

No Place Called Home

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When ICE told Ángel he was headed to Mexico, he could not believe it. After two years behind bars—and a whole life in California—he thought, “Okay, whatever, stop messing with us.” In the van, Ángel asked for his stuff. He thought back (in English):

A lot of men were complaining, “Where are our belongings?” [The guards replied], “Oh, we’ll just put a paper in—or do you wanna go back to jail? Because we can take you back, but it’s gonna be a *long* time and we’re gonna put you in county. You’re not going back to detention.” It was in San Diego: “We’re gonna put you in county jail for this. If you wanna wait, we have no problem, if you want to. Or you can just get out right now, free.”

Nah, Ángel thought to himself, “I want to be free.”

At the border, the fear hit. Ángel continued, “You don’t know what’s gonna happen next . . . So, you’re always in fear. I was shaking. I didn’t know what was coming up. And then I started seeing the Mexican flag just flying far away, and, wow, it hit me, like, “This is a reality.” In a gray, prison sweatsuit, Ángel walked over the busiest land border crossing in the world and into Tijuana.

ICE releases 96–99 percent of Mexican deportees at the U.S.-Mexico border, and virtually none to their home states or towns.¹ As immigration attorney Nora Phillips put it, deported men “get arrested one day, shoved into a van, driven to a concrete wall, and forced through a door into a foreign city—the psychological equivalent of getting pushed off a skyscraper.”²

Cast off at the border, deportees meet a tangle of cops, prostitutes, thieves, and scouts for cartels, who recognize them by their clothes and sometimes tattoos. With few contacts and rarely much money, men also face a decision: Should they try to reenter the United States? If not, then where do they go in Mexico?

Symbolically, deportation “puts migrants in their place,” sending them “where they belong.” Likewise, scholars often assume that migrants move “home” upon return. In the twentieth century, Mexico-U.S. migration *relied* on a symbiotic relationship between hometowns and destinations, as men (for the most part) went to work in the United States and women raised families on Mexican farms—á la apartheid.³ By the end of the 1990s, that pattern was fading. Yet, scholars, policy-makers, and the U.S. public still tend to think in binary terms. To date, most studies of deportation look either at how migrants reintegrate in their hometowns or at why they cross back into the United States.⁴

Banishment upends this binary system. Now, when deportees land in Mexico, they carry the scars of U.S. policing, detention, prison, and/or repeated border enforcement. These institutions undermine men’s families, jobs, and manhood in the U.S. *and* in Mexico. They crush men’s spirits. They also mark deportees as “criminals,” even back in their homeland and threaten further dehumanization should the U.S. catch them recrossing the border.

Men end up disoriented. Their bodies in Mexico, their hearts in the United States, they feel dislocated (*desubicados*), as if they belong to nowhere.⁵

In this chapter, I trace how banishment shapes where deportees go. First, I show, prison and detention leave men in limbo toward the United States: wanting return but wary of taking the risk. Many wait to go north. Some wait forever. Second, I look at where deportees end up in Mexico. I explore why they rarely go back to their hometowns, with a focus on the state of Oaxaca. I consider how those who wait get trapped at the border. Finally, I look at how some men overcome limbo by strategically opting into big cities, like Mexico’s capital. By comparing who ends up where, I show how men’s uncertainty and isolation map onto place.

Imprisonment, detention, and border enforcement inhibit reentry to the United States. Until the mid-2010s, more than 80 percent of deportees recrossed the border within a year.⁶ They were especially likely to cross if they had kids in the U.S. or thought of that country as home.⁷ Today, by contrast, less than 20 percent plan to reenter the U.S. right away.⁸ In interviews, men were torn about whether to risk reentry. Like deportees surveyed elsewhere, virtually all of them *wanted* to get back to the United States.⁹ More than half had U.S.-born kids, and most considered that country home. At the same time, stricter enforcement and punishments for reentry threatened more penal trauma. After prison and ICE detention, their U.S.-based families also felt distant.

While deportees weighed these impossible choices—and struggled with forced displacement—they waited. Even the most determined had to stay in Mexico until they could raise enough money—or conditions seemed “right”—to attempt a crossing. In the meantime, they had to decide where to go.

Though we met our interviewees in Mexico, barely any of them planned to go back to their birthplace to live.¹⁰ Like Ángel, few had nuclear family left. Villagers shunned deportees and passed them over for work (if there was work at all). In

some regions, cartels attacked returnees. Those who moved back to their states of origin tended to end up in cities, not in the *pueblos* (towns) of their birth. Resettling in one's hometown was a last resort, reserved for the old or the sick.¹¹

Instead, men often got stuck at the U.S.-Mexico border, exemplified here by Tijuana. Released at the border, many deportees were so shattered after prison that they did not know how to proceed. Alone and often depressed or anxious, they lingered in indecision. Some stayed in Tijuana because it felt close to their U.S.-based lives. The border was also the obvious place to *wait*—sometimes for months or years. Thus, the temporal limbo of waiting and the existential limbo of indecision mapped onto the liminal space of the border.

A few men escaped the border by moving to big cities—notably, Mexico City—in what I call “strategic urbanism.” Sometimes, they moved after other possibilities failed: when they could not recross to the United States, return to their hometowns, or stay sane at the border. This was also a choice that only comparatively privileged migrants could make. To move to Mexico City, men could not be tethered to the U.S. (or hometowns) by children. They needed enough mental stability for a move. If they were younger, more educated, spoke English, or had experience in business or organizing, it was easier to find jobs in the city and to connect with people “like them.”

In short, varying entanglements with U.S. detention and prison “sort” deported men into unequal spaces in Mexico. For decades, Mexico has exploited and neglected its poor, rural states (including Oaxaca), driving half a century of out-migration. Politics and economic activity are centralized in Mexico City, a metropolis of more than 22 million people. The U.S.-Mexico border, in turn, expresses the contradictions of being close to the United States: it is at once an exporting powerhouse and a place deeply impacted by drug cartels and the “wars” both countries have waged against them.¹²

By cutting men off from both the U.S. and “home,” U.S. enforcement shunts the most degraded to this zone of social precarity.

TEMPORAL LIMBO: AWAITING RETURN TO THE UNITED STATES

Most men we interviewed hoped to get back to their families in the U.S. Yet, prison, detention, and border apprehensions weakened the ties that might pull them north. In the early 2000s, the U.S. also stiffened penalties for reentry. Today, a deportee caught crossing spends 18 months in prison, on average, and up to 20 years if he has a record. It is also harder to get over the border. In the 1990s, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol apprehended less than a third of migrants while they were crossing. Today, estimates are up to two-thirds, thanks to new drones, cars, infrared cameras, and agents.¹³ Enforcement in urban areas has pushed migrants to the deadliest parts of the desert, where they must also pay more for *coyotes*, or guides.¹⁴

Under such conditions, the men we interviewed often waited to recross, deferring their hopes for a future (however distant) in the United States.

The longer and more dehumanizing men's U.S. carceral histories, the deeper their uncertainty toward the U.S. and the longer they had to wait. Men who spent the least time locked up (direct deportation)—and whose family connections stayed strong—remained *undeterred*. They insisted, "U.S. or bust." Those who spent more time detained or were stopped on a prior crossing (complex deportation) felt *ambivalent*. Facing tension with loved ones, risks in the desert, and more time in prison, these men grew uncertain whether, when, or how to attempt to return. Finally, men coming out of prison often *gave up*, consigning return to the realm of dreams.

The Undeterred

Men who did not go through prison, long-term detention, or repeat border enforcement were determined to go back to the U.S. as soon as they could, no matter the cost or the risk to their lives. Think back to Tonio and Berto, enraged at U.S. detention and still deeply tied to their spouses and children. In winter 2019, Zianía met Tonio in Tijuana, a few days after he'd been removed. He had six kids and one goal: to get back to California. He was quoted \$16,000 for a coyote, double the price we heard in conversations with other migrants and astronomical compared to the \$300 he paid when he first crossed the border in 1990. Still, he told Zianía, "I am going to try to cross. I don't care how. Well, the safest way, so that they don't detain me, but safe. It doesn't matter what I have to pay . . . What's important is to get there." Tonio's family ties still ran deep. Though he felt terrified of the border, his plans had not (yet) been ruined by struggles to get back across. On the contrary, he evaluated the prospect of crossing based on his memories from a far easier time.

Likewise, the minute 40-year-old Berto landed in Mexico, he could not wait to get "home" to LA. In Mexico no one called him. He felt like he "didn't exist." Planning to go back to LA gave him hope. Berto told Janet:

I was depressed when I had just arrived [in Mexico]. For about two months it was really hard. And right now, I am getting over it, precisely because I'm fighting to be able to see my kids. And if I were weak, or I went to do drugs or alcohol or do whatever—well, I think God has given me the strength to get over this [deportation], and I know that I'm going to succeed. I'm already here; I already have work and the will, and it's just a question of waiting.

Pining for his children, Berto found work in a restaurant in downtown Tijuana. He was saving his tips to hire a smuggler across the border. When we met, he'd been at it for almost four months. To him, it was a phase ("Just a question of waiting"). He would not succumb to U.S. enforcement. "I'm not one to accept (*conformarme*) and to live a life I don't like," he added. "Over there [the U.S.] is my future."

Studies estimate that 45–75 percent of people who say they’ll remigrate actually try, and, of those, 33–50 percent make it across the border.¹⁵ That is, less a third of deportees who plan to reenter the U.S. make it through. The physical risks, plus the high rate of apprehensions and incarceration, can interrupt or scuttle men’s plans. As they scrounge to make money or try again, they must bide still more time.

The Ambivalent

Men who tried (and failed) to recross the border were often resolved to get back to their loved ones at first, like Berto and Tonio. But after getting caught crossing—and/or spending months in prison or ICE detention—they grew ambivalent toward the U.S. Incarceration and detention also drove rifts in their families, as detailed in chapter 3. Men lost contact with children, parents, and siblings. Many separated or divorced. They also hesitated to risk further time behind bars. After failed attempts at recrossing, they began losing hope. Some decided to stay in Mexico “for a while,” until “things calmed down,” or until, they hoped, they got legal papers in the U.S. Ambivalence lengthened their limbo.

Just like the undeterred, ambivalent men longed for their children. But they did not want to die in the desert. And they did not want to go to jail for reentry—its own form of (social) death. They worried that if they got caught again—either by CPB or, worse, by *narcos* (cartels)—they could be beaten and face further pain. Locked up in the United States, they might have even *less* ability to reach or support their families than they did in Mexico. Sometimes, “thinking of family” meant avoiding such fates. As one man put it, “My son needs me out,” even if that meant staying in Mexico.

For instance, Raul, who attempted to recross numerous times, had been married when first deported. By the time we met in Tijuana, he’d lost all practical ties to his wife and kids. After several failed efforts to join them in the United States, he was also more pessimistic. He’d gone into debt and grown deeply depressed. He attempted suicide four times. Though Raul missed everything about the U.S. (especially his kids), he was not sure if he could risk it again.

Vicente, a 53-year-old dad whose wife had multiple sclerosis, expressed this catch-22 as well. Vicente had lived for 44 years in Oxnard, California. After Vicente’s removal, his daughter, an aspiring nurse, had put college on hold so that she could earn money and care for her mom. Now, she was on prescription medication for stress. Vicente grieved her normalcy. He wished he could see her date or go off to college. He felt lonely without his family, adding, “Family is what makes you fight. What do you do when you come here [Tijuana]? Be in a room alone, go out to work. You distract yourself, but it’s not the same as coexisting, sharing, relaxing, or talking [with family] . . . It’s lonely.” Every message from his daughter made Vicente feel worse.

Yet, Vicente feared he could not get back intact. On his latest attempt, Vicente had been kidnapped by a coyote who robbed him of all his belongings and held him for ransom. Then, CBP caught them both. The coyote escaped. Vicente did

not. Instead, border agents threatened him with beatings, slurs, and ten years in federal prison (a common tactic, even though border patrol does not have authority to sentence people to prison). Vicente felt broken. He was uncertain if he could withstand such stressors again. Even if things went right, he figured, he'd have to survive the desert: a long three-day walk and severe dehydration. He waffled over whether to try again. Emphasizing the threats of physical and/or social death, he added, "You have to keep living." Though Vicente wanted to go north, he was no longer sure it was possible.

Others added that though they were heartbroken to be ripped from their kids, they could not face detention again. Uriel, a loving, sensitive dad to a five-year-old girl, sighed:

I don't have that heart . . . to keep suffering what you suffer there [under ICE]. . . . I keep having—if I can put it this way—a psychological hangover from all that I lived through. You are hurt, really resentful, really sensitive. Any small thing—a movie, something like that—something happens, and you relate it to something, and like *that*, "Ay!" You get sad. It makes you want to cry. Or you see how they treat other people—racism, discrimination—and it bothers you because they treated you like that.

Uriel was still straining to overcome his short stay in U.S. detention. He did not think his heart could handle another round.

Caught between love and the U.S. carceral state, men felt "indecisive, uncertain, confused." Manuel, a 43-year-old father of three, was deported after a few years in prison. He was devastated. Arriving in Mexico, he said, he got stuck in a rut, thinking, "What am I gonna do? I want to get out of here. What's my next step? And desperation sinks in, and you don't know what to do." Manuel missed "*everything*" about the U.S. Yet he was scared to go back to prison. He wanted to *live* (and not endure emotional death behind bars). He thought about going back, but stopped himself:

I can't be stuck on that . . . This time, [if] I get caught, I can be facing time in jail for illegal [re]entry. I mean, I've seen people do years for that, and it's not worth it. I'm getting too old to be doing time. The years I have, I have to try to live them . . . I want to go back, but it's the same thing. I go back, and it's not really a life you have there because you can't have nothing under your name. We just live in the shadows.

At first, I took Manuel to be saying he'd given up on the United States. Yet when I asked at what point he decided *not* to recross, Manuel replied, "I still haven't . . . I'm taking it a day at a time. For tomorrow, I have to survive and work. I have to pay rent." Manuel added that he "never really thought about" his future. He hedged, torn between rejoining his kids and resigning himself to removal. In the meantime, he lived just a day at a time.

Often, such waiting dragged on for years. Many men hoped to go back to their children but feared U.S. prison. So, they waited and worked, and bided their time. As one 29-year-old father told us, "[It's] a filler job, because I'm not interested in working hard here or—I'm just, like, in transit . . . Right now, I'm still confused. I

still don't know what I want. I'm still not a person that has my future defined or that knows where I want to be. I'm one of those people who lives one day at a time—I don't like to make plans." Unsure how to weigh risks or imagine *either* possible future, men lingered in indecision. They also got stuck amid short-term planning.

Other men's ambivalence manifested as stalling. They waited for political conditions to change, for a chance to get papers, or to rest and recover. Amaris, a 40-year-old, had lived in the U.S. since he was 13. He reflected, "As soon as I stepped here, I stepped on Mexican soil, I was happy to be out of jail, but I was like, 'No, I need to go back to my son, my family, my wife.'" Amaris did not even visit his mother in Mexico City before he tried to recross. Desperate, he tried twice to rejoin his family. Both times, he got deported again. Now he was unsure when he could get back to his kids. By the time Ana met Amaris in Mexico City in 2019, he was in a prolonged state of waiting. He told her, "To be honest with you, I don't think I'm gonna stay here for that long . . . What I wanna do, I just want to wait until, maybe until mid-next year, until this South American caravan moves away from the border or whenever it gets a little bit colder, when it's not as hot as it is right now and I'm gonna try to sneak back in [to the U.S.] to be with my family."

Though Amaris was living in Mexico, he thought of his time there as short-term. Others who unsuccessfully tried to recross got depressed, telling themselves they should "rest awhile and see what happens, and then in the future if you want to cross, we'll try it . . . let the waters calm, and then you can go through again." To face the border, they said, they had to "get in shape" mentally and physically, especially after all they had just survived.

The Ones Who Gave Up

Men who'd spent time in prison rarely tried to enter the U.S. again, though they still fantasized about returning one day. Perhaps ironically, these men were the *most* likely to have grown up in the U.S. and think of that country as "home." Even so, few were prepared to repeat the anguish of prison.

Many men in this group had lost touch with their families. Only 6.6 percent remained married. While many were dads, few had contact with their U.S.-based children. Sometimes, building on narratives peddled in prison, they crafted an arc of "redemption" in which they imagined overcoming "their" criminality and proving they deserved to get back to the United States.

Though Enrique attempted to return to the U.S. 12 times, he quit after serving two years in federal prison for illegal reentry. When Fátima asked why Enrique kept trying, he said, "For my kids—not so much because I want to be over there. Right now, my ex told me, 'Look what you're missing! Your grandchildren are at the age where you like children,' and I told her, 'Yes, lucky you that you're there.' It makes me sad, and tears fall. I don't want to cry here, but yes, yes it makes me sad, and that's what made me [keep trying]." In Tijuana, Enrique had no one. He'd lost his old Mexican accent. He could barely remember the customs. He went on,

“Here, I feel really alone. Here I *am* alone (*Yo aquí me siento bien solo. Yo aquí soy solo*). I don’t have anyone here, it’s like—you’re not OK in your mind. [You think] Why is this happening? It’s because your mind is over there—even more when you’ve left your kids, your mind is over there.” For Enrique, limbo meant living in Mexico with his mind on the United States.

Eventually, Enrique gave up. His last deportation (from prison) was in February 2017, a year before our interview. After that, he said:

At this point, I have erased the United States from my mind . . . Because if they catch me again, it would be five or six years [in prison]. So, what am I going to do? Prison doesn’t kill, but psychologically it hurts you, yes, yes it hurts. . . . From the time you enter it’s psychologically traumatizing, first with the sentence. Then with the prisoners themselves, the rules, that “Look, you can’t spit here.” “Look, you can’t go to the bathroom here.” No, it’s something traumatic, traumatic, that “look, you can’t talk in the afternoons, at these hours you can’t laugh.” . . . So now, to avoid all those problems, I’d rather stay here in Tijuana. I’d better stay here and wait for the will of God.

Enrique figured it would take an act of God to spare him from prison again. When his daughters looked into legal paths for reunification, they learned that, quite literally, their father could only go back to the U.S. dead. Wistfully, he said he’d return to LA when he died, so his children could throw a flower on his grave.

Andres, 35, felt resigned to removal as well. After he spent four years in federal prison, his family ties had dissolved. Now, he said, “Practically, I am alone. I more or less consider myself—that I am alone in this world . . . I am not going to be able to return there, and if I want to return, they’re going to lock me up. And if they lock me up, it’s like they’re taking—it’s like they’re putting your life on pause. Like, your life just stops there until you get out.” For Andres, prison was short-term death, life on hold. With no family left, he had little cause to risk that again.

Others believed that in Mexico they could redeem themselves—as promised in prison. If they took responsibility, overcame “their” criminality, and proved themselves to be good, they hoped, they might “earn” their way back to the U.S. down the line. After the hopelessness of prison, for instance, Ignacio turned to God for a second chance:

I was locked up, and I said, “I want to change my life . . . I want to get out and have a different life.” Because you get mad. You get to a point where you can’t find a meaning in life, to keep doing the same, doing harm to people. I had to change. And that was my goal since I got out: to change. And, thank God, I’m more or less going in that direction . . . God gives us another chance to do things right, we have a second chance. And I, at least, have a second chance to do things differently and to teach myself to have a life like a normal person.

Now, Ignacio wanted to stay away from the U.S.—and “all that [crime].” In Mexico, he was no longer labeled a criminal. As he put it, “I got a chance here [in Mexico],

and here I don't have no record . . . It feels good, it feels good not to look behind you wherever you go." Ignacio believed he'd been deported "for my own mistakes." But he hoped that in Mexico he could free himself from an association with crime. *This* was his "second chance."

Others believed that if the U.S. marked them as "dirty" (criminal), in Mexico they could be "clean." One explained, "I'm not dirty in my country. In my country, I'm a clean man, I don't have penal antecedents. I don't have anything. Here I am a clean man, and I am at a really good point to start my life. And I'm going to do it, and I'm doing it." Some suggested that they had screwed up in the past but had learned to have morals, to be a good person. Still others spoke of leaving drugs, their homies, and the life of gangs in the past. Having found God in prison, they sought a "rebirth" in Mexico. They hinted that if they proved to their children (and perhaps to us, the interviewers) that they had reformed and were "good," they might one day reclaim their families and get back to the United States.

SPATIAL LIMBO: HOW U.S. IMPRISONMENT SORTS MEN IN MEXICO

If deportees were too isolated or afraid to go north right away, then where *did* they go? Where did they "wait out" the chance to return? Where did they land, as they figured out what to do—or dreamed of the U.S. lives they'd once known?

Carceral deportation muddled the home-away binary. After detention, prison, and leaving families in the U.S., most deportees could find *no "home" in their hometowns*. Instead, ambivalence toward the U.S. kept many stuck at the U.S.-Mexico border—a *space of limbo*. Prison left some men too traumatized or depressed to go anywhere after the U.S. released them. For others, the border was the obvious place to wait (sometimes indefinitely) and decide if reentry was worth the threat of more prison. Still others stayed because the border—although in Mexico—felt close to their lives and loved ones in the United States.¹⁶

Finally, younger deportees who spent less time in prison were sometimes able to adopt a "*strategic urbanism*," finding their way to cities (especially Mexico City), where they saw a chance at new lives.

No "Home" in Hometowns

When we met deportees on release at the Mexican border, almost none of them planned to go live in their places of birth.¹⁷ As detailed in chapter 3, two decades of U.S. border militarization had severed their ties on the Mexican side. In a *rancho* (village), it was hard to find jobs. Many people in Mexico assumed deportees were "criminals," making it hard for them to settle—even survive—in their rural hometowns.¹⁸ In some parts of the country, cartels also threatened violence.

Many men ruled out their natal homes for a lack of work—the reason their families had left in the first place. In Mexico, the areas that send the most migrants

are rural zones of federal extraction and neglect, with few stable jobs. Neoliberal restructuring since the 1990s has undermined such states' farming and manufacturing sectors, leading to wage stagnation. States in the south like Oaxaca have been especially hard hit, with up to 77 percent of people living in poverty, compared to just 1.1 percent in Baja California.¹⁹ The stigma of deportation makes it especially hard for returnees to find work, reinforcing their feelings of having failed to earn money as migrants. On top of this stigma, some of them come home with debts—only to face their unhappy lenders.²⁰

Take Benjamín, a 24-year-old Nahuatl speaker raised in a family of seven in a 200-square-foot wood house in the mountains of Veracruz. The family had little to eat, sometimes subsisting on just tortillas and salt. As the eldest, Benjamín migrated to send money home. After removal, he felt he had to stay in Tijuana to keep up that role. Similarly, Ulises, whom we met in Oaxaca City, explained that though he'd moved back to his state of origin, "I would not go back to my *pueblo* . . . there is nothing there. How do you survive there?" In a village, men saw no way to subsist, let alone start anew.

Men who did "go home" felt emasculated, powerless, even subhuman, for failing to make ends meet. Isaac, age 37, for instance, went back to Oaxaca but did not plan to stay. He explained, "I get really fucking depressed . . . I do three jobs, and sometimes it's not enough money. So, I say, maybe if I am in a, like, a better city, I can have more. And that's part of what I want. I don't know. They say that money doesn't buy happiness, right? But being poor doesn't buy anything." Scraping to get by, some men came to resent their places of origin. When Christopher got to his hometown at age 29, he started to work at his cousin's carwash, for 50 pesos a day (U.S.\$2.50). Unable to save even the money to buy his child back in the U.S. a box of diapers, Christopher said, "I didn't see my future. I felt like I was stuck; I was my cousin's slave." When Christopher started complaining, his cousin kicked him out of the house, "Cause supposedly I was like a bum: 'I didn't wanna work; I'm one of those lazy Americans,' that's what they would say." Expelled from "home" in *both* the U.S. and Mexico, Christopher added, "I felt horrible. Like the end of the world. Like the whole world that I knew, loved, and had was gone in the blink of an eye." Arriving back in their pueblos with U.S. ideas about money intensified such men's frustration and social rejection.

Men also faced deep disdain in their states of birth, as illustrated by our experience in Oaxaca. A rural, migrant-sending state of 3.4 million, Oaxaca is one of the top three states of origin of repatriated Mexican citizens. Yet, when Camila, Samantha, and I asked around in Oaxaca City, we struggled to find deportees. Long overlooked by Mexico's federal government, the state had very few deportee-serving organizations. Its reintegration services (such as they were) faced constant shaming for working with "those delinquents." When we did meet deportees—mostly through students' families or friends,—they kept a low profile, letting few people know they'd been forced to return.

Rural villages elsewhere rejected deportees, too, dismissing them as *cholos*, or gangsters. Ramón, raised in gang-ridden Dallas, was in his mid-20s and fresh out of prison the first time he got deported. For a year, he tried to “go back” to his cow-herding village in San Luis Potosí. He had no close relatives left there and only vaguely remembered the pueblo. Nevertheless, he gave it his all. He got a job. He fell in love. Still, people in town told Ramón that he did not belong, insisting, “Tú no eres Mexicano . . . Tu eres del gabacho” (You’re not Mexican; you’re from the U.S.). In a jumble of Spanish and English, Ramón confessed, “That, for me—it bothered me. ‘Cause you’re telling me I’m not something that I know I *am*.” Though Ramón showed neighbors his Mexican ID, they retorted, “That doesn’t mean that you’re Mexican.” Hurt, he said, “That’s when it hit me. I’m not a Mexican ‘cause *they* say I’m not a Mexican. . . . I’m a freaking American.” To cope with the isolation, Ramón started to drink. He got into fights. Eventually, at a *fiesta patronal* (an all-village party), the locals attempted to kill him. Broke, estranged, and depressed, Ramón left his “home” for good.

Ramón’s words echoed in other interviews, too. One after another, respondents told us they felt like outsiders in their hometowns. Judged “wrong” or marked strangers by distant family, some were overcome with shame, isolation, and fear.²¹ To avoid this feeling, 20-year-old Tavio did not even tell his family when he went back to Oaxaca. He did not want to face their scorn.

In regions with active cartels, deported men also faced threats of violence. States like Michoacán, Guerrero, and Jalisco (not incidentally, the highest migrant-sending states) had grown more dangerous in migrants’ absence, their villages wracked by extortion and sometimes spectacular brutality. Frequently, men from such states were too scared to even pay them a visit. Berto, for instance, explained that though he’d never been incarcerated or convicted of crime, he could not go back to his home state of Guerrero. He elaborated, “There are no police. There, it’s the world of whoever has power. So, there are a lot of people being destroyed. Because they [cartels] come and say, ‘OK, you have a nice car. Give me the keys.’ I want to bring my family, but I don’t want to bring them to a world like that.” Likewise, Esteban owned a house back home in Colima, but criminal organizations had since overrun his town. His sister warned him not to come back, fearing cartels would take him and hold him for ransom.

David, 47, also detailed risks he might face in his birthplace in Tamaulipas. Once a gang member, David spent 25 years in prison in the U.S. He knew that if he tried to go home, his tattoos would make him a target for cartel recruitment:

The cartels are really tough over there, and I have a lot of tattoos on me. So right here [in Tijuana] I can be on the street with like a slingshot [tank top] and also have tattoos. Nobody cares because everybody has tattoos here. But if I have tattoos over there and the cartels see me, then they’re like, “Oh we got a new guy.” . . . They’d kidnap me just to see who I’m working for, and if I say I’m not working for anyone, they wouldn’t believe me. They did that to my brother; my brother got kidnapped over there so I learned from that when he told me.

If deportees in Oaxaca suffered poverty and exclusion, those from some states—like Tamaulipas—also risked being kidnapped and killed.

As a result, deportees rarely settled down in their pueblos unless they were old or sick. Of 171 men we interviewed for this book, only two returned to their hometowns out of pride—or even saw those places as “home.” All those who did stay in villages were older than 55 or disabled. Some had advanced diabetes or had lost limbs in accidents. Others were addicted to alcohol or to drugs. Instead, most respondents who returned or planned to return to their states of origin lived in the central city. Even there, some stuck around only because they’d fallen in love or had kids. Ever, for instance, went back to his parents’ pueblo when he was deported, to get his bearings. He ended up having two kids. Though he knew he’d get better pay fixing cars in Mexico City, he stayed in Oaxaca to be with his children—and “only” for that. As one man put it, the hometown was a place “to live when you’re retired . . . a little house where you can stay and wait for death, nothing else.”

The Border as Space of Limbo

Instead of going “home,” deportees often stalled at the U.S.-Mexico border—sometimes indefinitely. Tijuana wasn’t a city men chose, they said, but a place they stayed in between other destinations. Yet carceral deportation left them untethered, often with nowhere to go. Released at the border, many stayed as they weighed what to do.

Tijuana has long been a staging ground for migrants entering the United States. Today, it is also a stepping stone back. Many men we met in Tijuana had just been removed from the U.S. and were on their way north or south. Yet the border was not just a short-term waystation. Some deportees had lived there a decade or more. They stayed because the border felt close to the U.S., because they were waiting, or because there was nowhere else they could go.

The border was the obvious place to stall. Of the deportees we met who intended to return to the U.S., 90 percent were currently in Tijuana. While a few of these people (27 interviewees) had concrete plans in the coming weeks, most were biding time until the “right moment” came, their reentry bans expired, or they made enough money to hire a smuggler. Their limbo may have been indefinite, but it occurred in a finite space—near the U.S.

The border was also a space of illusion, indecision, isolation, and slowed-down time—where men stayed when they *felt* close to the United States but could not go back. Manuel, who was “taking things one day at a time,” hung around in Tijuana for years. He knew no one in his birthplace in Guadalajara. He was ambivalent about going back to the U.S. again. At the border, there were other people who had been through the same kinds of things. Manuel also hoped to reconnect with his kids, with whom he hadn’t spoken in months. Perhaps if he stayed nearby, he figured, he could convince a sibling to bring them to visit. So, Manuel took a job in Tijuana and found an apartment, staging his uncertainty from the border.

Similarly, Gerardo told Fátima, “Why did I decide to stay in Tijuana? The truth is I have not decided if I’ll stay or go. I’m still in the process. But now that you just asked, you know what? I don’t know if I *should* stay or go . . . Why Tijuana? Look, in the first place, I have the hope that—I have that illusion of continuing to fight my case, the process, and my ex-wife is a U.S. citizen and she can come with my children to Tijuana, and I can see them.” Gerardo was 37, a gardener, and recently separated from his wife. He had zero family in Mexico. He adored his two kids in California. When Fátima asked where was “home,” he replied, “If I told you, ‘In the place I was born,’ I’d be lying. If I told you ‘Tijuana,’ too. There is nothing that makes you feel safer and happier than being with family, wherever that may be.” At the same time, Gerardo acknowledged that legal return to the U.S. was an “illusion.” To get as close as he could, Gerardo hung out in Tijuana.

Other men also stayed in Tijuana based on a (distant) hope that their families might visit. Alfredo, raised in LA foster care and juvenile detention, never met his father and grew estranged from his mother and sister while he was in prison. They did not know that he’d been deported. Still, Alfredo said “pretty much the only reason” he stayed in Tijuana was to be close to his brother and sister, in case they got a mind to come see him. Raul added, “I have hope that maybe [my ex’s] heart will soften all of a sudden, and they’ll surprise me—a dream that my family will arrive here, my kids.” Another man said he stayed because “I was still holding on to that thought, like, ‘No, no, you’re close, maybe they’ll come visit you.’ . . . I was still talking to one of my exes, and she’d be like, ‘Yeah, one of these days I’m gonna go visit you,’ so I was holding onto that feeling. It was a personal feeling—or maybe an illusion of me being closer. It was horrible ‘cause I was like, ‘Oh, they’re so close from here, it’s like a two-hour drive.’” Deep down, men knew the visits were dreams. Still, the fantasy—and the geographic proximity—had powerful impacts on men’s directions.

Border life offered another advantage: it had a similar culture and lifestyle to California.²² Tijuana appealed to those who had little connection to Mexico but feared returning to prison in the U.S. As Alfredo put it, “I don’t know nowhere else. It’s like being in LA.” David, likewise, joked that in Tijuana, “sometimes I wake up in the morning and I’m thinking I’m in LA. I wake up, and I see the roof top: ‘Damn!’” Another man said that after 25 years in prison—and the threat of life behind bars if he tried to go back—he stayed in Tijuana because “I don’t know nowhere else. It’s like being in LA. It’s like—[multi-]cultural here, and everyone is bilingual. They speak English, and you know your friends. I have a lot of friends here from California and from prison, so we kind of know each other. So, when we see each other here we would help each other find jobs, and that’s why I like it.” It wasn’t family, but at least in this in-between space, men could hang onto elements of their old lives.

Others were so depressed, anxious, or stressed that they struggled to make decisions at all. Deposited at the border, men who suffered the longest penal histories

in the United States—and the attendant trauma and family disintegration—tended to end up stuck where the U.S. government left them. Disoriented and detached from family on either side, they did not know where else to go.

Populated with so many uncertain and displaced people, the border could be difficult. NGOs and the Mexican state actively pushed deported men out of Tijuana, afraid their presence would negatively impact municipal finances. Border cartels, police, and drug dealers also targeted recent deportees, as explored more in chapter 5.²³ Thus, after staying at the border a few months or even years, some men came to want out. They lost hope that their families would visit. They decided the border was “dangerous” or felt they “did nothing good there.” Unable to reenter the U.S., return to their hometowns, or resettle close to the border, they had to figure out where in Mexico they could live.

Strategic Urbanism in Mexico City

In lieu of getting stuck at the border, some deportees strategically moved to Mexico City or other urban areas. Nearly half the deported men we met in Mexico City had tried living elsewhere first and then chosen to move to the capital. In cities, they found social, economic, and political support. There were communities of migrants, deportees, and others with experience in the United States. There were jobs that required English-language skills. There was also more room to cultivate a bicultural identity, bridging the cultural gap between “here” and “there.”

Yet, men needed the wherewithal to make such moves: mental stamina, youth, education, English skills, experience in advocacy or business, and/or a lack of tethers to children. Compared to men we met in Tijuana, those who moved to Mexico City were not as worn down by the violence of U.S. prisons.

For instance, Ramón, whose village in San Luis Potosí rejected him, headed to Mexico City after his second deportation. In the city, he explained, “They don’t understand what I’m going through, but they don’t reject you [like in the pueblo]. Yes, it’s better there.” In the capital, Ramón sought out people who appreciated diversity and identified with his experience growing up in the United States. He added:

Mexico City has the biggest—just in Mexico City alone it has over a hundred thousand Americans living in Mexico City . . . I said, “There is something there they want, and if they want it, I should want it too.” . . . and I start coming to the city because of the beautiful things—there is a metro here. You can get around. There are facilities. . . . I mean, cool, if you want to return to your rancho . . . but if you’re looking for culture, people, home? Mexico City. Because here there is a huge diversity of culture. You don’t stand out. Everyone stands out! Because everyone has their own lifestyle, it’s normal to be different. Where else are you going to want to be? . . . So, I say before you try to return [to the U.S.] and risk your life, try Mexico City first.

For Ramón, Mexico City was *the* alternative to both his hometown (“a place to retire”) and going north. Its size and diversity allowed him to be “himself” and hang around Americans, without the risks of reentry.

Other deportees went to Mexico City to get jobs, build community, engage in advocacy, and find “big city” adventure. In contrast to Oaxaca or Tijuana, where we did not meet anyone planning to advance their career by studying or gaining new skills, several interviewees in Mexico City were attending college, studying, or preparing for new careers. One said, “There is more work here, they say, and they pay better than up there [at the border where] . . . the work is killer (*matadito*).” Another added, “There’s always work for bilingual people . . . here [in Mexico City] I think that the people who are bilingual are idiots if they go around living in the streets or stealing.” Others joined organizations that trained bilingual people for jobs or helped get deportees back on their feet. In addition, as I explore later in chapter 6, Mexico City was the only place we met activists fighting against deportation. As one such advocate put it, “Mexico City is strategic for doing a lot of things.”

When we asked men how they *got* to Mexico City, most said they browsed the Internet, seeking support and people like them. As Ramón told it, “I did research . . . I’m on Facebook all day, because that’s my only way to be in touch with my people.” Alone at the border or in rural pueblos, those with English or Internet skills realized that Mexico City had opportunities for people who felt “in between.” Yet searching the Internet required education, facility with computers, and often English. The average deportee has a middle-school education. By contrast, those who made it to Mexico City tended to have finished high school (often in the U.S.) and know English.

Only about half the respondents we met in Mexico City had spent time in prison (compared to three-quarters in Tijuana), and those people spent an average of two years locked up, versus four at the border. One in five had graduated from college, and almost three-quarters had finished high school. Nearly two-thirds had been raised in the U.S. (migrating at a median age of 9), giving them familiarity with English and U.S. culture—critical skills for jobs.

Take Ángel, who grew up in the U.S., spoke English, went to college, and was an activist—arrested at a protest in favor of DACA. Seeking an alternative to his birthplace in Guadalajara, Ángel found an NGO on the Internet. It taught coding to deportees. He explained:

You start looking for help, start looking for other people you can actually connect with, that went through the same thing . . . I started searching for resources online, and I connected with some people that started telling me, “You know, there’s more to deportation, there’s more to returning.” . . . You start to reconnect with other returnees, deportees, so you get that sort of foundation . . . People that you can actually—know what you’ve been through, or you can sort of connect and say, “Oh, that’s true, it is a horrible feeling, the whole system needs to change.”

Ángel’s English and computer skills helped him connect with others like him, recognize alternatives to life in his hometown, and escape the “prisons” of his memory.

In Mexico City, Ángel started to feel like he had a future. He added, “I’m trying to actually have some solid—a solid life here, meaning to just be here in Mexico, continue my career . . . to actually make something myself . . . I’m trying to stay very positive, very optimistic, not waste time that I feel had already been wasted.” Other migrants we interviewed in Mexico City were optimistic and proactive, too, especially compared with those in home states or at the border. Being able to have a career, make friends with other deportees, and build a binational space was critical to their hope.

While deportees in Mexico City did not escape limbo altogether, their ideas about the U.S. took a different tone. They hinted that in Mexico City, they could *earn* a right to reenter the U.S. one day. Some hoped that by building careers, getting education, and/or and waiting out their bars on reentry, they could refute the U.S. image that they were “bad.” If they worked hard, finished school, or made enough money, they hoped, they might be able to get a visa to go back to visit or live. For instance, Manny, introduced in chapter 1, had been deported two years before. Now in Mexico City, he said his goal was to finish school and make money, “So I can go back . . . with a visa or try to get papers over there.” Others, too, believed they’d stabilize, get a degree, then seek a way to return. While the move gave men a chance to “start over,” they, too, had to prove themselves *within and against* U.S. stories of criminality and redemption.

CONCLUSION

If U.S. immigration control once enforced a symbiotic apartheid, with men in the U.S. and women in Mexican hometowns, carceral deportation breaks that interrelationship. Prison, detention, and border enforcement dissuade men from reentering the U.S. right away, forcing most to wait for further migration.²⁴ Though deportees typically want to go back to the U.S. at some point, less than one in five now try crossing within a year, and only about a quarter of those get through.²⁵

One might argue that carceral deportation “works” to deter reentry. But at what cost?

By merging removal with prison, detention, and border enforcement, the U.S. weaponizes trauma. To keep the unwanted out, it severs emotional ties. If there is a deterrent effect, it comes from dehumanization and family disintegration. Only by beating men down does the U.S. convince them to fully give up on reentry.

Banishment also severs men’s ties to their hometowns. Thanks to decades of U.S. border enforcement, few deportees now have close family left. In their places of birth, repatriated men face stigma and a lack of options for work. Instead, most think of their pueblos as places to retire or die. Feeling alone and “homeless” in Mexico then *drives* some men to want to migrate again.²⁶ Though deportation ostensibly sends Mexican migrants “home,” their liminality does not end when they leave the United States.²⁷

Shunting men away from both the U.S. and hometowns marks a shift in the geography of Mexico-U.S. migration. Instead of being another form of return, banishment extends the purgatory that undocumented immigrants face in the United States, where legal violence can undermine their well-being and make them feel they do not belong.²⁸ As a result, deportees look less like other returning Mexican migrants and more like the stateless.

The limbo of deportation also maps onto precarity and inequality within Mexico, where the rural south and west are deprived, the border caters to the United States, and resources and power concentrate in the largest cities, especially Mexico City. Deportees most traumatized after imprisonment often land in the no-man's land of the border. Vulnerable to stigma, police, and organized crime, these men struggle with existential dislocation and ambivalence about their "place" in the world. By contrast, the "lucky" ones escape to the capital.

Mexico's urban contexts then interact with men's U.S. carceral histories to shape their erasure and agency. In chapter 5, I explore the lived experience of alienation at the U.S.-Mexico border. In chapter 6, I turn to Mexico City and the possibilities for forging new space to belong.