Remesas: Sending Money Back

Every year, millions of people migrate around the planet in search of better opportunities and living conditions for themselves and their families. Within the logic of global capitalism, remittances are the records of human labour produced by migrants living abroad. Such flows of human and financial capital have deep economic and social implications at home and in foreign lands, and in many regions, such as Latin America, remittances exceed the combined total of all Foreign Direct Investment and Overseas Development Assistance. 1 Mexico is the largest recipient of remittances in Latin America and fourth in the world, receiving around $20 billion annually. According to the journal El Economista, 2 these are paid by the ten percent of Mexican-born citizens who live abroad—98 percent of whom are distributed across just four US states: California, Texas, Illinois, and Arizona. 3 These numbers belie the fact that sending money back home is actually quite expensive. Despite the use of new technologies such as mobile phones and internet-based transactions, migrant workers pay exorbitant fees that can be as high as 20 percent of the money sent. Several institutions and forums have been working to combat this highway robbery by legally challenging currency exchange rates, finding low-cost remittance products, deposit accounts, and other banking services, and promoting competition among companies offering money-transfer services.

Nevertheless, the illegal status of many of the senders overrides the best of intentions. Undocumented workers cannot risk opening legitimate bank accounts in their adopted countries and establish a paper trail of their illegal status. In many cases, the requirements for opening bank accounts are unable to be met by the migrant class. This is especially the case with Mexicans living abroad: of the estimated eleven million undocumented immigrants in the US, 52 percent are Mexican. Such numbers are difficult to establish, but the Mexican government estimates that 33 million Mexicans live in the US. At the same time, two of the largest companies offering remittance services—Western Union and MoneyGram—have gained control of more than half of all transactions between the two countries. 4

In 2003, I began photographing business establishments that provide money-transfer services across the United States. These include everything from barbershops and shoe stores to businesses specializing exclusively in cheque-cashing and money transfers. My work became interested in the physicality of the places where the second largest source of Mexico’s foreign income is transacted. In many rural areas of Mexico, remittances are used for basic needs such as food, clothing, housing, health and education. Several towns and small cities around the country have even that their main source of income comes from abroad. Thus the businesses where these transactions originate, with their various shapes and characteristics, can provide the initial indicators of the social and economic transformations occurring in Mexico.

I have amassed an extensive archive of pictures, with each entry containing the store location and the name of the few source companies that collect fees from each money transfer. I photograph these places with a 35 mm camera and, when possible, in the morning, as they are about to open for business. Their façades call attention to the shapes of the buildings, as well as their signage. Language boundaries often reshape these locations into gathering points, where workers who have recently arrived might connect with peers with whom they can identify. But by focusing on the buildings instead of their users, I try to
My archive is organized by date and location, and I group together all the businesses I can photograph in one morning according to their proximity to one another. This classification allows me to compare neighbourhoods based on the density of migrant populations, as stores are often located in close proximity to foreign workers and their daily habits.

The images here were largely taken in the two states where the majority of Mexican immigrants live: California and Texas, including pictures from Los Angeles (taken in 2008–2009), small cities and towns close to El Paso (taken in 2013), as well as pictures from other states taken since 2003. I selected a variety of locations in order to illustrate some of the changes that have occurred since I began the project. The use of technology and new migration patterns have transformed the money transfer service industry. For instance, there has been a decrease in Mexican immigration to the United States due to the 2007–2008 economic crisis and its subsequent slow recovery. Remittances to Mexico have likewise declined, forcing some of the businesses to close. In addition, monopolistic corporations such as Wal-Mart have effectively decimated small businesses in several areas I have visited, resulting in less diversity in the type of stores I can photograph (see images from Texas, taken in September 2013). I remain interested in these transformations and will continue building the archive, which I believe provides a testament to the notion that while globalization, supported by agreements such as NAFTA, allows for cheaper and more frequent exchange of capital and goods, human mobility remains imperfectly restricted.

Notes
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3502 W 8th Street, Los Angeles, CA 90005
Money Gram

5031 Figurerea Street, Los Angeles, CA 90042
Order Express

550 South Rampart Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90057
Western Union

105 North 15th Street, Alpine, TX 79830
Western Union
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407 and 409 West Baltimore Street, Baltimore, MD 21201   Money Gram

1309 South Broadway Boulevard, Albuquerque, NM 87104   Western Union

1515 McDowell Road, Phoenix, AZ 85007   Western Union

5234 South Peoria Avenue, Tulsa, OK 74105   Western Union
The US/Mexico border traverses the North American continent from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. At 1,952 miles it is the ninth-longest border in the world and the most tightly controlled border of its length. The landscape of US/Mexico borderlands is an exemplary twenty-first century text that reflects, represents, and reveals the conflicting demands and imperatives of the relationships between the two nations and the global economy. In its ideal form, the border is an infinitely thin, abstract line separating two other abstract constructs: the United States and Mexico as modern nation-states. Marking the border requires inscription of the abstract into the real, with all the material and conceptual violence that this entails. The drawing of a line on the landscape, and the enforcement of this line, entails various registers relating to ecology, political economy, culture, laws, and customs.

Over time, political attitudes have changed with regard to migration and trade, leading to a continuous re-writing of both conditions. In 1933, the Rio Grande Rectification Treaty was signed by Mexico and the US, and the Rio Grande was straightened and encased in an open concrete canal. The rectification of the river defined the border by preventing further shifting and avulsions of the riverbed during floods. As the western portion of the border undergoes similar “hardening,” the friction between the projected line and the landscape through which it passes is amplified. This case is best exemplified by the filling of Smuggler’s Gulch, a canyon used by migrants and drug smugglers near Tijuana. In a massive earthmoving project completed in 2006, Smuggler’s Gulch was filled with nearly two million cubic yards of fill, and then capped with a road and fence. In the early twenty-first century, the large-scale capital investment by the US to increase security resulted in a third wave of reification of the border, in the form of new fences, surveillance systems, modernized ports of entry, and a tripling of the border patrol workforce. Again, the dual regimes of the border landscape—the river and the abstract line—inflect and dictate how this investment is resolved both architecturally and tactically.

Border Policy [Effects On Migration]

In the early 1900s three quarters of the immigration from Mexico to the United States occurred through points along the border in California. In the following decades increased border security and a series of US funded operations resulted in shifting immigration patterns. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) established the border between El Paso and Juárez as the primary point of entry for immigration. In 1993, Operation Hold the Line was put into effect to control and deter the amount of illegal immigrants crossing the border. The Operation was able to decrease the amount of immigration through El Paso by 75%. Following the apparent success of Operation Hold the Line, Operation Gatekeeper was put in effect at the border between San Diego and Tijuana. Enforcement at the border shifts immigration to the more remote and desert regions of Arizona. The harsh conditions of the desert resulted in numerous deaths of immigrants, especially those on foot. Members of Humane Borders, a humanitarian aid organization have installed water stations on key migration routes and published maps in Mexico showing precise locations of migrant crossings.