

STUDY/RESEARCH ABROAD

Las complejidades del retorno: A Xicana in Mexico

by ROXANA JAQUELYN ROJAS



AMID SPILLED coffee and the playback of interviews in the background, the voices of those whose faces are now somewhat a fiction, probably more a false memory, resound *impregnando mis memorias como las manchas de café, círculos imperfectos, sobre mis apuntes en una libreta ya débil*

de viajar. Attempting to find the points of convergence between scribbled notes and static-filled audio, I find that not only were those I interviewed telling me their stories and processing their own experiences of returning to Mexico after forced migration, but I too was unraveling a story that was my own, my own return to Mexico.

I was in Jalisco conducting fieldwork for my thesis and a project on the social impacts of deportation; the struggle of “proving” my Mexican identity was the least of my concerns, or so I thought. Each deportee I spoke to had his or her own identity issues to battle. Some were due to changes in traditional gender roles, the stigma of their identity as *deportados*, the reality of being a Mexican citizen without “papers,” in essence undocumented in their own country, or because the trauma of coming back to a country they barely knew was shaking their core. When I first set up interviews, I was not concerned about

my own Mexicanness or my cultural capital. I grew up Mexicana in the U.S.; I learned Spanish as my first language and know the life story of the Mexican immigrant—I lived it. I had nothing to worry about when speaking to my fellow *compatriotas*. Then the interviews began, and I discovered I was wrong. The interviews were a whirlwind of emotional breakdowns, fierce anger, and eager hope; the disaster after the storm of each interview was what I was left with, to pick up the debris, the broken pieces, to put back the pieces, to find lost pieces. I am sure each person’s process of telling me their story left them with a similar impression and added vulnerability, doubt, maybe even emptiness at not knowing where I would take their story. Who was I to ask them to put themselves in a place of emotional vulnerability for me, a “researcher,” a “gringa,” an outsider?

I questioned my own perceived privilege. I could do what they could not—move, *migrar*. I can cross the border, that gaping wound between our countries, without risking my life or emotional stability (for the most part). I had an identification card and a well-rehearsed spiel that would get me into all the government offices I attempted to enter, offices that even a deserving, concerned citizen would not be allowed to enter, or at least not easily allowed. Questioning my own identity as Mexicana, Xicana, Latina, migrant, educated woman, and a U.S. passport holder was vital to understanding my own place in the picture. Deconstructing the inherent complex power structures



Migrantes wait outside the doors of FM4, an organization in Guadalajara, Jalisco, that provides food, clothing, and temporary shelter.

that existed as a result of my intersectionality of identities and that of those I spoke to was key to the learning I was to experience on that trip, those that followed, and those that are yet to come. I learned a vital lesson that has changed the way I see research and research methods. Interviews are not data.

They are stories, people, lives. I cannot speak of a person as a research subject and feign objectivity.

A professor I had once said, “I laugh whenever academics think that what they write has anything to do with reality.” My hope is that my work, not as an academic, but as a

socially responsible member of humanity, gets a bit closer to addressing reality. It is difficult after seeing and hearing the realities of deportees to consider doing anything to the contrary. I do not think of quantifying or categorizing the pain of someone’s story. It is another way of looking at research, one in which you place yourself as a part of the picture—like a photographer being represented not only in how the picture is taken and how it is presented, but inserting oneself into the vulnerability of the space focused in the lens, sharing the vulnerability with those you wish to capture in the photo. It is a critical perspective that does not feign an unbiased position. It is this perspective that can help us to question and to challenge the way we “do” research and the way we present it as well as the impact it can have.

Challenging the hegemony of traditional academics is what I learned to do. I learned to apply in my methods a challenge to what is considered “valid,” “scientific,” and “legitimate” and to appreciate the space and the relationship between myself and other migrants, not objectify it into the “researcher–research subject” dichotomy. I was able to apply what I had already decided was a necessary method for myself as a researcher and what I think is a more humanizing approach to the scientific process. If we want to be more active researchers, we need to deconstruct the hierarchy of power that exists in social science research. I was a Xicana in Mexico crossing borders of culture and language, a battleground in essence, where those I spoke to were fighting for their identity, and in the process so was I. In the words of Gloria Anzaldúa, “Yo soy un puente tendido/ del mundo gabacho al del mojado,/ lo pasado me estira pa’ atrás/ y lo presente pa’ ’delante.” I reasserted my migrant status, did not feign superiority, and placed myself in a vulnerable position, sharing my own personal story of migration and discrimination. It is this repositioning that has allowed me to see and feel things that I would not otherwise. It is what has allowed me to reconceptualize research and fieldwork into a space of decolonization of power, knowledge, and knowledge production.. 🌟

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Las Vías: The train tracks outside FM4 where many migrants congregate waiting for the train.