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## College Dreams à la Mexicana . . . Agency and Strategy among American-Mexican Transnational Students

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### Abstract

Drawing from in-depth interviews with university-level transnational students in Mexico, we highlight these students' resistance and agency in the face of US legal and educational policies that have marginalized them and other undocumented students. We also illustrate pitfalls and possibilities that students encounter in a Mexican system that has not anticipated their presence. The interviewed students viewed return migration for higher education in Mexico as a strategy that could allow them to access/develop their imagined identities as college-educated professionals and one day, legalized citizens of the United States. At the time they made their decisions, before Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, two students saw returning to Mexico as their best option for eventually becoming college-educated, US citizens and two others were trying to build their lives as global citizens. We conclude with a consideration of the implications of the existence of students like this for higher education and social policy in both Mexico and the United States.

**Keywords:** transnational students, higher education, Mexico, return migration, Proposition 300 (AZ), Arizona

### Return Migration as Strategy and Agency

This article narrates American-Mexican, transnational, university students' stories of transition to higher education in Mexico, a country from which they were estranged (because

of spending most of their lives living in the United States), despite their full-fledged citizenship status there. To provide context, we summarize US and Arizona legal and educational policies, as well as the US economic situation that pressured undocumented families and their children to search for new opportunities by returning to Mexico. Among these children were college-age youth who had spent many years in the United States, but who returned to Mexico upon perceiving blocked educational access as a result of the anti-immigrant laws in the United States.

Drawing from in-depth interviews with Carlos, Sonia, Salma and Germán (pseudonyms), we examine their return migration experiences, highlighting their strategies and agency in the face of US legal and educational policies that marginalized them from accessing higher education and legal employment. Our data thus problematize straightforward connections between citizenship and educational attainment. The narratives provide a chronological account of their transnational educational experiences. Each student explains their reasons for returning to Mexico (often without their parents' initial support), their arrival (including access to limited social networks in Mexico), their college admission process, and finally, the futures they imagine after they complete their current roles as enrolled college students.

### **Marginalizing Policies**

Back in 2006, with a not-yet-stalled economy and a Republican president advocating for the DREAM Act as part of comprehensive immigration reform, thousands of undocumented students and their allies all over the United States marched in support of immigration reform writ large and the particular prospect that undocumented students could legally, and with financial assistance, attend US colleges and universities (see Negrón-González in this issue). These students, many of whom had arrived to the United States as infants and toddlers and knew nowhere else as “home,” had been protected in their access to US K–12 education by the US Supreme Court’s 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* decision. Per the 5–4 majority in *Plyler*, children born outside of the United States and without legal documentation to be in the United States, merited protection in the United States because, as minors, their presence was not viewed as an act of their own volition. This protection included both the right to go to school and a prohibition against schools as sites of enforcement of US immigration law (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1988). It did not extend beyond high school, however.

Not much before the 2006 student mobilizations, Capps et al. (2005) estimated that there were 3 million foreign-born students in US public schools, with 38 percent of these born in Mexico.<sup>1</sup> Capps et al. also estimated that roughly 28 percent (or 840,000) of foreign-born students in US schools lacked legal authorization to be in the United States. All of these 840,000 undocumented students, like every other student in American schools, were subject to the increasingly common expectation that “to combat the soft bigotry of low expectations,” K–12 education should prepare students to attend college or university (Rosenbaum, 2001; Proefriedt, 2008). Hence, these students were taught to aspire for postsecondary education, but neither *Plyler* nor any other means offered them legal access or much financial support to pursue this aspiration. The Pew Hispanic Center estimated that in

2009, one of seven students in Arizona schools was undocumented or a child of an undocumented parent (Griego-Jones, 2012).

For the undocumented students who participated in the 2006 immigration protest rallies, the euphoria and catharsis of that public display soon turned more ominous, particularly in the US Southwest where most of the students who are focused on in this article lived before their move to Mexico. That year, although more than 30 percent of its population was Latino, Arizona passed Proposition 300. That proposition limited undocumented adults' access to English classes and other adult education opportunities, thereby also restricting the prospects of those who attended K–12 education under the protection of *Plyler* from continuing their education.<sup>2</sup> (According to polling at that time, roughly two-thirds of Arizona's Latinos opposed Proposition 300; so it was the non-Latino, mainly white electorate's large-scale support for it that led to its passage [Lomonaco, 2006].) Shortly thereafter, the US economy suffered its most substantial economic recession since the Great Depression. Unemployment grew rapidly, especially in construction and services where many undocumented Latinos were employed.

As the economy worsened, Arizona became an increasingly hostile environment for Latinos. For non-white Latinos, skin color became an even more salient identity marker, as the public discourses that surrounded the infamous Arizona anti-immigrant bill, SB 1070 were founded on racial profiling (even if that particular part of the proposition was later modified). For the undocumented, SB 1070 was even more directly hostile. For them, a return to their homelands seemed like an increasingly plausible survival strategy.

Indeed the declining pull of the United States and the greater push from it seemed to be reflected in changing migration patterns. Despite continued political rhetoric in the United States to the contrary, as Proposition 300 was passed and then SB 1070, large-scale immigration to the United States was ending, at least from Mexico. Jorge Castañeda and Doug Massey (2012) recently acknowledged in a New York Times editorial: “[D]ata from the Mexican Migration Project, a binational effort by demographers and other researchers, indicate that the rate of undocumented emigration [from Mexico] is nearing zero. It peaked at about 55 of every 1000 Mexican men in 1999; by 2010 it had fallen to 9 per 1000, a rate not seen since the 1960s.”

These changes may have been national or even international, but as our focus on Arizona already suggests, these changes were negotiated on a more local and particular scale. The northern Mexican state of Sonora and the southwestern US state of Arizona border each other and have long shared major transportation routes, as well as geography and history. The relationship between Sonora and Arizona has been built on layers of familial and social networks that range from people crossing the border each day for purchases and work, to their crossing the border for migrant settlement. The Sonoran diaspora has heavily concentrated in Arizona, a highly visible phenomenon evidenced by the fact that the Latino population enrolled in K–12 in public schools in Arizona totaled 42 percent of the total student population in 2010.

However, migration to Arizona from Sonora has been undergoing a shift with the rise of return migration, visible in the growth of enrollment of children in Sonoran schools who had once attended US schools since 2007 (Valdéz Gardea, 2011). This has included students

returning to *primaria* (grades 1–6), *secundaria* (grades 7–9), *preparatoria* (grades 10–12) (which has just become mandatory in Mexico), and *universidad* (university).

There is growing research on US/Mexico student transnationalism from the Mexican side (that is, students previously in the United States now in Mexico), much of which is supported by Mexico's National Science Foundation (CONACyT) and the Ministry of Education (SEP). That work has looked at the identity work engaged in by US/Mexico transnational students (Hamann and Zúñiga, 2011a), curricular discontinuities encountered when moving from one system to the other (Hamann et al., 2006; Zúñiga and Hamann, 2009; Hamann and Zúñiga, 2011b), ways the school experience for early elementary children might differ from that of older students (Sánchez García et al., 2012), and national estimates of the size and needs of Mexico's transnational student population (Cave, 2012). However, this research has not focused on students at the university level and, with the exclusion of Valdéz Gardea (2011), has not addressed the particular issues that affect the Mexican border states.

Other research has considered parent-child separation related to migration (for example, Suárez-Orozco, and Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Dreby, 2010), but that, too, has not looked at older children coming into adulthood. This study focuses on transnational young adults who return to Mexico for higher education, an almost invisible population in the literature because they are no longer children, but not quite adults, thereby falling between these two more studied populations.

### **Agency, Community, and Transnational Students**

Being undocumented shaped many aspects of these transnational university students' lives. Living in the southwestern United States, many had "passed" as US citizens until they reached the stage in their education when a valid Social Security number was needed to access higher education. Given the depth of the recession at the time, combined with the anti-immigrant political environment in the region, their possibilities for further educational growth were powerfully truncated. Therefore Mexico, the country their parents had migrated from, in hopes of finding a more prosperous future, became the more promising option for these transnational youth.

These transnational university students' decision to return to Mexico based on a careful balancing of aspirations and ambitions with an appraisal of their extant circumstances in the United States and their future educational possibilities. Unlike the earlier decision to come to the United States (often made for them in early childhood by parents), the decision to leave the United States was frequently made without their parents' initial support. This exercise of agency—Ahearn (2001, 110) defines agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act"—included using more than one national setting in an attempt to mediate the social forces they were subject to or even to outflank them. Smith and Guarnizo (1998) have labeled this agency in the face of structure "transnationalism from below." This exercise of agency is different from that described by some of the other contributors in this issue (for example, Unzueta Carrasco and Seif, Gonzales and Ruiz, and Negrón-González) in both its North-to-South transnational aspect and its use of existing institutions (Mexican universities) rather than the creation of new ones (like youth advocacy networks).

Like many Latinos, the transnational university students in this study faced a number of barriers in their US educational experience (Valenzuela, 1999; Valdés, 2001; Gándara and Contreras, 2010). As Díaz-Strong and Meiners (2007, 6) state, their challenges included: “[P]overty, under-resourced schools, unsupportive educators who lacked cross-cultural competencies, limited English proficiency, misinformation about higher education, and parental support but not parental knowledge.” They also faced the hostile legal and political landscape arrayed against undocumented Latinos, and living under a hostile anti-immigrant environment would provide “dead end lives,” as “educational success is constrained not by curriculum or teacher quality, but by policies that actively restrict their achievement” (Díaz-Strong and Meiners, 2007, 16).

These barriers were structural (although made manifest in day-to-day practice) and existed because of the larger play of the political economy. Cornelius (1989, 4) observed that, “[Immigrant labor] can be brought on board quickly when needed in periods of peak product or service demand and disposed of just as easily when demand slackens.” Spener wrote (1988), “A primary role for immigrants in modern, post-industrial countries is to serve as a buffer between the domestic population, specifically the native-born working class, and the effects of periodic downturns in the economy” (138). The transnational students in this study were coming of age buffeted and constrained by the “bargain” of how their parents had selected to enter the United States. As Hamann et al. (2006, 260) have summarized: “For transnational sojourner students’ parents, there are particular racialized dimensions to seeking work as minority newcomers to a receiving community.”

Cornelius, Spener, and Hamann et al. were describing manifestations of what dual system theorists call the secondary sector of the economy (Piore, 1979; Gutiérrez, 1999). Dual system theory posits that in the primary sector of the economy, jobs are salaried and stable, and an employee’s educational status correlates with the rank and compensation of his/her job position. Because capitalist economies are cyclic, the primary sector has created a more fluid and expendable secondary sector that can be expanded in boom times and reduced during busts. Jobs in the secondary sector can be reasonably well paid, but offer little job security and an employee’s school attainment does not correlate with their wage, job status nor job security. A goal of attending higher education is to gain access to the primary sector.

The transnational students in this study invested amply in this effort to access a new, more prestigious, more stable status—that is, they subscribed to the primary sector’s premise that greater educational success leads to better paying, more stable employment. In the United States they were all successful students and acknowledged as such by their teachers and their peers. Their success helped them imagine themselves as college educated and as competent professionals. Wenger (1998, 176) alludes to imagination as “a process of expanding oneself by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves.” The four students described next all imagined themselves as college students before being old and accomplished enough to become so.

#### **Four Students, Their Professor, and a Change of Narrative Tone**

The four focal participants in this study—Carlos, Sonia, Salma and Germán<sup>3</sup>—were part of an ongoing study at a large university in the state of Sonora, Mexico. Initially, there were

336 transnational university students enrolled at that university, with 58 of them in the B.A. program in English Language Teaching (ELT). That cohort included all four participants whose experiences are discussed in this article. The research objectives of that larger study were: (1) to examine the returnees' migrant experiences and their relationship to their newly developing social and educational experiences in Mexico; and (2) to examine their linguistic and cultural identities during different periods of adjustment to the Mexican college experience. This article focuses on some findings related to the first objective.

In order to achieve narrative flow and to clarify the relationships that allowed the gathering of students' candid perspectives, in the next paragraphs and for the remainder of this chapter, "I" refers to the lead author, Nolvía Cortez Román, while "we" refers to Cortez Román and the participating students. The second author, Edmund Hamann, was not part of the original team that initially collected these data in Sonora but became a contributor to the present article as an expert scholar on transnational students in Mexico.

As a professor in the ELT program, and as a US-Mexico transnational myself, I, Cortez Román, was contacted by some of my students who reported difficulties in Spanish language courses. The students and I both spoke the same variety of English, having acquired it in the US Southwest, and in solidarity, we code-switched like Southwest Spanish-English bilinguals. These encounters reminded me of an identity I thought I left behind when I crossed the border to Mexico and which I picked up again whenever I crossed back over to the United States. However, I came to see that in Mexico I was still an educated, bilingual, bicultural, agentive, primary-sector-employed transnational, that is, holder of identities or statuses to which the participant students either also belonged or aspired to.

It was in these encounters with US-experienced students and from my colleagues' comments that it became more evident that the transnational student population was changing classroom dynamics at my Mexican university. I saw that the transnational students and I formed a particular community of practice (Wenger, 1998), with our shared geographies including more than just a few classrooms in Sonora. Documenting these students, their needs and the funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) they brought to the classroom became my project, one with more than a few autobiographical dimensions.

To carry it out, the first step was to identify students who had graduated from US high schools from a list generated by the university's enrollment office. The first students contacted were in the ELT program. This was for practical reasons; it was the program with the highest enrollment of transnational students and it was the one where I had primary contact with them as a full-time professor in the program. The subsequent mainly qualitative inquiry combined data from interviews and participant observation but also used quantitative data from an examination of enrollment records and surveys carried out with all identified transnational students at the university.

The four transnational students participated in semi-structured interviews that lasted from 78 to 150 minutes. Each interview was analyzed for themes relevant to their return migration experiences, with a focus on their strategies and agency in accessing higher education and legal employment. As previously stated, the interview included four chronological periods: their decision to return to Mexico while in the United States; their arrival to Mexico; their experience once in Mexico, including their college admission process; and finally, their imagined futures upon graduating from college.

Turning the familiar term “Mexican American” around to describe the transnational students encountered in Mexico, Zúñiga et al. (2008) used “American-Mexican” to refer to students encountered in Mexican *primarias* and *secundarias* who had previously lived in the United States. That usage is repeated here, intending the reversal of the familiar word order to draw a parallel to the more important reversal of the typical assumption of Mexico as a sending rather than migrant receiving country. American-Mexican also prioritizes Mexican identity (which is where the students lived, had citizenship rights and were interviewed at the time the study was taking place). However, it should be clarified that this was not a label, per se, that the four transnational student participants used to describe themselves. Indeed, the lack of a precise self-label or an externally offered one may help explain why this increasingly common profile of learner has remained so invisible.

Carlos and Sonia were American-Mexican classmates who enrolled in the Mexican university in 2008, just as the US recession suddenly deepened and the reception for Mexico-born individuals chilled. As Table 1 illustrates, in 2008, enrollment of students with US high school diplomas more than doubled from the previous year at their university.

Year of enrollment	Students who graduated from US high schools
2003	10
2004	20
2005	30
2006	32
2007	20
2008	48
2009	55
2010	88
2011	41

Carlos’s family had migrated to the United States when he was an infant, and as a consequence, he had lived virtually all of his life in the United States, save those first few months. Before moving to Sonora to attend college, he had completed his K–12 education in California, where he had been offered highly competitive scholarships to attend the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). However, Carlos did not respond to the offers, knowing that he lacked a Social Security number. For him, it was important to have a better life than his parents had had, and getting a college education was the obvious way to do that. Given his legal status in the United States, he thought that his only chance for a college degree was to return to Mexico, where he knew he still had some family. He reported:

I never told anyone I was Mexican, and when the guidance counselors congratulated me because of my scholarships, I just said, Yeah, whatever. I never told them I was “illegal” . . . My dream was always to be somebody . . . A university professor . . . I never envisioned myself as working 60 hours and barely making it . . . That’s when I said, I gotta go somewhere where I can make this possible.



(Carlos, interview by Cortez Román, 2011)

Sonia's father had been living and working in Arizona for years, and by the time she was in fourth grade, her father finally had the means to reunite the family and bring her to the United States. In Arizona, she completed her last year of elementary school, along with middle school, high school, and her first year of community college. But the passage of Proposition 300, which meant that students without valid visas had to pay tuition as international students, made community college too expensive for her to continue. She moved to Mexico, the country she had not seen since the age of nine. Once she set foot in Mexico, the only way she could return to the United States again was to cross the border through the desert with a human smuggler. Crossing the border that way carries with it great risk of being caught or dying.

There was this law and the college took away my scholarship. The college gave it to me and then took it back, and then I had to pay for every credit. . . . After the third course I had to pay more than a thousand dollars . . . and that's when I decided to come [to Mexico].

(Sonia, interview and translation by Cortez Román, 2011)

Germán and Salma, enrolled in the Mexican university in 2009 and were in the middle of their program at the time of this writing. Both were high-achieving students. With the exception of Carlos, all the participants began their formal schooling in Mexico, and therefore their Spanish-language literacy likely provided a solid start for acquiring English as a Second Language in US schools. Carlos, Germán and Salma took Advanced Placement Spanish in high school, and Germán even enrolled in Spanish as a Foreign Language courses upon his return to Mexico.

Salma considers herself "an older student," as she was 3 years older than her average classmates because of time "lost" starting but not finishing community college in Arizona. She was unable to complete her studies because of the passing of Proposition 300. She had been one semester away from finishing all of the credits she needed to transfer to a 4-year college. However, once the law was changed, Salma decided to return and obtain an education-related college degree in Mexico. The ELT program was the closest option. She reported,

This was in 2005 when I graduated from high school and I was top ten percent of my class and they told me, you know? They did like college visits and we had people [saying] "with your GPA you go straight to the University of Arizona; you don't need to take any tests; we don't even need your SATs scores." If you belong to the top 10 percent of your graduating class—there's like 500 of us—they give you entrance to the University of Arizona. And then, I looked into their tuition fees and I said I can't pay for them. And they were like . . . we have scholarships and grants, but then I realized that in order for me to get that, I needed like a social security number [she laughs] something I didn't have. So I was like, oh, ok, well my dad can't pay \$6000 a semester, plus books, plus transportation,

plus whatever, . . . So I said, well, I'll just go to Pima [Community College] I guess, which is much more affordable.

(Salma, interview by Cortez Román, 2011)

Germán first migrated to the United States in sixth grade and returned to Mexico his junior year in high school. He was the son of a single mother who immigrated to Tucson with her three children from a small fishing village in Sonora where she had worked as a line worker in a transnational maquiladora specializing in small electronic parts. When Germán returned to Mexico, he was overwhelmed by the layers of legal bureaucracy he had to wade through, as well as the money he needed to become a student in the public educational system. He understood that his only option was to enroll in a small private high school in Mexico with a more relaxed admissions criteria that was originally geared toward students who were denied entry to public Mexican high schools because of their poor academic performance. In his words, *Ahí donde estábamos todos los rechazados* (That's where all the rejects were).

Nonetheless, he soon fared better academically in Mexico. Germán became a top student in his Bachelor's program, despite the fact that he felt self-conscious about his academic Spanish, and was among the handful of transnational students who were enrolled in Spanish as a Foreign Language classes. He had returned to Mexico for reasons similar to the other transnational students: His mother was struggling with employment, and Proposition 300 had limited his ability to go to school in the United States.

So then we started thinking that I wanted to go to college. That had always been my objective: I am going to college. So when they started with Proposition 300, when it passed, then you weren't going to be able to receive any help from the government or scholarships, or loans or anything, then I said it's not going to happen because I wasn't going to be able to pay \$10,000 a semester.

(Germán, interview and translation by Cortez Román, 2011)

The four participants had had extensive schooling in the United States (36 years' worth between them, or an average of 9 years each) and had the English proficiency of native speakers. They also self-identified as educationally successful students in the United States, who had had their college aspirations initially cultivated there. Salma graduated in the top 10 percent of her class. Carlos was offered a scholarship at UCLA; Germán had a high grade point average in school and earlier had transitioned from English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to mainstream classes in less than 2 years' time. Carlos, Germán, and Salma each said they were driven to succeed by their parents, who had emphasized respect for their teachers and a strong work ethic as immigrants to a new land.

At the time of the interviews, the transnational students were newly returned to Mexico and enrolled in a B.A. program in ELT at a public university in Sonora, a Mexican state bordering with Arizona. They were surrounded by Mexican classmates, who were products of Mexican schooling (public and private). When first aspiring to go to a university (while in the United States), none had imagined that they would realize that goal in a Mex-

ican institution of higher education. For the Arizona students, Proposition 300 was the culprit named in all of the interviews for their change of plans. Carlos, who had lived in California, was eligible to pay in-state tuition there (because states vary on if/how they accommodate undocumented students in higher education), but despite his own vague awareness of scholarship possibilities, he never received any information from his guidance counselors to alert him to his possible eligibility for financial support for college enrollment because he never disclosed his actual migrant status to anyone, including his closest friends. Moreover, Carlos, like the other participants, knew that his lack of a US social security number meant that even with a US college degree he would be hindered in using that degree to seek employment without a visa that was only obtainable (and still difficult to get) by leaving the country.

### Parents' Skepticism

One of the most salient interview themes was the parents' initial reluctance to approve and/or support their children's decision to return to Mexico, perhaps indicating a disjuncture between students' and parents' sense of what makes for a good life. For their parents, even if they then lived the "shadowed lives" (Chavez, 2012) of being undocumented, getting to the United States could be conceptualized as an agentive achievement of sorts by, for example, providing a better life economically (as illustrated by being able to fund family reunification in the United States). In contrast, for their children, with their substantial "indoctrination" in US schools (Counts, 1978) that taught middle-class and college-going aspirations, the lack of authorized access to what US society counted as important seemed like a loss.

Education in all of these families was highly valued, even though there were differences between the children and parents as to *how much* formal education was needed, and what was understood as a "good life." For parents, the fact that their child was returning to a country that the parents themselves had left, made the decision a harder one. They shared their children's hope for a better life, but were sometimes under the impression that higher education was not a requirement to "live a good life," which was a logical conclusion given their own direct experience in the secondary sector of the economy (Piore, 1979; Gutiérrez, 1999). Some urged their children to start off at 2-year colleges in the United States, offering to help them financially and encouraging them to wait to see if the political landscape improved, a strategy they followed as undocumented residents themselves. Parents also hoped their coming-of-age children could find employment in the United States and work towards "a better life" that way. For example, both Sonia and Carlos stated that their parents disagreed with their decision to leave:

My dad didn't want me to come [to Mexico], neither did my mom. . . . How was I going to leave the family, if I knew the responsibilities that I was going to take on, if I knew the risks? . . . because I was coming with nothing secure to take the college entrance exam, and so I said, "yes" and Gracias a Dios (Thank God) they supported my decision to come. . . . My dad said he would pay [for] school, but

I knew he had so many bills to pay. . . . Even if I finished my career there I wasn't going to be able to work because of my social security.

(Sonia, interview by Cortez Román, 2011)

My parents didn't want me to come . . . they said: "No, if you go that's your decision . . . you don't necessarily need to get an education to live a good life . . . you can work here."

(Carlos, interview by Cortez Román, 2011)

Yet, at the same time, the US economic recession was not helping the parents' financial situations, and the anti-immigrant environment did not support the belief that things would get better for the children as students or as employees. Deciding to attend college in Mexico, even against their parents' advice, illustrates an agentive coming of age, in relation to both a role in family decision making and transnationalism-from-below-related strategies for interacting with the hazards and opportunity horizons on both sides of the border. The decision to separate from the family meant breaking away from a highly valued institution for many Mexicans. Still, returning to Mexico was a means to outflank the constraining consequences of the increasingly hostile economic and political environment of the United States.

### **Social Ties**

All of the participant students had lived shadowed lives in the United States (albeit with the temporally finite protection of *Plyler*) and had differing degrees of personal ties to Mexico. Germán was the only student who had remained close to a family member in Mexico—his maternal grandmother—when he was in the United States. She offered him sustained logistic support (her home) when he returned. However, the other participants came back with fewer community ties, often just the tangible but limited rights of being Mexican citizens by birth and the prospect of limited help from distant relatives or family friends, who, to be sure, at first reached out to help. After initial stays with these distant connections, several participant students reported feeling isolated and that they had overstayed their welcome. At no small financial cost, they began to live on their own. Carlos and Sonia explained their situations:

I came here [to Sonora] because I had some family here, who I really didn't know. After a while, I just knew I needed to find a place on my own. I didn't really fit in. . . . Now, I hang out with Luis here, and we can count on each other. . . . My family here is just out of the picture.

(Carlos, interview by Cortez Román, 2011)

I stayed there with them [friends of the family] for almost a year, and my dad was like, "When are you going to go with your family?" . . . [I stayed with them] because I know them more than I know my own family. Besides, I've always

thought that living with family is a bit chaotic. So I was like, I don't want to have family problems. So I had to do what I had to do.

(Sonia, interview by Cortez Román, 2011)

The limited social ties of some of these participants presented substantial barriers, as Mexican households place a strong value on family solidarity to function. Multiple strategies, including the deployment of shared "funds of knowledge" (González et al., 2005) by all of the family members, are needed in order to survive economic hardship.

When Sonia and Carlos realized that their support networks in Mexico were weak, they moved out on their own, finding full-time jobs as English teachers in low-paying private institutions and earning just enough to make ends meet. Their typical day consisted of 6 hours at the university and another 5 hours working at the English institute. They complained frequently that they did not have enough time to do school work, as there was little overt connection between their studies and their wage work (although logically there could have been).

Their parents' financial support through remittances was also strained. All four students had initially received financial support, but as the economic recession in the United States worsened, their parents' ability to economically support them declined. With frequent code-switches, Salma explained:

Cuando recién llegué, porque traía dinero, así como que, (when I first got here, because I had money) my dad is like, toma (here) . . . I had \$2000 . . . You are going to move, so you need a lot of things to buy because the house has no furniture. So you need to buy I don't know towels, dishes, whatever. So I remember I would go to the grocery store and I'll be like, oh my gosh, it's so cheap, that's like one dollar. It's like one dollar . . . y luego ya después me doy cuenta de la realidad, empezó a mandar menos y menos dinero . . . y empecé a trabajar ¿no? (So later I realize that he had started sending less and less money . . . and so I started working, right?)

(Salma, interview by Cortez Román, 2011)

As the above stories show, the formerly undocumented students' strategy of returning to Mexico was met by unease and decreasing logistical or financial support from parents. Meanwhile, participants' social ties in Mexico were generally modest and, like a shallow aquifer, only temporarily available before they ran dry. Such a situation called for further agency: balancing their college life with full-time employment. It is important to note that participants' employment choices were based on a self-appraisal of what marketable talents they brought to Sonora. Specifically, their knowledge of the English language and American culture were considered assets in English teaching and call centers in Mexico. Participants were well aware of these discourses that favored them as ideal candidates and they exploited them. All four students were employed either as English teachers or call center employees when they were interviewed and were earning at least three times Mexico's minimum wage.

### College Admission

Perhaps reflecting their importation of American sensibilities to Mexican higher education, not all the participants initially envisioned themselves in the ELT program when they decided to pursue a college education in Mexico, but career choice was an urgent issue that the transnational students faced quickly upon their arrival. Unlike most US colleges, higher education in Mexico requires that the student choose a career pathway before enrolling in the program. Once enrolled, all the courses are then geared towards obtaining a professional degree in that program, and students take very directed and restricted course sequences. Thus, students enrolled in the ELT program take only courses in (applied) linguistics, English and pedagogy from the first day to the last day in the program.

Their next barrier was actually being admitted to the university. Here again, the decision was based on a careful self-evaluation of their cultural capital and feasible future prospects. College admission requires scoring well on the EXHCOBA, the General Exam of Basic Knowledge that tests basic knowledge in Math, Spanish, Life Sciences, and Social Studies as well as oral and quantitative abilities. The tested knowledge corresponds with the national curriculum in the Mexican educational system, a system that the transnational students had either been estranged from for years or did not have direct experience with at all. But there is not a fixed EXHCOBA “cut score” for admission, so how one performs is viewed in relation to the program one is applying to. Learning this, the participants knew that their knowledge in English would be valued in the admission criteria for the B.A. program in ELT, making it a pragmatically attractive choice, even if they had other interests too:

Salma: I wanted to be an art historian because I wanted to be an art history teacher . . . or, you know, a gallery director or something like that.

Sonia: I wanted to be a regular classroom teacher.

Germán: I wanted to study Construction Management.

Carlos: My dream has always been to be a professor of a university.

Still, choosing ELT was based not only on their pragmatic evaluation of the probability of acceptance into a program but also, for several, matched an expressed interest in teaching as well.

I’ve always been interested in education and I think it’s very important. I wanted to be doing my part being a teacher and transmitting that knowledge. And, so I said . . . *da lo mismo, con historia puedo ser historiadora, y quiero ser maestra de historia, pero siempre he querido ser maestra, ¿verdad?* (it’s all the same, with history I would be a historian and I want to be a history teacher, but what I wanted was to be a teacher, right?) . . . So then I thought, I know English, I thought I had a real proficiency in English.

(Salma, interview by Cortez Román, 2011)

The participants' career choice was a further illustration of agency and maturity given the difficulties of admission to a Mexican public university, where only 25 percent of college-age students are able to enroll in higher education institutions.

### **Imagining New Identities**

It is safe to say that the participants chose to pursue a college education because it would not only allow them to adopt new identities as college-educated individuals but also as a catalyst to new professional and educational opportunities. Being Mexican citizens (however dimly they remembered their birthplace), entitled them to an education, and education seemed a keyword to access their imagined identities. For Sonia and Carlos, who planned on returning to the United States there was an understanding that if they returned to the United States as college educated, there was a possibility of doing so legally, as they could be admitted into post-graduate programs and eventually be hired in academia, or be hired as ESL teachers.

I don't see myself living here [in Sonora] exactly for the rest of my life, but I think it would be a good opportunity to spend more time here to get more experience and maybe later on I'll do the exam (to be certified) and work in ESL classrooms in the States.

(Sonia, interview by Cortez Román, 2011)

That is my plan to get into a master's in the United States. Like I said, my dream has always been UCLA. . . . That's my goal, but someday I will be there, whether it's my master's, or teaching there maybe or hopefully. . . . Who knows if it's gonna go on? But, if it doesn't, it wouldn't be because I didn't try.

(Carlos, interview by Cortez Román, 2011)

These aspirations also index calculated strategies, as their college education is a stepping-stone toward acquiring student or work visas. A graduate degree in the United States is definitely a possibility for accomplished, English-proficient Mexican undergraduates and such students can qualify for student visas. Then with graduate degrees students previously labeled as "undocumented" can possibly obtain visas and jobs in the United States.

For Germán and Salma, the move to Mexico allowed them to reflect on their experiences as transnationals between the United States and Mexico, and unexpectedly opened up their possibilities toward a more global transnational identity:

I plan on getting a master's or a doctorate. . . . I want to get a master's in another country because I really like knowing other places. . . . I know Mexico already. But I am not up to getting a master's in the US, because I know the US, I mean the people are very different (from the government) . . . so I want to go to Japan.

(Germán, interview by Cortez Román, 2011)

[The United States] is a consumer-oriented society. Life is stressful. . . . Jobs are stressful . . . the concept they have about time, it's like you lose the human side of the person, but I don't like Mexico either. I don't see myself living here either.  
(Salma, interview and translation by Cortez Román, 2011)

I see myself being a teacher traveling. . . . Oh I will be here two years and there three years . . . in different countries and I look at a map . . . and, oh well, that is how I see my life . . . being like a gypsy kind of thing, wanting to learn languages and cultures and things and read.

(Salma, interview by Cortez Román, 2011)

For these transnationals, skepticism about the United States persisted. Germán's experience of feeling unwelcome, not by the American people per se, but by the government, led him to see Japan as a possibility (he was an avid anime fan) for continuing his graduate studies. Salma, while very critical of the way of life in the United States, at the same time realized that Mexico was not where she saw herself either. She saw herself as a true global and cosmopolitan citizen, living in different countries and learning different languages and cultures. She seems to want to be a grown-up "Third Culture Kid" (Brown and Lauder, 2009; Pollock and Van Reken, 2009). "Third Culture Kid" is the turn of phrase that was first used by "army brats" and children of diplomats whose childhood and schooling spanned enough countries that they felt concurrently global and inadequately national, with their home country feeling unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

### **Expanding our understanding of transnational students**

The stories of Carlos, Sonia, Germán and Salma are evidence that return migration may serve an important role in the transformation from disenfranchised, racialized, secondary sector-bound Latinos, into educated, empowered and resourceful beings. They illuminate a different way of challenging the inadequacies of how the United States contemporarily treats coming-of-age undocumented Latino students than the other articles in this issue and some articles previously published in *Latino Studies* (for example, Wampler et al., 2009). Their stories are evidence of a new education-centric version of transnationalism from below in response to the racist political environment that not only closes off access to American higher education, but also precludes the possibility of living out of the shadows and gaining legal and fulfilling employment in the education-rewarding primary sector. Immigration and educational policies have long intertwined to produce flexible and cheap labor within the United States (Spener, 1988; Díaz-Strong and Meiners, 2007). The students in this study were very aware of this interconnection, and had no intention of, as Carlos pointed out, "working your ass off sixty hours a week to barely make it."

Protected by *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), all four students had been successful in the American K-12 educational system where they absorbed the message that a college education should be the next step. Unfortunately, they were also aware of much more withering stereotypes and expectations. As Santa Ana (2002) and Díaz-Strong and Meiners (2007) discuss, mainstream media frequently circulates representations of "illegals" as criminals, and as lazy



and undeserving of rights creating an almost unbearable environment for undocumented people. Living in the shadows, an undocumented person's "behaviors, identities, and future are criminalized through public policies that are made possible because of public ignorance" (Díaz-Strong and Meiners, 2007, 3). Arizona has been especially active in pioneering such laws, while California, where Carlos was from, also made several politically charged, anti-immigrant changes in the 1990s—that is, Propositions 187, 209, and 227 (Santa Ana, 2002).

In this climate, it comes as little surprise that the bordering state of Sonora (the state of origin of many undocumented residents living in Arizona) has witnessed an important flow of return migrants of all ages in recent years. College-age students were not the exception, given Arizona's passing of Proposition 300 in 2006. Sonia, Carlos, Germán, and Salma returned to Sonora in the hope of transforming an oppressive, imposed identity into a positive one in an ancestral land where certain pathways of higher education were accessible, and where their documentation status, national identity, and race were not identity markers that were targeted in the legal and political discourses.

As seen from the participants' stories, the return to Mexico was similar to a move to a foreign land. Mexico was as unfamiliar to them as the United States had been to their parents. At the same time, their bicultural orientations were a constant in their lives. They had lived and grown up in the United States while living in Mexican households and, to a greater or lesser degree, maintaining social ties to Mexico. Like many immigrants, their acculturation strategies were an important factor in their lives, having to negotiate between two languages and two cultures, looking for alternative ways of self-definition, while coming to terms with their hybrid heritages (Kanno, 2003).

The participants had been successful in the United States, both in the way they learned the English language but also in the way they were able to adapt their cultural orientations to their immediate surroundings. Importantly, school had affirmed them as good students and had given them an identity that all chose to continue to work within when they returned to Mexico. As Germán shared, "So then I started adapting, and I wanted to adapt, I wanted to be a part of where I was. I dedicated myself to learning. I had a lot of pressure. I just had to learn."

Returning to Mexico was obviously not an easy decision for these successful students. Even though they were not US citizens, they had more developed social and familial networks there, and they had appropriate schooling, language, and cultural orientations to continue with the American dream of obtaining a college education. Yet, their legal status proved to have more weight in that political landscape, making Mexico a more viable alternative for continued schooling.

Ultimately, Carlos and Sonia conceived of their college education as a steppingstone to legality in the United States. In their minds, they saw the accomplishment of obtaining a college degree as a legalization strategy. They would return to the United States as educated people, eligible for student visas, graduate-level scholarships, and possible pathways to visa-enabled primary sector employment. Whether or not this vision will be realized is yet unknown, but their perseverance so far highlights resilience and ingenuity in the face of adversity—that is, their exercise of agency in the face of their situations.

For Germán and Salma, their transnational experiences, coupled with their attainment of a college education, allow them to see themselves as transnational global citizens. Their disappointment with the way they were treated by American anti-immigrant policies and/or with the American way of life, allowed them to be critical and to consider that other countries around the world might be viable options in furthering their education, or in carrying out their professions as potential educators. Their biculturalism and transnationalism offered a confidence and a skill set that opened an even broader world.

Currently, little is known about transnational college-age students in Mexico. Transnational students are virtually invisible in the Mexican educational system (although that is starting to change as the CONACYT and SEP-supported research noted earlier suggests) and little is known about their migrant experiences. It comes as no surprise that Mexican educators at all levels do not know what to do when confronted with students with different linguistic abilities and different participatory patterns in the classroom.

On the US side, there has been extensive debate as to whether undocumented students merit access to a higher education and a pathway for citizenship. Benefits of access are pragmatic—access to higher education and eventual citizenship results in a higher contribution to the US economy (Gonzales, 2009). The United States is founded on principles of liberty and justice for all, yet a great question in the current anti-immigrant political environment is whether child immigrants constitute part of this “all.” The 2012 approval of the federal program, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a step in the right direction acknowledging the immigrants who arrived to the United States as children. Under this program, they may apply for a deferred action permit that protects them from deportation for 2 years and also may potentially qualify them for work. Yet DACA says nothing about qualifying them for federal grants that may allow them to continue with higher education, a condition that still inhibits these students’ aspirations.

Hopefully, a more comprehensive DREAM Act may incorporate undocumented citizens into the United States and formally make students like the four featured here part of this “justice for all.” Talented, resourceful and 4-year-college-oriented youth are not the norm in the United States. It is a disservice to waste the talent of *Plyler*-protected, college-oriented, academically accomplished Latino high school graduates who have proven to be successful in their US schooling experiences, and who are aware that they can and should be college educated. Fortunately, even the toughest of laws are not enough to displace the pursuit of dreams. Agency is always possible in reaction to structure (although we should still interrogate why the obstacles have to be so numerous and the pathway so long). Returning to Mexico provided these students with a new platform to imagine themselves as future members of the primary sector of the economy and perhaps as respected professional legal citizens in the United States. As Carlos said of his US aspirations, “I’m going back so people can look up and respect me.”

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### Notes

1. Other contributors to this special issue (for example, Seif, Ullman, and Núñez-Mchuri) offer different estimates for the total number of undocumented students in US schools. Our point is not to challenge these other figures, nor to disagree with other published research (for example, Hoefler et al. (2009) estimating 3.2 million undocumented children and young adults below the age of 24 living in the United States); rather it seems unsurprising that estimates vary given the difficulty of tallying a population interested in living with a low profile and the fact that both the US economic recession and anti-immigrant hostility have precipitated population movement.
2. If undocumented students aspired to attend college in Arizona, this was possible only if they paid international student fees (the highest tuition category available).
3. To respect participants' confidentiality, the names provided in this study are pseudonyms.

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