



# Forging New Paths: Examining the Transnational Social Networks behind Latino Migration in the American South

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## Abstract

This paper examines the understudied, but socially salient significance of transnational social networks in the establishment of new migrant destinations in the American South. By comparing two independent migrant groups — one originating from Guanajuato, Mexico and the other from Honduras and Nicaragua — this research explores the structure, scope, and social dynamics of transnational relationships linking Latino migrants in emerging receiving communities to a host of sending communities. Building upon the concepts of migrant networks and social capital, this multi-sited, in-depth qualitative research with migrants and their families in Latin America reveals the essential role that certain trailblazing agents operating in transnational networks play in creating and maintaining multi-nodal destinations for migrant groups. This approach calls attention to the micro-level social processes, such as gender dynamics, behind shifting migration patterns. Furthermore, these case studies highlight the tactics and assistance that undocumented migrants rely on to reach and find employment in receiving communities and demonstrate the agency that migrants possess to move between destinations in a recipient country. The results of this research contribute scholarly insight into the roles that mobility, informal labor recruitment, gender, and social capital play in the migratory practices of Latinos.

Keywords: Latino Immigration, Transnational Social Networks, Social Capital, Tennessee, Louisiana

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## 1. Introduction

The emergence of new U.S. destinations for Latin American migrants over the past three decades, particularly in southeastern states, has provided social scientists with a myriad of new research opportunities involving a range of interests (Smith and Furuseth, 2006; Odem and Lacy, 2009). Because many new southern destinations had never experienced large-scale Latino migration before, they offer fertile ground for observing various socioeconomic and cultural phenomena relating to migration and demographic change. To date there is a considerable body of scholarly research on Latino migration in the American South examining numerous topics, such as local politics and

education (Winders, 2013), integration and host community incorporation (Chaney, 2010), economic and labor restructuring (Smith and Winders, 2008), rural settlement patterns (Marrow, 2011), and the transnational spaces in which newly arrived Latinos create and occupy (Cravey, 2005). This burgeoning scholarship has established a foundation from which researchers and policymakers can better approach the demographic dynamism taking place in southern communities.

However, unanswered questions remain about Latino migration in the U.S. South. Perhaps some of the most intriguing, as well as crucial to comprehensively understanding current migration and settlement patterns, are those regarding exactly how and why migrants choose and arrive at certain

destinations. A considerable amount of existing research looks at different macro push-and-pull factors; most focus on general economic and political trends (e.g., Mohl, 2003; Leach and Bean, 2005; Light, 2006). Nevertheless, such studies do not explain the personal decisions nor the reasons as to why an individual migrant and his or her family decide to settle in a particular community. Tackling these types of questions requires micro-level analysis involving a thorough qualitative methodology in order to identify specifically the informal cooperative tactics migrants utilize to travel, locate jobs, and adequately settle in a new community. Answers to these questions afford rich, in-depth information about the social and gender structures of migrant networks and explicates the mobility, labor, and settlement strategies in which Latino migrants engage to make their endeavors successful. Such insight enables researchers to better understand exactly how undocumented migrants successfully relocate to new southern destinations by illustrating the everyday practices and decisions applied to achieve mobility.

This study examines the informal, personal factors involved in the migratory decisions and strategies of individual migrants and migrant groups to fill the gap in the scholarship concerning contemporary Latino migration in the southeastern United States. Through the conceptual lens of transnational social networks, I analyze the networks of two Latino migrant groups in the southeastern United States. The first group is from Guanajuato, Mexico that traditionally migrated to Texas and California, but has recently begun to migrate to Nashville, Tennessee, and Atlanta, Georgia. The second group derives from El Paraíso, Honduras, and Nueva Segovia, Nicaragua, and they are destined for New Orleans, Louisiana, and Cookeville, Tennessee. Although independent of one another, these transnational migrant networks overlap geographically in the American South, and this provides an opportunity for empirical comparisons on the spatial, temporal, and social imbrications these networks have in both sending and receiving communities. These networks are highly relevant because they share structure and function, yet they are dissimilar in their origins and histories. Guanajuato is a long-standing source node of migrant workers to the southwestern United States. El Paraíso and Nueva Segovia have only recently emerged as significant sources of migrant laborers, due in part to the reconstruction efforts following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

There are two foci to this research. First, I explore the establishment and sustainability of new

destinations for particular migrant groups through reflection on fundamental questions: What factors lead individuals to forge new paths to non-traditional destinations, and how do they recruit others to follow? What strategies do they rely on to make their migratory endeavors successful? What human agents (migrant and non-migrant) operate in these networks, and does gender play a significant role in their operation? The second focus of this research is to understand, through location and mapping, transnational social networks.<sup>1</sup> Are these networks limited to specific sending and receiving communities, or are they constructed of connections between multiple nodes in both home and host countries? If multiple nodes do exist in migrant-group networks, where are they located and do these locations change over time? Furthermore, are they static or in flux (i.e., Do they expand or contract?)? Answers to these questions elucidate the social micro-processes through which Latino migrants find work, travel, and settle in new communities, and, thus, amplify our understanding of the character, scope, and scale of transnational social networks relative to migrant labor and migration patterns.

## 2. Social Networks in Migratory Practices

Recognition of the importance of social networks to sustainable migration streams is hardly new among scholars. Since the early twentieth century, researchers have noted the existence of these networks and their function in channeling large numbers of immigrants to reception communities (e.g., Thomas and Znaniecki, 1927). In what Massey et al. (2002) label “cumulative causation” after new migrants become established, they begin laying the groundwork for further, potentially larger, migration streams from places of origin. For this to occur, there must be individual agents initiating the process. These individual agents or intermediaries often facilitate the migration process by arranging transportation to and employment in receiving communities or by helping migrants circumnavigate bureaucratic restrictions (Gomberg-Muñoz, 2011).

Expanding beyond the intermediaries, study of the informal ties and contacts of migrants, non-migrants, and potential migrants has shed light on the individual benefits and complex roles of social networks in

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<sup>1</sup>“Transnationalism” in migration studies refers to the multitude of linkages that individuals maintain between their home and host countries (see Glick Schiller et al., 1995; Vertovec, 2009). For more information on mapping transnational migrant networks, see Voight-Graft (2004).

transnational movement (Voigt-Graf, 2004). Friendship and family ties, and even casual acquaintances or shared origins, serve as foundations for migrant networks. Interpersonal relationships that link sending and receiving communities aid cross-border movement by reducing both travel and settlement costs and mitigate inherent risks associated with international migration (Singer and Massey, 1998). This is especially true for potential or recurrent migrants lacking proper travel documentation as information attained through their social networks may help put them in contact with intermediaries (professional smugglers known as “coyotes” in Latin America) who specialize in clandestine cross-border movement (Krissman, 2005).

Once in a destination, documented and undocumented migrants can use social networks to find work. Established migrants who have contacts with migrant and non-migrant entrepreneurs or company managers can serve as patrons for the newly arrived. This kind of patronage is often crucial for locating work opportunities particularly for migrants bearing low human capital or lacking necessary language skills or legal work status (Grey, 1996). Furthermore, potential employee recommendations through informal patronages are equally advantageous for employers in receiving communities as they can establish a dependable avenue to recruit affordable labor. The expediency of these migrant networks are a boon for businesses that rely on large, low-skill labor pools (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006). While access to employment through informal networks is beneficial for migrants, those who are undocumented are vulnerable to exploitation by both employers and the migrants who recruited them. These migrants have limited legal recourse when their rights are violated. Furthermore, any exposure to formal institutions or authorities carries the risk of deportation. This holds especially true for Latino migrants as they are more frequently targeted by immigration authorities simply due to racial profiling and prevailing stereotypes that typecast migrants from Mexico and Central America as undocumented (Golash-Boza, 2012).

Labor recruitment through the transnational social networks of Latino migrants is a common tactic in southern U.S. destinations. Johnson-Webb’s (2002) study of low-skill labor recruitment practices in North Carolina reveals that employers often bypass native-born laborers for Latino workers by relying on their migrant employees’ social networks to attract new recruits, even if they are not authorized to work in the U.S. Similarly, Blue and Drever (2011) demonstrate that established entrepreneurial migrants also used these

networks immediately following Hurricane Katrina for construction labor recruitment in New Orleans. Migrant subcontractors quickly organized large construction crews through personal contacts with other Latino migrants in and outside of the U.S. to participate in the reconstruction effort.<sup>2</sup>

The notion of “social capital” can explain how the relationships between individuals (migrant and non-migrant) are used in networks to immigrate, find employment, and find accommodations (Haug, 2008). In its original theoretical conceptualization, social capital simply refers to the social ties intentionally accrued in order to secure future socioeconomic benefits (Bourdieu, 1986). In this vein, social capital enhances a community’s cohesion because members can build relationships much easier with one another based on common cultural knowledge and shared experiences. Small (2009,6) describes this as “the obligations that people who are connected may feel toward each other, the sense of solidarity they may call upon, the information they are willing to share, and the services they are willing to perform.” Accordingly, social capital is the glue that binds people in the nodal communities that anchor migrant networks.

Transnational social networks, however, are not used only by migrant laborers or non-migrant employers. Furthermore, network participants are not necessarily male. Rather, these social spaces are occupied by men, women, and children in both sending and receiving communities. Yet even though the analytical scope of migration scholarship has expanded recently to include gender dynamics and female migrants (e.g., Silvey, 2004; George, 2005), how exactly women participate in migrant networks, notably in those from Latin America currently expanding in the American South, is still unclear (O’Leary 2012). Certainly female migrants and non-migrants share in the social capital aspect of networks, and therefore, benefit from (though not always equally) and help redistribute the social and financial resources available through these transnational relationships (Wilson 2009). It stands to reason that women also play crucial roles in the operation of these networks. This paper addresses this lacuna in the literature by demonstrating the actions and contributions of Latina migrants in these types of migratory practices.

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<sup>2</sup>“Subcontracting” in contractual construction projects refers to the assigning of certain tasks of a contract to a third party.

### 3. Selecting Migrant Networks and Methodology

The 2010 Census counted 18.2 million Latinos living in the southeastern U.S., second only to the western U.S. with 20.6 million.<sup>3</sup> Excluding Texas and Florida, the total number of enumerated Latinos in the southeastern states increased from fewer than 600,000 in 1990 to 3.6 million in 2010, a 500 percent increase. There are also an estimated 1.65 million undocumented migrants residing in these states, most of Latin American origin. Due to this growing immigration, a dense web of transnational social networks blanket the American South providing abundant opportunities to investigate the formation and functionality of migrant relationships regarding migratory practices. The locations of the case studies in this paper were selected based on two initial factors: U.S. communities where Latino immigrant populations have demonstrated exponential growth in recent decades; and communities where I already had rapport with individuals embedded in migrant networks. In turn, the relationships I built with certain migrants in receiving communities determined the Latin American sending communities in which I conducted the research.

To explain the first criterion, Tennessee possessed the third fastest percentage growth rate of Latino population in the U.S. between 2000 and 2010 with a total enumeration of 290,059. The Nashville Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) accounts for 35 percent of Tennessee's enumerated Latino population. Within the city of Nashville, Latinos accounted for nearly one out of ten residents — a 700 percent increase since 1990 — making Nashville an opportune location to investigate Latino migrant networks.

New Orleans is the primary focus of the second case study. This southern port city has long been home to a diverse Latino population with Hondurans often considered the most salient group. Paradoxically to other southern cities, however, New Orleans' Latino population grew slowly during the 1990s, with the MSA's four primary contiguous parishes (Jefferson, Orleans, St. Bernard, and Plaquemines) increasing by only 5.1 percent (Sluyter et al., 2015). This demographic trend was quickly reversed in Hurricane Katrina's wake, as large numbers of Latino laborers arrived to find work in the plethora of employment opportunities generated during the reconstruction efforts (Blue and Drever,

2011). The Latino proportion of the total enumerated population of the aforementioned parishes increased from 51,102 to 76,129. While pre-Katrina social networks among long-term Latino residents were responsible for recruiting some Latino migrants, the immediate need of a large, inexpensive workforce encouraged federal and local authorities to suspend wage restrictions and employment eligibility verification enabling contractors to attract undocumented Latino labor from throughout the U.S., laying the groundwork for new migrant networks to emerge.

The dissimilarities in these migrant groups and receiving communities present an excellent opportunity to explore the functionality of transnational social networks through juxtaposition. To generate a comprehensive depiction of exactly how informal, interpersonal relationships and contacts are used by migrants to relocate and find employment laborers, I employed a methodology involving qualitative, multi-sited fieldwork in both sending and receiving communities consisting of formal and informal interviews, focus groups, and participant observations. The weaving together of the histories and personal accounts with the current experiences and migratory behaviors of case-study participants presents a clearer picture of the fundamental role and breadth of these networks including the fundamental actors involved in their operations.

Prior qualitative research with Latinos in Nashville (Chaney, 2010) has enabled development of a strong rapport with the Guanajuatense migrants, allowing me to undertake in-depth inquiry into the personal lives and migration strategies of group members in both the U.S. and Mexico. Between 2011 and 2013, I recorded 26 formal interviews, two focus groups (each consisting of four individuals), numerous informal interviews of, conversations with, and observations of Guanajuatenses at family functions, friendly outings, and group members' homes. During this time, I also conducted research in Nashville and Atlanta. In December 2012, I conducted interviews in San José Iturbide (San José) and León, Guanajuato (Figure 1).

My research with Hondurans and Nicaraguans began during the summer of 2008 and continued through 2013. Working as an associate director of a New Orleans Latino-focused nonprofit between 2008 and 2010, I built relationships with a group of transnational migrants living in the United States, and earned the trust of their families in Central America, with whom I lived during the summer of 2011 (Figure 2). These connections enabled investigation of the transnational worlds of group members that were

<sup>3</sup>All official population statistics used, unless otherwise stated, come from the decennial censuses and American Community Surveys available from the Census Bureau at [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) and [factfinder.census.gov](http://factfinder.census.gov).



**Figure 1.** Guanajuatenses Sending Communities (Map by James Chaney and Sam Williams)

revealed through interviews and observations. I recorded 28 formal interviews, and the activities of one focus group that consisted of ten migrants. As with the Guanajuatenses, casual conversations and interviews were recorded in journal entries.

The themes of formal, recorded interviews revolved around the migration histories, ambitions, and employment of group members. Most interviews lasted between thirty minutes and two hours, while focus groups typically lasted two hours. Recordings were translated from the native Spanish into English and then transcribed to identify reoccurring topics pertaining to transnational migration (Crang and Cook, 2007). Equally important, though, were the unrecorded, casual conversations, and observations. On numerous occasions in both receiving and sending communities, I witnessed group members negotiating informal employment agreements for migrants coming to a

destination and verbal agreements to help potential migrants clandestinely cross borders with coyotes.

The culmination of these ethnographic techniques provided data filled with discernable migratory tactics as well as unanticipated revelations about transnational relationships.<sup>4</sup> From these data, I inductively distinguished thematic commonalities among these groups and recognized the nuances of their migratory practices. These findings are presented in a narrative that chronologically and articulately illustrates the formation, extent, and function of each migrant network. Following a summary of each sending country's migratory history that portrays the contexts of cross-border environments in which these two migrant

<sup>4</sup>This methodological approach is rooted in grounded theory, which requires researchers to empirically identify themes and trends from data gathered in the field (Charmez, 2006).



**Figure 2.** Central American Sending Communities (Map by James Chaney and Sam Williams)

groups operate., I present results of the analysis in two sections (differentiated by migrant groups). All study participants discussed herein are represented by pseudonyms.

#### **4. Mexico's Migratory Relationship with the United States**

Due to their spatial propinquity, Mexico and the United States share a long history of migratory movement across their borders. Southwestern states that once were northern Mexico (California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas) developed into primary destinations in the circular migration of low-skill Mexican laborers. By the end of the century, land reforms brutally enforced during Porfirio Díaz's regime instigated a massive labor displacement in Mexico as small peasant farms were consolidated to promote large

capital-intensive agricultural practices (Massey et. al., 2002). This, in turn, generated strong pressures to emigrate northward where unceasing demand for cheap labor existed in U.S. mineral and agricultural enterprises. Coinciding with these macro-scale push/pull factors, new rail lines were constructed across the American Southwest and deep into central Mexico, enabling the recruitment of rural Mexican peasants from states like Guanajuato. Migration to border states ebbed and flowed through the first half of the twentieth century. In 1942, however, in response to an extremely tight wartime labor market, the U.S. government implemented the Bracero Program, allowing Mexican workers to temporarily migrate to the U.S. to fill vacant low-wage jobs, particularly in agriculture. By the program's end in 1964, more than 4.6 million documented Mexicans had participated in the legal migration. At the same time, 4.9 million undocumented

Mexicans were apprehended trying to cross the border for work opportunities. Clandestine entry into the U.S. continued after the Bracero Program ended as many large-scale farms continued to rely on undocumented labor. Heisler (2008, 68) claims that some migrants, both in the U.S. and returning to Mexico, relayed cynical news through their social networks about “opportunities” provided by the official Bracero Program. These may have encouraged migrants to choose to cross the border illegally to look for work.

Mexican migration patterns formed during the first half of the twentieth century continued to solidify during the second half. Although new destinations throughout the United States had emerged, Mexican immigration was (and still is) heavily skewed to southwestern states. Moreover, the mutual economic benefits gained by U.S. employers and migrants (documented and undocumented) encouraged formal and informal labor relationships that ensured future migration, especially during Mexico’s tumultuous economic periods during the late 1970s and after 1994.

The notable shift of Mexicans (and other Latino migrants) to new destinations at the end of the last century can be attributed to the legalization of undocumented migrants under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, leading to a saturation of migrant labor in traditional destination communities (Massey, Durand, and Malone, 2002). The flooding of labor markets in traditional communities with newly legalized workers made these destinations less attractive to potential migrants. Likewise, those migrants, now with legal residency in hand, no longer feared straying from the safety of traditional migrant communities and cast their sights on new opportunities in nontraditional locations. Light (2006) stressed other push factors occurring after IRCA, noting that the steady influx of poor migrants to metropolitan areas, such as Los Angeles, overwhelmed local housing and public services. This led to the passage of local and state policies in traditional destinations intended to “deflect” migrants to other states. Furthermore, the downward trajectory of wage labor in traditional destinations resulting from labor saturation coincided with a tightening of the housing market, making the cost of living more expensive and increasingly unattractive to migrants.

## 5. The Migratory Legacy of the Banana Republic

In contrast to the 33 million Mexicans living in the United States, the 2010 Census estimated that the country is home to about 700,000 Hondurans. Geographical relationships and the magnitude of source

populations explains this striking numerical difference. The population of Honduras is estimated to be around 8 million, which is only a fraction of Mexico’s 121 million people (World Bank, 2014); there are therefore fewer potential Honduran migrants. And, unlike Mexico, Honduras is separated from the U.S. by the intervening spaces of Guatemala and Mexico. This distance, coupled with the precariousness of the journey across Mexico, makes terrestrial migration much more difficult, especially for undocumented migrants (Gomey, 2008). Not surprisingly, a long tradition of extensive circular migration from Honduras has never developed.

Nevertheless, a migratory history between Honduras and the United States exists, largely due to the neocolonial legacy of the banana industry (Sluyter et al., 2015). The nutrient-rich alluvial plains that spread across the northern lowlands of Honduras provided perfect locations for banana plantations. Two U.S. companies, United Fruit and Standard Fruit, were the most notable operators in Honduras, and both were headquartered in New Orleans, a principal port for banana imports. Consequently, recurrent maritime movement between Louisiana and ports along the coast of northern Honduras enabled frequent passage between countries. Although New Orleans emerged as a major debarkation point for Hondurans of all socioeconomic levels, other U.S. ports, such as New York and Miami, were also destinations. These cities later became nodal destinations in the transnational social networks of Garifuna Hondurans, an Afro-Hispanic ethnic group that frequently worked on fruit-company ships and later on U.S. merchant-marine vessels (Chaney, 2012).

Like many other interior departments in Honduras, El Paraíso—which shares its mountainous southern border with the northern Nicaraguan department of Nueva Segovia—never significantly participated in the maritime migration common in northern coastal communities like La Ceiba or San Pedro Sula. Instead, El Paraíso, blanketed by the fertile Jamástran Valley and flanked from the south by the Sierra de Dipilto, developed into an important tobacco and coffee producer with a relatively stable economy (Chaney, 2013). This reduced the need to migrate as work, however menial, was available in agriculture or in cigar factories. The stability and shared border with Nicaragua made El Paraíso an attractive destination for Nicaraguan refugees fleeing conflict in their country. During the U.S.-backed Contra War of the 1980s, many Nicaraguans from border communities like Jalapa, crossed the mountains searching for temporary refuge (Chaney, 2013). Many found work during seasonal

coffee harvests as more affluent Nicaraguans integrated into the tobacco and cigar industry. Strong social relationships between the *Paraisanos* and *Nueva Segovianos* soon formed through business ventures, friendship, and intermarriage, creating transnational ties that exist today. Therefore, when tragedy struck twice in El Paraíso—first caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1996 and later due to a substantial drop in global coffee prices in 1999—*Paraisanos* and *Nueva Segovianos* looked to each other for help, especially when migration to the United States became a suitable option to avoid the stagnant poverty gripping their communities (Reichman, 2011). The US Immigration and Naturalization Service (now the Citizenship and Immigration Service) granted Hondurans Temporary Protected Status to allow non-immigrants already in the United States (e.g., university students) to remain while their country recovered from Mitch's devastation. However, for rural *Paraisanos*, the economic devastation left by Mitch in Honduras, followed by a sudden decline in coffee profits, are what jump-started a visible surge in undocumented migration to the United States, with New Orleans emerging as a primary destination.

## 6. Guanajuatense Network Case Study

In February 2006, I conducted interviews with eight men from León, Guanajuato who were sharing a house in Nashville's Hispanic enclave. All were working on plumbing crews run by the Garcías, an extended family from San José. The Garcías not only employed the men, but also rented and paid utilities for the home in which they lived. These undocumented tenants subleased the house. This informal agreement provided these men a safe, comfortable place to stay, and helped assure the Garcías a stable workforce. Interestingly, many of the Garcías' employers also lacked documentation that would enable them to legally rent property and provide utilities. They therefore relied on documented members of the García family who lived in Nashville and Atlanta to handle these matters. While six of the Leonés men were about twenty years of age, two were older than thirty. The older men had immigrated repeatedly to the United States for more than ten years, mainly to Texas and Ohio. Nashville was a new destination for them. Nashville was the first and only place the younger men had settled. Indeed, Nashville, at that time, was emerging as a gateway destination for certain migrant communities.

This Leonés connection is only an extension of a larger, transnational social network originating from San José and has its inception not in Mexico, but in the U.S.

(Figure 3). In 1996, Juan García, a young migrant from San José, had found work with his uncle on a plumbing crew in Atlanta. The city was bustling with construction due to a vibrant economy and the upcoming Olympics Games. On the crew, Juan made friends with David, another recent migrant from León. This friendship would develop into an informal recruitment network later when Juan found success as an entrepreneurial plumbing subcontractor in Nashville.

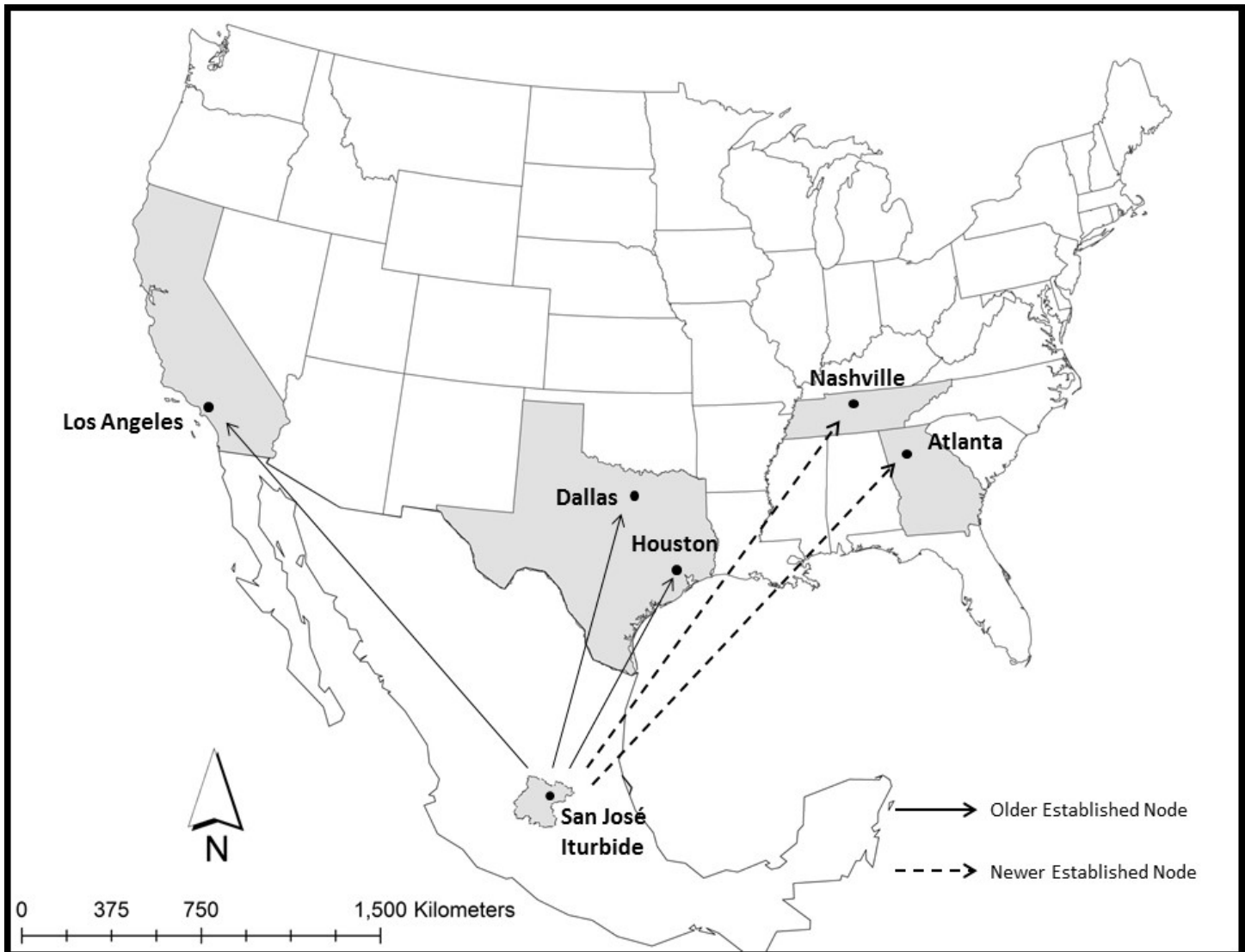
Juan's personal migration story is noteworthy because it embodies the shift of Mexican migrant men from traditional receiving communities to new, uncharted destinations. Moreover, Juan became a contributory agent in this shift, through his entrepreneurial success and recruitment. Born in a one-room house on the outskirts of San José, Juan grew up in extreme poverty and, like others from his community, dreamed of migrating to the United States. For generations, his grandfather explained to me, young men from San José had two choices: work locally for meager wages in either agriculture or other menial jobs, or migrate to California or Texas.

In 1994, sixteen-year-old Juan followed the well-worn, clandestine path to Los Angeles that so many from his community had taken before him. Juan settled in an apartment in Pasadena with two friends. Through the kinship network of his father's family already living there, he reluctantly took a low-wage job at a carwash. Juan remembered:

That was not the idea I had when I moved to the United States. I grew up poor and wanted more. I wanted to support my family. I wanted build a house in San José, buy a car, and start a family. But, earning \$11 an hour, it was not possible. In California, everything is expensive, I couldn't save money, and I had no chance to advance in my job.

Disappointed, Juan returned to San José in 1995 with a new migration plan. His uncle had recently moved to Atlanta. A plumbing crew he was working for in Houston had been recruited as additional subcontracting labor for a local plumbing company. As laborers were in demand, Juan's uncle called him to offer him and others work on his crew. Within six months of returning to Mexico, Juan got married, organized a group of three young men, and headed for the U.S. border. They covertly crossed the Texas border at a location recurrent migrants from San José had used





**Figure 3.** Nodal Map of Guanajuatense Migrant Destinations (Map by James Chaney)

many times before, where a friend was waiting to drive them to Atlanta.

In Atlanta, the men found ample work, and as Juan recalled, all bought automobiles for the first time in their lives. More importantly, the men's fortuitous success quickly trickled back to San José. Al, Juan's younger brother who was still in secondary school, recalled the sudden improvement in his life:

Juan used to send me money and clothes from the U.S. It was the first time that I had nice things. Kids used to make fun of me because I was always poor, but suddenly I started showing up to school in expensive clothes. Later, Juan gave me his Honda Prelude and built a house in Cinco de Mayo (a community in San José) for his wife.

The appearance of Juan's success encouraged others to make the trip to Georgia instead of to California or Texas. Ciro, another uncle of Juan and recurrent migrant, explained, "Every time I went to the California, it was harder to find good-paying jobs, Atlanta was a new opportunity." Juan's fortunes and ambitious personality, coupled with his mother's financial and marital problems in San José, elevated his role in his family and later in the community. Margarita, Juan's mother, had remarried and bore five children since 1988. Her husband was unable to support the family so the responsibility fell to Juan. This was the catalyst for Juan to take a risk and independently launch a business. Subcontracted plumbing jobs sometimes carried Juan's crew to other states. On several trips, Juan had been sent to Nashville. Compared to Atlanta, he found Nashville much smaller but growing with a

healthy economy. He saw opportunity because although a small Latino community existed, it was not saturated with laborers as was Atlanta. In 1998, he relocated to Nashville on his own, finding subcontract work with a local company that installed plumbing in newly constructed houses and buildings. With a beachhead established, Juan began recruiting family and friends from Atlanta to join him and his brother Al from San José. When Al arrived, Juan obligated him to “go door-to-door” to local plumbing companies looking for subcontracting work.

Within a year, Juan and Al had established working relationships with several local companies. With multiple contractual opportunities, Juan began organizing several plumbing crews to handle the workload. To fill these crews, Juan looked no further than his transnational social web of friends and family. By 2000, Juan was recruiting young men from Georgia, Texas, California, and Guanajuato. Juan also relied on the networks of those he had met in Atlanta. His friend David from León relocated to Nashville and began inviting laborers in his social network living in the United States and Mexico. Juan’s mother was able to move legally to Nashville with her five children. Juan’s wife soon followed, though without documentation. With his family in Nashville and with stable employment opportunities, Juan permanently settled, purchasing a house and starting a family. Furthermore, he had established a new nodal destination in this social network.

An essential component of Juan and Al’s success in Nashville was their relationship with non-Latino owners of local plumbing companies. Even with their limited English skills and lack of legal documentation, the García brothers were able to develop strong partnerships with contract plumbing companies. By 2003, Al had set out on his own, working solely for one commercial outfit, while Juan had expanded crew operations with one contracting company.

As each contractor procures project contracts with developers to install or repair plumbing, they delegate the labor to their subcontractors—in this case Juan or Al, and later their brother Ray and *cuñados* (brothers-in-law) Ernesto and Pedro. The subcontractors are responsible for assembling the labor (crews) and for properly completing projects on time. The contractor pays the subcontractor directly by check. The subcontractors then divide the money to pay their crews. Subcontractors are responsible for transportation, some tools, and insurance. Juan, Al, and their *cuñados* are not legal residents; therefore, they rely on Ray, who has

residency, to cover their policies. This arrangement is beneficial to both contractors and the Garcías. The plumbing companies always have a workforce for which they are only marginally responsible, and the Garcías are assured subcontracted work. During a conversation with Al’s contractor, he expressed that Al’s crews are the best subcontractors with whom he had ever worked. He added that Al “runs a tight ship,” stating that Al’s crews always show up on time, work extra hours if needed, are trustworthy, and never complain. Consequently, he gives Al as many projects as his crews can handle.

Juan has been even more successful as the company he works with has extended their business to other states. As a result, Juan has had to organize mobile crews, capable of traveling to surrounding states for large projects. Someone that Juan trusts is chosen to head each crew. Often, these positions belong to family members (brothers, *cuñados*, uncles, and cousins) or to close friends from San José or León. Two of Juan’s sisters married men who had migrated from San José to Nashville to join crews. While their integration into the García family helped to ensure them a lucrative position in the family’s business endeavors, it also expanded the Garcías’ transnational social network from which they can attract laborers. Each *cuñado* comes from a family with different migratory traditions. Each marriage into the García family, each home purchase, each child born, and the relative stability of employment signifies to the Garcías that the person (and their family) will most likely stay in Nashville permanently. This stability has encouraged other family members of Ernesto and Pedro’s families to relocate to Nashville from both Mexico and other U.S. communities.

One notable development in the dynamics of the Garcías’s transnational social network since my first interviews in 2006, is the increasingly prominent role of women in the recruitment processes and the provision of remittances to San José. Certainly, this network’s formation and its initial social and gender structure follows the pattern typically portrayed in migration scholarship: male migrants arrive first, become financially established, and later bring their wives (or partners) and children. Indeed, the García brothers and their male relatives were the first to arrive in Atlanta and Nashville and they later brought female members of their families. They were also the primary recruiters of other Guanajuatense migrants. Nevertheless, as the women who followed them became established (i.e., they find employment and integrate into their new communities), they, too, became active network agents capable of recruiting migrants, financing travel, and

supporting friends and family in Mexico through remittances.

Juan's younger sister, Reyna, typifies this empowering change in network agency. Reyna arrived in Nashville as a teenager. She finished high school and married one of Jose's laborers. As she explained, "My husband would have been fine with me staying home and raising our children, but I wanted my own money and to contribute to our family." Reyna launched an informal housecleaning business. Her ability to speak English and rudimentary computer skills enabled her to find clients through online advertising sites, such as on Craigslist. Since 2010, she has accumulated enough clients to bring on other Guanajuatense women to help with her workload. Some of these women are wives of laborers working with the Garcías, yet others are female migrants from San José that Reyna has recruited from other U.S. cities. Reyna's financial independence allowed her to return to Mexico in 2011 and to enroll in an aesthetics institute. She returned to the U.S. as a nail technician and plies her craft to supplement her income. These financial gains, however, are not solely for her household. Reyna, alongside her other working female siblings, sends remittances monthly to her father and other family members in Mexico. As Reyna explained, she and her sisters send small sums for day-to-day use (i.e., for food, clothes, etc.), while the occasional purchases requiring larger sums of money, such as automobiles or appliances, are handled by male migrants in the family.

The social and financial capital accumulated within the Garcías' network has also allowed the Garcías to expand into other enterprises. Jose and Al helped finance a restaurant for their mother, Margarita, which in turn has opened up a new source of employment for migrants from Guanajuato. Margarita hires migrants who have either worked in restaurants before or simply prefer not to work in construction or housecleaning. For Margarita, this new role as entrepreneur has elevated her status. She explains, "In Mexico, I had no job opportunities, personal money, or respect. Now, I get calls all the time from family in Atlanta and San José asking if I'm looking for workers." Yet, she also pointed out that this position has also changed her relationships with family and friends:

I used to get along with everyone, because no one ever needed anything from me. Now, if someone calls me from Atlanta looking for work and I tell them I don't have openings, they sometimes go behind my back telling

others that I don't care about helping others get ahead or I've become uppity.

The Garcías' success is reflected in an improved quality of life. Many family members have purchased homes for themselves and family members in Nashville and Mexico. Likewise, Margarita now owns and operates a restaurant. These advances in material lifestyle options are also salient among the Garcías' laborers and their communities in Guanajuato. Through remittances and recurrent migrations, the lifestyles of those living in San José, particularly in Cinco de Mayo, have significantly improved. Newly constructed homes flank paved streets that just fifteen years ago were dirt roads. Most homes boast one or more automobile as well as modern amenities. Nevertheless, the most conspicuous addition to the community is a fully equipped public soccer stadium financed solely by Juan. It stands as a testimony to Juan's success in Nashville, and to potential migrants it connotes the possibility of financial success that may await them in Tennessee.

The Garcías have a seemingly limitless pool of laborers to call upon from the U.S. and Mexico. The Garcías estimate that since their arrival to Nashville, they have been responsible for attracting more than 100 male and female migrants. Of course, not all those who come stay. Labor movement between the nodal destinations in this network is common. Therefore, the Garcías must sometimes rely on informal patronage to maintain a sufficient labor pool. Juan has a working relationship with several coyotes who help him move undocumented migrants across the border. Juan pays coyotes in advance with the understanding that indebted migrants will reimburse him by working for his family or making monthly payments.

However, the relationship between the Garcías and laborers is not entirely exploitive and should not be reduced to simple business schemes. The Garcías also use their coyote contacts to bring the families of laborers to the United States when asked. Almost all of this social network's members have community ties going back decades and, consequently, a substantial amount of social capital exists among them. While the Garcías have pecuniary interests in keeping laborers content so they remain employees, they repeatedly stated that they feel obligated to help the less fortunate from their communities. Therefore, besides renting apartments for newly arrived, undocumented migrants, they also provide interest-free loans to laborers and friends to buy automobiles.

Furthermore, laborers are not bound to Nashville or beholden to work for the Garcías. Instead, the

Guanajuatense network provides laborers optional nodal destinations and employment options. This gives laborers agency in mobility. A laborer unsatisfied (for whatever reason in Nashville) may look for work in Atlanta or Houston, inquiring about opportunities through contacts. Movement between Atlanta and Nashville is common. Equally, if the Garcías need temporary laborers, they can contact potential workers in other nodal destinations for short-term projects. This tactic also applies to crews located in the same cities. When Al takes on large projects requiring more laborers, he may call on his brothers or *cuñados* to lend him laborers. This flexibility proved advantageous for everyone during the recession. As construction projects slowed, laborers turned to their networks to find work. This sometimes required relocating to another city or to just another crew where they lived. Many of the Leonés men I interviewed in 2006, for example, moved to Houston or returned León in 2009. Recently, however, the Garcías have been fortuitous in their plumbing endeavors, much more so than have their counterparts in Atlanta. As a result, a number of Guanajuatense migrants—some with families—have relocated to Tennessee from other U.S. communities and Mexico, further solidifying Nashville as an attractive destination for those embedded in this transnational social network.

## 7. Praisano Network Case Study

Axel, a 36-year-old carpenter in New Orleans, holds a position in his social network similar to that of Juan's. A close partnership he has fostered with a developer in New Orleans has propelled him to a central role in his transnational social network. Although Axel is a carpenter by trade, the developer he works with is involved in new construction and renovation projects and requires inexpensive laborers who bear a variety of skills in roofing, carpentry, and electrical wiring. Like the Garcías', Axel works through subcontracting, and he serves as the principal intermediary between the developer and laborers. This privilege gives Axel the capability to recruit, hire, and fire laborers—a well-known fact among members of his social network in both the U.S. and Central America (Figure 4).

Axel's story is similar to Juan's. Living in Las Lomas, a poor village in El Paraíso, Axel explained he would never be able to find a good job to adequately support his wife and newborn child. He made the decision to migrate in 1997. Unlike San José, however, Las Lomas lacked a migratory tradition. In fact, denizens recalled the first two men from Las Lomas to immigrate to the U.S. These men, Santos and Roní,

were brothers who moved to New Orleans in the early 1990s. Locals recounted their story to me several times, and it appears to be the original catalyst for migration to the U.S. As one informant explained:

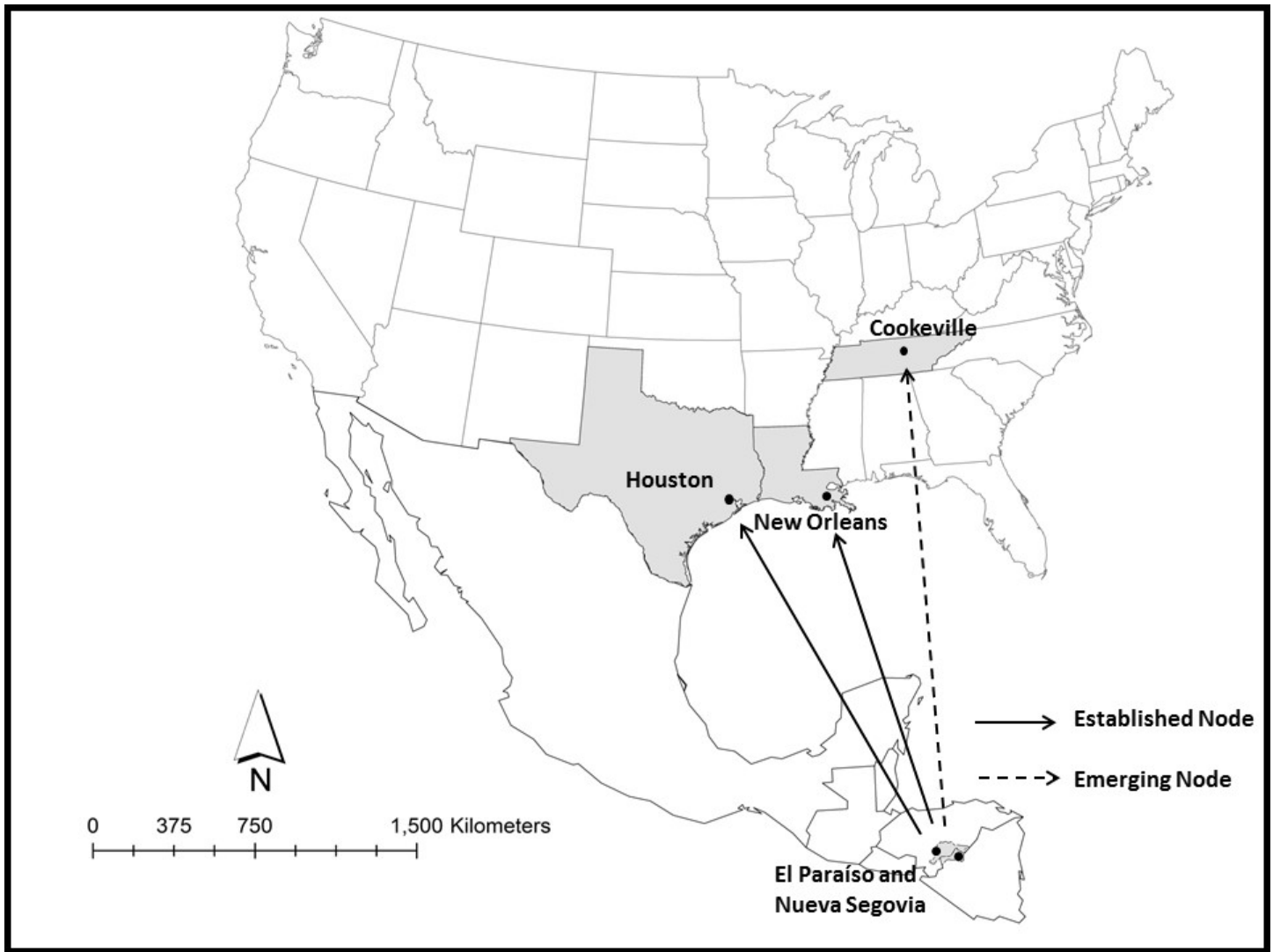
It's like a faucet, it started with a drop, but when Santos was already there, the faucet was turned on. Almost everyone in Las Lomas is connected to each other one way or another. Maybe, one person wants to move to the U.S. for a couple of years, so he calls his sister or brother-in-law for help getting there. . . . That's how I did it. I called Axel.

Axel's first trip to the U.S. was unsuccessful because he lacked necessary transnational contacts and support to make the journey. He was arrested by immigration authorities in Mexico and deported:

I tried to do it by myself. I was so disappointed and frustrated when they sent me back, because that wasn't my goal. But, you're always going to be disappointed if you can't get here [the U.S.]. It's just you always need someone to lend you a hand; it's impossible without help.

With the help of a friend in Houston, who lent Axel money and shared information on how to ride freight trains as a stowaway in order to cross Mexico, his second attempt to reach Texas was successful. However, he soon became disillusioned with his life in Houston. Like Juan in California, Axel was working menial jobs making \$11 an hour; he could barely afford to send remittances to his wife, Isabel. In 2002, his brother Gerson moved to New Orleans after an invitation from a friend. Though work was not exactly plentiful, Gerson recalled, the city had a "Honduran feel" to it but with fewer Latinos, compared to Houston, competing for jobs. Axel followed and met the local developer he works for today.

During the same period, Ned, Isabel's brother, migrated to New Orleans with Axel's financial support. Once there, Axel got Ned a job with a roofing crew. Ned, however, had larger ambitions. Following the advice of a Mexican friend who had moved to Tennessee, Ned moved to Nashville in 2004 before relocating to Cookeville, a city of 31,000 inhabitants, where he established his own roofing company as a subcontractor. According to Ned, "When I first got here, there still weren't a lot of Latinos, but the town was growing, and there was a lot of money to be made. People here think Latinos are hard workers so they



**Figure 4.** Nodal Map of Central American Migrant Destinations (Map James Chaney)

prefer hiring us.” Within a year, Ned had made enough money to bring his family to Cookeville and began recruiting laborers from New Orleans and Central America.

The destruction left in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 completely altered Axel’s career and amplified the migration streams from communities embedded in his transnational social network. As previously mentioned, the reconstruction of New Orleans following the storm immediately intensified the need for skilled and unskilled construction labor. Axel remembers his developer simultaneously feeling overwhelmed and excited. He turned to Axel to find laborers. Axel relied on his social network, first looking for laborers in Houston and Cookeville, but soon turned to El Paraíso. Axel is particular about his recruits—a fact that he and others in his network brought up often. Understandably, he looks for certain skills that fit the need of his crews, such as carpentry or painting. Unlike

the Garcías who are willing to train recruits, Alex believes it is best to bring those onboard who have a proven skill set. Equally important, he added, are potential laborers who have a reputation as hard workers. In this type of recruitment, résumés are nonexistent; instead one’s reputation and social capital are paramount when soliciting work.

This method was best exemplified in 2006 after Axel had exhausted all his potential recruits from his personal list. Having been in the U.S. for several years, he was less familiar with many of the younger men living in Las Lomas and the surrounding communities, who were just children when he left. Consequently, he relied on his wife, who was still living there, to be a recruiting liaison. Isabel briefly took on this responsibility for Ned in Cookeville too. This responsibility propelled Isabel’s position in Las Lomas. Isabel became the go-to person for those looking to emigrate, and her evangelical church became a primary recruiting source.

As Isabel remembers before she joined Axel in New Orleans in 2007:

While Axel was here [in New Orleans], I would talk to people in Las Lomas, usually at church. I knew who wanted to migrate. Sometimes, someone's aunt would approach me to tell me her nephew from another village or Danlí wanted to go and if Axel or Ned needed workers. I talked to Axel every day on the phone and mentioned who was looking for work.

Through Isabel's recruitment, Axel's transnational social network expanded to include individuals from Nicaragua. In the early 2000s, several men from the Honduran coffee community of El Naranjo descended into the Jamástran Valley looking for work. Frequently, these groups included men from Jalapa, Nueva Segovia, located across the mountains from El Paraíso. Two friends, Martín from El Naranjo and José from Jalapa opened a small carpentry job in Las Lomas in 2003. Before long, they developed a good reputation as skilled carpenters and through the evangelical church became friends with several families in the community including Isabel's. When Axel needed skilled laborers, particularly carpenters, Isabel immediately recommended Martín and José. Without meeting them, Axel agreed. However, both men had already returned to their communities. Isabel contacted them with an offer to move to New Orleans with her husband's help if they would be willing to work on his crew. Both men accepted and migrated to the United States through Axel's financial assistance and coyotes. Axel's investment in these two men proved gainful, and all three became friends. The resulting social capital generated through their relationships opened the door for more migrants from Martín and José's communities to come to New Orleans, and by 2007 a small, but noticeable migrant stream from Jalapa had taken root.

Axel and Isabel estimate that around 50 people have immigrated to the U.S. with their help and promise of employment. This includes wives, sisters, daughters, and girlfriends of male migrants who wish to accompany them or join them in the U.S. The stream of migrants, including recurrent migrants, has remained constant even as the post-Katrina recovery effort tapered off. Nevertheless, Axel's developer continues to provide work to Axel's crews through city revitalization projects. Since Isabel migrated to New Orleans, her mother has taken on the responsibilities of recruiting laborers.

Isabel pointed out that it is often non-migrant mothers, aunts, and grandmothers who contact her mother to inquire about their sons, grandsons, and nephews migrating to the U.S. to work for Ned or Axel.

While the persistence of these projects usually keeps Axel's crews employed, stable work is not always guaranteed. In times of slow or no work, crew members consider other options, such as traveling to Cookeville to work temporarily for Ned's roofing company. This tactic acts as a release valve for Axel when there are too many laborers but not enough work in New Orleans, and it relieves labor demands for Ned, particularly during spring and summer months when his roofing business is busiest. Ned keeps a small, equipped camper behind his home to house arriving migrants until they find their own places or for those who only plan to stay temporarily. While some decide to settle in Cookeville, most plan to return to New Orleans in the fall. This transitory pattern is due partly to Cookeville's location on a plateau at 1,100 feet, which causes the area to experience cool winters, often with snow. This climate reduces the need for roofers during these months, making this migrant nodal destination less stable compared to New Orleans or Houston where other Paraisanos have settled. Roger, a young Paraisano in New Orleans who has traveled twice to Cookeville, explained, "Working in Cookeville in the summer is like a vacation from New Orleans; it's small, peaceful, and not humid. But, in October there's no more work, so everybody returns to New Orleans."

This labor volatility creates a dilemma for Ned. Without steady labor, it is harder to win lucrative contracts. Ned complains that every winter he has to begin contacting potential laborers to make sure he has enough workers for the local roofing industry's peak season. His recruitment tactics include phone calls, yearly trips to New Orleans, and most recently social media platforms, such as Facebook. Ned bought a computer in 2011 so he could open a Facebook account to connect with friends and family across the U.S. and Central America. Facebook's social reachability has been a boon for Ned. Not only can he easily negotiate employment and wage agreements via Facebook's message application, but he can also announce immediate labor vacancies to all those subscribed to his account. Certainly, this use of social media is not only beneficial to Ned's business, but also to mobile migrants looking for work in different communities across the U.S.

## 8. Conclusion

This comparative analysis sheds light on an understudied component of Latino migration in the American South by demonstrating exactly how transnational social networks play a crucial role in the mobility and success of Latino migrants. The micro-scale qualitative methodology applied in these case studies reveals the interworking of these networks in relation to labor migration and new migrant destinations in the American South; thus, filling a significant gap in migration scholarship regarding the “New Latino South.” In doing so, this research calls attention to the agency of individual migrants who take initiative to establish themselves in new communities and how, when successful, they attract others to follow. It also demonstrates the fluidity between destination nodes embedded in these contemporary migrant networks. Furthermore, both case studies highlight the roles of women and transnational households in the functionality of these emerging migrant networks. The culmination of these findings provides more a comprehensive depiction of labor mobility and the practices of contemporary Latino migrants in the southern United States by answering questions about where, how, and why individual migrants relocate to particular communities through personal stories. When put into the larger contextual framework of migration studies, these case studies illustrate the decision-making processes and strategizing taking place within contemporary Latino migrant networks in response to macro-forces, whether they be the general economic conditions of a location or obstacles imposed by governmental authorities, such as border control and labor restrictions on undocumented migrants.

Both networks presented are relatively new, allowing for their origins and formations to be examined. In both instances, young men looking for better opportunities than those found in their home communities initially immigrated to traditional destinations. Yet, they quickly became disillusioned by their economic prospects and relocated to a secondary destination via family contacts. These actions follow previous notions of how migrant networks operate; however, these stories do not end at secondary destinations. In both cases, individual migrants saw personal opportunities in either their new destinations or in other southern locations. Juan from Mexico and Ned from Honduras took a risk, moved to Tennessee without assistance, and established businesses. Axel remained in New Orleans, finding opportunity in post-Katrina reconstruction efforts. All are undocumented

but have built working relationships with non-migrants in their communities for whom they provide subcontract work. Subcontract work enables them to employ large crews of undocumented labor, which they manage by recruiting from other U.S. cities or directly from communities in Mexico, Honduras, and Nicaragua. In the case of the latter, established subcontractors, like Juan and Axel, arrange and finance clandestine border crossing and resettlement. The result is a multimodal, transnational network of migrant labor that connects a host of receiving communities in both traditional destinations and new ones in the American South to migrant sending communities. In the case of the Paraisano network, nodes extend across multiple sending communities in Honduras and Nicaragua. This revelation underscores the geographic variability possible in transnational migrant networks—in this case binational sending communities—and demonstrates their flexibility to expand or contract depending on internal and external forces or simply the individual agency of migrants.

Although these men were the initial trailblazers who established new nodal destinations within their social networks, they are not the only enterprising and influential individuals operating within them. Women, too, play active roles in the maintenance and functionality of transnational social networks. In Nashville, Margarita, with her sons’ help, opened a restaurant. And, like her sons, she relies on her family’s network to recruit labor. Margarita, along with her entrepreneurial daughters, such as Reyna, now wields substantial influence in her transnational community. Instead of relying on male family members for financial assistance, the García women provide employment to migrants and send regular remittances to Mexico. In the Paraisano network, Isabel played a significant role while in Honduras. Although her husband and brother provided employment and financed travel for migrants, Isabel was the gatekeeper. She was responsible for recruiting and vetting potential migrants before Axel or Ned agreed to sponsor and employ them. In either case, these particular women are active members of these networks, and, thus underscore that women are crucial players in the mobility of migrants and expansion of Latino migrant networks in the southern United States.

In conclusion, this work joins with those of other researchers (Johnson-Webb, 2002; Krissman, 2005; Wilson, 2009; Blue and Drever, 2011; Gomberg-Muñoz, 2011) who call for more attention to transnational social networks as a means to examine and understand the dynamics behind contemporary Latino migration. These case studies demonstrate how Latino

migrant networks have extended away from traditional destinations into new frontiers by focusing on the strategies and reasons of trailblazing migrants behind this shift. However, this research by no means reveals all aspects, perspectives, or experiences of individuals operating within these networks. Rather it focuses on successful individuals who now hold elevated network positions and, thus, reap most of the social and financial benefits rendered by these networks. In contrast, questions remain about the positionality, experiences, and opinions of others—particularly recruited undocumented laborers. Certainly, the Garcías, Axel, and Ned have helped many undocumented migrants come to the U.S, but are there negative outcomes of these informal arrangements? Do laborers perceive the multi-nodal structures of these transnational networks solely as advantageous to their migratory and financial endeavors, or do they feel exploited? Equally relevant are questions regarding the impact national immigration reform can have on migrant networks and migratory patterns. If the passing of IRCA was a catalyst behind the expansion of Latino immigration into non-traditions destination, then what impact would future reforms have on immigration patterns? Likewise, would the legalization of millions undocumented migrants weaken the need for networks and, thus, disrupt the labor recruitment and mobilization they provide? Exploring such questions would generate a more detailed depiction of the micro-level, transnational processes behind undocumented migrant labor, mobility, and agency in the United States.

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