arrival's sense of isolation, as can English-language difficulties. Alejandro says that when he first came to Chicago,

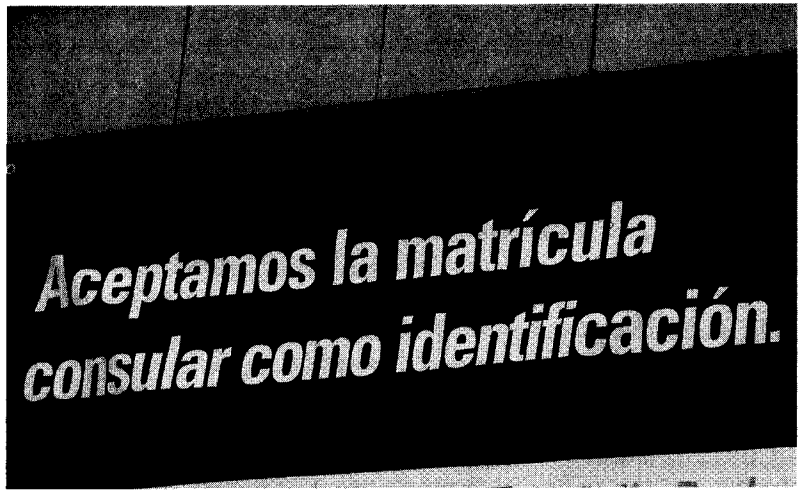

FIGURE 3.5 **A Chicago-area bank advertises that it accepts the *matrícula* ID as identification.** (*Courtesy of the author*)

> I was so hungry one day, and this guy [that I was living with] knew English and I asked him, "You know what, I'm starving, can you come with me to get something to eat?" And he was like, "What, you don't know English? That's your problem." So I said to myself that day, I will learn English and when somebody needs me to go translate I will do it. Every time somebody comes to me like, "I got pulled over and they took my car"—there's times people call me at four in the morning because they got pulled over. And I was there. I was never like, "Screw you." Because that happened to me and I didn't like it.

For Lions who plan to stay in the United States only briefly and then return to their homes in Mexico—like Alberto and Lalo—there is little incentive to learn English and make Chicago their home. They tend to limit their movements to neighborhoods with high concentrations of Mexican immigrants, and they remain largely segregated from wider society. For Lions who have lived in Chicago for many years, are proficient in English, and have families in the United States—like Alejandro, Manuel, and Rene—there is a higher degree of comfort moving about the city and participating in Chicago's social life. Rene, for example, likes to take his family to Cubs games and to Navy Pier in the summer, while Alejandro and his girlfriend enjoy downtown Chicago's restaurant scene. Rene, Roberto, Chuy, Leonardo, and Alejandro have all studied English as a Second-Language (ESL) at a nearby community college to ease their time in the United States.

But even for Lions who have little difficulty integrating socially in wider society, their primary social group consists of friends from León.

While migration to the United States disrupts traditional household arrangements and threatens undocumented immigrants with emotional isolation, cultivating friendships with other workers helps guard against that isolation. Even though they work together fifty or more hours each week, the Lions also spend much of their time away from work socializing with one another. Rene, Roberto, and Chuy usually make dinner together on Sundays, while housemates Alejandro, Alberto, Luis, and Carlos like to stay up late, talking and drinking beer. Though the Lions miss their families most intensely on holidays such as Christmas, they spend these rare days off together, preparing traditional Mexican dinners, playing card games, and listening to music. (See Figure 3.6.) Luis says that when he began working at Uncle Luigi's, friendship bonds helped him get through the first few months of work: "Everyone was Mexican, and when I get there it was, 'What's up, brother?' 'How you doing?' 'Where are you from?' And you talk with people, you know, 'I'm from here,' you know, so we made friends. And that's how you get by at work." For the Lions, cultivating a transnational social network that turns friends from

FIGURE 3.6 **Roberto, Manuel, and Rene celebrate the 4th of July, and a rare day off, with a picnic at the beach.** (*Courtesy of the author*)

home into coworkers and housemates helps supply crucial material and emotional resources.

Luis notes that, after the initial elation with making dollars passes, getting adjusted to life in the U.S. involves accepting the drudgeries of workaday life. He says,

> Eventually you realize that it's the same shit. You're working just to get by and it's the same as [in Mexico]. Sure, I'm making dollars, but I'm spending dollars too. You have to pay your bills, your rent, you have to buy your food, you have to wash your clothes. You know, everything you have to do in Mexico you have to do here. It's the same, the only difference is that here it's the U.S. and there it's Mexico.

Perhaps the most critical difference between living in Mexico and living in the U.S. is having to manage the risks associated with illegal status. Being undocumented impacts everyday, routine activities—particularly getting around. The Lions are not eligible to get valid drivers' licenses, although as suburban residents they invariably have to drive to get to and from work. The risk of not having drivers' licenses is compounded by consequent ineligibility for insurance coverage (though their vehicles are typically covered), which makes driving even more stressful. Being stopped by police will mean a hefty fine, a court date, and an impounded vehicle for unlicensed drivers. Getting a vehicle out of the impound requires getting the car released to its owner, who must produce a driver's license. For this reason, the titles to Lions' vehicles are held by U.S. citizens whenever possible. For Lions who aspire to home ownership, being undocumented means either taking out a mortgage with a high interest rate—because people without valid Social Security numbers do not qualify for the best loans—or having the loan held in the name of a citizen spouse or relative. This makes undocumented people especially dependent on and potentially vulnerable to their citizen family members, a vulnerability that can disrupt family relationships. One undocumented parent said that he is afraid to discipline his teenage daughter, who has threatened to call immigration authorities on him if he does not allow her to stay out at night with her friends.

Fear of detection by authorities affects broader behaviors, as undocumented people are careful to "fly under the radar" at work and in society at large. This is one reason why undocumented workers tend to have such "good attitudes"—being confrontational with the boss may put them at heightened risk for detection, as bosses have been known to call immigration authorities on their own employees. Former migrant worker Ivan

explains that, "What happens is that Mexicans or Central Americans who go illegally are scared, scared of the *migra* [immigration authorities], of the police. So, they keep a low profile so they won't have problems with anybody. The difference between Mexicans and other workers is that Mexicans always keep a low profile and keep their mouths shut." Lalo agrees and says that, as an undocumented worker, "You know that you have to do [what is asked of you], you come here to work, [and] you have to do what they tell you to do." Relatedly, undocumented people have little protection from unscrupulous employers who take advantage of them by not paying them, not providing required safety protections, or refusing to take care of undocumented employees who are injured on the job. This last situation happened to Luis, who fell on an unsafe construction site and injured his back. His employer not only refused to cover Luis' medical expenses, but fired him, explaining that Luis' injury made him a liability. Angry but resigned, Luis paid for a few sessions of physical therapy on his own then began looking for another job.

Changing Ideas of Home: Return Migration and Return-Return Migration

While most transmigrant workers from Mexico come to the United States with a temporary goal in mind and plan to go back to Mexico once it is reached, over time goals change, new expenses arise, and the conception of "home" itself can shift. This is especially true when so many people from the same area migrate that entire communities become substantially relocated from Mexico to the U.S. For example, the last time that Rene went back to León to visit, he was bored; he had expected to see all of his old friends, but there is no one left in his neighborhood. He says,

> It's not the same in Mexico now. I mean, life is better in Mexico, but after you've been here for a while, being there again is hard to get used to. Before I came here the first time I had a lot of friends in León, you know, and I would hang out in a lot of different places. But after I was here for three and a half years, I went back to Mexico and I would go to those same places, but there was no one there. Everyone was here.

When I met with Roberto in León in the spring of 2008, he was also restless. Going from an active work and social life to one in which he has nothing to do during the day was nice at first, he said, but was beginning to get on his nerves. He explained, "When I come to the United States it's like going to the factory and when I go to Mexico it's like going home again

for the weekend." Though he had a nice visit with his family, Roberto soon returned to Chicago and to his job at Il Vino.

Like the rest of the Lions, Leonardo grew up in a modest house in a working poor neighborhood of León. He is the youngest of nine children, all of whom were supported on his father's weekly salary of about 150 dollars, which he earned as a machine worker in one of León's many shoe factories. Leonardo says that his family lived "regular," not poor but not rich either, and as a teenager Leonardo began working to help pay his own way. He learned to paint cars, a job that paid about 100 dollars a week for full-time work. At nineteen, he decided to move to the United States to "get ahead" [*superarse*], since his income was too modest to enable him to buy a house in Mexico. Leonardo says that he did not want to be like his brothers, who got married but had to bring their wives to live at his parents' house because they could not afford a home of their own. For more than five years, Leonardo has been sending a portion of his earnings back home to Mexico, part of which goes to help support his parents and part of which goes into a savings account to pay for his future home. Finally, Leonardo is ready to begin construction on the house, but now his goals have changed. He has met a girlfriend in Chicago, a nursing student and waitress, and the two have gotten serious. Now, Leonardo is unsure whether he will return to Mexico or make his life here; for now, the construction is on hold.

Some transmigrants who achieve their temporary goals return to Mexico and settle there permanently. For Ivan, who lived in the U.S. for ten years and established a successful landscaping business, Mexico offers a better quality of life than the debt-oriented culture of the United States. He says that,

> There [in the U.S.], it's easy to make money, they give you credit, and you can get a car, then you get a house. And after a few years, you get a better car, or a better house, but now you're working to pay for that. And it's like a chain, and you get used to it. So you're always in debt, but they make it easy for you to keep paying... it's a kind of slavery. You think you need that stuff, and you will keep working to keep paying for it.

Ivan says that he prefers living in Mexico, debt-free, and he has used the money that he saved to build a nice home on the outskirts of León. He is working as a truck driver and, even though he makes far less money than he did in the U.S., Ivan says that he is going to try to make it in Mexico. He believes that his familiarity with English, his work experiences in the U.S., and the esteem that he gets from being a transmigrant, will help him build a successful landscaping business in León.

Other return migrants are more ambivalent about their lives in Mexico. During my time in León, I paid a visit to Mauricio, a long-time Il Vino busboy and an old friend of the Lions. As I located his house on a street map of León and plotted my course to his neighborhood (creatively named "León 1"), my hostess grew so concerned that she insisted her daughter accompany me to the interview. While I thought such precautions were probably unnecessary, as I drove through León 1's garbage-strewn and potholed dirt streets, past open sewers and crumbled houses, I was glad for the company. I found Mauricio living in a very small one-room building that he shares with his wife and their infant son, his brother, his aunt and uncle, and two young cousins. There were sheets hung up to create "rooms," but the house was undeniably cramped.

Mauricio was a two-time transmigrant worker in the United States. The first time that he went to the U.S., he was recruited by Alejandro, Alberto, and Rene to work as a busboy at Uncle Luigi's. He stayed for five years before returning to Mexico. He spent a full year in Mexico, without working at all, and then returned to Chicago, his friends, and his busboy job. After two years, Mauricio went back to Mexico to marry his long-time girlfriend, and he has stayed in Mexico ever since. In spite of his modest surroundings, Mauricio says that he has been able to work steadily as a salesman, and that overall he is happier in Mexico. He says, "I'm making pretty good money, like $180 a week, and my house and my car are paid off, so, yeah, it's fine what I'm making. Here, the work is slower, life is more tranquil." Mauricio hopes to return to Chicago someday and bring his wife, but he has no immediate plans.

I again provoked my hostesses' consternation when I planned a trip to the neighborhood of Chapalitas to interview Alberto and Alejandro's brother, Rigo (Chapalitas apparently has a reputation for kidnapping gangs). From the patio of Rigo's two-story home—the very same house that Alejandro bought for his mother and her sister which is shared by Rigo, his wife and two children, his mom, his aunt and her family, and Alberto's wife and three daughters—Rigo talked about the difficulty of "making it" in Mexico. After eight years as a busboy, first at Uncle Luigi's and then at Il Vino, Rigo returned to Mexico and has been working in an assembly plant that manufactures shoeboxes. He works ten to eleven hours each day, Monday through Saturday, and brings home the equivalent of one hundred and twenty dollars weekly. He says, "That's a lot of hours for little money. With what I make now we have just enough for food and our daily needs. We had a car, but we had to sell it because we didn't have enough money." In contrast, when he was working as an Il Vino busboy, Rigo was sending home about two hundred and fifty

dollars a week, or more than double what he currently earns. As Rigo finds it difficult to make ends meet for his family, he said that he will probably go back to Chicago, "I want to, I don't know when, but yes, I want to go back." As I get ready to send this book to press, I have recently heard that Rigo has just arrived in Chicago and is already back to work at Uncle Luigi's.

One fact highlights the degree to which these workers' lives have become truly and probably permanently transnational: the workers in Mexico mostly say they want to come back to the United States, and the workers in the United States mostly want to return to Mexico. Close relationships with friends and families in both Mexico and the United States mean that the Lions will forever emotionally reside in both places.

Notes

1. http://www.e-local.gob.mx/work/templates/enciclo/guanajuato/municipios/11020a.htm
2. But see the Epilogue.
3. See Cohen 2001, 2004; Smith 2006; Stephen 2007.
4. Chacon and Davis 2006; Jimenez 2009; Massey et al. 2002.
5. Massey et al. 2002; Porter 2006b.
6. http://www.ssa.gov/legislation/nomatch2.htm

CHAPTER FOUR

Múy Unidos

Friends, Networks, and Households

HAVING FRIENDS MAKES THINGS EASIER: ALEJANDRO

My name is Alex, and I'm thirty five years old. I came from León, Guanajuato, Mexico when I was sixteen, so in 1989, almost twenty years ago. I started working when I was seven years old. That was my dad's idea, to learn to be responsible. There was not too much I could do when I was seven, but just like bring the tools to the guys and stuff. Later I worked in a tire shop, doing alignments, balance. I became a professional at balancing, I went to school for it. But the pay was like nothing you know, if you're talking about dollars, it'd be thirty dollars a week.

So when I came to Chicago I went from making thirty dollars to a hundred and fifty dollars a week and I was like, "Yeah!" I started working as a dishwasher and then within a month they put me on as a busboy. And as a busboy you had a day off, and it was like ten dollars more per week. And you were like, "Oh my god," you know, "I have a day off!" But there's not too much you could do if you don't know the language and you don't have a car.

My mom's brothers were here, but as soon as I got here I didn't see them much, I was by myself. And my dad was here, so I was saying to myself, "Oh my dad is here, my uncle is here, so I'm set." But the day I got here my dad told me, "Oh you're gonna work here, you're gonna live here, I'm leaving." So he left. He hooked me up with a job but not with secure pay. Just to get me a job he told the managers, "Just try him out, if he works you can pay him, if not then he'll learn." They didn't pay me for the first month. I was working twelve hours a day, not a day off.