

Franziska Bedorf

SWEET HOME CHICAGO?

Mexican Migration and the Question
of Belonging and Return



From:

Franziska Bedorf

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Mexican Migration and the Question of Belonging and Return

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Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork among older Mexican migrants in Chicago, Franziska Bedorf investigates the phenomenon of return migration by tracing how people's intentions to go back change over time. Considering global labour mobility, she examines transformations of belonging and the wider economic, political, social and cultural frameworks that shape them. Against the backdrop of debates on integration, transnationalism and belonging, the study explores why migrants keep and form attachments to and detachments from places, people and cultures.

Franziska Bedorf (PhD) is a sociocultural anthropologist and a postdoctoral researcher at Freie Universität Berlin. Her research interests include migration, identity formation, and boundary making.

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To my parents

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1. Introduction

“Yo vengo del centro de Mexico, San Luis Potosí, so es casi el centro de México que hay que cruzar para el norte. Entonces de allí llegamos aquí en downtown para la central y de allí, claro, tomé un taxi para darle la dirección de la casa de mi hermano que es acá en el norte. Y me acuerdo que al bajar del taxi, no sé si no tenía suficiente para pagar el taxi, yo tenía que bajar para decirles que me pagaron el taxi y me acuerdo que al bajar el taxi me caí, me caí en el hielo. Y aquí hay una tradición que dice que uno que se cae aquí en el invierno en la nieve ya no se va, no sé si era cierto pero es una tradición que dicen.”¹

This is how Francisco Gallardo, who came to Chicago in 1958 at the age of 17, remembers his first contact with the city. Francisco has a very vivid memory of this particular moment, describing how he arrived at Chicago’s main station, took a cab that drove him to his brother’s place in the north of Chicago and slipped on the ice when he got out of the cab and set a foot on the ground. When Francisco tells me that story, we are sitting in his office at the Nuestra Señora de Gracia church in Logan Square, where Francisco still works as a deacon two days a week. Although the church is not very far from where I live, I regret for the first time having taken my bike and not the car or bus to get to our meeting because the streets are so slippery – just like on that winter day of 1958 when Francisco met with the ‘Windy City’² for the first time. “Yo llegué en invierno,” he remembers. “Me acuerdo ahora con el hielo que llegué.” At the beginning of December 2010, the famous Chicago winter everyone has cautioned me against is finally taking a serious approach, letting the first ten-

1 | Interview Francisco Gallardo, 07.12.2010. I have changed the names of all my correspondents.

2 | ‘Windy City’ is a term often colloquially used for Chicago. It is said to originate either from the fact that Chicago is literally a very windy city – particularly in its center part, the ‘Loop’, where the wind coming from the lake hits the highrises – or Chicago’s windy (in terms of corrupt) politics.

tative snowflakes swirl through the air, covering everything with a thin layer of ice and claiming the city for itself, rushing the people inside. I am not yet equipped properly, I realize, as I without avail try to protect myself against the biting wind, Chicago winter's pride and joy, blowing from Lake Michigan while I pedal cautiously along Humboldt Boulevard, then Fullerton Avenue and into Ridgeway Avenue, where the church is located. When I hurry inside, I am shivering, cursing myself that I did not invest in a proper winter coat and serious gloves in good time. Francisco, in contrast, appears as if he was born into such a kind of weather and has spent his entire life strolling through the snow when he opens the door a few minutes later. He smiles heartily, takes off his seemingly Siberian fur hat to shake off the remaining snow flakes, peels himself out of his thick sturdy coat and stomps firmly with each foot to clean his shoes from pieces of dirt and ice.

"It says that if you fall on the snow here in winter, you never return [to Mexico]. I don't know whether it's true." Francisco has, in fact, not returned to Mexico and does not plan on doing so either. Already by looking at his clothes, one can tell that he has adapted to the Chicago winter, and happily so. Francisco recalls his first impression of Chicago covered with snow and ice more than fifty years ago as if this experience already predicted that he would stay there for good. The weeks and months following his fall on the ice when greeting Chicago were far from uniformly pleasant and happy, quite the contrary in fact. Francisco describes that period as "un cambio terrible", because of "el ambiente mismo, el idioma, el frío." Adjusting to the new environment, Francisco recalls, was extremely challenging for him, particularly since he had been working as an accountant in Mexico and had no choice but to do physically demanding factory work in Chicago. He found a job in a metalworking factory, "una fábrica donde pintaban acero." His task consisted of operating a machine painting car seats. "Imagínese Usted: Yo venía de una oficina sentado, trabajar con mis manos y mi cabeza, y de repente yo tenía que estar cargando esto para colgarlo en una máquina." Francisco still shakes his head in disbelief when recounting the situation 50 years later: "Fue una cosa terrible."

Nevertheless, he talks almost as if his arrival in Chicago already determined that he would stay, his fall on the ice binding him to Chicago, sealing the accord, still unknown to him, that he would never really leave again. Francisco tried to move back to Mexico once, with his wife Juanita and his four small children, but it did not work out. They were both drawn back to Chicago. Francisco recalls the situation during his stay in San Luis Potosí that made things clear to him:

"Un día digo a Juanita que vamos al cine a ver una buena película en inglés. Era una película, se llamaba, Robert de Niro hizo una película en estos años que era muy buena, algo con hunter. Bueno, esa película era muy familiar, pero muy familiar, la

vida de aquí [Chicago] de las fábricas, vímos la nieve, la navidad, todo eso. Nos pusimos tan nostálgicos que salimos todos emocionados. Total, los dos decidimos que debíamos regresar, después de un año y medio.”

Looking back, it makes sense to Francisco that he could not do anything but return to Chicago, because this was the place, “este era el lugar.” Francisco’s interpretation of his arrival in Chicago almost implies a notion of fate. Although he smiles half-mockingly when he mentions the proverb that slipping and falling in Chicago means that one is going to stay there, it seems that he refers to the story to create a rationale for the turns his own life took when looking back.

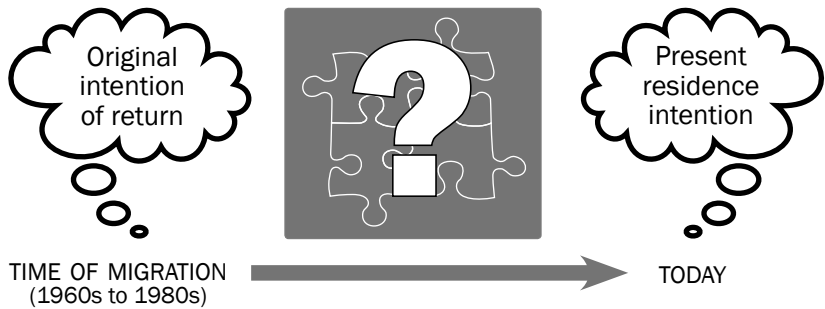
When people migrate, the issue of return is mostly, if not always, inextricably linked with these movements. Migrants leaving their homeland usually plan to stay in the new country for a limited time and to go back to their home country some day, at the latest upon retiring from work (Golbourne, et al. 2010: 121; Levitt 2001: 92).³ More than that, they might never leave in the first place if they did not expect to return later (Serrano 2008). This intention of return often impacts the entire migration experience, influencing how people relate to both their place of origin and their new residence. The desire to return might, as the literature on transnationalism has suggested, even constitute one of the main causes for migrants to remain connected with their home country “thus consolidating transnational social fields” (Sinatti, 2011: 154, see also Conway 2005: 276; Golbourne, et al. 2010: 135). However, several studies have demonstrated that over the course of time, return often turns into a “myth” (Anwar 1979; Bolognani 2007; Brettell 1979; Senyürekli and Menjívar 2012). Contrary to their initial intentions, migrants frequently keep postponing their return and end up remaining in the host country permanently. This ‘myth of return’ is particularly evident in the United States, a nation overwhelmingly composed of former migrants, many of whom probably intended to only stay in the U.S. for some years before moving back ‘home’ – and ended up staying.

It is this puzzle of the transformation of return intentions I want to explore in this study. Retirement constitutes a special case in this respect since most migrants move back to their country of origin either within a few years of migrating or when retiring from work (King 2000: 41; Klinthäll 2006: 173; Massey, et al. 1987: 310; Percival 2013a: 8). The phase of the life course thus, it seems, affects the likelihood of return migration. This is linked to the fact that economic factors (better income opportunities) usually constitute the primary factor initially motivating and subsequently perpetuating (labor) migration.

3 | This refers to the context of international labor migration. People migrating for reasons of war or because they are politically persecuted in their home country might have a similar desire to return, but less pronounced actual plans of returning.

When work becomes less relevant with old age, economic motives recede, and the possibility of return comes into clearer focus (Bolzman 2013: 68; Hunter 2011: 179). I will therefore address the ‘blackbox’ between initial plans of return when migrating and potentially altered residence intentions at retirement (see figure 1.1). What, I ask, does this ‘blackbox’ contain? What are the factors shaping individual residence decisions that can account for substantial dynamics in population movements?

Figure 1.1: The puzzle of return intentions



Examining this ‘blackbox’, as will become apparent, sheds light on important processes and transformations inherent in migratory experiences, such as changes in social relations, cultural preferences and loyalties, interactions with different spheres of home and host society, and processes of assimilation and transnational engagement. It illuminates the institutional, social and cultural structures framing migration on local, national and global levels, such as formal and informal politics of belonging, economic frameworks and social networks. It unveils the larger discourses informing and reflecting how migrants react to and engage with these frameworks and reveals shared patterns. It also highlights the role of emotions, affects and narrated experiences in this context. Ultimately, I suggest, exploring this ‘blackbox’ represents a key for understanding how notions of connectedness with people, culture and places (belonging) evolve and change in the migratory context over the life course, eventually modifying the initial plan of return. This question is rooted in individual biographies and thus – at first glance – concerns the micro-level. Yet, as I have mentioned above, and as anthropologist Katy Gardner has aptly pointed out, different levels of analysis are tightly interconnected here, since life courses are “shaped by culture, history and global economies,” which “articulate with

various forms of movement and migration between different places” (Gardner 2009: 229). Resolving the puzzle thus requires taking into account migration as a process comprised of individual experiences that allow for discerning general patterns and dynamics.

In this study, I will investigate the puzzle of the transformation of return intentions upon retirement for the case of elderly Mexicans (aged 55 and above) living in the United States, more specifically in Chicago. This migratory context represents a case in point for studying retirement return migration since Mexican migration to the United States, just like to European countries, rapidly gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s (Massey, et al. 1987: 3; Passel, et al. 2012: 19). Even Chicago’s Mexican population increased considerably during this time, growing more than six-fold within the city limits to 352,560 people, which made Chicago the city with the second largest Mexican population in the United States after Los Angeles (De Genova 2005: 116; Lowell, et al. 2008: 16). Consequently, Mexicans who migrated to Chicago in these decades represent the first substantial cohort of Mexican migrants who are approaching retirement in the United States and might consider a return to Mexico today. The potential impact this entails for both the U.S. and Mexican society is significant: Where this generation chooses to live after retirement will have consequences for the welfare sector, politics and the demographic setup in both countries. With this study, I therefore aspire to contribute to the understanding of an issue that will be of increasing importance both in the Mexico-U.S. context and in many other Western countries in the future and has been underexplored so far.

While some research has been conducted on return migration upon retirement, there are hardly any studies covering the Mexico-U.S. context.⁴ Additionally, and more importantly, this study will move beyond existing research by addressing return migration as a process and a result of migratory experiences. Going beyond the identification and testing of factors that might influence return considerations, I focus on the transformation of return intentions and relate these processes to changes in individual belonging as linked to the migratory life courses and the wider contexts shaping them. Following Katy Gardner, I assume that “movement through the life course affects our propensity to move” (Gardner 2009: 229). Addressing this topic will, first, contribute to the discussion on return migration, specifically on Mexico-U.S. return migration. Second, it touches upon questions of assimilation and transnational involvement of migrants and links these, third, to a systematic exploration of how be-

4 | A notable exception is research conducted by American sociologist Michael B. Aguilera (Aguilera 2004). Several studies on Mexican migration examine post-retirement return from the United States to Mexico as one aspect (Jarvis, et al. 2009; Massey, et al. 1987; Sana and Massey 2000; Smith 2006) (see also chapter 2.2).

longing is reconfigured in the context of migration. This contributes, fourth, to the discussion regarding the relationship between migration and time articulated by the interaction of individual migrants with meso- and macrolevel contexts over the life course. Doing so requires taking into account the migrants' narratives in the sense of remembered and narrated experiences.

My approach is somewhat unusual in that my study does not investigate the dynamics of one transnational community, even though I consider cross-border ties. In contrast to much insightful sociological and anthropological research on migration, I did not investigate migrants who are from the same region or even village in Mexico. Instead, I focused on three neighborhoods in Chicago and included people from different home regions in Mexico in my sample.⁵ While concentrating on a bounded transnational group certainly helps to trace long lasting cross-border ties and practices, it neglects those migrants who are not part of a transnational community. The approach I adopted covers a potentially more heterogeneous set of people. This makes the question of belonging all the more intriguing. It will be interesting to see whether migrants with a variety of backgrounds nevertheless display a similar sense of belonging.

The study is based on 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork in San Antonio, Mexico (July–September 2010) and Chicago, U.S. (September 2010–August 2011). The research question underlying my fieldwork was twofold: First, I aimed to explore where elderly Mexican migrants living in Chicago planned to live after retiring. Second, I wanted to examine the reasoning and justification for their possibly altered residence intentions, the content of the 'blackbox'.

The book is structured as follows: In chapter 2, I delimit the fields of research my work draws upon. I start by discussing research on Mexico-U.S. migration in general and to Chicago in particular (2.1) as well as studies on return migration in general and return migration upon retirement in particular (2.2). I also reflect on the concepts of 'belonging', specifically in the context of migration (2.3). Based on these theoretical reflections, I then build a conceptual framework for the analysis of retirement return migration (2.4). Subsequently, I move to 'the field': Chapter 3 presents my research design and the stages of my fieldwork. I delineate my initial design (3.1), the different periods of the fieldwork (3.2) as well as methods of data collection (3.3). The chapter concludes with a discussion of my personal circumstances and role during the fieldwork (3.4) and the methods of data analysis (3.5). In chapter 4, the setting of the study is introduced. This includes an overview of Mexican migration to the U.S. (4.1) and a presentation of Chicago (4.2). I also trace the history and the current characteristics of 'Mexican Chicago' (4.3.). This sketch of the setting is

5 | The initial idea of the research project was to explore a transnational community (see chapter 3.1). When I, however, had to adapt my research design, I came to realize the advantages of not focusing on a bounded transnational group.

followed by an introduction of my sample, the people this study is about (chapter 5). In order to give an impression of both my interlocutors' backgrounds and their current circumstances, I present several vignettes (5.1 and 5.3) that frame an overview of their contexts prior to migration, their motives for migrating and their lives today (5.2).

I present the major part of my empirical data and my analysis in chapters 6 and 7. In Chapter 6, I examine my interlocutors' return considerations by applying both quantitative (6.3) and qualitative (6.4) methods of analysis. I find that the majority of the older Mexicans living in Chicago included in my sample envisions a future either exclusively in Chicago or going back and forth between Chicago and Mexico (chapter 6.2). Permanent returns to Mexico are only rarely planned. In order to explore this common transformation in return intentions and fill the 'blackbox', I examine whether certain motives my interlocutors stated in their explanatory discourses are systematically linked to their considerations. I first employ a statistical analysis and then conduct a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) in order to see whether there are consistent patterns in their reasoning (chapter 6.3). In a second step, I add a qualitative in-depth analysis of cases representing different residence intentions (chapter 6.4). I find that pragmatic factors (such as economic motives or the legal status) hardly influence the migrants' current considerations, whereas relational factors (belonging) feature prominently. The analysis further reveals the role of emotionally laden key experiences and shared overarching motifs framing my correspondents' narratives for reconfigurations of belonging over time (chapter 6.5). Accordingly, chapter 7 focuses on the transformation of belonging as a key to comprehend my correspondents' return considerations. To this aim, it traces narratives of attachments and detachments and prominent key experiences included in them over time. These developments are tightly linked with my correspondents' interactions with institutional, social and cultural contexts and framed by shared motifs manifesting their aims and achievements: "seguir adelante"/ getting ahead (7.3), "volver"/ returning (7.4) and "adaptarse"/ adapting (7.5). The analysis of my correspondents' experiences interlaced with their manifestations of belonging today indicates that, by and large, their sense of connectedness to people, culture and places has shifted to Chicago. Chapter 8 relates these findings to the present by exploring some expressions of belonging today in detail. To this effect, it explores the migrants' social worlds, their delineation from the current migrant generation and their intended places of final rest. In chapter 9, I summarize the insights and provide a conclusion.

Before I continue, two remarks on the terminology are in order: First, in what follows, return migration refers to migrants returning to their home country voluntarily as opposed to migrants deported by the sending countries' authorities (e.g. Drotbohm 2012). Besides, following Gmelch's definition that return migration is "the movement of emigrants back to their homelands to re-

settle” (Gmelch 1980: 136), I use the term return migration to speak about permanent returns, leaving aside seasonal or temporary return migration. Second, when speaking about the places my correspondents relate to, I will often refer to ‘Mexico’ and ‘Chicago’. This different level of labelling – referring to Chicago as a concrete place in the United States while ‘Mexico’ remains unspecified – might be confusing. It reflects, however, my correspondents’ terminology. Usually, they used the more general expression ‘Mexico’ even when actually referring to their home region. In the following, when I speak of ‘Mexico’ this refers to the respective home region in Mexico, if not indicated otherwise.

Finally, before letting the study unfold, I want to quote the anthropologist John Borneman in order to highlight that, although the following insights are based on empirical data, the account I present here represents, of course, my interpretation. Hence, “in the narrative that follows, the initial meanings may be theirs, but the final story is mine” (Borneman 1992: 37).