

Reclaiming Removal

Acknowledgment: Fátima Khayar Cámara, Ana López Rico, and Abi Thornton's volunteer and organizing work with deportees greatly informed this chapter. In particular, Ana spent summer 2019 volunteering at Otros Dreams en Acción and interviewing more than 50 men and women in Mexico City, giving on-the-ground context to the stories men told us. I am also grateful to the leaders described for their candor.

In 2018, when this study started, newspapers in Mexico, the U.S., and Europe were abuzz over deportee-led movements in Mexico City. From the ashes of deportation, they announced, migrants were building new ways of being. For instance, *El País*, the most-read Spanish newspaper online, described an area in Mexico City called “Little LA.” There, the article touted, more than 2,000 repatriated Mexicans had started food stalls, barbershops, and mutual aid organizations: “The neighborhood, in the center of Mexico’s capital, has become a refuge for Mexican Americans, attracted first by the call centers that capitalized on their bilingual talents, and later by a community that is no longer scandalized by Spanglish, baggy pants, or tattoos.”¹

Deportados Unidos en la Lucha (Deportees United in Struggle, or DUL)—a grassroots organization that arose around the same time—exemplifies the fight to flip deportation from a source of shame to an object of pride. In summer 2019, on a visit to Mexico City, I met Jonathon, Patricio, and Itzel, who cofounded DUL. Each wore an emblem of the fight to restore their status as human. Jonathon had a ragged gray beard and stretched lobes from old earrings, but he also sported a bright red T-shirt emblazoned “Deportados Brand: 100% Mexicano.” Patricio’s black tee declared him freshly deported—merging the word *deportado* with the phrase *aguas frescas* (fresh juice) into a playful portmanteau: “Deportaguas frescas.” Meanwhile, Itzel’s forearm was tattooed, in English, “Believe!” Each time she raised her fist, the big, blue letters proclaimed her defiant hope. Her shirt bore the word “Chingona” (badass), in cursive like the old logo for the Chicago White Sox, recalling the city where she once lived. Below, it read “aquí y allá:” here and

there.² The trio designed and printed the shirts themselves. With each clever turn of phrase, they reclaimed the label “deported.”

Three years after removal, these activists still bore scars from their deportations. Patricio had lost his wife and 4-year-old daughter the day ICE detained him in Vegas. His teeth were cracked and crooked, and when we spoke, he hinted at how detention had damaged his mental well-being. In Mexico City, he said, it was hard to find work, to hold up his head. He longed for the days he used to play with his daughter back “home” in Nevada. Likewise, Itzel cried when she spoke of the years spent away from her two teenage sons. Deportation felt—as she said in a video later—like “living without living” (*un vivir sin vivir*).³

Still, DUL’s creativity diverged starkly from the border-town alienation I looked at in chapter 5. Itzel and her comrades twisted the words that had been used to degrade them and wore them, instead, with pride. Together, their clothes, words, and tattoos pronounced that instead of belonging to no one and nowhere, deportees could create new space to belong.

Naming who they were (*deportados/deported*) and what they were doing (*unidos en la lucha/united in struggle*) helped Itzel, Jonathon, Patricio, and their comrades form the collective that became DUL. At the group’s early meetings, they took time to *desahogarse* (unload) and build solidarity. Later, the group realized they could make money off their binational identities and their refusal to be erased. With help from a government program (and Itzel’s Chicago contacts), they bought a printing press, adopted the name *Deportados Brand*, and began selling T-shirts in Mexico and the United States. The sales brought in income. They also raised awareness of the pain inflicted by deportation. As Patricio put it later, “Organizing gives you community. *Es como sanar un corazón roto*. (It’s like healing a broken heart).”⁴

DUL makes clear that even in a system of banishment, there are alternatives to alienation. Though carceral deportation leaves most people traumatized, isolated, and displaced, some refuse to accept social death. They do this *not* by reintegrating or becoming Mexican again, per theories of return migration, but by parlaying their status into radical new identities.

How do deported men (and women) exercise agency, rebuild community, and reclaim their dignity? And what conditions or past experiences help them refuse to simply be “banished”?

Theories of social death suggest that carceral institutions (including deportation) reduce people to “bare life.”⁵ That is, such systems strip people of their identities and social relations, leaving them barely alive, let alone able to advocate for themselves. Yet even under state violence, some people refuse erasure. Postcolonial scholars and Black feminists have long questioned the idea that people subjected to social death end up abject or outside the law. Even those who endure profound dehumanization continue to exercise agency, through embodied survival, joy, and

collective care.⁶ Despite the violence of carceral deportation, deportees go to great lengths to affirm their humanity.⁷

Alongside heartbreaking stories of loss, our team also heard something different. Deportees were finding ways to reclaim masculinity, forge community, and seek rights and resources, inside or outside the law. Some of their strategies took shape in the limbo of border sites like Tijuana. Others relied on the resources of bigger, interior cities (and on the know-how of younger, more educated, computer-savvy deportees). Respondents adopted multiple, different modes of refusal, three of which I trace here: (1) they flipped stigma on its head, to build organizations around migrant pride; (2) they brokered and sold their skills to “earn dollars;” and (3) they embraced the criminality others imputed to them, plugging into cartels and breaking state-imposed rules.

Deportees’ new subjectivities had four things in common. First, they claimed a place for themselves between (or beyond) “here” and “there.”⁸ Second, they used these frames to forge community among deportees and migrants who felt “in between.” Third, they upended the terms of banishment. Instead of feeling disgraced, they reclaimed their status as forced returnees. Fourth, they leveraged these reframes to make money or claim political entitlements. In the process they also built hope.

Much of this reclamation was driven by charismatic individuals who brought toolkits from the U.S. into institutional contexts that enabled their innovation. Founders of deportee organizations all had relevant training from the United States: know-how in English, activism, business, or with violence and gangs.⁹ In addition, they were not *completely* worn down by incarceration.

Depending on deportees’ histories in the U.S. and the conditions around them in Mexico, they had access to varying strategies of refusal. If men came out of carceral deportation still able to see and choose for themselves, they fought dehumanization. Mexico City also enabled them to leverage their experiences in the U.S.¹⁰ A metropolis of more than 22 million people, Mexico City is one of the largest cities in the world, on par with Delhi, Shanghai, and São Paulo. Given its concentration of political, economic, and civic power, deportees in the capital had more access to government money and civil organizations than those in other locales. Mexico City was also a hub of call centers, coding, and other computer-based jobs. It drew deportees who were already politicized. Then, it made others political, too.¹¹

While advocacy centered in Mexico City, the border context fostered a different kind of refusal: joining criminal organizations. Men with histories in prison or gangs often found themselves stuck at the border, where one of the only ways out of alienation was to (continue to) participate in organized crime. Some scholars argue that border zones embody the *mestizaje* (cultural mixing) and duality that deportee organizations embrace.¹² The liminality of the border and its distance from national structures of power may facilitate cultural transformations,

including identities that seek to escape from federal government confines.¹³ That is, the region housed organizations already refusing state laws, borders, and norms.¹⁴

In what follows, I trace how deportees came to these different approaches. I also consider the limitations of each for full “liberation.” First, I show, women and those least exposed to U.S. prison often *built grassroots organizations*. Second, young men with moderate carceral histories were drawn to a work-based approach, in which they *brokered binational skills*. Third, for those who’d spent time in prison, *breaking laws and borders* could feel like the only way to re-prove they were men. While I trace the emergence of these strategies one by one, they can (and do) overlap. At times, people moved between them, as they fought against alienation and sought a place in the world.

BUILDING GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS

In Mexico City, DUL and grassroots groups like Otros Dreams en Acción (ODA) and Deportado no Agotado (deported not exhausted) organized to reframe deportees as multicultural, multitalented people. Often led by women who had been activists in the U.S., these organizations leveraged their binationality to build community, earn money, and demand recognition from Mexico and the U.S. They also forged new, physical spaces in which to belong, such as ODA’s Poch@ House (loosely, House of U.S.-based Mexicans), in the center of Mexico City. Men who took up this strategy had often been activists in the U.S., as well, and few spent more than a year in U.S. detention or prison. Yet such men also felt tension, especially when “pure” activism conflicted with pressure to reestablish their status as breadwinning men.

Advocacy post-deportation had its seeds in U.S. immigrants’ rights. Most of the leaders of DUL, ODA, and other organizations had been activists in the U.S. When they returned, they applied skills, slogans, strategies, and networks from U.S. immigrant movements to fight the stigma of deportation. Though deportation was painful for them (as for anyone), they had rarely spent much time in prison. Their sense of a “right to have rights” was intact. They had frequently *chosen* Mexico City, where proximity to the state helped them access funding and sometimes spur policy change. Organizing at the grassroots was a “maternal” strategy. That is, not only did women lead most such organizations but these groups also emphasized mutual care, “nesting” (creating spaces of belonging), and cultivating public compassion. Through talk of emotions, the members restored their own worth.

Itzel García, the founder of Deportados Unidos en la Lucha, exemplifies the conditions that helped such groups bloom. A dynamic, passionate mom in her early forties, Itzel had thick black hair with a white streak in the front. In 2000, Itzel moved to Chicago to support her young family in Mexico. She learned English, got a GED, and took classes in leadership. She sent for her son and had one more child. She worked in a wide range of jobs: at a secondhand store, a sweets

factory, and ultimately at Arise Chicago, an immigrant advocacy organization. In 2016, Arise offered to sponsor Itzel for a work visa, and she prepared to return to Mexico to finish the papers. She only got to the airport. There, ICE detained and deported her, imposing a 20-year ban on return. Itzel was shocked: “I was not on the list of ‘deportables.’ I never had so much as a traffic violation.” Though ICE denies targeting activists (and doing so is illegal), Itzel insisted, “The deportation was due to my activism in the United States.” In an instant, “Everything my life had been up to that point ended . . . My life was there: my children, my house, my work, my friendships.” Itzel was 41.

Itzel grew up in a *ranchito* (village) in Jalisco, Mexico. After 16 years in Chicago, she did not feel like she could go back. So, when the U.S. flew Itzel to Mexico City, she stayed. Still feeling shell-shocked, she faced stigma and public hostility. As Itzel put it, “The truth is that we continue being undocumented” post-deportation. In Mexico, “It’s really difficult to reclaim your identity—or an ID document, a place to live.” Without a Mexican birth certificate or work record, Itzel could not get an ID card, rent an apartment, or find a job. Her friends from Arise Chicago pitched in, contacting the Mexican Secretariat of Labor to help Itzel get unemployment.

When Itzel arrived to claim her support, the secretary of labor invited her to an event where she—gregarious—met other deportees. That, Itzel said, was how *Deportados Unidos en la Lucha* was born:

It was to talk, more than anything, it was to chat. It started like that at first, as a self-help group . . . We would get together every Tuesday outside the Franz Mayer Museum, and the first thing we did was to talk, vent, vent, vent (*desahogarnos*). And a symptom of deportees is always complaining. We would complain about everything, everything. There is a lot of rejection on the part of your family here—or other people, even if they were your friends. [They’d tell us], “Ay, get *with* it. You’re here; this is Mexico.” But yes, that’s part of the process of healing, complaining about Mexico. So, we represented this space where we could complain all the time about what we wished for from Mexico, and you didn’t feel rejected. You didn’t feel bad.

Building community helped members heal from losing their families and U.S.-based homes. The group, one member said, made him feel “comfortable, protected, like a family.” As DUL grew, it turned its focus to new deportees. Members began going to Mexico City’s airport to meet repatriation flights and offer support like phone calls, or advice on government benefits.

Energized, Itzel quit her job to work full-time on DUL. The men in the group had trouble finding good jobs, due to their lack of education and the stigma they faced after deportation. But Itzel had saved money and contacts from her advocacy work in the United States. So, she said, “I took charge of the campaign to help people make a living.” Itzel had seen people selling candy on the streets in Mexico City and decided that DUL could sell sweets as well.

As DUL’s members went out to sell treats, their visibility brought new scrutiny. People denigrated the deportees as criminals and dependents on the Mexican state.

Itzel went on, “I started to get texts from people, that ‘You migrant thieves, you want to come live off the government . . . Go work, you traitors. You left and now you want to return.’” On the streets, people constantly asked Itzel and her friends, “What [crime] did you do?” Rather than hide, Itzel decided, “No, you know what? We’re going to do something. We’re going to start working . . . to make visible the people the system had forgotten.” She would stand outside conferences, do interviews with the media. To break down myths about deportation, she told critics her story: “Look, I’m this person. I have kids. I have a family just like you. I *had* a family, and my only crime was not having papers.” Echoing the “undocumented but unafraid” language of U.S.-based immigrants’ rights, Itzel maintained that she and her friends were “Deportado pero no derrotado” (deported but not defeated).

Embracing the word “deported” was a crucial step to empowerment. Itzel went on, “For me there is no problem if people use the word deportee. That’s why we call ourselves Deportees United in Struggle. It’s the first step to [help them] see what is going on underneath and what we are living through.” Over time, DUL integrated the word into all they did. To survive, Itzel felt, they had to reclaim deportation, make new, binational space, and earn money. In the process, they also started marketing deportation itself as creative or trendy.

To do this, DUL built on U.S. approaches and slogans. When the group ordered labels to put on their sweets, they also got T-shirts and flyers. The first, which they made “just to blow off steam,” used the logo of handcuffed fists from the U.S. anti-deportation campaign “Ni Uno Más” (Not one more):

We would go out to sell T-shirts, and we would talk to people. I started talking to people, and I would tell them, “We’re not criminals. We’re this, we do this.” . . . I’d say, “You know what, if you can’t buy sweets no problem, just hit ‘Like’ on our [Facebook] page.” And that’s how we also got a lot of followers, and we were able to expand the work of Deportados Unidos a lot, because it wasn’t just my family that had liked it, it was people we talked to in the street.

Woven throughout DUL and Itzel’s reinvention of deportation were strategies and even phrasing from the United States.

In the capital, migrants could also access state funds. Itzel’s Chicago contacts connected her with the Mexican Secretariat of Labor, which offered DUL credit to establish a print shop: Deportados Brand. Soon, DUL sold T-shirts on both sides of the border. The team knew English, and they had a sense for which styles appealed to Latinos in the United States. Their slogans were inventive, direct, and popular. Their “Fuck Trump” shirt was a notable hit. While the employees could not return to the U.S. themselves, they sold their products through friends, family, and eventually formal distributors.

Such tactics were most accessible to women. For one, women predominate in immigration protests and advocacy in the United States. In addition, while U.S.

police frame undocumented men as criminals, their female counterparts sometimes get state or NGO support by playing the role of “good immigrants” or empowered women.¹⁵ In a Chicago program called *Empresarias del Futuro* (Businesswomen of the Future), Itzel was trained in this mold. She also learned, in her words, “to develop and empower the community through knowing their rights.” She recalled:

That’s what I learned in *Empresarias del Futuro*, that I should give it another turn . . . something different. So, I thought of the idea, “OK, let’s call it *Deportados Brand*, 100% Mexican,” since we were deportees. And also, for me it was really important to say the word like that, “deportees.” . . . On a personal level, the world deported, it made me feel shame. It made me embarrassed . . . it was important to give the word new meaning, to take out that side of criminalization, of failure, of frustration, of shame, like, to be able to notice that the word “deported” also meant rising up again.

Itzel used her training, charisma, and contacts to reclaim deportation and start DUL. Organizing post-deportation was easier with experience.

The men who joined DUL were, perhaps, more “typical” deportees. Few had been activists in the U.S. Most left their children up north, and they rarely felt welcome in Mexico. At the same time, these men had been spared the worst degradations of carceral deportation, spending less time detained or in prison than other interviewees. A few also had U.S. business or other acumen that helped land them in Mexico City and drive them to seek community. Only later did they get politicized.

Jonathon, the mild-mannered cofounder of *Deportados Brand*, provides an example. When Jonathon was 25, he moved to Washington State. He built a construction business that supported him and his two U.S.-citizen daughters for nearly two decades. In 2016, ICE detained and deported him, breaking his family as well as his heart. Jonathon spent two years trying to fight his case, with a lot of grief in the process. Ultimately, he lost. Though Jonathon was born in Oaxaca, ICE flew him to Mexico City. When he landed, he told Fátima:

I felt alone. Despite the fact that I was with my [Mexican] friends, with my brother, I couldn’t find myself (*no me ubiqué*). Once I got to the Secretariat of Labor . . . Itzel arrived, and a couple of other *compañeros* who came with her. And we started to talk about the things that were happening to us . . . I was building solidarity with the *compañeros*. Why? Because they’re living the same pain, and they’re facing the same situation, right? And I went to be with them because they were as lost as I was. And there, we started caring for each other. And from there we started building this union.

It was, more than anything, listening to each other, because you get back and you’re thinking to yourself, “What do I do? How can I talk to my brother, my friends who don’t understand me?” And there were moments in which the sadness got the best of us, and it was just to care for each other that we were together. And that’s how we started building unity. It was a group to listen to each other (*de autoescucha*).

Itzel, with everything she knows about community organizing and activism, guided us and taught us. And I started realizing how important it was to serve the community, and we started going to the airport and offering help . . . I didn't know it was activism; I didn't know it was a community organization. I didn't have a clue. But I think, in the process, I started learning it here with Itzel. And I'm still learning from her to this day.

Unlike Itzel, Jonathon did not set out to reclaim deportation. But he had the initiative and resources to seek state benefits. By luck, he found Itzel and the support of others like them.

Jonathon could never forget the United States; he had U.S. citizen daughters. In Mexico City, it was also hard for him to find well-paying jobs. In his desperate moments, Jonathon thought, "Fuck it all. I'm going [back]. I'm going because I can't—I've been here three years, it's going to be three years, and I can't—I don't have *una vida digna* (a dignified life). I don't have stable work. I arrived to a country that wasn't mine [the U.S.], without knowing the language, and in eight months I had a car and I could buy a house, and I could buy things and have credit and have access to medical services. And I can't do that here—right?" Though Jonathon still lived in limbo, especially as a breadwinning dad, he found roots in DUL.

Patricio, 47, was a new activist, too. When ICE stopped Patricio on the street near his Las Vegas home, he had already applied for U.S. citizenship. Instead, he was ripped from his Salvadorian wife and their 3-year-old daughter. When I met Patricio, he told me they called the group *Deportees United in Struggle* because it was a struggle, and the organization gave members unity. In DUL, Patricio gained a voice that he'd never imagined. He spoke at the United Nations, the Global Pact on Migration, and the National Palace (Mexico's White House). He helped write and act in a play on YouTube called *Visa Fronteriza* (Border Visa). He learned "how to value yourself and make your voice be something—so they know that you're here as a deportee, not as a delinquent, but from a deportation. So that people see that deportation is something sad because it leaves families [broken] like this." In such statements, he reframed deportation for the state and the public as well.

ODA also drew on U.S. organizing to invent ways for deportees to "*floreecer aquí y allá*" (flourish here and there). Like DUL, ODA's key leaders were women with political experience in the United States. One of them was U.S.-born graduate student Jane Taylor. As part of her PhD dissertation, Jane organized young deportees and returnees who had feared deportation. Again, ODA emerged from a need for mutual support and then began to take action.

As its name suggests, ODA built on the DREAM movement in the U.S.¹⁶ ODA also focused on claiming more legal rights. To do this, the group used three key strategies: (1) They built a physical space they called Poch@ House; (2) They used members' U.S. education to make demands of the Mexican state; and (3) They built an NGO network to honor binational culture.

First, ODA rented a space. In a bright corner office in Mexico City, members put up murals of liberation. They offered tea to all who came in the door. Together, they chose a name that played on words used to denigrate Mexican Americans. Clad in a long, knitted sweater and sporting blue-rimmed glasses, the founder Jane Taylor recalled:

In some ways the naming of the place as Poch@ House has been about saying, you know, “I’m *pocho*—or *pocha*—so what?” That used to be a very—it had a very negative connotation, particularly for a lot of Chicano and Chicana-identifying Mexicans in the U.S. who have come back and suddenly they’re *pocho* or *pocha* in a derogatory sense. I feel like this return and deportation—where you’re in exile in Mexico. You feel all that stigma. You’re faced with it, sometimes by your own family members. But . . . there’s healing in saying, “So what? I’m proud, I can’t undo 20 years of my life. I also can’t necessarily go back right now, even though—.” This sense of, “I’m not from here *or* from there, *no soy de aquí ni de allá*, but I’m claiming my identity and my rights to be *de aquí y de allá* (from here *and* from there)—something that doesn’t exist, something that is not really valued culturally or politically in either country, but I’m creating the space and this identity.”

At Poch@ House, ODA members centered the hybrid culture of Spanglish. Claiming belonging despite the pain of return, they made their own “really healing and empowering and amazing” transnational space.

Second, ODA’s young, bilingual members pressured the Mexican state. While DUL’s participants skewed toward middle age, those in ODA tended to be in their twenties, with U.S. high school or college degrees. In the early 2000s, as U.S. immigration reform faltered, the Mexican government actively opened its arms to DREAMers from the U.S. ODA used such talk for leverage. They insisted that the state ease documentation requirements for returned migrants and validate their identities and educational histories, so they could get jobs. ODA also pushed to reduce documentation hurdles to school enrollment. It convinced Mexico City to eliminate barriers to employment such as requiring official (notary) seals from the U.S. and copies of high school diplomas. In addition, its members connected with U.S. universities and nonprofits (including UCSD) to train students about deportation and advocate against ICE.

Third, ODA built a network to celebrate binational culture, holding festivals that used arts, music, and poetry to foster public support for the group’s demands. They called for reunification of families, guaranteed safety for migrants and deportees, and recognition of diverse communities.

ODA took public pride in its ecosystem of advocates that included DUL, Deported Veterans, DREAMers Moms, and several other organizations.¹⁷ They also aligned with the DREAM movement in the U.S. by working with immigrant youth who returned to Mexico on their own.¹⁸ Their website declared, “We are a part of a dynamic and ongoing process to build the convergence of voices and experiences in the aftermath of return, and to connect with other movements for

justice, such as gender rights. In collaboration with our partners, we support concrete projects to benefit our community, join with other movements to denounce discrimination and violence, and amplify the artistic and cultural voices of those in exile.”¹⁹

Organizations like DUL and ODA inspired other deportees to find ways to reject U.S. banishment. Elías, a 38-year-old self-identified punk with a long beard and glasses, was deported from North Carolina after working 17 years in chicken processing plants. He lost his children. In Mexico, he felt, remaining family did not understand him. So, he joined DUL and turned other deported migrants into his “chosen family.” After learning to print bags and T-shirts, Elías decided to start his own shop. He called it “F*ck la Migra” (a nickname for ICE) to both criticize the U.S. deportation system and appeal to U.S.-based activists. Though at first he thought the name sounded “a little much,” he grew to identify with the slogan: “It’s like an attitude of *coraje* (anger/courage), but at the same time it’s funny.”

Likewise, Ramón, deported after serving time for reentry, established a group he called *Deportado no Agotado* (Deported, Not Exhausted), with a logo mixing the U.S. and Mexican flags. He hoped, one day, to open a home for deportees emerging from prison. Similarly, Mercedes, who had been an organizer and the first Latina and undocumented student body president of Cal State Northridge, started a blog and an organization to fight against ICE after her deportation. Many others simply turned to the web to share stories, documenting Mexico City’s flourishing, bilingual, bicultural population of deportees.

Through grassroots organizing, these individuals and groups converted binational experience into a source of creativity and pride—and, in some cases, a lever to pressure the Mexican state or make money. In those cases, they created a “struggle brand,” intersecting with entrepreneurial modes of refusal.

BROKERING BINATIONAL WORK

In other cases, deportees adopted a strategy I call brokering. That is, they strove to reclaim deportation through entrepreneurship and work. Expelled from U.S. jobs and threatened with social death, they showed agency by embracing a neoliberal breadwinner identity. Like DUL, these groups leveraged binationalism for pride and connection, benefiting from Mexico City’s resources and appeal for young workers. Yet for them, capitalizing on deportation was not just a tool of resistance. Instead, their end game was to get deeper into American business. Via work, they explicitly sought to restore deportees’ standing as *men*.

Typically, brokering organizations were led by men who had business experience in the United States and embraced the idea of “earning dollars in Mexico” by doing business north of the border. These men recruited deported workers to call centers and other U.S.-focused companies. They enticed recruits to remake themselves as status-worthy entrepreneurs. Men who adopted such strategies tended to

have moved to the U.S. as kids and been deported after limited time in detention and/or in prison. Work gave them a path forward, helped them establish community, and offered a Mexican variation of the American dream. As good capitalists, the leaders both gave their peers opportunities and exploited them.

César Quiroz, the founder of an organization called New Comienzos (New Beginnings), had lived in the U.S. on-and-off since he was a toddler. He earned a BA in business in Texas and started a taxi company. When police detained César for a traffic violation, he had just learned his partner was pregnant. For two years, he fought his case from detention. He lost. When César arrived at the border for his removal, cartels kidnapped him. He moved to Mexico City in search of safety.

There, César saw a labor market thirsty for U.S.-trained, bilingual workers. He'd made cash in the U.S. and wanted to prove he could "do it again" in Mexico. Fluent in English, he got a job at a call center. Then, he learned he could earn commissions if he referred others to work there as well. He described, "So, I would start referring to this call center—over 200 people a week. I was making so much money, you know? . . . This is where I started, just by myself, in one of these spots, on the computer helping people find jobs." Soon, César became a full-time labor broker, earning commissions for connecting English-speaking deportees to Mexican jobs. Thus began New Comienzos (a tellingly blended name), an organization that served returned and deported migrants. As of 2019, César bragged to the press, New Comienzos had helped thousands of deported DREAMers find work.

New Comienzos was headquartered at Homework, a swanky coworking space in the middle of Mexico City. Modeled on the incubators of Silicon Valley, Homework had glass walls and wood trim, an expensive espresso machine, and U.S. music playing over the speakers. The space itself seemed to frame deportation as trendy, pronouncing its inhabitants' pride in being "American in Mexico" (albeit on capital's terms). Surrounding the office were five- and six-story call centers, plastered with photos of well-dressed, attractive young workers, inviting other "cosmopolitan" young people to join them.²⁰ Such jobs were not just for deportees; in fact, Ana López Ricoy, one of the RAs who helped to research this book, grew up in Mexico City and worked for one of the centers before she came to UCSD. Yet in presenting deported men as ideal employees, organizations like New Comienzos portrayed removal as a source of useful bicultural skills.

When I visited New Comienzos in September 2019, César greeted me with his hair slicked back and a crisp white T-shirt stretched across his muscular, barrel chest. (He said he often worked out, as if cultivating the physique to match his manly persona). His greeting echoed the grandeur he showed to the press. In one YouTube video, for instance, César wears a full suit and tours reporters through Homework and the neighborhood of "Little LA." "Welcome!" he boasts, "The American Dream can be achieved in Mexico, too! . . . Now millions of people can turn toward Mexico and see that there is life after deportation, there is a light at the end of the tunnel."²¹ It was the first time I saw someone proactively *sell* deportation.

In 2018, César also founded a business of his own, an internet service called EG Logistics. There, he hired recently deported, English-speaking workers to connect producers with shippers around the United States and transport their goods. We toured the company that same day. Near Homework, the office contained a series of rooms filled with dual monitor workstations, each equipped with a clean-cut and muscular man, most of them under 40. In the hallway, with César's prompting, the men traded weightlifting stories. As if on purpose, these workers presented a striking contrast to deportees we'd met in Tijuana. They were young, optimistic, and smartly dressed in U.S.-brand clothing. César made the comparison explicit: "The idea here is that if you're not doing well, if you're depressed, [deportation to Mexico] is gonna be horrible . . . But if you're able to come here and get an opportunity . . . [You're] recently deported and now you're creating your own opportunities, you're gonna see things different."

César considered New Comienzos a direct but friendly competitor to organizations like DUL and ODA. He used a comparison to highlight his own flashy, masculine approach:

Imagine a family. The older sister, you know, the rocker, the one that likes motorcycles, maybe in a motorcycle gang, that's Itzel, Deportados Unidos, you know? She's a little bit of a feminist perhaps, but an activist. She's a fighter. Then we have the younger sister. She's all about love and peace; maybe she's a little bit of a hippie. I see ODA that way, you know? And they're feminist—I never understood that, how can you be a feminist and help migrants? . . . According to them it's not about men, it's about women sticking together, but also about helping migrants . . . And then we have the little brother. He's the favorite, you know, he's the youngest, the favorite brother. But guess what? He's also charismatic, so all the attention is going toward the little brother. But at the same time, he's kind of smart and beginning to help so many people and think outside the box always . . . that's New Comienzos.

Beyond a cute metaphor, César's description captured the tensions among different methods of organizing. He also linked his approach to *men*. All three groups were trying to use Mexico City's resources to forge new identities and communities. But in César's mind, DUL was an activist, ODA a feminist, and New Comienzos an innovative, intentionally masculine businessman.

César leaned into U.S. capitalism. He held up becoming "American" in Mexico as *the* path to overcoming the story that deportees were subhuman, criminals, or no longer men. When I asked what the "American Dream in Mexico" meant, he simply said "dollars." To avoid being erased, he concertedly strove for a place inside U.S. capitalism.

At the same time, by hiring deportees for *lower* wages than they had earned as unauthorized migrants in the U.S., César (and the corporations he worked for) profited off their displacement. Tanya Golash-Boza calls such exploitation the "neo-liberal cycle" of deportation.²² Several of his workers complained of hours-long bus commutes. It was hard to ignore that the structure of New Comienzos looked, from

some angles, like a pyramid scheme. César also made money off academics, including me and my graduate RAs, whom he charged a fee for the privilege of meeting the people who worked at his company.²³ Near the end of our fieldwork, ex-employees accused Cesar of exploitation and worker mistreatment. In short, neoliberal masculinity (and the strategy of working for betterment) could not be divorced from labor abuse. Indeed, neoliberalism itself relies on the illusion of becoming a self-made man, rather than encouraging concrete, coalition-based flourishing.

Either way, neoliberal masculinity offered a powerful alternative to erasure. Like DUL, New Comienzos and its peers became spaces of belonging.²⁴ Despite César's mixed reputation, his businesses attracted thousands of deportees (far more than DUL membership). Among them was Ángel, the young man described in this book's opening pages.

When I asked César why people moved to Mexico City to work with him, he speculated:

The media has grown tremendously, also our social media, also all the groups we're in. Besides the Facebook page, we're in many groups. We're connected with many people, especially in the U.S., many universities, especially DREAMer groups, which is the group that's, like us, better organized. So, a lot of people know about us . . . [They think,] "Hey, there's an area where people can have opportunity." . . . People from our community that were deported, they may be suffering from substance abuse, maybe from—how would you say it? Psychological issues, depression. So instead of living in some other part of Mexico, guess what? They want to live here in this area because here they feel safe or at least understood by some people . . . people from our community that are fully bilingual, and they're here for a reason, so it's now, you know, a group of people, is not one person, it's something that's happening.

New Comienzos especially appealed to deportees aged 18–39, who saw the office as a place to be “cool.” Many people we met there had moved to the U.S. as kids and grew up speaking English. Some—like Ángel—used the Internet to find New Comienzos or similar organizations, then moved to Mexico City to join. Others attached working there to a fantasy of “earning” a U.S. visa, and with it the respect of their family in the United States. If they worked hard enough, they hoped, they could earn back their manhood.

For these respondents, combining community with a job was very appealing. Christopher, a 29-year-old from Puerto Vallarta, recalled how it had been hard to fit in or find work at home after his 2019 deportation. He “felt useless” when he could not make enough money to send to his kids in the United States. When Christopher read about New Comienzos in the news, he started saving up bus fare. He stepped off that bus one Sunday night, and Monday morning he was shaking hands with César, accepting a job at EG Logistics. Christopher had been there a month when we met. He felt a small thrill on earning commissions, and he was grateful that César had taken him on. Like others at New Comienzos and EG Logistics, he finally felt he was “home.”

When Fátima, Ana, and I interviewed people at New Comienzos, most said the organization promised a path out of suffering post-deportation. After detention and often short stints in prison, they said, work felt like one of few areas left for agency. Some had learned this entrepreneurial mentality in the U.S. Others echoed the narratives of redemption from prison, in which “getting pumped” (physically fit), cleaning up their style, hiding their tattoos, and joining a business became almost like a religion. Often, they appeared to be making a physical effort to “look the part”: dressing in button-up shirts, neatly combing their hair, working out, and thus claiming their newfound roles.

Aldo, who ran an organization similar to New Comienzos, proclaimed himself an enemy of César Quiroz, though his approach was strikingly similar. A handsome man in his early thirties with gelled hair, glasses, and a carefully trimmed beard, Aldo met me for breakfast south of downtown Mexico City. Before his deportation, Aldo had run a small landscaping business in North Carolina. Then, police caught him selling marijuana. Aldo spent two years in prison, missing his three-year-old daughter, whose name and birthdate he had tattooed along his arm. He tried to defend himself, begging \$20,000 from his parents to pay a lawyer. When the judge said he’d lost the case, he cried. Eight months before we met, he was removed from the United States.

When Aldo got to Mexico City, he saw César Quiroz making money by linking recently repatriated people to jobs. So, he set up a Facebook group to do something similar: build community, lift deportees’ spirits, and offer to find them work. He, too, earned commissions for worker recruitment. Some of his “members” became virtual assistants. Others were paid to call homeowners in California or Florida to ask if they wanted to sell their houses. Aldo also used people’s Facebook profiles to vet potential workers for businesses: “I got all my groups, I got the skaters, I got the druggies . . . So, if I get a job, I’m gonna look through someone’s Facebook [scroll motion].” Like César, Aldo constantly spoke of community, boasting of his group’s huge membership and insisting that God had “called” him to do this work. “I’m here for a reason,” he said with conviction. He, too, nurtured a clean-cut, businesslike image, admitting he’d changed from a T-shirt into a starched gingham button-down to make a better impression on me. After losing his family and business and then spending time degraded in prison, Aldo said, brokering labor *was* his route back to manhood.

An organization called Hola Code offers a third example of this entrepreneurial model. In its own description, Hola Code was “an immersive, five-month software engineering bootcamp that fosters social mobility through accessing high-demand jobs in the tech sector for youth.” Founded in 2017 with support from Hack Reactor, a well-known U.S. coding bootcamp, Hola Code worked with employers to create a new tech sector in Mexico City and hire deported youth. With an eye to reintegration, Hola Code’s leaders put in a great deal of effort to building community, helping returnees empower themselves and find ways to be “both here and

there.” Its average worker was 18–35 years old and had lived in the U.S. a decade or more. The organization’s appeal was obvious: it promised to convert deportees into twenty-first-century tech workers, who could echo the masculinity (and money) of Silicon Valley men.

Perhaps organizations like New Comienzos and Hola Code “sold people to the system,” making money off their bilingual skills and familiarity with the U.S., while the men themselves were unable to travel north. Yet, in the face of banishment and limbo, neoliberal masculinity gave men identity, belonging, and a sense of importance. In this sense, brokering sometimes overlapped with organizing, bringing deportees together to advocate for their standing in Mexican (and U.S.) society. In other moments, its logic intersected with the strategies of criminal organizations, which offered an alternate—extralegal—means to make money and claim a place in the world.

BREAKING LAWS AND BORDERS

A third group of people rejected state violence by breaking the laws of the states that sought to erase them. They smuggled narcotics or migrants, sold drugs, worked for cartels, or engaged in other prohibited actions. After enduring abuses in U.S. prisons, these men echoed the same tactics to earn money, pride, and ties to a social group. Under border conditions, crime was one of the only ways to reclaim the story of their criminality. For men, in particular, cartels, violence, and illegal markets pitched a tantalizing path “back” into masculinity.

As classic studies reveal, men join gangs for money and pride, particularly in contexts of degradation.²⁵ In his ethnography *Selling Crack en El Barrio*, for instance, anthropologist Philippe Bourgois documents how, by selling drugs and practicing violence, men earn “respect.”²⁶ Joining gangs gives people an identity, solidarity, and a sense of place,²⁷ the very things they lose under carceral deportation. At the U.S.-Mexico border, Shaylih Muehlmann adds, the *narcotraficante* (drug trafficker) offers an alluring and omnipresent symbol of dignity and income, contrasted with widespread economic and social limbo.²⁸

But is engaging in organized crime a form of agency, or are men forced into it by deprivation? Trafficking industries reward men like ex-U.S. prisoners and gang members, who already have skills in violence but lack the education to work in most other places.²⁹ For some, embracing the “criminal” stigma bestowed by the state is the only choice left.

Despite these constraints and contradictions, I argue that organized crime is a form of “delinquent refusal.”³⁰ Anthropologist Gilberto Rosas, who proposed this term in his book *Barrio Libre*, argues that by joining gangs, young people refuse the state’s terms about who is fully human and who can legitimately exercise violence. That is, unable to escape the criminality thrust upon them, deportees *embrace* it instead. Many adopt the label “cholo” (Americanized gangster) as an identity of

their own.³¹ In the process, they resist being banished and claim a circumscribed self-renewal. Rather than staying broken, they break the law.

This kind of refusal was most common at the border. Border zones are rife with criminal groups that reward such actions. Men who stay there have frequently lost their families and even a sense of themselves. Those recently out of prison tend to lack the wherewithal or resources to relocate away from the border or seek other jobs.³² Amid border limbo, smuggling also promises funds to get back to the United States or just buy a bus ticket home.

Like grassroots organizers and self-described businessmen, those who broke laws drew on toolkits from the U.S. In this case, they used skills both surviving and practicing violence, which might appear to outsiders as liabilities. Most of these men had spent time in U.S. prisons. Their incarceration disconnected them from friends and family, leaving them as “free agents.” Having witnessed prison brutality, many no longer believed in state “justice” or the fairness of laws. In prison (if not before), many had been in gangs for community, identity, masculinity, and, indeed, survival. These gangs *trained* men to engage in violence. Alongside prison guards, gangs also instilled a particular kind of discipline.

It was not easy to trace the scope of men’s participation in organized crime. I worried about students’ safety and did not let them recruit on the street, let alone seek out current members of gangs or cartels. If we met such people by chance, they may not have disclosed their criminal actions to students from the U.S.—most of whom were young women. (Though masculine preening *could* be a reason to boast or exaggerate violence or crime). Nevertheless, more than 20 of 171 male interviewees *volunteered* that they witnessed, were tempted into, or participated in such activities. We heard stories from deportees who had been recruited by cartels or seen their peers join or be killed. Several had worked for criminal groups in some way since their deportations, and many more knew other people who had. Occasionally, participants openly admitted to engaging in organized crime.

One such person was Cristos, a 32-year-old ex-gangster recently out of U.S. prison, who now helped traffic heroin for the Aztecas Cartel. When Cristos met Ana in 2019, he squeezed her hand so tightly it hurt. He spoke in a hyperactive jumble of Spanish and English that made Ana wonder if he was high. Cristos grew up in a neighborhood called Little Mexico, in Phoenix, Arizona. He had been in gangs since he was a teen, starting with Phoenix’s 18th Street Gang. He had also been addicted to drugs. During the interview, he talked openly about stabbing people. He boasted that Mexican police were afraid of him and that he “liked” U.S. federal prison, “Because I got to know a lot of big narcos, a lot of powerful people. Like, literally, you get to meet the heavy leaders, you know. Motherfuckers that I saw when I was growing up, that you see them on the news and you’re like ‘Oh shit, I’m with *them*.’ You know, like, ‘Hey, with all due respect, can I take a picture with you, sir?’ People of respect, literally who would kill you.” For Cristos, being associated with such men was a source of pride.³³

Cristos had also faced brutal abuse at Victorville and Riverside Federal Prisons, leading him to scorn the “justice” of U.S. incarceration. He saw friends killed behind bars. He was forced to kill others as well. He had lingering trauma from the time his gang made him murder another inmate. He recalled, “When they tapped me to kill a guy . . . It’s hard when I look back at it. When I saw that person die, he was bleeding. He was right there on the fucking ground, you know. You just see him like—he just shook, and he just pissed in his pants. You just like see him take his last breath, I was like, ‘Fuck!’” Prison guards also lied to Cristos repeatedly and beat him without remorse. Several times, they told him he was about to be released, only to extend his time or move him into another prison. At his trial, he decried, they presented evidence of *his* violence but nothing of the beatings he endured under prison guards.

After deportation, Cristos arrived in Mexico disillusioned, with a history of drug use and violence (and little else). Then, he met cartel scouts recruiting people like him. He remembered:

Over there at the border is nothing but people like us. I mean, not like you [Ana] [laughs]. Just like myself. Or not *just* like myself but similar situations, where they go through the [U.S. prison] system. They’ve been put through it, you know. They’ve been to prison, but the one thing that we all have is that we’re all hustlers, you know? If we’re locked up or in the streets, we know how to make money *y andamos así en chinga* (and we work our asses off) . . . They [cartels] went to border towns, and from there it’s just a requirement that you were locked up. After a while when I learned [how to do that, too], they told me that it’s in the way they [deportees] dress. They look for people who were locked up or who were like that because they’ve already struggled (*batallado*) and they know how to get around, or they’re going to find a way to survive. So, there’s gonna be a way for them to go ahead and sell this [drugs].

Wrecked, hardened, and trained by U.S. prisons and gangs, Cristos saw the next step as a no-brainer. Moving heroin for the cartels gave him a way to be cool, to be “free.”

In describing his criminal life in Mexico, Cristos presented a posture of invincibility, living large and outside the law. He showed off tattoos that linked him to the Barrio Azteca Cartel (formed in Texas prisons, the Aztecas aligned with the armed wing of the Juárez Cartel, whose primary source of income was smuggling drugs). Though Cristos was vague about his exact activities, he spoke of growing and managing heroin. He also talked at length about how much money he made, bragging:

I lived in San Pedro. It’s super cool, super fresh. It’s like fucking Polanco [a swanky Mexico City neighborhood]. Really *mamalón* (awesome), really cool, and there the police—it’s the opposite [of the border], they take care of you. Like if you live in San Pedro, it’s because you’re a thing, you know? And I was there because I made really good money. In just a year I made like 800,000 pesos on pure sales, and I was stupid that I didn’t buy land. I didn’t buy cattle, but I bought a shitload of drugs, a shitload of women, a shitload of watches . . . I really love this—I love Mexico. I feel safer here,

and free. And here, well, here is where I've become a big man (*me he puesto gordo*). I don't have to work. I'm not working in construction . . . earning friggin' 200 pesos [\$10] a day . . . It's fucking awesome.

Cynical about anything "inside" the law, Cristos worked the drug trade as a way out of police abuse and into (in his mind) riches, safety, and "freedom." Again, his manhood was deeply embodied. Yet, where César got buff at the gym, Cristos got fat and bought sex. In claiming this image, Cristos felt powerful—more powerful than the state agents who had abused him on either side of the border. Now, he said, police took care of *him*.

Cristos also gained pride and a community (of sorts). Compared to U.S. prison, he said, "I think I'm doing fucking damn well. I mean, I'm living by myself, but I have gorgeous women that surround me, that love me. I have people that are—well, that support me." He did not feel alone. He also contrasted his swagger with the shame he saw among most deportees. He insisted:

Being in California you have that sense of Mexican pride or Chicano pride, "Viva la Raza!" . . . And then you get back here, and everyone's going around with their heads down. They don't have any damn pride in their own people. Like literally, what the fuck? Lift up your chest, son! Lift your head up high. You come from Aztec roots! . . . And that's what we have—by "we" I mean the people that come from over there [the U.S.]—because we're hustlers, and that's why we make it so good . . . I've seen 1.5 million pesos in cash they gave my manager. Like, who the fuck does that shit?

If deportation made men go around with their heads down, for Cristos, "hustling" directly challenged that outcome.

Other respondents hinted at similar patterns—toying with the invincible image that Cristos portrayed. They talked about how, when ICE released them in Mexico, cartels picked them up based on their clothes or tattoos. For some past gang members, it was harder to get *out* of cartels than *in*. During men's time at border—whether a night or a decade—many tried or considered taking a cartel job. Some said that while in Tijuana, Reynosa, or Ciudad Juárez, they "did nothing good," "did nothing legal," or "were drawn into illegal things." At least 15 respondents considered or attempted smuggling, drug sales, or other illegal activities.³⁴ Some trafficked money or drugs. Others guided people across the desert. Secondary contacts also told us that men we'd interviewed were currently stealing, selling, or trafficking drugs. Some men said that *everyone* leaving prison got asked to work for cartels the moment they crossed, and that easily half accepted. If these reports are anywhere near correct, embracing criminality may be the default path for deported men after prison.

As anthropologist Shaylih Muehlmann points out, criminal organizations permeate life at the border, so it can be tough to separate who is "in" a cartel or "out," and who is involved *intentionally*, versus by force. The informal drug economy involves a wide range of players, from sellers to stashers, smugglers to addicts,

and many others whose roles fly under the radar. Muehlmann argues, the “line between participant, *narco*, and someone who is simply dabbling around the edges of criminal activities is blurry and confusing.” For some people, Muehlmann adds, it can be riskier *not* to participate in the drug market.³⁵ Deportees may already be part of this trade, whether they choose to or not. Under such circumstances, the victim/perpetrator and subject/object binaries are profoundly gray.³⁶

Whatever the scope of participation, cartel activity hung over deportees as a threat and a constant option. Pancho, a 35-year-old veteran of LA gangs, had the teardrop tattoos to show for it. In fluent English, he explained that in Tijuana he almost “headed back to the homies” or took cartels’ offers to work as a mule. By chance, a call from a cousin stopped him. He remembered:

I was tempted to go back by Sonora, because I found out—this friend of mine, he’s like, “Hey, we could come back [to the U.S.], and they’re gonna pay us. All we have to do is just take 25 kilos of weed, and they’re gonna pay us.” And I was like, “Oh, hell yeah, I’m gonna go back, and then I’m gonna get paid.” But then I was like, “You don’t know if these people—once you do take that drug, they’re gonna kill you there. You’re in the middle of the desert. They don’t know you; you don’t know them. No, I ain’t trying to take that risk.” So, I didn’t took [*sic*] it.

Transporting weed through the desert was a tempting way to get back to the U.S. and “get paid” in the process. Yet this alternative came with risks not just of prison but also of assassination or death. Eventually, Pancho “got out” and moved to Mexico City. Others were not so lucky.

Men who *did* admit to illegal activity post-deportation said it made them feel “above” the state whose threats they had long endured—and more like a man. Twenty-seven-year-old Brayan, whom Ana met in a shelter in Mexico City, worked for years as a drug mule, as mentioned in prior chapters. He was caught more than a dozen times and beaten at the border by the Mexican army. The last time, he spent two years in U.S. prison and seven months in detention. After that, he felt desensitized to the state and its threats: “You think they [U.S. prisons] are going to scare me now, by saying that ‘I’m going to give you more time?’” Brayan waved a dismissive hand, calling the whole system arbitrary. Disillusioned and desensitized by U.S. prison, he no longer believed in the law. By breaking it, he claimed a precarious sense of self. As a mule, he could “make his own rules.”

Similarly, Milton told Ana that getting brutalized by the Zetas cartel made him feel tempted to rejoin a gang. When Milton landed in Tamaulipas, at Mexico’s northeastern border, he had just bought a car, and the Zetas stole it (along with his cell phone and money). They also beat him, leaving him bloody and stranded. Milton thought to himself, “You know? I can do the same thing they’re doing. That’s not a problem, I got what it takes to do it.” Milton had been in gangs in the past. Maybe, he thought, he should “man up” and do it again. If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em, right? Facing abuse from both the state and cartels, he figured that *joining* the violence might be one of the few ways to show them that he, too, was still a man.

Like Cristos, Pancho, and Milton, interviewees who admitted such thoughts were often young men who'd previously been in gangs. Like César Quiroz, they liked money. Many adopted neoliberal, U.S.-type mindsets about "success" or the American Dream. Yet they'd also grown up in U.S. cities and been criminalized as teens. They emerged deeply critical of the U.S. carceral system. Now, state-run "justice" felt like a farce. They thought of the government as a corrupt, abusive machine made to crush men like them. Often, these interviewees talked or acted like U.S. and Mexican laws were meaningless, or like they themselves were "above" the law. Policing and prison broke their trust in the state and left them feeling betrayed.

For some, crime was inescapable. They risked being killed if they did not comply with their previous masters or enemy groups. After prison, some had no alternative means of subsistence. As Gilberto Rosas puts it in his study of gangs at the U.S.-Mexico border, "It's a circumscribed agency, of those who face imminent death."³⁷ Other scholars emphasize that gangs offer a path to "respect" *in a context* of danger, constrained lives, and bad jobs (or no jobs at all). This context includes the alienation, addiction, and specter of death produced by carceral deportation and detailed in chapter 5.³⁸ As Rosas points out, most people are not criminals, but U.S. and Mexican security regimes "crystallize the haunting effects of more nightmares to bear."³⁹

Criminal activity was also a double-edged sword. It gave men agency, but only by turning them into perpetrators of crime and/or violence. It also made them more vulnerable to addiction, brutality, and death. Caught in the game of the "big man," respondents like Cristos rarely presented a broader vision of social transformation or collective agency. As gang scholar David Brotherton writes, their actions were "opposition without the possibility of any political or cultural transcendence, any meaningful link to larger movements of the marginalized, or any indigenous self-renewal, innovation or discovery in which consciousness is changed, agency is redefined, and other worlds are imagined."⁴⁰ Nevertheless, scholars must take seriously the strategies men adopt to refuse the terms set by states that have marked them as less than human.

CONCLUSION

If banishment portends social death, deportees are never simply erased. Even in deeply adverse conditions, they fight the system that oppresses them and find new forms of love, hope, and home. Using their experiences in Mexico and the U.S., deportees have invented new, binational identities, created spaces beyond "here and there," built community, and reclaimed deportation. At best, such innovations enable deported men and women to build "chosen family" in Mexico, even after losing their families in the United States. They *name* new identities that challenge the stigma of deportation and reclaim the stories told of them by the U.S. All insist on recognition.

Some groups also make money from their new identities (whether by selling T-shirts, U.S.-based houses, or drugs) and market their binationalism to buyers in the United States, even if they cannot physically cross. Others' efforts also lead to policy change, ensuring better access to resources or formal acknowledgment of their educational and labor achievements in the U.S.

Different deportees also take varying strategies. Some organize at the grass-roots, others embrace a binational business masculinity, and still others refuse to play by the government's rules.⁴¹ Each of these strategies is embodied and gendered. While grassroots organizing often takes the form of maternal care, many men turn to other approaches to demonstrate masculinity, sometimes even physically, through bodily strength or "bigness."

Whether deportees got involved in such organizations—and which approach they adopted—depended on the skills they brought from the U.S., their mobility within Mexico, their histories in prison (and related constraints), and the institutional landscapes they encountered in Mexico. While Mexico City was not the *only* place innovation could happen, it offered government funding and NGO networks unparalleled elsewhere. To get into that context, however, deportees needed emotional wherewithal, economic resources, and the capacity to find opportunities (often on the Internet) and make the move.

In practice, most deported men and women did *not* join such organizations. It was hard to find groups like ODA or New Comienzos unless one was young, bilingual, and capable with the Internet. Often, one had to be in Mexico City already, where most of the first two forms of organizing (flipping the script and brokering deportation) took place. Even if deportees made it into the capital, many continued to struggle with alienation. As a result, reclaiming deportation was limited to those with experience in organizing or business, the gumption to seek alternatives, or the luck to meet a charismatic organizer. For formerly incarcerated people, there were rarely viable paths to resisting erasure *except* to join gangs or cartels. At the border, where deportees often got stuck after prison, their chances were shaped by a different set of powerful institutions.

Deportees' strategies also contained contradictions, to the point that one might question whether they can truly be thought of as "agency." Their efforts were not always cohesive. They often fell short of transforming the system that kept them down. For one, virtually all the groups relied in some way on U.S. capitalism, hustling (out of necessity) to sell things to the United States. Deported workers were subject to transnational enterprises (legal or illegal) that profited off their binational capabilities *and* off their immobility. The capitalist "trap" was especially poignant in brokering, as men actively identified with U.S.-based masculinity but struggled to avoid exploitation in practice. Meanwhile, grassroots organizers were often stymied by infighting; indeed, Deportados Unidos itself splintered several times.

Cartels and gangs presented their own problems, defying "acceptable" form of refusal. Historically, scholars and advocates have hesitated to frame men's engagement in extra-state violence and or informal markets as "agency." Many fear that

doing so would reinforce the “Latino threat” narrative or fuel further punishment, cruelty, and social control of Latino immigrant men. Yet, respondents’ stories hint at the subjectivity involved in going to work for cartels. On one hand, gangs extend violence and rarely offer a broader vision for change. Given deportees’ severely circumscribed lives, participating in gangs also walks a line between voluntary and forced, subjectivity and subjugation. On the other hand, as any observer of Mexico can attest, cartels are currently doing more to change Mexico (and the U.S.-Mexico border) than most “civil” modes of resistance. If states and advocates want to help men in the face of multisided state violence, they must take seriously the omnipresence of extralegal institutions and their compelling offers of dignity, manhood, community, or simply the ability to stay alive.