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El Sueño Mexicano: returning migrant youth's adaptation experience in Mexico

Mexican migration in the US is typically perceived in a South to North direction, with migrants visualizing the “American Dream” as they are walking for days through the desert of Arizona, hiding in a hidden compartment of a car, or “sending” for their children to be brought with another child’s documents. My research is focused on this latter population; those that has no agency in their migration to the US. Even at such a young age some of these children form some sort of understanding that they were not “legal” because of small signifiers like their parents always going to a local store to get their social security, or being prepared by a *coyote* on what to say when crossing the border. You could think of it as a certain kind of rite of passage: at some point in their adolescence their parents will have “the talk” explaining their choice to bring their child to the US to be subjected to an uncertain future with certain degrees of danger and fear. Parents that are never faced with such a decision might be easy to judge this choice, thinking, “I would never expose my child to such a danger or such conditions,” but there are many factors that go into this decision, such as economic, no family to leave their children with, and the basic human desire to be with family.

The question for migrant youth then becomes, “What will be my future in this country?” Some do not even dare to “dream” of any future in the US, and accept that their future would be very similar to their parents; their employment limited to those of the informal sector like babysitting and domestic work, among others. Yarely¹ stated, “*La verdad no pensaba en mi futuro allí, yo pensaba en que trabajo iba yo hacer. Luego más cuando decían que era más difícil para un migrante.*”² Some continue on to take AP/Honors classes, top of their classes, and receive offers from top universities in hopes that they will be able to join their classmates in the college. However, that “American Dream” they soon realized was not constructed for those without documentation. One student I spoke with had not realized this barrier to his “American Dream” until he was stopped by immigration officers at the New York airport; they did not understand how he had obtained a student visa from within the US. He was ready to begin his higher education in Art on a full scholarship. He had received many national awards for his art throughout high school and never questioned his documents until that point. Like Julian, Manuel described the moment he realized this shift, “*I was right on the line [border] and I’m like, ‘Well, this is, this is it for me.’ And looking back I had a dream that hadn’t even started, I’m leaving back a life that I didn’t begin...I took my last breath, and crossed the*

¹ Names have been changed to protect the respondent’s identity.

² “*Honestly I did not think of my future there, I thought about what job I was going to do. Even more so when they said that it was more difficult for a migrant.*” Yarely. Personal interview. 24 July 2015.

border [to the Mexico side]. Sad, but knowing that [pauses] that something is going to be waiting for me in the other side [Mexico].” The physical US-Mexico border reflected Manuel’s identity being caught between both cultures and country, and his “crossing” into a new reality and alternative dreams.

One would expect US citizens and resident students to strive towards the “American Dream,” but this is where it is crucial to keep in mind that while they have documents, many come from mixed status families. Parents’ immigration status has an impact on these youth’s lives and possibilities in the US. I spoke with one young girl, a US citizen who said her father’s deportation affected her mother’s financial situation, and she told her the only way for her to attend college would be to return to Mexico after she completed high school so her father could help her finance college. The majority of US citizens interviewed “returned” to Oaxaca when they were less than ten years old. Unlike most of the non-US citizens I interviewed, they do not speak much English nor remember much about life in the US. Thus, they are better able to incorporate into their new communities in Mexico. Interestingly, though, they feel they need to avoid people knowing they were born in the US because that changes their perception of them because they automatically thought about them as Americans because of their birthplace. The middle school US citizens in Oaxaca continue to pursue the “American Dream” by planning to return to the US for their high school and college education. They prefer to wait until after middle school because English classes begin in middle school, so they see this as preparation for their future journey to the US. Among the older US citizens there is a strong Mexican identity, and they do not have any plans to return to the US. However, among the younger respondents there was a sense of being caught among both US and Mexican citizenship, even though two of them had not obtained their double citizenship.

Return Migrant youth, both with and without US citizenship, arrive in a country that is supposed to feel like home. This, after all, is the country where they were born, where their family feels at home. The next challenge becomes how to incorporate and transform their identity to make sense in a new context. Language and culture become a barrier to these migrants. In the case of my research, return migrant youth dealt with two layers of belonging; feeling and being perceived as Mexican, and also Oaxacan. This includes for many learning or greatly improving their Spanish, knowledge and mastery of colloquial terms and *albur* or double meaning, history, music, food, among other things. For those who spoke English at home while living in the US, incorporation and making sense of their identity becomes more difficult because they are perceived even more so as *gringos* or Americans regardless of their citizenship status. Especially for these returning migrants forming friendships and high school clubs, formerly called “New Dreamers,” with other returnees becomes a crucial part of their adaptation and

incorporation process in Oaxaca. Some stated celebrating American holidays, such as fourth of July and Thanksgiving in Oaxaca, and continue to speak English with their families at home to continue practicing.

The majority of these students continue to be caught or feel no attachment to Mexican citizenship and American citizenship, in a sense they continue to develop a double consciousness that they experienced in the US. Even so, these students and returnees are forming part in shaping their new environments, through becoming English teachers, opening art galleries that welcome global artists, having different ideas about gender roles, and highlighting the complexities of US-Mexico relations, and racial relations within Mexico as well. In order to properly address all the different challenges that accompany this phenomenon, further qualitative research has to be done for future quantitative research can build on.