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Cover Image

On the cover, a protestor wearing nitrile gloves and holding his fist, 31 May 2020.
Credit: Sicheng Wang | Daily Nexus.

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The Pandemic in the Immigrant Home: Oral Histories of First-Generation Los Angeles

*Taylor Mcleod*¹

The year 2020 is now synonymous with the deadly COVID-19 virus. By June, when I conducted oral history research, there were upwards of 7.2 million confirmed cases worldwide, of which 410,000 resulted in deaths.² Social distancing, lockdowns, and quarantines had set in globally. Yet, by March 2021, as I finished writing this article, according to Johns Hopkins University, more than 128 million cases worldwide had led to about 2.8 million fatalities.³ In the United States, the 30 million confirmed cases and more than 551,000 deaths, worse than most other countries, is an ongoing grievous tragedy.³

In California, between March and August, many people who politically identified as conservative consistently refused to participate in social-distancing norms and wear masks wherever mandated.⁴ The media widely covered these debates as the tragedy of the infectious virus turned political. Even as infections kept rising, news organizations were occupied with controversies around the anti-vaccination protests. In Los Angeles, coverage of right-wing movements claiming “a violation of constitutional rights” and raising demands for the security of their “personal freedom” was consistent and common across news media.⁵ These narratives were often dominated by people born and raised in the U.S. who were predominantly white, affluent, and privileged individuals. In complete contrast, the most vulnerable communities – undocumented families, immigrants, disabled persons, Black and Latino families – were comparatively overlooked in the widespread media.

By explicitly focusing on Black and Brown immigrants in Los Angeles County who arrived after 1980 from varying countries, this article examines how the pandemic affected first-generation immigrants. First-generation immigrants are subjects with immediate ties to their previous homelands and often struggle to establish a sense of home in the U.S. There is a missing sense of belonging in many immigrant communities in Los Angeles, as immigrants not only see their homeland as a birthplace but a vital aspect of their identity. Using oral histories conducted with 19 interviewees between April and June 2020, I argue that the pandemic starkly exposed feelings of isolation among recent immigrants, deepened the lack of a sense of belonging, and severely pressured the sense of unity within immigrant communities. Through the reflections on home, food, and strategies of survival under the pandemic in the testimonies of my interlocutors, I argue that such voices and perspectives redirect our attention to how emotions of dignity and nostalgia centered on the home are valuable counterpoints to mainstream narratives of the global pandemic.

Interviewees in my research had transnational familial connections with Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Jamaica, Cambodia, and Egypt. Having migrated to Los Angeles after 1980, these connections are sentimentally still powerful. I interviewed nine men and ten women, most of them aged between thirty-five and sixty.⁶ I used extended interviews and structured questionnaires focused on the importance of their cuisine, grocery shopping practices, familial relationships, employment, and policies in their former home countries around the pandemic.⁷ Participants generally expressed the pain of being separated from family and former feelings of familiarity that crossed generations. Despite a sizeable immigrant population in Los Angeles, with little over a third of residents having been identified as “foreign-born”, feelings of isolation and discomfort remained frequent themes.⁸ According to

the first State of Immigrants in L.A. County (SOILA) report, conducted by researchers at the University of Southern California's Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, immigrants from Mexico alone constitute 2.5 million people in Los Angeles.¹³ Without homogenizing "immigrant" as a category while still using it capaciously, my research suggests broad patterns of similar viewpoints and shared struggles, despite different national backgrounds among my interviewees.

In this article, I focus on the dignity of self, nostalgia for food, and the sensibility of home as three shared patterns across my interviews. These intersecting patterns became more sharply visible under the pandemic, as my respondents expressed feelings of isolation, lack of community, and yearning for feelings of "home" and "belonging". I locate these intersections in relationship to California's food economies and large grocery chains, which have historically tried to attract an affluent customer base, effectively dissociating from working-class peoples of color. Under conditions of food scarcity in smaller food stores or Latino-focused grocery chains, these structural inequities of race and class became more evident as my respondents remained intentionally distant from large food businesses.

Dignity, Home, and Nostalgia

As the pandemic surged in April of 2020, California had suffered 1,469 deaths, fifty-four percent of which were in Los Angeles.⁹ Los Angeles has a population of upwards of ten million people, 3.6 million of whom were born abroad.¹⁰ The SOILA report found that eighty percent of that population has been in L.A. for less than ten years. It also noted that immigrants make up forty-four percent of the workers in Los Angeles and contribute "a combined spending power of about \$108.6 billion and pay around \$38.2 billion in state, local, and federal taxes."¹⁰

California offered no less than \$600 a week to those who were unemployed due to the pandemic. Many documented and undocumented immigrants are self-employed or work for the service industry and were deemed "essential," meaning they could not access these benefits. Elise Gould and others conducted a study at the start of the pandemic in early 2020, examining how COVID-19 impacted specifically undocumented and Latinx immigrants. The researchers found that these immigrants experience a lack of health insurance, work for low wages, and have higher levels of unemployment without the option to receive unemployment benefits.¹¹ It became evident that other immigrant communities of color experienced similar situations to that of the Latinx. In addition, once the quarantine began, people panicked and rushed to every store to buy up most of the edible goods, such as pasta, vegetables, meat, and rice. These people also cleaned the shelves of toilet paper, soap, and hand sanitizer. Many people have the privilege to walk into any store, feel welcomed, and find their desired items. Recent immigrants, such as those interviewed for my research, do not have this privilege. Their struggles show how the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing issues of class inequality, isolation, lack of belonging, and discomfort.

Since the 1980s, California has witnessed refugee migration from the Vietnam War, Iraq War, and civil unrest in Asia, Central, and Latin America. PKM is an immigrant from Cambodia who explained her journey as "difficult" and "traumatic." She, along with her sisters, arrived first in San Francisco in 1981, aged 14.¹² She was a refugee, coming from a concentration camp, and sought refuge with her grandmother, who resided in California. She explained to me the pain of not knowing the language and only being able to communicate with her family, saying she "was fourteen and couldn't make any friends, so the only people [she] has to talk to and learn from are [her] sisters."¹³ Relationships of community and support built in the near past have thus been the focal point of the pressure felt by my respondents during the pandemic. Many immigrants rely on the support of their families to maintain social

and cultural ties. A special bond is created between families who immigrated together, such as the bond PKM shares with her sisters. Having to exist in a foreign land with a strange and different society is highly straining on one's sense of self. As such, all that is familiar, such as one's family members, becomes essential.

Over time, the topic of the legalization of immigration has proved to have racist and classist tones. The criminalization of immigration and deportation is a historical phenomenon. While U.S. immigration systems have evolved to recognize those seeking refuge and safety by changing its laws and visa procedures to include refugees, the same laws are still structurally anti-immigrant. In *The Deportation Machine*, historian Adam Goodman traced the history of deportation, detention camps, and border walls in the United States. Goodman noted that since 1882, the United States government has deported more than 57 million persons, more than any other country.¹⁴ Historically, the 'Alien and Sedition Acts' of 1798–1801 provided a basis for the exclusion and expulsion of immigrants on political grounds. Legal restrictions in 1875 banned individuals with "crimes involving moral turpitude" and "prostitutes" to bar many Chinese women from entry into the United States as a precursor to the more restrictive 'Chinese Exclusion Act' of 1882.¹⁵ In 1929, the United States Congress made "unlawful entry a misdemeanor, punishable by one year of imprisonment or a \$1,000 fine, or both, and made a second unlawful entry a felony, punishable by two years' imprisonment or a \$2,000 fine, or both" with the passage of the 'Immigration Act.'⁵

In 1930, as the Great Depression set in, the *Los Angeles Times* argued for the restriction of Mexican immigration, conceiving them as a "charity burden."¹⁶ Though immigrants represent a significant part of the workplace in Los Angeles, the underlying racist sentiment behind this narrative has been perpetuated for over a century. A broader culture of xenophobia is reflected in American immigration legislation through the repeated criminalization of immigrant groups. This repeated history of barring and discrediting various immigrant groups normalizes the disrespectful tone toward immigrants today on both the macro and individual levels.

Since the 1970s, the United States has expelled more individuals than it has allowed to stay permanently, with most deportations conducted in private without due process.¹⁷ Among my interviewees, 'S.C.' came from Honduras as a single mother and was detained by the Texas Border Patrol in 2018. She said, "I was so scared, they separated me and my son (who was five at the time). I didn't know if we were going to be sent back and, even if we were sent back, where we would stay. It's a pain I do not wish on any mother."¹⁸ S.C. witnessed a process that punishes vulnerable immigrants instead of welcoming them.

Sentiments toward immigrants have been appalling and racist. According to the Chicago Survey Council that studied the sentiments toward immigration into the United States in 2019, 78% of Republicans and 24% of Democrats considered refugees and immigrants a threat.¹⁹ The same study also reported that 81% of Republicans and 25% of Democrats backed the Trump administration's deployment of 3,600 troops to the Texas border, basing their support on their concern for the safety of U.S. citizens. Recent immigrants feel more strongly unwelcome, criminalized, and racially oppressed. In 2016, the then President of the United States labeled "Mexican immigrants" as "rapists" and people "that have lots of problems" who "bring drugs and crime."²⁰ Followers of the President breathe the same hate and continue his narrative. For Black and Latino immigrants, what was it to be like in the U.S. in 2020, when the country's highest elected office deemed entire cultures and nations criminal? Torn between nationality and residence, these struggles were critical to this oral history project.

As stated previously, immigrants make up thirty-five percent of the Los Angeles population and forty-four percent of the workforce.²¹ Immigrants are paid less than U.S.

citizens and often accept whatever wage they can get to survive. Exploitation through poverty wages continues even though “immigrants have a combined spending power of about \$108.6 billion and pay around \$38.2 billion in state, local, and federal taxes.”⁷ Per capita, immigrant workers face the lowest wages, longest hours, and often no health insurance. A 2015 study conducted by members of the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education found that fifty-eight percent of garment workers, thirty-five percent of domestic workers, and thirty-two percent of building or restaurant service workers in L.A. (all positions that are majorly held by immigrants of color), experienced minimum wage violations.²² I asked S.C. why she accepted lower wages and brutal treatment from her employer at a restaurant in Woodland Hills, and she replied, “I take every opportunity as a blessing. I know that many of my fellow people here struggle to find *any* work. I am lucky. I thank God every day that I am able to feed my son and send the little I make back home to help my mom.”²³ Like SC, all of my interviewees stated that they send money or care packages back to their families. Working extra hours to support their family in the U.S., as well as in the country they left behind, was a common thread in my interviews. S.C.’s emphasis on blessings shows how some immigrants endure burdensome conditions in the United States by casting it as a blessing. This notion of ‘blessing’ captures their gratitude and serves as a means through which immigrants make sense of the inequality they face. To my interviewees, being in the U.S. alone is enough to be thankful for, while the harsh conditions they endure are explained merely as necessary parts of their life.

This politics of dignity, or the careful ways immigrants resist any articulation of neediness or vulnerability, is critical to analyzing the COVID-19 pandemic. Greater isolation, precarious jobs, and employer intimidation during the pandemic are further silenced in narratives already couched in the language of dignity. The fear of embarrassment or appearing ungrateful came up in all my interviews. On being asked if they would rather be in their former home country during the pandemic, all but three respondents replied in the negative. GM, a forty-five-year-old woman from Mexico who arrived in 1981, put the financial and emotional stakes of supporting a family across the border in these words: “I want to support them because they have no one else. If I had the choice, I would rather bring them here. They’ve closed off my pueblo, and my aunt can’t access her medication, supplies, or money. The government isn’t saying much. They’ve closed the small shops that the pueblo relies on for money and their lives, but [the government] doesn’t support them. It’s horrible; I feel helpless.”²⁴ What G.M. described as helplessness, caused by the broader economic and policy shortcomings both in the U.S. and Mexico, was shared by other respondents but not in equally frank terms.

One other respondent, SR, a 30-year-old Black man who came from Jamaica in 2008, shared a similar story of cross-border relationships of care. He had immigrated to the United States to further his acting career and expressed how stressful it was to be far from his family during the pandemic, noting that “my brothers are all in the hotel business and they all were out of work. Jamaicans don’t receive unemployment checks like Americans do; it’s more of a ‘figure it out’ type of thing.” He continued, “my brothers have children and my parents who can’t work to support, and I am over here trying my best to offer whatever support I have. I’m here for my career; if I could do that in Jamaica, I would.”²⁵ Without mentioning more specific details, S.R. still managed to convey the scale of the support needed, as several family members abroad are supported by a meager part-time acting income. In such refusals to acknowledge feelings of lack of historically structured cultural norms of dignity. Especially in working-class immigrant families, notions of dignity mean that one must keep their chin up and not ‘let them see you cry.’

Expressions of privacy can surround and hide experiences of inequity, something sharpened by the pandemic. In my interviews, I chose to frame questions around realities in the home, such as food, groceries, and domestic chores. Home is more than just a house. It is a safe place where people create private memories separated from but in relation to outside pressures. The freedom to organize the physical interiors of homes allowed my respondents to feel closer to their families in their former domestic country. My respondents have expressed that they feel they cannot always exist comfortably in this overtly anti-immigrant country. Home is the site where they expressed their lived, transnational realities. For example, LC, an Afro-Latino woman from Guatemala who immigrated to the United States in 1990, said it brought her joy to put up the Guatemalan flag and paintings passed down from her grandmother in her house, saying that at home, “she represents who [she] is.”²⁶ Immigrants experience the difficulty of existing and building a future in a new country while still being deeply tied to the cultural value systems of another. Having to uproot generations of ways of life and move to another country makes the story of building a home a potentially painful one.

In one sense, the new nation-state is a home, just as a neighborhood or a house is. Building on the history of segregation and urban redlining in the U.S. that structurally created isolation, current xenophobic narratives create more discomfort and anxiety around socializing and exploring. Such histories shape how immigrant families relocate and stick to one area or neighborhood. Many of my interviewees did not have more than two family members who resided in Los Angeles when they arrived. For example, JMP arrived in Los Angeles from El Salvador in 2010 without legal documentation. While he began by expressing how he came hoping to venture and relocate more than once, he quickly changed his ambitions. He remarked, “I came to this country thinking that I would explore other cities or states. But when we arrived, it was difficult for me and my family to get to know our own area and how to get around that. I found a decent job and have stuck with it for years. We’ve been in the same house for nine years, and I don’t plan on moving any time soon, either.”²⁷ Efforts to assimilate and find a sense of belonging within neighborhoods or areas, broadly defined, take longer for recent immigrants like ‘JMP’ than for those native to the United States. Without legal documentation, many of these immigrants live in fear, and as a result, their hopes and aspirations become seemingly unattainable. Many respondents confirmed a contrast between knowing the ‘ins and outs’ of places in their previous countries and lacking familiarity with the United States. Freedom to roam around in the past was often compared to trouble and insecurity in the present. PM, another immigrant, remembered El Salvador, saying, “you know it, you see it, and you feel it.” PM further explained, “I may not know where everything is at, but I know what I can, and I can’t do. I grew up there. It will always be home.”²⁸ The words “always” and “home” capture the tension present in the long time it takes to accept a new place of home while still facing racial prejudice and social isolation that limits practices of community and socialization.

With the spread of the coronavirus, the closure of churches took a substantial emotional toll on immigrant communities. Building communities around language, food, religion, and experiences with the U.S. immigration processes were common to my respondents. In my interviews, more than half of my respondents indicated that they relied on church and the workplace for socializing. EPM, a 45-year-old woman from El Salvador, who came to LA in 2010, goes to church to show her gratitude and love for God, but also to regularly feel “welcomed and loved” by the people who join her in giving thanks.²⁹ Catholicism binds many immigrant communities from Central and Latin American countries. Churches are more than places of worship – they provide social services and help members negotiate with the U.S. government and social sector, in addition to providing worship and sociality on Saturdays and

Sundays. JMP commented on how the church closure affected him, saying, “Church was a Sunday ritual for my family and me. My wife and I always had Sunday off. The kids would dress nice and go to youth service, my wife would chat with her friends, and my father even preaches sometimes. It was really the only day we had with friends.”³⁰ More than half of my interviewees came to the United States without knowing anyone, and many said the church was their primary way of making friends and receiving advice on the city. Many are referred to or recommended for jobs through connections from church since immigrants often arrive without leads on employment. Churches hold clothing drives, provide free or affordable home-cooked meals, and design small social gatherings for Christians across ethnic backgrounds. The impact of the pandemic on such broader practices of home, centered around the church, is severe and difficult to quantify.

Impacts on food and cuisine, the cornerstone of home, were equally concerning. With the disruptions to food circulation due to the pandemic, my interviewees articulated the importance of culture to the place where food is purchased. When I asked BM, a 65-year-old woman from Mexico who arrived in 1980, where she buys groceries, she replied, “I shop at Vallarta because they speak Spanish. I don’t like to speak English, so I go where I’m comfortable. Where I know my people are.”³¹ During the pandemic, even though the long lines at grocery stores caused wait times of up to three hours, B.M. and many other interviewees stuck to their regular grocery stores and firmly stated that they didn’t bother venturing out searching for shorter lines. YM, a 19-year-old immigrant from Egypt who arrived in 2011, explained, “There was no need to look at other stores. I already knew they didn’t have the ingredients I needed.”³² The culture and foodways of a grocery store were more critical during the pandemic than ever before.

In March and April of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic first spread in California, food shortages became a significant challenge. Besides a source of nutrition, food is also a mode of cultural, emotional, and intellectual communication between generations of the same family and different social groups. All my respondents clearly emphasized how they were still primarily making dishes according to culinary styles from their previous home countries. They had never intended to sever any ties with food practices, even in the face of different kinds of food availability or cooking tastes prevalent in the U.S. Just as the food shortage intensified under the pandemic, rice, pasta, cuts of meat, milk, and butter became challenging to find in stores. This fundamentally challenged the insistence of my respondents on their “fixed” diet, the strongest piece of home that they have.

Spices such as turmeric and ginger, valued in these immigrant households for both taste and medicinal value, ran out in stores, as stories of the antiviral benefits of these spices made headlines.³³ However, the absence of rice, quickly bought up due to ease of storage, was the most fundamental turning point for most interviewees. PKH gave a heartfelt testimony on rice, claiming, “Rice is the staple of my country. In Cambodia, we eat rice for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It’s all we eat. I couldn’t find rice for me or my family for weeks; it was hard. And to add to that, the stores have almost doubled the price! The stores are definitely taking advantage of us; they know it’s all we eat.”³⁴ PKH came to the U.S. in 1981 from Cambodia and still cooks all her dishes using methods her father taught her. She explained that it was a way for her to keep her country with her, even though it didn’t necessarily taste the same given the different quality of store rice. PKH was visibly angry and frustrated, saying she had settled for a small bag of brown rice at the fifth store she visited. It was not enough for her household, nor was it the type of rice she was accustomed to cooking. To ensure the place of rice in her home, she cut down on her meat consumption and turned solely on

vegetables, saying, “vegetables in America are bland and don’t have a ton of flavor, but it’s better than the meat. Meat just is not natural at all.”³⁵

Many of my interviewees stated that they did not alter their diets despite widespread hoarding, price rise, and unavailability of customary foods. They tried their best to keep dishes as familiar as possible. This unwillingness to surrender the diet to the pressures of the market is complicated. Having left home to begin building a new life in the U.S. is fundamentally about not forgetting, more than it is about learning what is new. When interviewees like PKH were furious and disappointed about foods being hoarded and prices inflated due to market panic, their frustration was borne of an unwillingness to relinquish generations of food cultures to the supposed conveniences of U.S. market fluctuations. Food is more than just nutrition. Even when the lines wrapped around the store for hours during the pandemic, all my interviewees reported that they stuck to their preferred stores to get at least some of the foods they were accustomed to, rather than go to a store with a shorter line and therefore less chance of exposure and product shortage.

The decisions of grocery store chains to stock certain kinds of food at specific prices reveal subtle signs to immigrants about whether they are welcome as customers there. While Los Angeles’ Latino and Chicano population is over fifty percent of the total population, stores such as Trader Joe’s, Whole Foods, Sprouts, and Vons, with their extensive supply chains and highly advertised quality of foods, are primarily located in affluent areas with predominantly white residents. This is yet another facet of structural urban segregation that upholds racial differences in the U.S. Working-class immigrant persons interviewed in my research were not exposed to the “quality” that these stores usually advertise. I asked PM why he did not visit these stores, and he answered, “They’re expensive.” This was not a curious assertion, and he later admitted that he had never stepped foot in or interacted with anyone at these stores.³⁶ Their locations in white neighborhoods instead shaped his opinions on prices and the subtle exclusionary approach of such stores. For instance, Trader Joe’s stores are in affluent and gentrified areas, such as Beverly Hills and West Hollywood. In predominantly Black and Latino communities, like Downtown Los Angeles, Compton, Gardena, South Los Angeles, and East Los Angeles, the nearest Trader Joe’s is at least ten miles away and conveniently near the University of Southern California’s campus to cater to its wealthier student population. The exclusionary and prohibitive pricing strategies in bigger grocery stores like Trader Joe’s indirectly caused tremendous overcrowding at outlets run by Super King, Vallarta, and Food4Less when the virus spread in L.A. These stores speak to a larger base of ethnically and racially diverse communities and the pressures on their stocks during the pandemic only revealed how deeply my interviewees felt unwelcome at stores like Trader Joe’s.

The taste of food emerged as another area where my respondents acutely felt the pandemic. S.R. explained his previous food buying habits in Jamaica compared to those he developed in the U.S. Once the pandemic began, he resorted to buying more groceries through online services and stocking up on spices like ginger root and turmeric. He was deeply nostalgic for the way his food tasted in Jamaica. Compared to more “synthetic” tasting food in the U.S., he recalled Jamaican produce that was naturally grown near his house. He nostalgically described the pleasure of going outside and picking a ripe orange or mango off a tree. His cassava, porridge, and “ackee and saltfish” have lacked the same embodied experience of taste in the U.S. due to differences in flavor and the unavailability of some ingredients.³⁷ S.R. resorted to going to Latin supermarkets to find similar ingredients once the pandemic began. “I went where I was going to find the stuff I needed,” he said, since “Vallarta has some stuff like Jamaican supermarkets.” However, he continued, “I would usually get most of my key ingredients shipped from Jamaica because American food lacks taste. The Spanish markets

is as close as I was going to get.” Importing small quantities of key foods was common among many interviewees who considered food in the U.S. either unnatural or less flavorful.

Y.M. talked of dishes his mother made with tomato sauce and rice, saying that he too can taste the difference, and it makes him “miss home.”³⁸ JCM, who arrived in Los Angeles in 2019 from Honduras, explained the pork stew and a yucca dish is “nowhere near the same as home,” yet he noted, “I’d rather eat that than any other food they have made in the supermarket. It’s better than nothing.”³⁹ Many of my interviewees who professed their different palette as an intricate part of their feeling of belonging consistently held on to it even under the pandemic. Even with produce being scarce, their styles of food consumption did not change. C.S. stated that she would never resort to American dishes, noting, “This is my culture. This is my home; why would I want to even try to change it?”⁴⁰ Such resilience of specific food cultures stands in direct contrast to the general ignorance in the U.S. around foods like yucca or cassava root, let alone salt fish. The lack of spices noticed by my respondents across supermarkets in Los Angeles is a result of how large grocery chains ignore the needs of immigrants despite fetishizing organic and foreign foods.

DM, an immigrant from Jamaica, explained to me what it was like to have mangoes in her house in Jamaica: “You know when there are ripe mangoes in someone’s house because the home fills with the smell of mango. They are picked when they are ripe and ready to eat, often from folks’ backyard.”⁴¹ The ripeness of the fruit and the desire for its taste are deeply tied to the sensory history of the body. D.M. said that in Jamaica, one goes by scent.²³ Due to the normalization of chemically engineered food preserving practices in the United States, most of my respondents seemed to believe American food to be “unnatural”. Karen Miner has previously studied how grocery store produce in California arrives after vegetables are ripened in controlled atmospheric storage days before delivery. She found that many vegetables that are on the shelves for weeks or even months are kept intact by “regulating the oxygen, carbon dioxide, and nitrogen levels, along with temperature and humidity.”⁴² According to her research, apples on shelves can be up to a year old. Bananas can be manipulated to control the pace of ripening. In contrast, many other products are “washed in a solution of chlorine and preservatives before being put in cold storage for up to a month.”²⁴ In complete contrast, she further adds that in the U.K., fruits and vegetables are typically stored for about a week.

Similarly, the Fruit Growers Supply News found that farmers from Mexico produced a vast amount of food sold in California. In the U.S., “50 percent of fresh fruits and 20 percent of fresh vegetables” come from Mexico.⁴³ In the U.S. commercial food businesses, fruits and vegetables are waxed to create a more presentable store shelf and an aesthetically appealing fruit or vegetable rather than a more flavorful one. This loss of taste is most clearly articulated through the sensory and bodily experience of recent immigrants interviewed during the pandemic. Long-term residents in the U.S. have been accustomed to deeming newer tastes more acceptable. On the contrary, my interviewees were not ignorant of alternative tastes of fresh foods and confirmed how this also structured their feeling of alienation and discomfort under pandemic conditions.

Nostalgia was a consistent theme in my conversations on food sensibilities. Like PKH’s testimony about meat tasting unnatural, B.M. told me that meat in the U.S. tasted “very synthetic” and that she preferred the meat in Mexico.⁴⁴ She reminisced about the beef stew her mother would make for her, saying that she would “love to go back and enjoy it one last time.” CS, an immigrant from Guatemala who came in 1992, described meat there as “tasteful,” since “the meat is fresh and never frozen.” Further, she said, “I think that once they freeze and maybe ship the meat all over the place, it loses its taste and texture.”⁴⁵ PM stated that the cuts were “smaller and natural” in El Salvador where, in his recollection, “they

only kill the animals if there is a demand for the meat.” He further stated, “you know some farmers raise the cows and only kill them when they need to. So, a lot of the meat that you’re buying is from an animal that was just butchered no longer than the day before.”⁴⁶ Talking about food made all my interviewees smile as they reminisced about their days at the butcher shops in their former hometowns.

The normalization of American factory farming practices using feedlots and meat-packing plants stands in stark contrast to the culinary and cultural practices of many that I interviewed. Recent immigrants registered the effects of such foods through their bodies and senses. When my interviewees described meat as synthetic and tasting like plastic, they were not exaggerating. Instead, they were disclosing how their bodies are responding to broader dynamics of food economics in California and the United States. Thinking about the relationship between the body, the home, and emotions is critical to understanding the experiences of immigrant families that current COVID-19 discussions have ignored.

Conclusion

The body is central to the economy, just as the tongue is central to bodily experience. When mainstream COVID-19 narratives focus on large-scale economic disruptions, we lose sight of how such disruptions eventually come home and affect the body. The home can tell us a lot about the impact of the pandemic on the immigrant family, and their experiences in the U.S. can tell us a lot about the pandemic. All my interviewees shared a critical element – they were highly conscious of the taste of foods in California and preferred food in their former home countries. Food, and its effects on the body, are crucial to their ability to find comfort and belonging in the U.S. while remaining grounded in their culture and traditions. Since immigrants after 1980 have not had as much time to acclimate to U.S. food cultures, their struggle to retain and reproduce familiar tastes reveals how the pandemic unsettled their everyday routines and the immigrants’ resilient response. The pandemic has exposed immigrants to greater vulnerability and brought to the forefront how cultural notions of thankfulness and dignity continue to structure their lives, despite severe inequalities.

The struggles of first-generation immigrants in Los Angeles have only been exposed and worsened by the pandemic. High numbers of deaths from the virus among California’s Latino and Black population, business closures, rocketing unemployment, and closed places of worship have made the burden on immigrants heavier than other more long-standing groups. Few governmental resources for Black and Latino immigrants and xenophobia raging in the system of the United States make the reality grimmer. D.M. told me in her interview that some of her friends from Jamaica gave up their green cards and went back to Jamaica. While a few had done so after the election of Donald Trump, the pandemic was another reason many others were moving back. “I know my best friend C. just gave up his green card,” she said, “it was really a long time coming because ever since Trump got in office, it has been harder for him to come in and out of the country to visit his wife. The airport workers would harass him harshly in customs.” D.M. was justly frustrated, remarking, “I mean, the man just wanted to visit his wife a couple times out of the year, and every time, since Trump, they would act like he was a criminal and interrogate him. I don’t blame him for moving back.”⁴⁷ Her anecdote is a reminder that there are other forms of refusal at play – some simply do not consider being in the U.S. worth the uphill battle. The dignity and gratitude of those who stay and endure the pandemic, unwilling to change their meals or give away their pain too easily – their stories have a lot to teach us.

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- ¹ I am grateful to all the interviewees who shared their experiences and life stories with me. For help with research, I thank Dorothy Williamson, Rosie Villegas, and Blanca Milgarejo. In addition, I give the utmost thanks to Dr. Utathya Chattopadhyaya for his counseling and support throughout this journey.
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- ⁷ All interviews were conducted solely by the author. Recordings and transcripts are in the author's possession and all names have been initialized and altered to ensure confidentiality. Translations from Spanish are by the author.
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- ²⁴ "Interview with GM," (April 22, 2020).
- ²⁵ "Interview with SR," (April 21, 2020).
- ²⁶ "Interview with LC," (April 19, 2020).
- ²⁷ "Interview with JMP," (April 22, 2020).
- ²⁸ "Interview with PM," (May 13, 2020).
- ²⁹ "Interview with EM," (May 12, 2020).
- ³⁰ "Interview with JMP," (April 22, 2020).
- ³¹ "Interview with BM," (May 13, 2020).
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- ³⁴ "Interview with PKH," (April 21, 2020).
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- ³⁸ "Interview with YM," (April 29, 2020).

³⁹ “Interview with JCM,” (April 30, 2020).

⁴⁰ “Interview with CS,” (May 13, 2020).

⁴¹ “Interview with DM,” (April 30, 2020).

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⁴³ “[How Does Produce Get to the Grocery Store?](#),” *Fruit Growers Supply*.

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⁴⁶ “Interview with PM,” (May 13, 2020).

⁴⁷ “Interview with DM,” (April 30, 2020).