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# Dreams sin Fronteras: Exploring the Lives and Experiences of Five Returned Migrants in Mexico

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*Dreams sin Fronteras:*

*Exploring the Lives and Experiences of Five Returned Migrants in Mexico.*

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER IN MIGRATION STUDIES

by **Andrea Portillo**

**May 10, 2018**

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this thesis project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

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***Abstract:***

Due to an unprecedented number of deportations in the last decade, coupled with a recent fall in net migration from Mexico, return migration from the United States to Mexico has made its way to the forefront of the immigration discourse. This article uses the experiences of five Mexican migrants who have returned to Mexico, “voluntarily” or through deportation proceedings, to argue that the stories and experiences of returned migrants can provide insight into the challenges/successes of life post-return. In doing so, this article draws parallels between the personal experiences of these five returnees and the broader discourse on return migration, to highlight the significance that eliminating policies like DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) can have for the undocumented community within the United States. The experiences shared by returnees highlighted that upon return, many struggled to “reintegrate” into Mexican society, grappled with financial instability but managed to further their education, and in general remained hopeful of their futures. These findings, suggest that while life for returnees is difficult, many continue to strive to achieve the same dreams they have been working toward.

***Introduction:***

Migration has always been integral to the relationship and history of both the United States and Mexico. Return migration, though always present, has most recently become a focus within the immigration discourse, as net migration from Mexico fell below zero in 2015 (more Mexicans were returning to Mexico than were migrating to the United States) (*Pew Hispanic Center 2015*). Many returnees find themselves back in Mexico as a result of deportation while others have returned “voluntarily” or through “self-deportation”. As we will see from the literature below, anti-migrant policies, the criminalization of migrants and the recent increase in deportations cause us to question whether people’s decisions to return are in fact “voluntary”. While there are many other factors that influence return migration, the focus of this research is not to provide an analysis of the theoretical approaches to return migration or an in-depth history of return migration from the United States to Mexico. The aim of this article is to provide insight

into the lives of five “returnees” in order to answer the following question: *How are return migrants navigating the cultural, financial, social and emotional nuances of life back in Mexico?*

Interviewing returnees on their experiences will not only shed light on the reasons/ decisions of their return but will also provide insight into what life is like post return. The more recent phasing out of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) announced on September 5, 2017 by the Trump administration, and the overall anti-migrant rhetoric within the U.S. makes the experiences of these five returnees extremely timely and important. These narratives will shed light on life in Mexico post-return as well as on Mexico’s response to the more recent influx of return migrants.

While much is written in regard to the demographic and characteristics of those that return, little has been written regarding the experiences of returnees once back in Mexico (Hazan 2014). Researcher and activist Jill Anderson, wrote a ground-breaking ethnography (Los Otros Dreamers 2015) of the lives of those who return shedding light on their experiences and the lack of support that these youth receive once in Mexico. This article expands on this analysis and pushes the conversation further. Before diving into the experiences of the five returnees I will begin by providing context on return migration to Mexico, a brief overview of DACA, and finally Mexico’s response to return migration.

### ***Literature Review:***

#### *Return Migration to Mexico:*

Return migration to Mexico, while always present, has been scorned by instances of forced removals and mass deportations. Mass waves of deportation were seen at the end of the Great Depression, the Bracero Program, and more recently under the Obama administration, in which two million people were deported in the span of six years (Latapí 2016). Anti-immigrant laws and policies have also played a leading role in the deportation and return of Mexican migrants and their families. Laws like the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRAIRA) which instituted expedited removal and interior repatriation. The creation of the Department of Homeland Security, the implementation of the Immigration Nationality Act (INA), the Secure Communities Program and the Criminal Alien Program (CAP), all led to a heightened securitization of the U.S. – Mexico border and intersected the immigration enforcement system with the U.S. criminal justice system (Hazán 2014). Miryam Hazán (2014), at the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies argues that increased enforcement both at the border and beyond, along with the subsequent criminalization of undocumented immigrants, has impacted many in their decisions to return. (Hazán 2014). Because many migrants return to Mexico forcefully i.e., through formal deportation proceedings, it is crucial to discuss deportation and its impact on the return experience. Deportations do not only tear families apart, but it often forces people who had lived in the U.S. for many years, back to a country they are no longer familiar with. This can make it extremely difficult for migrants to reintegrate to Mexican society and get back on their feet. Data from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2012 shows that of the 200,000 deported “criminal aliens” to Mexico, only a quarter (24%) were deported due to immigration offenses. Twenty-three percent were deported for traffic violations, and twenty-one percent for drug violations. Relatively few deported on “criminal” grounds had been convicted of violent crimes (Golash-Boza 2015). The

dehumanizing aspects of the deportation system do not only impact individuals while in detention, but greatly impact the way in which individuals experience trauma and return (Golash-Boza 2015). Immigration detention has not only been used as a way to punish migrants but has also become a critical part of what Tanya Maria Golash-Boza (2015) calls the political economy of incarceration. The privatization of immigration detention, has made these centers extremely profitable for the states in which they are built. Reports of horrendous conditions inside the detention centers make the experience extremely difficult and traumatizing for migrants, especially as they try to get back on their feet.

The unprecedented increase in mass deportations, coupled with the most recent economic recession, have led to an overall decrease in Mexican migration to the U.S. and has instead transitioned this once influx into a steady outflow of return migration. A Pew Research Center study (2012) showed that between 2005 – 2010 the U.S. had experienced “zero net migration” from Mexico and approximately 1.39 million Mexican immigrants and their children returned to Mexico, double the number of returning immigrants from 2000-2005. (Pew Hispanic Center 2012). According to two Mexican national databases the ENOENational (Encuesta Nacional de Ocupacion y Empleo) survey of occupation and employment and the EMIF Migration (Encuesta Sobre Migracion en la Frontera Norte de Mexico) survey of Mexico’s northern border, it is estimated that between 255,000 to 438,000 people returned to Mexico every year from 2005 to 2010 (Latapí 2016). While both of these studies and surveys were conducted before the implementation of DACA (2012) in which those eligible were able to apply for two-year stay of deportation, Jill Anderson (2015) estimated that while 900,000 undocumented youth have had the temporary option to stay with their families, Mexican migrant youth continue to arrive in

Mexico every day. This was evident between 2012-2013 when half of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement deportees were between fifteen and twenty-nine years old (Anderson 2014) (TRAC Immigration 2014). As the stories of the five returnees will show, programs like the Dream Act and DACA were not enough to either protect individuals from deportation, or sway many in their decisions to return.

A study conducted in 2015 by the Pew Research Center, *More Mexicans Leaving Than Coming to the U.S.*, also outlined a net loss of 140,000 from 2009 to 2014 indicating that more Mexican immigrants have returned to Mexico from the U.S. than have decided to migrate. Using the Mexican government's ENADID (Mexican National Survey of Demographic Dynamics), various contributing factors were highlighted in people's decisions to return. According to the survey, while the U.S. economy and recession were highlighted as factors for return, results showed that stricter enforcement policies as well as family reunification were also main factors in people's decisions. As families continue to be separated by deportations, the report noted that a majority of the 1 million who left the U.S. for Mexico between 2009-2014, left on their own accord reporting reuniting with family as a primary reason for return (Pew Hispanic Center 2015). While economic and political factors undoubtedly play a role in people's decisions to migrate it is clear that there continue to be other factors that impact ones' decision to return. The stories recorded by Jill Anderson for example, describe how living undocumented in the U.S., has impacted many in their decision to return. These stories also shed light on the difficulties that many returnees (forced or "voluntary") face upon return. Experiences of cultural disconnect, difficulty finding employment as well as continuing their education (Anderson 2014). As the

stories of these five individuals will show, the challenges that they have faced upon return are similar to the challenges of most returned migrants.

*DACA:*

June 15, 2012 was a historic day in the United States; while the executive order was a win for immigration advocates it was a major victory for the thousands of undocumented youth who had marched, occupied spaces, protested, wrote letters and had been advocating since 2001. The resilience of this largely youth led movement, lobbied and pressured the Obama administration after the DREAM Act failed to pass in 2007. After years of hard work, the Obama administration announced the implementation of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012; an executive action that would defer deportation for two years, grant work authorization, and allow thousands to come out of the shadows. In order to apply for DACA, applicants must have come to the United States before the age of sixteen, have continuously resided in the United States for at least five years preceding the date of the memorandum and be present in the United States on the date of the memorandum. Applicants must also currently be in school, have graduated from high school, obtained a general education development certificate, or be an honorably discharged veteran of the Coast Guard or Armed Forces of the United States, and not have been convicted of a felony offense, a significant misdemeanor offense, multiple misdemeanor offenses or otherwise pose a threat to national security or public safety. And finally, applicants cannot be over the age of thirty (DHS 2012).

Since its implementation, several studies have been conducted exploring the policy's impacts; studies and surveys conducted by the Migration Policy Institute, the Center for American Progress, the National Immigration Law Center as well as United We Dream, all

discuss the positive impacts that this policy has had for recipients and their communities. Improvements in educational attainment, economic mobility, and security; driver's license attainment, and higher rates of health insurance attainment have all been highlighted. While these are all important impacts of the policy perhaps the most crucial impact has been the feeling of ease that it has given many. Studies conducted throughout DACA's tenure, for example, showed improvements in economic and social incorporation, educational attainment and more. Roberto Gonzales, professor of education at Harvard, published the first national survey of DACA recipients in 2013. Study findings suggested that after DACA's first 16 months, its beneficiaries obtained new jobs and internships, opened bank accounts, obtained drivers licenses, and widened their educational and employment opportunities (Gonzales 2013). In a survey conducted this past August 2017 by Tom K. Wong, United We Dream, the National Immigration Law Center and the Center for American Progress, showed not only the continued policy impacts but the negative impacts of ending DACA. According to the study, 69 percent of survey respondents reported that their increase in earnings 'helped me become financially independent' and 71 percent reported that their increased earnings 'helped my family financially', showing that the impacts of DACA transcend individual benefits and help improve the lives of families and communities.

As these studies have shown, the overall impacts of DACA have been extremely positive not only for those who have applied, but for their families and overall communities. The announcement of the phasing out of DACA by the Trump Administration this past September, brought these extremely positive impacts, dreams, hopes and the overall lives of many to a halt. While the Trump administration has yet to announce its plan for the thousands of recipients, each

day that Congress delays in acting, is another day that a DACA recipient loses their status. It was estimated that approximately 122 immigrants each day, from October to March, had their DACA-issued work permits expire because they were unable to renew their applications in time to meet the March 5 deadline. Many who did not meet the renewal deadline have since gotten 2-year renewals, due to the injunctions against the Trump administration by both California and New York which ordered USCIS to keep accepting and processing renewals (Lind, Dara). The Center for American Progress estimated that by March 5, 2018, approximately 22,000 DACA recipients would have already lost their status, being stripped of their work authorization, and their protection from detention and deportation (Jawetz, Svajlenka 2017). It is estimated that since the announcement of the phasing out of DACA in September 10,939 DACA recipients have already lost their status (Jawetz, Svajlenka 2017). While it is too early to know whether the elimination of DACA will influence any former DACA recipients to return to Mexico, it is important to learn from and hear the stories of return migrants who are currently in Mexico. Not only to share their experiences and stories but to shed light on what life may be like for those who do decide to return. In the following section I explore how Mexico has responded to the recent influx of return migrants.

#### *Mexican Response to Returnees:*

Mexico's approach/ response to return migration has been criticized by many scholars, and activists who have demanded a more proactive role from the Mexican government (Weiss 2017). Whether migrants find themselves back in Mexico due to deportation or "voluntary return" many are confronted with barriers that make it extremely difficult for them to reestablish themselves. Bureaucratic issues and a general lack of knowledge make it extremely difficult to

navigate a new country, to reenter the labor market, or qualify for social services. These logistical factors coupled with the emotional trauma and anxiety that many returnees feel due to deportation, or family separation, can make return all the more difficult (Latapí 2016). The Mexican government has made efforts to ease the transition of returnees through the creation of several programs and initiatives geared toward “reintegration”. Programs like Programa para las Comunidades Mexicanas en el Exterior and the Institute for Mexicans Abroad as well as more than thirty official MOU’s (memorandum of understanding) agreements between local authorities along the border, non-border states and local governments (Latapí 2016). More recently we have seen the creation of organizations and programs including the INM (Instituto Nacional de Migracion) and their initiatives like Programa Paisano (1989) and Somos Mexicanos (2014) which were started by both the INM and the Secretaria de Gobernacion (INM 2016). The initiative Somos Mexicanos for example, works to provide support and information to return migrants making their way back from the U.S. From the moment that migrants land and or cross the border into Mexico they are greeted by INM staff and are given food, medical attention, toll free calling to relatives, free transportation to their final destinations, as well as employment support. Programs like these though, have done little to ease the transition of returnees who continue to struggle with access to employment, educational opportunities, and overall support from the Mexican government (Anderson 2014). Mexican scholar Agustín Escobar Latapí who has called Mexico’s emigration stance a “laissez partir” or “let them leave” approach, argues that while Mexico may have more recently prepared pamphlets and advertised its government programs geared toward return migrants, many (migrants) continue to face the same challenges of unemployment, lack of access to social security and poverty (Latapí 2016).

Similar findings were also found in a report conducted in 2013 - “*Binational Dialogue on Mexicans Migrants in the U.S. and in Mexico*” by CIESAS (Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social) and Georgetown University. According to the report while neither the U.S. nor the Mexican government are adequately protecting the rights and safety of migrants who are deported back to Mexico, the Mexican governments’ role in facilitating their “reintegration” has been ineffective (Latapí, Lowell, Martin 2013). The report found for example, that one of the biggest challenges for return migrants comes from a lack of proper documentation and an extremely bureaucratic system, that can make collecting documentation nearly impossible especially for those who have been deported. Monica Jacobo, a professor at CIDE (Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas) along with Nancy Lara, a deported “Dreamer” herself, discussed the difficulty of life post deportation and return in conjecture to access to education. Not only is it difficult for many to pull together the documents that they need, but most official enrollment documents from schools in the U.S. need to be notarized and translated into Spanish, this includes documents that prove identity as well as, proof of level of schooling, and language mastery (Jacob, Lara 2015). The same bureaucratic process, has made it difficult for many returnees to also obtain health insurance. According to the Seguro Popular, individuals must provide a proof of address, birth certificate, proof of identity etc. making it nearly impossible for many returnees, especially those who were deported, to gain access to the services that they most need.

Most recent developments, within Mexico’s return migration discourse, have been geared directly toward return “Dreamers” and former DACA recipients. In March of 2017, President Enrique Peña Nieto announced a reform to the Ley General de Educacion, (General Education

Law) in the hopes of making it easier for return youth to continue their education in Mexico. The process has made it extremely difficult for many “Dreamers” and returnees to continue their education, making their integration into Mexican society challenging (El Universal 2017).

Following the announcement of the Trump administration’s repeal of DACA, Mexican officials as well as the Secretaria de Educacion announced that they encourage those who may be affected by the termination of DACA to apply for jobs as English teachers in Mexico. The department promised to ease the transition for those returning by ensuring that people get credit for their studies abroad and certify language and other skills. Regardless of its attempts to ease the return process for Mexican migrants, it is clear that any move to deport 800,000 young DACA recipients of which 548,000 (79.4% of all DACA recipients) are Mexican-born, would be overwhelming for Mexico (Dibble 2017). While the history of return migration to Mexico is quite extensive, the experiences of the five returnees will also highlight the continuous lack of response from the Mexican government. There is a lot to be done in order to ensure the “reintegration” and success of return migrants, regardless of whether they decide to return on their own accord or have been forced to do so. Before diving into the stories/experiences of returnees I will begin by outlining my methodological approach as well as the process of selecting my participants, followed by the interview process itself.

### ***Methodology:***

In order to answer the research question mentioned above; *How are return migrants navigating the cultural, financial, social and emotional nuances of life back in Mexico?* semi-structured interviews were conducted with five returnees who are currently living in several states across Mexico. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to not only gain a first-hand

account of the experiences of each individual, but to identify similar experiences and expand the overall discourse surrounding the complexities of return migration. As previously mentioned, the current discourse on return migration is very much survey/ census data driven, data that does little in providing us with a clear understanding of life post-return. While scholars like Latapí and Hazan, have studied return migration using large questionnaires, which have allowed us to identify patterns and common themes, the voices of the returnees themselves are very rarely incorporated into the discourse. This research is following in the footsteps of scholar Jill Anderson (2015), who produced an amazing ethnography, that gave voice to a community that is often forgotten. I wanted the reader to hear about these experiences of return directly from those who have and continue to live them.

*Research approach:*

While Mexico has slowly begun to acknowledge the presence and the needs of returnees, little continues to be done to support this community. The work that is being done is mostly spearheaded by non-profit organizations who are beginning to acquire the capacity and resources to support the return community. Therefore, in order to facilitate the recruitment of participants, I collaborated with New Comienzos, a non-profit organization that works to facilitate the reintegration of return migrants. All of the participants interviewed were to some extent, connected to New Comienzos, whether they were directly involved in the organization as volunteers and members, or had only heard of the organization through social media. New Comienzos was founded in 2015 in order to support dreamers, bilingual and repatriated people and their families as they reintegrate back into Mexican society. The organization strives to “prove that the American Dream can also be accomplished in Mexico”. New Comienzos provides free programs that assist in bilingual job search, psychological assistance, emergency

shelters, assistance with identification documents, Spanish grammar courses as well as a mentoring program. The organization advocates for the general rights and treatment of return migrants. Israel Concha, co-founder of New Comienzos, was extremely helpful throughout this process, not only in allowing me to post information on the organizations social platforms but by putting me in direct contact with returnees who were willing to be interviewed. As I conducted this research entirely from the U.S., the transnational nature of the project, made collecting data more difficult than initially anticipated. Solely recruiting participants in this manner also had its limitations and merits of which will be discussed in more depth below.

In order to facilitate the conversation as well as ask the questions that would best answer my research question, an interview guide with sixteen questions was used (see Appendix). Most of the phone interviews conducted ranged from an hour to an hour and a half, with four being conducted in mostly Spanish with some instances of “Spanglish” and one conducted entirely in English. At the start of each interview verbal consent was collected and each participant was able to choose the language they felt most comfortable speaking in. Each participant was informed that our conversation would be recorded and that I would be taking notes. The interviews began by me first allowing participants to share their initial immigration experiences, starting with where they were born and how old they were when they migrated to the United States. After each interview was completed I transcribed each one, not translating the ones in Spanish to English, as to keep the language and words used to share these stories in their original form. Coding was used to analyze the data and pull similar themes and experiences. The small sample size, five participants, made sifting through transcriptions and pulling out key themes fairly easy.

*Limitations:*

There are several study limitations that should be mentioned in this section. Firstly, as previously mentioned, the recruitment of participants via a non-profit organization for which they were already active members, while somewhat helpful, limited both the size and range of experiences collected. Working through a local organization facilitated the recruitment of participants, yet only talking to individuals who were directly/indirectly involved with said organization, left out the experiences and stories of returnees who are not members, or do not have access to these types of organizations in their communities. Secondly, it is worth noting that conducting interviews over the phone, which did allow me to speak directly with people while physically being in the U.S., made it difficult to interact and pick up on emotional cues or body language. This method of interviewing also made the experience rather impersonal; while I would have liked to speak with individuals in person, both time and resources limited my ability to do so. The time frame for this study also greatly limited the scale and diversity of the participants selected. With these limitations in mind, there is grave need for further research that will capture an in-depth analysis of the complexity and diversity of returnees to Mexico.

*Overview of Participants:*

All of the participants in this study are unique, and as such differ demographically, as well as in their experiences of migration and return to Mexico. While each individual's story is unique, several experiences are common among the five returnees. All five returnees described instances of struggle both in reintegrating into Mexican society, as well as in overcoming financial obstacles. After years of struggling to get back on their feet, the majority of participants managed to further their studies and are now hopeful of their lives and futures in Mexico. The table below provides a brief glimpse into the demographic characteristics of the five returnees.

Before diving into the individual stories, I preface that I will be using pseudonyms to protect the identities of individuals. The quotes used throughout this section are direct quotes, transcribed from the phone interviews conducted.

Name	Gender	Age	# of Years Spent in the U.S.	Home State in the U.S.	Home State in Mexico	Deportation or “Self-deportation”
Jorge	Male	27	5	California	Guerrero	Self-deportation
Santiago	Male	41	15	California	Sinaloa	Deported
Roberto	Male	22	20	Texas	Estado de Mexico	Self-deportation
Gilberto	Male	34	6	California	Guerrero	Deported
Leticia	Female	20	U.S. Citizen 20 years	Nebraska	Jalisco	Self-deportation

***“Ni de aquí ni de allá”: An exploration into the cultural disconnect felt upon return***

Returning to a country that you left years ago, is an extremely difficult experience for all migrants who find themselves back in their countries of origin. Regardless of whether their return was “voluntary” or the result of deportation, all of the returnees interviewed experienced initial feelings of culture shock upon return. As previously mentioned a lack of support from the Mexican government to facilitate the re-integration of migrants makes it difficult for returnees to adjust to new cultural norms, day to day activities, language barriers and more. Cultural disconnect can also greatly impact the mental health of returnees as many grapple with feelings of depression and loneliness. Jorge and his family lived in Northern California as “undocumented” migrants for five years before his father decided it would be best for his family to return to their home town in Zihuatanejo Guerrero. Just as he was finally finding his place within “American culture” Jorge’s dad decided that the entire family would return to Mexico.

Jorge recounts the disconnect he felt upon return and how difficult it was to adjust to his new life back in Guerrero.

*“Difícil, Zihuatanejo es un pueblo rural, y pues yo ya estaba acostumbrado a tener muchas cosas en California. No había internet, y nuestra casa todavía estaba en construcción. No tenía amigos, no había nada que hacer, En verdad era un shock. Me encantaban los libros de Harry Potter y no podía conseguirlos, me sentía muy solo, era muy difícil. It was hard to intégrate because were seen as foreigners.”*

Little things like access to internet and other cultural objects like books or music, can make adjusting to life back in Mexico challenging. Moving to a rural pueblo, in which the lifestyle was much slower and limited, also made it difficult for Jorge to adjust to his surroundings. These feelings of disconnect were heightened further by the way that others treated Jorge and his family. Like foreigners. Santiago, who found himself back in Mexico after being detained for 8 months and eventually being deported, also describes the disconnect he felt upon return. Having to leave behind a wife and child, Santiago expressed, *“Lo más difícil de estar en Mexico, era dejar la cultura americana. Hay muchas cosas chichitas como la manera en que la gente habla español, y el estilo de vida. Sabía que tenía que hacer una vida nueva para mí mismo. Ni modo.”* Being deported after having lived in the U.S. for 15 years can make the littlest of differences extremely difficult to adjust to. Returning to Mexico after so many years away is like returning to a country you had never been to before. Migrants find themselves having to adapt to a language and cultural norms they may no longer be familiar with. Adjusting to life in Mexico can be even more difficult for returnees who have also experienced long periods of detention.

Roberto was born in Guanajuato before making his way to San Antonio Texas where he lived for 20 years. Though he doesn't remember much about crossing the border, he remembers when he first realized that he was undocumented. Frustrated with his undocumented status,

Roberto, the youngest of three, decided he would return to Mexico. *“En los Estados Unidos era muy independiente, ya vivía solo, tenía un trabajo seguro, y me la pasaba con mis amigos. Vine a Mexico a ser un cambio muy grande en mi vida, pero se me hizo muy difícil. Me sentía, solo y frustrado. El primer año se me hizo muy difícil me tuve que acostumbrar y sigo extrañando mi familia mucho”*. Undocumented migrants in the U.S. are limited in many social, political and cultural aspects. These limitations that keep undocumented communities in the shadows, force thousands to return to Mexico in search of a life free of the fear of deportation and free of these limitations. Returnees often experience these same feelings of frustration and isolation upon their return, which can make reintegrating into Mexican society difficult. Deciding to return after so many years in the U.S. can be a tough decision for anyone, even when the decision to return was forced. Gilberto was born in Guerrero before living in the U.S. for five years and having a successful career as a cross country runner for Dickenson State University. Gilberto was deported during his final semester at Dickenson and arrived in Mexico disillusioned. *“Llegue a Tijuana decepcionado y aguaitado. Traté de cruzar varias veces, pero no lo pude lograr. Deje de correr por mucho tiempo. No pude encontrar empleo y me tuve que mover a Chilpancingo en Guerrero, y empezar de nuevo. Al principio no era fácil es muy difícil estar lejos de mi familia”*. Deportation can add a layer of complexity to the experience of return. Those who return as a result of deportation often experience trauma, depression, isolation and are in most cases forced to “start over” often times from zero. Those who are deported are also more likely to attempt to cross the border again, risking their lives to return to loved ones and a life they were stripped of.

Migrants in the U.S. are often a part of mixed status families; some members are U.S. citizens while others are undocumented. The deportation of one member of the family can

greatly impact the entire family, especially if the person deported was a parent, spouse or primary caregiver. Families are either separated or forced to return to Mexico along with their loved ones. Leticia, a U.S. citizen of Mexican descent, returned to Guadalajara with her fiancé who was deported in November of 2017.

*“I honestly feel like our whole family was deported. The hardest part is hand washing my clothes and dishes. Life is a lot slower here. I speak Spanish so that’s been helpful, but there are cultural barriers, like the different norms and what day is like here vs. in the U.S. There hasn’t been a lot of support, a little emotional support from New Comienzos, but we have been doing it mostly alone. – Leticia*

The separation of families and the forceful return of U.S. citizens, mostly children who return after the deportation of a parent, is a phenomenon that requires further research. The forced migration of U.S. citizens is important not only for the impact that this migration has on their lives, but for the way in which Mexico is responding to this influx. The experiences highlighted above are evidence of the difficulty that all returnees face in reintegrating and adjusting to their new lives. Whether migrants return “voluntarily” or find themselves back in Mexico as a result of deportation, life post return is challenging. Returnees experience feelings of shock, isolation, and depression that can make adjusting to day to day activities, navigating society and overcoming language barriers difficult. Not only are returnees tasked with surviving in their new communities with little to no support from the government or local organizations but are often left dealing with emotional obstacles that can make navigating life in Mexico difficult.

***“Hay que echarle ganas”:* Exploring the struggles returnees face in securing employment**

While thousands of immigrants migrate to the U.S. in search of employment opportunities, these same opportunities are not always available to migrants if they find

themselves back in their countries of origin. The little research that has been conducted on return migration, highlights a lack of employment as one of the major obstacles faced by returnees. All of the migrants interviewed described instances of homelessness, poverty and of having to migrate internally to secure employment and financial stability. Upon return, Roberto found himself starting from zero. With little support from his extended family in Mexico he was forced to work jobs that did not pay well, that were far from where he lived and that provided him little to no financial security.

*“Empecé estudiando gastronomía y trabajando en un restaurant, pero no era suficiente para sacarme adelante. Después trabaje como tutor de inglés por 3 meses. También trabaje en un call center, pero no me estaban dando suficientes horas de pago. Después de 4 meses me mudé a la ciudad y empecé a trabajar en una escuela de inglés como tutor. Estoy muy feliz con mi trabajo y mis alumnos al final me siento tranquilo”.*

After several months of job hunting and moving, Roberto was finally able to gain financial stability, at an English School. Much has been written regarding the employment of returnees in call centers that often recruit people with a strong knowledge of the English language. While the call centers can serve as a primary employment option, the centers often do not meet the financial needs or the educational and skill capacity of returnees. Santiago also experienced difficulty in securing steady employment but was finally able to secure a position after months of moving between both jobs and different states.

*“Al regresar trabaje en construcción en Tijuana, pero solo me pagaban \$70 dólares a la semana. No podía sobrevivir con ese sueldo, haci que empecé a trabajar en un restaurant. Hice eso por unos cuantos meses, pero no me iba muy bien. Me mude a Mazatlán y de ahí llegue a Sinaloa, donde he vivido por 8 anos. Un día vi un anuncio para maestros de inglés. Hable al número y me contrataron. Ahora trabajo como director de los programas de inglés en la prepa de Culiacán.”*

Both Roberto and Santiago were forced to move around in search of opportunities that fit their financial needs. Employment opportunities for returnees are scarce regardless of whether

individuals return as a result of deportation or through “voluntary” return. Returnees often work remedial jobs and move from state to state seeking employment opportunities that will allow them to grow and get back on their feet. With no support from civil organizations or the government, return migrants struggle to navigate a labor market that they are no longer familiar with. Relying on his English skills and understanding Gilberto was able to secure employment after some searching and moving. *“Después de meses de no conseguir trabajo en Tijuana me mudé a Chilpancingo y empecé a trabajar como maestro de inglés en una escuela. El trabajo es muy pesado el horario es pesado, pero no hay de otra. Tengo que aguantarme.”* As we have seen with the experiences mentioned above, knowledge of the English language can be extremely beneficial for returnees, especially in terms of employment opportunities. Three of the five returnees interviewed, were able to use their English proficiency to find opportunities that allowed them to become financially stable.

Leticia, the only U.S. citizen interviewed, continues to struggle to find employment and balance being a mother. *“Now I’m a full time stay at home mom and a student, so it’s a lot of stress. We’re missing out on a lot of opportunities such as building credit and buying a house”.* Lack of financial stability and economic opportunities can make it extremely difficult for returnees to get back on their feet. Returnees who have spent several years in the U.S. may not have the resources or knowledge to begin to navigate the Mexican labor market. Returnees who no longer have family in Mexico or who have not had contact with family members in a long time, have a difficult time tapping into these networks that could lend them a hand. The Mexican government continues to fall short in easing the transition of returnees forcing many to navigate life in Mexico alone. Those who find themselves in Mexico as a result of deportation can have an

even more difficult time finding employment, because they have not had sufficient time to “prepare” for their return. The struggle for financial stability coupled with the feelings of shock and depression highlighted in the first section can make life extremely challenging for anyone who finds themselves back in Mexico.

***¡Sí se puede!: Pursuing higher education amidst the bureaucracy***

As highlighted above, return migrants face several obstacles that can make life post return difficult. Previous studies on return migration have often highlighted the difficulty that many returnees face when attempting to continue or further their education. This is often attributed to the difficulties many experience in transferring their credits, and gathering the documentation needed to prove their prior level of schooling in the U.S. While the experiences below will also highlight these difficulties, all of the returnees interviewed managed to pursue higher education opportunities upon return. The returnees interviewed varied in the levels of education they had completed in the U.S. Though continuing with their education meant many returnees were starting from zero, all were successful in furthering their studies. Gilberto, was the only interviewee that pursued higher education while in the U.S. and even still was not able to transfer his credits and was forced to start college in Mexico as a freshman. *“Como solo pude tramitar mis papeles de prepa, tuve que empezar de nuevo. Después de un tiempo recibí mi certificado de maestro y sigo trabajando como maestro de inglés”*. Returnees are often taxed with producing documentation that proves their educational attainment, and school records. Documentation must be officially translated and notarized making the process extremely time consuming and nearly impossible for many who have not been able to prepare their documentation before returning to Mexico. Not being able to successfully transfer credits sets

back returnees by months and often years, forcing them to start over. Santiago was also able to receive his bachelor's degree in Mexico, while only having received his GED in the U.S.

*“Complete mi Bachelor of Arts en English Language teaching en la Universidad de Culiacán. Ahora trabajo creando los programas de inglés en las preparatorias en Culiacán. Cuando regresé, no había organizaciones de apoyo como hay ahora, y tuve que empezar de cero”.*

Again, we can see how knowledge of the English language can be helpful, not only in obtaining employment, but with putting returnees in a position to further their education. That being said, Santiago like Gilberto was forced to repeat high school in Mexico before pursuing a university degree. The struggle that returnees face in continuing and furthering their education is extremely relevant to DACA. Even though DACA recipients may have completed high school and university equivalent degrees they may still face issues upon returning to Mexico. The bureaucracy within the Mexican education system is extremely detrimental to the success of returnees regardless of whether they have already obtained a degree in the U.S.

Jorge was able to complete his studies in Mexico after only having completed high school in the U.S. *“Como nomas habíamos estado en los Estados Unidos por cinco años, no era tan difícil adaptarme a esta vida. Pude tramitar mis papeles de la high school y recibí mi licenciatura en ingeniería civil.”* Jorge was one of the only returnees who was able to process his schooling paperwork and was almost immediately able to continue his education upon return. Perhaps his transition was easier than most because his family always knew that they would return to Mexico and as such were able to prepare their documentation beforehand. Roberto, who is still working to complete his studies describes the difficulty of his educational journey upon return. *“Después de trabajar como tutor de inglés, y en un call center, pude obtener empleo en*

*la escuela de inglés y tomar cursos intensivos para hacer maestro de inglés. Al fin estoy feliz con mi trabajo y mis alumnos. Me siento tranquilo. El primer año se me hizo muy difícil*". It is clear that many returnees strive to complete their education upon returning to Mexico. For many that can mean starting from zero, for others it means establishing financial security before being able to enroll in classes or preparing documentation to ensure a smooth transition. As more and more people return, it is clear that there is a need to reform the Mexican education system to one that allows individuals to pick up where they left off, not one that makes an already difficult transition even more difficult. If access to education is challenging for returned Mexican nationals it is extremely difficult for U.S. citizens whose mastery of the Spanish language may not be sufficient and who often lack the support and resources they need to register in schools. Leticia, the only U.S. citizen interviewed, shed some light on her plight as a recently returned college student.

*"I'm an online student at the University of Nebraska Omaha. I'm currently a sophomore in college going for my bachelor's in Criminology and Criminal Justice. My kids are growing up somewhere that does not have adequate medical care or education. It is just hard to believe my own country would want me to live like this. I want to go to law school."*

Return migration to Mexico does not only include return Mexican migrants, but often times U.S. citizen family members and children. Studies on return migration have highlighted the difficulty that parents face when attempting to enroll their U.S. citizen children in schools. It is clear from the experiences highlighted above, that even Mexican nationals continue to face obstacles upon furthering their education. As previously mentioned, Mexico has done little to aid returned youth in completing their studies. While several Mexican universities are now providing scholarship programs for returned Dreamers and DACA recipients, this type of support should be available to all who return and wish to further or complete their education. A bureaucratic system

that makes it difficult for migrants to further their education, coupled with the challenges previously mentioned, can greatly impede the success of returnees. A community that deserves the support necessary to easily transition to life in Mexico.

***“El sueño americano esta en Mexico”: Remaining hopeful of their new lives in Mexico***

After asking returnees to share their experiences of return, which included many obstacles and setbacks, resilience and optimism filled their voices, as I asked about their hopes and dreams for the future. I want to end this section with their responses to these questions to highlight and complicate a narrative that we often do not hear. Life post return is not the end for those who find themselves back in Mexico. As the testimonies that Jill Anderson (2015) collected also showed, many returnees continue to strive to achieve the same dreams they had in the U.S. They are optimistic of the changes happening in Mexico; the opportunities, the space for growth and the relief many feel to be living a life without fear of deportation in a country that no longer views them as “criminals” or economic burdens. Amidst the challenges described above, returnees remain determined to make the best out of their new lives. They are surviving and thriving.

*“Tenemos que trabajar en mejorar las oportunidades en Mexico porque hay muchas buenas oportunidades. No estoy arrepentido de lo que me paso. Ha sido una buena experiencia”.*

*“Al principio no era fácil, pero hay que echarle ganas para salir adelante. Si me gustaría regresar a los estados unidos, pero no para quedarme.”*

*“Si tenía que elegir me quedaría en Mexico. Es más fácil crecer. Tengo más oportunidades en Mexico de carrera y empleo. Mexico ha cambiado mucho no es el Mexico de antes. Puedes vivir sin miedo. Hay muchas oportunidades y hasta mejores que en los Estados Unidos”.*

*“Ocupamos gente emprendedora en Mexico, gente con buenas ideas. Hay muchas oportunidades en Mexico. Yo tengo esperanza, de Mexico, de crecer a la raza, sé que se puede. El sueño americano también está en Mexico”.*

*“I think it is important for families to be together and the Trump administration makes that impossible. We’ve gotten some emotional support from organizations, it’s easier to think about this experience as an adventure”.*

Returnees face many obstacles upon returning to Mexico. The experiences shared above indicate that it does not matter how many years you lived in the U.S. or whether the choice to return was “yours” to make, transitioning to life in Mexico is not easy. These experiences however, have also shown that those who do return continue to thrive amidst the challenges they face. With time they have adapted to their new lives, gained financial security, furthered their education and remained hopeful for both Mexico and their own futures.

***Conclusion:***

As the literature has shown, return migration has always been a part of the migration discourse, though little attention has been given to the experiences of those who return. Many find themselves back in Mexico; victims of the deportation machine that has forced thousands out of the country; many who had built and spent their entire lives living in the U.S. Anti-migrant policies, coupled with the criminalization of migrants and the securitization of the border has only further served to separate families and profit from the detention of human bodies. The fear and anxiety of living “undocumented” and the more recent residence of DACA have forced many to return to Mexico through “self-deportation”, taxing them with the obstacle of navigating Mexican society with little to no aid from the Mexican government.

The experiences of the five returnees show that the decision to return can be a difficult one; returning after the deportation of a loved one, in search of a life without fear, or returning with entire families. Though the reasons for return may be different, common experiences impact all who find themselves back in Mexico. The four themes discussed; cultural, financial, social and emotional nuances of life post return, support prior research in that they too highlight the challenges that returnees face upon return. The returnees interviewed experienced feelings of shock and frustration as they worked to reintegrate into Mexican society, a society and culture that many had left behind at a very young age. Returnees also struggled in finding suitable employment opportunities that could get them back on their feet and give them financial stability. Lack of employment opportunities forced many to move from state to state in search of jobs that matched their education and skill levels. The general narrative of life post return continuously paints a very negative picture of what life is like for those who return, and while many are tasked with navigating their new lives with little to no help from the government or local NGOs, the experiences of the five returnees reveal that while many challenges do exist one can continue to strive to achieve the same hopes and dreams. Amidst the challenge of transferring school credit and providing proof of educational attainment, which forced many to begin their schooling from zero, all of the returnees have been successful in continuing and completing their undergraduate equivalent degrees. Finally, and perhaps the biggest take away from this research is the hope that returnees feel. Hopeful for their futures and the future of the country, hopeful of the opportunities ahead of them and hopeful that they will achieve their dreams. Some have started new families, while others continue to build transnational lives/relationships with loved ones in the U.S.

What I have hoped this research has done is humanize the migrant experience and highlight the importance of and for the narrative of return migration. The migrant discourse is often flooded with headlines and statistics that distract us from the long history of migration between Mexico and the U.S. The recent increase in return migration to Mexico, the current political climate under the Trump administration and the uncertainty of the future for DACA recipients, makes the analysis of the experiences of already returned migrants in Mexico extremely timely and urgent. Exploring these experiences has not only shed light on similar experiences of struggle and success but have also highlighted a need for further research, advocacy and understanding. The complex relationship and long history of migration between the U.S. and Mexico make return migration an inevitable part of the migrant journey, a journey we should continue to learn from and normalize. A journey that both the U.S. and Mexican government should work toward easing and embracing. These experiences remind us that migrants are human beings, whether they are coming or going, whether they have lived in the U.S. for years or months, have adjusted their status or remain undocumented; they are human. They deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. To exercise their rights, and to live a life without fear. To travel, to have families, to go to college and to achieve whatever dreams they may have, no matter what side of the border they find themselves on.

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***Appendix:***

Interview Guide:

1. How old are you?
2. Where were, you born?
3. Where did you grow up in the U.S.?
4. What is your level of education?
5. Do you still have family in the U.S.?
6. How old were you when you were brought to the United States?
  - a. Could you talk a little bit about that experience?
7. When did you realize that you were "undocumented"? Could you describe that experience?
8. How was life like growing up "undocumented"?
9. Do you consider a DREAMER?
  - a. Are you a DACA recipient?
10. How did you find yourself back in Mexico?
11. What has life been like since you've returned?
  - a. Could you talk a little bit about that experience?
12. What have been some of the biggest challenges of being back in Mexico?
  - a. Have you felt a cultural disconnect or experienced any language barriers?
  - b. Are you currently employed?
  - c. Did you continue your education?
13. Are you receiving support from any organizations here in Mexico? If so which ones and what kind of support have they given you?
14. If you could give some advice to an undocumented youth in the U.S. or to a return migrant in Mexico what would you say to them?

15. Is there anything else that you would like me to know?
16. Is there anything that I didn't ask you, that you think I should have?