The Second Generation's Homeland Trips: A Parental Expectation for the U.S.-Born Children of Mexican Immigrants in the South Bronx

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THE SECOND GENERATION’S HOMELAND TRIPS: A PARENTAL EXPECTATION FOR THE U.S.-BORN CHILDREN OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE SOUTH BRONX

by

ALEXIA RAYNAL

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Abstract

THE SECOND GENERATION’S HOMELAND TRIPS: A PARENTAL EXPECTATION FOR THE U.S.-BORN CHILDREN OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE SOUTH BRONX

by

Alexia Raynal

Adviser: Professor Ana Yolanda Ramos-Zayas

New deportation policies in the United States are making it harder for undocumented immigrants to return home periodically (Dreby 2013a). This has a direct impact on their children. Because parents can’t travel, thousands of foreign-born minors have recently been forced to travel alone in hopes of reunification. Their U.S.-born counterparts face a similar challenge: immigrants’ lack of mobility places a new expectation on them to visit relatives that were left behind. Unlike their parents, these children can move freely across borders and maintain family ties. This project explores the second generation’s homeland trips as experienced by a small group of children—five girls and three boys—of Mexican-origin in the South Bronx, New York. It seeks to understand how children make sense of, negotiate and redefine a parental expectation to visit Mexico alone. When do they make these trips? What do families expect from their visits? And what do they reveal about intergenerational relationships in families of mixed immigration status? Findings suggest that while these visits are valued for their potential to strengthen family ties, they can also expose children to resentment created by family separation. The results show an expansion of the role of children as cultural mediators for their parents that is no longer limited to their settlement communities in the United States, but reaches back to their parents’ communities of origin in Mexico.
Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Sergio and Rosario, and to the children who kindly participated in this study.
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INTRODUCTION

Dreams are where we visit the many lands and landscapes of human possibility and discover the one where we feel at home.

Jonathan Sacks

As I boarded a plane in New York that would take me to Mexico, I noticed a group of children chatting excitedly across the corridor. There were no adults among them and I could tell, by their use of Spanglish and Mexican flags, that they were of Mexican origin. Amidst the hustle there was a boy whose pale expression seemed out of place. “Is this your first time flying without your parents?” I asked. “No,” replied the group leader for him, “me and my cousins have done it many times, but this is his first time.” Children’s plans for the holidays, a mix of remembrances and new goals, lasted through the flight. Their plans for visiting Mexico without their parents resonated with testimonials I had heard about children traveling unsupervised. What was their motivation? Did they consider Mexico home? Upon landing, the quiet boy joined the rest of the group in their cheering and clapping. Their journey had finally begun. This project seeks to uncover some of the conditions that frame children’s journeys as homeland trips.

Homeland trips—visits to the society of ancestral origin (Kibria 2002)—are common experiences in immigrants’ lives. Through many literary traditions, these journeys have stood as metaphors for personal transformation, testing the travelers’ character and serving as a rite of passage (Mahler 1992). These trips are usually short holiday visits that vary, like participation in other transnational activities, across the lifespan and in response to different demands (Levitt 2002). Much like family vacations, homeland trips are a way for families to spend time together and reconnect with relatives in the home country. The majority of U.S.-born Latinos in New York (a solid 73%) have visited their immigrant parents’ homeland at least once and up to three
times by the time they reach adulthood; several have done so up to nine times, and a smaller percentage have visited these places ten or more times in their lives (Kasinitz et al. 2002). The tradition of visiting the ancestral homeland extends into the second generation, as children of immigrants engage in their own transnational movements. While common to immigrant family life, homeland trips can also be understood as a specific responsibility of the younger generation.

Parents’ reliance on their U.S.-born children is particularly salient now, as undocumented immigrants in the new Deportation Regime find it harder to move across borders than before (Dreby 2012). From 2009 to 2013, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement conducted an average of 400,000 removals per year (ICE 2013). In New York, Mexicans are the third largest Latino group (12.9%), reaching an estimated total of 450,000 people of Mexican origin; they are also a population with the highest number (58%) of unauthorized immigrants (Pew Research Center, 2010; Smith 2013). Children of Mexican immigrants are thus more likely to live in families of mixed immigration status (with at least one undocumented member) and are often affected by the enforcement of immigration policies as much as their parents (Dreby 2013a). When undocumented immigrants are discouraged from traveling, they turn to their children for support. Unlike their parents, U.S.-born children can travel across borders and foster family ties, acting as cultural mediators between their U.S.-based families and those living in Mexico.

In this context, the current project seeks to document how U.S.-born children of working-class Mexican immigrants in the South Bronx experience homeland trips. Because Mexican immigrants in this neighborhood are often poor and undocumented, their children must visit Mexico without them. When children participate in these journeys, they negotiate and

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1 Some people argue that the second generation refers to the offspring of the first generation born in the U.S. I use Kasinitz’s (2008) and Portes’ (1996) use of this term to describe children who were born in the U.S. to immigrant parents or arrived by the age of twelve. In doing so I hope to reconcile immigrant parents’ experiences and self-worth as a meaningful part of their families’ settlement in the U.S. (Portes and Rumbaut 2003).
appropriate intergenerational responsibilities in the U.S. and in Mexico. Because they sense that they cannot entirely make up for their parents’ absences in Mexico, they select which parts of this journey to embrace. In a way, this project is also about the collective act of dreaming. It illustrates how families of mixed immigration status work together to redefine and reimagine, through events such as homeland trips, the kind of family life in which they feel more at home.

The research is designed as an open-ended ethnographic study with a small group of children that participate in an after school program. It begins by looking at the resources the children use to make sense of Mexico, followed by their understanding of their participation in homeland trips, and concludes by illustrating the impact of these journeys in children’s appropriation of transnational behavior. By investigating children’s multi-layered understandings of homeland trips, the current project seeks to build rather than test theory.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. A total of eight U.S.-born children—three boys and five girls within five Mexican families of mixed immigration status—between 7 and 12 years old participated in this study. Interviews were 20 to 60 minutes long. Children’s prompts were categorized into three major themes: (1) types of narratives about Mexico that children are exposed to, (2) children’s possible adoption, rejection or challenging of such narratives, and (3) how narratives influence children’s perceived expectations to travel.

Marginalized movement from the South Bronx to the Mixteca

This study offers a new perspective on how Mexican immigrants in the South Bronx, as part of the larger Latino community in New York, connect to the native homeland. Most of the children in the study come from poor families that emigrate from the Mixteca region to the South Bronx, both similarly marginalized spaces The South Bronx—a New York neighborhood separated from Manhattan by the Harlem River, delimited eastward by the Bronx and East
Rivers, and distinguished from the rest of the Bronx by Fordham Road—has been socially and structurally segregated for decades. While the Mixteca region—a cultural and ecological zone in central Mexico that includes the contiguous parts of Puebla, Oaxaca, and Guerrero—has been depleted by migration to New York since the early 1940s (Smith 2006).

The journey from South Bronx to the Mixteca region is not easy, and it can affirm the value and appeal of transnational engagements as much as reveal the difficulties of creating them. Planning requires thorough coordination between families in Mexico and in the U.S., including scheduling phone calls and visiting dates that work on both ends. Plane tickets are expensive and flights rarely arrive directly in immigrants’ hometowns. Most times, children depart from New York, make a U.S. connection, and head down to Mexico City, where they are picked up by relatives or acquaintances. But if no one is available to pick them up, children have to travel by bus, which can be challenging for U.S.-born children who do not speak Spanish. For most of the families in the current study—originally from small rural towns in Puebla and Guerrero—Mexico City is a 2 - 4 hour drive. The map below shows a common route.

**Figure 1. Route from New York to Tehuacán, Puebla, a sample town in the Mixteca region (near Mexico City)**
A focus on transnational movement between these two sending and host societies reveals children’s movement across marginalized spaces. In Robert Smith’s (2006) account of the transnational connections between the Mixteca region and New York, he explains how the few working men who stay in Mexico find jobs in a market known as the construction of “empty houses”—houses that immigrants finance and use as vacation homes. The seasonal arrival of immigrants in the Mixteca region during vacations certainly has an impact in the way these hometowns feel, both for locals and visitors. Smith describes these towns as vibrant, festive, and crowded during the summer—but then they become quiet and empty the rest of the year. He provides a rich description of the area as a marginalized yet transnationalized space:

Descending from the mountains that separate the Mixteca from the rest of Puebla, one finds that roads are in worse repair, vegetation is sparser, and the mountains are covered with sere shrubs; yet, numerous travel agencies list prices for flights to New York, signs advertise videos and cell phones, and parabolic television antennas…sprout from the roofs of the houses. Internet cafes have popped up, linking migrants and stay-at-homes by e-mail (Smith 2006:39).

Smith’s description provides grounds for a parallel comparison of children’s homeland trips as journeys that happen in the edges of society. By traveling from their parents’ settlement communities in the South Bronx to their immigrant societies in rural towns in the Mixteca region, they move from one marginalized space to another.

The Mexican American Network of Students (MANOS)\(^2\), the place where child participants were recruited, is a grassroots organization that was founded in 2001 by Mexican immigrant and educator Angelo Cabrera. Cabrera, who was born in San Antonio Texcala, Puebla (a small town in the Mixteca region), arrived in the South Bronx at the age of 15 accompanied by another immigrant minor in search of relatives. He, like many poor Mexican immigrants, shared

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\(^2\) I use Steven Alvarez’s (2012) made-up acronym for the Mexican American Network of Students, which is also the site of his research.
a crowded apartment with more than twelve people at times. Through his experience, Cabrera acquired an understanding of the barrier poor Mexican youth face in the South Bronx. Having worked double shifts at the basement of a supermarket store for several years, Cabrera finally received a friendly donation to go to school, bound by the simple promise of helping marginalized youth reach their educational goals. Going to school allowed Cabrera to socialize outside of the South Bronx and build social capital. He then obtained a Master of Public Administration (MPA) and a BA in Political Science from Baruch College.

While attending university, Cabrera founded an after school program to help children born to Spanish-monolingual parents from Mexico excel in school. He was among the first to create an initiative that would support the new and growing community of Mexican immigrants in the South Bronx. The organization emerged from a campaign lobbying for undocumented students to qualify for in-state tuition at CUNY and SUNY. When the law was passed in 2002, MANOS began to provide tutoring support for elementary- and middle school-aged students, and guidance for students seeking post-secondary education.

MANOS’s first ten years ran entirely with the support of volunteer students and parents who met in the basement of an old church in the South Bronx. Several years later, the organization partnered with CUNY and became the recipient of an international grant aimed at supporting Mexican-origin immigrant families in New York. These two events allowed MANOS the economic flexibility to tackle educational attainment more strongly and position itself as a lead community-based organization for underserved families in the South Bronx.

At the time of this study, there were forty-five children K-12 and about twenty-five families registered at MANOS. The program met Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings from 6 to 8 pm. By the end of the 2013 school year, there were over twenty-five families in the
waiting line. The following chart shows the distribution at the community center’s initial location. All interviews but the first one were held in the entrance steps at the top right.

![Diagram of MANOS space distribution at St. Pius V Church, 2013]

**Figure 2. Space Distribution at MANOS in St. Pius V Church, 2013**

One of the things that the community center did best when it started was to provide a space for families to work together to achieve educational goals. Parents and tutors worked together with children on schoolwork. Eventually, MANOS split groups into two. The new generation-specific approach fostered less collaborative learning among families, but it was also more effective in serving the needs of each group. While students attend tutoring, parents attend English classes, participate in talks about civic engagement and citizenship rights, and are provided with assistance in navigating the U.S. educational system. Ideally, this kind of scaffolded support would also allow families to work together in the long run.

Like MANOS, there are many other organizations that support marginalized communities in the South Bronx by helping them navigate U.S. institutions. In fact, the South Bronx’s recent development was largely promoted by community-based organizations that—beginning in the mid 1970 but most effective as of 1980—began revitalizing the neighborhood from the bottom up. Community Development Corporations like the Mid-Bronx Desperadoes, the Southeast

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3 During the summer of 2013, MANOS moved several blocks north to a bigger location in the basement of the Immaculate Conception Church and School, also in the South Bronx.
Bronx Community Organization, the Longwood Community Association, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, War on Poverty, and United Bronx Parents, helped revive the South Bronx at a time when it was being systematically miseducated and destroyed—with dilapidated schools and houses signaling students and residents that nobody cared. These groups made consistent demands to the city and achieved relative support from the government.

One of the biggest challenges in many Bronx neighborhoods is gauging the arrival of poor immigrants. As of 2010, the total population of the South Bronx was 654,360, with the majority of it being of Latino origin (62.8%). While Mexicans constitute only about 12% of the neighborhood’s population, the group has tripled during the last twenty years, making the Bronx the second most popular destination for Mexican newcomers (25% percent of all Mexicans in New York live in the Bronx). This group, however, has comparatively lower median household incomes than Mexicans living in Queens or suburban counties, with Bronx families earning $15,000 – $35,000 less than families residing in Queens and Middlesex. Most parents in this study cited their economic situation as one element in their decision to settle in the South Bronx.

The South Bronx can be framed as a staging area, a place where newcomers “regroup and begin to devote their energies to consolidating their small gains and [giving] their children the education that would enable them to move onward and upward—to better, more ‘fashionable areas’” (Gonzalez 2004:133). The use of the term staging area in sociology is thus practical and symbolic, as it illustrates the social construction of the South Bronx as a migratory space used for temporary settlement. Most poor immigrants in this study hope to eventually move to a better

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neighborhood, and many identify with wider trends of Mexican immigrants wishing to return to Mexico once children settle into adulthood (Mahler 1995).5

So what does the South Bronx look like today? Much of the area is occupied by multi-family residences (about 35%), by industries (11-20%), and by formal institutions like schools, community centers and churches (11-25%). The neighborhood has the youngest population in the city, with Mexicans being one of the youngest Latino groups to live there. Approximately only 7% of the neighborhood’s Latino population over 25 years of age has a BA degree, and 45.2% of the South Bronx Latinos speak only Spanish at home.

Mexican immigrants contribute to the revitalization of the South Bronx by providing labor force and generating more businesses. In 2007, 36% of the total companies in the Bronx were owned by Latinos, and almost half of these were owned by women. Today, “fewer Bronxites are on welfare, more are working, and an absolute concentration of poverty has been eased by the influx of thousands of working, striving new immigrants” (Jonnes 2002:403). This has helped support the community’s efforts to counter the Bronx’s pervasive negative image and instill pride in the borough. But as Mexican immigrants continue to settle in the area, they are likely to encounter some resistance too. In her exploration of the South Bronx, historian Evelyn Gonzalez (2004) explained that “already fearful of being trapped in the slums, many Bronx families resented the imposition of different and often poorer peoples within their midst” (p. 114). As they learn from these experiences, newly arrived immigrants might try to prove their worthiness as valuable residents by abandoning their identity as immigrants and seeking ways to present themselves as native New Yorkers, which is culturally more acceptable.

5 Grassroots organizations have tried to keep long-time residents in the area. In 1997, the South Bronx won the All American City Award, which celebrates communities that have overcome great adversity. These advancements, however, seem threatened by the South Bronx Initiative, a strategic plan to create a mixed-income, urban village in the Bronx areas that are closest to Manhattan, placing the South Bronx at risk of gentrification.
Theoretical Framework

The current study draws from literature on migration, Latino communities in the U.S., intergenerational relationships, and childhood studies to explore children’s understanding about their participation in homeland trips. Its goal is to document and analyze the ways in which children interpret, challenge and negotiate a parental expectation to travel to Mexico alone. While homeland trips have received more scholarly attention recently, most of the literature about the second generation’s visits to the ancestral homeland focuses on people between 18 and 40 years old. The formative years in children’s lives have, until now, been slightly disregarded.

Immigrants settling in the U.S. at the end of the twentieth century—mostly White Europeans—tried to assimilate to their new communities by cutting ties with the past. The new wave of migration, however, is characterized by its unprecedented size, diversity, and ethnoracial shift (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001). Immigrants settling in the U.S. today are predominantly Latino, Asian and Caribbean (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Foner 2002a). And, while they too emphasize the importance of segmented assimilation, they are much less willing to give up their ethnic identities (Kasinitz 2008). New immigrants often hope for the best of both worlds: they aspire for the right amount of incorporation into the U.S. fabric while retaining a connection to their ancestral roots. This connection can help children in the second generation use their parents’ immigrant culture and the resources from their new communities to negotiate their place in the U.S. (Kasinitz 2008).

Many researchers have discussed the sentiments that Mexican immigrants develop towards their own country while away (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001; Smith 2006; Dreby 2010). Many more have studied the ways in which adolescents

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6 See Levitt and Waters’s (2002) compilation of articles about the transnational lives of the second generation.
of Mexican origin inherit certain traits of their parents’ homeland (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova 2008; Smith 2006). What remains unexplored is young children’s relationship to Mexico as an imaginary homeland—one that exists, for a critical period of their upbringing, physically remote.

Comprehending the second generation’s relation to the parental homeland requires understanding the Latino homeland not only as a physical space, but a conceptual one. The concept of the Latino homeland can be equated to the Spanish term patria, which means fatherland. Patria “embodies the aggregate of hundreds of patrias chicas (little fatherlands) that ordinary [Latinos] know intimately and for which they have sentimental and enduring feelings of attachment” (Nostrand 2001:167). It also encompasses how they adjust to a new environment, how they stamp it with their culture, and how they create a sense of place. While these characteristics seem true about most nationalities, Nostrand’s (2001) contribution is significant for his acknowledgment that for Latinos, “the concept of a homeland embraces a level of territorial consciousness or place identity that today is uncommon in mainstream American society” (p. 167). Mexicans, like other Latinos, develop a particular attachment to the homeland (a concept, not a space), which they consider unique and morally superior to other nations.

Some Mexican immigrant parents hope their U.S.-born children will value their Mexican roots. Even while understanding that the possibilities for a better life are greater in the United States, immigrants remain viscerally attached to the images and values of their native communities and wish to pass them on to the second generation. For some immigrant parents, children’s diminishing regard for their own cultural origins is the first sign of a dissonant acculturation, which is marked by intergenerational conflict as children try to fit in with native peers and reject parental values (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006; Kasinitz et al. 2008). Some of the
participants’ parents, for example, hoped interviews would teach children how to be closer to Mexico. Having a common point of identity such as the homeland can align parents’ expectations with those of their children. For the U.S.-born children of Mexican immigrants, however, the Mexican homeland exists as an illusion fed by family and media narratives. This silhouette becomes more robust once children finally visit Mexico and experience, challenge, or reject the narratives that they grew up with.

Most Mexican-origin families believe that their children’s internalization of familism values—a set of normative beliefs that emphasize the centrality of the family unit—can help adolescents exert the self-control to not model what they consider deviant behavior (Marín, Otero-Sabogal, and Pérez-Stable 1987; Dreby 2010). Immigrant parents of U.S.-born children often rely on Mexican familism values to teach their children about intergenerational relationships and ways to support and care for family members, stressing the obligations that family members owe to both nuclear and extended kin (Marín, Otero-Sabogal, and Pérez-Stable 1987). The infusion of such roles impacts the way U.S.-born children of Mexican immigrants understand and experience their families from abroad and during their visits. While family roles are usually clearly defined in Mexican families, they are renegotiated during periods of migration or separation, and some discord might arise as families try to adjust to the U.S. context (Dreby 2010). Typically, the negotiation happens between adults, but when the second generation visits Mexico without parental guidance, it might extend to these children of immigrants.

Children can play important roles in facilitating their parents’ interactions in schools and family-owned businesses by helping them navigate educational, medical, and legal settings (Valenzuela 1999). As children participate in homeland trips, they extend their help to their
parents’ immigrant societies, acting as cultural mediators in both countries. These interactions might place children in relatively more powerful, but also vulnerable positions.

The challenges that immigrant parents face are partly determined by their ethos of reception—the general social and cultural climate they encounter upon arrival (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001). These attitudes—aimed at immigrant parents first—trickle down to children, affecting their perceptions, identities and behaviors, and confirming the constructionist view that children are exposed to and shaped by the same living environments as adults (Qvortrup 1990). In this and many other ways, belonging to an immigrant family exposes children to anxieties that are usually relegated to adults. Children that are asked to translate for their Spanish-monolingual parents in institutional settings (such as schools and hospitals) are brought into a more visible sphere of public life, which could either empower them or render them more vulnerable. These interactions expose children to racialization and stigma against their parents. In fact, some are challenged with reconciling their parents’ Spanish demands with more culturally-acceptable requests in English to sustain their parents’ reputation (Orellana 2009). Other children in similar situations become surrogate parents; helping their younger siblings with homework and taking them to school while their immigrant parents juggle several jobs. By assuming these positions, children implicitly restructure family life to improve their own position and further personal aims (Orellana 2009; Dreby 2010; Foner, 2013; Katz 2014).

Children’s perspectives about themselves are tied to their parents’ definitions of proper child behavior. Parental expectations that children do well in school, support their families, and love and respect relatives that are not part of their daily lives, impacts the way that children perceive themselves (Valenzuela 1999; Foner 2002b; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008; Orellana 2009; Dreby 2010). The immigrant bargain—whereby parents expect children to do well in school as a
way to redeem their migration sacrifices—is perhaps one of the strongest parental expectations in immigrant families and might affect children’s perceptions about their trips (Smith 2006). Children might perceive their participation in homeland trips as a short-term solution to redeem their parents’ migration sacrifices.

Modern researchers agree that there is a growing interest in the nature of intergenerational relationships in immigrant families today, especially between immigrant parents and their U.S.-born children (Katz 2010; Foner, 2013). Migration forces families to change. The host of structural constraints and the norms and values families encounter when they move to the United States shape the arrangements, roles, and orientations that emerge within immigrant families (Zolberg 1999).

Migration also has the potential to influence family relationships in ways that vary by gender and generation (Kibria, 1993; Hongdandeu-Sotelo 2001; Dreby 2010; Katz 2014). These variations reveal how children and parents can experience migration-related changes differently even while learning together. Whether adults migrate with their children or become parents after arrival, parenting practices are affected by moving to and living in a new place (Katz 2014). The shared expectation for children to visit Mexico proves that migration forces families to re-organize themselves in a new setting.

Orellana (2009) suggests that “in this time of rapid social change, with increased flows of people traversing national boundaries around the world, there are many visible variations in the structuring and meanings of childhoods” (p. 125). For children in this group, assuming adult-like roles may happen earlier as they visit relatives in Mexico. They might be forced to deal with family resentment created by separation, or with relatives’ expectation that they provide for them. In this sense, childhood takes a new meaning after children’s homeland trips. The journeys
introduce them to a more complex family life and might raise intergenerational conflict. But to say that families are like battlefields between generations is an oversimplification (Foner 2013). In many cases, conflict is mixed with caring and cooperation, and rejection of some parental standards and practices is coupled with acceptance of others (Katz 2014). In immigrant families, “norms of responsibility and feelings of closeness generally characterize intergenerational relations, which are a source of material, practical, and emotional support” (Swartz quoted in Foner and Dreby 2011:548).

Families create strong emotional ties that bond members together, and even young people who resent parental constraints and obligations feel, at the same time, a complex combination of affection, loyalty, gratitude, responsibility, and a sense of duty to their immigrant parents (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). Children in immigrant families tend to appreciate their parents’ sacrifices on their behalf and recognize the importance of family and the need to provide financial and other kinds of instrumental assistance to family members (Foner and Debry 2011).

**Theoretical contributions**

In her analysis of Chinese and Korean homeland trips, Kibria (2002) focuses on the ways in which children’s accounts of these journeys provide insight into some of the conditions that surround and shape the development of transnational engagements, arguing that such experiences provide a space where children can discuss their relationship and membership to the parental homeland. In the current study, homeland trips are valued by Mexican families of mixed immigration status for similar reasons and are an opportunity for children to redefine family roles. Kibria also describes homeland trips as voluntary visits “that are limited and fairly short in duration and generally focus on such goals as tourism, leisure, seeing family and friends, and learning, discovering or rediscovering the cultural aspects” of the ancestral society (2002:297).
While such reasons are also part of this population’s goals for visiting Mexico, the trips gain a new dimension due to parents’ deportability. U.S.-born children of Mexican origin living in the South Bronx are not only encouraged to travel to Mexico for leisure, but are also expected to do so as a way to support their undocumented immigrant parents.

These experiences can significantly change the second generation’s transnational behavior. Visiting relatives alone can expose children to family conflict without clear guidance. Studying the way families of mixed immigration status negotiate homeland trips can reveal a dimension of family life for immigrants who are restricted by their legal status, showing that regulation and deportation policies not only impact undocumented immigrants, but also their U.S.-born children.

Unlike other family roles and duties (like cooking, washing dishes, helping with homework), the responsibility of homeland trips is constant across gender and sibling position (Valenzuela, 1999; Katz 2014). My findings suggest that while the eldest sibling in a family might assume greater responsibility in certain situations, the pressure to participate in these trips is equally spread. Three siblings in this study, for example, ages 6-11, were highly encouraged to visit Mexico even though the two older sisters had already been there before. My findings also show that parents rarely send their children without getting children’s consent first, belying traditional parent-child authoritative relationships. It could take children in this study up to three years to finally agree to visit Mexico after parents’ first request. In this sense, homeland trips remain relatively voluntary visits, but not exactly as Kibria describes them. Children in this group retain some degree of autonomy by choosing when exactly to travel, even if the expectation looms.
Levitt and Waters (2002) explain that homeland trips rarely interfere with children’s daily routines in the U.S. If children have a busy academic agenda, families willingly postpone their visits. As such, these visits are hardly central to the second generation’s lives (ibid). My findings are consistent with this view. Families’ plans to visit Mexico, while appearing constantly in family discourses, are not a top priority and have a smaller impact in practical, everyday experiences. In a way, the relevance of homeland trips could be understood through Penny Tinkler’s (2008) analysis of the symbolic role of family albums as hypervalued yet playing little part in everyday life. Families speak about them often, but prioritize on goals that are more directly related to children’s development in the U.S., such as going to school. These trips, however, cannot be reduced to mere family nostalgia. The emphasis that parents place in their children’s ability to reunite with relatives that were left behind is a tangible pressure that second generation children in this group feel in their daily lives. When children visit relatives in Mexico, they participate in their families’ efforts to maintain ties across borders.

Research shows that selective transnational activity (such as sending gifts to Mexico or visiting relatives) can have an impact in the way children interact with their parents’ sending and receiving communities even as they settle in the United States (Levitt and Waters 2002). My findings suggest that because children visit Mexico while still young, they appropriate roles as caregivers or providers for Mexican relatives before entering adolescence. Looking at the second generation’s involvement with their parents’ native society can lead to a better understanding of children’s U.S.-based lives, as today’s second generation is more likely to develop and seek a connection to their parents’ homeland than the previous ones (ibid)\textsuperscript{8}.

\textsuperscript{8} In 2012, there were 20 million adult members of the second generation and an additional 16 million U.S.-born children of immigrants under 18 in the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2014, “Second-Generation Americans”).
My findings are in line with studies showing that children born to Latino parents are influenced by the individuals, resources, and ideas from the homeland that are a constant presence in their lives, even if they are not physically present (Foner 2002b). One participant, for example, was inspired to visit Mexico by listening to the stories about farm animals her uncle told her while living with her in the South Bronx. This and other stories show that the discourses and narratives of the homeland can shape the lives of children and influence the way in which they make life choices (Levitt and Waters 2002). In fact, this thesis suggests that children can develop strong emotional ties to the people that live in Mexico even before meeting them in person, as did a young boy who cried at night for not being able to meet his dying grandmother in Mexico. That children can develop such close relationships with relatives that are far away shows the risk in overemphasizing the importance of physical movement and giving short shrift to the strong influences of the transnational social fields in which the second generation lives (ibid). Moving beyond the focus on physical mobility can bring attention to the things children do in preparation for their trips.

This explains why modern researchers are interested in learning about how immigrants construct their identities and imagine themselves and the social groups they belong to when they live within transnational social fields and when they can use resources and discursive elements from multiple settings (ibid). Some children are sensible to the economic differences between themselves and their relatives in Mexico—whom they consider poorer—and try to be humble in the way they interact with them. Child participants were also often flexible about their nationality. Possibly fearing a disrespectful attitude against their parents while feeling confident about their U.S. identities, some refused to identify as exclusively Mexican or American. As one child explained to me, “I do care about both places, I just don’t care which one I am.”
The first chapter in this thesis seeks to contextualize U.S.-born children’s homeland trips as a parental expectation. By looking at the ways in which undocumented immigrants encourage their U.S.-born children to travel, and at children’s understanding of these visits as a parental expectation, it hopes to illustrate intergenerational negotiation after migration.

The second chapter explores the narratives that children appropriate, challenge and reject in preparation for their journeys. It documents resources children use to create an image of Mexico, a place that exists mostly in their minds. Recognizing the time U.S.-born children spend imagining and exploring their parents’ homeland can bring a closer understanding of transnationalism as enacted both literally and symbolically (Espiritu and Tran 2002). In the end, it illustrates children’s use of and reaction to sensitive topics in ways that protect their families.

The third chapter seeks to reveal the disparities between children’s expectations before traveling and their real experiences. By analyzing children’s appropriation of transnational roles as providers or caregivers for relatives in Mexico, it illustrates the family dynamics that perpetuate immigrant families’ habitus.
CHAPTER 1: THE MEANING OF HOMELAND TRIPS

[My parents can’t travel with us] because maybe then they will get sent back to Mexico and then they’re not going to be able to come back no more. All they want, all they want is to make me and my brother meet . . . my parents’ parents. Because we never met my grandpa and my grandma.

Sara, 9 years old

Contextualizing homeland trips as a parental expectation

Nine-year-old Sara ran her fingers through her ponytail and smiled as she searched for ways to put her thoughts into words. She had been trying, for the last couple of minutes, to explain why she and her older brother might have to go to Mexico alone. She knew her parents were physically able to travel, and she knew they both wanted to, but she also knew that somehow, they could not. Sara’s parents are undocumented immigrants from Mexico. They arrived in New York more than ten years ago, while Rebeca was pregnant with now twelve-year-old Yamil. The family has been living in the Bronx ever since, in a narrow and mostly windowless 1,750 sq. ft. apartment that they manage to keep with hard work. Jaime, the father, works night shifts in a Manhattan restaurant. His earnings barely make it possible for them to rent their low-income apartment in the South Bronx. (Something hardly possible in other districts.) When Sara’s parents first came to New York, Rebeca worked in construction, carrying materials and helping set things ready, but a serious back injury sent her to the emergency room and forced her into bed for several months. Because of her undocumented status, Rebeca did not get full medical attention, facing a slow, painful, and frightening recovery back home that threatened to eliminate Rebeca’s ability to walk. Fortunately, Rebeca recovered and now runs her own decorative business from home.
The vast majority of Sara’s relatives live in small towns in Puebla. Some of them used to travel back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico, but increasing deportation rates (to include Rebeca’s father’s deportation about three years ago) raised a red flag for those who wished a safe stay in New York. Family members’ inability to visit each other has an impact on Sara’s familial intergenerational relationships. Sara’s parents have not been able to return to Mexico since migrating, and hope that at least their children can. Sara and Yamil feel for their parents; they know how much they want to “see and hug” their own parents again.

A little later, and finally finding a way to articulate her family’s intricate position, Sara leans forward and explains that her parents would not travel with her “because maybe then they will get sent back to Mexico and then they’re not going to be able to come back no more.” Then, realizing the impact that this has in her own life, she explains that, “all they want, all they want, is to make me and my brother meet . . . my parents’ parents. Because we never met my grandpa and my grandma.” Thus, visiting Mexico is an inter-generational expectation.9

This chapter seeks to contextualize U.S.-born children’s homeland trips as a parental expectation that is meant to alleviate immigrants’ parenting concerns. It builds from informants’ notions that visiting Mexico will contribute to their families’ well being by both easing their parents’ anxieties and supporting relatives in Mexico. It hopes to illustrate the ways in which children appropriate such responsibility and the expectations that both parents and children might have for these trips. Whether these expectations align will vary from family to family, but the tensions that arise from parents’ inability to make ends meet are constant across families.

Traveling to Mexico is expensive and risky. Research shows that Mexican parents have stopped returning home periodically for fear of deportation (Dreby 2013a). This places a new

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9 The expectation is less salient in mixed-race families with parents who migrated young. Domingo, whose mother is a NY-raised Mexican and father is Dominican, is not as bound by an expectation to care for relatives in Mexico.
expectation on second-generation children to visit Mexico on behalf of their parents. One of the main reasons Sara hopes to go to Mexico is to bring her parents “a little [bit] of memory”. Her understanding of homeland trips as a parental expectation is a byproduct of the ways in which immigrant families reorganize themselves in response to a threatening environment.

Yolanda, eleven at the time we spoke, struggles to respond positively to her father’s daily attempts to convince her to go to Mexico. She doesn’t feel confident enough to face people she has never met before in an unknown setting. Yolanda’s parents, Luis and Miranda, are from Guerrero. They came to New York before their two daughters were born. Luis works in construction, and, while he has had the opportunity to visit Mexico in the past, he does not feel safe doing so anymore. Border violence, enforced paroling, smuggling, and drug trafficking have made it harder and riskier to travel today (Mahler 1995). As a result, Yolanda says, “[my father] convinces me to go, like, every day—not like everyday, but, when he talks about Mexico. . . I think I wanna go now. . . And then like, I change my mind very often.” The decision is certainly not easy for her. Yolanda knows how important it is for her father to have his daughters meet relatives in Mexico. But she also fears traveling alone and resists the idea of spending her entire summer with people she barely knows. The fact that parents like Luis wait for children to make up their mind proves that children like Yolanda can negotiate responses to parental demands.

Yolanda explained herself in this way: “I was just thinking like being in a . . . place for like a whole month or a week, like that, it’s just going to be weird and awkward. . . because uh, well . . . I don’t really talk to my family in Mexico that much. So when they told me like, ‘Oh, maybe you might go’ it felt awkward at the same time.” Yolanda is not alone in this feeling. Many other children in this group struggle to manage the tension between their own need for independence and their sense of duty to their families (Katz 2014).
Fathers in this group expect to move back to Mexico more than mothers, confirming notions that men have a greater interest in returning to their native societies than women (Grasmuck and Pessar 1991). Yolanda’s father has steady plans to return to Mexico and uses them as a safety net in case of deportation. He sends part of his earnings to his mother, who manages the construction of a house and a grocery store in Guerrero. According to Yolanda, “my dad says like ‘oh prepare, when we move’...my grandma would be making chile and then that’s like the only thing I’ll be eating, chile with tortillas and frijoles.” She is not too excited about the idea of moving back, which possibly affects her willingness to visit. Yolanda takes her father’s resolution with reservation also because she considers the project economically unfeasible. She’s careful, however, not to bring him too fast on his feet. “I feel kind of weird,” she said, “because, you know, it might take years for him to go over there.” Yolanda, unlike her father, seems more willing to acknowledge the harder but realistic parts of moving back to Mexico.10

In fact, plans to visit the parental homeland often reveal the disparities in status among members in households of mixed immigration status. This is visible through Sara’s account in the beginning of this chapter and is reaffirmed by participants’ testimonials. One child explained how he had to go to Mexico without his mother because “she doesn’t have papers because she wasn’t born [in the U.S.]. She was born in Mexico. So only my...one of my mom’s friends will take me there.” If his parents came, he added, they would have to “face the migration thing.” Another participant noted that her parents “were thinking about sending me to Mexico with my cousin last year, but it didn’t happen.” Children in this study are aware of their parents’ limitations due to immigration status and know they avoid traveling.

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10 There is an additional layer of tension in the expectations of Yolanda’s family. Yolanda’s grandmother has been requesting her daughter to leave one of her granddaughters in Mexico, which would bring company and comfort to her. The request is obviously conflicting, and would defeat the purpose of parental migration.
Traveling alone for the first time is always frightening. But most children feel more comfortable after having tried it at least once. Because these experiences affect the way children think about their families, I divide participants in two groups: visitors and non-visitors.

Non-visitors (or potential visitors)

Sara, Yamil, Yolanda, and Nancy belong to the group of participants that could go to Mexico but haven’t done so yet. Typically, non-visitors rely on Latino U.S. media, school activities, the Internet, and parental accounts to form an image of Mexico. Some of the information they gather is factual, but it also provides outdated, nostalgic, and sensationalist images of Mexico that don’t necessarily match the realities that children experience during their trips. Because Mexico is often thought of as both exotic and poor, some non-visitors dread the idea of traveling. Yamil, for example, said that because of the amount of kidnappings he hears about on TV, “I would, still like to go to Mexico, but I would never come out of the building”; while Yolanda thought Mexico “looked like a really sad place” as shown in Google Earth.

Non-visitors value Mexican culture and traditions to some extent, but they do not feel confident making claims about Mexican culture. Sara, Yamil, Yolanda, Nancy, and Valentín (who eventually went to Mexico but had not done so when we first met) all hesitated about their participation in this study because they thought of themselves as inexperienced. They did, however, share a strong desire to participate in homeland trips. They knew that they were expected to fulfill a role in their families and were eager to support their parents.

Accomplishing this goal, however, depends on parents more than it does on children. Some trips get canceled or postponed because parents don’t have enough money, because they don’t want to interrupt children’s school schedule, or because they don’t think their children are
ready. When this happens, children might experience stress, anxiety and depression because they can’t fulfill a strongly felt parental expectation.

**Child Visitors**

On the other side of the spectrum are children like Valentín and the Ramos siblings, who have visited Mexico at some point. These children usually feel more confident talking about Mexico than non-visitors and consider themselves as credible sources of information. Their participation in homeland trips gives them a new perspective about their families and introduces them to transnational behavior (see Chapter 3). When children return from their visits, they seem more interested in maintaining communication with relatives that live in Mexico.

Valentín had not been to Mexico when we first met, but became the only child whom I saw transition into a visitor. On the summer of 2013, 11-year-old Valentín flew to Mexico for the first time accompanied by a girl of his age. His grandfather waited for him at Mexico City’s airport and together they rode a bus to Puebla, where Valentín stayed for over a month. Traveling to Mexico was an important turning point for Valentín because it allowed him to meet his older half-siblings for the first time and learn about family conflicts prompted by migration.

Lety and Yanira Ramos—ages ten and eleven at the time we met—had a less positive experience visiting Mexico. In December 2006, when the girls were about four and five years old, they went to Mexico with their father. On their way back they were flown back to New York accompanied by a family acquaintance who seemed more like a stranger to them. Their father (an undocumented immigrant) had to cross the border by foot. It took the girls’ father over four months to finally meet his family back in the U.S. The difficulties in Mr. Ramos’s trip, and the emergence of violent threats against the girls’ mother by gang members in Mexico City, discouraged the family from visiting Mexico again. Their last attempt was in 2012, when the
siblings had to cancel their trip last minute due to new threats. The inability to meet this expectation made the Ramos siblings feel a sense of failure. Lety now fears talking about Mexico and Matt cries at night because he couldn’t meet his grandmother.

Figures 2 and 3 show participants and families organized by visitors and non-visitors.

**Figure 3. Non-visitors and their families**

**Figure 4. Visitors and their families**

What do families expect from homeland trips?

Latinos emphasize “the centrality of the family unit and stress the obligations and support that family members owe to both nuclear and extended kin” (Sabogal, F. et al. quoted in Germán, Gonzales and Dumka 2008:17). These links do not disappear with migration (Dreby 2010). By sending children to Mexico, parents hope to strengthen family ties and increase children’s
appreciation of their cultural roots. Doing so can help children alleviate the anxieties of the immigrant bargain. By showing love and care for relatives in Mexico, they pay back for their parents’ migration sacrifices.

The term “homeland”—widespread among immigration literature—captures a common perspective for Latino immigrants that home is not entirely re-created in the settlement communities. The true home exists far away, in the different societies that immigrants left behind. Some children appropriate their parents’ idea of Mexico as a true home, where, they assume, they will finally be closer to family members, religion, and authentic culture. This assumption explains why the most cited reason to go to Mexico would be to visit family members, followed (with fewer mentions and less urgency) by reconnecting with cultural roots (raíces), and exploring exotic places (this last one most common among younger children).

When it comes to visiting family members, grandparents (particularly grandmothers) are at the top of the list:

Yamil, when asked why he would like to go to Mexico: “I would like to go there just to meet my Grandma.”

Yolanda, when asked what she used Skype for: “Um, I just talk to [my grandmother.] Like, how’s her life, and how’s her health. And then she says like in a really little voice that she wants me to come, she wants to hug me, like to be there with her.”

Lety, when asked what she remembers doing in Mexico: “We went to see my mom’s grandma, my grandma—my two grandmas—and my one grandpa.”

Yanira, when asked why she would like to go to Mexico again: “Cause I could go visit my grandma and I could go visit my cousins, and um my house there.”

Nancy, when asked if she thought she would like to go to Mexico on her own: “I’d live with my grandma!”
Sara, when asked if she would like to go to Mexico at all: “I think it'll be nice to visit there. Where my grandma lives. . . My mom said she was gonna get me a ticket [to go there], probably before my grandma dies.”

Children’s responses show a tight correlation between a personal drive to go to Mexico and a sense of duty to meet parental expectations. Sara’s response above shows an awareness that there is an expiration date to visit old relatives. The accounts also show how children have incorporated their parents’ narratives about intergenerational relationships into their own understandings. In talking about the frequency with which Matt dreams about his never-met grandmother, Yanira notes that he has a special connection to her as a result of his being close to his mother. “My mom and my brother are so related. . .” she said, “that if she feels something, he feels it too.” Hence, if the mother feels particularly sad about not spending time with her parents, the assumption is that Matt does too. In many ways, parents’ narratives become a point of departure that children use to bond with relatives even before meeting them.

**An emotional starting point**

Most scholars argue that children’s homeland trips during adolescence help them appreciate their ethnic background, strengthen family ties, and overcome teenage crises (Kasinitz 2008). Robert Smith (2006), for example, spent more than fourteen years documenting how children of Mexican immigrants returned to their parents’ hometown as college students and as young adults. For many of them, he argues, an intense emotional attachment to the ancestral home did not exist during childhood. The emotional attachment was formed through their participation in adolescent rituals during their visits. In Smith’s rich ethnographic project about the transnational activities of Mexicans in New York, we hear about older children’s sudden feeling of excitement—their arms’ hairs’ standing up—upon arriving in Mexico. This may well be the first time they perceive such physical connection. But the fact that they feel it proves that
there are previous connections helping to build up to this moment. All child participants in my study, for example, had a strong emotional reaction (marked by excitement, fear, or sorrow) to their parents’ homeland, proving that engagement can begin when children are much younger—regardless of whether they have actually been there.

In fact, children’s visceral appropriation of homeland trips can be described through Levitt and Waters’s (2002) emotional transnationalism, where children experience an emotional reaction with multiple notions of home. This relationship could also extend from children themselves to their parents. Through children’s participation in homeland trips, parents experience some kind of emotional transnationalism. They get a sense of satisfaction or family commitment. They experience the home through them. Thus, children’s homeland trips are not only useful to them, but also to their parents. By fostering these visits to Mexico, it is the first generation that is complying with family responsibilities through the second. Half of the children in this group reported having been to Mexico (with the youngest visitor having done so at barely four years old.) The rest are still waiting for their parents to have enough money or are themselves contemplating their journey.

The next chapter illustrates which narratives children appropriate, challenge and reject in anticipation of their trips. It documents the kind of resources children use to create an image of Mexico, a place that has—for the most part—existed only in their minds. It seeks to understand how children make sense of these narratives, and how discourses affect the positive or negative images children have of Mexico. Finally, it also illustrates children’s understanding of sensitive topics and situations promoted by homeland trips.
CHAPTER 2: PREPARING FOR HOMELAND TRIPS

And then one day, before he left, he told me his story ...and I had time to [ask] him about his story.

Yanira, 11 years old

Building an image of Mexico through others’ narratives

Yanira is not like many other children in this study. She went to Mexico once but has also had other failed attempts. Like most children, Yanira has questions about Mexico and has trouble getting her parents to share their stories. On the one hand, Yanira’s parents rarely have the time or energy to talk extensively about migration. And on the other hand, they often avoid such topics. The quotation above illustrates Yanira’s excitement when her father finally agreed to tell her his story. Because such meaningful interactions are unusual in her life, Yanira remembers them with pride. Jesús took a moment out of his regular routine to spend time with her, and she treasures that. Yanira was lucky that time—she was out of school, her mother and siblings were doing errands, and her father had a couple of spare minutes before leaving for work. Had her siblings been around, chances are that Yanira would not have brought up the topic.

Storytelling in general, and storytelling about migration in this case, are strong symbols of family affection. Because migration stories are often told confidentially, they can become strong marks of affection. Children like Yanira may come to value these stories by associating them with family bonding. But because finding such moments is not easy, children like Yanira often rely on other kinds of accounts to build an image of Mexico.

Yanira reads the news regularly and, at the time we spoke, she was also trying to read a book about the border. (Trying is an important distinction because Yanira’s mother likely hid the book from her after deeming it inappropriate.) The book’s cover caught Yanira’s attention
because it had “a picture of the border, the actual border!” Borders are a common source of curiosity for children of immigrants who wish to learn more about their parents’ journeys. Yanira also sympathized with the book’s concerns: “I think in the blurb it said, ‘I don’t know why’—like my dream!—‘I don’t know why something like this would have existed,’ or why the border existed.” Her excitement makes more sense as framed by her dreams for a world without geopolitical borders. In one of these dreams, Yanira stands before Mexican president Felipe Calderón and U.S. president Barak Obama to request the elimination of the border. When she finally took the borders out, she explains, “everybody was filming it! I was creating the houses, the buildings, the stores and all that stuff—the crops! And I was, I had the illusion (dream) that I could do that one day.” Yanira’s dream (ilusión in Spanish) shows a girl’s struggles to understand and remove borders.

This chapter explores children’s appropriation of narratives about Mexico. It illustrates the ways in which children prepare for their trips by looking at the information they gather. While relatively powerless, children in these situations are nonetheless active participants of what might be thought of as the “game” of homeland trips. They are not oblivious or indifferent to this expectation. Like active participants, they take the game seriously (Bourdieu 1998). In doing so, they identify and manage sensitive topics that, like migration, yield undesirable reactions from their parents. Ultimately, this chapter illustrates how children navigate their own families as they attempt to map out a part of the world still unknown to them.

**Children’s exposure to narratives about Mexico**

Children’s access to information about Mexico is limited and is often regulated by adults. While immigrant parents cannot control everything their children see and learn, they often do choose which things get discussed back home. Sometimes their selection is emotional. They
chose topics that might increase children’s regard for Mexico or justify migration sacrifices, like the immigrant bargain and familism values. Other times their selection is strategic. Parents want to provide their children with information that will prepare them in their journeys. Yanira’s mom, for example, thinks her daughters have been overexposed to negative narratives about Mexico and chooses to emphasize “las cosas bonitas de Mexico” (the nicer things of Mexico). But she also cautions them about improper behavior there, like speaking in English.

Most children in this study are familiar with representations of Mexico displayed by family members, school material, TV shows, newspapers, and online media. They have heard about violence and insecurity through the news and their relatives’ concerns. They also know about the vast landscapes, the dynamic inner cities, and the colorful and warm towns and villages of Mexico as described by educational texts and parents’ remembrances. This combination of narratives provides a diverse mix that children must assimilate to imagine their parents’ homeland and to prepare for their journeys.

Yamil is a gentle, shy and well-mannered boy who wears square glasses, speaks with a nasal voice, and who likes listening to his grandfather’s myths about Mexico. His favorite one tells the story of a man that gets trapped with a devil in a cave. In the story the man receives a coin for each day spent there. Many years and coins later he finally exits, only to find out he is old and lonely, and goes crazy. While fantastical in nature, this story shows Yamil that some sacrifices come at high costs. The man endured isolation saving money, but when “he came out of the cave, [he] figured that he was really old and nobody ever saw him.” There are similarities between this story and the paradoxical position many Mexican working-class immigrants find themselves in. Many move to the U.S. in hopes of providing for their families. But this often comes at the high cost of leaving loved ones behind. For some, there is comfort in returning
someday. But for others, as Yamil’s story foretells, the future is less bright. Relatives die, hometowns change, and families disintegrate while immigrants work in the U.S. Yamil likely observes these connections.

Yamil also associates Mexico and border crossing with the desert. Places like the Samalayuca Desert—which extends approximately 772 square miles south of Texas—are a symbol of persecution and fear because that’s where people “get picked up by the frontera people,” where immigrants get “jumped back,” where children starve or get incarcerated. Children hear about “a place in the middle of the desert” where no electronic equipment works and people get stuck “without no-one knowing.” These depictions account for children’s fears.

Children in this study who have never visited Mexico seem more susceptible to negative narratives of Mexico as precarious, violent and poor. They see their parents’ homeland as a potentially dangerous place. Yolanda, for example, has seen the dirt roads of Tlapa, Guerrero in Google Earth, and has learned, through TV shows like El señor de los cielos11, to associate Mexico with narcotráfico (drug-dealing). Her understanding, though overtly simplistic, is also the only way in which Yolanda can build an image of Mexico. Her parents’ tenuous attempts at explaining her Latino media are often not enough. With an air of frustration, she explains:

Sometimes they see the news and they be talking about Mexico and all that. I’d be [ask]ing them like “what’s going on?” Cause I don’t understand what they be sayin’. So they be explaining me but still I don’t understand, I still don’t get it. And they get like very mad at me cause they like, it’s really hard to like, tell me what it [is], cause I don’t understand what they’re saying. So they get really mad cause I keep, I keep on asking them, like I never get what they’re talking about.

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11 A Spanish-language telenovela produced by United States-based television network Telemundo Studios, Miami and Colombian Caracol TV, aired in 2013
Narcotráfico may be labeled as an adult topic in Yolanda’s home. When news or TV shows in the topic are featured at night, Yolanda has to sprint through her dinner and leave. These topics are also difficult for parents, which explains their frustration at Yolanda’s clarification requests.

On the other hand, children who have already been to Mexico are less attentive to narratives about Mexico. They speak, instead, about what they themselves have seen. As children visit their parents’ homeland, they begin to resist the idea of learning about it from others. Instead of taking their parents’ experiences as a blueprint, they become interested in building a personal image. Valentín, for example, relied heavily on his mother’s accounts before visiting Mexico. But after doing so, his contact became more immediate (see Chapter 3).

Yanira’s collection methods include surfing the web, scrutinizing television shows, and sneaking into conversations about Mexico. Learning about it through secrecy opens up spaces unregulated by adults. One of them is provided by Yanira’s overhearing of adult conversations:

Alexia: So when you went to Mexico the first time you didn’t know anything about this?
Yanira: No.
AR: Like the border stuff?
Y: No, I don’t think so.
AR: When did your parents decide to tell you their stories?
Y: Well, when my mom had visitors, sometimes I’ve heard, I was playing in my computer, so I would hear what they said, and-
AR: Mhm.
Y: But I didn’t, I wouldn’t come into the [room] with them.

Yanira does not learn much about her parents’ migration experiences directly because these topics get censored, pushing her to rely on secrecy to overcome uncertainty.

Other times, however, it is children themselves who limit or avoid interactions with adults. Yanira’s little sister, Lety, regulates discussions about Mexico with her parents through play. Admittedly, she does not find her father’s migration stories appealing because they often
link back to the immigrant bargain (highlighting children’s educational privileges made possible by migration.) Many children, in fact, find these stories relatively annoying. The immigrant bargain stands out for the burden it places upon them. When I asked Lety what she thought about her father’s stories, she said she was “a little bit” pleased to listen to them. But I knew she was being polite. In reality, she meant no. “Why yes or why no?” I asked. Lety responded in an accelerated and monotonous way, elongating vowels to emphasize just how repetitive these conversations usually are for her: “No because, I know I have to work haaarder to go, to move up graaadess-and get to cooolllege-and get my diploooma-and get my career. And yes cause I love hearing stories, but my problem in reading is comprehending what the story is about.” In this case, Lety apparently tries to steer the conversation in a different direction by introducing new topics, but her father resists. She explains her frustration by showing how her father, noticing her hidden intention says, “I wasn’t talking about that.” Then, she adds, “we come to that part of the story and he tells me more and more until… [I say] ‘Uh-oh, it’s time! I need to go take a shower.’” The interaction is not easy to follow, but it reveals an intergenerational disparity. Lety’s father wants to talk about his daughter’s academic responsibilities, while Lety resists by offering new topics and finding an excuse to leave.

Lety’s conversation with her father exemplifies a disparity between what adults want to say and what children want to listen to. Migration expectations are challenging topics. Parents seem more interested in speaking about the immigrant bargain, which often upsets children; and children are curious about their parents’ migration journeys, which often get censored by parents who resent family separation. Learning how to manage opposite needs is a challenge that immigrant families face while preparing for children’s journeys.
Negotiating and reacting to sensitive topics

Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) note that because immigration is a stressful event, it is important to examine how immigrant families deal with the gains, losses, changes, opportunities, and stresses associated with immigration. Topics like border crossing, separation and reunification, violence, racism, and adjustment to unanticipated realities can signal traumatic experiences for immigrants who face the challenges of learning new rules about social, family, and gender relationships in their new society (ibid). Migration, for example, is a sensitive topic for Mexican immigrants because it touches on issues of race, violence, deportation, family separation, and other struggles that are difficult for parents and children to assimilate. For some parents, speaking about their journeys implies recognizing that they left spouses and children behind and that perhaps their sacrifices were not all that worth it. It implies recognizing a humiliating endurance of violence and abuse at the hands of others. It implies acknowledging that families are still vulnerable, even after migration.

Undocumented immigrants resent policies that make it harder for them to travel back and forth. As a result, they often face the sad challenge of leaving loved ones behind, including their own children. Many of the children at MANOS have older siblings in Mexico whom they have never met. In fact, they have trouble recognizing their names or distinguishing between siblings and cousins. This does not mean that they are not interested in learning about them. U.S.-born children are usually excited about meeting them. But because migration is such a difficult topic to discuss, their accounts are often shadowed by uncertainty and speculation. When I asked one of them what his grandmother’s name was, he simply shrugged his shoulders and replied abuela.

Different families negotiate the exchange of information in different ways. Yolanda’s parents restrict her exposure to topics about violence and drug dealing in Mexico, and Yolanda
herself resists conversations about homeland trips. The Ramos parents avoid talking about stressful memories, while Yanira and Lety prefer not to talk about the immigrant bargain. Yamil’s parents often restrict their children from talking about migration in an attempt to circumvent distress. In general, however, children and adults alike avoid sensitive topics. In doing so, they participate in intergenerational negotiations, as children did during our interviews. (Some refused to talk about things that upset them, while others deflected conversations towards more interesting issues for them.) In general, children protect their families by avoiding sensitive topics. Yet ironically, many of the topics they avoid (e.g., a relative’s deportation) are topics for which they also feel most curious about. As I worried about disturbing Sara while discussing her grandfather’s deportation, she comforted me by assuring that “I’m not gonna be sad because at least I get to express myself…to someone.” Sara and Yamil wanted to participate in a second interview. Their requests made me think they appreciated being heard, and helped me understand just how restricted they were from discussing certain topics back home.

Sara knows which topics arouse sad feelings in her family and adjusts her behavior to align with them. She avoids talking about migration with her older brother because doing so makes him sad; cause he also never met his grandma. So I am not supposed to talk about it, neither does my mom. Because it’s kind of like sort of sad; she left the relatives and brothers and sisters and all that over there when she came over here. But I don’t talk about it to not make them feel sad. Especially my mom, because she’s the one who had the hard time. So, I don’t talk about it because I don’t want to make her cry and [make her] think about her mom, her sisters.

It thus became clear to me that Sara’s family had rules about what should and should not get discussed about Mexico. In a way, it mirrored Yanira’s reaction when I asked her if she could share the details of the violent threats from Mexico against her family and the cancellation of her second trip. “I can’t go to Mexico. I know what the incident is,” reasoned Yanira, “but I don’t
wanna tell it because it brings back sad memories.” Thus, negative experiences (even at the planning level) affect children’s perceptions. The lack of spaces where they can discuss these difficult topics leads to anxiety and fear, and reveals a need for intergenerational dialog.

**Dealing with deportation**

Yamil’s grandfather got deported briefly before the child and I met, and I could see that the boy still resented his deportation. During our interview, Yamil tried to avoid sad topics, but these would surface as he narrated other kinds of stories about Mexico.

Yamil tried to explain what he used to like most about living near his grandfather in the Bronx, but his voice cut short. He took a deep breath and paused. And I, just like Sara, tried to change subjects, but it was almost of no use. Yamil’s eyes filled with water and his chin began to tremble. He bent forward and covered his mouth with his left arm. I remember feeling a quick rush of blood through my body as I saw my 11-year-old interviewee struggle to deal with an emotionally difficult situation. I felt desperate and anxious, and could clearly understand Sara’s desire to avoid such topics in an attempt to protect her brother.

Deportation—even the mere threat of it—carries a huge burden for children and their families. In her study of the effects of deportation policies on children of immigrants, Joanna Dreby (2013b) notes that children of working-class Mexican immigrants equate migration and illegality. She uses De Genova’s term for the “threat of deportability” to argue that women and children in Mexican immigrant households are disproportionately exposed to high levels of stress and concern in their everyday lives, even if children themselves are free from deportation risk. Dreby also explains that “regardless of whether or not a family member is actually deported, attentive to the significant increase in deportations, Mexican family members begin to fear and prepare for this potential outcome” (2013b:74). The fact that most parents in this study consider
moving back to Mexico and have steady means of doing so (e.g., by building homes there) reveals the ongoing concern with procuring an alternative plan in case of deportation.

It is beyond question that Yamil’s grandfather’s deportation affected the child’s sense of security. He and his sister linked being Mexican with deportation. Sara explained that “you know how people that Mexico, that were born there like they get, if they cross the border and they get caught, they get sent back to Mexico? That happened to my grandpa...he got sent back to Mexico.” In Sara’s mind, people born in Mexico have to get caught and deported. And images of violence and deportation drive Yamil to conclude that if he ever visited Mexico “I would just stay in my house, do whatever my family tells me to do and, stay there, stay in there.”

Many children in this population have had some sort of contact with deportation, either by hearing of it from a friend or experiencing it with their own families. Yanira, for example, knows that her parents had to “jump” the border in order to get to the United States and believes that “once you step into the U.S. territory, when you jump the border, then they can arrest you.” She remembers dreaming about her father taking her to the border in Mexico “and, I saw that there was a boy, a man I mean, that was crossing by himself…and then I realized that they had jumped him back in.” The fact that Yanira mixes boy with man is probably not a coincidence. She knows that children also get caught by the *frontera people* in their attempt to reunite with family members. “Many children like under 10 years old,” she said, “want to go across the border and… end up in jails that they have.” It is important to reconsider Yanira’s perception in the current context. As I write this thesis, thousands of unaccompanied minors from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras are caught in the U.S.-Mexico border as they attempt to reach relatives in the U.S. I am sure that, if I were to interview Yanira today, her understanding about the *frontera people* would be even more frightening.
Language and identity

Language carries semiotic meaning according to the social structure in which it is produced. In the United States, language is a signifier of social class and status (Zentella 2002). Today, bilingual Latinos are better able to use this as an asset to advance particular interests than before. Unfortunately, code switching and Spanglish are useless tools in parents’ hometowns. In fact, not knowing Spanish, or having trouble understanding it, is often a source of concern for children who expect to visit Mexico without their parents. Yanira, Yolanda, and Nancy admitted feeling frustrated when trying to speak with Spanish monolingual relatives:

Yanira: “Over there, [my sister] might get like, a little afraid. ‘Cause it’s not the same. Like she has to start practicing her Spanish. And the kids here (in the U.S.) like you can speak Spanglish, you can speak both languages and they understand it. And like over there (in Mexico) you have to speak Spanish Spanish. Cause they only learn Spanish.”

Yolanda: “[Speaking with my family in Mexico through Skype felt] really awkward, ‘cause I was thinking in English! And then…it was like ‘Oh, I just remembered they don’t understand English!’ . . . And, it felt like awkward because my uncle was there, my grandma, my cousins. And, there were just staring at me and I was just like . . .” (smiles).

Nancy: “[Living in Mexico would have been different] because they speak more like that language (Spanish) instead of this language (English). And, me… and my sister speak more this language than that language, cause I can’t say “car” in Spanish.

In this way, it makes much sense to understand Sara’s desire to master languages as a personal strategy to prepare for her trip:

AR: You seem to like languages a lot. Why do you think you like them so much? Have you ever thought about that? Why are you so interested in learning different languages?

Sara: Well, I’m interested because I want to communicate with other people and help people who need help… ‘cause they got to travel around, throughout the borders and that stuff… And then they could communicate with other people without having to struggle, and then, I could learn… their culture because I know how to speak with them.
Like other Latino populations across the United States, young children in this group struggle to dominate Spanish. As a result, they resort to Spanglish to communicate with relatives. This strategy, while increasingly valuable in the U.S. Latino market, is also regarded as risky by immigrant parents during children’s homeland trips. Speaking Spanglish (or straight English) in Mexico reveals U.S.-born children’s foreign nature and possibly higher economic status. Yanira admits, “my mom always told us never to speak English in Mexico, cause it could be a threat to them.” Thus, aside from traveling alone, the U.S. born children of immigrants who visit Mexico also have to worry about blending in with locals. “Cause you know how there is all these problems with Mexico, cause they are stealing all these girls over there?” added Yanira, “so [my mom] said, ‘if they were to ask you where you’re from, say Cancún, or whatever place that you know is in Mexico, just say a place that’s in Mexico. Don’t say you are here from U.S.A.’”

Teaching children not to mix languages or reveal their foreign identities in Mexico is a protective strategy—a kind of sensitive training—used by immigrant parents in preparation for children’s trips. Thus, even young children are taught to recognize the power of language as a social marker not just in the U.S., but also in their parents’ communities of origin.

Migration places people in linguistic borderlands (Zentella 1997). Children’s ability to analyze context and choose proper language use reveals their navigation skills. In Mexico and in the U.S., children learn how to manipulate languages in keeping with norms, goals, styles and societal expectations (Zentella 1998). When Ana Celia Zentella (2002) coined the term anthropological linguistics, she hoped to illustrate how U.S. Latinos’ linguistic choices across situations reveal socioeconomic and political realities. But while code-switching might be a way for the U.S.-born children of immigrants to prove that they belong to both worlds when in the U.S.—to negotiate compliance with parental expectations of Spanish and contextual demands of
English—, doing so in Mexico can be threatening. As a result, children learn to avoid English in their trips not because they cannot speak it, but because they should not. Children’s need to give up English in dangerous situations might reinforce their perception of Spanish as a minority, inferior or stigmatized language.

The following and last chapter explores children’s appropriation of transnational behavior as they prepare for and participate in homeland trips. It furthers the idea that homeland trips reinforce children’s appropriation of immigrant transnational behavior as much as family habits. In doing so, it documents the disparity between children’s expectations and experiences with their journeys. In the end, it hopes to illustrate how U.S.-born children assume adult-like roles across borders as they seek to mediate for immigrant parents that can no longer visit Mexico periodically for lack of resources and fear of deportation.
CHAPTER 3: PARTICIPATING IN HOMELAND TRIPS

[Sending clothes makes me feel] like, happy, because, I [don’t] want my brothers to feel like their mother doesn’t care about them...but I also care about them. 
Valentín, ten years old

Passing on the torch to the second generation

In Sarah Mahler’s (1995) account of immigrants’ post-migration disillusions, she offers two options: immigrants either emerge onto U.S. soil as heroes or as outlaws. In her study, participants perceive themselves as unsuccessful, which leads them to recast themselves (through fake photographs and videos) as the successful people their families expect them to be. For the U.S.-born children of immigrants, journeys can also bring about change and disillusion, forcing them to negotiate new belongings.

Valentín had never been to Mexico when we first met. He had only heard about life in the state of Puebla through his mother. Initially, Valentín mimicked his mother’s nostalgia closely, with a romantic idea of what Mexico would be like and the clear hope of visiting someday. But a year later, and having visited Mexico, Valentín's enthusiasm was more realistic. He had finally met his half-siblings and experienced just how hard long distance relationships can be. He had gained new perspectives about his family, including a more immediate understanding of separation, jealousy, and perceived abandonment. Unfortunately, Valentín faced tensions without parental guidance. Forcing a casual tone, he explained what he learned on his trip: “When I wasn’t born my father had another woman. So then my dad left her for my mom. So... I don’t want to stay with [my dad’s family in Mexico] because my other brothers say that because of me my dad is over there, so I really don’t want to stay with them.” His disappointment proves that
immigrants’ marital relationships after migration affect not only their children back home, but also the children they have with new partners (Dreby 2010).

Valentín’s concerns are quite valid. Sadly, they also exemplify common situations that children are forced to manage while visiting relatives in Mexico. Dreby’s (2010) work documents how children that were left behind seem aware that material objects are not equivalent to parental affection and might even feel embarrassed about this aspect of their relationship with their parents. It shows that they have trouble accepting relationships with step-parents and often view U.S.-born children as a potential threat. When U.S.-born children travel to Mexico, they often face resentment along with gratitude, suffering along with joy. Valentín’s father’s ex-wife, for example, refused to see Valentín when he tried to bring her gifts, so he had to arrange to have them delivered by his half-siblings. Fortunately, Lidia’s family was more receptive and happily welcomed Valentín into their home. Nonetheless, Valentín’s visit made him reevaluate his relationship to newly met relatives with whom he now had a connection.

This chapter builds mostly from Valentín’s experience visiting Mexico. It seeks to reveal the disparity between children’s expectations and experiences when traveling. It takes from Dreby’s analysis of transnational parenting (inside a Mexican immigrant community in New Jersey originating from the Mixteca region) to compare and analyze tensions that arise among transnational families in this group. As children like Valentín participate in these journeys, they negotiate their appropriation of transnational behaviors.

Jesús and Lidia—a construction worker and a housekeeper—met in New York about fifteen years ago. Before giving birth to Valentín, they had additional families in Mexico whom they had barely seen since migrating. Valentín did not know his half-siblings while growing up—none of them could visit the U.S.—but Lidia tries to help them get along by making
frequent phone calls and sending gifts. Some of these projects (e.g., maintaining family ties) are
passed down to children as they participate in homeland trips. The first thing Valentín
remembers doing after getting his plane ticket, for example, was getting supplies for his
relatives. “We started buying our supplies, buying my supplies,” he corrected himself in a rush,
“…my bags…[I took] a lot of clothes with me for my family.”

Traveling to Mexico is a particularly sensitive issue for Valentín’s family. One morning
about two years ago (when Valentín was about to turn ten), Jesús left his home in the South
Bronx for work and didn’t come back. Worried that her husband had been kidnapped, injured, or
deported, Lidia waited for a call. She was furious when she found out days later that her husband
had gone to Mexico to visit his old family. Jesús left without even saying good-bye, probably
repeating a routine learned while leaving Mexico. Fathers usually avoid saying goodbye or
discussing their departure with relatives and/or children to make it easier for them to leave
(Dreby 2010). Jesús eventually came back to Valentín and Lidia, but the desperate decision he
had made without informing his family and the life-changing threats he faced with coyotes at the
border impacted the entire family’s visiting plans. Fearing deportation and Lidia’s threats, Jesús
promised not to go to Mexico again. This placed, perhaps inadvertently, a new responsibility on
Valentín, who must now go to Mexico not only to meet relatives, but to mediate for his parents
in their absence. When Valentín finally went to Mexico, he fulfilled long-held personal and
shared expectations. He belongs to the group of children that successfully participate in
homeland trips, and the only one whose transition I was able to monitor.

It is important to note that children like Valentín might conceal information about their
journeys if they find it unfavorable to their role as contributors—pretty much as immigrants
conceal information that they consider unfavorable to their identities as successful breadwinners
(Mahler 1995). When I asked Valentin if he had spoken with his parents about the problems he had in delivering gifts, he looked away in rejection. Valentin could have commented this to his mother on the many times she called asking for him, but he chose not to. Half excited about his journey and half hesitant about sharing negative encounters, Valentin refused to take her calls. He seemed more worried about preserving parental expectations and displaying a particular image of himself than about seeking parental guidance. By refusing to accept the disillusions of his visit, Valentin mimicked a common immigrant behavior of suppressing the grim reality of migration in order to maintain family order and honor expectations (Mahler 1995).

**Learning transnational behavior**

Dreby’s (2010) research shows that parents rely on three consistent techniques to relate to children that live abroad: weekly phone conversations, sending gifts, and regular remittances. These techniques allow family members to show care while apart, giving immigrants a sense of relief for helping their poor relatives in Mexico (Rivera-Batiz 2004). As U.S.-born children learn from their parents’ techniques, they appropriate similar behaviors. Some children in this study felt compelled to send clothes and gifts to Mexico, to call relatives abroad, and to think of themselves as future providers. Exploring children’s visits to the society of immigrant parental origin can provide insights into the conditions that surround the development of transnational engagements and identities among the second-generation (Kibria 2002). For some children, visiting Mexico upgraded their status as future caregivers. While some connection existed before traveling, visiting made the project more salient and personal.

Meeting children’s demands for clothing and money in Mexico is a specific way in which immigrants do parenting from abroad (Dreby 2010). Some U.S.-born children learn from these strategies. In watching his mother’s techniques, Valentin equipped himself to better understand
his half-siblings. Before even visiting Mexico, Valentín valued sending clothes “because, I don’t want my brothers to feel like their mother doesn’t care about them...but I also care about them.” His phrasing suggests a desire to show authentic and not just reciprocal care from abroad.

This, in fact, reveals a common habitus in immigrant families. It is only because Valentín has been exposed to his mother’s transnational parenting techniques that he knows how to show care himself. It is only because he has grown up learning about the importance of making phone calls and sending gifts that he himself considers them important endeavors. If, as Pierre Bourdieu (1998) stated when analyzing the replication of habitus, the structures of the “game” were not also in people’s mind, the project would seem futile and ridiculous to them. Thus children like Valentín appropriate their parents’ culture not only by participating in homeland trips, but by planning for them and responding to needs and conflicts like their parents.

Valentin is not the only child hoping to solve problems through transnational values. Yanira, who went to Mexico when she was barely six years old, feels responsible for family members in Mexico and wishes she could go again because “I told my great-grandmother I was gonna take care of her. Cause my mom, she told me that nobody will care for her.” Yanira probably thinks that if her mother lived in Mexico, she would care for great-grandmother herself. Her appropriation of parental responsibilities is a way in which she hopes to alleviate the stress of separation. “Me and my sister and my brother had that illusion,” she says. But the dream (la ilusión in Spanish) has not been met despite the family’s efforts to send children again. Parents’ inabilitys to make ends meet can make children feel like a failure. When parents link their emotions to the homeland and when they place all hopes to reconnect with relatives on their own children, they elevate the value of homeland trips and the disappointment of not traveling.
Yanira has appropriated several additional demands after her visit. Her desire to introduce her newborn brother to relatives in Mexico reveals the sporadic nature of participation in homeland trips for the second generation in response to specific life events (Levitt and Waters 2002). If Yanira finds births important, she will likely continue to try to visit relatives in Mexico in later stages. As adolescents pass into adulthood, they participate less actively in transnational life, both because they have settled many of the adolescent identity questions that animated their participation and because of the demands of jobs and children (Smith 2006). But, as documented by Smith, most still return and maintain relationships forged through homeland trips.

This does not necessarily imply, however, that children who engage in transnational behavior are aware of their position as transnational mediators. Most of them see these visits simply as a way to help their parents. The fact that children hope to contribute seems part of a desire to relieve stress momentarily. I believe children in this group are genuinely interested in helping their parents, but not necessarily because they see transnational behavior as an objective. In “Is a Disinterested Act Possible?” Bourdieu (1998) accuses social researchers of pretending that agents always have an end, of transforming people’s journeys into projects. Thus, partly avoiding this problem, I suggest that children’s willingness to participate in homeland trips and other transnational activities is not tied to a common goal of becoming transnational mediators. Rather, these actions stem from their desire to help parents preserve—or even improve—their social relationships with relatives in Mexico, if only momentarily.

**Links to the immigrant bargain**

Families are bound by a kind of “habitus” that directs them on what is to be done in a given situation in order to perpetuate the family unit as known by its members. Bourdieu (1998) described the habitus as the lifestyle, values, dispositions and expectations that particular social
groups acquire through the experiences of everyday life. In a way, children acquire their parents’ habitus by being part of an immigrant family, pretty much as Yanira and Valentín did in appropriating parenting techniques or as Yolanda when anticipating her father’s limitations.

A salient aspect that affects children’s behaviors are parents’ goals for the future. Some children in this group hope to use their education to help their parents gain legal status in the U.S. Valentin, for example, dreams of working for the U.S. government in order to “like, come, and go, come, and go” between borders. Seeing his father’s traveling aspirations probably inspires Valentín to think about the freedom of “coming and going” as desirable, showing that parents’ transnational behavior works as a blueprint for children in the second generation. Valentín’s plan is quite simple to him: “go to college, and the university, and to school and learn, learn a lot, so I can prepare for that.” Sara, Yamil and Yanira share similar dreams. They want to do better at school to help their parents gain legal status.

Homeland trips can also provide outlets for children to comply with their part of the immigrant bargain by offering a way to pay back for their parents’ sacrifices. Children might be more inspired to do well in school after visiting Mexico, or might seek alternatives to make their parents proud by visiting and caring for relatives. Yanira and Valentín felt motivated to make better use of their education in New York after visiting Mexico.

Moreover, homeland trips might increase children’s confidence in themselves and their cultural heritage. The most important lesson that Valentín learned during his trip was knowing where he came from. “I don’t care what they say anymore,” he said while we parted, “I know who I am now, and I’m proud of my culture, and that’s the only thing that matters.” Visiting Mexico had made Valentín more self-confident and able to overcome racial bullying in the U.S.
There are, however, instances in which children resist parents’ narratives about the immigrant bargain and homeland trips altogether. Children like Lety and Yolanda avoid discussing such topics with their parents to avoid the pressure. This is also visible in Valentín’s evaluation of homeland trips as a stressful demand. His words stumbled as he tried to explain that “because sometimes I get stressed and everything… sometimes I don’t know… sometimes I get stressed being here…” Valentín couldn’t explain where this frustration came from, and I didn’t want to push further at the time. But based on his account about homeland trips, it seemed possible for stress to result from a combination of uncertainty (not knowing exactly what he’s supposed to do), fear (of rejection and deportation), and the lack of parental guidance. Excessive stress or anxiety is more strongly felt without adequate support to buffer these feelings (Orellana 2009). In these cases, parents’ insistence that their children do well in school because they themselves had less educational opportunities, and that they visit relatives because they themselves cannot, can backfire on families’ migration goals.

In Lety’s case, her lack of enthusiasm for travelling to Mexico might be the result of the violent threats against her family in Mexico. But it is also possible that sisters relegate family responsibilities in a way that exempts each from complying with certain things. While the expectation to participate in homeland trips is usually equally distributed among siblings, some might embrace it less after seeing other siblings take up the charge.

Non-visitor’s adoption of transnational behavior

Participating in homeland trips can certainly elevate children’s sense of duty with relatives in Mexico. But, as explained in chapter one, feelings of connection and responsibility also exist even before children travel. Most of the children in this group have learned to care for
relatives from abroad through exposure to their parents’ caring strategies. Sara, Yamil, Nancy, and Yolanda—none of whom had been to Mexico when we met—had their own strategies.

Nancy is Yolanda’s little sister—she was seven years old at the time we met. Back then, there were few things as exciting to her as “traveling from one place to the other.” But she also had ideas about how to improve relationships with relatives abroad. In our first interview, Nancy suggested we create a video following her through New York and other places she imagined visiting. Her goal was to send the video to her relatives in Mexico as a kind of guide to New York. Emotional gifts like videos and photographs are, in fact, one of the most cited gifts immigrant’s children acknowledge receiving from parents (Dreby 2010). But Nancy’s proposal is multilayered. While the purpose of creating such video seems strictly practical, it is also possible that the idea seems attractive for its reciprocation potential, which would encourage relatives to send video guides for Mexico. Whichever the case, it is also clear that Nancy’s experience as a non-visitor is guided by a sense of cosmopolitanism that other researchers have identified in different communities. In a way, Nancy’s attitude reveals her expectations for reciprocity and status through transnational activities.

**Donkey Politics**

Many immigrant parents prefer to send money rather than goods through mail services and rely on people carrying gifts for them sporadically (Dreby 2010). Sending goods to Mexico with U.S.-born children is a common but unexplored strategy. Because it is carried inside the immediate family kinship, this strategy allows parents to meet the needs to show an emotional-type of care for relatives without incurring any additional expenses. It is common, for example, to see children carry large bags on their trips. Valentín certainly carried bags with goods in them. And other children, like Yamil and Sara, will likely too. Rebeca keeps an entire room with
appliances in hopes of sending them to Mexico with her children. In carrying these gifts, Yamil and Sara will face the challenge of negotiating their role as symbolic providers for their families.

In this way, homeland trips introduce children to new expectations about appropriate transnational economic and emotional care. Valentín, for example, had several assignments on his trip to Mexico, including the task of delivering gifts and bringing back relatives’ portraits with him. Both were relatively simple tasks. But there are additional lessons about transnational family care during homeland trips. Because immigrants’ decisions are framed by economic factors, Mexican relatives often expect immigrants to provide for them (Dreby 2010). As Valentín learns to appropriate such expectation through his relationship with a donkey, I refer to these lessons as “donkey politics.”

One of the things Valentín enjoyed most about his visit was his contact with nature. Specifically, he remembers the time that he saw a baby donkey being born. Valentin recalls such experience as one of the most wonderful things that ever happened to him. And, in his excitement, decided to adopt the donkey (despite the donkey already having an owner—Valentín’s grandmother). Whenever Lidia spoke with relatives on the phone after Valentín’s return, Valentín would run and inquire about “mi burrito” (my little donkey).

In one such case, Valentín grabbed the phone and directed the question to his grandmother, to which his grandmother replied, half seriously, that his donkey had nothing to eat because he—Valentín—had not sent them money. Her statement clearly expressed an economic transnational expectation for him to which Valentín reacted quickly. He resolved to save money and send it back to Mexico so that the donkey could be fed. Whether this in fact happens or not is of little concern. What matters is the fact that through these kinds of situations, children like Valentín appropriate transnational roles as providers. Valentín learns, through the donkey’s
needs, to think of himself as someone who, like his immigrant parents, should care—emotionally and economically—for relatives that were left behind. This makes him, at least conceptually, a transnational actor. As Mexico’s economy continues to experience inflation and negative GDP growth, Mexican relatives will become more dependent on their immigrant relatives for support.\textsuperscript{12} Valentín’s grandmother’s request for money will doubtfully be the last one.

It has been argued that children in poorer communities develop an acute awareness of household finances that their more economically stable counterparts lack (Chin 2001). This was certainly the case for children in this project. Their narratives about homeland trips were often framed by a concern—an awareness—of their families’ economic struggles and sacrifices. Sara, Yolanda, and Valentín not only knew that they would not be able to visit Mexico until their parents saved a specific amount of money, but they could also estimate how much time it might take them. They understand their relatives’ economic needs and adjust to them. Some, in fact, appropriate identities as providers like Valentín. Lety speaks about her desire to become a designer in order to “donate” clothes for her grandmother in Mexico, and Sara—two years older than her—wishes she could work with her grandmother in Mexico so that both could come together to New York. The dreams and expectations of children like Lety, Sara, Yanira, and Valentín show that, regardless of whether they have been to Mexico, an emotional engagement can exist across borders. Children in poor families of Mexican-origin living in the South Bronx appropriate transnational values and behaviors while they are still young in response to their undocumented parents’ limitations.

\textsuperscript{12} U.S. Department of State. 2010.
CONCLUSION

Mexican immigrants in well-established areas of New York (like Queens, the suburbs, and certain parts of Brooklyn) are usually able to visit Mexico with their children (Smith 2006). But their undocumented counterparts in the South Bronx, with limited economic resources and little community support are rarely able to join their children on their journeys. Because immigrant parents in the South Bronx are structurally disadvantaged, they rely on their U.S.-born children to maintain family ties across borders.

The variation in household stability changes the way children experience homeland trips. For the U.S.-born children of immigrants in relatively stable families, as documented by Smith (2006), traveling to Mexico during adolescence is an act of exploration, an opportunity to discover the native heritage, and to develop alternative identities than the ones they have in the U.S. For those who grow up in poor families of mixed immigration status, however, visiting Mexico is also a way to comply with family responsibilities and to mediate for parents who cannot travel.

In dealing with a parental expectation to visit Mexico alone, U.S.-born children of undocumented immigrants are introduced to a different set of roles than children who travel with their families for leisurely purposes. Children like Valentín, Sara, and Yanira support their families by carrying clothes, toys, documents, and money with them, acting as cultural mediators for their parents and placing themselves as alternative resources of support. Because they expect to visit Mexico alone, these children learn to see themselves as mediators, caregivers, or providers for relatives that live in Mexico.

Many, in fact, appropriate these roles by virtue of planning their journeys, challenging notions about children’s attachment to the parental homeland as achieved only through
adolescent visits. In watching their parent’s transnational parenting strategies, U.S.-born children of immigrants who have never been to Mexico learn to show love and care from abroad while still young. As U.S.-born children of Mexican-origin begin to plan for their homeland trips, they negotiate and appropriate intergenerational responsibilities in the U.S. and in Mexico.

The first challenge children perceive as they prepare for their journeys is linguistic limitation. Some are afraid to speak English or Spanglish in Mexico for fear of being targeted as foreigners. This is a hard problem to gauge, but if local agencies in the Mixteca region could foster a friendlier and safer reception for immigrants and their children as they return to their native hometowns, children’s experiences would be less challenging.

The second difficulty children perceive as they try to prepare for their journeys has to do with parents’ lack of willingness to share their migration stories with them. Speaking about these topics implies recognizing the failures, sacrifices, and abuses that many poor immigrants endure along their journeys. While these conversations are hard to handle, immigrant parents could do a better job at looking for ways to manage this aspect of immigrant family life. When children feel supported, they feel better prepared to deal with conflicts. Adults can try to reduce the most stressful dimensions of children’s visits by providing background information in manageable ways, like encouraging children to ask questions, explaining information, and respecting children’s decisions (Dreby 2012).

The current project shows that parents’ expectations that children visit relatives in Mexico for them places an extra burden on children, complicating their enjoyment of an otherwise healthy experience. Thus, community centers like MANOS could improve children’s positions by suggesting alternative solutions to managing family separation, such as better calling plans for parents or providing access to information on how to regularize immigration
statuses. Programs like MANOS could also help children by creating a space where children share experiences between them. If MANOS could take up again the project of supervising children of immigrants on field trips to Mexico, these children would benefit from adult guidance and support while navigating an unknown setting. In addition, the children could get a sense of shared experience with their peers in similar transnational circumstances.

Researchers traditionally expect the second generation’s participation in homeland trips to become less regular as children grow older, with new visits emerging sporadically as they enter later stages in life (Vickerman, 2002; Smith 2006). But if poor and undocumented immigrants are kept from regularizing their statuses, the expectation to visit Mexico might continue to rely largely on their U.S.-born children. As such, looking at the way immigration policies impact families of mixed immigration status can reveal additional burdens that are placed on the second generation because of parents’ undocumented status.

The last chapter of this thesis argues that children appropriate roles as mediators, caregivers, and providers while they visit relatives in Mexico. But very little is known about how long they maintain these connections. Thus, further investigation on the way U.S.-born children hold onto or let go of roles that were appropriated through homeland trips (and on the methods they use to sustain them) would reveal a deeper understanding of intergenerational relationships in poor families of mixed immigration status across borders.

Recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau suggests that the number of unauthorized immigrants living in the United States has stabilized in the last century, showing that immigrants are more likely to be long-term residents, and to live with their U.S.-born children. In 2013, unauthorized immigrant adults had been in the U.S. at least five years longer than adults a decade earlier (Pew Research Center, 2014). As immigrant parents continue to settle in the U.S. and to
reduce their visits to the native homeland, more children might be forced into larger transnational responsibilities and engagements. In this sense, homeland trips might be of interest for people who work with immigrant communities, not only because they mark the beginning of ethnic identity formation, but also because of the real and symbolic introduction they offer into children’s roles as providers and caregivers for their relatives abroad. In the end, homeland trips can work as a temporary solution for U.S.-born children of immigrants who are concerned with solving family separation (Dreby 2010).

When carried out successfully, these trips can: (1) Introduce children to Mexican familism values, whereby they learn that family members can be dependable sources of help, should be united, and maintain close relationships; (2) Reverse children’s resentment against their immigrant heritage and reinforce self-confidence; (3) Consolidate the benefits of the immigrant bargain as a system that can instill educational values as they return to the U.S.; and (4) Introduce children to transnational roles and transactions as they become more aware of their relatives’ emotional and economic needs.

Homeland trips have the potential to align intergenerational expectations between immigrant parents and their U.S.-born children. But they do not come without costs. These new strategies are a response to parents’ lack of mobility and fear of deportation. Sending children to Mexico in lieu of their parents can elevate Mexican relatives’ sense of abandonment. Parents’ absence during these journeys can also negatively impact children’s perception of themselves. Excessive stress or anxiety is not good for children, especially without adequate support to buffer these feelings (Orellana 2009). When children of undocumented immigrants visit their native communities alone, they are forced to navigate an unknown landscape without clear direction or support of their parents, and they too might resent this exposure. While visiting relatives in
Mexico, U.S.-born children experience relatives’ feelings of resentment and jealousy and might also come to resent their parents’ migration choices. While most value their immigrant parents’ sacrifices and are willing to help through participation in homeland trips, some of the challenges they face as they redefine transnational roles without clear parental guidance can also be overwhelming.

Looking at the second generation’s homeland trips reveals how today’s immigration enforcement policies impact not only undocumented and immigrant communities, but also the citizen children that live within them. They are harmful to children and their families because they carry the potential to permanently restructure families (Dreby 2013a). The phenomenon is not exclusive to the Mexican population. One third of all U.S. citizen children live in families of mixed immigration status (Pew Research Center, 2011). And, while visiting relatives in native communities can be good, pushing children to engage in these journeys alone can even work against families. Children who would otherwise receive parental guidance during their visits are left to make sense of a complicated setting on their own. Having to manage homeland trips independently is a particularly challenging aspect of how children are asked to honor the immigrant bargain. These trips reflect an important, largely unexamined dimension of how mixed-status families work to manage the daily threat of deportation.
AFTERWORD

I first conceived of this project during the summer of 2012, while studying at The CUNY Graduate Center in New York. My enrollment in Professor Ana Yolanda Ramos-Zayas’ seminar on Latino Studies and my role as a voluntary tutor at a community center for Latino families in the South Bronx motivated me to continue working with children of Mexican origin. Their stories introduced me to the difficulties they faced in making sense of overlapping cultures and demands, such as those at school, at home, and in Mexico. Because migration topics often get censored (both formally and informally, at school and at home), children find them the most difficult to understand. The notion that children should help protect their families from deportation (by not speaking publicly about them) and the desire to avoid sensitive topics at home (such as those about migration) silences children’s concerns.

Initiating contact with families at MANOS had its challenges. Although I am also a Mexican immigrant, the children’s parents and I belong to very different realities, both in Mexico and in the U.S. The socio-cultural differences that separated me—a bilingual tutor born and raised in Mexico but living in the United States under relatively favorable conditions (e.g., with economic stability and authorized legal status)—from the children’s parents (mostly undocumented, working-class immigrants) made reciprocation difficult. Parents were hesitant to allow me into their circles. Families engaged in friendlier conversations with tutors who had been at the community center long enough to watch the children grow. It was only through periodical visits to MANOS that I was finally regarded as someone with whom families would be willing to speak.13

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13 This way of establishing rapport, while common to most social studies, illustrates a feature of immigrant family life. Because working-class immigrants often live in fluid communities, they are likely to expect abandonment.
Being a tutor at the community center for children of Latino origin allowed me to learn about children’s perspectives more closely. The experiences I collected there influenced the way I framed my project. In speaking honestly about their fears and desires, children at MANOS steered the focus of this project to a topic that reflected their transnational and intergenerational concerns. Children and their families felt engaged in this project and, as it neared its end, I faced the challenges of closure. I did not want to make them feel rejected. Thus, the struggles of departure were alleviated by my ongoing involvement as a fifth- and sixth-grade tutor. While working with different children than those who participated in the current study, I have been able to remain visible and close to them. Although I have ceased to record their testimonies and behavior, I have nonetheless continued to observe the progress that they make in school and within their families. My hope is that, should I find ways to develop this research further, they will consider sharing new experiences with me.
REFERENCES


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Studying children is challenging in many ways. Most of the time, the challenge begins by recognizing that having gone through childhood does not necessarily mean that we know anything about children’s lives and culture. That I am a Mexican immigrant, for instance, like the parents of the children in this study, and that I grew up in a border town in Mexico where American and Latino cultures fuse like they do in the South Bronx, does not tell me anything for sure about the Mexican-American lives of the second generation. Unlike these children, I was not raised inside an immigrant family, I did not face the challenges of belonging to a minority group, and, until now, I was never expected to reconcile two physically distant worlds. As I establish myself in the United States, I become more aware of just how hard it is to maintain healthy family ties across borders, which seems even harder than reconciling conceptually different territories. When my mother and father split, they had different expectations for me, and I struggled to harmonize my belonging so that I could equally participate in both worlds. It was not easy, and it still isn’t. Both of them make part of whom I am, and I am the smallest unit of analysis in myself.

I am not suggesting that children of immigrants and I share common childhoods. Their life experiences are unique and unknown to me in almost every way. But working between worlds—whether they take the shape of our parents or of distant countries—does put us in a similar kind of limbo—an area where uncertainty determines the ways in which we make meaning. In this gloomy and challenging mist, the children in-between worlds become navigation guides, performing not only as linguistic, but also as cultural mediators for others.