

# The Migration Industry in the Monterrey-Houston Connection

In this chapter I analyze a different kind of social infrastructure connecting origin and destination in this migratory circuit, namely, the matrix of entrepreneurial activities and services easing cross-border movement and channeling sojourners between Monterrey and Houston known as the migration industry (Castles and Miller 1998). In turning my attention to the migration industry, I undertake two distinct yet related analytical tasks: first, I identify the components and characterize the role of the migration industry in the social organization of international mobility; and second, through the lens of a case study, I tease out the interactions between the migration industry, its entrepreneurs, and its activities, on the one hand, and social and political actors, such as migrants, their social networks, and state institutions, on the other. Making sense of these interactions is vital to understanding, for example, whether entry into the migration industry is contingent on the migration entrepreneur's membership in the social network and the ethnic group he or she serves.

I define the migration industry as the ensemble of entrepreneurs who, motivated by the pursuit of financial gain, provide a variety of services facilitating human mobility across international borders (Hernández-León 2005; see also Castles and Miller 1998). Although the literature on international human mobility has always paid attention to various kinds of migration entrepreneurs, scholars have generally treated the migration industry as a marginal subject and have subsumed it under other actors and structures of the social and political process of international

migration, such as coethnic and immigrant networks.<sup>1</sup> More recently, studies of the migration industry have focused on entrepreneurs who facilitate clandestine entry into countries of destination, namely, *coyotes* and other human smugglers, often reflecting the concerns of receiving states seeking to control immigration. Similarly, in response to the growing interest of sending states in extracting benefits from expatriate populations, a growing strand of the literature has started to analyze the remittance industry (de la Garza and Lowell 2002).

In contrast to these prevailing perspectives, I argue that the migration industry comprises a broad set of actors and services that play an active role in every step of the process of migration (i.e., initiation, continuation) and are present in different types of migratory movements (i.e., permanent, cyclical, return). In a sociopolitical context characterized by the restriction and control of cross-border population flows (Zolberg 1999), the migration industry “greases” the engines of international human mobility, providing and articulating the expertise and infrastructural resources that facilitate such mobility and the realization of goals intimately tied to the experience of migration. Migration industry entrepreneurs include moneylenders, recruiters, transportation providers and travel agents, legitimate and false paper pushers, smugglers, contractors, formal and informal remittance and courier service owners, lawyers and notaries offering legal and paralegal counseling to migrants, and, under certain circumstances, promoters of immigrant destinations.

I also contend that the migration industry should be treated analytically, as a distinct actor in the social process of international migration that overlaps the mainstream, ethnic, and immigrant economies and straddles formal and informal sectors of economic activity (Hernández-León 2005). Still, I recognize that often migration entrepreneurs are coethnics with their customers and are able to identify business opportunities by virtue of their membership in immigrant and ethnic social networks. At the same time, nonethnic entrepreneurs might use ethnic and immigrant employees and their cultural and linguistic knowledge to enter the industry and to make inroads into particular business niches (i.e., transportation, remittances, and legal services). These observations, derived from Light’s (2005, 2006) understanding of the ethnic and immigrant economies, suggest that migration industry entrepreneurs, their employees, and their activities are often closely connected to their customers via immigrant social networks and social capital.

While some researchers have studied the migration industry as a borderless ethnic economy (see Harney 1977), I contend that international

boundaries are not only at the heart of the phenomenon but are also its very *raison d'être*. Indeed, even though the migration industry does not erase the borders signaling “the geopolitical discontinuity” (Foucher 1991: 38) between countries, it exists and thrives because of its distinctive capacity to span such borders. This suggests that both sending and receiving states play a fundamental role in shaping the contours of the migration industry, the rise and fall of particular types of entrepreneurs and activities, and the social organization of services offered to sojourners and to the employers of immigrant labor. This is not to say that state policies and regulatory regimes completely determine the profile and dynamics of the migration industry. Instead, what I argue is that the intended and unintended consequences of such policies and regulations, including the strategies of both migrants and migration entrepreneurs to circumvent them, effectively influence why certain services become available, under what conditions such services are offered, and who provides them.

Here, I seek to map out in great ethnographic detail the relationships among the migration industry, the sending and receiving states, and the *regiomontano* sojourner networks in the Monterrey-Houston circuit through the case study of a courier service shuttling between the two cities transporting remittances, parcels, and passengers. This venture, identified here by the fictitious name of Transportes García, is one of the many transportation services that exist in the Monterrey-Houston connection and one of the perhaps hundreds that undertake similar operations between the United States and Mexico. These small transportation companies are known in the Monterrey-Houston migratory circuit as *camionetas*, or passenger vans, describing the vehicles used to conduct these transborder activities. A key feature of these operations is the combination of multiple services under one roof: the delivery of cash remittances to the Monterrey homes of Houston-based immigrants; the shipping of parcels containing a wide variety of new and secondhand goods destined for household consumption and for sale at local swap meets; and the transport of small numbers of passengers. Before the advent of inexpensive cellular telephones and international calling cards, the *camionetas* used to carry correspondence between sojourners and stay-at-home members of migrant households and families. In fact, customers would euphemistically refer to the remittances as *las cartas* (the letters), since the cash would be delivered in an envelope that often contained a letter or a brief written message from the sender. On the way back to the United States, Transportes García would bring letters, medications requested by

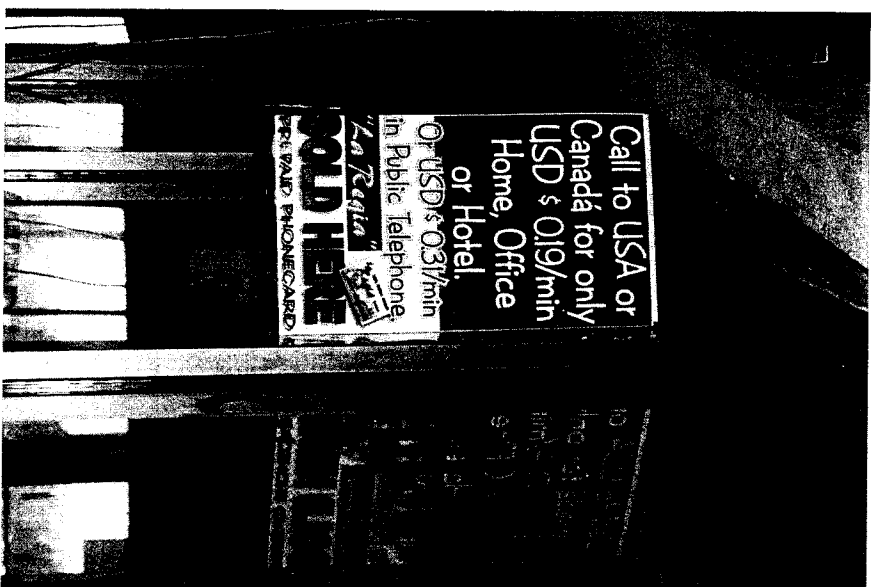


Figure 7. International calling card advertisement posted at an exchange booth near La Fama. Such ads have become visible in recent years. Photograph by Rubén Hernández-Léon.

those without ready access to health care, and tokens of appreciation for the money just delivered by the courier, including food and beverages.

In this chapter, I begin by situating Monterrey and Houston in the larger network of migration industry services available to sojourners in the Mexico-U.S. migratory system. Partly because of their geographic location and their salience as major urban centers in their respective countries, both cities are actual hubs of the migration industry. I then recount the origins of Transportes García and describe how the courier business functioned, effectively connecting its binational clientele. In the

following two sections, I examine the relationship of this transport to the social network it primarily served, during “normal” times and then in the context of successive crises that led to the eventual shutdown of this particular operation. I argue that looking at the ups and downs of a specific venture, such as Transportes García, over several years provides unique insights into long-standing questions regarding the relationship between the migration industry and actors germane to the social process of international migration (i.e., immigrants, employers, states, and advocacy organizations).

## THE MIGRATION INDUSTRY IN MONTERREY AND HOUSTON

### Monterrey

In Monterrey, the migration industry is largely invisible. Still, this city—known nationally and internationally for its industrial capitalist trajectory—is a regional service center for the migration industry. Several geographic and social conditions allow for this role, including Monterrey’s own proximity and long historic ties to the United States. Only two hours away from the border by car, La Sulana del Norte is the largest urban center in all of northern Mexico, the main transportation hub of the region and a gateway to Texas. For most long distance coach lines heading to and returning from the United States, the city and its bus depot are the obligated stop where vehicles refuel and change drivers and passengers board buses to their final destination in Mexico’s interior. Geography has also turned this metropolitan center into a staging area for Central and South American undocumented transmigrants, suggesting that at least some of the services that facilitate these flows are located in this city and its hinterland.

Monterrey is also home to the U.S. Consulate that issues more work visas than any other worldwide—more than 66,000 in 2003 (Henney-Fiske 2004). The consular district includes the states of Nuevo León, Coahuila, Durango, San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, and Aguascalientes, all with a long tradition of migration to the United States. This combination of circumstances makes the city a center for formal and informal recruitment, with agents identifying and processing candidates’ applications for the H2A and H2B temporary work visas issued by the U.S. government. These recruiters provide different services to their customers, who include both workers and employers, from transportation to and lodging in Monterrey to assistance with the visa application process at the

consulate and transportation to the worksite in the United States—all for various fees (Henney-Fiske 2004). Recruiters, or *enganchadores*, may be based in a city or in rural areas of a state with long-established migratory flows, operating from storefront offices or private homes. Some are most likely former participants of the temporary visa programs (Fitzgerald 2006a). Whether based in the city or the countryside, these *enganchadores* appear to have one thing in common: They both search for and sign up potential laborers in rural areas and not in the city itself, suggesting how U.S.-bound rural and urban migratory streams remain separate not spontaneously but as a result of the active involvement of migration entrepreneurs and other actors (see below). Early on in the midst of conducting fieldwork in La Fama, I encountered the presence of recruiters using homes in the neighborhood as part of operations that involved enrolling *ejidatarios* (communal land farmers) from the state of Coahuila for work in agriculture in Tennessee. Notably, these recruiters did not seek to enlist men from La Fama.

The U.S. Consulate in Monterrey also attracts a variety of paper pushers who fill out forms and promise visa applicants a speedy and successful bureaucratic process. These paper pushers are often the subject of police crackdowns but have apparently survived the advent of a system of consular appointments and interviews, which limits the exposure of visa applicants to certain intermediaries. There is also an ancillary industry of false Mexican documents—paycheck stubs, utility bills, social security contributions—which migrants utilize to satisfy their visa application requirements.

Monterrey is also the base for numerous human smugglers, or border-crossing *coyotes* or *polleros*, often seen by scholars as the archetypical figure of the migration industry. The *coyote* is a historical fixture of the northeast Mexico-Texas border, and even though both governments and media have portrayed smuggling as an increasingly complex, multinational enterprise, ethnographic studies suggest that in the case of Mexicans, this branch of the migration industry is still dominated by individuals who are firmly embedded in immigrant networks and who often are little more than experienced sojourners themselves (Spener 2004). Clearly, different types of *coyotes* operate in and around Monterrey, including rural-based smugglers who use the city merely as a transit point as well as those who service the urban networks studied in this book.

I met el Güero, a city-based *coyote* smuggling migrants from La Fama, during the early stages of my fieldwork in Houston, and I stayed in touch with him long after he left the business. In a manner that reveals how

*coyotes* pass as regular sojourners, when I first met him, el Güero introduced himself as a just another La Fama migrant in Houston. I did not find out about his actual occupation until I started conducting research in the neighborhood back in Monterrey. During one of my first visits, I quickly found out that el Güero was in jail in a Texas border city, accused of smuggling undocumented immigrants. When I interviewed him in his home more than two years later, el Güero recounted the circumstances of his arrest. He was leading a group of Monterrey and Mexico City migrants around a well-known Border Patrol checkpoint on I-35 in south Texas. To his surprise, the Border Patrol had set up a second checkpoint. Once the group was detained, one of the sojourners, a man from Mexico City, got scared and quickly identified el Güero as the smuggler. A few days later, during court proceedings, el Güero pleaded guilty to charges of smuggling undocumented migrants and spent eight months in jail near Laredo, Texas. Since his release, he has returned to his wife and children in Monterrey and started work as a truck driver.

Although analyzing el Güero's career as both migrant and smuggler is beyond the goals of this section, it is worth noting that his case is typical of many migration entrepreneurs, including the transportation businessman studied in the remainder of this chapter. El Güero was a regular migrant for many years, shuttling back and forth between Monterrey and San Antonio and then Monterrey and Houston, working primarily in construction. The opportunity to get started as a *coyote* came to him when a smuggler asked him to replace a guide who had become ill. Selecting el Güero to complete the job was by no means arbitrary; a longtime sojourner of this region, he knew the highways, backroads, and ranches of south Texas, as he says, "como la palma de mi mano" (like the back of my hand) (interview with el Güero 1999).

Like many migration entrepreneurs, el Güero was originally a member of the network he served, although he also smuggled individuals outside this network (such as the migrant who told on him to the Border Patrol). In his description of the smuggling business, el Güero emphasized the significance of trust between the *coyote* and the migrant, a quality derived from their common membership in a bounded network or community (usually the hometown or the *paisano*-kinship network). In this interview and subsequent encounters, he distinguished between three kinds of *coyotes*: the rural smuggler, who often doubles as a recruiter and contractor, offering migrants both clandestine border crossing and work placement services; the urban-based *coyote*, embedded in a social network but often limiting his assistance to facilitating

illegal entry into the United States; and the border smuggler, not connected to the migrant through any particular set of social ties. According to el Güero, it is the latter type who, absent any kind of trust cementing his relationship to the sojourner, often preys on his clients, asking them for advance payment and even victimizing them in transit to their destination in the United States (interview with el Güero 1999, 2000).

Illustrating how state actors might limit the field of action of *coyotes*, recruiters, and allied intermediaries (Spener 2005), presenting them with potential "competition," in 2005 the state government of Nuevo León established the Oficina de Atención al Migrante (Office of Migrant Affairs). The newly formed agency was charged with recruiting candidates in Nuevo León and other states for the H2B temporary worker program of the United States. The office thus functioned like most *enganchadores*, connecting Mexican job seekers with companies across the border, chiefly in landscaping, hospitality, and reforestation industries, but without charging fees to the workers. The agency's staff holds information sessions in the state's rural areas, maintains links with similar entities in other states, and helps H2B candidates apply for visas at the American Consulate in Monterrey. On the demand side, the office identifies potential employers taking advantage of the state secretary of economic development's contacts with U.S. firms. These companies pay for the interview and visa fees and for transportation of the individual to the worksite in the United States. Still, according to the office's staff, these same firms are often reticent to offer formal contracts to these workers (author's notes 2005).

The government of Nuevo León is by no means alone in establishing a state agency to run this type of mini-Bracero program. In fact, the states of Jalisco and Zacatecas have implemented similar efforts since 2001 (Fitzgerald 2006a). However, two things are worth noting: first, the office did not recruit in the city, something that would have infuriated local industrialists and undermined the grand narrative of Monterrey as an economic powerhouse attracting rather than shedding workers; and second, as they conducted information and recruitment drives in rural areas of the state, the agency's staff seemed quite careful not to step too hard on the toes of well-entrenched *enganchadores*. Although it is not clear what kinds of effects local state participation has had on the activities of recruiters and how the latter have responded to government intervention in the management of the H2B temporary worker program, the potential for displacement of private agents was clear. Still, a complete dislocation was unlikely, given that the office's involvement was

reduced to the formal guest worker program and naturally limited by the number of visas granted by the United States.

As one of the largest metropolitan areas in the country, Monterrey is home to numerous households receiving remittances from the United States. The 2000 Mexican census showed that in the nine metropolitan municipalities combined, there are more than sixteen thousand households that benefit from such cash transfers (CONAPO 2002)—a figure that places Monterrey above several states in the country in absolute number of households taking delivery of remittances. More recently, data from the Banco de México demonstrated that the rate of growth of remittances in Nuevo León for the 2004–2006 period hovered around 25 percent, well above the national average (PNUD 2007).

While the remittance industry has come to be dominated by electronic transfer companies (Banco de México 2007), the movement of remittances in kind has emerged as a potentially lucrative market. Interestingly, Monterrey-based corporations, such as Cemex and Famsa, have flocked to this new frontier, illustrating how the migration industry as a matrix of economic activities comprises not only informal (and illegal) services but also legitimate mainstream firms. The entry of these corporations into the migration industry matrix stems from three factors, all unfolding in the 1990s: the internationalization of Mexican conglomerates (Pozas 1993a, 2002); the geometric growth of the Mexican immigrant population in the United States, which more than doubled during the decade in question (Grieco 2003); and the inability of increasing numbers of undocumented workers to go back and forth across the border due to heightened policing of the international boundary (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). Mexico's cement giant, Cemex, has established a subsidiary called Construmex, which allows immigrants to purchase construction materials in the United States that can in turn be picked up at any of its thousands of retail locations south of the border. Customers still have to transfer the money through Construmex for a nominal \$1 transaction fee. The firm also offers free construction consulting services to its clients, including planning and estimating building costs and using designs developed by its own architects. In addition, in partnership with several developers, Cemex has recently launched a pilot program offering mortgages to immigrants who want to buy a house in Mexico (Boutreaux 2003; [http://www.cemexmexico.com/se/se\\_co.html](http://www.cemexmexico.com/se/se_co.html), accessed December 15, 2005; Reuters 2007).

Similarly, the appliance store Famsa offers its immigrant customers the possibility of buying all sorts of items (from refrigerators to living

room furniture sets) at any of its U.S. outlets. These items can then be delivered anywhere in Mexico using Famsa's vast network of warehouses and stores, including one strategically located in La Famsa's main shopping center. Tellingly, Famsa's sales slogan in the United States is "La Tienda sin Fronteras" (The Borderless Store). Still, rather than erasing borders, Cemex, Famsa, and other corporations, such as Elektra and Telmex, are capturing migrant savings even before they leave the United States by offering the transfer of remittances in-kind while capitalizing on their leading position in the Mexican market. Industry analysts have estimated the value of this emerging above-ground in-kind remittance market at \$20 billion (Delannay 2002).

Finally, as a regional capital of the migration industry, Monterrey has emerged as a transportation hub servicing not only U.S.-bound *regio-montano* migrants but also sojourners from many origins in northeast, north-central, and southeast Mexico. As an important connection of rail lines from the late 1800s onward and a recruitment center for braceros during the 1950s and 1960s, Monterrey had probably performed this nodal function for most of the twentieth century. Today, however, as buses and vans have replaced trains, the city has become headquarters to a number of transportation companies often established by entrepreneurial migrants tapping the needs of fellow international sojourners. This is the case of Autobuses Adame, a bus operation started by a Mexican migrant to service the Monterrey-Houston circuit. Using first his car and later a fleet of vans, Esteban Adame initiated his cross-border venture in the early 1980s, switching to buses ten years later. By the late 1990s, he had opened his own bus terminal in Houston and a similar bus station in Monterrey. He also established El Paísán, a separate bus company that transports passengers from the Monterrey terminal to locations in Mexico's interior. In addition to bus rides, Autobuses Adame offers money transfer and courier services, through which customers can send correspondence and documents to any of its multiple destinations (Moreno 2003).

In early 2003, Autobuses Adame had a fleet of fifty buses, with eleven offices in the United States and eight in Mexico, and provided transportation services to 180,000 people yearly in the two countries. In newspaper accounts, Adame reported annual revenues of \$13.5 million from the bus service and \$1.5 million from the remittance business (Moreno 2003). My own observations in Texas and Georgia suggest that Autobuses Adame has enjoyed a tremendous expansion as a result of the opening of the southeast as the new frontier of Mexican immigration in the United States. With Houston as its U.S. base, Adame's destinations now include the Atlanta

metropolitan area, Nashville, and cities and towns in North Carolina and Virginia, where the company owns terminals or shares bus depots with other firms specializing in the immigrant market (Borden 2004). In one of my last fieldwork stints in Monterrey in early 2006, I found out that Autobuses Adame had established an alliance with Autobuses Ejecutivos and Omnibuses Mexicanos, two firms with a dominant position in the Mexican interstate bus system. This alliance underscores how large corporations are seeking to establish a foothold in the expanding immigrant transportation market (also see Posada García 2005).

Still, coach lines do not have the monopoly on land transportation in the Monterrey-Houston circuit. Courier services, typically using small fleets of vans, compete with bus companies by specializing in particular networks and clusters of neighborhoods of the Monterrey metropolitan area. As the story of Autobuses Adame shows, some of these van operations have been the startup version of current full-blown bus firms. However, the *camionetas* remain a distinct kind of service offered by migration entrepreneurs in this circuit.

### Houston

Over the past twenty years, Houston has emerged as a major hub of the migration industry in the Mexico-U.S. migratory system—a development that stems from Houston's own geographic proximity to Mexico and the city's newly found place as the third-largest concentration of Mexicans in the United States, the distribution center of Mexican labor for the Southeast, and the gateway to the larger eastern seaboard. Needless to say, as the chief destination of U.S.-bound *regiomontanos*, the Bayou City also hosts services and entrepreneurs specializing exclusively in the Monterrey-Houston circuit.

As in the case of cities and towns with sizable immigrant populations across the United States, an array of migration industry services are concentrated in Houston's Mexican neighborhoods. In the Bayou City, no other place reflects this phenomenon more clearly than Magnolia, the historic Mexican neighborhood adjoining the Houston shipping channel. Here, newcomers can locate the services of smugglers, contractors, formal and informal transportation operators, remittance firms, travel agents, lawyers and notaries offering legal and paralegal advice, individuals producing fake papers, telecommunications agencies to stay in touch with friends and relatives across the border, grocers and check-cashing establishments catering to the clandestine segment of the immigrant pop-

ulation, and ethnic realtors offering rentals and homes for sale to both documented and undocumented Mexicans. There are emerging clusters of migration industry services in the more recently established Mexican ethnoburbs of northwest Houston, including Summerland, but they still lack the density of businesses observed in historic neighborhoods.

An area in which the stations and small storefront offices of bus and *camioneta* services are concentrated, Harrisburg Boulevard is the center of migration industry entrepreneurial activities in Magnolia. Many of the transportation services located along this thoroughfare are among the oldest and most established operations in the city. As figures 8 and 9 show, these are “above ground” firms which advertise in local Spanish newspapers and offer multiple services, including transportation, wire transfers, and remittance and parcel delivery in Mexico. An examination of these ads suggests that the overwhelming majority of firms transporting passengers to Mexico use coaches, while businesses offering transportation to U.S. inland destinations utilize vans.<sup>2</sup>

The distinction between bus and van transportation operations and their sharply different destinations reveal aspects of the social organization, division of labor, and geography of this segment of the migration industry. While the highly regulated and expensive-to-operate coach lines appear to focus on the cross-border market, linking Houston to a handful of preestablished locations in Mexico along clearly defined routes (usually reflecting one or more migratory circuits), the small and often informal van operations perform an entirely different function, namely, the distribution of Mexican immigrant workers from the Bayou City to numerous labor markets along the eastern seaboard, the Midwest, and even California. Thus, the vans offer a great deal of flexibility in terms of specific destinations, often advertising the names of states instead of cities and towns (with the exception of large metropolitan areas). To be clear, these van services are not entirely new; on the contrary, for decades, they have offered their services to immigrants toiling in agricultural labor markets in the way of the more informal *vañeros* (ride providers) and *troqueros* (truck drivers) (Criffith and Kissam 1995).<sup>3</sup>

However, two important developments have changed the role of van transportation operations and perhaps have even boosted their numbers.<sup>4</sup> The first of such developments is the rise of new destinations of Mexican immigration, particularly in the northeast, mid-Atlantic, southeast, and Midwest regions. As millions of Mexican newcomers moved to urban and rural destinations in these vast areas starting in the late 1980s, Houston became not only a gateway into the United States





vans, bus companies traveling across the international boundary, through established ports of entry and along major highways, cater to legal border crossers, while van lines specialize in clandestine immigrants who seek a low profile while trying to reach destinations in the U.S. interior.

Van courier services such as Transportes García combine some of the features of both bus and van passenger services. Like bus companies, they specialize in the cross-border market of services; and like their van counterparts traveling to the U.S. interior, they are largely informal operations.

#### THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF A MIGRATION INDUSTRY BUSINESS: THE CASE OF TRANSPORTES GARCÍA

##### *The Origin and Operation of Transportes García*

Like many migration entrepreneurs who emerge from the ranks of the newcomer group, Jorge García first got started in the Monterrey-Houston circuit as a regular labor migrant. He arrived in Houston in 1979, following his father and two siblings who had made the trip earlier in the decade. They were part of the flow of skilled and semiskilled industrial workers who started migrating to Houston during the 1970s and early 1980s and who found employment in the city's booming economy in companies specializing in petrochemicals, oil and gas extraction, and oil technology. First recruited by agents of these expanding industries and later displaced by the contraction and restructuring of heavy manufacturing in Monterrey, these workers had already acquired the necessary skills to become machinists, industrial welders, and maintenance mechanics in the Houston metropolitan economy back in Monterrey. Thus, after several years of employment in a machine repair company servicing textile factories in Monterrey, Jorge García moved to Houston to work a numeric control machine in a shop that produced turbines for NASA.

Jorge's remittance transportation business practically began as an extension of his frequent visits to Monterrey. The relative geographic proximity of Houston and Monterrey made it possible for him to travel home regularly, leaving Houston on Friday night and returning Monday morning. The frequency and regularity of his visits quickly became public knowledge among *regiomontano* migrants settled in the northwest Mexican ethnoburbs of Houston where he lived. These migrants started to finance Jorge's gasoline costs in exchange for the transport and delivery of packages to family members in Monterrey. Soon after initiating

these exchanges, he became aware of the lucrative business prospects that this activity held, including the perceived benefits of self-employment. Transportes García began operating as such in 1982. However, Jorge did not leave his salaried post right away: For four years he combined his job as a machinist with his emerging transportation business until the latter absorbed most of his time. The growing success of this small company allowed him to quit the shop and work full time in the transport of money and correspondence. The evolving infrastructure of Jorge's company reflects the origins and development of his business over more than fifteen years of operation. His first trips were made in his own car until he purchased two vans. These more spacious vehicles provided him with the opportunity to not only transport money and correspondence but also parcels and, to a lesser extent, passengers. In 1997, Jorge replaced his old vans with two recent models he used to do the traveling between Houston and Monterrey. At that point, the old vans were kept in Monterrey and used exclusively for the delivery of remittances and other items in La Sultana del Norte.

One of Houston's local neighborhood parks was Transportes García's first center of operation. Here, Jorge collected and organized envelopes with money, correspondence, and packages with a variety of items that Monterrey migrants were sending to their families. After seven years of having utilized the park as a site for his activities, two policemen forced him to leave the park area. It is worth noting this encounter with agents of the receiving state, who clamped down on the operation's obvious informality and partly chartered the small firm's resulting step. Following this forced removal, Jorge decided to lease a small office located at the back of a Mexican restaurant on one of the main streets in northwest Houston, paying \$350 for monthly rent. After operating out of this space for a few years, Jorge had to move the business to a similar locale in a small commercial strip along the same avenue and then again to another shopping center near his house. The reason for these moves was basically the same: Both the back of the Mexican restaurant and the commercial strip where the business was located did not have the capacity to accommodate the flow of customers and vehicles stopping by the office during the days the *camionetas* were set to leave for Monterrey.

Jorge García's passenger vans used to make two trips between Houston and Monterrey every week. Every Friday and Monday afternoon, families and single men gathered in the small office and parking lot to drop off the money to be remitted to their relatives living in the Monterrey metropolitan area. Others stopped by to leave a parcel or to ask



why a particular item had not been delivered back home. According to Jorge, the Friday trip was the more important of the two conducted every week because of the many persons who received their paychecks and were ready to send part of their salary to Mexico on that day. Inside the office, in Houston, Jorge, his wife and oldest son, a niece, a brother-in-law, and two to three assistants worked on the recording and organizing of the shipments. Thus, the business was fundamentally a family operation. Jorge, his wife, and his niece personally handled the money and correspondence.<sup>7</sup> The employees were in charge of placing boxes, packages, and bags in the van and a small trailer, and one of them was responsible for driving the vehicle. It is worth noting that these assistants were all from the same neighborhood where Jorge grew up in Monterrey, once again pointing to the significance of the urban barrio in the organization of networks and contacts that support city-origin migration from Mexico to the United States.

The system used to ship the money deserves a detailed description since it illustrates significant aspects of the informal nature of the operation and its significance as an example of the migration industry facilitating the movement of cash, goods, and people in the Monterrey-Houston circuit. The money handed in by each customer was counted by Jorge and his wife and placed in an envelope. A letter or brief written message frequently accompanied these cash remittances. Once the envelope was sealed, the address of the person receiving the shipment in Monterrey would be written on the outside as well as the dollar amount to be remitted. Jorge and his wife did not extend any receipts to their clients, although his niece registered the names of the sender, the beneficiary, and the total sum in a logbook. Again, the sender did not keep any receipt or slip acknowledging the shipment. When the delivery person arrived at the home of the recipient in Monterrey, he required the customer to count the money in front of him to make sure that the figure written on the outside of the envelope matched the actual cash amount. Then the recipient was asked to sign the front of the empty envelope, which served as proof that the money had arrived safely in the hands of family members in Monterrey.

Thus, the *camionetas* traveled the highways that connect Houston and the capital of Nuevo León every Friday and Monday night. The trip would take approximately ten hours, but sometimes the border checkpoints could add two or three additional hours to the journey. Jorge used to make one of the two weekly trips, while his assistants were responsible for the other one. Upon arrival in Monterrey the following

morning, the passenger van proceeded to the Mexico "office" of the small company, a house that Jorge bought for his father to spend the last days of his life in under the care of his sisters. The second fundamental phase of the small transportation business was conducted here: Another brother-in-law, a sister, and a nephew were in charge of delivering the envelopes with money, letters, and parcels. They were also responsible for classifying the shipments according to their destination in the metropolitan area. Nevertheless, some clients would prefer to go directly to the house to pick up *las cartas* from Houston. The delivery would begin once the envelopes and parcels had been classified and placed in the older vans. The actual delivery routes of Transportes García evidenced that this small company specialized in distinct migratory networks located in two metropolitan municipalities. Of the two-van fleet dedicated to the distribution of shipments to the nine Monterrey municipalities, one was solely used for the delivery of packages in two of these municipalities while the other was utilized to transport items to the remaining metropolitan districts. In other words, this *camioneta* business catered to clusters of households and neighborhoods, connected to each other not by accident but as a result of the strong and weak ties channeling migrants to the Bayou City in the first place.

How much money in cash remittances did Transportes García move between the two cities, and how many households and families did it serve? According to Jorge, his small transportation company mobilized some \$40,000 from Houston to Monterrey every week. His clients in Houston remitted an average of \$200 per *carta*, with the *camionetas* two weekly trips making a minimum of two hundred deliveries. The number of deliveries, however, is not commensurate with the total number of families and households using this service. Jorge García's clientele was composed of regular as well as more occasional customers. Regular clients, those who would send money every week, were most likely members of *casas divididas* (divided households), where an immigrant breadwinner had left behind his or her dependents in Monterrey, usually a spouse, children, and, in some cases, aging parents who relied on the income remitted from Houston.<sup>8</sup> Most of those who sent cash intermittently were individuals who had immigrated with their entire nuclear family. This type of customers remitted \$50 a month on average, sometimes responding to an emergency occurring within the extended family or to some other special occasion. The total amount of money the *camionetas* moved reached as much as \$60,000 during particular times of the year. For example, in April and May, larger sums would be sent because

because migrants remitted their tax refunds to Monterrey. Another reason for the increase in remittances during the month of May was the celebration of Mother's Day in Mexico. Similarly, December was a peak time for remittances because of the Christmas holiday.

Participant observation I conducted at the home office in Monterrey and during the vans' delivery trips throughout the metropolitan area indicates that families received anywhere between \$70 and \$400 from their relatives in Houston. There was little difference in service costs for varying amounts of cash delivered: Clients in Houston would send up to \$300 for a \$10 fee; up to \$500 for \$12; up to \$700 for \$15; and up to \$1,000 for \$20. However, the most important features of the service, from the point of view of migrants, were that the funds were delivered the next day in cash (and in dollars) and that they arrived directly to the family home in Monterrey. Thus, cost was one of the obvious differences between this small transportation company and wire-transfer services such as Western Union. In 1998, sending \$500 to Mexico through Western Union could cost between \$70 and \$80, considering fees and the hidden costs of an unfavorable exchange rate (see García, Levander, and Sandoval 1998).

Even though the movement of remittances in cash was the main line of business of Transportes García, the transport of items and merchandise used in daily household consumption was also an important part of the operation. These goods were actually remittances sent in kind. Shipping *paquetaria* (parcels) was less profitable for Jorge and considerably more troublesome than transporting cash remittances (see below). However, this activity had great significance for the material and symbolic reproduction of the Monterrey-Houston migrant circuit. In any given trip, the *camionetas* carried an average of forty *paquetaria* deliveries. In Monterrey, an array of goods ready to be distributed throughout the metropolitan area littered the front of the home base, the sidewalk, and the street and occupied much space in the vans and trailers used to transport these items: clothes and shoes; coolers full of chicken, milk, and orange juice; bags of tortillas; television sets; toys; bicycles; chairs; lamps; air conditioners; stereos; and car tires.<sup>9</sup> Other types of items were present as well: heaters, refrigerators, living room furniture, and washing machines and dryers. On the way back to Houston, the van would take a variety of items that family members in Mexico had sent to their relatives in the United States. Aside from correspondence, food, flour tortillas, medicine, Mexican beer, and local soft drinks were the articles most frequently shipped to Texas.<sup>10</sup>

In the eyes of those who sent and received these objects, whether

in Houston or Monterrey, the items not only possessed discrete and material value (for immediate or long-term household consumption or productive or leisurely utilization) but were also endowed with symbolic meaning. To me, the presence of some of these items among the *paquetaria* cargo of Transportes García was at first puzzling. For instance, some immigrants in Houston sent corn tortillas to Mexico. In turn, some people in Monterrey sent locally produced Coke and other bottled soft drinks to the United States. When these sodas were consumed, the crate with empty bottles would make a trip back to Monterrey for refill. Once these bottles were exchanged for full ones, the *Cocas*, *Joyas*, and *Topo Chicos* began their journey back north aboard the *camionetas*. These seemingly misplaced and redundant objects (i.e., U.S.-made tortillas in Mexico, Mexican soft drinks in the United States) provides symbolic continuity to a population that inhabits a discontinuous geographic space, establishing links between families, households, and groups of friends of distant cities located in two nation-states. Because individuals conduct social interactions through objects and artifacts (Borrichhoff 1999), sending goods (even if they were of little monetary value) allowed persons living and working in one place to assert a symbolic presence in another while claiming participation in the daily lives of distant family members. Thus, the shipping of a secondhand stove or a bundle of used clothes to Monterrey allowed a person to contribute to the daily reproduction of a family back home, while the sending of local foods and beverages to Houston permitted the expression of gratitude. The case of Transportes García shows how the migration industry not only facilitates human mobility across borders but also helps realize material and symbolic goals associated with international migration.

Jorge's *camionetas* also transported passengers back and forth between Monterrey and Houston. Eight or nine people would make the one-way trip in the van. These clients were usually residents of the two neighboring metropolitan municipalities in which the small company specialized. The transportation of passengers was a facet of the business that Jorge had tried to develop in the past with little success. A few years back, he had purchased a minibus but was forced to sell it because he could not make his insurance payments. As explained above, small, informal businesses like Jorge's compete with larger, "above-ground" companies that concentrate on the passenger market and on routes connecting Houston and other cities in the United States with cities and towns in Mexico's interior. These companies utilize large coaches instead of vans, offering daily departures to multiple destinations. However,

most of them are still located in Magnolia, the historic Mexican neighborhood in Houston, far from the area where Jorge operated and where many recently arrived Mexican immigrants have settled, effectively sheltering Transportes García from direct competition.

Over the years, Jorge and his employees developed specific funds of knowledge (Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg 1992) that eased their workload and allowed them to keep costs down. These funds of knowledge consisted of strategies to efficiently and effectively transport thousands of dollars in cash and merchandise across the border and to manage the risks involved in this operation. Although Jorge and his drivers were legal residents of the United States and could go back and forth at will, crossing the international boundary with money, mostly used goods, passengers, and no formal permit to conduct these activities required a constant interaction and negotiation with customs agents and other officials at different ports of entry along the Texas-Mexico border.

For instance, one particular fund of knowledge had to do with the management of interactions with Mexican customs and highway police and being able to choose alternative ports of entry when customs agents wanted to extract excessive bribes to allow the van's cargo to come into Mexico. As it is shown in detail below, such negotiations were not always successful, occasionally provoking critical incidents that compromised the viability of the entire business. Another important knowledge reserve was related to the familiarity with the urban geography of the two metropolitan areas. Jorge and his employees developed substantial expertise on the geographic location of migrant households in Houston and Monterrey, which was used to drop off the *carritas* containing remittances, packages, and passengers directly to clients' homes. There were other skills that made up this repertoire of knowledge and that were particular to the characteristics of the small company: learning how to fix the mechanical malfunctions of the vans, knowing how to solve the occasional loss of money and packages, and satisfactorily administering the operation.

#### *Social Capital and Network Membership in the Initiation of a Migration Industry Business*

What allowed for Jorge's transformation from a wage worker into a migration industry entrepreneur? A fundamental precondition was the gradual emergence of an actual migratory circuit linking Houston and Monterrey in the 1970s and 1980s, that is, a critical mass of the Monterrey immigrant population in the Bayou City and a growing density of

its networks and activities. Second, Jorge's ability to become one of such entrepreneurs stemmed not from his personal attributes but rather from his membership in the network of immigrant industrial workers from Monterrey, namely, from his social capital. It was his membership in this network that allowed him to identify the needs of fellow *regiomontanos* and to detect the opportunity to make money as these immigrants sought to remit funds, send correspondence and parcels, and travel back home. In other words, Jorge, as opposed to an outsider, was particularly well positioned to take advantage of the potential business opportunity embedded in the social practices of these newcomers.<sup>11</sup>

But when Jorge García decided to turn his social capital into a launching pad for a business operation, he also changed the terms of his nexus to fellow migrants, which shifted from feelings of trust, reciprocity, and solidarity to the expectations of efficiency and effectiveness that characterize a commercial transaction. There is no doubt, then, that the prolonged survival of Transportes García had to do with the efficiency and low cost of the multiple services that Jorge and his assistants provided to customers. Like the Salvadoran *vigiteros* (travelers) studied by Mahler (1999), the *camionetas* continued existence as a successful small-business operation was largely anchored on such efficiency and not solely on personal relations based on trust (i.e., between Jorge and his clients—fellow immigrants). Jorge himself acknowledged that it was the regularity and uninterrupted character of his services that attracted and kept the patronage of other *regiomontanos*. For instance, he emphatically asserted that his passenger vans *never* skipped the Friday trip to Monterrey, since this was the day when most migrants cashed their weekly checks and remitted money to their families in Mexico. Thus, even though Jorge's ability to initiate his remittances business was intimately connected to his relationship with fellow immigrants from Monterrey, as the nature of his relationship to them changed (from *paisanos* to customers) and the circle of clients expanded over time, the entire enterprise became dependent on the ability to deliver a service and not on trust and personal acquaintance. From just another member of the network with access to free resources to be used in case of need, Jorge García became the successful owner of a profit-seeking enterprise.

In my interviews with Jorge, he often produced an account of his migration industry enterprise that described his clients' trust in him and the moral obligation he felt toward his clients and the members of the extended family employed in the business. He explained these notions with the example of the secondhand items that people shipped from Houston

to Monterrey. During an interview at a Houston restaurant, Jorge and his brother-in-law argued about whether they would have to raise the fees charged for the *paquetaría* service to make the shipment of parcels a profitable activity. Most of these fees were utilized at the border to bribe Mexican customs officials. This was necessary because people sent mostly used goods, such as secondhand clothing, that could not be legally introduced into Mexico. Jorge saw two impediments to a service fee increase. First, his clients tended to remit items with very little or no commercial value, making it difficult to estimate the appropriate levy. Second, he stated that to make a profit with the parcels, he needed to charge \$50 to \$60 for small packages for which he was currently asking \$10 to \$12. In his view, immigrants earning \$250 a week could not pay such an amount. He concluded that the trust and moral obligation that he felt toward the people that used Transportes García prevented him from raising the prices for shipping parcels. I interpret the motives provided in this account not as the real reason why prices of parcel shipping could not be increased but as part of Jorge's moral self-justification for what in the end was an economic decision.<sup>12</sup> As shown below, eliminating or even scaling down the parcel part of the business compromised the remittance segment of the venture (the most profitable one, in fact), as many customers patronized Transportes García because of the multiple services it offered, including its low cost and virtually duty-free package shipping service.

In contrast to Jorge's moral account, his customers and employees—members of the same migratory network—verbalized a different view of him and his operation. One of his customers reasoned that people used this and similar services simply because they did not want to pay the import taxes (on parcels sent to Mexico) and higher fees charged by formal courier and remittance firms. Others even argued that Jorge García was taking advantage of his customers by not delivering the exact amounts of cash remitted from Houston and by losing large sums of money and parcels quite often. One interviewee contended that Jorge García had been using the remittance business as a front to smuggle large numbers of goods, such as computer monitors, without having to pay taxes.

One of the drivers who used to deliver remittances and parcels in Monterrey also provided a dissonant account of the business, exposing some of the internal cleavages of Transportes García. The circumstances in which I talked to him helped reveal these inner tensions. I had gotten permission from Jorge to ride with the driver, Andrés, throughout his delivery route, which included I a Fama and the two municipalities where most customers lived. GUSTAVO, Jorge's brother-in-law, was going

to cover the rest of the metropolitan area. Andrés had seen me talking to Jorge during my visits to the *camionetas* home base in Monterrey, and so he immediately suspected that I was spying on him on behalf of the owner. Although Andrés did not say this, I could sense his discomfort from his body language and from the many questions he asked about what I was doing. Only after we spent several hours together and after lengthy explanations on my part about the purpose of my activities did he appear to soften his original reluctance, confessing his suspicion that I was Jorge's spy, ready to tell on him. Helping Andrés unload boxes, television sets, and other heavy items from the van and into clients' homes also contributed to establishing trust between us.

Andrés told me that customers had complained to Jorge about missing money, including lost envelopes and incomplete remittances. In fact, while assisting him along the delivery route, I witnessed how clients confronted Andrés about partial transfers and missing cash. Andrés believed that Gustavo was taking money from the envelopes for his own use when Jorge was late paying his salary without informing him (Jorge) of his actions. Throughout the day, Andrés bitterly complained about his low pay, about having to withstand a great deal of downtime as he waited for the arrival of the *camionetas* from Houston, and about having to use his own vehicle to make the deliveries. Although Jorge provided him with money for gas, the wear and tear on his already old pickup truck were not covered. Needless to say, all of these dynamics raised tensions and provoked distrust, especially between Andrés and Jorge. Soon after this conversation, Andrés left Transportes García.

These dissonant interpretations of the same business activity reflected cleavages that had unfolded as Jorge García became a successful entrepreneur. Even though he had been able to identify and pursue a business opportunity, thanks to his social capital, the profit-seeking nature of his flourishing venture had set him apart from the largely horizontal network of industrial workers from Monterrey. The consequences of such a cleavage would not show up until the operation faced its most critical juncture.

#### *The Demise of Transportes García:*

##### *The Role of Sending and Receiving States*

How do sending and receiving states affect the social organization, success, and demise of migration industry ventures such as Transportes García? The description of the origins and mode of operation of Jorge

García's business might suggest that this *camioneta* service was the textbook example of the ethnic economy enterprise developed by immigrants with the assistance of their networks and social capital. But I argue that Transportes García was more than an ethnic enterprise. As a migration industry business, this courier and passenger transport firm was part of the social and economic infrastructure that facilitates the mobility of people and monetary and in-kind remittances across international borders. Furthermore, Jorge and his Transportes García took advantage of the distinct and uneven institutional realities of the two countries to stay in business for nearly twenty years—often straddling a formal and informal existence in the United States but always operating informally in Mexico. As described before, Jorge regularly bribed Mexican customs officials at various ports of entry along the Texas-Mexico border to bring cash and parcels into the country with minimal inspection. On one occasion, while at his home base in Monterrey, Jorge was approached by a low-level representative of the Ministry of the Treasury who tried to get him to register his business or face fines and other penalties. Unable to bribe him, Jorge's response was to "hire" a local policeman to intimidate him and drive him out of the neighborhood.

Clearly, the different institutional realities of the two countries created opportunities for Jorge García and his employees, shaping the organization and strategies of the operation. But at the same time, frequent interactions with state officials, especially at the border, created risks.<sup>13</sup> One of these encounters in the late 1990s brought the *camionetas* to the brink of bankruptcy. On that particular occasion, U.S. customs agents in Laredo, Texas, seized \$27,000 in remittances that Transportes García was taking to Monterrey. The agents confiscated the money because it exceeded the \$10,000 in cash that a person is allowed to take outside the United States without declaring it to customs. This problem had been solved in the past by having one or two assistants take part of the funds (while the rest was kept in the van) and walk across the border to get on the vehicle again on the Mexican side. Jorge was not traveling with the van at the time this incident happened, and when the customs officer asked the driver how much currency he was transporting in cash and he hesitated, stating that he did not know, the agents moved in, counted the whole amount, and confiscated the money. It is worth noting that although Texas authorities often fine bus and *camioneta* firms for engaging in currency transportation without the proper permits, local state officials do not confiscate either funds or vehicles—something their federal counterparts obviously do.<sup>14</sup>

Even before trying to get the remittances back from U.S. customs, Jorge had to figure out how to deliver the money to the families in Monterrey. The incident had occurred during the weekend, and he could not withdraw large sums of cash from a bank's ATM. In light of this situation, Jorge asked some of his clients to wait a few days until he could either manage to get the remittances back or pool some funds together. According to him, most of his customers did not accept this proposition and asked to have their remittances handed over to them immediately. Only a few agreed to his request. Such a reaction led Jorge to a rather discouraging conclusion: People were not returning in kind the support and favors that he had extended to many of them over the years. Jorge was nonetheless able to borrow \$11,000 from a *compadre*, which he pooled together with some savings to deliver the remittances to his clients in Monterrey. Nonetheless, the confiscation of the money put him under such financial strain that he considered leaving the remittance transportation business altogether. In order to retrieve the \$27,000 from customs, Jorge had to hire a lawyer, who charged him \$3,000, and to pay a \$4,000 fine. In the end, with other expenses tallied, the incident had cost him \$8,000. The viability of the business was also in doubt because, as a reaction to these events, a sizable number of customers stopped utilizing the services of Transportes García. The drop in the number of deliveries was significant: from a normal average of one hundred to one hundred twenty remittances to only thirty to forty after the border episode took place. As a consequence, Jorge's earnings had dropped to about \$200 to \$300 per trip.

To make things worse, all of Jorge's vehicles started to break down at nearly the same time. These circumstances forced him not only to spend additional money to fix them but also to temporarily halt the shipping of packages. Since they could not get their parcels delivered, many customers decided not to use the *camionetas* to send remittances. Not surprisingly, when Jorge openly expressed to individual clients the possibility of ending the remittance transportation service—an interaction I witnessed at a cantina in La Tana—many urged him to continue with the operation.

To cope with the financial problems derived from these events, Jorge began to consider selling one of the houses that he had bought in Monterrey—the home where his father had lived until his death. This was the house that Transportes García used as a home base and also where his sister, Beatriz, and brother-in-law, Gustavo, were living with their children. When he mentioned the idea to them, they rejected it

immediately, arguing that this was their home. Jorge had actually registered the property title under Beatriz's name, and there was little he could do, given that she appeared as the legal owner of the house. Needless to say, Jorge's proposition to sell this asset provoked heightened conflict within the extended family, evidencing underlying tensions and contradictions. Although all of these individuals participated in the operation of the *camioneta* business and were members of the network of migrants of the Monterrey-Houston circuit, there were significant differences in the sharing of power and resources among them. Lacking any kind of migratory experience, Jorge's sister and brother-in-law were subordinate to him in various ways; they depended on him for living quarters and for wages, as Gustavo worked for him delivering the shipments and had no other source of income. But tensions were not new to the family. Jorge had been thinking about removing Gustavo from the reception and delivery of remittances in Monterrey because his brother-in-law had been taking cash for his own use without notifying him. When remittances were missing, Jorge had to put back money from his own pocket. Still, firing Gustavo was not an easy thing to do, given that Jorge himself acknowledged his sister's and brother-in-law's dependence on the income provided by Transportes García.

The small transportation company survived this prolonged crisis that nearly drove it out of business, but not for long. Customers continued to use the service, and the number of remittances sent regained its normal level. Gustavo stayed in charge of delivering *cartas* and parcels in Monterrey, even as both he and his wife reasserted their right to the house and blocked any efforts on the part of Jorge to sell it. Moreover, the house remained the home base of the *camionetas* in Mexico. Nevertheless, similar problems continued to emerge, underscoring the risks of the constant interface with state officials on both sides of the border. Agents of the Mexican Ministry of Communications and Transportation seized one of Jorge's vans because he did not have the permit and insurance to transport passengers. Although these encounters with state officials were not new, the outcome confirmed the perilous effect of regulation on this informal migration industry enterprise. In a separate incident, U.S. authorities had jailed Jorge's most reliable driver and a friend as they were trying to introduce an American car into Mexico. Jorge had been paid by the owner of the vehicle to take it to Mexico to probably sell it there—an illegal but rather common practice. Although the title documents of the car were in order, the two men were detained. Jorge realized that the owner of the vehicle, in a clear abuse of his trust,

had reported the car as stolen, with the purpose of claiming the value of the automobile from the insurance company. Given his indirect responsibility in the affair, Jorge felt compelled to pay the \$15,000 bail bond to set the two men temporarily free.

Shortly after this string of incidents, Transportes García went out of business. Still, just as important was the way in which it ceased operating. According to customers and acquaintances of Jorge García, the final months of the courier service's operation were fraught with conflict between him and his employees, on the one hand, and between him and his clientele, on the other. A fellow *regiomontano* and longtime patron claimed, "Jorge and his crew were stealing from people" and that, "at the end, folks were constantly complaining to him." As Transportes García closed down, Jorge disconnected his phone and basically "disappeared" from sight. Although he was still living in town, his new low-key profile appeared to be the result of missing money he owed to his former customers. One interviewee stated that he had momentarily seen Jorge and that he had gone back to do factory work in Houston. I later found out that the house used as the home base of the *camionetas* in Monterrey had been sold and that Beatriz and Gustavo had moved to Houston.

#### CONCLUSION

The shutdown of Transportes García did not leave the migrants from La Fama and surrounding neighborhoods without a *camioneta* service to tend to their remittance and transportation needs. Immediately after the closing of Jorge García's business, at least two others sprung up to replace this long-established operation. Both were set up by "insiders" of the Monterrey-Houston migratory network: One was established by Jorge's most trusted driver, while the other was launched by Antonio and Raquel, the couple introduced in the previous chapter. During a 2003 visit to the Summerland area of Houston, I identified yet another service, also founded by a *regiomontano* and also specializing in distributing *cartas* and parcels in La Fama and the westernmost districts of the Monterrey metropolitan area.

The fact that not one but several *camioneta* operations emerged as Transportes García went out of business attests to the persistence and growth of the migration industry. The reason why only *regiomontano* migrants and no "outsiders" took advantage of the chance to launch a similar venture had to do with the highly embedded nature of this

money-making opportunity. Just like Jorge García himself, all of the new migration entrepreneurs arising in his wake were members of the same social network as their clients, were acquainted with the needs of fellow migrants, and had a sense of how to satisfy them in a cost-effective manner. At the same time, they were all aware of the juncture opened by the failure of Transportes García. Still, the ultimate reason why all of them flocked to seize the opportunity was clear: This was simply a highly profitable venture.

Even though I never got a firm answer from Jorge García regarding what kind of profit margin he was making on each trip, one of his successors did share this information with me. Antonio, the asbestos laborer who threw a lavish *quinceañera* party for his daughter, told me that he could make \$1,000 profit on a single trip (or \$4,000 a month, as a result of four weekend trips). It is evident that even for a “reluctant” *camionero* like Antonio, who always downplayed his incursion in the business and never quit his regular job in asbestos removal, these were handsome earnings. Indeed, two years after he became one of Jorge’s successors and despite the fact that he serviced a small number of clients on his weekly trip to Monterrey, Antonio, his wife, Raquel, and their four children were able to move from the rundown apartment where they had lived for more than a decade into a single-family home. As related in chapter 4, profits from the van courier operation also helped pay for his daughter’s \$10,000 *quinceaños* celebration. Still, neither Antonio’s insider status nor the sheer profitability of the opportunity was enough to guarantee a successful and durable business operation. The financial and personal cost of two highway accidents—one in 2003 in Mexico and another in 2005 in Texas—ended up driving Antonio out of business, narrowing the number of *camioneta* providers specializing in La Fama to two.

But the *camionetas* that link the urban neighborhoods of Houston and Monterrey are part of a larger matrix of businesses catering to the mobility, communication, legal, and financial needs of immigrants and their families and households on both sides of the border. This matrix—the migration industry—is not getting smaller. On the contrary, it is growing and becoming more varied. In addition to the migration industry entrepreneurs and businesses rooted in the Monterrey-Houston circuit (or entrepreneurs using these cities to conduct far-reaching operations), over the past ten years, new actors, big and small, have entered this market. It is worth noting the establishment of alliances between firms traditionally identified with separate services (i.e., remittances via

sus transportation) and the participation of large corporations in the remittance business and the already-discussed remittance in-kind sector of the migration industry. For instance, wire transfer corporations, such as Western Union and MoneyGram, are partnering with transportation firms, like Senda, in Mexico, turning bus depots into outlets where customers can send and receive remittances. In establishing these partnerships and despite their already large share of the remittance market, companies like Western Union are catching up and competing with options immigrants have enjoyed for some time, enterprises like Transportes García and Autobuses Adame.

The emergence of new actors, novel strategic alliances, and innovative modalities trying to capture a share of the remittance market raises questions about the long-term survival of small, informal courier services like Transportes García and its successors. Together with the above-mentioned corporations, medium- and small-sized money transfer businesses (i.e., Sigue, Orlandi Valura, King Express) and banks (i.e., Bank of America, Wells Fargo) are now part of the migration industry landscape, generating heightened competition between old and new service providers, all of them trying to get a piece of the more than \$23 billion Mexican immigrants sent back home in 2006 (Banco de México 2007).<sup>15</sup> Competition, together with political pressure to bring down transaction costs and legal challenges by immigrant organizations, has fostered a decline in fees for sending cash and in-kind remittances to Mexico and the drop of such fees across regions in the United States (Orozco 2002; Banco de México 2007). Given the availability of multiple low-cost options, can the *camionetas* compete and survive? Although obviously only time will tell, I would argue that these types of courier services are unlikely to disappear, at least in the short run. So long as they can offer some reliability to customers, the *camionetas* will continue to build on the very competitive advantages outlined in this chapter: specialization and social embeddedness in distinct migratory circuits, a combination of multiple services under one roof, and the negotiation of risks and costs by moving between formality and informality in the two political and legal contexts where they operate.