



## Juggling Currencies in Trans/border Contexts

### Final Report

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*Money is always only a human creation, kind of collective illusion... It's something we invent as societies and states and communities, and we can reinvent it if we want to...*

Bill Maurer. IMTFI. UC Irvine<sup>1</sup>

Mexican and bi-national families residing and/or working on both sides of the Mexican-American border experience and manage different monetary and social currencies, not only in peso-dollar exchanges, but also in transactions involving different means of equivalence that entail diverse normative and cultural frameworks.

This is the object of our study, which, thanks to the support of IMTFI, was carried out from May 2014 through June 2015 in two different localities: one involves commuters between the twin cities of Calexico in the United States and Mexicali in Mexico; and the other is the rural community of Sabinilla, in Jalisco, Mexico, which is, although very distant in geographical terms, closely linked to its diaspora in Hawaii,

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<sup>1</sup> Q and A with Bill Maurer. JWT Intelligence. Oct 29, 2014.

where many of its residents live and work. Thus, both communities can be considered border communities in that a representative portion of their population resides at least part time or for extended periods in both nations. The different time-space dimensions entailed in the comparison between the two trans-border scenarios provide rich contrasts that we build upon in our analysis. While there are many similarities in the processes by which currencies are devised and taken up, there are also significant differences. The migrants in these communities frequently pass between Mexican and American locations, immersing themselves and their loved ones in the rules and norms of multiple, sometimes even contradictory environments. It is in this advantageous scenario, where juggling between normatively distinct settings is a common practice, that this project set out to investigate and observe how actors manipulate both financial and social currencies.

We encountered people living multiplex realities, complying with multiple, sometimes contradictory normative frameworks. The most important eye opener for us is that, in the process, people not only manage and juggle different currencies, but they *need* to do so in order to make do. Those who are more adept at such juggling are the ones considered more ‘successful’ by virtue of their relative economic stability. Currencies, of course, are not ‘autonomous’ languages that spell out value equivalences. They are brought into play with each other, intertwining in the context of different social relations. They most often become interdependent, relying as they do on the social and cultural milieu within which they are embedded.



Photo by Pablo de la Peña: Workers in Sabinilla earn between \$11 and \$15 a day. Here they are grinding and bagging the dried maize, used to feed the region's dairy cattle. The work is dusty, uncomfortable and formidable.

Monetary currencies work differently in different contexts. We are here resorting to Viviana Zelizer's portrayal of social currencies, wherein, as she explains, monies are differentiated by the social relations in which they are involved:

"The forms of monetary earmarking multiplied just as official money became *more* uniform and generalized. This is the irony: while the state and the law worked to obtain a single national currency, people actively created all sorts of monetary distinctions. Outside the world of printing and minting, however, people spent less energy on the adoption of different objects as currencies than on the creation of distinctions among the uses and meanings of existing currencies—that is, on earmarking."<sup>2</sup>

The cases we take up in this study involve earmarking official national currencies (the peso and the dollar), wherein

- Each national currency tends to be attributed particular values in particular contexts. Within different contexts, diverse social categories, expectations and moralities are mobilized.
- But the social currencies entailed in such earmarking often cross national boundaries and official denominations. That is, certain meanings apply both to the peso and the dollar within specific domains, creating some sort of mixed currency.
- Moreover, such currencies are indispensable in the operation of official currencies, which are never neutral. They represent values that are not only numeric. They are embedded in social interactions within particular transactions involving diverse social and cultural frameworks.

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<sup>2</sup> Zelizer, Viviana A. (1998) 'The proliferation of social currencies' in Callon, Michel, *the Laws of the Markets*. Oxford. Blackwell p. 59.



Photos by Joshua Greene: In Mexicali, many people cross the border daily for work, shopping and family relationships.

In addition, a host of transactions do not involve official money. Rather, they entail the exchange of social resources, including gifts, promises, favors, status, prestige, social links, credit, debt, etc. Such exchanges also involve social currencies. That is, people resort to particular 'languages' wherein commonly accepted value equivalences are resorted to. Some of the assets and resources involved can be considered 'social commodities'. Often, monetary devices are brought into the exchange.

This generally brings us to the notion of social capital. It is important to mention at this stage, that we step back from this notion, which entails the idea that social resources can be stockpiled and measured independently from the social circumstances within which they are attributed value. We thus prefer to explore the concept of social currencies, which allow us to visualize the social and cultural processes by which such resources are valued, weighed and exchanged.

This project has thus focused on diverse currencies (monetary and nonmonetary) circulating in trans-border contexts and the ways in which values are transformed in the process. We found that:

- Such currencies are an important element in the everyday management of economic life, and they become more evident in trans-border contexts, wherein different monetary currencies are used.
- But people have to deal with different currencies, and this requires a great deal of juggling. (We will delve into the concept of juggling below.)



**Photo by Lya Niño: Many workers from Mexicali cross the border daily (or nightly) in order to work in the fields of California. Here, women harvesting and sorting chives.**

- Currencies entail different velocities, tempos, and time frames, as well as space dimensions.
- Currencies are not necessarily organized around the creation of market based wealth and/or individual gain.
- Our units of analysis, whether they are states, nations, counties, and even households in these border scenarios, involve a high degree of porosity and penetration as individuals work, live and spend both sides of the border taking advantage of differences in prices, conditions, and government services.

We will also discuss the issue of value as represented in different currencies, and the processes of transformation it undergoes under particular circumstances, based on ethnographic scenarios concerning both sites. In so doing, we hope to shed light on the complex nature of money and currencies, teasing out different forms of signification and valuation.

This report will expand on these key findings in addition to presenting a brief introduction to the research sites, the methods resorted to, the concepts employed, and an analysis of the significance of the main observations. Concepts and findings are closely intertwined, since one of our main aims was to reach an understanding of the ways in which social currencies operate in the everyday lives of border people.

Hence, after explaining the methods used, we delve directly into issues of reverse remittances and '*transmigradólares*', social commodities, juggling currencies, the velocity of money and the different tempos involved in the juggling of currencies.

### **Region of study:**

**Map 1: Mexicali to Calexico 1**



**Map 2: Sabinilla to Hawaii 1**





Photos by Joshua Greene: Despite their very rural setting, villagers from Sabinilla are intimately integrated into communities in Hawaii. The uncle of these girls (right) spent many years in Hawaii, as did the girls' father (not pictured).

## Sabinilla/ Hawaii

The village of Sabinilla is located deep in the heart of central-west Mexico. It is a small ranch community on the border between the states of Jalisco and Michoacán. We are considering this village as a border community because of an almost 50 year history of migration to Hawaii. Most of the men and a handful of the women in this village have lived and worked in Hawaii. Sabinilla is typical of the traditional migrant sending regions of Western Mexico in that the village's residents have a long history of migrating to the United States. Characteristic of the general history of migration from the US to Mexico, this sleepy village with an official population of 80, began sending migrants to the US during the period of the Bracero Program (1942C 1964), when workers from the village would go to the Californian fields to harvest crops for 40 to 90 day contracts. In the 1960's, cousins working in a restaurant in California were invited to help open a Denny's in Hawaii. Since then, this village has enjoyed a deep relationship with Hawaii, where at least for the first decades there was little border agent presence. Migrants who were in Hawaii during the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986-7 were able to legalize their status. Since then, these legal, established relatives have acted as anchors, financing the illegal journey of their relatives from the village who wish to come.

Junior looks up to when the time is ripe for him to go and seek 'a fortune'. He who has resented his father for going north, is now preparing his own journey. The US is the site for social mobility. Valuable dollars flow, not like Mexican pesos, which are not worth much. Yet it is a cycle. His granddad did it as well. 'It is all about luck', he says. 'I will be luckier than they'. His mother will wait, like she did with his father, to when the time comes to receive a few dollars. Never enough, but always welcome. In the process, banks, money orders and checks are familiar to her. She also knows, amid anger, resentment and resignation, that the flow might or might not arrive. She makes her calculations in accordance.

Some women have migrated as well. Others have established a niche in village life. Still others, tired of local constraints, yet unwilling to 'go north' have joined local NGO's and worked in ecological projects. Such is the case of Chavela, who is now the poster child of local, bottom up techniques of agro ecology and alternative energy sources. In fact, she did go to Hawaii for a short period, earned enough money to build her house and came back. She is now called upon by local environmental organizations to teach agro-ecological techniques in different villages.



Photo by Ana Torres: Sabinilla is located in Central-West Mexico, several hours from the nearest city.



Stock Image: For 50 years, Hawaii has been a destination for villagers 3,500 miles away, in Sabinilla, Mexico.

Today there are more village residents and descendants in Hawaii than in the village. Hence the economy, and in general, an important part of its social life, is configured by practices, ideas, expectations and normative frameworks that entail both local traditions and more ‘modern’, urban lifestyles. This includes notions of wealth, poverty and wellbeing as well as ideas concerning development, the ecology and entrepreneurialism.

When a phone in this village rings, it is often relatives from Hawaii checking in or micromanaging their investments. Or, more likely in the digital phone revolution currently unfolding world wide, they communicate by sending texts. A combination of increased risk and cost in making the dangerous and illegal journey has meant that many of the village’s sons and daughters have simply not returned. On a daily basis, villagers here negotiate a world dominated by decisions and conditions far beyond their control. Yet they juggle the resources they have in order to make do.

The lucky ones can include land, cattle, pigs and decent crops as part of their resources, and most have close relatives in the United States who can send remittances in times of difficulty, but all resort to their own work and that of their families as the key sources of income. Children and the elderly play important roles in such endeavors.

Village men gather and talk in the early hours of the day, while the women are making coffee and cooking. They chat, sharing what they've heard, where they're going and what they have learned. This includes conversations concerning climate, pesticides, fertilizers and life up 'north', in Hawaii. Beto, a returnee who worked for 25 years as dishwasher and cook in the US, now has to plan ahead and get the chemicals for his maize crop to the shed before the rains, when the trucks can still transit the dirt road. He needs to garner the money he will require, although he will also ask for '*fiado*' (delayed payment) in regional shops. According to his calculations, he will harvest some 35 tons of maize, enough to make a living, but nowhere near the amount other large producers will make.

The value of their resources, however, can be differently measured in different scenarios. One could say people have 'capital' when they own a house, agricultural land, or cattle. Yet the value of a cow or a pig is differentially established according to the situation. Most of the cows are kept for breeding and milking, but calves can be sold to the market or kept for a celebration. The same applies for pigs. We see social currencies at work in these cases. César, for example, despite his objections to animal husbandry and the cruelty he sees as raising an animal for meat or milk, when it came time to provide a feast for his neighbors and friends, he is the first to select and weigh and cook up the pig for the feast. One night, he was pouring out his personal feelings and explaining why he doesn't raise animals, and a few nights later he was proudly celebrating his daughter and his family while eating fresh pork tacos. His brother Hernando had come from Hawaii for the event, he explained. It was socially expected



Photo by Joshua Greene: One villager, who spent twelve years working in the US, came home to buy and restore the former Hacienda in the Sabinilla.

that he would provide as much good meat and salsa and alcohol as his guests could consume. Here he was resorting to a different 'circuit of signification and valuation' wherein his empathy for animals was left out of the frame.

Another important resource is debt. Debt fuels household economies, making up for shortages and time gaps in income. Families can borrow a chicken, cement or bricks. But in times of great need they will ask brothers, sisters, cousins, neighbors or friends for a loan. Most emergencies have to do with health. There is no way they can pay for the costs involved in an accident or a sickness with their small liquid savings. They generally ask for loans from several people at a time (one person will hardly be likely to possess the needed amount in cash). If the money is required immediately, they will resort to their local networks.

But networks cross national borders. Uncle Chelo, for example, is now 77. He was short on cash to pay for the team of ten men and tractor needed to harvest his ten hectares. He called his son in Hawaii. By cell phone, Uncle Chelo - three hours from a city and half an hour from a store, on a dusty, rocky river crossing in Mexico - can borrow money from his sons, brothers, cousins and nephews and nieces in Hawaii. Chelo had debt with a local credit union, and he sold a few cows to pay it off, but in the end it was his son who provided the money that allowed him to harvest his crops. The flow of social links allowed the flow of monetary assets, but this framed the latter in particular ways. Did his son consider this an investment? Aid? Reciprocity? Social obligation? We have yet to ask him about this. However, we can observe that normative, moral and economic frames embedded in the social relations entailed in transactions involve different currencies, which, in turn, have different social and economic implications.

Like Uncle Chelo, most sell assets to pay back loans: cows, pigs, houses, and trucks are used in these cases, depending on the amount of debt. Money does flow *from*, but also *to* the United States, as we shall detail below. However, most often people will resort to migration to cover their debts, especially if the amount they owe is high. Here they

need to ask for another loan in order to make the journey. Such loans are generally provided by their relatives in the United States.

We must point out that debt is also used as advanced savings. People can build a house with loans and then pay little by little. This, they say, obliges them to earmark some of their income to pay off their debt, or viewed from another angle, their investment. Some have had to work for three years in the United States to pay back debts acquired to build a house or buy equipment. This was the case of Chavela. In 2002, when she went to Hawaii, she went to pay off debt that she incurred from the relations in Hawaii. She had borrowed \$50,000 from her brothers and uncles and to buy her land and build her home. After it was built she left her son, 13 at the time, and went illegally to Hawaii where she worked 16 months. She repaid her debt and returned to Sabinilla. Now she plants her small plot of corn and raises chickens and pigs. These activities augment her income as she takes work when she can in a variety of government programs that promote ecological practices.

Different normative frameworks are brought into play with the use of debt and other resources such as cattle, land and labor. Money is signified differently within different



Photo by Joshua Greene: Guillermo hitches his mule to his brother's horse to plow the rocky hillside.

domains. For example, land is not necessarily valued in monetary terms, and when it is, its price might be considered in pesos and/or dollars, but intertwined in such calculations are a series of considerations of a social and/or economic nature. And debt, of course, entails a host of social relations that are assessed according to the nature and context of the bond. Here we find different currencies at play.

Some people are more adept at juggling these different currencies. Bacho, who recently returned from Hawaii, has been able to skillfully operate his networks. He makes agreements and semi-commitments throughout his working day as he encounters people or they call him. He labors as a field worker, grinding corn stalks as part of a crew; as chef in a nearby restaurant, making cheeses for his father in law; and as a tradesman, building and restoring custom wood and ironwork. But Bacho is forever calculating the production capacity of his turkeys in eggs per week, or his cows in liters of milk per day and calves per year. He anticipates the value of raising purebred dogs and organic chickens, two of his favorite projects, which he started operating but hopes will grow with the increasing demand for them in nearby touristic towns.

### **Mexicali/ Calexico**

Mexicali is the capital of the northern Mexican state of Baja California. The USC Mexican border cuts through Mexicali and the US counterpart is Calexico. While agriculture is the dominant activity on both sides of the border, the population mainly resides in Mexicali. Whereas Mexicali has a population of 670,000, Calexico only has 38,000. It is estimated that two thirds of the Mexicali population are in possession of a Laser visa, which allows access to no more than 25 miles of US soil beyond the border. The intimate relationship between the two communities is visible in the early morning, as long lines of elementary students make their daily trek to their schools in Calexico and then return each afternoon to their homes in Mexico.

Here, of course, one also finds people juggling currencies. Making currency transactions between pesos and dollars is a routine matter in Mexicali, Calexico.



Photo by Joshua Greene: In Calexico, less than a block from the border, a US plasma purchaser advertises in Spanish.

People say they wake up to find out what the currency equivalence between the peso and the dollar is in that particular day. Crossing the borderline is also ordinary for most of the inhabitants, many of whom live and work on both sides of the border. It is common for Mexicans of naturalized Mexican Americans to live in one country and commute regularly to the other for work or other purposes. Wages, debts, taxes, savings, investments, insurance and social benefits cross the border boundary, which is not only a dividing line, but also a lived-in point of linkage, translation and communication. Some of these people live on the Mexican side of the border and work in the United States. Others live in the US (because of work or because it is a legal requirement in applying for residence or citizenship status) but their families are in

Mexico and their economies are framed within Mexican frontier social and cultural contexts.

Some Mexican residents have a bank account in the US and many are indebted, be it by credit cards, or in having bought real estate, cars, and a range of everyday consumption items in the neighboring country. More than a few have lost their houses in the United States due to foreclosure and are trying to make a new start in Mexico.

Still others mobilize in '*corridas*' that circulate between the US and Mexico following a particular crop. The efforts of these workers contribute significantly to household economies in important sectors of the population. Forty four percent of the population that lives in Mexicali and works in the United States labors in the agricultural sector. Many of them are transmigrants, whose process of migration is transitory or circular. Some are entitled to unemployment benefits when they are out of work, benefits that can be used to support their families in Mexico.

It is quite frequent for a family to live in two houses, one on each side of the Mexico-US boundary line. These can also host relatives and friends. Thus, household configurations take on diverse forms. This is not only related to employment. Parents in Mexicali often send their offspring to study in Calexico or San Diego to learn English, and families might decide to give birth in the United States so that the babies acquire double nationality. This requires having an address in the US. Here trans-border networks play a critical role.

Social networks are also relevant in the process of buying real estate. Capital flows in both directions, from Mexico to the US or vice-versa. More than a few sold their properties in their places of origin to try and salvage new acquisitions in the US. The social, economic and symbolic cost of keeping such networks vibrant is a critical issue, as are the ways in which risk is calculated and social differentiation enforced in such calculations.



Photo by Pablo de la Peña: Exchange Centers are a common sight on the Mexicali-Calexico border.

In scenarios like this, we immediately come across commonplace transactions that involve the use of differential normative, cultural, moral, and symbolic frameworks. Sandra, for example, went back to Mexicali, the city where she grew up and her parents lived after losing her house at the Imperial Valley. However, she commutes to Calexico twice a week to take care of her one-year old granddaughter. In the same way, Sandra's minor son, who studies at El Centro, California, lives with her sister, who cares for him. Another similar case is that of Karla, who lives in Calexico. She organizes "garage sales" in El Centro, California, and her mother, who lives in Mexicali, arrives at her house very early to care for the grandchildren. When Karla and her family go on vacation, they leave the key to their mother so that she can drop in and check the house, but particularly so that she can feed the dogs. Commuters such as these are constantly managing both dollars and pesos, but also a gamut of circuits of exchange within which values are differentially weighed.

Another example concerns borrowing social security numbers. Undocumented workers can greatly benefit from a social security number, which is held by legal citizens or residents. Here, different calculations are brought into play. Those holding a green card, but working in Mexico, can lend out the social security number in

exchange for unemployment benefits in times when there is no work and income tax returns. But many prefer not to use such benefits and instead profit from the work history provided by those who are 'working' their number. In the longer term, this will be beneficial in their applications for United States citizenship. They are very careful, however, to cross the border only at times when the people using their numbers are not expected to be working.

In addition, Mexicans in need of cash might cross the border to sell their blood or plasma. People selling their plasma can receive from \$100 to \$285 dollars per month, which is generally spent in Mexico to cover school fees, debts or complement everyday life expenses. In Mexico it is illegal to sell blood, which must be donated (although it is not uncommon for such transactions to take place 'under the table' when, as is generally the case, a hospitalized relative that has required blood needs to return a given amount). It is also common for Mexicans to cross the border to labor in the agricultural fields, hire themselves out as domestic helpers, gardeners, cleaners, assist nurses or care for the elderly, etc. as well as organize ROSCAS, buy groceries, and even cash pensions for friends or neighbors who are not able to cross to 'the other side', or simply as a favor. In each case, the value of legal tender is influenced by the urgency of the need, the social relations entailed, and the opportunities opened up in engaging in such activities.

Access to information is critical in the case of employment, in which they need to be well informed about work sources, work conditions, contracts and benefits such as the unemployment compensation. Some farm workers learn how to use several social

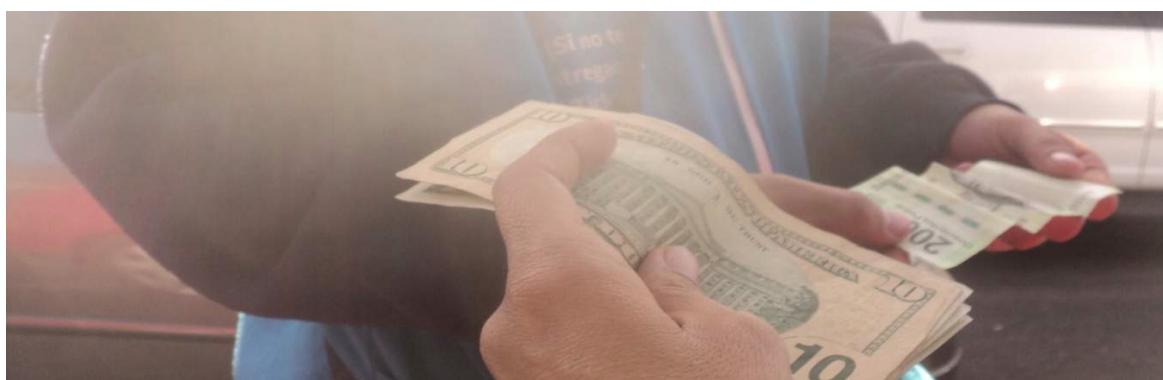


Photo by Pablo de la Peña: Currency exchanges can be made while waiting in line to cross the border. Here the "dollar boy" sells pesos for dollars.

security numbers at a time and receive “unemployment compensation” while they work in other cultivations, usually following “runs” or going to work “up North”. Such information is laden with notions of citizenship, rights, obligations and opportunities, involving normative and other frameworks. Currencies entailed will implicate such notions and frameworks.

Another important issue is the search for a double nationality. In border cities of Northern Mexico, it is very common that women give birth to their children in the United States. Here, social networks play an important role, because information concerning medical services, lodging, etc. is required. Patricia, for example, lives with her two children in Mexicali. Both were born in Riverside, California, where her brother and sister in law helped with all the necessary logistics. Even though Riverside is located 170 miles from Mexicali, her relatives had made calculations and hospitalization in this city appeared cheaper than in Indio, California. A week before giving birth, he and her sister in law went to pick her up and hosted her during this period, until she considered it safe for the baby to travel back. Double nationality is highly valued in Mexican border regions. It is considered to open up opportunities for work, study, investment, and in general, social benefits. It is hence that citizenship becomes a social commodity.

Living on the border, it is convenient to manage oneself in English as well as Spanish to be able to switch quickly between calculations in dollars and in pesos, but also to be *au fait* on legislation and normative frameworks on both sides of the border. The latter is a difficult task, since it not only entails reading and understanding the small print in contracts and legislation, but also being able to anticipate problems that can arise, and having the capacity to juggle with the different currencies entailed in their everyday transactions.



## Methodology

The team, comprising Dr. Magdalena Villarreal, MSC Joshua Greene and Dr. Lya Niño, met several times throughout the year to coordinate methodological approaches, visit each other's field sites and discuss findings.

The main research methodology entailed ethnographic observation of everyday life, with a special focus on the ways in which values were signified and represented, both in monetary and nonmonetary economic transactions. Special attention was paid to people's use of different currencies for different transactions and the ways in which their calculations were framed in each case.

Semiformal interviews were carried out with broad samples of the population in both sites, following, first, key informants, then snowball techniques and later selected cases (at least 12 in each site). Life histories were performed with the latter in order to understand how their previous experiences influenced their current views and how the use of money, currencies and the social relations entailed had changed over time. Here we sought certain people that met particular criteria in such a way that we were able to document diverse scenarios covering different social categories (including gender, place of origin). Thus we interviewed people from different backgrounds, involved in diverse economic activities or associated with particular social groups. The researchers had no problems of access to and from the US and Mexico, holding as they do, the necessary documentation. Issues of access to people's homes, and discussion concerning private money matters, however, were easier in Sabinilla, where we were welcomed into their households. However, in both cases, it helped that we had previous contact with some of the interviewees, who in turn introduced us to others.

Participant observation was implemented in market scenarios, fiestas, baptisms and other critical events where we could register everyday interaction involving money, finances and economic transactions. Fieldwork involved day-to-day interaction and participation in community undertakings. In Sabinilla, the researcher participated in repairing a community water line; the breech birth and thus loss of a calf; clearing land, plowing and planting. In Mexicali, the researcher knew many of the sources for several years and had established relationships. In both communities the children of the researchers played as friends with the children of the researched. Interviews could be conducted while the children played (and reminded everyone of the shared values on both sides of the tape recorder). We also implemented situational analyses, which allowed us to focus on particular issues such as the use and differential signification of social currencies. In order to do so, certain events, such as a conflict in the community, a celebration, the negotiation of a debt, a problem concerning taxes, etc., were carefully documented and analyzed from different angles.

In addition, small surveys were carried out in each site with a view to contextualize our cases more systematically, documenting possession and use of resources, financial practices and forms of capital. These were conducted over extended periods of time. At more than 150 questions the survey required multiple visits. Actors were interviewed while they carried on their normal days, preparing for the day, taking their breaks and during their work. The answers were recorded and then entered as data in a spreadsheet.

Because of the delicate nature of the issues dealt with, particularly those involving taxes, social security numbers and visas, individuals' identities have been changed through the use of pseudonyms and informants have been provided with the opportunity to read and review written or taped material concerning them before it is published.



Photo by Pablo de la Peña: The Priest does not come regularly to the little chapel in Sabinilla. On this special day in 2015, seven children from the village had their first communion. And religion is an important element present in people's economic and calculations.

## Key concepts

As mentioned above, our findings have everything to do with the ways in which social currencies operate in these two scenarios. Hence, the following sections spell out key concepts to understand such operation. With this aim, we first turn to what we have called reverse remittances, as well as what Sánchez terms *transmigradólares*.

### Reverse remittances and *transmigradollars*

The issue of reverse remittances has been totally omitted in most literature. Yet, it is a common practice. People send money to the United States when their relatives are in need, mortgages being the most prevalent, but also rent, education, money to pay for their return, or bail to get them out of jail when they are caught without documents or after an accumulation of traffic fines. In more than a few cases, cattle, houses, land and other assets are sold to meet requirements.

Such remittances are difficult to measure, and people tend not to mention them outright. They are un-stereotypical and quite unexpected. Yet, they are not infrequent.

We came across several cases in Sabinilla, including the case of Chavela's husband, who was sent money to travel back home when he was unable to do so. Hernando received support on several occasions from the village to pay for his bail and to meet the requirements of lawyers who would help him out in his legal status in the United States, and more than a few payments towards mortgages were paid through the sale of village resources. Reverse remittances can be a one-off occurrence, or they can be more systematic, as in the case of support for education, rent or to pay debts.

In Mexicali, on the other hand, money circulates back and forth at high speed. Money earned in Mexico is very often spent in the United States, used to buy consumer goods or support family. On the other hand, Agustín Sández<sup>3</sup> has coined the term of *transmigradólares* to label money that is earned in the United States and travels in people's pockets to Mexico, where they live. In a study he carried out in the border region, he found that much of that money travels back to the United States for consumption in grocery and department stores, or to be saved in American banks. It is common for people to buy electrical appliances, cars, but also houses and land in the United States, whether the money was earned in Mexico or 'up north'.

Whereas Mexicali was historically inhospitable due to its arid dry hot conditions and was only developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as an agricultural region, Sabinilla is the wild ranchlands high in the mountains with almost five centuries of history as a dairy cattle region ruled by roving bands of thugs, rich barons. While Mexicali has its cactus, sage and border controlling bandits, the region around Sabinilla is pine and olive trees and drug traffickers. Yet, despite their differences and the distances separating them from each other, these two communities share the fact that large portions of their populations leave to live and work in the US.



Photo by Joshua Greene: The daughter of a villager and the daughter of the researcher play together in Sabinilla.

<sup>3</sup> Interview. May 25, 2015.



**Photo by Pabla de la Peña (left):** After the first communion mass there is a village celebration. Many of the padrinos, the Godparents of the children, have come and they are treated as guests of honor. **Photo by Joshua Greene (right):** Villagers in Sabinilla gather in front of the store at the end of the day.

## Social commodities and currencies

All commodities have a social dimension to them: how quality, demand, social impact, and other attributes are valued and weighed are examples of this. However, we find social resources that tend not to be considered commodities, inasmuch as their price is not valued in monetary terms, although people might invest money in obtaining them. Such is the case of citizenship, social security numbers, contacts, information, etc.

As mentioned above, the notion of social capital is generally resorted to in an effort to bring such resources into economic and financial equations. This is fine, but the problem is that these efforts have entailed attempts to measure such assets, assuming that they are all accumulatable, transferable and can be included in general accounting. Our study shows this not to be the case. People's social assets are necessarily tied in with social relations. They are signified and weighed within concrete situations, and changing circumstances entail fluctuations in terms of value. In this process, the means of equivalence are framed within particular normative and cultural circuits of signification. Most of the time these do not involve explicit calculations involving rational arguments, but rather entail taken for granted values and assumptions. The moral norms that are brought into play for certain estimates can be transformed in contexts oriented to obtain status or monetary gain. In addition, their reckonings can involve fear, resentment or despair. Arithmetic is signified in the light of beliefs, fears and hopes. It is also signified within frameworks of calculation

wherein particular hierarchies are acknowledged and perhaps resisted, and where certain aspects are considered trivial or simply ignored.

In working with the notion of social currencies, key analytical issues concern the practices through which equivalences are framed and assessments forged with reference to specific socio-historically constructed associations. Acknowledging the workings of different currencies impacts the ways in which statistics and other unidimensional data might be interpreted.



Photos by Joshua Greene and Pablo de la Peña: Here we see Bacho engaged in a number of different activities to make a living. He manages a farm, he is a cook in a local restaurant, he works with iron and wood. He juggles all the time.

## Juggling

The concept of juggling refers to the historical art that included dance and performance. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the word itself originates from the Middle English *jogelen*, which meant to entertain by performing tricks. The act of juggling is typically defined as keeping more objects in the air than you have hands to manipulate them. In a more general sense, juggling is keeping objects in motion.

In this research we use this metaphor to refer to the actions that individuals take in order to manipulate and operate in multiple circuits of currencies. Specifically because these communities are border communities, with individuals balancing bi

national social relationships and the reproduction of dichotomous social contexts, the allusion to juggling allows us to conceptualize how someone operates in these multiple circuits in which multiple mechanisms of currencies are simultaneously manipulated by individuals and groups.

Furthermore the allusion to juggling further serves to illustrate how these multiple circuits of valuation operate when we consider some other properties of the act of juggling. First, the act of juggling implies that a number of the objects are in the air at the same time. In three ball juggling, only one ball is in the hand while the other two are in motion. In our cases, we can understand this as the way in which future plans involving distinct circuits of valuation are constantly unresolved. In the cases in Sabinilla, the future plans for the farmers depends so much on crop and livestock sales, which depend on a number of factors which are unresolved, and thus in the air. The mobilization of resources within the family network —for instance to ask an uncle in Hawaii to pay for the journey— involves numerous assemblages of factors that are all in motion. We see this as well in the cases of Elia and Mago who wait for the bill due date to calculate the exchange rate for purchases paid in dollars and repaid in pesos.

The metaphor further informs the conceptualization of transactions in these border communities when we understand that the act of juggling becomes exponentially more difficult as the objects being juggled differ by degrees. For instance, three beanbags are much easier to juggle than a scarf, a beanbag and a tennis ball, but a machete, a bowling ball and an egg would be considered even more difficult. It is the difference between types of currencies that makes this juggling of multiple life realms such an art.

In this sense, we see in the village of Sabinilla the great difference between the juggling styles and difficulty levels of Linda and her brother-in-law Guillermo. While Guillermo lives on the bottom rung of the accumulated asset ladder, his circuits of circulation tend to share many more similarities than the circuits within which Linda operates. Guillermo works as a day laborer when there is work and when there is not he hunts and gathers. In the community Guillermo is a central figure and he participates in helpful capacities, but he has no leadership role. In contrast, in the running of her farm Linda is constantly working with circuits of exchange that span a large realm of relationships: from complex relationships with her husband involving business cycles in Hawaii and varying levels of remittances; to accounts and terms with local and international financial institutions, the banks and creditors they deal with; to the constant negotiations between buyers and sellers of agricultural products that her farm requires; to relations she maintains in which she provides labor to



Photo by Joshua Greene: In Sabinilla, Guillermo's two boys take a break after helping carry stones.

numerous villagers and relations. Whereas Guillermo is somewhat alienated from these cycles of circulation, Linda is equally alienated from social circuits in the village (See Linda's case study for more details).



Photo by Joshua Greene: *Presentador* Jorge Reza, juggling at the Festival Internacional de Circo in Guadalajara, June 21, 2015.

Further insight can be gained from trying to understand the grammar inscribed in the patterns when juggling occurs between parties and in groups. In the performance art of juggling pairs of jugglers can exchange their objects but only if they do it in rhythm. When done in rhythm passing between two persons is as easy as juggling alone. The balance and rhythm become even more important when an additional odd item is added to the mix. Again, the level of difficulty climbs when the types of objects juggled are mixed up and when more persons are included in the exchange. Extending the metaphor to currencies, we see in these cases that negotiations between two individuals is quite easy. In this way we think of a juggler keeping many circuits of circulation in motion but exchanging only some with certain partners and others with others. The intensity of this operation increases as multiple parties and groups are added to the mix. We see this clearly in the cases of Juan in Sabinilla and Mina in Calexico. Trying to negotiate legal status in multiple jurisdictions, exchanging currencies in multiple languages, navigating socially constructed realities that are

context-specific, all the while attempting to earn a living and provide for one's family and the needs and desires of all involved becomes a serious performance worthy of Vaudeville.

Hence, the allusion of juggling of currencies implies that there are a number of different economic and livelihood circuits that people operate in. Some of these circuits include religion, gender, identity, family, markets, with distinct criteria; others involve hard cash, or perhaps social and symbolic assets. It is the act of keeping these multiple circuits in motion at the same time that is the juggling of currencies.

The more skilled juggler makes it appear that there is no juggling taking place. Her activities denote stability. It is interesting that stability is a kind of ideal even when juggling is the norm.<sup>1</sup>



Photo by Pablo de la Peña (left): Children at the village store buy candy. Photo (right): Bacho standing next to the Harley he bought in Hawaii where he worked in restaurants.

### **The velocity of money:**

This research was undertaken with a keen eye on the concept of the velocity and direction of money. Velocity is a mathematical component in the formulation of the quantitative theory of money, concerned with the relationship between money supply and prices. In this highly debated arena of theory, velocity can be illustrated as the number of times a single unit of currency is circulated in a given time period. In this

<sup>1</sup> We thank Nathan Dobson for pointing this out to us.

sense it is a comparative number, relying on other periods of time or other units of currency to compare with. As a pure measurement it is a "ratio of total spending to the money stock."<sup>5</sup> Following this with fiat currencies such as dollars, a velocity of 5 represents a set of conditions in which each dollar in circulation finances \$5 in goods and services.

In the field, carrying out economic investigations, or livelihood studies, trying to understand exactly how it is that people make do, the idea of the velocity of fiat monies is easy to see. In Sabinilla, the store owner Memo, keeps a moving stock of instant consumables, and almost no hard goods (durable goods). He takes in small coins' worth of chips and sodas and beer and pure alcohol. He sells in the smallest of quantities. His margins are slim and most of the money he takes in pays for the week's shipment delivered by a Coca-Cola or Pepsi truck. This money goes out. Out into the globalized market of packaged instant consumable commodity goods and minced into the accounts of investors throughout the world. The changes in this flow, the Delta Velocity,  $\Delta V$ , between time periods, is rhythmic. When the men in the community are all out harvesting and grinding the region's grain; when the flows of pre-election campaign funds come flowing through the region; when funds for government projects, bridges, water infrastructure, and road improvements are finally released, Memo's little store runs out of beer and the only things left on the shelves are bags of spicy greasy corn chips and hard tack candy. And in early May, when the region's corn is all ground up and the rains for the planting season are still a month away and there is no work except for those like Guillermo, who will take very little to perform fence repair and shovel the manure out of stables, the store's shelves are stocked and sometimes Memo closes the front door and takes a long nap. And sometimes he does not even open up until 5 in the afternoon. It is this velocity that Memo counts on, taking a small cut of each transaction.

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<sup>5</sup> Higgins, "Velocity: Money's Second Dimension," *Economic Review*, Kansas City Fed, June 1978.

Some of the money goes to César for rent. This money comes from the transactions made between Memo and the members of the community. The money goes to César and is mixed in with his income from his two jobs. César works from 4 a.m. to 10 a.m. every day of the year, milking and managing an absentee farmer's herd of 80 dairy cows. He receives \$1500 pesos per week for this work. Upon arrival to his home he finds out where his next gig is, working on a crew made up of men from Sabinilla who work harvest, grind, and plant the region's crops. He usually receives \$180 to \$250 pesos per day for these jobs. When the work is good, which is sporadic, he ekes out a modest living, earning \$195 USD (June 2015 exchange) per week. When there is no extra work and he is left to depend on income from his steady slog, he and his wife and three daughters are restricted to something closer to \$100 USD per week. As he says, after having worked many years as a migrant in Hawaii, "here you work only to eat. You have to work every day, or you don't eat." He is also fond of noting that despite the common retelling of the history of Mexico, Mexican farmers actually lost the revolution. César is fatalistic yet, in many ways a romantic poet. He knows he could leave and do better economically but he measures his worth, his time, his life, in different units. After many years separated from his wife and children, and despite the few glimpses of his family between his returning at sundown and getting ready for the 4 a.m. start time, he treasures being near them.

In César's case we see his money mostly leaving the village as well. Yet some stays as he buys a beer from the man who rents from him. When he has more work he buys more beers and bottles of alcohol that he generously shares with his coworkers and relatives. When the work is good he tries to take care of household and familial expenses that have been postponed. He stocks up on staples. He tries to save what little he can. And when there is no work he switches currencies and works in his garden and offers to help his relatives and neighbors.

In both Memo and César's case we see a very fast movement of monies. There is very little visible accumulation except what can be noted in the upkeep of their home and the health of their children. This is a common observation among households

surviving in the lowest quintile. In the case of César's cousin Bacho, the flow is very different. Bacho also works by the day but instead of locking into a steady job he rents out his labor in a dozen directions, always fishing for the best deal. He runs the crew of men that César joins after his first shift. He likes to engage in what he calls 'other people's circuits'. He says he learned from his years in the US that the best thing was to try to make money from other people's flows of money. So he sells himself as a contractor farmer who can coax a higher level of productivity from the land if the farmer will not only pay him his wage but cut him in 20 percent of the total earnings. And the daily flows of income that he generates working by the day gets spent immediately on food and clothing and medicines for him and his wife and daughter. And all of these flows go out, out into the globalized marketplace. While the windfall checks, the bigger chunks of pay that he receives for selling his own crops or the sale of one of his employers crops, these monies are invested into his farm. Bacho can be characterized as the representative of the entrepreneur, someone in the process of accumulating capital, slowly, rhythmically, against the stiff winds of depreciation. And these flows are mostly local. He buys cows, pigs, dogs, chickens, turkeys and supplies for his kennels and tools. These mostly come from local farmers and stores but the flows are slow and irregular and seasonal.

In the close examination of these flows of fiat monies we begin to see Viviana Zelizer's social meanings of money. Bacho's flows are labeled and earmarked. Money generated through certain circuits is not mixed in to the general category of needs. We see that, although some of the milk is shared with family and friends, the milk money that is generated from his two cows is used exclusively for the cows' needs, their supplemental nutrients and medicines. The money he earns in the fields is used for the house. The money he and his wife pool together selling crafts or oyster mushrooms or other adventures in production is dedicated to extra wants. As noted, his larger flows are dedicated to investments that he hopes and expects will pay out in the future. Memo as a store operator shows us clearly when he reduces the price of an item for a child or an older person or a friend, and when he extends credit to some and denies others.

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**Photo by Lya Niño: The money exchanges on the border give exact change, and as research Lya Niño notes, "everyone lives with one eye fixed on the exchange rate.**

"Earmarking currencies is one of the ways in which people make sense of their complicated and sometimes chaotic social ties," Zelizer writes (1997, p215).

In these complicated transactions between individuals and their globalized worlds, many of the flows that this study has been able to document are beyond the geographical boundaries of the study area. Money comes in from a multitude of directions and most of it speeds on through like a wind that breathes a little life into the people and passes on. And some of it spins around in a multidirectional funnel until it too speeds out into the commodity market. In the cases in Sabinilla we encountered several investors who have returned to the region after many years in the US. From afar they continue to manage their investments and cream off the earnings and reinvest them in houses and education and the lives of their growing families in the US. One man has worked 40 years for the Chicago Police Department and has built an impressive hotel in the nearby Manzanilla. The hotel is an investment that his brother manages and sends back the earnings. Typical remittance studies examine the transfers of money brought from the US to Mexico by migrant labor but

very few consider the advantage that capital intense investments can make in landscape dearth of capital. These capital intense investments follow the flows of the villagers, going back out of the local and regional economy; and in this case, back into the hands of the investor who never leaves the US. In Sabinilla, Elio manages a herd of cattle for another absentee Chicago investor. He comes to the village twice a year to make sure his herd is growing, and while some of the money that he earns gets touched and circulated by Elio, most of it goes back to Chicago to pay for his daughter's college education.

In Mexicali, the close proximity of the border gives an even more spectacular view of the flows of fiat currencies. Money is earned on one side of the border, carried back to other side, put into a bank or changed into cash, and then split into parts and spent on both sides. As researcher Agustín Sández in Mexicali has described it, there is a large flow of pay and expenditures which pass unmeasured in the pockets and backpacks of the thousands and thousands of people passing both ways through the border each day. In the earliest hours of the morning the migrants cross in tidal flows. The region's brutal heat has led many of the regions producers and packers to depend on night labor. Shifts can start at 11 pm or even 2 am. By 10 am all rational creatures have to begin to seek shelter and shade. At 2am in Calexico workers line the streets, waiting in pockets in front of gas stations and side allies. Buses that haul the workers to Arizona, 4 hours away in addition to the 4 hour return and the 8 hour shift and the hour crossing the border to go back home the next day. One person reported renting a room close to the border in order to just have a crash pad where he can shut his eyes for a few hours. His family lives hours and hours south in Sinaloa, political refugees from the region's violence. He sends most of his earnings to Sinaloa, money he earns in the fields in Calexico. He earns dollars and sends his wife dollars and she spends them in pesos. He's sending his daughter to school. But some of the money stays on the border, in Mexico, to pay his share of the rent where he boards.

And some of the money that he earned in the US and took to Mexico comes back to the US when he crosses the border the next day with a few bills in his pocket for whatever

expenses he might encounter during his day; his breakfast and snacks in the US before his shift, small bets he makes at lunch with the others, a beer, a tool and so on. It gets intricately more complicated when we see the transactions of a case of coworkers who share the credit resources of a single individual. One friend will cross the border to purchase items for another friend who lacks both a visa and transportation. The first friend will expect repayment, not of the price of the good on said day, but the price of the good on said day that the credit card is due and on that day's exchange: in pesos. They will handle all of this electronically, working in the same government institution they will be paid electronically on the same day, and thus know when resources are available between each other. In this case the money is not only flowing in a number of short and long distance circuits, it is moving electronically, from bank account to bank account and managed on cellphones. Again we see that these flows are anything but linear or uni-directional. Unlike our conventional conceptions about money moving across the border as measured by official bank and electronic transfers, these flows are much like a river: they have many measureable dimensions that form not only flows but eddies and back currents.

The notion of flows taking on multiple dimensions is visible under the microscope of close examination and situational analysis and long form interviews. These concepts are important because they represent challenges to the most fundamental of factors in economic measurement. People working and living on two sides of the border bring into question such issues as how to count employment, poverty levels, and how to count and think about remittances. Local productivity as measured by income within the region lacks the important component of laborers who work on the other side of the border and bring their money home in their pockets of employees working in Mexico who cross to the US to buy most of their household goods. What we begin to see is that these units of county or city or region or even nation actually penetrate into other units. In the case in Mexicali the binational geophysical space that makes up the border region is a separate unit and it allows us to see how the units of United States and Mexico become blurred together in this other interdependent border region. In Sabinilla we actually see the penetrating of incomes and investments

moving from the county of Manzanilla de la Paz in Mexico all the way to Cobb, County Illinois, or La Haine, Hawaii. These may be isolated cases, but everywhere we looked, they were present. We believe a significant error in measurements occurs when these units are assumed to be nonporous.

One of the key reasons behind the vivid debate about the quantitative theory of money is related to the argument that velocity is held to be in a relation to prices. The most basic representation of the formula says that the quantity of money (M) multiplied by the velocity (V) should equal the prices (P) multiplied by the total output (Y):

$$a. \quad MV=PY^7$$

Following this into the communities we see that it is clearly not just the raw speed of transactions but also the change from one period to the next in activities. These changes in velocities represent accelerations or a dampening of economic activities. As mentioned above in the case of the store owner Memo, extended periods between work, which are frequent after the harvest is in and the fields are still months from being planted, often mean that people spend less and less. And in good times there is a period of acceleration as villagers catch up on past debts and begin to spend again. In Mexicali and Calexico we also see in many ways that velocities of expenditures slow down and speed up, following harvests and the management of their exportation. We have already established that these economic flows are not only irregular, multi-directional, and nonlinear they are also not constant. In fact they are constantly changing.

In the case of Doña Elba we see clearly how this works in terms of the food she has to offer. It is customary for her to offer to feed whoever comes by her place. She is the

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<sup>7</sup> McCallum, Bennett; and Edward Nelson; *Money and Inflation: Some Critical Issues*, Finance and Economic Discussion Series Division of Research and Statistics and Monetary Value Affairs Federal Reserve Board, Oct. 1, 2010.

maternal leader of her family and it is her nature to make sure everyone has had something to eat. Sometimes, when her daughter is around and has gone shopping, she offers steaks, or if her grandchildren have gone hunting, she offers armadillo stew. And other times there are only beans and eggs and manufactured tortillas that come on the truck each morning. And sometimes there is nothing but homemade tortillas.

According to most measurements, Doña Elba lives in poverty and she has for her entire life. In her case we see that the degree of poverty can vary from week to week and sometimes from day to day. She often goes into extreme poverty, skipping medicines, eating simply. She continues to share what she has but she has less to offer. But these periods are episodic. There are other times when her bills are paid, the pantry is stocked, and there's still money left.

### **A note on the velocities of other currencies**

As noted earlier in this report, this study sought to understand how people manage multiple circuits of currencies. Thus we must question how these currencies function and much like trying to understand velocities of fiat currencies, ask whether there is some similar mechanism at play with other currencies. The ability of someone to mobilize these other currencies, and their ability to do it on command or with much



Photo by Joshua Greene: Contact Juggler Cyrille Humen at the Festival Internacional de Circo in Guadalajara, June 21, 2015.

difficulty could represent some sort of measurable velocity. Whether or not Mina can get her aunt to pick her child up from school when her employer decides at the last moment to make her work late, is vital to her ability to survive. She does not pay this aunt but instead offers to take her on vacation in the far off future. Her vacation will be organized by visiting another aunt who lives on the coast. Hence, she uses networks to pay off debts. Yet, there are other factors, currencies of love, family loyalty, solidarity and empathy that kick in. She has to pay into these currencies in order to mobilize them when the time comes.

In Sabinilla, the social currency of networks are often realized. Access to these networks give the migrant the ability to set out with minimal notice, on a costly dangerous journey that is paid for by a relative in Hawaii. This only works if the money can be sent quickly to pay for the Coyote, the smuggler who brings the migrants across the border. The migrant also has to ensure the airfare to Hawaii is paid for as soon as the migrant makes it safely into the US. Other circuits move slower. Villagers often borrow money to keep themselves afloat. When they have a hard time paying back official creditors, such as in the case of Linda, their debts grow and grow. Yet when they forget to pay back their informal creditors, their uncles and brothers and in-laws, such as in the case of Linda's son Martín, do not increase the debt so much as they decrease the access to future loans. In essence their access to the network is curtailed or becomes a troublesome emotionally- charged currency that is hard to mobilize.

In the two communities selected for study, looking at financial practices and multiple social currencies such as trading favors, paying with gifts and the use of debt, allowed us to see the flows of various forms of currencies in multiple, sometimes contradictory directions. The results of the case studies and surveys in these communities show constant manipulation of multiple currencies by both migrant and non-migrant members of these communities. In the specific cases of migrant and return-migrant women, the extent to which they employ social currencies in addition to cash to pay for child care, housing, and transportation shows the resourcefulness which they resort to in their daily endeavors. This research additionally revealed the blending of economic flows and activities on both sides of

the border, showing that the "two" national economies actually penetrate the other to a high degree. Most of these cross border transactions are undocumented and in fact unknown.

Furthermore by conducting participant observation and extended case studies in these two border communities, this project shows not just the extent to which people rely on favors and social currencies but also the range of other items that people use as currencies. The sale of valid and forged social security numbers and birth certificates has been widely documented yet in this research we observe the actual exchanges and interview actors involved. Thus we can add depth to this knowledge, reporting that these numbers are often rented or lent in order for the rightful owner to increase their contributions to social security with the promise of higher returns upon retirement; families in Mexico with children who are US citizens will often rent or sell the Social Security numbers of their children to relatives or trusted actors in the US who will use these numbers to increase the number of dependents on their tax filings and lessen their tax debt; entrepreneurial actors will search for US citizens who die in Mexico in order to recycle and sell the social security numbers and birth certificate; those with legal access to the US often make a business out of buying goods on the US side for those who lack access; labor performed on the US side of the border can be paid on the Mexican side, exchanged for dollars and then returned to the US side and spent on consumer goods; in other cases Mexican businesses are in fact micromanaged by migrants in the US; and those with savings earned in the US are able



Photos by Pablo de la Peña: In Mexicali (left) cross border communications are often conducted directly through the fence. In Sabinilla (right) migrants often come home for village celebrations such as this baptism.

to provide housing and work for others who in turn repay with labor and availability.

It is clear after looking into the issue of juggling social currencies that more examination is needed. If we are to grapple with these socially located means of exchange then it makes sense to go beyond identifying them and try to understand their rules of operation and dimensions.