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Children's voices about 'return' migration from the United States to Mexico: the 0.5 generation

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Abstract

Since 2004, our research has focused precisely in those minors who 'returned' from the United States to Mexico. Our interest has been to know the social, geographical, educational, and symbolic trajectories of those migrant children and adolescents who are part of the contemporary move of returnees. Based on the children's narratives (all collected before US November 2016 federal election), we now have a multifaceted response to the question: How and why are young Mexican migrants returning from the United States to Mexico? Some of these returnees were born in Mexico and arrived to the United States when they were young. International migration literature describes them as members of the 1.5 generation. But others were born in the United States and often started school there. They did not 'return' to Mexico, they arrived to their parents' home country for the first time in their lives. We call them the 0.5 generation.

Keywords: Mexican migrants, migrant children, return migration, Mexico and the United States, children's narratives

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Introduction

This article is part of a two-decade research project on children who have moved from the United States to Mexico since the start of the twenty-first century. This research project has included an interdisciplinary dialogue (anthropology, sociology, demography, geography, education, and linguistics) about children's cosmologies and geographic itineraries, as well as their processes of integration (or lack thereof) in Mexican society and its institutions. All these children have something in common: they are international migrants because they crossed the border. Some of them are migrant returnees because they were born in Mexico then moved to the United States, and then returned to Mexico. Others were not returnees at all because they were born in the United States and moved to Mexico, the country that was generally the home country of their parents and extended family.

Heeding Dobson's invitation (2009) to *unpack children in migration research*, our work has focused on expanding the 'knowledge of children's experiences [of migration] from their own point of view' (357), acknowledging that as a 'central aim for children's geographers' (357), but also for anthropologists and sociologists studying children's international migration. Our methods privilege migrant children's representations, explanations, cosmologies and narratives, while they only tangentially broach children's emotions.

We agree that mapping emotions (Chakraborty and Thambiah 2018) is an essential task for geographers, sociologists and anthropologists of childhood. However, our emphasis on children's representations has allowed us to incorporate their categories and reformulate 'adultist constructions' (Holt and Holloway 2006) of chronicles about international migration.

This article has two purposes. First, to describe, classify and analyze migrant children representations about 'return' migration from the United States to Mexico; second, to contrast children's definitions about their migratory experiences with those of US and Mexican scholars specializing in international migration. Doing this, we argue that considering children's voices provides a new approach to defining different periods of the 100+ years of people moving between the United States and Mexico. This approach will offer a different typology of periods based on children - and their parents - experiences, aspirations, and practices.

In the following section, we start with our second purpose and review critically the *adultist* and standardized way scholars have chronicled migration between Mexico and the United States. Then, we continue with our first purpose, describing children's representations before confronting these orthodox, even canonical, scholarly framings with the material we collected from mobile children and their families. We aim to offer a new way of considering United States/Mexico migration based on children's own narratives and explanations. We see this reformulation as the most relevant contribution of our paper and return to it in the conclusion.

Before presenting our empirical findings, we propose a new category (the *0.5 generation*, that we have discussed recently elsewhere – Zúñiga 2018; Zúñiga and Giorguli Saucedo 2019 – but that is not yet broadly known).¹ We think this helps communicate more clearly than older, better known taxonomies used by geographers, sociologists, and anthropologists today. We argue that we need to highlight the very nature of children moving from an archetypical country of immigration (United States) to a historic country of emigration (Mexico). And we want to note that thinking in terms of first generation (or second or third) misses the point that these children's moves/returns to Mexico are not fully something new and culturally unfamiliar.

The canonical way of chronicling United States/Mexico migration

Scholars studying US/Mexico migration like chronological markers to distinguish the various periods of movement of people between both countries. As a result of this, they usually utilize the dates of US legal reforms to distinguish different migration periods from the nineteenth century to the present. For instance, the literature distinguishes the 'Bracero Era' (1942–1964) – when agricultural Mexican workers were 'imported' by US farmers under a bilateral labour agreement between the Mexican and the US governments – from the 'IRCA period' (Immigration Reform and Control Act, 1986–1996) when 2.3 million Mexican migrants legalized their residency in the United States (Kalavita 1994).

As a result of this convention, the post-IRCA period of migratory back and forth flows between both countries has been labelled the

'Era of Restriction and Recession' (Leal and Rodríguez 2016). From the start of Bill Clinton's second presidential term (1996), restrictions began intensifying, but this was exacerbated both during and after the Great Recession (2007–2009) in the United States (Rodríguez 2011). In this most recent era, legal obstacles are increasing, with accelerating deportations, new restrictive local and state level ordinances, and strengthened bureaucracies for controlling migrants (Bhatt and Bryan 2012; Golash-Boza 2015). The Trump Administration did not initiate these changes, but it is implicated in a related rise in xenophobic and anti-Latinx/anti-Mexican rhetoric and attempts to further 'harden' the US/Mexico border.

This method of delineating periods of migration history (using dates and facts associated with enactment of various laws) underlines and privileges the will of the State because of its power to open or close doors, attract or remove immigrants, and legalize or 'illegalize' foreign-born people. However, that State-centred dominant way of chronicling international migration processes eclipses and obscures the strategies, responses, resistances, and/or decisions taken by migrants themselves and their children. In this paper, we propose to look at those migrant children's social practices, beliefs, and aspirations as alternative tools for establishing periods and characterizing each of them.

Certainly, migrants as social actors act amidst political, economic, and legal constraints. But in the middle of those restrictions, migrants create and pursue their own strategies and agency. These various scenarios have to be considered if we seek to catch the whole story of what propels return migration to Mexico and its implications for Mexican communities.

The migrant children we have met and studied were trying to develop epistemologies for understanding why they left the United States and 'returned' to Mexico. Taking seriously the emic categories and idioms (Harris 1976; Wolcott 1988) used by children, lets us examine three issues more closely. First, we classify and analyze the children's answers to the question: 'Why did you return to Mexico?' Second, we view those answers through the lens of a classic dichotomous typology of return migration: voluntary versus forced migration. Third, we show in which senses children are agents of the migratory decisions that they participate in as parts of their family. Doing this, our paper

shows children's definition of the last period of US/Mexico migration. We have decided to call this period the *family-reunification-in-Mexico* period because that squares with what children told us.

Before analyzing data collected from our surveys and in-depth interviews, we want to clarify how we depart from a dominant way of thinking of these children. Imagining the United States as an archetypical country of immigration and Mexico as classic example for emigration, traditional label for naming those who immigrate to a new country is first generation. Children born to this 'first generation' are then known as 'second generation' while the first generation's grandchildren are 'third generation', and so on. This counting system, however, does not function as well if/ when children return to Mexico or 'emigrate' to their parents' homeland. Labels like first generation and second generation don't seem to readily apply once children are (back) in Mexico. There, they are not members of the first generation or second generation anymore, nor of 'Generation 1.5' (which we further clarify below).

Who are these children: the 0.5 generation

We suggest that the label *0.5 generation* for these transnationally mobile youth helps us conceptualize how these child/youth voices and perspectives matter and illuminate geographical dynamics of migration. In one sense, Mexico is becoming a country of immigrants, and an important component of those immigrants is the mobile children we have been describing (Zúñiga and Giorguli Saucedo 2019). For those moving from Mexico to the United States, the international migration literature describes such youngsters as 'the 1.5 generation' (e.g. Harklau, Lose, and Siegal 2009; Rumbaut 2004), '1' because they are first generation (i.e. the migrating generation), but '.5' as a qualifier to point out that the migration occurred in childhood.

Yet we propose that there is a quandary when members of the 1.5 generation return to Mexico. Should they no longer be separately signified because they are back in their birth country (even if their first memories are of the United States because they left as infants or toddlers)? We also wonder about what to call the so-called second generation (children born in the United States to first generation immigrant

parents) when they move to Mexico, their parents' home country. From a US perspective, they are the 2.0 generation (Portes 1996), but that label ignores the point that they are no longer in the United States and that their 'new' country is somewhat familiar because of their parents' experiences and other ties. While we could label these youths as part of a 1.5 generation as well (albeit 1.5 to Mexico and not to the United States), to distinguish them from the born-in-Mexico-moved-to- United States-returned-to-Mexico population, we are instead calling them the 0.5 generation. It should be noted that many in the 0.5 generation have birthplace citizenship rights in the United States, whereas those who were known as generation 1.5 youth when they were in the United States may not.

The original articulators of the idea of generation 1.5 were commenting on migration between Mexico and the United States, but the phrase originates chronologically from when the primary movement was to the North, and the creators of the label wanted to distinguish between the experience of first generation children, who though born in Mexico had scant memories of it and primarily came of age in the United States, and that of their parents, who had much more vivid experiences in both places. Both parents and children were technically 'first generation', but children were in many ways more like the second generation (the generation without lived experience in the homeland) because they remembered so little of their country of origin.

Generation 1.5 is an important and influential label. Indeed, it helps articulate a key logic for the powerful label DREAMers (which references the young adults who came to the United States as children) and more recent label DACA, which references President Obama's executive order for Deferred Action on Child Arrivals. In short, the label generation 1.5 has helped emphasize that for a generation of Mexican newcomers to the United States, even though they were born in a different country, the United States is their home. Even three years into the 'Trump Era' at a time of widespread US xenophobia, this logic has resonated. We do not want to argue against the 1.5 generation label.

However, for our purposes attempting to describe the experiences of children and youth who have moved/returned to Mexico, using the label generation 1.5 is not ideal. While it is true that the label does describe some in our sample – some were born in one country (the United States) but have mainly come of age in another (Mexico)

– trying to use the same label risks confusion (are we now talking about youth and young adults in the United States or Mexico?), ignores that many in our sample actually have the more complex trajectory of Mexico-United States-Mexico, and also ignores that, even for those born in the United States, Mexico was the home country of their parents and/or grandparents.

The turn-of-phrase ‘generation 1.5’ is used in the literature to emphasize when in the life cycle immigration occurred. With the ‘point five’ pointing out that the migration occurred in childhood, so calling them ‘first generation’ is misleading because they really have limited recollection of their birth country. In a similar manner, the word play of *generation 0.5* is that it invokes childhood mobility. The ‘point five’ part is indicative of geographical mobility, while the ‘zero’ pushes back at the framing of being an immigrant or emigrant and instead illuminates something embryonic, of being of both sides (Zúñiga 2018).

So instead of generation 1.5, we are proposing here the label *generation 0.5* to describe the children and youth we found in Mexico with prior experience in the United States. We like how the ‘point five’ in the generation 1.5 label references geographical mobility during childhood as being different to geographical mobility as an adult, so we want to preserve that, but we choose ‘zero’, instead of ‘one’, or several numbers, or an algebraic variable like ‘generation X’, for a few more reasons. We want a single label that encapsulates our whole sample. While there are important rights differences between children born in Mexico with US experience, and those born in the United States (because the latter clearly have citizenship rights in the United States that the former often do not), there is also some coherence to our sample irrespective of birth country.

Together they form a generation that brings a different experience and different worldview. Together they have more familiarity with the English language and the ubiquity of technology in US classrooms and public institutions, like libraries. Most crucially, they share the idea that, semiotically, being *of* a nation is contingent. After one comes two, after two comes three, but after zero, because of its location at the pivot point of a number line, it is not clear what comes next (one? minus one?). Is one going *forward* to Mexico or *back* to Mexico?

We prefer *generation 0.5* because we want to escape the implications of being of an immigrant generation. With generation 1.5, the

one references being a first generation immigrant. We are not sure children in our sample are well described as being immigrants or emigrants, suggesting they are clearly from one nation and clearly now in another (although they are migrants). Children in our sample often referenced the State, but their view of their move/return to Mexico was usually not primarily about the State. Rather their emphasis – as we are going to show in the findings section – was on family reunification and/or the contingent necessity of continued binational family dispersal. Some felt counted/heeded by their families in the decision to move; a smaller group felt excluded and angered by that exclusion, but in practically all cases family (including extended family) was part of the framing for explaining their mobility.

As we have argued elsewhere (Hamann and Zúñiga 2011), it is not clear that *generation 0.5* always feels welcome in Mexico. Nor is there a consistent perspective about the United States and the viability/desirability of living there. It is a generation that is between nation states and embedded in families and family calculations as it negotiates where to live and what to aspire for. While in current size (several hundred thousand) it is dwarfed by the mononational coming-of-age populations in both the United States and Mexico, perhaps it is also a vanguard generation, particularly as the xenophobic Trump administration in the United States, precipitates new rounds of mobility and contingent household planning with more children and youth coming to Mexico. As a vanguard generation, it merits a memorable label that enables it to be seen, recognized, and accounted for. The worlds of migration research, children's geographies, and education policy need to account for *generation 0.5*.

Sources of data

We used two main tools for interacting with migrant children. One was a survey applied in Mexican schools (6–12 years old). The youngest children (6–8 years old) only responded to a few oral questions, so the written survey answers exclude them. The surveys were conducted at a stratified random sample of schools in five different Mexican states at different dates (see Table 1).² The stratification was based on *municipio*-level (county-level) participation in international migration;

Table 1. Main characteristics of the student's samples.

State	Survey year	Schools in the sample	Children surveyed	Children with previous schooling in the US (in the sample)		Children born in the United States without school experience in the US (in the sample)	Children interviewed after the survey
				Born Mex	Born US		
Nuevo León	2004–2005	173	14,473	178	68	90	63
Zacatecas	2005–2006	218	11,258	134	93	145	78
Puebla	2009–2010	214	18,829	51	56	101	33
Jalisco	2010–2011	200	11,479	213	149	124	5
Morelos ^a	2013–	4	1,383	45	16	23	12
Totals		809	57,422	621	382	483	191

Source: International Migration Inter-institutional Seminar: School, Family, and Return Migration Databases.

a. The Morelos sample is not representative of the universe of students enrolled in state school system.

we wanted to be sure in each state we were including schools that included all types of likely migration dynamics. The questionnaire we used for the surveys included 15 questions for all students and then two addendums. One addendum with 11 questions was for children without previous school experience in the United States. In contrast, the second addendum was for children with previous school experience in the United States; it included 40 items. Respondents answered prompts related to their family, school experiences, internal and international migration, and vision of the future. One of the questions included in the second addendum was about the journey/return from the United States to Mexico. Because it was answered only by those with previous school experience in the United States, there were survey respondents who had been born in the United States or briefly lived there as toddlers who were excluded from describing their international journeys.

The surveys generated 1522 responses from children with international migration experience. Among those with international residential experience, 41 per cent were born in Mexico, 57 per cent were born in the United States, and the remaining 2 per cent came from other countries. Two thirds of these children had been enrolled in US schools, while the rest of them started their schooling in Mexico with their international migration predating their school enrolment. Children who arrived in Mexico when they were very young (0–7 years

old), with very few exceptions, did not remember their life in the United States very well. Often, they did not even know exactly where they were born or where they had lived. However, they did know if they were US citizens because of their birthplace. So the bulk of the information we possess comes mainly from children and adolescents aged 9 to 16, who had prior experience of being enrolled in US schools.

The second tool we used was in-depth interviews (also referenced in Table 1). All 191 of those interviews were conducted in schools, excepting a few that we made in the state of Morelos. In that region, some of the interviews we have conducted were in children's homes and thus sometimes also included conversations with parents, grandparents, and siblings of the focal migrant children. During the interviews, we discussed six main themes at greater or lesser length depending on the child's interest in that particular topic: (a) Life in the United States; (b) Moving to Mexico; (c) Mexican schools; (d) US schools; (e) Current links with family members, friends, and peers in the United States; and (f) Any specific questions we derived from reviewing interviewees' earlier responses on the written questionnaire.

While those interviews and surveys were conducted in different years, only one important difference appeared comparing responses from the first two states (2004 and 2005) and the last three (2009–2013): the context of return migration. The contextual fact making a difference was the Great Recession in the United States that occurred in 2008–2009. When we collected data in 2004 and 2005, the Recession had not started yet. The difference was essentially quantitative, not qualitative. In the last three samples, returning children still described similar factors to explain their returns (i.e. family reunification, parents tiring of the United States, anti-immigrant atmosphere, job scarcity, deportations, etc.). While deportations were cited by international migrant students in all five states, in each case it was a factor mentioned by only a small segment of the total.

From the surveys, we got 638 short narratives where members of Generation 0.5 responded to the question: Why did you return to Mexico? From the interviews, we obtained 191 stories of return migration, some eloquent and detailed, others much briefer. In this paper, we decided to classify and analyze the 638 short responses and then to summarize some illustrative, typical accounts told by three of the interviewed children.

Findings

(a) Moving from the United States to Mexico through children's eyes: The *Family-Reunification-in-Mexico* period

Analyzing and classifying the short answers written by children that illuminated their understanding of the decision process that had led to their move/return to Mexico, we arrive at one conclusion: they were almost always forced migrations, but 'forced' summarizes a variety of explanations and may obscure the very real differences in how children understood the facts of their mobility. Very often State policies (*migration deported my mom*, survey in Jalisco, 2010), legal ordinances (*legal troubles my father had*, survey in Zacatecas 2005), economic forces (*jobs [of his father and mother] worsened*, survey in Puebla, 2009), fear (*I was afraid they [ICE agents] push them to come back, and then I would stay alone*, survey in Puebla, 2009), and undesirable conditions of life (*because my parents don't like it [life in the United States] me either*) forced them to leave the United States.

But for children, the most important motive for returning was the desire to live together. Family reunification seems to be the way migrant families are facing the legal, economic, and political macro-conditions that acted against them (see Table 2). For instance, when a child wrote *I wanted to meet my father and stay here* (survey in Jalisco, 2010), she was telling us that the border was dividing her family (Dreby 2010). Thus, often, the only strategy some migrant families found for resolving this dispersal was reunification in Mexico.

More often, children did not refer to State forces (or labour market unfavourable conditions) but rather to family dynamics for explaining the crucial decision to return to Mexico. One particularly important issue is what we have classified as 'family duties' and 'family troubles' (Table 2). Children's accounts about these two issues represent 20 per cent of the responses. Grandparents' illness (*my grandparents were sick*, survey of Morelos, 2013), parents' desires (*because [sic] my mom b grandma b grandpa wanted me to study for a moment here* – [in original English], survey of Jalisco, 2010), parents' nostalgia (*because my mother got sad*, survey of Puebla, 2009), death of family member, divorce (in the US), and conflicts between parents or grandparents were among other explanations for children's move from the

United States to Mexico. In those explanations, children did not point to political or economic contexts, but family ones: *My mother wanted to sue my father* (survey in Zacatecas, 2005); *because my parents divorced and my father went to jail* (survey of Puebla, 2009). Again, in these accounts, children did not characterize themselves as involved in the decision to return/ move to Mexico. Troubles and duties had forced them to move, but 'forced' can be as much recognition of parents or guardians as decision makers and not necessarily any sort of legal action by the State.

In other cases, children were subject to decisions taken by their parents in order to protect them or otherwise attend to their well-being. This kind of condition was especially visible when children transformed the question 'why did you return to Mexico?' ('you' is singular in the Spanish version of the question) to a third person response invoking the pronoun 'they (parents)', or nouns like 'my mother' or 'my father' as follows: *my mother did not want to let me alone in Los Angeles* (survey in Puebla, 2009); *my mother came back and wanted me to visit my brothers and sisters [in Mexico]* (survey in Morelos, 2013); *they wanted to support my uncle who was running for mayor [in family's town of origin]* (survey of Zacatecas, 2005).

Finally, we found narratives where clearly children felt explicitly excluded from the returning decisions and rationale (see Table 2). These were the cases of children who did not understand or did not know why they returned to Mexico (almost 16 per cent of the children's responses). In this category, we included the exceptional cases where children clearly explained to us that they were against the decision taken by their parents or relatives: *My mother thinks that the social environment is better in Mexico. I don't*, (survey in Nuevo León, 2004). Shorter responses also highlighted children's sense that what they wanted was not part of the decision: *My parents forced me to come* (survey in Zacatecas, 2005); *I never understood why* (survey in Morelos, 2013); *my father did not want to stay there [the United States]* (survey in Jalisco, 2010); *dad and mom took me back* (survey in Zacatecas, 2005). We found also answers to the question 'why did you return to Mexico' where explicitly children wrote: *I don't know why*.

Comparing short answers, we did not find significant differences between girls and boys, nor between different regions of Mexico or

Table 2. Why did you return to Mexico? (Children's written narratives).

<i>Child's explanations of returning move</i>	<i>Types</i>	<i>Total (%)</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Circularity	Transient circularity	17 (3%)	Every year we come back and then return to the United States
	Planned return to Mexico	23 (4%)	We were there [the US] just for saving money
Schooling	Finish studies in the United States	10 (2%)	My father was studying in the United States and he finished
	Continue schooling in Mexico	27 (4%)	My parents wanted I learn Spanish
Family	Reunification	136 (21%)	We wanted to be with our father, my brothers and sisters
	Troubles	73 (11%)	My mom and my dad had problems
	Duties	58 (9%)	My grandpa was sick and my mother was in despair and she wanted we came
Life style/perceived danger	Unacceptable life or future in the United States	39 (6%)	We couldn't go out/we got bored/my father was exhausted
	Mexico is better	37 (6%)	We missed Mexico
Job	Job scarcity in the United States	26 (4%)	My dad had no job in the US
	Job opportunities in Mexico	23 (3%)	My father's job here is better
Legal status	Deportation, fear of deportation, legal issues	61 (10%)	My father got deported/we feared being deported
Unknown or disagreement	My parents just decided	99 (15%)	I don't know why
	Disagreement	4 (0.5%)	My parents forced me
Other	Fill out legal formalities	5 (1%)	My father wanted to get my mother's papers in order
	Religion	3 (0.5%)	My father is a minister of church affairs

Source: International Migration Inter-institutional Seminar: School, Family, and Return Migration Databases.

different times. Table 3 shows a comparison between the results of Zacatecas survey (December 2005) and Morelos one (September 2013). As one can see, responses provided by children aged 9–16 in 2005 and in 2013 coincided in that family reunification, duties and troubles were the most relevant to Generation 0.5 explanations of their migration. There were some differences but they leave intact the main findings. The lack of differences between girls' and boys' responses, suggests the power of 'sending' and 'receiving' forces, including family reunification in Mexico, were more powerful than any patterned gendered ways of knowing, although girls were slightly more likely to note perceived dangers than boys.

Table 3. Comparing children responses to the question 'why did you return to Mexico?' Surveys conducted in Zacatecas (December 2005) and Morelos (September 2013).

Child's explanations of returning move	Zacatecas (n = 180)		Morelos (n = 45)		All five samples (n = 638)
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	
Family (reunification, duties, troubles)	60%	60%	50%	57%	41%
Life style/perceived danger	17%	13%	21%	10%	12%
Other	23%	27%	29%	33%	47%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

(b) Sources of 'return' migration through children's eyes: The *Family-Reunification-in-Mexico* period driven by expulsion forces

Let us summarize the 'return' migration of Beto who we interviewed several times between 2013 and 2019 in the state of Morelos. He was born in Mexico in 1999. His father moved from Morelos to California when Beto was just a year old. Several months later, his father wanted to reunite the family in California. So when Beto was two, he crossed the border without authorization, using the services of a US couple who said at the border check point that Beto was their son. About one month later, his mother also crossed the border without authorization. So, Beto was raised in Santa Ana, California where his parents worked hard in hotel services and restaurants. Beto became a Californian child and adolescent like his peers in the school. Not surprisingly, his primary language became English although he spoke Spanish with his parents.

However, when Beto was fourteen his life was suddenly disrupted. One day, Beto's mother was leaving their house and someone tried to rob her cell phone. She reported the incident to the police and the thief went to jail. Unfortunately, the thief was a member of a gang and other gang members went to Beto's parents' house and threatened to kill Beto if they did not leave town. So Beto's parents decided to leave the United States in a hurry. Several years after those events, Beto maintained that he still did not understand the 'real' reason of their 'return'. However, once in Mexico, he learned that he had been an undocumented young man living in California. He learned this only when he told his parents that he wanted to return to Santa Ana (Román, Carrillo, and Hernández-León 2016).

Mary's story (12 years old, Puebla, February 2010) of returning was short and overwhelming. She was born in North Carolina and lived there with an aunt. When we asked her why she came to Mexico, she simply responded – in Spanish-:

I came because I wanted to see my mother, I hadn't see her for long time. She wanted to have me here, and I wanted that too. And then, my mother asked me: 'Do you want to visit me or to stay with me?' She left me to make the decision. So, I wanted to stay here with her.

A migrant child who was participating in the same conversation asked Mary: 'For a while or forever?' Mary answered: 'I think, forever'. Mary did not tell us if her mother had previously been deported. Mary did not talk about her father. We did not get information about why her mother had left North Carolina. We can even conjecture about whether her father had abandoned the family or died or if Mary did not know who her father was. Yet those speculations go well beyond what Mary shared. The only thing we know for sure is that Mary came to Puebla to live with her mother and that family reunification explained her migration and continued presence in Mexico.

A third 'returning' story comes from an interview in Zacatecas. Jackie was 10 (November, 2005) when we met her in Las Adjuntas del Refugio, a small town in the municipality of Villanueva. She was born in Chicago and had lived there the first seven years of her life. When we asked her why she moved from Chicago to Las Adjuntas, she answered literally: *my mother wanted to come to celebrate the town's holy days*.³

Jackie was an easygoing girl, and we engaged in a long conversation with her. During the interview, we learned that her father was still working in Chicago, that many members of her family were in Chicago (including her grandparents), that her younger brother was also born in Chicago, but that her mother had no authorization to live in the United States. Jackie knew that her father had 'papers' for residing in the United States. While we can speculate if her mother might have offered a different answer about the relevance of legal status to explain why she was in Mexico, for Jackie, the decision to move from the United States to Mexico had nothing to do with legal issues, but rather her mother's desire to celebrate her town's holy days every year.

When we asked her at two different points in the interview if she wanted to return to the United States, Jackie brought up different themes: (a) she explained that her emotional ties (friends, cousins, aunts, etc.) and her preferred lifestyle were in Las Adjuntas, yet (b) she told us that during her grandmother's most recent visit to Las Adjuntas (from Chicago) that her grandmother and her mother almost decided to send Jackie back to Chicago to live with her father. Jackie did not explain why they finally decided against it. Thus, 10-year-old girl knew that she was not the one who made the decisions about where she would live, but she also knew that the prospect of being in either country remained open. She had not emigrated from the United States, nor immigrated to Mexico in the sense of fully leaving behind one life or fully engaging with another.

In sum, neither Beto, nor Mary, nor Jackie had participated in a 'voluntary' decision to migrate to Mexico. However, they had also not been deported. Complicating the story even more, Mary and Jackie are US citizens. State policies and rules could not have removed them. Nevertheless, in their mind, they were forced to leave the United States. Beto's 'return' was forced by the dangerous environment in California, Mary and Jackie's 'returns' were linked to their mother's lack of documentation and the threat of their primary caretakers' deportation. There is a hint in Mary's account that she could indicate a preference regarding who she wanted to be with (i.e. her mother); in this sense, for her, moving to Mexico seems to be a personal decision.

(c) Children as the protagonists of *family reunification*

A very common syntax used by children, in the questionnaire, for explaining their migration began with 'they (or he/she)' referring to their fathers, mothers, or grandparents. Their written formulations follow this logic: 'I returned to Mexico because *they* decided or because *they* had troubles or because *they* were sick or because *they* lost their jobs or because *they* were undocumented or because *they* wanted to prevent deportation', etc.

However, we found 71 children responses where children changed the syntax in a different direction. In these latter mini-narratives, the protagonists of the accounts were the children themselves, as if they had made the decision to return. Among those responses, the most

frequent ones were related with yearning/homesickness and children regularly utilized two verbs: to *miss* and to *like*, as follows: *I missed my family, I mean my grandparents, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins, so I did not want to go back [to the United States] (survey in Zacatecas, 2005); I like very much my country [referencing Mexico] and I missed everything [when she lived in the United States] (survey in Jalisco, 2010); I like it here, I don't like it there (survey in Jalisco, 2010)*. Thus, some Generation 0.5ers included their preferences in their explanations for why they had moved/returned. In those cases, they did not see themselves as forced migrants; they were choosing the place where they wanted to live.

In other kind of responses that started with 'I', children stated that they opposed living separate from their families. According to these responses, they moved from the United States to Mexico because they (children themselves) did not want to live separate from their families: *I could not stand anymore living separated from my mom and dad (survey of Zacatecas, 2005); I wanted to live with my parents (several times, surveys of Puebla, 2009 and Jalisco 2010)*. Thus, once again, some children appeared to see themselves agentively as actors who made the decision about with whom and thus where they would live.

Finally, we found 21 additional answers where children referred to factors they considered when deciding to migrate that also suggest they felt centrally involved in the decision to move/return to Mexico. Because these responses were so wide-ranging, we present several of them: *I couldn't go out [to the street, to have fun, to play, to see friends] (survey of Nuevo León, 2004); I really did not like the country (survey of Zacatecas, 2005); My dad and I were there alone and I did not like there (survey of Zacatecas, 2005); I was bored in the United States (survey of Zacatecas, 2005); I don't like that society [U. S. society] (survey of Jalisco, 2010); I had conflicts with my relatives (survey of Zacatecas, 2005); I wanted to know how Mexicans schools are (survey of Jalisco, 2010)*. These children were saying that they were the protagonists; they had migrated because they wanted to.

As an aside, in many of these answers, our young respondents also reference a dynamic discovered by Reese (2002) in a comparison of parenting strategies by siblings who, variously, were raising children in Mexico and the United States. Reese suggested that siblings' variations in how they reared children were not likely to be much

influenced by how they were parented (as presumably siblings' experiences as children in the same households were largely similar) and instead were more influenced by their read of the environment in which they were raising their children. Reese discovered that Mexican-origin parents in the United States often forbade their children to be out and about in dangerous US neighbourhoods, while their still-in-Mexico siblings were less vigilant and restrictive of their children's movements (feeling Mexico was safer). Many of the transnational children's responses point to similar understandings.

Conclusions

Viewing facts from macro-structural forces that remove migrants from the countries of destination to the countries of origin, children will typically be subordinate social actors buffeted by the political decision making and labour market changes that their parents and other caretakers have to react to. From this perspective, the mobility of Generation 0.5 was just a by-product of the will of the State and its officials.

In contrast, viewing United States to Mexico migration from migrant children's representations, we can briefly trace the last eight decades of migratory history in three basic phases. The first one may be called *migration without family* or the *children left behind era* (Zúñiga 2015). During that period (1940s-1980s), Mexicans participating in that migratory flow were mainly older youth and adult males who circulated between both countries and generally stayed for short periods in the United States while their families continued living in Mexico (Durand and Massey 2007). While there were exceptions, for more than fifty years of migration, a leaving-children-behind-and-migrating-temporarily logic dominated. That strategy involved several steps: leaving Mexico, working and networking in the United States, saving money for the well-being of migrant's children and spouses, returning to Mexico, preparing older sons to join the cycle because that seasonal and circular pattern included intergenerational blending and then replacement (i.e. sons joined fathers in back and forth journeys until fathers, because of their advancing age or declining health, decided to stop travelling between both countries and stayed in Mexico, but sons continued to migrate).

That circular-youth-adult-male migration declined during the second half of 1980s and then more sharply during the 1990s and 2000s as militarization of United States/Mexico border made regular crossing more expensive and dangerous. Once Mexican migrants reached the United States, they prolonged their stay as long as possible while gaining financially from the growing labour opportunities in several regions of the United States (which scholars have called both 'New Destinations' [Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005] and the 'New Latino Diaspora' (Wortham, Murillo Jr, and Hamann 2002; Hamann, Wortham, and Murillo 2015)).

The amnesty that was part of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act also positioned previous undocumented circular migrants to regularize their status and start petitioning for family members' legalization. Many Mexican migrants who were already in the United States used their new legal statuses to safeguard their right to stay. Once they settled in new US destinations, they reunified with their families (spouses, sons, daughters, parents, cousins, uncles, aunts came to the United States with or without authorization). Thus, as border crossing became harder, observers witnessed for the first time a massive settlement of entire Mexican families in the United States, and the number of Mexicans born in Mexico but who lived in the United States jumped from 0.8 million in 1970 to more than 10 million in 2000 (Escobar Latapí, Lowell, and Martin 2013).

Telling this story from migrant parents' points of view, even if the new migration was piecemeal and involved periods of separation (Súarez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001), the goal was family reunification. Parents wanted to have their children (born in Mexico) with them, and the children wanted to live with their parents. This was the second period of the story told by migrant families and their children.

However, it seems like the *family-reunification-period-in-the-United States* wound down in the mid-2000s, as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids and related detentions and deportations grew in number, even as local communities sometimes lamented these disruptions (Hamann and Reeves 2012). Even though the September 2001 terrorist attacks had nothing to do with Latin America or Latin Americans, Mexican and Central American migrants soon thereafter learned that dark times for immigrants would soon arrive (Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2016).

Deportation machines, criminalization of undocumented migrants, and anti-immigrant public scripts accelerated with the Great Recession (2008-2009). Returning/moving to Mexico became one of the most significant migrant strategies to appear in the last ten years (Menjívar 2016). Again, migrants decided to live together as families, but this time in Mexico. Today, the family-reunification-period-in-the-United States strategy is transforming into a different flow: *family-reunification-in-Mexico*. According to the Mexican population census of 2010, 1.4 million Mexicans and Mexican Americans 'returned' to Mexico from the United States between 2005 and 2010, and approximately 25 per cent of them were minors aged 0-17 years old (Giorguli and Gutiérrez 2011). This was also the case for about 900,000 'returnees' between 2010 and 2015 (Zúñiga and Giorguli Saucedo 2019).

As we wrote in the introduction, recognizing that children's experience of migration may well differ from that of adults (Dobson 2009), our research has focused precisely on Generation 0.5, those children and adolescents who 'returned' from the United States to Mexico. Our interest has been focused on the social, geographical, educational, symbolic, and cultural trajectories of these migrant children and adolescents who are part of the contemporary flow of returnees. While studying these trajectories, we identified many challenges that migrant children face upon moving/returning to Mexico. Our research project started just when the period of *family-reunification-in-Mexico* began, and the study continues until today. Based on hundreds of transnationally mobile children's narratives collected in interviews and surveys, now we have a multifaceted response to the question: how and why young Mexican migrants are moving/returning from the United States to Mexico? We now have children's depictions about the new era of US/Mexico migration.

Now we know that children know that there are multiple macro level forces that push their parents and siblings to move to Mexico. The children's understandings about those forces that remove them from the United States include different forms of 'everyday knowledge' (Heller [1970] 1977). Yes, these children know that their parents had little freedom to react against conditions that forced them to move and negotiate family dispersal. Often children know how and why their parents could not regularize their legal statuses in the United States. Some witnessed their father's or mother's incarceration; some shared their parents' fears of being deported. Others saw

parents lose homes or savings and so on. Thus, children knew that their parents had little option for reversing the conditions that forced them to leave and move.

However, children also know they and their families reacted against those contextual constraints. We learned from migrant children that the canonical chronicling of US/Mexico migration did not take into account strategies developed by migrants themselves, and we learned also how children members of the 0.5 generation understood the current period of US/Mexico migration. A predominant frame was *they decided to reunify in Mexico*. That *reunification* is conceived by children as a defensive strategy of mobile families confronted by the anti-immigrant atmosphere in several regions of the United States. Generation 0.5's meaning making should be part of our conceptualization of US/Mexico migration.⁴

Notes

1. This article differs from earlier depictions of the 0.5 generation that we have offered because we analyze here children's voices about 'return' migration as keys for chronicling U.S./Mexico migration through the children's eyes. The only coincidence is that we argue in these three works in favour of the relevance of using the category '0.5 generation'.
2. We made comparative analysis between data collected at different times (2004, 2005, 2009, 2010, and 2013). We did not find any relevant differences in terms of children's visions about moving from the United States to Mexico. We also made analysis comparing boys and girls. The conclusion was: there are no significant differences between these two groups as we are going to show below.
3. In many rural towns in Mexico, people celebrate 'las fiestas del Santo Patrono' which always coincides with the date on the Catholic calendar of a particular saint. In some regions of Mexico, every town has a Christian saint identified as the protector of that community.
4. While there is not space here to consider whether the Generation 0.5 frame applies to other child-including migration dynamics in other parts of the world, Vandeyar and Vandeyar's (2015) portrayal of African and South Asian notes children's awareness of tensions about whether to imagine 'sending' versus 'receiving' countries as 'home'. A first, second, third generation etc. framework also does not appear to fit very well there. Coe et al.'s (2011) book *Everyday Ruptures: Children and Migration in Global Perspectives* offers still other examples of children's meaning making from around the world. While we cannot assure that this is so (doing so would require a more systematic literature review and would be another paper), we anticipate that a 0.5 generation framework is not unique to the US/Mexico dynamic.

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