An Argentine Evangelical Church: Twilight of a Transnational Field?

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Forty Years of Religion across Borders
Twilight of a Transnational Field?

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As my family and I board a flight from Houston to Newark, we run into Esteban and Mary Gaston, full-time “workers” at the Iglesia Cristiana Evangelica Compasion y Amor (hereafter ICE), an immigrant Latino congregation where I did participant observation over a two-year period. We are all on our way to Mendoza, Argentina, via Santiago de Chile. It is not surprising that we should run into each other given that similar events motivate our travel. Esteban is the featured speaker at the national conference of denominational leaders in Mendoza, and I am on my way to attend the same event as part of a project on “transnational religion.” My purpose in traveling is partly to study the role of people like Esteban and Mary, who build and maintain “transnational social fields” (Glick Schiller 1999:97) in their travels between Houston, Mendoza, and other cities. Fortuitously, I am able to join the Gastons on one of the many journeys that spin a web between Houston and Mendoza. In this chapter, I explore how and why a specific transnational social field emerges, including the role of people such as the Gastons in this process.

A growing number of social scientists speak of transnationalism as a distinctly contemporary economic, political, and cultural phenomenon in which people and institutions in nations of origin and settlement are linked together in complex ways (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994). In the United States, much of the literature on transnationalism is prompted by the ties of new (post-1965) immigrants to their countries of origin. Scholars interested in things transnational conceptualize the phenomenon or its implications in a variety of ways: as a new political/cultural form that undermines the nation-state as it is currently known (Levitt 1998a:76; Soysal 1994) and deterritorializes civic membership (Basch et al. 1994; Cohen 1997:173; Glick Schiller, Basch,
and Szanton Blanc 1992), as a dimension of a long-term process of global capitalist penetration (Portes, Guarnizo, and Pandolfi 1999:227), and as a migration perspective that tries to escape from the “tyranny of the national” (Noirel, cited in Gabaccia 1999:1115). In the United States, transnational “communities” are said to provide an alternative path to assimilation and a potential site of resistance to dominant structures (Portes et al. 1999:228; Roberts, Frank, and Lozano-Ascencio 1999).

As a cultural system and basis of social organization, religion has recently become prominent in discussions of transnationalism. Peggy Levitt’s work (1998a, 1998b), for example, has been most prominent in examining various cases of cross-national religion. She argues not only in support of macro-level claims (e.g., the impact of transnationalism on the nature of nation-state membership) but also for the importance of transnational religious ties in understanding everyday immigrant religious life (Levitt 1998a; Levitt, Maira, and Purushot 1997). The argument is really one about religious globalization or, more specifically, the way in which changes in the world order affect religion at a local level. Levitt’s work is important in that it highlights the potential importance of religious institutions for sustaining social relations and political institutions across national borders. She also contributes to our analytical toolkit the notion of “social remittances,” a concept that focuses scholarly attention on the “ideas, practices, and social capital that flow from receiving to sending-country communities” (Levitt 1998a:76, 1998b).

While sympathetic to Levitt’s endeavor, one may nonetheless question the sense in which the ties, public spheres, collectivities, and relationships are “transnational.” Is the adjective meant to underscore the simultaneous involvement of immigrants in the affairs of sending and receiving countries? Is it meant primarily to emphasize a sense of “consciously belonging to a group that [spans two settings]” (Levitt 1998b:929)? Is it meant to call analytical attention to social spaces where the exclusive claims of nationhood are contested and negotiated and alternative axes of identification and organization are developed? Does transnational refer to all of this? The answer is not entirely clear. Analytically, it seems worthwhile to distinguish how transnational is being used in specific contexts; otherwise, it is difficult to assess claims made in this and other work on “transnational” phenomena. For example, Levitt (1998a:87) claims that “contemporary global connections are likely to lead to more permanent homeland religious influences [relative to ones in the past], albeit constantly evolving ones.” Here the sense seems to be one of involvements in two or more countries. Does this necessarily imply transnational identifications? It is entirely possible that while the former persist or evolve, identifications develop in a more locally grounded context. I will pick up on this point later in this chapter.
In an effort to push the underlying explanation of transnational phenomena further, I suggest a relational definition of the term *field* that specifies how and why specific social actors generate and maintain fields. By transnational social field, I mean a set of historical relations between actors that cross—but nevertheless are constrained and enabled by—geopolitical borders between nation-states. Referring to relations as *historical* means that one takes time and place seriously in examining how they come to be and how they change (Tilly 1994:3). Speaking of a *field* underscores the quality of relations between actors. The relational configuration between actors on different sides of borders is endowed with a specific “gravity” imposed on objects and agents that enter it (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:17). As new actors enter the field or change their positions, the configuration of power and the quality of relationships change. Hence, it is a space of competition in which actors vie to establish monopoly over, in the case related here, authority and status in the religious field. I make no claims that nationhood as an institutional configuration or nationness as a quality of relations between people who think of themselves in national categories change as a result (although they may). Rather, I explore the actual mechanisms of field formation and change under specific circumstances. Their embeddedness in larger fields is a matter for further empirical work.

In what follows, I limit the scope of transnationalism to occupations and activities that require for their implementation regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders (Portes et al. 1999:219). The point of departure is the history and activities of individuals who comprise the networks that make transnational enterprises possible. The focus is primarily sociocultural rather than economic and political.

The data presented in this chapter tell a story of how and why a relational web spanning several cities in four countries came to be and changed over a forty-year period. The process (i.e., the “how”) by which a transnational religious field emerged may be thought of as twofold. First is the typical chain migration process by which a pioneer facilitates the migration of relatives and friends who, in turn, do the same for other friends and relatives. As the migrant community matures, its institutions and organizations become more prominent. In the case at hand, the church becomes the central institution in the lives of Argentine migrants in Houston. Second, and not surprisingly, the church offers a field where religious authority and social status become linked and the object of competitive relations. Migrants in Houston view the “world” as the stage on which their evangelistic endeavors can be played out to fulfill and perhaps exceed the goals of their religious predecessors.

Why do social actors in a religious migrant network engage in constructing a transnational social field? On a broad historical level, the “transnational agents” described in this chapter are following the vision of late nineteenth- and early
twenty-first-century religious missionaries from western Europe and the United States to Argentina. That vision, one with an elective affinity to capitalist expansion, was to go out into the world and spread the Christian gospel. While there is a discursive similarity between the old wave of English-speaking missionaries to Argentina and the new cadre of Latin American convert missionaries described here, the latter find themselves in a world of rapid and accessible communications that enhances their ability to "span" the world. They do this by building and maintaining a social field with actors in the United States, Spain, Honduras, and Argentina.

Why do these particular people engage in activities across national borders? From the actors' perspective (both ordinary members and others who became leaders and missionaries), engaging in activities beyond geopolitical borders is part of responding to the divine call to spread the gospel. Heeding the call implies considerable personal and family sacrifice (e.g., loss of income, home, and family network). At the same time, sacrifices made for the sake of following a divine call elicit the admiration and respect of congregation members. Those who go to the mission field merit considerable social status among ordinary members. This explanation should not be construed as questioning the personal motivation of transnational leaders. My contention is that, given the religious frame of reference briefly outlined previously, it is understandable that the actors described here choose the transnational religious sphere as an alternative career path and status attainment venue. Midlevel service-sector jobs in the United States, no matter how profitable, do not offer the level of status and/or meaning to which these people aspired. It is not surprising that most church leaders who remained in the United States when others left for the mission field work in middle-class occupations (accounting, engineering, and technology). While becoming a missionary represents significant financial downward mobility (at least initially), it also offers a career path with potentially high-status yields.

Few studies of transnational phenomena consider local-level data over a period as long as the one considered here. Even fewer give full attention to sociocultural, particularly religious, phenomena. Nor do they emphasize the distinctive role of and logic deployed by cultural agents in a religious field. Finally, recent work has not clearly shown the mechanisms by which transnational ties involve change in the sending and receiving communities. By studying the evolution of this religious field over a forty-year period, I show the actual mechanisms by which receiving communities influence sending communities and vice versa.

Data, Methods, and Context
The data discussed in this chapter came from several ethnographic methods (participant observation, informal interviews, and semistructured intensive interviews)
that I employed during the RENIR I and II projects. I observed the activities of a Protestant congregation in Houston, Texas (ICE), composed primarily of Argentines (50 percent) but with a considerable representation of Mexican (16 percent), Central American (14 percent), other South American (10 percent), and Caribbean immigrants (8 percent). I interviewed members, leaders, and converts, including first- and second-generation representatives in each category. I spent about thirty months as a participant observer of this congregation, during which time I conducted intensive interviews with fifteen converts, twenty first- and second-generation leaders, and eight second-generation members. In addition, I informally interviewed more than 50 church members in a variety of contexts, and I gathered socio-economic data on 270.

It became clear during RENIR I that Argentine migrants maintain significant ties to their community and congregations of origin. Therefore, in RENIR II, I have focused on transnational ties between the ICE in Houston and congregations in Mendoza and neighboring Luján, Argentina. I spent the summer of 1999 in Argentina observing these congregations and interviewing church leaders and members. I spoke to thirty-two people in formal interviews and more than eighty people in less formal contexts. I also spent a considerable amount of time observing and participating in congregational life during the two-month period and was able to attend the annual meeting of all Argentine Brethren leaders. In June–July 2000, I followed up with additional questions to leaders and members in Houston and attended services and weekday activities at the newly completed Family Ministries Center.

### Changing Field Configuration

In examining how the transnational religious field changed over time, I consider two intertwined dimensions of religious transformation: structural (who is part of the social network and what are the symbolic boundaries between subgroups) and cultural (what resources flow in what directions and with what effect). I find that this particular transnational religious field is best understood by studying changing resource flows between Houston and other network congregations. Over the past forty years, the social field in which actors from Houston, Mendoza, and Luján interact has changed in terms of who is involved, the relative positioning of actors, the resources exchanged, and the frequency of interactions. In broad strokes, during the early stage of settlement in the United States, economic resources flowed primarily from Houston to Mendoza and Luján, while cultural resources followed a reverse route. Subsequently, economic flows to the South continued, but the flow of cultural resources became more reciprocal, after which cultural resources began to follow a North-to-South route. Recently, financial transfers from Houston to Argentina have all but disappeared (or shifted to other regions), while cultural flows
from the North have become more hegemonic. The following paragraphs weave together the stories of key actors in the field-building and maintenance endeavor. A brief history of the Brethren in Argentina and Mendoza provides an important frame for these stories.

The Brethren in Mendoza, Argentina

The Plymouth Brethren movement emerged in 1829 to “unite all true believers in a biblical fellowship, reacting against institutionalism and ecclesiology” (Douglas 1970:117). The founders were a group of young men from Trinity College, Dublin, who sought to promote worship and fellowship across denominational barriers. They advocated a straightforward reading of the Bible that emphasized the grassroots, anti-institutional perspective of the church in New Testament times (Bruce 1993). The movement was a reaction to Methodism and a highly structured ecclesiastical apparatus in Great Britain (Lang 1955; Wilson 1967). Initially, the movement was ecumenical in scope and included Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Methodists. It spread rapidly throughout England, continental Europe, and then to the New World, where it continued to develop according to regional factors.

The Plymouth Brethren arrived in Argentina just as the phenomenal immigration flow from Europe got under way in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In contrast to the ethnic Protestant denominations that emerged with the great migratory wave to Argentina, the Plymouth Brethren did not identify with a specific immigrant enclave and made significant efforts to recruit “Argentines” of various national origins. Along with other evangelical denominations, the Brethren were responsible for much of the increase in the Argentine Protestant population (Enns 1971; Martin 1990; Monti 1969). Beginning in 1882, Brethren lay missionaries traveled throughout Argentina, employed by British railroads, banks, and other commercial ventures. Lay and professional missionaries alike were, in historically complex ways, influential agents of Northern cultural hegemony (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:7ff).

The Brethren came to the province of Mendoza in the early 1920s and were relatively successful among the working class and those aspiring to the middle class. Jaime Russell, an English missionary, started a small group in the provincial capital (also called Mendoza) that became the first Brethren congregation in the area. Members of the Mendoza congregation eventually founded a church in nearby Luján de Cuyo. Brethren congregations in Mendoza and Luján were composed primarily of Italian and Spanish migrants and their descendants (although there were also immigrants from Holland, Czechoslovakia, and France) as well as Creoles. The first members of the Brethren congregations in Mendoza and Luján
were generally craftsmen, farmers, or vineyard workers; only a handful were professionals. However, the next generation was expected to attend school and pursue a traditional profession (medicine, accounting, or engineering). Although some pursued higher education at local public universities, many moved from the vineyard to newly built oil refineries. Not content with the long-term prospects offered by either of these alternatives in a context of declining economic possibilities, others migrated to Buenos Aires or abroad. Many had already made the geographically less distant move from the small town of Luján to the city of Mendoza. Socioeconomically, Mendoza became a more affluent congregation than Luján, where even today many members are part of the working poor.

Emergence and Consolidation of the ICE in Houston (1958–72)

In the mid-1950s, dissatisfied with the opportunities available in Argentina, some of the youth in Mendoza and Luján decided to migrate to the United States. Gabriel, the first youth to migrate to Houston (via Buenos Aires), investigated work possibilities extensively at the local American Cultural Institute. He also talked about his plans with the American missionary, who was serving as pastor to the Mendoza congregation. Gabriel traveled to the United States in 1957 with the American missionary’s son, Alex Clifford. After a failed attempt at finding work in Miami, he followed Alex to Houston. Alex’s relatives offered Gabriel two weeks’ worth of hospitality and then helped him find room and board at the local YMCA.

Gabriel quickly found work as a waiter at a local continental restaurant and advanced to a managerial position. He was able to offer siblings, relatives, and friends migrating from Argentina work on arrival. As more people from Mendoza and Luján arrived and found employment (in the restaurant industry or in other parts of the rapidly expanding service sector), the options for subsequent migrants multiplied. The initial cohort had at least a high school education, and some had technical and/or university training. According to several informants, service-sector employers preferred Argentines both to other Latin American nationalities and to African Americans for supervisory jobs.

The exodus of capable young men and women, as aging leaders in Mendoza still refer to this process, was deeply felt by the congregations in Luján and Mendoza. This is not surprising when one considers that most Brethren congregations are financially self-supporting and lay led. Not only did membership drop precipitously (four large family groups left in a three-year period), the cohort of emerging young leaders was almost totally depleted. Further, the departure of a large contingent for the United States happened at a time of infrastructural expansion: Both Mendoza and Luján were engaged in building bigger facilities. At
least one new ministry in an outlying neighborhood was affected by the departure of young leaders. Younger leaders and the numerical growth of both congregations eventually filled the vacuum left by emigrants to the United States.

As more Argentines arrived in Houston, they began to hold religious services in the facilities of an American Brethren congregation (1959–62). Although the native Brethren apparently did not object to meeting with the Argentine contingent, according to informants on both sides, each had a different style and language of worship that made it difficult to worship together. At this point, the Argentines organized their worship and ministry to replicate the Mendoza and Luján practices as closely as possible. “In the first years,” recalls one female participant, “this was an almost exclusively Argentine club.” Theologically, the group was very dependent on Mendoza. For example, even as late as the early 1970s, the pastor of the Mendoza congregation sent recorded sermons to which Houston members listened during Sunday worship service. Visiting preachers from Argentina were received with considerable deference. The general orientation during the early phase of the Houston congregation’s life was to replicate the way things were done in Argentina.

The group continued to grow and arranged to meet in the garage of another English-speaking Brethren congregation (1963–67). By 1967, it had grown significantly through migration and evangelizing efforts, and the leaders decided to purchase a house to use as a meeting place. During this time, two highly respected lay preachers from Buenos Aires visited Houston and encouraged the new congregation to start an evangelistic radio ministry and to think about ways to evangelize beyond the Argentine population. The radio ministry was successful in recruiting other Latin Americans, many of whom are still members. A prison ministry and a crisis hot line in Spanish were added to the congregation’s ministerial repertoire, partly because of the visiting preachers’ inspiration. Houston leaders remember these projects as a turning point in the congregation’s ministerial vision. One woman, who was gone for a three-year period during this time, recalls that on returning she “found the church totally changed. They had started a radio program at a secular Mexican station and at the end of each program Bibles would be offered” and then delivered by a church member. It was no longer an “exclusively Argentine club.” The possibility of reaching a more inclusively defined Spanish-speaking audience became an increasingly influential frame of reference for the church. Accounts by members and leaders suggest the emergence of a tension in the congregation’s discourse between the universalistic cast of the gospel and the strong kinship ties among Argentine members, a tension that was to grow in the following decades.4

As the members of the congregation became more established, they sent financial remittances to their relatives and also designated gifts for the ministry in Mendoza. Don Pedro, who became pastor of the Mendoza congregation in the
early 1960s, views financial remittances to church members as an indirect contribution to the church. On the one hand, financial remittances meant that the church would not have to support members in need, as it might otherwise be obligated to do. On the other hand, members’ giving increased as a result of funds received from relatives in the United States. Further, Don Pedro received gifts designated for him personally, as the following field note excerpt illustrates:

[Don Pedro] relates an experience where he was personally affected by an offering sent from Houston. As a Brethren missionary he had no guaranteed income but received “offerings” every month. He had been wanting to make a missionary trip to the Patagonia where he had ministered in the past. One day he was very ill… A Christmas card arrived [from Gabriel Gaston in Houston]. When Don Pedro opened it, he found a $100 bill… He was very impressed by this. He knew it had to be for a specific purpose since in the past he had also received money like this to meet a specific need… He prayed about what to do with this money. He asked his wife for a little piece of paper where he had come up with an itinerary and budget for his missionary trip to Patagonia… When he looked at his budget it came out to $98. He then called his brother-in-law and they set out on their trip. … When he returned… a month later he had $25 left over. This was one of many experiences where God used someone from the US to allow them to carry out a ministry here in Argentina.

Don Pedro also received equipment that would help his ministry (e.g., a reel-to-reel recorder used to record sermons and take them to the sick or send them to the United States). However, direct congregation-to-congregation contributions were and remain rare.

In 1969, the ICE in Houston purchased a church facility from an English-speaking Brethren congregation that was moving to the suburbs. It was considerably larger than the small house where the congregation had been meeting, but it too was soon full to capacity. Migration from Argentina and various recruitment ministries continued. By the early 1970s, attendance averaged between 180 and 200 on Sundays. From this point forward, the ICE continued to expand its ministries, particularly in other countries.

The Missionary Phase (1973–93)
The increase in church membership coincided with and was fueled by a vision of missionary expansion. In the early 1970s, the leaders and members increasingly shared a sense that they were to take the gospel message to the ends of the earth. For example, a church missionary recalls being motivated

to go to Spain by Juan Gerardi, a traveling evangelist from Barcelona who visited Houston in the early 70s. Gerardi knew of the Houston congregation through
contacts in Argentina. Esteban felt that because Spain had no knowledge of the Scriptures and the gospel, he should go there. After praying about this for some time and talking to the church elders, he and his wife decided to go to Spain.

(Field notes)

Three families were "commissioned" as missionaries. One went to Honduras, one to Spain, and a third to a rural village in Mendoza. In addition, three other families who were active in the Houston congregation returned to Argentina for work reasons, became active lay leaders there, and maintained ties to Houston. Several of the families that left during this time were charter members of the ICE and very active in church ministries. However, the level of participation was such that several strong leaders remained in Houston. Those who left and those who stayed shared strong bonds of friendship and family that were important to future mission projects. The adults in each of the missionary families, as well as several ICE members who returned to Argentina, were to act as carriers of ministerial, ritual, and theological innovation. In the following sections, I give a detailed account of one missionary couple and briefly discuss two others as well as lay leaders who became liaisons between Houston and other congregations. I focus on camp ministries as an illustration of a ministerial model developed in Houston, used in Spain and Mendoza, and "reengineered" for an urban context in Houston.

THE GASTONS. Who are the cultural agents and engineers of the transnational social field that came to encompass actors in the United States, Argentina, Spain, and Honduras? My travel companions on the trip from Houston to Argentina are among their number. Mary Gaston is the Argentine-born daughter of American Brethren missionaries. She had some tertiary education and experience in business administration before she immigrated to Houston. In the Mendoza congregation, Mary had been very active in lay ministries among poor children. In the United States, she worked at home raising four children and was an active leader among the church's women. She and her husband, Esteban, are charter members of the Houston congregation. Before emigrating, Esteban was a youth leader of the Mendoza congregation and by his late twenties an elder at the ICE in Houston. He is a graduate of a prestigious preparatory school in Mendoza but did not attend college. In Houston, he worked as an installer for a successful interior design firm. Even by current standards, the Gastons were financially well off. Yet there was a disjuncture between the relatively high status accorded leaders at the ICE and the status of a manual services worker. In the religious sphere, congregation members ascribed to Esteban and other church leaders a degree of status not readily available in the workplace (cf. Warner and Wittner 1998:25). In this sense, the religious sphere, particularly the transnational social field, became an alternative status attainment venue.

In 1997 they spent a year among the Spanish-speaking missionaries in Argentina. However, predictable misadventures in Spain and Argentina frustrated their plans.

The Gastons' trip to Mendoza and González church in Spain then led to work with the Brethren's church in Spain.

In 1989 for a brief addition to the congregation of the Brethren Church in Mendoza, they found the model of the religious experiences a great distance from a more urban context.

Thus, the Spanish-speaking congregation in Mendoza continued, and the Gastons' project for Argentina and Spain continued.
In 1973, the Gastons left Houston to become missionaries in Spain, where they spent eight years. Once there, they founded a Brethren church and helped develop a camp/retreat ministry still in operation. Esteban gained a reputation among Brethren in Spain, the United States, and Argentina as a charismatic speaker and an effective organizational leader. While in Spain, he was invited to Argentina and Houston for religious conferences. Not all was smooth sailing, however. The Gastons struggled to make it financially on a meager and unpredictable missionary salary. Both Esteban and Mary became ill during their time in Spain and struggled with the aftereffects for many years. The Gaston children struggled in the very rigid educational system of Franco’s Spain.

The Gastons’ links to evangelicals in Spain were to have a long-lasting impact on Mendoza and Houston. For example, the Gastons became friends with Mariano Gonzalez-Navarro, a computer systems consultant and well-known Spanish Brethren theologian. They introduced him to leaders in Houston and Mendoza who then regularly invited him to speak at conferences and special lecture series. Gonzalez-Navarro recruited a young leader from Mendoza who now pastors a church in northwestern Spain. Another young Argentine leader spent time in Spain ministering in various congregations, and two others are being recruited to work with churches in that country, all through contacts with Gonzalez-Navarro.

In 1982, the Gastons moved to Mendoza, where they served as missionaries for a brief period before settling in Luján. They ministered there until 1993. In addition to pastoral duties in Luján, Esteban and Mary were charged by several congregations in the greater Mendoza area with starting a camp/retreat center. During an interview and subsequent visit to the Parque Evangelico Fuente de Vida (Fountain of Life Evangelical Park), Esteban explained that his vision was originally to develop something along the lines of the retreat center in Spain. In turn, the model for that camp was loosely based on what Esteban learned from his experiences at Brethren camp facilities in west Texas, where he served as a church retreat director and, along with several others, had spiritually consequential experiences such as feeling “a call” to become a missionary or a leader in the church. On a more mundane level, Esteban knew the administrative inner workings of a retreat center through his service on the camp board.

Thus, the park in Mendoza drew on experiences garnered in the United States and Spain. It would have lodgings for large and small groups; a multipurpose building for meetings and indoor sports activities; soccer fields; tennis, volleyball, and basketball courts; as well as swimming pools, gazebos, and other amenities. The land not used for park activities would be cultivated and used to sustain the project. How to accomplish this in the midst of severe economic instability proved to be a challenge. Esteban met it by drawing on his connections in the United States and Spain. In fact, the park was built primarily with donations from
two or three wealthy Houstonians who funded the project primarily because Esteban asked. Esteban also negotiated a legal status for the park independent of any one particular congregation, and this facilitated the solicitation of funds overseas. In addition, Esteban served as chairman of the nonprofit foundation board that administered Brethren schools and properties in the province of Mendoza. In fact, he reorganized the nonprofit church association very much along the lines of the 401(b) he had known in Houston. In the process, control of church assets shifted from the Brethren denominational board in Buenos Aires to Mendoza. Esteban’s status on this national board, where he also served as a member, made this transfer of organizational power relatively uneventful.

In 1993, Mary and Esteban returned to Houston with an offer to oversee the development of a new family ministries center. Leaders of the Houston congregation, now close to 300 members, wanted to build a complex that incorporated features of a camp or retreat center with those of a multipurpose community center. The Gastons were involved in the purchase of a fifteen-acre plot in a growing Houston suburb and in the design and implementation of the project. They concluded the first phase of the project in September 1999 but are still involved in its ongoing operation. For anyone familiar with the retreat center in Mendoza, the conceptual similarities are striking, yet the urban location and array of services to be offered at the complex sets the Family Ministries Center (FMC) apart as a distinctive adaptation to local circumstances.

During the past eight years, the Gastons have continued their involvement in the administration of the retreat center in Argentina. The official administrator, Esteban’s former project foreman, calls weekly from Argentina to consult about park matters. He also visits Houston on a regular basis to assist Esteban in the arduous building project. During visits to Mendoza (generally twice a year), the Gastons spend considerable time ministering in Luján and attending to park matters.

THE SABBATINIS. Shortly after the Gastons moved to Spain, Houston sent a second missionary couple to Argentina. Evelyn and Gabriel Sabbatini have spent most of the past twenty-five years in the province of Entre Ríos, in northeastern Argentina, where they minister to a Brethren congregation of German immigrants. Before leaving Houston, their socioeconomic profile was very similar to that of the Gastons. In Houston, Evelyn worked at home raising three children and was an active leader in the women’s group. Gabriel was a very successful salesperson at a high-end decorating supplies firm. He had among the highest incomes in the congregation before he “heard the call to the mission field.” Like the Gastons, the Sabbatiniis were also oriented to the church community as a source of social recognition. As they became well known in Brethren circles in Argentina, they gained considerable status both there and in Houston.
The Sabbatinis started a camp/retreat center in a rural area of Entre Ríos much like the one the Gastons had developed in Spain. In fact, they visited the Gastons in Spain at least twice and were also familiar with the retreat center in west Texas. They eventually moved to the retreat center and developed a self-sustaining project through the sale of agricultural products and organic fruits, jams, and so on, something that the park in Mendoza has not been able to achieve.

In the mid-1970s, the Sabbatinis, along with the Gastons, attended a religious conference in Germany where they made contacts with German evangelical organizations that later funded significant portions of the project in Entre Ríos. The participation of German immigrants in the Entre Ríos Brethren congregation had been attractive to these organizations. The camp/retreat center also received funds from Houston. The Sabbatinis traveled to Houston on a regular basis, particularly after their children returned to the United States for college. Their daughters married two cousins from Córdoba, another Argentine province, who are now worship leaders.

The Sabbatinis played a key role in adding new actors to the religious network emerging between the United States and Argentina. Their contacts with Brethren churches in nearby Santa Fe initiated a relationship between these congregations and the ICE that persists to this day. For example, Rodolfo Donati, a lay preacher from Santa Fe, visited the ICE at least once a year over the last decade. A missionary from his congregation who works with street children regularly approaches ICE members for funding. Other acquaintances from Santa Fe congregations visit Houston regularly and are a source of renewed Argentine influence in the congregation.

In the early 1990s, the Sabbatinis spent two years in Houston working with a church-planting ministry and in fact founded a congregation composed primarily of Central American members. They recently returned to Houston, where their children now live. They continue to be involved in the administration of the camp facility in Entre Ríos and maintain contact with Brethren in various Argentine provinces. The Sabbatinis also collaborate with the FMC and perform pastoral duties at the ICE.

The Lopezes. A third missionary couple went to Honduras at about the same time the Gastons and the Sabbatinis left for Spain and Argentina. Both Fernando and Lucia were employed in the oil and gas industry in Houston and were very comfortable financially. Like the Gastons and the Sabbatinis, the Lopez family started a camp/retreat center in Honduras. In addition, because of the significant medical needs in the rural region where they settled, the Lopezes established a community medical center. They have become highly respected in Honduras and frequently travel to Houston for visits and to participate in church conferences.
and retreats. Church members travel to Honduras and serve on short-term projects. One elderly woman spends several months at a time helping the Lopezes in Honduras. While this part of the Houston network has not been very influential in Argentina, it recently benefited from the Houston–Argentina link. After Hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras in 1998, the Lopezes funneled almost $30,000 in direct aid to victims. As word of the catastrophe spread from congregation to congregation over the Internet, funds were sent from all over the United States, Spain, and Argentina to Houston. An elder in the ICE opened a special account and in turn transferred the funds to the Lopezes in Honduras. The Houston congregation also coordinated shipment of a large container with vital supplies for hurricane victims. All this happened before other nonprofit organizations in Houston were able to figure out how to get aid to Honduras. Through this event, the Houston ICE gained considerable visibility among Brethren congregations elsewhere in the United States, Europe, and Argentina.

**LAY FAMILIES FROM HOUSTON.** During my visit to Argentina, it became clear that it was not only missionaries who contributed to the emergence and maintenance of a transnational religious field but also several lay families that returned to Argentina in the mid-1970s (about three couples and their families). As it happens, these couples were close friends with the Sabbatinis and the Gastons. While they were active in supporting the camp ministry, they also initiated several ministries that were innovations in the Argentine context. For example, Nidia and Fernando, two native Mendozas, recalled the success of home Bible studies started in Mendoza by one of these couples in 1977. Hosts to one of these gatherings, Nidia and Fernando recounted how surprising it was to find themselves discussing spiritual matters with neighbors, many of whom they had known superficially for many years. The church in Mendoza started to grow as people from these neighborhood groups began coming to Sunday services as well as in response to several other innovations introduced by the couples from Houston. In addition to developing a fifty-member choir with “serious rehearsals” and auditions, one migrant returnee started a Sunday school for adults and a weekend Bible school. Several youth who had drifted from the church in the tempestuous 1970s returned to engage in serious theological discussions. While Nidia and Fernando tell this as a story of the church’s own returning to minister in Argentina, it is clear that these innovations, which are common practices in Houston, constitute a clear case of Northern influence on Argentine congregations. These couples also renewed friendships and social ties at a time when the congregations in Houston and Argentina were slowly drifting apart. Their influence continues to be felt as they travel on a regular basis between Mendoza and Houston.

The Gastons, Sabbatinis, and other families were frequently mentioned in interviews as influential leaders in Mendoza and Luján. Camp ministries, home
Bible studies, and liturgical innovation are some of the topics that arose often during interviews. I have focused primarily on the camp ministry because it is relatively easy to trace the origin of this ministerial model and its adaptations by actors in the different locations of the transnational social field examined here. While the foregoing account privileges the role of specific individuals, one should keep in mind that, for the most part, they were acting in an organizational capacity. An organization encompasses historically, well-bounded clusters of social relationships in which people in one position have the right to commit collective resources across boundaries (Roy and Parker-Gwin 1999; Tilly 1998). The Gastons, Sabbatiniis, and others were in Mendoza, Luján, and Spain with the support of, and in keeping with the evangelistic philosophy of, the Houston congregation. Simply put, they acted with a mandate from the Houston congregation: They were elders or acknowledged lay leaders in Houston and/or commissioned as missionaries (which involved financial and organizational support). Argentine denominational leaders also recognized them as leaders. Thus, they were able to mobilize resources (financial and symbolic) across borders and affect the congregations of Houston, Mendoza, Luján, and elsewhere (e.g., the creation of multifunctional retreat centers in Mendoza, Entre Ríos, and most recently Houston). Their links to Houston, along with its range of weak and strong network connections in Spain and elsewhere in Europe and the United States, significantly affected Brethren congregations in Argentina. They continue to act as carriers of ideas and practices between congregations, demonstrating that this process is at least somewhat reciprocal. In sum, a small number of Houston leaders have had a significant impact on ministerial practices and network extension in Mendoza, Luján, and Houston. They are the clearest example of organizational links and influences between nodes in a changing transnational web of Brethren organizations.

**Houston as the Established Core of the Network (1994–2001)**

The Houston ICE gained considerable recognition in Brethren circles because of the Family Ministries Center. As the project became a reality and visitors perceived it as a success, Houston's position as an important player in a transnational religious field became consolidated. If in the early 1970s the ICE was viewed as an energetic and (possibly overly) ambitious congregation, the ties established between Honduras, Argentina, Spain, and the United States, as well as the success of the projects undertaken by its representatives, confirmed to people in the know that this was a trendsetting congregation. Indeed, four of the main speakers at the 1999 national leadership conference for Brethren in Argentina (with the theme “Evangelization for the Twenty-First Century”) were from the ICE, including the keynote speaker. In a workshop presented by a Houston missionary and a lay
leader, Argentine church leaders asked many questions about the sorts of ministe-
rial strategies that these two leaders saw as most important for the twenty-first
century. It was clear in these exchanges that Argentine leaders were very interested
in and deferred to the opinions of the speakers because of the Houston congrega-
tion’s success in various ministries and its key role in binding together believers
in the several countries.

Transnational Social Fields and the Children of Immigrants
To recapitulate briefly, as migrant networks between Mendoza and Houston be-
came established and as migrants in Houston acted on their global evangelistic vi-
sion, a religious field encompassing several countries emerged. Actors and their rela-
tive importance in the field changed. At one time, religious actors from Mendoza
were relatively more influential in the religious field. Over time, however, religious
actors from the North gained greater ascendancy, and they looked to the more or-
ganizationally sophisticated actors in the South for interaction (e.g., leaders in
Buenos Aires). Houston’s transnational actors also developed important ties with
religious organizations in Europe, particularly Spain. The previous account shows
that the religious field spanning Houston and other cities is largely the product of
efforts by a small number of people (even if a broader range of field participants
were impacted by their activities). What happens when these key players are no
longer active? Will this field continue to exist once its mostly first-generation par-
ticipants become inactive? As the burgeoning literature on the children of post-
1965 immigrants shows, the answer to these questions depends largely on their
role in transnational social fields.

Participant observation of and interviews with children of immigrants at the
ICE underscore the precariousness of the religious field described previously. Given
a limited institutionalization of transnational ties, the very existence of a transna-
tional social field depends on the participation of the children of immigrants. Pre-
liminary findings in a new exploration of immigrants’ children at the ICE point in
the direction of different experiences among the misleadingly titled “second gen-
eration.” However, even when taking into account age and differential experiences in
terms of the community’s maturity in the U.S. context, one is left with a very dis-
tinct impression that, insofar as its future depends on the children of immigrants,
the religious field described is close to its demise or that, at best, the ties that sus-
tain it may survive but serve some other purpose (e.g., to facilitate future migration).
The experiences of Terry, Dylan, and Pablo illustrate the possibilities and challenges
to the persistence of the transnational social field examined earlier in this chapter.

Terry grew up in the ICE as the youngest of three children. Her parents are
founding members of the congregation. Her early childhood friends were mostly
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from church. However, as she became older, Terry developed friendships and relationships with children from school and later from her dance troupe. In Terry’s estimation, an important difference between her experiences and those of her siblings is that she was allowed much more frequent interaction with people outside the church (whom she often conflates with “Americans”). She attributes this to her independent personality and rebellious streak. She cites an example of bringing home an American boyfriend whom she knew her parents would not like (he wore earrings and did not attend church) and recalls her siblings’ astonishment when she confronted her parents. Becky, her older sister, confirms that she could not get away with confronting her parents like Terry. Traveling on a trip to Guatemala with her then fiancé and now husband was another action that Terry’s siblings would never have been allowed to carry out.

Distinguishing herself from her parents and siblings as an independent, self-sufficient American woman, Terry nevertheless identifies much more strongly than her siblings as “Hispanic,” an identification she associates with her parents’ “Argentina” and as a “nonwhite” category. Although she has been to Argentina only once, as a toddler, she feels very drawn to exploring these ties. Visits by two of her cousins during her sister’s wedding prompted her to foster family connections. She now maintains almost daily contact with them by e-mail. She also tracked down the e-mail address of a cousin who lives in Buenos Aires with whom she corresponds regularly. They view family pictures on their respective web pages.

Interestingly, religious ties are missing from this account. Terry attends the ICE about once a month. She feels somewhat alienated from her parents and relatives because they hassle her about her dancing profession. As a performer of Latin American folkloric dances, she feels that this is a way to connect herself and the teenagers in her troupe to a common heritage. Terry is aware of missionaries who worked in Argentina, Spain, and elsewhere, but she does not know the details of their connections in various countries, and these do not seem very relevant to her life. Were the ICE to continue its focus on local activities while transnational ties became frayed or severed, she would not feel at all affected. The opportunity to teach Latin American folklore to youngsters at church is what matters to her. Thus, while symbolic ethnicity is important to Terry, the maintenance of organizational ties to Argentina is a pursuit very distant from her everyday experiences and desires.

Dylan, on the other hand, has a much greater appreciation of current ties with religious organizations outside the United States. His father is the main leader who remained in Houston during the missionary phase outlined earlier and the main link to North American Brethren churches and organizations. Dylan is being groomed to lead the youth and, someday, the congregation. He also had an experience very distinct from that of his four older siblings. He attributes this to
coming of age in the 1990s rather than in the 1980s. Growing up in the 1980s meant that his siblings' lives revolved largely around ethnic community activities. In the 1990s, Dylan was much more attuned to American society and had many ties outside the Latino community. Church has been central to his life experience. He even relearned Spanish so that he could be a more effective church leader. During the summer of 2000, Dylan visited a large church in Buenos Aires that has an urban as well as rural ministry, especially for poor children. In Argentina, he met a young woman whom he began dating. One would expect Dylan to be the perfect candidate to foster existing ties with religious organizations in Latin America and Europe. Indeed, he is the only person of his generation to return to Argentina for an internship. Nevertheless, he believes that the Family Ministries Center will be the focus of his ministry. His frame of reference is clearly in the United States. He is now in his second year of premedical studies and does not even consider the possibility of living in Argentina or elsewhere (although he continues to date an Argentine woman).

Pablo, the oldest child of immigrants I interviewed, would appear to be a more likely candidate to succeed in the maintenance of religious transnational ties. He came to the United States at age four. His father was one of the main leaders who remained at the ICE while others left as overseas missionaries. In the early 1980s, Pablo, his father, and several others left the ICE and founded an splinter charismatic group called Agua Viva (Living Waters). The initial core group was largely Argentine but self-consciously sought to incorporate people of other Latin American origins. The group grew tremendously and by the early 1990s had a Sunday attendance of 500 to 700. Pablo became the senior pastor, and in 1994 the church purchased the facilities of a television station. Since the mid-1980s, Pablo, his father, and a cousin have traveled to Argentina, Colombia, Chile, and Venezuela on a regular basis. They established several churches, including one in Mendoza, as an extension of the U.S. ministry. Pablo's church also became affiliated with a North American charismatic denomination that saw these transnational ties as an indicator of Living Waters' potential to minister to Latin Americans living in the United States. As these congregations became self-sustaining, Pablo traveled less frequently and was less involved in transnational religious activities, although his father continues to travel for speaking engagements. Pablo's interest turned increasingly to the life of his congregation in Houston and professional opportunities in the religious market. He is currently writing a book about ministerial possibilities among Hispanics. His children, although very involved in church activities, would never consider going to Argentina other than for brief visits.

These three examples illustrate the array of experiences and the potential for maintaining a transnational religious field. Terry, generally representative of many younger children of immigrants, is focused on the ICE to the extent that it can bol-
ster her sense of symbolic ethnicity. Her contemporary, Dylan, is much more involved in ICE organizational activities and has a relatively comprehensive knowledge of ties with religious organizations in other countries although little interest in actively pursuing them. Pablo, closer in his experiences to Terry’s and Dylan’s older siblings, has been an actual participant in a transnational religious field but has withdrawn his attention from it. Whatever the significance of their differential experiences, and despite differences in perceived potential as transnational religious actors, none of these children of immigrants seems inclined to participate in the sort of religious field described earlier. I conclude that its days are numbered.

Under what circumstances might one expect a different outcome? The field might persist if other actors became more proactive in maintaining ties. This will likely be the case if religious actors find a mutually beneficial point of exchange, for example, if Argentine congregations are able to offer religious workers that match Houston’s needs. Given the low participation by immigrants’ children as church leaders, projects such as the Family Ministries Center may drive up the demand for religious workers from elsewhere. Uninterrupted migration streams from Argentina and other Latin American countries may drive this demand even further. In the course of three months in 2000, five people from different parts of Argentina appeared on the doorsteps of the Sabbatinis and Gastons in Houston looking for help in settling. These people’s children were about the same age as the children of some second-generation members. This means that third-generation children are being exposed to newly arrived immigrants with strong connections to Argentina. If this new migration coincides with an increasing valuation of symbolic ethnicity by current children of immigrants, transnational religious ties may be fostered. Thus, the strength of future migration streams likely will play a major role in determining whether transnational ties are maintained in the future.

From a more explicitly organizational perspective, ties that contribute to the maintenance of a transnational space may come into play if they are perceived to provide some sort of advantage in the local or global ethnic and/or religious market. For example, to be perceived by American-based denominational organizations as a trendsetting congregation with strong ties to Latin America and innovative ministries among Hispanics may put the ICE at a competitive advantage in terms of available resources for programs. Indeed, the ICE and the Family Ministries Center have already started to reap the benefits of such a position. Likewise, when the religious marketplace is thought to include the entire Spanish-speaking world, strong relations to Latin America and Spain are likely to be fostered and maintained much more instrumentally than they have been thus far. However, this would be the case only if strong relations with Latin America were associated with an ability to minister in the U.S. ethnoreligious market.
In brief, contrary to Glick Schiller’s (1999:96) hunch that transnational social fields may persist beyond the first generation, I conclude that their durability requires a possible but as yet unrealized change in circumstances. Further, one can envision other scenarios that would limit the persistence of transnational social fields, at least in the more restricted sense used in this chapter. For example, migration policies could change and migration streams could be interrupted.7

Conclusions
How and why did the transnational religious field with actors in Spain, Honduras, the United States, and Argentina come to be and change over the past four decades? Building on the migration network spanning Mendoza and Houston, certain actors became key leaders, first at the local level and then in the transnational field they helped generate. With time, Argentine immigrants in Houston came to exert considerable influence in this field. Why did these particular actors engage in a transnational social field? Inspired by evangelical discourse about spreading the gospel to all nations and at considerable personal cost, religious actors found an alternative career path and status attainment venue, first at the local and then at the transnational level. They generated a field within which they and the ICE congregation came to have considerable weight. However, they also bore the responsibility of maintaining this field. As key transnational players with ties in Houston became less active and returned to Houston, the very existence of the field has come to seem precarious. New generations at the ICE have not seemed interested in maintaining this field. Other venues of status attainment are available to them in the U.S. context to which they are primarily oriented. While portions of this field may survive (e.g., the field encompassing religious organizations in Spain and Argentina), it is likely that it will not persist in its current configuration. Simply put, as some of the players sit out of the religious game, no substitutes step in to keep the ball in play.

What can a case study tell us about transnational social fields more generally? Emigh (1997:657) notes that “generalizability may not be the best use of single case studies. Instead, the role of negative cases in developing the content of theory, not the range of its applicability, may be more important.” In this sense, the data presented suggest the need to further conceptualize the conditions affecting the durability of transnational fields. Focusing on the individual careers of organizational actors suggests a logic for understanding when transnational social fields are durable. Insofar as no social capital is at stake in a given field, one would expect that it will not persist. To the extent that children of immigrants no longer need these fields for the same purposes, they will fade or evolve into something very different. Children of immigrants can gain a sense of affiliation with their

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parents’ homeland, if they so desire, without maintaining the sorts of intensive ties found in transnational social fields. They can buy Argentine music in the United States, view the daily news on the Internet, correspond with friends and relatives, and buy ethnic foods without participating in such a field. This also suggests that while time- and space-compressing technologies may have qualitatively affected the experiences of newcomers relative to those of an older generation of migrants, that alone does not ensure the durability of transnational social fields. My findings recommend caution in making claims about the persistence of transnational social fields. A relatively short life span does not imply that a social phenomenon is unworthy of scholarly attention. Indeed, it may weigh on the future of immigrants in very consequential ways. I suggest merely that we consider the historical contingency of transnational phenomena (cf. Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001).

Notes
1. In previous work (Cook 2000), I recorded that the ICE purchased fifteen acres of land and began construction of a multifunctional church and community service complex. The first phase of the project was completed in September 1999.

2. According to Skidmore and Smith (1992), the demographic impact of this immigration was the greatest experienced by any country in the Western Hemisphere. Net immigration between 1857 and 1930 was about 3.5 million, and 60 percent of the total increase in population during this period could be attributed to immigration (Rock 1987). About 80 percent of the immigrants to Argentina came from Mediterranean countries; half were Italians, a quarter Spaniards, and the others Ottomans, Russians, French, Germans, and Portuguese. The causes of migration to Argentina were complex (Moya 1998, 2001) but included economic incentives and deliberate government recruitment in Europe. Early immigrants achieved swift social mobility. Immigrants after 1870 remained mostly proletarian (Recchini de Lattes and Lattes 1974; Rock 1987).

3. A significant proportion of Brethren leaders are lay rather than professional clergy. The only significant difference between professional clergy and the laity is a formal recognition by the congregation as an elder (worker). The person may or may not have specialized theological education and may or may not receive a steady salary. The Brethren believe that God provides for his workers on a day-to-day basis. The lay preachers mentioned here paid their own way and combined ministry with business trips. It is no coincidence that many of the Brethren’s most popular conference speakers are fairly affluent businessmen and executives.

4. Elsewhere (Cook 2001), I explore how these immigrants from Argentina recognized that their social classificatory “in-betweeness” placed them in an advantaged position from which to capture a portion of the emerging “Hispanic” religious market.

5. This is Brethren-speak for the official recognition of missionary status. “Commissioning” means that the congregation assumes the responsibility of providing financial and
spiritual support for the family (although no fixed amount of financial support is guaranteed).


7. This chapter makes only oblique reference to broader macrostructural factors that shaped the development of this transnational religious network. State migration policy is one such factor. The Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 and the 1991 U.S.-Argentina Agreement (by which Argentines could enter the United States without a visa) had a significant impact on the evolution of the transnational social field described here. Missionary leaders were able to enter Spain, Honduras, and Argentina because of the passports they held (generally dual Argentine-U.S. nationality). Thus, a final factor shaping the future of this transnational religious field will be whether the nation-states spanned by it decide to impose restrictive policies. The hard realities of state migration policies and their role in circumscribing the movement of people from the periphery to the core (see Zoelberg 1999) is one dimension that seems neglected in some portrayals of transnational phenomena.

References

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