

MEXICAN MIGRANTS RETURN SOUTH: TRANSBORDER TESTIMONIALS OF
RESILIENCE AND ADAPTATION IN MEXICO CITY

by

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ABSTRACT

Migration from Mexico to the United States is a prominent topic in the U.S. and is the foundation for many political agendas and policy debates. However, return migration has received comparatively little attention in academia or policy initiatives. This thesis/documentary film examines the lived experiences of young adult Mexican return migrants in Mexico City, those with extensive histories in the United States who have been forced to return due to deportation or untenable living conditions as undocumented individuals in the US. Through an ethnographic research project, consisting primarily of a testimonial-based documentary film depicting the lives of return migrants, this study investigates transnational identity, liminality, structural violence, and the roles of community and resilience in adaptation to a new and unfamiliar country and culture. This project uses qualitative data from interviews, field observations, and video documentation to present a nuanced and candid view of how return migrants are forced to create a life in an unfamiliar place while at the same time giving rise to an emerging bicultural and transnational demographic in Mexico City.

Keywords: Return Migration, Mexico City, 1.5-Generation Migrants, Transnationalism, Bicultural Identity, Liminality, Structural Violence, Resilience, Social Networks, Adaptation, Ethnographic Film, Neoliberal Policies, Community Building, Identity Reconstruction, Migration Studies

Introduction

Overview of the Research

The U.S.-Mexico migration narrative is often framed by south-to-north push/pull dynamics, focusing on border crossing numbers, impacts on U.S. jobs, education, housing, the economy, and “American Society,” writ large. Indeed, migration is a prominent framework for US political discourse, policy debates, and even shifting and evolving trends in pop culture. However, the story of migration in between the U.S. and Mexico is not limited to the physical border and the impacts on the U.S.. Since the late 1990s, increasingly draconian anti-immigration policies in the U.S., such as the expansion of deportation operations have led to an increase in forced returns to Mexico. Between 2005 and 2010, more than 1.39 million Mexican migrants found their way back to Mexico after living in the U.S. (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2021). Between 2005 and 2015, over 500,000 of these returnees were young adults who were deported or made the difficult decision to self-deport, a figure that has continued to grow under subsequent administrations (Escobar Latapí et al., 2016; Kanstroom, 2012). Among these returnees are 1.5-generation migrants—those brought to the U.S. as children—who face unique challenges as they attempt to rebuild their lives in a country they barely know.

This thesis seeks to offer an intimate and humanistic perspective on the lived experiences of these return migrants in Mexico City, specifically those who have found their way to "Little LA," an emerging transnational community in the heart of Mexico City's historic center,



Figure 1-Recruitment flyers soliciting migrants for U.S.-serving transnational call centers target new arrivals eager to find employment.

characterized by a high concentration of English-speaking returnees. Many are aggressively targeted and recruited by transnational call centers, where their bilingual skills and familiarity with U.S. culture are commodified for low-wage labor (Brophy, 2017).

This study examines how return migrants navigate their bicultural identities, adapt to structural

inequalities and the shared trauma of deportation, and form supportive networks and communities to foster

resilience and support.

This combined thesis and documentary project focuses on three research questions: 1. How do return migrants navigate their identity and sense of belonging in Mexico City after living in the U.S.? 2. How do neoliberal economic policies and structural violence create untenable living conditions for migrants and their families in the U.S. and Mexico?; and 3. What role do community networks and the shared experience of deportation play in fostering resilience and adaptation?

Significance of the Study

The phenomenon of return migration raises critical questions about identity, belonging, and economic exploitation in an increasingly globalized world. Returnees embody the tensions of transnationalism, living and embodying the concept of "ni de aquí, ni de allá" (neither from here nor there) as they navigate cultural and social liminality (Anderson, 2015; Minian, 2018). Their experiences also reveal the far-reaching impacts of the U.S./Mexico Border, the U.S., and U.S. immigration policies, which not only criminalize, displace, and dehumanize migrants but

also restructure labor markets in Mexico by creating a vulnerable and bilingual workforce for transnational corporations (O'Neill, 2012; Farmer, 2004).

Through this film project, I hope to fill a gap in the research by focusing on the intimate adaptation processes of young return migrants, including 1.5-generation returnees¹, an understudied group within migration studies, as they seek to overcome collective traumas, and establish a sense of community and belonging in one of the world's largest metropolises. While significant scholarly work exists on south/north migration into the U.S. (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Gonzales, 2016), less attention has been given to the reverse flow and the implications for individuals and communities south of the border (Escobar Latapí et al., 2013). This study also contributes to a growing and evolving visual ethnography and digital storytelling field by producing a 27-minute documentary that intimately depicts the migrants' lived realities in their own voices.

Personal Context

As a Mexican-born researcher, journalist, and multimedia producer who moved to the United States as a child, I am uniquely positioned to collaborate with my subjects in telling their stories. I can empathize with many of the bicultural experiences and challenges faced by the participants in this study, albeit without the legal implications and criminalization of modern migrants. My personal transnational journey began when I left Mexico City, my birthplace, to

¹ The term "1.5-generation migrants" refers to individuals who immigrated to a new country during childhood, typically before their mid-teens. They occupy a unique cultural and social position between their parents' first-generation immigrant experience and the second-generation born in the host country. Unlike first-generation migrants, who often maintain strong ties to their country of origin, or second-generation individuals, who typically grow up fully immersed in the host country's culture, 1.5-generation migrants are shaped by formative experiences in both countries. This bicultural upbringing often leads to a dual identity, marked by linguistic fluency and cultural adaptability but also a sense of "in-betweenness," as they may feel disconnected from full belonging in either their country of origin or the host country (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Gonzales, 2016).

move to the U.S. with my mother, a U.S. citizen, as I entered fourth grade. At the time, leaving Mexico City felt like leaving my home—the place where my extended family, culture, and sense of belonging resided. I was young and deeply attached to my life in Mexico, but circumstances beyond my control meant my father remained in Mexico while I left for the U.S. with my mother.

My upbringing became defined by a perpetual state of movement and “in-betweenness” as I returned to Mexico City each summer to spend time with my father and extended family. This cyclical migration created a disjointed sense of belonging, and every few months, just as I settled into a routine, I was uprooted and forced to cross the border to begin a new stage in either Tucson, Arizona, or Mexico City. These back-and-forth movements across the border were dictated by custody arrangements, school schedules, and adult decisions that left me feeling powerless. Each transition was emotionally charged --leaving family and friends, routines, and the comfort of familiarity behind-- and left me longing to be in one place long enough to build continuity and a true sense of belonging in my life.

Reflecting on these experiences, I now see the value in the cultural and emotional duality they afforded me, and I see these same empowering themes in the adaptations and resilience of return migrants. Indeed, the disorienting liminality of my young personhood eventually gave way to an affirming fluidity in my ability to navigate across borders, language barriers, and cultural differences. In interviews with my collaborators, we often arrived at “de aqui y de alla,” as an empowering twist to the phrase that describes a fluid sense of belonging, capable and worthy of occupying both sides of the *frontera*. However, as a young person, it was profoundly painful to feel torn between two homes, unable to anchor myself fully. My experiences pale in comparison to migrants forced to return to Mexico because of the structural violence embedded in U.S.

migration policies, but they provide a valuable pathway in my film's goal of understanding the collective trauma experienced by these individuals. This sense of being "ni de aquí, ni de allá" (neither from here nor there) resonates deeply within me, and my connection to migration and the liminal spaces it creates has shaped my perspective and approach as a researcher. However, I acknowledge the privilege inherent in my ability to move freely across borders.

My professional background as a journalist and documentarian has equipped me to combine academic analysis with creative storytelling. The film component of this project is grounded in relationships built on shared understanding, vulnerability, and mutual respect. While I acknowledge the unequal privilege between myself and my collaborators, my ability to relate to their sense of displacement and liminality has facilitated my ability to engage with their experiences. Participants entrusted me with their stories because they recognized my sincere interest and empathetic connection to their struggles. Through this project, I strive to convey their resilience and highlight the complexities of return migration through an ethnographic film project that combines qualitative research principles and a humanistic storytelling documentary.

Methodology

Ethnographic Approach

This research project and thesis film employed a qualitative ethnographic approach, integrating interviews, participant observation, and visual documentation to provide an intimate understanding of the lived experiences of return migrants in Mexico City. Ethnography is particularly well-suited to this research because it captures the nuanced and contextual realities of identity, adaptation, and community building. The approach combines academic rigor with creative storytelling, ensuring that the voices of return migrants are accurately represented. Field research, and filming, was conducted in Mexico City from May 21st to August 13th, 2021. It

resulted in thirteen formal interviews and four in-depth, on-camera interviews with additional b-



Figure 2-Flyer distributed in public spaces and social media, soliciting participants for this study and film on return migration in Mexico City.

roll footage-gathering opportunities. I also conducted informal interviews with approximately twenty-four other migrants, allies, and researchers. I distributed flyers in and around areas frequented by English speakers and returnees. Most of my initial contacts were discovered through announcements on bulletin boards, social media outreach, WhatsApp messaging groups, and flyers inviting potential collaborators to take a short Qualtrics Survey on their migration status.

I also solicited collaborators/participants for my research through my initial contact and involvement with O.D.A. (Otros Dreamers en Acción) and other N.G.O.s working

to support and provide resources to return migrants in Mexico. Through a snowball interview and conversation process, I discovered several men and women willing to share their experiences with me on camera and open to having me spend time with them to document their lives.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, allowing participants to share their personal narratives while creating a structure allowing that key themes relevant to the research were addressed. The goal was to create conversations around three primary areas: identity reconstruction, economic adaptation, and community building. The interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language—whether English, Spanish, or a mix of both—to create space for comfort and ease, encouraging participants to reflect deeply on their lived experiences.

The first primary focus of the interviews revolved around **identity reconstruction**, where participants were encouraged to share their challenges and strategies in navigating their dual cultural identities. Questions such as *"How would you describe your sense of belonging in Mexico compared to the U.S.?"* and *"What challenges have you faced in reconnecting with family members here in Mexico or in the U.S.?"* The goal was to uncover how participants negotiate their identities in the context of disrupted family structures and cultural dislocation. Many participants shared the tension of feeling "ni de aquí, ni de allá" (neither from here nor there), describing feelings of alienation and anxiety alongside the challenges of finding a sense of self and belonging in Mexico City.

The second key area, **economic adaptation**, was prominent in the conversations and delved into participants' efforts to find employment and navigate the challenges of finding work in Mexico City. Participants were asked questions like *"What has your experience been like finding work in Mexico?"* and *"How has your bilingualism or experience in the U.S. helped or hindered your job opportunities?"* These conversations often centered on their relationships with transnational call centers, where many returnees find employment opportunities and a safe place while they work on getting established. Participants shared stories of economic struggles and frustrations with low wages but were also grateful to be able to find any work at all.

Finally, the interviews focused on **community building**, examining the role of social networks in fostering resilience and belonging. Questions such as *"Who or what has been most helpful to you in adjusting to life in Mexico?"* and *"Can you tell me about the people, community, or groups you've been involved with since returning?"* provided insight into the role of peer support groups, NGOs, and informal networks. Participants described moments of solidarity, such as forming connections with fellow returnees in and around "Little L.A." or receiving

guidance from organizations like ODA. Several of my subjects learned about ODA, Pocha House (ODA's community space for return migrants in La Roma), and other NGOs through our conversations and expressed gratitude that such resources exist. These narratives highlighted the importance of community in countering feelings of isolation and creating opportunities for mutual support.

The interviews helped illuminate the complicated realities and challenges of return migration by focusing on these interconnected themes. They also provided the foundation for the testimonials in the film and, ultimately, a platform for participants to communicate their challenges and strategies for resilience and adaptation.

Participant Observation and Visual Documentation

Participant observation formed the cornerstone of my research methodology, enabling me to deeply immerse myself in the daily lives of return migrants in Mexico City. This approach allowed me to build relationships with my collaborators, understand their social and cultural contexts, and create familiarity and comfort in our partnership. Over three months, I spent time with my collaborators in their workplaces, homes, and public spaces, observing and participating in their routines while documenting the multifaceted realities of return migration.

Participant observation included workplace visits, where I spent significant time observing and interacting with return migrants who worked or had previously worked in call centers, home-based work settings, and entrepreneurial spaces. In the public spaces of "Little LA," where many transnational call centers are based, I examined workplace dynamics, the demographics of employees, and the commodification of bilingual skills.

Since my field research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, many participants worked remotely, allowing me to film and observe their daily routines at home under

pandemic-era conditions. I also visited a cooperative graphic design and printing shop established by return migrants. I spent time with collaborators as they worked and shared insights into their creative and entrepreneurial endeavors. One participant, who lost his job at a call center, invited me to accompany him on his search for employment as an English teacher in affluent neighborhoods like La Condesa. These experiences provided a nuanced understanding of the structural challenges and the personal strategies return migrants employ to navigate precarious economic conditions.

Social gatherings offered another critical dimension to participant observation. Weekly visits to community spaces, such as the offices of ODA's Pocha House in the La Roma neighborhood, provided a window into the role of support networks and NGOs in returnees' lives. These offices served as resource hubs, offering meeting rooms, a library, a kitchen, and other communal facilities as a refuge for returnees seeking connection and assistance. By spending time in these spaces, I observed how individuals formed social bonds, shared experiences, and negotiated their identities through peer interactions. These gatherings also allowed me to introduce myself to the community and gain their trust, fostering an environment conducive to collaboration on a film.

In addition to structured visits and gatherings, I documented participants' everyday activities in their homes, neighborhoods, and public spaces like parks and a martial arts gym. These moments revealed how returnees navigated Mexico City's unique physical and cultural dynamics. Whether walking through the weekly rock-music pop-up market (Tianguis Cultural El Chopo), running errands, taking martial arts classes, or simply spending time alone at home, these activities offered a nuanced perspective into their strategies for building stability and finding a sense of belonging in a foreign city that is now their "home."

Through this intentional participant observation, with and without a camera, I sought to facilitate candid conversations and real-time interactions with my collaborators. These interactions ultimately led to a partnership that produced an ethnographic perspective, capturing the complexities of return migration through their experiences and words.

Film Production and Visual Documentation

My methodology's central objective was to produce an ethnographic documentary that portrays resilience, adaptation, and community building among return migrants in Mexico City. The documentary captures various experiences, from individual reflection during interviews to the rhythms of daily life in "Little LA," including public markets, parks, and homes. It includes workplace scenes, recreational activities, meals, and solitary moments that highlight the emotional and psychological liminality of return migrants.

Visual documentation, or filming, was a research tool and a medium for amplifying the voices of return migrants to broader audiences. The documentary adheres to the principles of *cinéma vérité*, avoiding extraneous and contrived production techniques and voiceover narration. Instead, it relies on participants' own words to guide the narrative. By capturing the sights, sounds, and atmospheres of participants' environments, the film provides an immersive portrayal of their experiences.

Production for this project took place once I established my initial contacts over three months, from June to August 2021, in Mexico City. Filming was supported by a Tinker Field Research Grant from the University of Arizona's Center for Latin American Studies and the University of Arizona's Center for Creative Inquiry Fronteridades Grant. This intensive immersion yielded a substantial body of qualitative and visual data, including 18 hours of raw footage capturing interviews, observational scenes, and moments of daily life. A total of 13

formal interviews were conducted, alongside four extended interviews accompanied by B-roll documentation. Additionally, 26 informal interviews were completed with return migrants, their families, NGO representatives, and other community members. This comprehensive collection of material provided the foundation for thematic analysis and narrative development within the film.

The fieldwork process was inherently iterative, with initial observations and interviews informing the direction of subsequent on-camera interviews and shooting schedules. This approach allowed for a fluid and adaptable exploration of emerging themes, such as the commodification of bilingual skills and the emotional toll of forced return. My collaborators were actively engaged throughout the process, making suggestions and sharing ideas and information that helped me understand their experiences. This collaborative dynamic enriched the research, ensuring that the voices and perspectives of return migrants were represented in both the written analysis and the accompanying ethnographic documentary.

Thematic planning identified key areas of focus, such as resilience, liminality, and community networks, which informed participant selection, interview questions, and filming locations. The *cinéma vérité* approach emphasized unstructured, natural footage, minimizing contrived settings and allowing participants to narrate their own stories authentically.

Ethical considerations were central to the project. Participants provided informed consent and were actively involved in shaping how their experiences were portrayed during the shooting. They were invited to review their interviews and provide feedback, fostering a collaborative and respectful relationship throughout the research and shooting process.

Film Contribution to the Thesis Objectives

The ethnographic approach, integrating academic analysis with visual storytelling, provided a multidimensional perspective on the experiences of return migrants. Semi-structured interviews offered detailed insights into personal narratives, while participant observation contextualized these within broader social and cultural dynamics. Visual documentation added a compelling and accessible dimension to the research, amplifying the voices of return migrants and ensuring they were accurately represented through the filming process.

This methodology aligns seamlessly with the thesis's objectives of providing a new perspective on the complexities of return migration by exploring identity, adaptation, and community themes. The research bridges academic scholarship and public discourse by combining qualitative research methods with documentary filmmaking, contributing to a deeper understanding of migration in an accessible format.

Through immersive fieldwork and an iterative process of participatory observation, this ethnographic documentary is a viable and effective tool for documenting the nuanced realities of return migrants' lives. The film captures the process and struggles of identity reconstruction, economic adaptation, and community building, uniquely portraying resilience and agency. By presenting these narratives in a compelling and accessible format, the documentary extends the impact of the research, serving both as an academic resource and as a medium for promoting empathy and awareness among broader audiences.

Theoretical Frameworks and Application to Research

This literature review situates my research and film on return migration to Mexico City within four interconnected theoretical frameworks: 1. transnationalism and bicultural identity, 2. liminality and identity construction, 3. community and social network theory, and 4. structural violence and neoliberal critique, primarily as the underlying contributor to the return migration flows. These frameworks provide a helpful perspective and a context for viewing the film. Ultimately, the goal is to examine the lived experiences of young return migrants as they adapt and grapple with the unique challenges of belonging, economic precarity, and cultural hybridity in their new environments.

Transnationalism and Bicultural Identity

Transnationalism emphasizes the cross-border social, cultural, and economic ties migrants maintain. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) define transnational social fields as the networks and practices that connect nation-states, enabling individuals to maintain dual cultural affiliations. Their study is part of the *Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS)*, which examines the experiences of the second-generation immigrant population, focusing on major metropolitan areas such as Miami, Florida, and San Diego, California. The work emphasizes the concept of transnational social fields—networks and practices that span national borders, enabling individuals to maintain dual cultural affiliations. While their primary focus is on second-generation immigrants in the U.S., Portes and Rumbaut highlight how the persistence of cultural ties to countries of origin shapes identities, practices, and community networks. In the context of return migration to Mexico, these ties manifest through a persistent connection to U.S. culture and norms, even as migrants navigate life in Mexico.

Bicultural identity, a subset of the transnationalism theoretical framework, adds to the latter by focusing on how individuals integrate elements from two distinct cultures to construct a hybrid identity. Gonzales (2016) expands on this duality in his research on undocumented youth in the U.S. He emphasizes and explores the tension between cultural belonging and systemic or structural exclusion. This duality is a defining characteristic of return migrants who find themselves "ni de aquí, ni de allá," a theme Anderson (2015) explores skillfully in her ethnographic project on deportation narratives and testimonials in Mexico City.

In the case of my own research, return migrants in Mexico City, particularly those congregating in and around "Little LA," embody this duality as they blend U.S. cultural norms with the process of reintegrating into Mexican society. This hybridization can be seen in their workplace environments, such as transnational call centers, where their U.S. cultural fluency is both commodified and a source of identity affirmation (Brophy, 2017). It's also evident in some returnees' small business ventures, like U.S.-inspired barber shops, pop culture graphic design enterprises, and food carts emphasizing Mexican American food.

The ethnographic film, in the form of the accompanying documentary project, provides a powerful tool for capturing these dualities, documenting language use, adapting to and overcoming challenges, and documenting identity markers such as fashion and musical preferences. By collaborating with the film's subjects to find strategies and ways of showcasing the lived experiences of forced return migration, this project reveals the quotidian details of how returnees navigate their bicultural lives in daily interactions, workplace structures, recreation, and community spaces.

Liminality and Identity Construction

The concept of liminality, as first articulated by Victor Turner, describes the "in-between" state individuals experience during periods of transition, where they are removed from familiar social structures and norms. Individuals often lose defined roles in this state, leading to ambiguity, uncertainty, and disorientation (Turner, 1969). Turner originally developed the concept in the context of rites of passage, where individuals move through distinct phases: separation, transition (liminality), and reincorporation into society with a new status. The idea of liminality has since been applied to various fields, including studies of tourism and ritual, where individuals temporarily leave their normal lives, inhabit an ambiguous space, and return to a state of transformation (Edensor, 2001).

For return migrants, however, liminality is not merely a temporary phase. It often becomes a more enduring and even inescapable experience. These individuals exist in a cultural and psychological "in-betweenness," where they are neither fully "American"² nor fully Mexican. Their identities and roles remain fluid and undefined as they navigate unfamiliar social, cultural, and economic systems. This liminal state is characterized by the absence of familiar social anchors, such as longstanding friendships, family ties, or established community networks.

Although liminality typically represents a transitional phase, with an eventual resolution as individuals adapt to a new reality, this process can be prolonged or indefinite for return migrants.

² Using "American" to describe U.S. acculturation processes reflects a common shorthand in academic and colloquial discourse but remains contentious and problematic. This usage conflates the identity of U.S. citizens with the broader populations of the Americas, erasing the shared American identity of people from Latin America, Canada, and other regions. By using the term exclusively for U.S. citizens, this practice perpetuates a form of cultural dominance that ignores the shared historical and geopolitical significance of the term "American" across the hemisphere. In the context of this thesis, "American" is used specifically to refer to cultural markers, social practices, and identity constructs shaped by life in the United States. The author acknowledges the limitations and implications of this terminology, attempting to critically engage with its usage while maintaining clarity in describing the experiences of return migrants.

Unlike temporary liminal experiences—such as attending a religious service or going on vacation, which provide structured, time-limited opportunities for reflection and transformation—return migration places individuals in persistent ambiguity. The absence of clear markers for reintegration or belonging extends the liminal state, delaying or complicating the transition to stability and normalization.

Zygmunt Bauman (2004) elaborates on this concept of liminality by describing how, although challenging, such a state can also open pathways to identity reinvention and negotiation. This duality of disordered identity and potential transformation is important in understanding the lived experiences of return migrants, who are forced to reconcile their U.S. identity with the challenge of reintegration into Mexican society.

The psychological toll of liminality for return migrants often manifests in feelings of displacement, alienation, fear, and identity conflict. Jill Anderson (2015) explores these dynamics among deportees in Mexico City, noting the acute sense of being "ni de aquí, ni de allá," and the effects of "disrupted social and cultural identities." Many returnees lack proficiency in Spanish or familiarity with Mexican bureaucratic systems, exacerbating their sense of being outsiders in a country they ostensibly should call "home." Similarly, Ana Minian (2018) highlights how return migrants struggle to reconcile the cultural values and norms of their "American" upbringing with the expectations of Mexican society. This dissonance is particularly acute for individuals who grew up with strong attachments to U.S. identity markers, such as language, education, and pop culture, but are now forced to adapt to cultural expectations that feel foreign in Mexico.

In my research, liminality is a defining feature of the return migration experience in Mexico City. Here, returnees try to make sense of unfamiliar bureaucracies, labor markets, and

social expectations while clinging to the characteristics of their U.S. identity. For example, returnees working in transnational call centers leverage their bilingual and bicultural skills, blending their “American” cultural fluency with the demands of the Mexican labor market. However, this reinforces their "in-between" state, as their work environments commodify their hybridized identities rather than integrate them fully into mainstream Mexican society.

However, the liminal state is not permanent, as we witness through the gradual adaptation process of return migrants. Over time, many returnees begin to come to terms with the reality of their new lives, and their bicultural identities gradually shift from being markers of disorientation to tools for adaptation. The prolonged liminality, influenced by the longing and desire that they might one day return to the United States, gradually gives way to a sense of permanence and a reshaping of identity. For some, the act of rebuilding "home" in a new place marks the end of the liminal state, transforming their biculturalism into an asset that enables them to navigate both cultural contexts, the U.S. and Mexico, with confidence. Indeed, this flip occurs when a sense of being becomes a resilient "de aquí, y de allá" affirmation.

The resulting documentary film vividly captures this transition. Through visual storytelling, scenes of solitary reflection, workplace interactions, and social gatherings illustrate the struggles of living "in-between" and the resilience and agency that emerge as returnees adapt to their new realities. These moments reveal how liminality, while disorienting at first, eventually becomes a stepping stone to a redefined sense of self and belonging. As one subject reflects, *"I'm learning about my culture. It's amazing. We have real history, and now I get to see it and experience it for myself."* This sentiment encapsulates the transformative journey of returnees as they navigate their way toward reconnecting with their heritage and carving out a renewed identity.

Structural Violence and Neoliberal Critique

Paul Farmer's (2004) concept of structural violence highlights the systemic inequities and entrenched social structures that disproportionately harm marginalized populations. Unlike overt physical violence, structural violence operates through political, economic, and social systems, creating conditions that limit access to resources, opportunities, and well-being. For return migrants, structural violence is evident in the intersecting forces of U.S. deportation policies and Mexico's neoliberal economic framework, both of which exploit their vulnerabilities. Enda Brophy (2017) explores how neoliberal globalization commodifies bilingual and bicultural skills in industries such as transnational call centers. These workplaces capitalize on migrants' linguistic abilities and cultural fluency, essential for serving U.S.-based clients, while offering low wages and precarious working conditions. This commodification reinforces systemic inequalities, treating return migrants as disposable labor in a global economic system that prioritizes corporate profit over worker welfare.

Neoliberal reforms in Mexico have exacerbated economic precarity by prioritizing privatization, deregulation, and reducing social welfare programs. These policies, implemented over decades, have widened income inequality and eroded the social safety net, leaving vulnerable populations with limited avenues for upward mobility. Kevin O'Neill (2012) shows that such reforms create a "race to the bottom," where labor is devalued, and workers are trapped in cycles of poverty and marginalization. For return migrants, the impact of these policies is compounded by their marginalization within both the U.S. and Mexican systems. In the U.S., deportation policies strip individuals of stability, severing their access to education, employment, and mainstream society and community benefits. Once they arrive back in Mexico, these

migrants face a labor market that exploits their bilingual skills for low wages, averaging 44 pesos (\$2.30 USD) per hour in call centers. While valuable to employers, their cultural and linguistic capital fails to manifest into economic mobility. This dynamic exemplifies Farmer's concept of structural violence, where systemic inequities perpetuate harm and constrain agency.

Neoliberalism also intensifies and exacerbates the forces that contribute to return migration. U.S. immigration policies, shaped by contentious political discourse and nationalistic rhetoric, target and criminalize undocumented workers while benefiting from their labor. As deportations rise, Mexico absorbs the economic and social costs of reintegration. Simultaneously, neoliberal reforms in Mexico create conditions where return migrants find their way into precarious jobs, often unable to leverage their U.S.-based education or skills in a meaningful way. This convergence of neoliberal policies and structural violence demonstrates how systemic forces operate across borders to perpetuate displacement and exploitation. As a result, the return migration experience is shaped by unique individual struggles and *the* broader economic and political systems that create and sustain inequality (Wacquant, 2009; Sassen, 2014).

In my own research, structural violence is particularly evident in the "Little LA" enclave of Mexico City, where many return migrants congregate. Transnational call centers in this area symbolize the intersection of neoliberal globalization and return migration. While these centers provide returnees with immediate employment opportunities, they also exploit their unique positionality. Migrants' bilingualism and cultural fluency are commodified, enabling companies to profit from their ability to serve U.S. markets while paying wages far below a living standard. This commodification highlights a critical aspect of structural violence: the devaluation of individuals within an economic system that depends on their exploitation.

Structural violence extends far beyond the workplace. Return migrants face significant bureaucratic barriers to accessing healthcare, housing, and education in Mexico. Their U.S.-based credentials and professional experiences are often unrecognized, confining them to low-wage sectors and reinforcing their marginalization. These systemic obstacles perpetuate the cycle of inequality initiated by U.S. deportation policies.

The interplay of structural violence and neoliberal globalization is central to understanding return migration. U.S. deportation policies uproot individuals from their established lives, forcing them into a Mexican labor market that offers limited opportunities. This systemic inequity creates a transnational cycle of displacement and exploitation, leaving return migrants in a state of continuous marginalization. While both countries' policies treat return migrants as expendable, their lived experiences reveal resilience and agency in the face of adversity.

Framing return migration within the context of structural violence underscores the systemic forces driving this marginalization. Addressing these challenges requires policies that prioritize social equity and support reintegration, breaking the cycle of displacement and exploitation. By situating return migrants' struggles within this framework, this thesis emphasizes the urgent need for systemic change to ensure a more equitable future.

This framework is integral to the overarching analysis of return migration. Structural violence not only explains the systemic barriers faced by return migrants but also underscores the urgency of addressing the conditions that drive and perpetuate displacement. By linking individual experiences to broader economic and political systems, this framework complements other theoretical perspectives, such as transnationalism and resilience. Together, they provide a

multidimensional understanding of the forces shaping return migration and the strategies migrants use to navigate them.

Community and Social Network Theory

Community and social network theory explore how relationships and social bonds contribute to resilience and adaptation in challenging circumstances. Robert Putnam (2000) emphasizes the role of social capital—resources embedded within social networks—in fostering trust, cooperation, and a sense of belonging. Putnam distinguishes between "bonding" social capital, which reinforces ties within a homogenous group, and "bridging" social capital, which connects diverse groups. Both forms are critical for individuals navigating complex social landscapes.

Michael Ungar (2011) integrates social network theory with resilience theory, arguing that communities serve as ecological systems where individuals access emotional, informational, and material support. Resilience is not merely an individual trait but is deeply influenced by the availability and quality of social networks. These networks enable individuals to navigate adversity by providing stability, resources, and opportunities for collective problem-solving.

For return migrants in Mexico City, community networks play a vital role in mitigating the challenges of reintegration. The process of forced return often leaves individuals disconnected from established support systems in the U.S., compounding feelings of displacement and vulnerability. In Mexico City, NGOs such as Casa de los Amigos (places where I conducted participant observations) serve as initial points of contact, offering resources such as temporary housing, legal assistance, and job referrals. These organizations provide a bridge for migrants to connect with informal networks of fellow returnees, forming an important source of support, connection, and community.

These informal networks are particularly important in neighborhoods like "Little LA," where return migrants often congregate and seek support and employment. Fellow returnees share practical advice on navigating bureaucratic challenges, finding employment, and accessing services and healthcare. More importantly, these networks offer emotional support, creating a sense of belonging through shared experiences of migration, displacement, and adaptation (Anderson, 2015).

Community network dynamics are palpable where returnees engage with others in similar situations, such as social gatherings and workplace interactions that foster resilience and identity reconstruction. For many, these connections provide stability in the face of systemic barriers such as low wages, limited upward mobility, and the challenges of cultural reintegration. Social gatherings and NGO activities serve as spaces of cultural affirmation, allowing returnees to honor their shared identities that blend elements of U.S. and Mexican cultures. Workplace friendships in transnational call centers and other enterprises also become sources of support and camaraderie. These interactions transform individual resilience into collective adaptation as returnees gain strength from one another to navigate their new surroundings.

The documentary component of this thesis captures these dynamics, showcasing moments of solidarity, healing, and cultural affirmation. Scenes of returnees participating in community-building activities—such as organizing small businesses or attending recreational activities—highlight the essential role of social networks in fostering resilience and belonging. As Diana reflects, *"I get to learn about my culture. It's amazing. Like, we have real history."* This sentiment underscores how reconnecting with cultural roots and shared histories becomes a source of strength and affirmation for returnees, helping them navigate their new realities while redefining their sense of identity.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the complex experiences of return migrants in Mexico City, offering insights into their adaptation processes through the lenses of transnationalism, structural violence, liminality, social networks, and resilience. The findings address the key research questions, highlighting the interplay between systemic barriers, individual agency, and community support in shaping the lives of return migrants.

First, the research demonstrates that cultural and psychological liminality is a defining feature of return migration, even though it may not be permanent. Migrants' initial sense of being "in-between" is rooted in disrupted identities and the lack of clear reintegration markers. However, over time, many come to terms with their bicultural realities, transforming them into tools for adaptation and resilience. This evolution underscores the dynamic nature of identity reconstruction, as migrants blend their experiences in the U.S. with their new lives in Mexico, ultimately fostering a redefined sense of belonging.

Second, the study reveals the critical role of social networks and community organizations in mitigating the vulnerabilities of return migrants. NGOs like ODA, Pocha House, and informal peer networks provide essential resources, emotional support, and opportunities for cultural affirmation. These networks not only help migrants navigate unfamiliar bureaucracies and labor markets but also foster a sense of community that counters the isolation of return migration. This finding reinforces the importance of community-driven solutions in addressing systemic inequities.

Finally, the research highlights the systemic challenges imposed by structural violence and neoliberal economic policies. The commodification of migrants' bilingual skills, coupled with exploitative labor markets and limited upward mobility, perpetuates cycles of

marginalization. While many return migrants initially expressed gratitude for the opportunity to find work in call centers or similar environments, it soon became evident that these roles often exploited their bilingual abilities. Despite the initial appeal of earning wages in Mexico, the pay—although encouraging at first—was insufficient to make a living in Mexico City’s expensive urban environment. While their U.S. education and career training ostensibly offer opportunities, systemic barriers in Mexico often prevent them from fully leveraging their skills, leaving them in a cycle of underpaid work and economic uncertainty.

Despite these barriers, return migrants demonstrate remarkable resilience, leveraging their social capital and cultural adaptability to rebuild their lives. Identifying and naming these systemic challenges provide a foundation for policy recommendations to support return migrants through more equitable labor policies and targeted reintegration programs.

The accompanying ethnographic documentary amplifies these findings by presenting the stories of return migrants in their own voices, capturing the emotional and social dimensions of their adaptation. This project combines academic analysis and creative storytelling and contributes to public discourse on migration, fostering empathy and awareness.

While this thesis provides a significant contribution to the study of return migration, it is not without limitations. The three-month fieldwork period offered a snapshot of the adaptation process, but long-term studies could further explore how migrants’ identities and social networks evolve over time. Additionally, expanding this research to include other geographic and demographic contexts would deepen our understanding of return migration as a global phenomenon.

Completing this project has been both a reflective and transformative personal journey. As a researcher with bicultural roots, I have found that the stories of return migrants deeply

resonate with my own experiences of navigating identity and belonging across borders. Their resilience in the face of systemic adversity has inspired me and challenged me to critically examine the intersections of privilege, agency, and vulnerability within the broader narratives of migration.

As I finalize this project, I remain committed to continuing this line of inquiry and film production. This project serves as a stepping stone for future research and creative endeavors that center migrant voices and challenge systemic injustices. By combining academic rigor with visual storytelling, it seeks to inspire further inquiry and advocacy, ensuring that the experiences of return migrants remain at the forefront of migration studies and policy discussions.

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