



Article

Reconstructing Roots: Emotional Drivers of Migration and Identity

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Abstract: This study examines how emotions propel migration from the United States to Mexico and subsequent migration within Mexico for young deported migrants and migrants compelled to return. Though often relegated to a second tier of importance after political or economic factors, emotions are central to the decisions that young migrants make about where to live and how to identify. I argue that emotions influence young immigrants in the U.S. to make life changing decisions to return to Mexico at moments of acute stress or uncertainty. Additionally, I argue that both compelled and deported return migrants carve out spaces of belonging and construct identities through emotional labor. Specifically, I find that young returnees draw on memories from the U.S., connections with other returnees, and imagined attachments to their ancestral cultures in Mexico as they adopt proud Mexican identities in surroundings that often mark them as outsiders on both sides of the border.

Keywords: return migration; deportation; immigrant incorporation; 1.5-generation; Mexico

1. Introduction

Manuel moved with his parents to rural Virginia when he was 12 years old. Although he lacked authorized immigration status, he quickly felt comfortable in school where he was a star athlete and, once his English skills improved, a strong student. He had ambitions to continue his schooling after high school but could not afford to pay out-of-state tuition rates. He moved with his family to North Carolina where he began working in high-end restaurants while taking barista and sommelier classes. He also did translation work with the emergency medical system and in the court system. At the age of 23, he had a serious girlfriend and felt settled, well-integrated, and ready to plan a future in the U.S.

After drinking too much after a barista competition, however, he got into an altercation with a police officer and ended up in jail. He spent a month behind bars before he was transferred to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody, and ultimately deported. He felt desperately sad about being separated from his parents, siblings and girlfriend, but he was fortunate that he had maintained contact with his cousins and grandparents in Mexico. He thus had a comfortable place to land after being deported to Mexico. Reflecting on his current situation living in Mexico, he stated:

The best part of being here is that, well, in my case, the best part is that I'm back in my roots. I'm back taking the steps my grandparents left here for me. The tough part is that since I know how the life is in the US, sometimes it . . . puts that question mark in my head if I want to be here or if I want to be there. But my heart feels very well-fitted here.

Explaining how he cultivated a sense of belonging in Mexico, Manuel emphasized his renewed connections to his heritage and his ancestry. Moreover, he highlighted the role his emotions played in his adjustment to Mexico when he referenced his "heart". However, he also longed for the lifestyle and the people he left behind in the U.S.

Since returning to Mexico in 2012, he has married his girlfriend, a US citizen. They hope that they will be able to arrange for his return to the U.S. after his ten-year penalty



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has elapsed. In the meantime, she has visited him and his “heart”, though “well-fitted” in Mexico, has felt fractured across the border.

In this article, I explore the role that emotions play in the migration decisions and incorporation pathways of young return migrants. Relying primarily on interview data with individuals who spent their childhoods and/or adolescent years in the United States and then returned to Mexico during their late teens or twenties, I examine how emotions influenced painful decisions to make “pseudo-voluntary” returns to their country of birth rather than face the chronic stress of living without citizenship in the U.S. (Rodríguez-Cruz 2022). Subsequently, I examine how emotions influenced adaptation journeys and perceptions of national identity for both “pseudo-voluntary” and deported returnees in Mexico.

According to data from the 2010 Mexican census, 1.4 million Mexicans returned to Mexico between 2005 and 2010 (Passel et al. 2012). Return migration to Mexico nearly quadrupled between 2000 and 2010, with nearly 31% of Mexican migrants to the U.S. returning to their country of birth in 2010 (Masferrer et al. 2022). Moreover, return flows have dispersed to new geographic areas with younger, more educated and more female returnees ending up in border towns, tourist towns and large cities (Masferrer and Roberts 2012). Despite new trends in return migration flows, the experiences of return among 1.5-generation immigrants (Rumbaut 2004), or immigrants who arrived in their host countries as children, remain under-researched.

Like Manuel, young returnees confront complex emotions as they adapt to life in Mexico. Crossing borders is necessarily an emotional experience, as individuals leave behind the lives that they knew and embark on new beginnings, sometimes without warning and often without full agency over their journeys. Emotions that arise through migration emerge in political contexts of exclusion, stigmatization and “legal violence” (Menjívar and Abrego 2012). Taking into consideration the political weaponization of immigrants and the social stigma that emerges from that weaponization (Chavez 2008; Román 2013), I ask how emotions propel migration and influence identity and incorporation for young return migrants in Mexico.

Because they are so difficult to measure, emotions are often relegated to an afterthought in migration motivation research. Yet, emotions are inextricably intertwined with every stage of the migration process. Increasingly, researchers have emphasized the role that emotions play in immigrant and return incorporation (Aranda et al. 2022; Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Boccagni and Kivisto 2019; De Bree et al. 2010). I build on this literature as I examine how emotions influence the incorporation of young returnees who spent their childhoods and adolescent years in the United States. Specifically, I argue that young return immigrants draw on their memories and sustained emotional attachments to the U.S. as well as their heritage connections and peer networks of other returnees in Mexico to reconstruct their identities after returning to Mexico. Through their social and emotional connections, they make intentional choices about how to identify, and carve their own spaces of belonging within contexts that often relegate them to marginalized pockets in both the U.S. and Mexico regardless of immigration authorization or citizenship status.

2. Emotion and Migration Motivations

Historically, most theories of migration motivations have emphasized rational choice models that place economics at the forefront of decision making, relegating emotions to an afterthought (Massey and Espinosa 1997; Stark and Bloom 1985). Theories of return migration have also prioritized economics and earnings potential, characterizing return as a result of failed migration or as a final move for permanent settlement after migrants have surpassed their prime working and earning years (Cassarino 2004; Durand 2004; Gmelch 1980; Massey et al. 1987). These theories downplay how powerful emotions can be in motivating migration journeys.

Although economics and rational choice reasoning remain a focus of migration research, migration research (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Carling and Collins 2018; Mai and

King 2009), psychology research (Bagozzi et al. 1998; Perugini and Bagozzi 2001) and economics research (Lerner et al. 2015; Loewenstein et al. 2001) have increasingly emphasized the central role of emotions in decision making. Specifically, integral emotion, or “a type of emotion that strongly and routinely shapes decision making”, such as feelings of anxiety or fear that arise at a moment of choice, may guide individuals toward options perceived as safer (Lerner et al. 2015, p. 802). Additionally, anticipated emotions, or expectations about anticipated fear, frustration, anxiety and joy play large roles in what decisions individuals make both leading up to and at the moment of choice (Bagozzi et al. 2003). Although previous research has stressed the important role that negative emotions play in influencing human behavior, particularly at moments of uncertainty (Loewenstein 2000), both positive and negative anticipated emotions can influence decisions (Bagozzi et al. 1998, 2003).

Applying emotion research to migration research is both instructive and complex. Research on emotion and decision making tends to favor individual-level decisions based on clear choices that can be reproduced or tested in experimental models; however, decisions to migrate or return extend over time. Previous research has highlighted the way that decisions to migrate are influenced by “perceptions of expected migration outcomes [that] have functional and cognitive-emotional attributes” (Czaika et al. 2021, p. 20). In other words, potential migrants weigh the expected outcomes and long-term benefits of migration against the potential emotional risks of the journey and of residing in a new place. Feelings about potential migrations, moreover, may change over time as potential migrants gain more information about political, social and economic contexts and imagine new potential outcomes of their migration decisions (Carling and Collins 2018; Czaika et al. 2021).

Shifting political atmospheres help shape migration and return decisions as host nations become more or less hospitable to unauthorized immigrants. Thus, the choice to leave or stay, which is already present in the daily lives of unauthorized immigrants, comes into clearer focus as the anxiety of “deportability” (De Genova 2002) and fear of family separation (Dreby 2015) come into sharper focus or fade into the background. As previous research about “affective mobilities” indicates, “possibility-reducing emotions such as anger, fear and despair, and possibility-enhancing ones like hope, anxiety and wonder” can either trigger or impede migration (Glaveanu and Womersley 2021, p. 629). Emotions such as fear and despair often arise in response to hostile political contexts with high levels of surveillance and immigrant enforcement. In contrast, hope can motivate migration as individuals imagine futures of economic security and intergenerational mobility.

For 1.5-generation immigrants in the U.S., the choice to stay to return to their country of birth may feel like a distant or even hypothetical thought exercise that arises while pondering how life would be different if their parents had not moved to the U.S. However, the choice may come into clearer focus at particular crossroads, such as those immediately following high school graduation or after seeing the deportation of a close contact (Silver 2018a; Gonzales 2016). At these moments, integral emotions such as devastation at the deportation of a family member or frustration arising from blocked opportunities may push young immigrants to return to their country of birth. In other words, emotions related to migration can be influenced by a constellation of factors, including the local and national climates of immigration enforcement, economic pressures and life stages of transition.

Previous research has emphasized the way that emotions can both enhance or effectively block economic drivers of migration (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Mai and King 2009). In one of the clearest examples of intersecting emotional and economic motivators of migration, researchers have vividly described the sense of obligation and love pushing parents, and particularly mothers, to migrate in order to provide a better life for their children who remain in their countries of origin (Dreby 2010; Parreñas 2001; Schmalzbauer 2005). In these cases, economic drivers of migration cannot be parsed out or analyzed separately from emotional drivers of migration. Likewise, journeys of return migration are often motivated by intersecting emotional, political and financial motivators.

3. Emotions of Incorporation and Identity

Just as emotions play a large role in determining if, when, where and for how long migrants will reside in one place before returning home or engaging in a secondary migration, they also powerfully influence journeys of incorporation. Research has historically emphasized labor market outcomes and institutional access as markers of return incorporation (Cassarino 2004; Gmelch 1980). Although economic markers of incorporation and mobility are of course central to measuring integration, they do not map seamlessly on to feelings of belonging. Instead, emotions of incorporation respond to various social, economic, and political contexts that influence how immigrants and return migrants feel and construct identities of membership in new surroundings.

There is widespread agreement in sociological research that emotions are inherently social and intertwined with culture and laws (Bericat 2016). In immigration research specifically, migrants' emotions are seen to be influenced by local communities, national laws and surrounding cultures, but they also stretch across two or more nation states and permeate transnational social spaces (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015). Migrants' emotions emerge in response to both geographic movements and family separations, and against backdrops of policies that have the capacity to violently exclude or remove them from one country and forcibly send them to another.

In political contexts that label immigrants as unwanted outsiders, young immigrants can feel trapped without a clear sense of national identity or homeland. In her acclaimed book *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa (1987) draws on her own experience growing up along the U.S./Mexican border to highlight the exclusionary intent of borders. She explains that "a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary . . . The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants" (p. 25). She thus identifies borderlands as both physical boundaries that have been given social and political meanings, but also as emotional spaces where inhabitants exist in-between defined nations or categories of insiders. For immigrants and returnees, emotional borderlands remain ever-present in their journeys of incorporation and identity formation.

For example, research about young undocumented immigrants, has highlighted an ambivalence about adopting an American identity, in spite of strong commitments to American cultural values, as young immigrants nonetheless feel rejected by laws that exclude them from full membership in the country they know best (Aranda et al. 2015). While in the U.S., young immigrants who grew up around their U.S. born peers and traversed the U.S. school system feel cultural attachments to their communities of residence. Yet, as they emerge into early adulthood, they increasingly realize that their opportunities for continued advancement are blocked (Abrego 2006; Cebulko 2013; Gonzales 2016; Silver 2018a). Thus, even as they maintain strong social and cultural attachments to the U.S., they simultaneously experience anger, sadness and frustration as they confront political exclusion (Aranda et al. 2015; Vaquera et al. 2017). Thus, undocumented immigrants who have grown up in the U.S. experience the "coexistence of opposing emotional and cognitive orientations" (Boccagni and Kivisto 2019, p. 6) toward their countries of residence and origin as they try to make sense of where they belong.

Research about immigration adaptation has emphasized the way that emotional ambivalence can endure indefinitely (Boccagni and Kivisto 2019; Kivisto and La Vecchia-Mikkola 2015). For example, in their study of young immigrants in the U.S., Patler and Pirtle (2018) illustrate how beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy experienced improved psychological wellbeing, including less stress and anxiety (Patler and Pirtle 2018). Thus, a political shift aligned with an emotional shift for young immigrants who suddenly became better incorporated with the acquisition of DACA. However, when the policy was rescinded in 2017 and threatened thereafter, beneficiaries experienced a loss of "ontological security", or confidence in the predictability and consistency of their surroundings, which brought on negative emotions, such as stress and grief, and impeded their incorporation journeys anew (Aranda et al. 2022).

Beyond policies, local communities can also impact migrants' feelings of belonging through reactions to influxes of immigrants or returnees. Previous research suggests that there is an "interplay between migrant and local emotions . . . through empathy (or its lack) and anticipation of the reaction of others (Glaveanu and Womersley 2021, p. 634). In other words, as immigrants anticipate how the local community will receive them their emotions are triggered, which can in turn trigger local emotions in a cyclical manner. Thus immigrants, and presumably young returnees, must construct their identities in uncomfortable borderlands (Anzaldúa 1987) where they see themselves through the often unwelcoming eyes of surrounding community members.

As immigrants respond to evolving social and political surroundings, their identities also shift. Previous research has shown how identity shifts that emerge through the process of migration are necessarily emotional transformations as migrants respond to a "psychological moving back and forth between here and there, between past and present, followed by an effort to develop a sense of belonging in the new homeland" (Kivisto and La Vecchia-Mikkola 2015, p. 91). In their examination of the incorporation of Iraqi immigrants in Finland and Italy, for example, Kivisto and La Vecchia-Mikkola note how Iraqi immigrants in both settings engaged in identity-work to distance themselves from negative stereotypes about Iraqi immigrants, and to embrace various aspects of the host cultures. They stress that identity-work is emotion-work that is characterized by a dual ambivalence toward both origin and residence countries.

Applying a similar lens to return migration reveals that young migrants who grew up in the U.S. undergo similar ambivalence and identity transitions as they navigate the emotional journey of incorporation in their country of birth. Emotional responses to return migration often emerge in contexts of social discrimination. For example, young returnees and U.S.-born children of immigrants in Mexico report hostility from peers and teachers in Mexican schools (Kasun and Pablo 2021; Medina and Menjívar 2015; Zúñiga and Hamann 2009). Additionally, young deported and compelled returnees often experience social exclusion, labor market discrimination and criminalization upon return to Mexico (Anderson 2015; Boehm 2016; Caldwell 2019; Hagan et al. 2011; Hernández-León et al. 2020; Sarabia 2017; Silver 2018b; Wheatley 2011). Thus, feelings of isolation and displacement are common among young returnees who grew up in the U.S., especially when their initial returns are still recent.

Despite widespread emotions of frustration, sadness and anger, young returnees have also demonstrated resilience and worked together to establish spaces of inclusion. Jacobo and Despaigne (2022) identify the formation of bicultural peer networks as a "resistance strategy" for returnees who characterize their shared identity as returnees and their shared language of "Spanglish" as new ways of being Mexican. Even if they are stigmatized or rejected as true Mexicans by their Mexican families or peers, they find their own sense of membership with each other.

Strategies of resistance, such as the formation of peer networks, illustrate how migrant communities can become spaces of membership as young returnees remain psychologically engaged in a "diaspora consciousness" (Vertovec 1999) with simultaneous attachments to both Mexico and the U.S. These transnational communities of belonging may be crucial for the well-being of young returnees. Indeed, previous research has illustrated that return migrants with little agency over their decisions to return struggle to find a sense of belonging, particularly when they lack opportunities to engage in transnational practices, such as speaking the language of their former country of residence (De Bree et al. 2010). Thus, transnational engagement with local social networks of returnees may help foster feelings of belonging and emotional wellbeing in surroundings that can often be unwelcoming.

4. Data and Methods

I, along with one graduate student, collected the bulk of the data for this article in Mexico during the spring of 2015 and summer of 2018. I focused data collection on large cities and tourist destinations where recent return migrants have concentrated (Masferrer

and Roberts 2012; Escobar Latapí and Masferrer 2022). I recruited interviewees by targeting industries, such as call centers, restaurants and hotels serving English-speaking patrons. From these initial contacts, I utilized snowball sampling to recruit additional interviewees. I conducted 46 semi-structured in-depth interviews with young adult return migrants, and three with U.S.-born citizens of Mexican heritage. Previous research about return migration has also included U.S.-born migrants, noting that the migration of U.S.-born individuals to Mexico is strongly related to return migration as many of these U.S.-born migrants are children of Mexican nationals (Masferrer et al. 2022).

Interviews took place in eight different locations in Mexico, including the urban cities of Guadalajara, Mexico City, and Toluca, the colonial cities of San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, and Tlaquepaque, the beach resort of Sayulita, and one other colonial town that the respondent preferred to remain unnamed. Interviewees also discussed their experiences in other destinations such as Cancún and Los Cabos. In cities (n = 31), most interviewees worked in call centers where they used English daily, serving clients of American companies such as T-Mobile, American Express, and HP. In areas with bustling tourism industries (n = 18), most returnees worked in restaurants or hotels catering to English-speaking patrons.

In total, I interviewed 17 women and 32 men. The mean age of the research participants was 26.5 years old. Respondents had spent an average of 13 years in the United States, and an average of six years in Mexico since returning. Reasons for return varied widely among respondents, but the vast majority were either forced or compelled to return. Most compelled returnees (n = 34) left the US in their late teens or early twenties due to family reasons, such as family member deportation, family obligations in Mexico, or due to fear of deportation or a frustration with the lack of opportunity. Most of the deported returnees (n = 13) left in their twenties and were apprehended either in routine traffic stops or as a result of minor traffic violations or on criminal charges related to drugs or guns. Two returnees described their returns as purely “voluntary”.

Interviews lasted from 40 min to nearly four hours, with most lasting about 90 min. Participants discussed their experiences with immigration enforcement in the U.S., family life, work and school experiences, feelings of belonging, decisions to return to Mexico, first impressions upon return, challenges to incorporation over time, national identity, and plans or experiences remigrating to the U.S. I analyzed interviews by coding for traditional indicators of immigrant incorporation, including occupational and educational trajectories, as well as sentiments of belonging and feelings of comfort in both the U.S. and Mexico. Codes about emotional connections to ancestral heritage cultures and evolving understandings of the influences of racism and discrimination in the U.S. over emotions and pathways of incorporation in Mexico emerged inductively through discussions about adaptation after return and desires to move back to the U.S. Additionally, although I anticipated discussing feelings of belonging, the centrality of emotions as drivers of movement both across and within borders emerged inductively as a theme throughout the interview process.

5. Deciding to Leave, Deciding to Settle: Emotional Impetuses

Young adults who spend most of their childhood and teenage years in the U.S. rarely set out to return “home” to a country that they may not remember well and where they have few attachments. However, as they leave the relative protection of childhood, many begin to imagine how their lives would be different if they returned to the place where they were born. Confronted with blocked opportunities due to lack of immigration authorization, many consider moving to the countries where they have citizenship. Enrique, who grew up in Portland, Oregon recalls how years of frustration finally boiled over and propelled him back to Mexico:

I actually wanted to study and do something . . . I just couldn't get a good job without a Social Security number, so I just didn't want to work like that anymore. I was working as a supervisor at Toys-R-Us and they just kept asking me for proof of my social, and I just felt nervous with them asking questions so I just

quit. Then I started working with my mom cleaning offices, but it just wasn't paying any money—like my mom would get the paycheck and she would give me half and then I felt bad taking half the money so I just got desperate, and I was like, I'm going back to Mexico.

As outlined in previous research (Loewenstein 2000), a constellation of negative emotions at this acute moment of uncertainty led Enrique to make the decision to return to Mexico rather than confront what appeared like ever narrowing options for his future. These negative emotions were, for Enrique, “possibility-reducing emotions” (Glaveanu and Womersley 2021) that made him feel as though he was out of options in the U.S. These emotions emerged in a context of mounting immigration enforcement that inhibited his labor market opportunities. Thus, both political and economic circumstances incited an emotional response that set in motion his return.

Enrique's journey to Mexico was motivated by a combination of anxiety, guilt and desperate frustration at his limited options. These emotions were not sudden, but they built to a breaking point. He could not pinpoint the exact moment he made the decision, but he felt the move was possible as he had maintained connections with his cousins and grandparents in Mexico. Despite these connections, he did not return with a plan.

When Enrique arrived in Mexico, he felt shocked and began to second guess himself. He moved in with his grandfather and an aunt, but they put a lot of pressure on him to “grow up and not depend on them”. They told him that with his English he could get a job at a call center, so after about three months of living with his family in a small town on the outskirts of Guadalajara, he applied for a job at TeleTech, a large technology-based customer service company contracting with various corporations. He got the job on the spot. The commute was long, and he missed his lifestyle from the U.S., so after he saved some money, he decided to move into the city where he felt more comfortable. He lived with roommates from work, enjoyed going to clubs and bars, and felt he could be more open about his sexuality. Boredom and discomfort in a small community pushed him to a secondary migration once in Mexico. He continued to second guess his decision to return to Mexico and he missed his family dearly but living in a large cosmopolitan city gave him the opportunity to forge close friendships with other returnees and engage in an active social life.

Enrique was one of several young returnees to move, or at least commute long distances, from their extended family's hometowns into more touristy or cosmopolitan settings where they felt more comfortable. Many returnees noted that they felt surveilled and isolated prior to moving, and thus felt compelled to move again, even if moving meant striking out on their own in an unfamiliar country. For example, after getting deported Emiliano described how he searched for surroundings that would allow him to capture some of the familiarity of Chicago in Mexico. He explained:

My grandparents live in the jungle . . . and there's nothing, so I couldn't live there . . . I went to Cancún and I got discriminated there because, you know, they're like, 'What are you doing? Go back to the States!' . . . I was just lost. I thought Cancún was like the States. You know, I'm like, oh, I'm going to fit right in. But once you leave the tourism site, you don't fit in anymore . . . They were kind of discriminating because they're like, 'What are you doing here? You're not from around here. You should leave' . . . 'You're taking away our jobs'. I'm like, well, it's not like that, man. I got deported. I'm a Mexican, you know, I was actually born here.

Emiliano's move to Cancún was precipitated by “anticipated emotions” of imagined comfort and joy (Bagozzi et al. 2003). In appraising what his life would be like in Cancún, Emiliano imagined that he would recapture a sense of home away from home. And although he felt comfortable in the tourist zone, that feeling of familiarity dissipated once he moved to the outskirts of town where he could afford the rent. The disappointment he felt at being cast as an outsider made it impossible for him to stay. Just as previous research

describes how immigrants respond emotionally to discrimination from the local community (Glaveanu and Womersley 2021), Emiliano explained why he left by emphasizing the social exclusion he felt in Cancún.

After Emiliano left Cancún, he moved to Mexico City and began working in call centers. Although he appreciated the friends he made there, he detested the “exploitative” call center work. Moreover, he noted that he felt judged every time he got on the subway due to his baggy clothes, and every time he spoke English or Spanish because of his accent. He felt lonely and homesick and, although he was “trying to adapt”, his main goal was to return to the U.S. to unite with his children whom he missed terribly.

While Emiliano was forcibly taken away from his children when he was deported, other parents chose to temporarily separate from their children in the hopes of providing a better life for them. For example, Sara decided to send her one-year-old daughter to Mexico with her mother, who had been helping care for the baby in the U.S., when her mother returned to Mexico to care for Sara’s grandmother after she had a stroke. Sara took advantage of the arrangement to double up on restaurant shifts in Nevada and save money while searching for another trustworthy caregiver. She attempted to get her U.S.-born daughter a passport and had arranged for her uncle to bring the baby across the border, but his plans kept falling through. When her uncle delayed his trip to the border yet again, Sara made a spur of the moment decision to return to Mexico as she could not bear the thought of missing her second birthday.

She explained, “I promised I was going to be with her on her birthday, and so I freaked out. I got all my stuff together the same day he told me he couldn’t [bring her up]. I put everything in a bag and I’m gone. I just came down with like \$200 in my pocket which is basically almost nothing, and I was with my daughter on her 2nd birthday”. Sara was only 22 years old when she made the decision to get on a bus from Reno to reunite with her daughter in Mexico. Her “integral emotions” (Lerner et al. 2015) of anger and disappointment arose at the moment of choice to either reunite with her daughter on her second birthday or endure an unexpectedly prolonged separation. Because Sara was “big on promises” and she knew that her daughter would only turn two once, she made an emotional decision to return to Mexico. Although she wanted to move back to Nevada, she felt more comfortable remaining in Mexico than risking her life or her freedom attempting to cross the border.

Sara’s fear stopped her from remigrating to the U.S., but she moved within Mexico for both economic and emotional reasons. She struggled to make ends meet through the agricultural labor she was doing in her mother’s small, rural hometown. Moreover, she felt judged for her style of dress and U.S. upbringing. So, after two years, she moved to the small beach resort of Sayulita where she felt she could wear what she wanted, drink alcohol, and have a boyfriend without feeling judged. Although she continued to long for the “easy money” and her family members in the U.S., she nonetheless felt far more relaxed in familiar cultural surroundings where “everybody [was] used to all the tourists”.

6. Deciding to Be Mexican: Emotions and Identity

Just as emotions pushed young returnees to move to and within Mexico, emotions also dictated how young return migrants identified. Upon first returning to Mexico most felt immediately out of place and often longed for the U.S. As Belinda stated:

I mean I knew I was born here. So it was like okay, I’m returning to where I’m originally from, but so many years over there, it was just it was a weird feeling knowing like I’m from here, but I don’t feel like I’m from here. But at the same time, I also was ready for a change . . . [from] the bullying over there. And, like, in some way, I felt like I never really belonged. So it was weird the feeling of like returning, but not returning.

Despite feeling stuck in an uncertain borderland, most returnees moved toward embracing Mexican identities as they aimed to establish a sense of home in the country where they “belonged”, at least according to their citizenship status.

Importantly, identity shifts did not occur simply as a result of becoming more accustomed to life in Mexico, learning Spanish, or becoming integrated in the labor market. Instead, their identity shifts were constructed through emotional identity-work, similar to the work described by [Kivisto and La Vecchia-Mikkola \(2015\)](#) in their study of Iraqi immigrants in Finland and Italy. Moreover, shifts in identity did not necessarily follow an easing of emotional hardships as returnees adjusted to life in Mexico over time. By contrast, returnees intentionally engaged in identity-work, even as they grappled with the emotional hardships of return.

For example, Emiliano desperately yearned to return to the U.S. Yet, he identified as Mexican both because he was born there and because his deportation forced him to remain there. He explained:

I actually found myself to be the person who I guess I really am here, which is Mexican. The United States is an immigrant country so I have to realize that my family—my mother, my father—are Mexicans. They're born here. They grew up here. My grandfathers are here. I mean, we've only gone as far as living in the States like for me and beyond, because when my dad and my mom grew up here, their childhood was here. Mine wasn't, but I guess if I want to live the rest of my life here, I can live here and be proud of it.

Noting the emotional borderland ([Anzaldúa 1987](#)) that he straddled between his heritage and his upbringing, Emiliano, like Manuel at the start of the article, linked his own identity to his bloodline. Thus, his own sense of ambivalence about his identity involved a psychological journey between the U.S. and Mexico, but also between his ancestral past and his imagined future. He thus extended the “psychological moving back and forth between here and there, between past and present” ([Kivisto and La Vecchia-Mikkola 2015](#), p. 91) into spaces that he himself had not traversed, but to which he connected emotionally. Emiliano referenced his grandfathers and his parents as he made a choice to be proud of his Mexican identity. This choice was a strategy to prepare to live the rest of his life in Mexico, even as Mexicans told him to “go back to the States”. Facing social rejection, the emotional labor that he enacted to celebrate his Mexican identity was a constant choice that he committed to making under the pressure of emotionally trying circumstances.

Like Emiliano, the majority of returnees in this study commented that the discrimination they felt upon returning to Mexico made them feel dejected and isolated, at least at first. Almost every returnee had a story about getting chastised for speaking English in public or speaking Spanish poorly. Many noted that these experiences pushed them into marginalized pockets where they relied on each other to create a sense of community. For example, Estella, who had returned to Guadalajara seven years prior, when her father was deported, noted that she met all her friends at the call center. Enrique explained that it was “hard for [him] to make friends that [didn't] speak English and then invite them over to be with [his] friends because they get so offended” Yolanda, who had returned to Guadalajara when her father was deported five years prior, echoed, “it's just that we're so used to speaking English, but I mean we'll get yelled at like on the street”.

Beyond linguistic tensions that evoked anger and discomfort in the surrounding community, returnees discussed facing social stigmas as well. Most of the men noted feeling criminalized by passersby or by police who assumed that they had been deported for gang or drug activity in the U.S. Multiple women commented that people made assumptions about their morals or promiscuity since they had been raised in the U.S. In recounting these stories, returnees engaged in “distancing strategies” ([Kivisto and La Vecchia-Mikkola 2015](#); [Snow and Anderson 1987](#)) to differentiate themselves from these stereotypes.

For example, Rodrigo, who was deported for drug-related offenses, spoke with anger in his voice when he recounted how he was forced to defend himself against negative judgements, saying:

I was at a friend's house and I started getting offended because he started stereotyping me, thinking I was just like everybody else that comes from the States . . .

And he started barking at me, and I was like, “No you’re wrong . . . if only you knew how much things I hate about over there, you would know my position. But don’t judge me if you have an experience, because how many times have you gotten into a fight just for being a Mexican? How many times? You know, who are you going to fight with about that over here? Another Mexican? But ask me how many times in high school and junior high that I got into a fight with a Black kid or White kid just because I was Mexican for some racist slurs? . . . Don’t talk to me about being proud of being Mexican. Who are you going to be proud with?”

Rodrigo’s experiences being stigmatized for his immigrant background at times erupted into anger and fights. These interactions reflected the emotional interplay between local and migrant communities that shaped how returnees formed their identities in hostile settings (Glaveanu and Womersley 2021). Moreover, the stigma and ensuing anger described by Rodrigo reflected how emotional borderlands experienced in the U.S. (Anzaldúa 1987) also bridged transnational spaces, shaping Rodrigo’s experience in Mexico as well.

Rodrigo explained that he was proud to be from Mexico when he was in the U.S., largely in reaction to the racism and microaggressions that permeated his daily life there. He was disheartened to feel judged in Mexico as well, and while he maintained pride in his national identity, he noted that he often felt isolated, socializing primarily with other returnees that he met through call center work. He explained, “I don’t like people turning around and telling me you’re in Mexico when I’m f***** talking in English . . . It has nothing to do with them. They just get offended, and I get mad, so to avoid that I just don’t talk . . . I guess I stay to myself a lot. That’s why I talk to [other deported and compelled returnees who worked in the call center]”. Around his peers who did not judge him for his use of English, tattoos or style of dress he found a sense of belonging.

Rodrigo described hostility in social settings, but others battled stereotypes in institutional settings as well. For example, Gloria, who returned to San Miguel when her father decided to bring the family back to Mexico, recalled being singled out by her English teacher in her final year of high school after living in in the U.S. since elementary school. She explained how their superior English pronunciation skills led to clashes in the classroom, stating, “Being teenagers and imprudent we would correct [the teacher] when he made a mistake. And he didn’t appreciate that . . . so he kicked me out of class . . . Even though I spoke English I could flunk the class if he put more grammar into the test than actually speaking the language. So, I had to learn the grammar in order to pass his class while being kicked out of class most of the time”.

Gloria realized that the teacher’s treatment toward her could have easily interfered with her progress in school, and she had to work extra hard to learn grammar rules on her own as she was so often removed from the classroom. Gloria’s experience was not unusual. Students in both high school and university complained that both peers and teachers discriminated against them, with one noting that his professor repeatedly called him “stupid” and another emphasizing that the “bullying” he received from both peers and teachers in junior high school led him to change his personality entirely.

Enrique explained how scarring the experience was when his parents decided to return to Mexico for his middle school so he would not lose his Spanish language skills in the U.S. He recalled, “My Spanish was so bad. I would get picked on because of it. They would call me the little gringo. Even teachers would pick on me. In elementary school I was like the popular kid, but then when we moved to Mexico everyone was picking on me, and I thought, this isn’t fun. This isn’t cool so . . . I didn’t really talk to anyone and I think I kind of isolated myself”. Enrique moved back to the U.S. for high school, and even after five years in Mexico as a young adult, he continued to feel far more comfortable with English. Although he had hoped to pursue higher education in Mexico, he felt that his Spanish was still not good enough to enter university. Thus, the mobility pathways that had been blocked to him in the U.S. due to documentation status remained blocked to him

in Mexico due to language skills. Both affected him emotionally as he struggled with a sense of frustrating paralysis due to either legal exclusion in the U.S. or linguistic and social exclusion in Mexico.

The experiences of returning youth in Mexican schools echoed experiences that some had in U.S. schools. For example, Oscar described how his calculus teacher in North Carolina had punished him for speaking Spanish in class. He explained, “she said ‘Y’all don’t need to be speaking Spanish in this class!’ And she kicked me out of the class . . . I said ‘why is she telling me not to speak Spanish when I’m Spanish? This is my language’ . . . She gave me an F . . . So when I got here to Pueblo they said ‘but you have an F, and if you want to get into school you have to take this to the government office’.” Oscar had returned to Mexico in 2009 out of fear of deportation as immigration enforcement in North Carolina heightened to what felt like near suffocating levels to him. However, he could not just leave the pain of discrimination and surveillance behind him. Like Gloria’s experience with her teacher in Mexico, Oscar’s treatment by his teacher in the U.S. had the potential to affect his long-term educational outcomes. Although Oscar was able to find someone who was willing to doctor his transcript for a fee, allowing him to enroll in college in Mexico without redoing credits, the experience continued to haunt him emotionally, triggering feelings of anger every time he spoke of it.

Like Oscar, nearly all of the returnees in this study recalled experiences with racism or surveillance in the U.S. For many, their decisions to embrace Mexican identities were borne out of memories of exclusion in the U.S. that crystalized in Mexico. However, they continued to struggle to find a robust sense of membership in Mexico as well. Despite feelings of displacement and social exclusion upon return, they all noted the relief they felt from finally living in a country where they had citizenship.

The juxtaposition between the chronic anxiety returnees felt in the U.S. to the feelings of security that came with having citizenship status clearly illustrated the link between the political context and emotions and identity. As Estella neatly summarized, “When we were over there we didn’t have any papers, so if we would see a cop I would panic and be like ‘What if they ask me for this? What if they asked me for that? I don’t want to be deported!’ So here it’s just like, do what you want to do. I’m in my country”. The comfort of living with citizenship, and the knowledge that that citizenship came from generations of family that built roots in Mexico, lead returnees to embrace their Mexican identities.

7. Conclusions

As the data in this article illustrate, migrants’ decisions about where to live, when to move, and how to identify once there are all deeply intertwined with emotions. Far from being private matters of the heart, emotions emerged from within contentious transnational political and social climates that often criminalized immigrants as morally corrupt outsiders in both the U.S. and Mexico. In both locations, the individuals in this study emphasized the emotional ambivalence characterizing their experiences with political and social exclusion in the U.S. and social and cultural exclusion in Mexico. Yet, they also emphasized deep rooted attachments to both the U.S., where they were raised, and to Mexico, where they could claim citizenship and trace their heritage.

As they discussed their political exclusion in the U.S., they recalled feelings of anxiety and “ontological insecurity” (Aranda et al. 2022; Vaquera et al. 2017) that permeated their daily lives. They explained that surveillance, discrimination and racism in the U.S. brought on negative emotions that in some cases propelled them to return to their country of birth. As they discussed their reasons for return women were more likely to discuss family member deportation, while men were more likely to have experienced deportation or left out of a fear of deportation or frustration with limited options for employment. Of course, feelings of powerlessness, frustration and fear are wide-spread among young undocumented immigrants in the U.S., and while many consider returning to their countries of origin, only a minority of young 1.5-generation immigrants actually do. While these data suggest that family member deportation, family connections in Mexico, life transitions

or phases of uncertainty, and acute moments of frustration are central to decisions to return, more research is needed to better understand why emotions push some to return and not others.

Just as emotions pushed some to return to Mexico, they again emerged as central to discussions of identity. As returnees recalled their political and social exclusion in the U.S., they engaged in intentional and emotional identity-work to emphasize their own membership in Mexico, and to distance themselves from negative stereotypes of other immigrants. Their political membership in Mexico, via their status as citizens, illuminated a pathway for them to claim a Mexican identity. For some, claiming a Mexican identity was a coping mechanism, helping them to come to terms with the circumstances of their lives after deportation or compelled return.

While the political context gave them access to citizenship, they justified their Mexican identities as more than just a technicality as they described emotional connections to their parents and grandparents. Their Mexican heritage carried emotional weight as they imagined walking in their grandparents' footsteps and rediscovering the roots that had been planted for them in their country of birth. Many referenced these roots as a point of pride, even as they contended with social discrimination and feelings of ostracization in Mexico. Moreover, their daily lives were no longer marked with a chronic fear of deportation. Thus, despite the anger and hopelessness that many felt at being deported or compelled to move to Mexico, their political membership allowed them to construct proud Mexican identities which helped them accept Mexico as their home.

As returnees shifted their understandings of self and national identity, their memories of political exclusion and social discrimination in the U.S. affected how they carved out spaces of belonging in Mexico and crafted their identities as Mexicans. They expressed relief at their ability to move freely without worrying about immigration enforcement, and they experienced renewed anger at the discrimination they experienced in the U.S. Although they lamented the social discrimination they continued to experience at school and in public spaces in Mexico, they relied on each other to create spaces of membership and comfort. For returnees in touristy areas, their surroundings offered cultural familiarity, where returnees felt more comfortable speaking English and dressing in U.S. fashions without feeling judged or surveilled. For returnees in cosmopolitan areas, large call center industries, though not necessarily conducive to satisfying work experiences, offered returnees connections to large social networks of returnees who shared similar experiences.

Returnees highlighted their peer networks as pivotal in helping them find spaces of membership in often isolating and exclusionary contexts. These peer networks, most of which were formed organically through work in call centers or tourist-serving industries, highlight a need for more formalized support groups. Social support groups for both compelled and deported returnees would help to combat isolation and help create communities of mutual understanding.

Although both governmental and privately run organizations are working to improve reintegration experiences for returning migrants (Ruiz Soto et al. 2019), few returnees in this study had heard of or participated in either government-run or private support programs. Thus, more outreach to young returnees as well as more widespread public campaigns and training to combat negative stereotypes of returning migrants would help to ease some of the social tensions that inhibit the incorporation of young returnees in Mexico. Moreover, more accessible mental health services that specifically acknowledge the emotional costs of return migration for young people who grew up in the U.S. would help equip young returnees with the necessary resources to cope with the adjustments to their life after their return. Services could be attached to schools or advertised in large cosmopolitan call centers which often serve as the first stop for young returnees. Although political membership allowed young returnees to claim Mexican identities, most continue to feel deeply ambivalent about their return, due to their social exclusion in Mexico as well as the lingering scars of racism in the U.S. Without the resources to address these issues,

most continued to battle feelings of anger, rejection and loneliness even as they relied on each other to cope.

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