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ME ESPERA UN PUEBLO: RETURN MIGRATION TO ANCESTRAL HOMELANDS IN OAXACA, MÉXICO

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Advised by Professor Victoria Robinson

Undergraduate Honors Thesis

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May 17, 2022

To my mom and sister,

Alba Aguilar Rodríguez & Sheila Cosmes Aguilar,

And to our fellow returnees who generously trusted me with their stories.

ME ESPERA UN PUEBLO: RETURN MIGRATION TO ANCESTRAL HOMELANDS IN OAXACA, MÉXICO

Abstract 3

Introduction 4

Return Migration in the Literature: Why it Can't Explain Us 8

Situating this work: In and from Oaxaca, México 13

- Forming Impoverishments 13
- Valles Centrales and Sierra Norte 15
- Pueblos and Comunalidad 17
- Patterns and Statistics of Oaxacan Migration to the US 19
- Transborder Communality 22

Border Abolition: Historiography of the Border and Theoretical Framework 23

- Historiography of US-Mexico Conquest and Border Formation, Neoliberal Impoverishment and Carceral Governance 23
- Border Abolition 27

Cine Comunitario as Methodology 30

- Limitations and Tensions 34
- Future/Visions for this Work 36

The United States' Unlivable Futures: Return migrant experiences of Anti-Indigeneity, Racial Capitalism, and Surveillance in the US. 37

- Anti-Indigeneity by other Mexican migrants 38
- Always in Debt: Experiences of Racial Capitalism in the US 39
- Surveillance of Culture and Compulsory Surveillance 41

Transborder Communality and Return 43

- Adult experiences of transborder communality 43
- Youth/Children experiences of transborder communality 44

Affective Geographies of Return 46

- How the Body Experiences Return 46
- Descriptions of Dramatic Shift in Space 47
- Shifts in Culture, Perceptions of others, and Understandings of Self 48
- Language 50

Agency in Return: Joys and Tensions in Separation, Reunification and Rematriation. **51**
Agency and Contradictions in Family Separation: Return as a Means to Protect Ourselves 52
Agency and Contradictions in Family Reunification 53
Multiple Migrations– Need for Border Fluidity and Abolition 54
Joys of Return and Rematriation 55

Conclusions and Beginnings **57**

Acknowledgements and Gratitude **59**

Bibliography **61**

Abstract

Between the years 2005-2010, 1.4 million Mexican migrants residing in the US migrated back to reside in Mexico. The state of Oaxaca, a primary return destination, holds the highest and most diverse population of Indigenous nations in Mexico, with especially strong forms of communal organization locally and in diaspora. This project consists of both a documentary film in progress and an Ethnic Studies honors thesis composed of interviews with migrants who have returned to their ancestral homelands in Oaxaca after living in the US for several years. In the record of migration literature, theorizations of return migration have centered around settler colonial, nation-state forces of immobilization and confinement, thus, overlooking and oversimplifying the complex affective experiences of return. In contrast to such literature, my methodology and theoretical framework, grounded in *Cine Comunitario* (communal filmmaking) and Border Abolition, intentionally facilitate relationship building and long-form storytelling, politically structuring individuals within community knowledges and histories–rather than in state-centered approaches–as means for self-representation. This study is formed around several core enquiries, such as: What are the contradicting affective processes that Indigenous Oaxacan migrants experience when returning to their ancestral homelands? and How do they (we) understand concepts of home, ancestry, identity and belonging?

Key words: Return Migration, Oaxaca, Ancestral Homeland, Cine Comunitario, Border Abolition, Affect, *Pueblo*, *Comunalidad.*

Note: Throughout this thesis, I will use the Spanish words *pueblo*, to refer to hometown or community of origin, as well as the word *paisanos,* to refer to people from one's pueblo*,* as the words in Spanish hold connotations and feelings that cannot be fully denoted in English translations.

1. Introduction

Mi Ombligo. Digital Photo-Collage by me.

The image above is a digital collage I made recently with a map of my pueblo, Ixtlán de Juárez, and pages from a history notebook from when I was in the third grade and had just returned to Oaxaca. My school was called *Escuela Primaria Benito Juárez,* named after the first and only Indigenous Oaxacan president of Mexico, and it was the only school that allowed me to enroll when my mom, Alba, my sister, Sheila, and I migrated back there in November of 2006. This was my first time being in and living in my family's hometown–a Zapotec pueblo in the mountainous forests of Oaxaca. I knew very little Spanish, nothing of Zapotec as the language has been lost in the last two generations of my family, and much less about my family's ancestral

homeland. The page on the upper left corner was from an autobiography assignment my teacher gave his third-grade class, and to date was likely the first time I wrote about my experience of returning to Ixtlán after having been born and grown up in the United States until the age of 8. The bottom two pages are from another assignment for which we had to research and learn by heart the meaning of the name our pueblo. In the Zapotec language variant of my pueblo, it is called Laa Yetzi, meaning the place where the Ixtle plant grows. The page on the upper right is a description of all the pueblos that are north, south, west, and east to Ixtlán, which are the same as the ones detailed on the map.

This collage is a visual compilation of my spatial and affective memories of returning to a Zapotec community as a young child. I chose to introduce this body of work with a piece of visual media that reflects on such memories because I often find it easier to express my own contradicting feelings of estrangement and reunification to my homeland through the ambiguities of blending images together, as opposed to through unambiguous academic language. This is also the reason why I chose to produce audiovisual work for this project, alongside this piece of scholarly research. There are ambiguities in this work that I often feel a thesis cannot fully hold, but instead find a better home in visual art. Nonetheless, I find it imperative to intervene in the literature on return migration and Indigenous Oaxacan migration to honor those of us who the literature has flattened. This senior honors thesis is my attempt at that.

The first part of the title of this work was borrowed from a song by the same title, *Me Espera un Pueblo,* written by Jaime Martínez Luna. Jaime is a Zapotec musician, philosopher, and land defender who was a crucial strategist in the fight to protect the forests of the northern highlands region of Oaxaca against extractive industries in the 1980's, as well as one of the thinkers who coined the term, *Comunalidad*–which describes the way of cooperative,

interdependent living of Indigenous pueblos in this region and is a term critical to the methodology and theoretical framework of this work. He wrote songs that served as political education tools for adults and children and that spoke to the collective stories and experiences of Oaxacan Indigenous peoples living in pueblos. *Me Espera un Pueblo* speaks on the contradicting feelings of returning to one's pueblo after being absent for many years, specifically on what one hopes to find when returning back home. Jaime is also my elder, and I borrow the title of his song to recognize and honor that my elders and *paisanos* know, feel, have theorized on and have lived return. For the past decades, stories of migration and displacement have been ingrained in the fabric of our communities in Oaxaca. We know return, we have yearned for return, and we have also dreaded return–all the same time. We hold those affective experiences of migration as knowledges.

I was raised in a family of return migrant women and femmes. My family is from the Zapotec Northern Highlands region of Oaxaca, Mexico. I was born in the United States, and at age 8, my mother, my sister, and I migrated back to my parents' hometown, Ixtlán de Juárez, due to domestic violence, as we were no longer safe living in the US with my father. My mother returned to the town where she was born and raised in, but a town that had drastically changed since she left decades before. My sister returned to the place she was born in, but one she didn't recognize nor feel as her own, as she had grown up in and made a home in the US. I arrived at a place that was completely unknown to me, but where my entire family and ancestors are originally from. Returning implied many systemic challenges for us–family separation, economic vulnerability, difficulties accessing schooling, having to learn a new language with little support, etc. The only space we had to speak on and make sense of our return was with each other. Outside of the three of us, we hardly ever spoke of our return, and we never made contact with

other returnees; our return often isolated and confused us. Returning at a very young age and growing up in Oaxaca is the most abrupt and defining experience of my life. I see this project as my way of making sense of that return alongside other returnees, and in doing so, preserving ourselves.

To create space for listening and understanding the complex feelings that arise with return, I interviewed other return Oaxacan migrants of different ages, gender identities, pueblos, and migratory status and began creating an audiovisual compilation of our testimonies, along with this thesis. During our conversations, I asked them what drove them to migrate back, what/who they hoped to find when they returned, what didn't they recognize of their hometowns, what they wish hadn't changed, what they hoped not to find the same as when they left, how do they view themselves after returning, what was easy about returning, what is their sense of belonging to the communities they left in the US, what is their sense of belonging to the communities they arrived to, how have they rebuilt a home, what they dream of, how they deal with nostalgia, if they plan on migrating again, whether they identify themselves as returnees, whether they identify with other return migrants, etc. They had the freedom to ask me those same questions in return, and more.

Our conversations and testimonies revealed the non-linear narratives of migration that give life to this project. This project is about agency, indigeneity, human connection, ties to homeland and place and identity formation. The participants in this research are Indigenous Oaxacan migrants who move against and beyond logics of immobilization and confinement, against and beyond settler colonial borders. Our stories do not necessarily make sense through the various logics of the state–immigration policies, trade agreements, etc.–and they do not have to. Although we are deeply affected by settler colonial, nation state borders, we know and have

our own understandings of ourselves beyond them. Through this multidisciplinary project, I hope to portray some of the innumerable ways our bodies and souls resent, rejoice and feel return.

2. Return Migration in the Literature: Why it can't explain Us

For the purposes of this paper, I define return migration as the movement or displacement back to one's country or land of origin from which one first emigrated and/or has roots in, and I will argue that the existing literature on return migration cannot hold the return to ancestral homelands that this project is centered around. Return migration as a whole, within the larger field of Migration Studies, has only been afforded close attention and analysis starting in the 1980's, only in an attempt to systematize the factors that drove to migrant's return (Rogers, 1984). In the record of traditional migration literature, return has simply been considered as the concluding moment of a migratory project, as opposed to a migration process in and of itself (Durand and Massey, 2006). The different migration theories ignored return completely or considered it as a failure, alluding often to forced removal by the state, or success, alluding often to planned return for retirement (Stark, 1996). This binary of success and failure mirrors the classification of voluntary and involuntary return that academics then began utilizing to explain the conditions under which migrants experience return. Neither side of this binary alludes to simultaneous feelings of estrangement and reunification that migrants experience in the aftermath of return, the constant and multiple movement between borders, and the various and multiple periods of their lives that migrants experience return. In other words, migration theories have historically fallen short in illustrating the complications and ambiguities of return (Cassarino, 2004).

Over the past decade, increased statistical analysis, scholarly, and community work around the causes and consequences of return migration from the United States to Mexico specifically has slowly emerged. This was following the sharpest downward trend in net migration between Mexico and the United States, which occurred between the years of 2005-2010, as reported by the Pew Research Center in 2012. According to the study, during this period, migration from Mexico to the US went down by more than half, and migration from the US to Mexico roughly doubled in comparison to the previous 5-year period. This was a dramatic reversal of a net Mexican migration to the US that was held for four decades. The study also reports that while the majority of migrants who returned during this period did so voluntarily, a significant minority were deported, or more precisely, forcibly removed by the state through its border militarization and mass deportation mechanisms–the histories, structures and consequences of which are discussed further when considering the theories of Border Abolition. Overall, the study illuminated that within the past two decades a significant trend of Mexican migrants leaving the United States and returning to their country of origin began.

A quantitative study developed by the Comisión Nacional de Derechos Human (National Commission for Human Rights) and the Colegio de México in 2019 is the most comprehensive database on the institutional barriers for so-called reintegration of returnees into Mexican society up to date. Among the several systemic challenges the study exposes, return migrants face an already deficient Mexican labor market, deteriorated health and exacerbated illness from living and working in the United States, and Mexican housing and education systems that are not equipped to receive them when they migrate back (León, 2019). In terms of the institutional conditions migrants returning to Oaxaca face specifically, its economies heavily rely on farm working/agriculture, small scale commerce, and tourism. The form of employment most

common among return migrant populations is in the informal economy. Thus, social network of family, friendships and *paisanaje* (the relationships and kinships sustained with those of their same pueblo), unlike other regions in Mexico, are the among the most determining factors in guaranteeing migrants access to basic social rights such as health, housing, employment, and education. The *Sistema Normativo Interno* self-governance mechanism (more in the Situating this work chapter), is especially significant to return migrant reincorporation, as it can provide a support network that can ease reunification, while its demands and obligation can also become burdensome to already vulnerable migrants. (León, 2019).

Although studies like the one above use the term "reintegration" to conceptualize migrants' processes of adaptation back into Mexico, there exists push-back (Kopp et al., 2021) to place the burden, even if nominally, on returnees to integrate into the fabric of Mexican society, as opposed to signaling the impossibilities of integrating into a country riddled with already unlivable conditions facilitated by its governments. In response to empty promises for reintegration, Otros Dreams en Acción, an organization based in Mexico City dedicated to mutual support and political action by and for the returned and deported community in Mexico, has coined and prefigured the term *retorno digno* or dignified return. Dignified return is an expansive, abolitionist vision that aims to repair the policies that led to the mass expulsion of families over the last five decades and repair the social and economic fabric that threaten the well-being of all who live in Mexico, independent of migrant status. Dignified return speaks more intimately than previous academic literature to the "livable lives" (Butler, 2022) the participants in this project sought out and rehearsed in their return.

In a set of academic literature on return migration that is very thin with work that I can call on into the space of this study and how it's evolving, the work of Christine Wheatley is one I

draw from. In theorizing the simultaneously voluntary and involuntary forces of return and migration, Wheatley explains that the multiplicity of circumstances driving migrants to return fall broadly under three categories: 1) their success or failure in the market economy in the US, 2) their participation in a gift economy and obligations with family and community in Oaxaca, 3) and/or their interaction with the US state that results in their forced removal (Wheatly, 2017). These categories de-center state forces and problematize the voluntary/involuntary binary that obscures the various social forces and constraints under which migrants operate and the agency they hold to shape the meaning of their return. However, it still follows the inertia of social science research to categorize return migrant experiences as means to explain them–a practice I aim to deviate from in this work.

Moreover, what is left unexplored, and where my intervention in the return migration literature lies, is the *affective* experiences of Indigenous Oaxacan migrants who return to their ancestral homelands. Within the field of geography and study of movement and displacement (Migration Studies), affect refers to the ever-changing processes that human and non-human bodies undergo as they experience, encounter, and perform life among other bodies moving within material space. It prioritizes the body as a means for making sense of the world (O'Grady, 2018). Migration is a dislodging, disorienting experience with profound and often traumatizing effects. The pull of home and ancestry runs deep in our bodies. Indigenous Oaxacan migrants formed visions of their communities of origin while being away, and their communities retain expectations of them upon return. Those visions hold weight in how our bodies as resent, rejoice, and feel return–and everything in between and all at once. Our bodies and emotions are archives of our return and are the sources of knowledge this project pays the closest attention to. This body of work seeks to be an archive of those archives.

Deviating from scholarly research are two foundational sources for this project that touch on affective experiences of return: the film *Una Vida, Dos Países* (Donnellon, 2016), a documentary in collaboration with educators, researchers, and filmmakers on return migrant children in Oaxaca and *Los Otros Dreamers* (Anderson, 2014), a community-based anthology of stories and photos on the experiences of return and deportation to Mexico. The film focuses on three high school students, Melchor, Sharely, and Brian, and their families' experiences returning and making a new life in Tlacolula, Oaxaca after having grown up in the US. Through one-on-one interviews, students express the difficulties they had to overcome as newly arrived return migrants at school–from not knowing enough Spanish to understand lecture, to being told they are not "Mexican" enough, to conflicting desires between longing to return to the United States and wanting to reconnect with their Zapotec cultures and languages.

Similarly, the collective testimony of *Los Otros Dreamers* captures the evolving search for a new agency of returning migrants in their country of origin, a narrative "rarely acknowledged and often misconstrued." (Anderson, 2014). Through online questionnaires, in person interviews, and photographs that tell a physical story of the spaces they navigate, the book complicates the notion of return itself, whether voluntary or forced. The stories shared range from those who feel that there is no such thing as voluntary return when it implies exile from loved ones in the United States, and those for whom return was like "breath of fresh air." The project became a platform for return migrants to shed light on their experiences of discrimination, bureaucratic frustration, cultural shock, ambitions, etc. and gave origin to the grassroots organization that is *Otros Dreams en Acción* today. Overall, these work's most important contribution to the theoretical foundation of this project is their insistence on the

inward and on community affective component of return migration in order to shed light on the complexities and contradictions of the return migration journey.

3. Situating this work: In and From Oaxaca, México

The participants in this study all have roots in the Southwestern Mexican state of Oaxaca. Oaxaca is a state with deep socioeconomic, geographic and cultural complexities and contrasts. It is the state with the highest number of municipalities, with 570 out of the 2457 that exist in all of Mexico and the majority of which are rural (INEGI, 2010). In addition, the state is divided in eight distinct geographic regions: Sierra Norte (Northern Highlands), Valles Centrales (Central Valleys), Sierra Sur (Southern Highlands), Mixteca, Cañada, Isthmus (Isthmus), and Costa (Coast) and Papaloapan. Within its territory, Oaxaca holds the largest concentration of Indigenous nations in Mexico, with at least 16 state-recognized language groups, while Indigenous peoples make up just over half of the population of the state (Wheatley, 2017). Among these Indigenous nations are the Zapotec and Chinantec nations, which the participants in this project are descendants from.

Forming Impoverishments

Oaxaca is also one of the most impoverished and exploited regions in the country, with its economy relying heavily on extractive industries such as mining, foresting, and tourism. On average, 71 percent of Oaxaca's households less than what is considered by the Mexican government as a living wage, which is approximately $20 USD a day (CONAPO, 2000) These conditions of impoverishment are historically rooted in the ongoing settler colonialism of Indigenous Oaxacan nations by the Spanish crown and subsequently by the Mexican nation-state, as Patrick Wolfe defines settler colonialism as a "structure, not an event." (Wolfe, 2006).

Nonetheless, I will only offer a brief overview of the tactics of impoverishment that Oaxaca and Indigenous nations in Mexico as a whole have undergone in the recent decades, in particular since the passage of the North America Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994–based on the historiographic work of Harsha Walia in her border abolitionist work, *Border and Rule.* Similar connections are drawn between NAFTA and the militarization of the US-Mexico border when discussing Border Abolition as the theoretical framework of this project.

NAFTA, as is the case of all free trade agreements under global capitalism, has resulted in the large-scale devastation of Indigenous livelihoods within what is known as Mexico. The number of people in Mexico in land-based subsistence economies and ways of life, which pueblos in Oaxaca have ancestrally been organized around, such as agriculture, fishing, and forestry, fell from 8.2 million in 1991 to 6.1 million in 2006 (de Ita, 2007). The deeply unfair trade practices flooded the markets in Mexico with modified cash crop maize by removing Mexican tariffs on subsidized US agricultural exports, for instance, which in turn directly attacked Indigenous food-sovereignty, particularly that of Indigenous women harvesters–as well as damaged the sacred relationship countless Mesoamerican communities hold with maize (Walia, 2021). In addition, private ownership and land seizures by US agribusiness and US and Canadian mining giants over previously communal Indigenous and peasant landholding was facilitated through NAFTA and the Mexican State. In Oaxaca particularly, the Economy Department (Secretaría de Economía) of the federal government, from 2002 to 2011 granted 389 mining concessions for the extraction of gold, silver, lead, zinc, and copper over 742, 791 hectares distributed over the 8 geographic regions–the equivalent of 7.78 of the state's territory–some valid through 2062 (Contralínea, 2022). "The international companies are robbing us. They

take our lands, our forests, and our mines," describes Oaxacan Chontal councilor of the Consejo Indígena de Gobierno (Indigenous Government Council), Reyna Cruz López (Dowley, 2018).

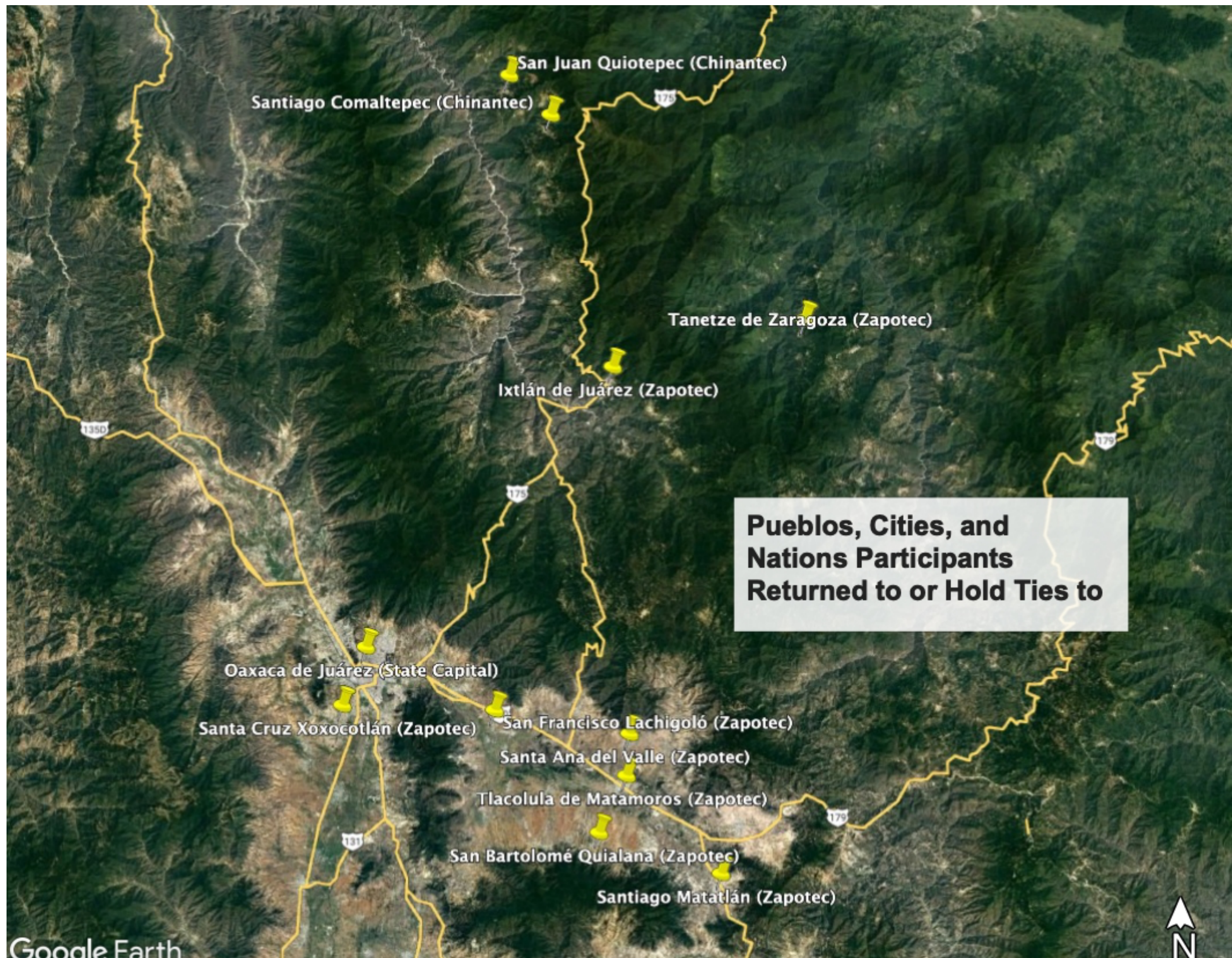
Such conditions of dispossession have created a deeply rooted crisis of displacement over the past decades that has uprooted Indigenous peoples from Mexico, particularly Zapotec, Mixtec, and Maya peoples into the US (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004). When before NAFTA, Indigenous peoples made only 7% of migrants coming from Mexico to the US, a decade later they constituted 29% (Bacon, 2014). Details on Oaxacan Indigenous migration to the US can be found later in this chapter.

Valles Centrales and Sierra Norte

The participants in this project returned to and/or hold ties to 11 *pueblos* or cities in two distinct geographic regions of Oaxaca, the *Valles Centrales* (Central Valleys) and *Sierra Norte* (Northern Highlands). These are the two regions where I filmed and conducted the interviews, since they are the two regions of Oaxaca I grew up in, and those that are most accessible via public and private transportation from the state's capital–where I lived while conducting this field work. These pueblos or cities are from the Zapotec and Chinantec nations as listed and mapped below:

Sierra Norte
- Ixtlán de Juárez (Zapotec nation)
- Tanetze de Zaragoza (Zapotec nation)
- Santiago Comaltepec (Chinantec nation)
- San Juan Quiotepec (Chinantec nation

Valles Centrales
- Santiago Matatlán (Zapotec nation)
- San Bartolomé Quialana (Zapotec nation)
- Santa Ana del Valle (Zapotec nation)
- San Francisco Lachigoló (Zapotec nation)
- Tlacolula de Matamoros (Zapotec nation)
- Santa Cruz Xoxocotlán (Zapotec nation)
- Oaxaca de Juárez (state capital)



The *Sierra Norte* region, where 3 out of the 10 participants are from, is a mountainous and forest region in northern Oaxaca in which the Zapotec, Mixe, and Chinantec nations have portions of their territories and where the land is recognized by the state as communally held by each pueblo. It is where significant portion of the Indigenous-language speaking population of the state is concentrated, self-determination and land management projects within *Comunalidad* (Martínez Luna, 2010) have flourished, all of its municipalities are self-governed under the *Sistema Normativo Interno* and from where the first waves of migrants from Oaxaca to the United States emigrated. This is a region heavily characterized by its cultural and linguistic diversity, its vigorous political movements, and intense migration processes and patterns.

(Hernández-Díaz, et al., 2018) Pueblos in the Sierra Norte have a long history of inter-community cooperation and movement building in defense of its territories and managing shared resources.

The *Valles Centrales*, where 7 out of the 10 participants are from, is a valley region in central Oaxaca that surrounds the state's capital, Oaxaca City, and where the Zapotec nation has a big portion of its territory. The region's local economies are heavily tied to the city and its tourist industries, accounting for a significant portion of the city's workforce (INEGI, 2001). In addition, farmlands are critical for the population's Indigenous food systems and survival. When rains are regular, households produce an average of six months of the maize they need for family consumption and thereby relieve some of the pressure on wage labor and remittances to cover expenses (Cohen and Rodriguez, 2005; VanWey, et al., 2005). While the infrastructures that provide access to basic services such as water, electricity, schooling and medical care in the region are increasingly precarious and privatized by local and state governments–as a trickled down consequence of NAFTA's neoliberal impoverishment–communities in the Valles Centrales rely on the ancient, interdependent, and cooperative systems and kinship networks of public labor, public office and gift deposits made during feasts, called the *Guelaguetza,* to sustain and preserve each other and themselves (Flores-Marcial, 2015).

Pueblos and *Comunalidad*

Oaxacan peoples hold a specific sense of regional identity, which is often grounded in the specific pueblos and cities we are from, hold ties to, and/or return to. Participants often identified themselves as being from their specific pueblos before they referred to themselves as being Oaxacan or even Mexican. Thus, it is crucial to name and recognize each of our pueblos and distinct, although they share socio-spatial organizations within their respective regions and

nations. This is in large part due to the fact that most *pueblos*, governed under the *Sistema Normativo Interno* (previously referred to as *Usos y Costumbres),* a legal mechanism that allows them varying degrees of self-determination from the nation-state, have their own decision-making mechanisms, rules and procedures to impart justice, mechanisms to organize social and productive life, as well as cultural practices that sustain and engrain each *pueblo*'s communal identity. *Pueblos* are the central sociocultural space in which political and administrative structures are held, and thus, collectivity is articulated. They are the most fundamental units and geographic spaces of social and political organization. In other words, *pueblos* are where community and *Comunalidad* (Communality) is materialized in Oaxaca (Hernández-Díaz, Castillo and Cruz, 2018).

Zapotec singer-songwriter, philosopher and community leader, Jaime Martínez Luna, and Mixe leader, thinker and educator, Floriberto Díaz Gómez, coined the term *Comunalidad*, which translates to communality. "Communality is the element that defines the immanence of the community." (Díaz, 2004), a concept that was theorized from the ways of life and discussions around autonomy of Indigenous Oaxacan pueblos in the Sierra Norte region, especially those that live varying degrees of autonomy from the state through to the Sistema Normativo Interno (a Mexican state-recognized mechanism that facilitates the right for Indigenous self-determination)–where the assembly of community members (*asamblea)* holds the highest authority and its citizens rotate holding public office (*cargo),* often without pay. Communality, then, speaks to the systems through which Oaxacan pueblos and communities, collectively and not through individuals, exercise sovereignty and kinship over their internal decisions and their material realities, despite and beyond a tense relationship with the nation-state (Martínez Luna, 2010). It is self-determination over land, economies and education, permeating all aspects of

daily life. However, it holds no singular definition, as each pueblo and community has lived out different strategies to perpetuate themselves against attempted erasure through assimilation, and physical elimination by colonial governments. (Maldonado Alvarado, 2013 & Martinez Luna, 2010). It is also imperative to note that communality is not the utopic way of life of perfect Oaxacan Indigenous societies, but rather it names and honors the legacies of the experiments, systems, and relational approaches to survival (Nicolás, 2021) and autonomy, against and beyond colonial powers, that imperfect Oaxacan Indigenous societies have carried out since time immemorial.

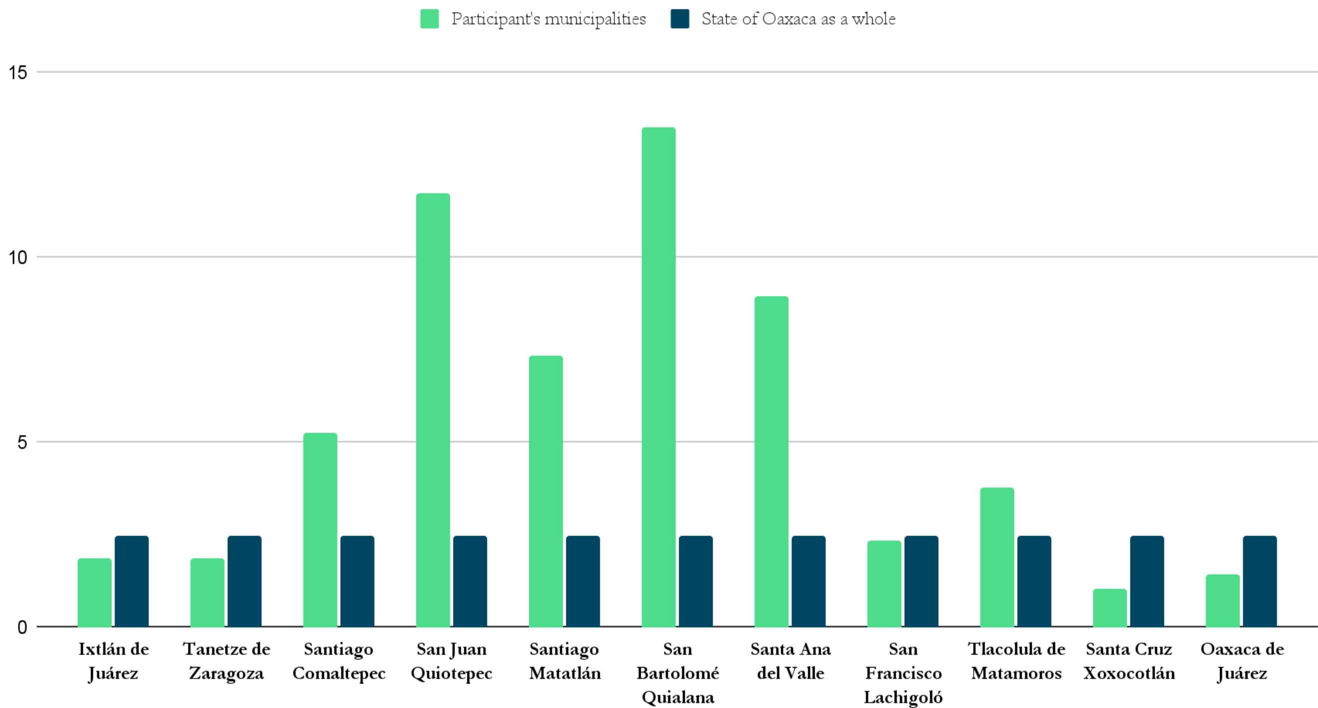
Patterns and Statistics of Oaxacan Migration to the US

The start of transnational Oaxacan migration can be situated during the Bracero Program between 1942 and 1964. Historically, and in part as a result of the Bracero Program, Mexican Indigenous migration patterns were typically temporary. However, the militarization of the US-Mexico border beginning in the 1990s, which exacerbated the financial cost and risk of death and deportation of crossing the border with authorization (Walia, 2021), has led to the rise of long-term settlement of Indigenous Oaxacan communities in the US starting from the 1980's (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004).

Oaxaca is currently classified by the Consejo Nacional de Población (DIGEPO, 2010) as one of the states in Mexico with High Level of Migratory Intensity, meaning it has emerged as a new significant sending region to the US in the past three decades. For the year 2010, a third of Oaxaca municipalities showed statistically relevant patterns of migration to the United States. More so, there are 153 municipalities with a Very High and High Degree of Migratory Intensity, representing 27% percent of the total number of municipalities. In the Valles Centrales and Sierra Norte regions specifically, the percentage of municipalities with Very High Degree and

High Degree of Migration Intensity to the United States in relation to the total of municipalities in the region is higher than the state's same percentage (27%) with 36% and 30% percent respectively. This indicates that in the Valles Centrales and Sierra Norte, the presence of municipalities with a migrant population is statistically significant and relevant by measures of the state. (DIGEPO, 2010). That is to say, over the past decades, migration to the United States has been deeply ingrained into the fabric, imagination and reality of Oaxacan peoples.

The migratory intensity index is a summary measure used by the Mexican National Population Council (Consejo Nacional de Población) that allows to differentiate states and municipalities of the country according to the intensity of the different modalities of migration to the United States and the reception of remittances (CONAPO, 2012). In other words, the index helps statistically illustrate, and therefore only partially, the magnitude of the ties each municipality (or pueblo or city) holds to the United States through migration. The chart below shows the Degree of Migratory Intensity of each of the eleven municipalities participants returned to and/or hold ties to (green), compared to the same index for the state of Oaxaca as a whole (blue):



In addition to providing insight on the extent of displacement from participant's specific homelands in Oaxaca to the US, this graph also offers another dimension through which to understand the experiences of return of the participants in this project. I argue that the transborder connections established between their pueblos and their communities in the US, which can be only partially gauged through this data set, are influential in their experience of return. Participants whose pueblo has a higher migratory intensity will likely see themselves recognized in intergenerational patterns of migration and displacement of their paisanos to the US, as well as be part of tightly knit transborder communities. In turn, those with lower migratory intensity levels in their pueblo's population, will likely hold less communal ties to their pueblos while living in diaspora and experience degrees of social isolation and feelings of being misunderstood by their paisanos in the aftermath of their return. More in-depth analysis of

this chart in relation to the testimonies shared in the interviews can be found in the Transborder Communality and Return chapter. As mentioned before, this statistical analysis only offers numerical insight into the complex networks and kinships that Oaxacan peoples construct and sustain in diaspora. Transborder communality in the following section offers a more holistic understanding of communal organization of Oaxacan migrants in the United States.

Transborder Communality

Since the 1980s, long-term settlement in the US and geographic concentration, particularly in the state of California, has led to the creation of a critical mass of Indigenous Oaxacan communities. These communities of Indigenous Oaxacan migrants, have drawn on ancestral legacies to build new branches of their home communities in the US. The public expressions of those diasporic legacies range from building civic-political organizations, the celebration of religious holidays, basketball tournaments, and the mass celebration of traditional Oaxacan music and dance festivals, such as the *Guelaguetza* and the formation of bands (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004). These distinctive forms of social organization and cultural expression are often heavily and distinctively pueblo-based and are sites where Comunalidad is practiced and perpetuated. Zapotec scholar, Dr. Brenda Nicolás, intervenes the concept of Comunalidad by naming these forms of belonging and kinship against and beyond borders by Indigenous Oaxacan peoples as *transborder comunalidad,* which speaks to the Indigenous epistemologies and practices of communal belonging and being across generations in diaspora (Nicolás, 2021). The concept of the transborder experience (Stephen, 2007), Nicolás argues, recognizes a multi-ethnic, class, cultural, colonial, and state border consciousness that Indigenous migrants hold, as opposed to the dominant imaginary of solely the US-Mexico border and engages the realization of pre-nation-state and ongoing transit and mobility of Indigenous peoples. The transborder,

communal practices and beliefs of Oaxacan peoples across generations crafting lives in the US while in close relationship with their ancestral homelands directly contest logics of assimilation and disappearance of migrants and Indigenous peoples into both settler colonial states of Mexico and the United States. I will argue that participants in this project practiced transborder communality in different forms and to different degrees while in diaspora in the US, which in turn shaped their sense of belonging to their pueblos after return, the meaning they crafted of their returns, and their overall affective experiences of return.

4. Border Abolition: Historiography of the Border and Theoretical Framework

Historiography of US-Mexico Conquest and Border Formation, Neoliberal Impoverishment and Carceral Governance

Below is an overview of the history of how the US-Mexico border came to be and the means through which it has been violently enforced, based on the rich histography work of Harsha Walia in her work Border *and Rule* (2021).

Carceral geographies pose a spatial fix, in this case through the US-Mexico border, as necessary, natural, and inevitable. The naturalization of the border as an incontestable fact of geo-political organization obscures the history and violent implications of its formation. Therefore, in order to pose border abolition as the contradiction, praxis, and solution to and beyond carceral geographies, it is imperative to understand the US-Mexico border as a weapon of imperialist expansion, Indigenous elimination, and anti-Black Enslavement (Walia, 2021). Early bordering practices functioned directly and explicitly to eliminate Indigenous peoples and control Black peoples. The border is intrinsic to these modes of genocide, and thus, cannot exist in just and livable worlds.

During the 1830s, the incipient Mexican state outlawed slavery and refused Anglo-settler, secessionist immigration into its territory from the US south. Nonetheless, in 1837, US President Jackson officially recognized the independence of the Republic of Texas as a slave state where free Black peoples required special permission to live (California African American Museum, 2020). In 1845, the US annexed the Republic of Texas, which in turn led to the US military invasion of Mexico and debt manipulation that three years later would result in the annexation of half of the Mexican territory into the US through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Walia describes that during this time and thereafter, an "Anglo American racial order or conquest was enforced" (2021).

While the Mexican populations in the seized territories endured systemic racial discrimination and segregation, enslaved Black peoples were subjected to the Fugitive Slave Act and all Black peoples were continuously denied citizenship in the expanding slavery frontier (Ngai, 2014) The lands of sovereign nations including the Comanche, Apache, Seri, Coahuilteca and Kiowa land were seized and forcibly assimilated into the US nation-state. Thus, the current delineation of the US-Mexico border was and is facilitated through white supremacist capture of land and peoples.

However, seizure of Indigenous nation's land and peoples is not only a bordering practice, but a pillar foundation of the US genocidal empire itself. The Doctrine of Discovery of the 1400s was the legal justification for the conquest of Indigenous peoples. It granted European powers access and power to entire continents of and nations of people. It declared that any and all lands uninhabited by Christians could be claimed. When codified into federal case law in 1823, it meant unrestricted access to lands, labor, resources, bodies, and souls of Indigenous and African peoples (Estes, 2020). In 1830 with the Indian Removal Act, 50,000 Indigenous peoples

were forced to relocate west to the Mississippi River to specifically designated "Indian territory" to open land to white settlement and cotton plantation slavery. In turn, both land and people became property (Walia, 2021) The United States' border imperialism is deeply rooted in nation-states' genocidal foundations.

To jump forward in time to the political and economic conditions that gave rise more immediately to current bordering practices between Mexico and the US, it is imperative to speak, even if briefly, on the North American Trade Agreement–an alliance between the US ruling class and the Mexican oligarchy that allowed the former domination over Mexico's politics and economy (Walia, 2021). Although sold by both nation-states as a strategy that would allow for Mexico's popular classes eventual upward mobility, over 1.3 million Mexican farmers were pushed into bankruptcy in the first decade since it came into force in 1994 (Chacón and Davis). In addition, the number of people in primary subsistence economies such as agriculture, fishing, and forestry fell from 8.2 million in 1991 to 6.1 million in 2006 (de Ita, 2007). With NAFTA, industries and services are continuously privatized, capital flow and investment deregulated, resources commodified for export, export processing zones expanded, and corporate property rights protected always above people (Walia, 2021). Such systemic impoverishment has given rise to the dispossession, proletarianization and consequent mass displacement of peoples from Mexico to the United States. From 1990 to 2008, the number of Mexican migrants in the US nearly tripled from 4.5 million to 12.67 million, including 7 million undocumented migrants (Bacon, 2014). Such mass displacement was premeditated. The US Congress Commission for the Study of International Migration and Cooperative Economic Development warned that NAFTA would create human suffering (Walia, 2021). Again, the nation-state requires to make the lives of oppressed peoples unlivable in order to sustain itself.

A more detailed description of how NAFTA and its tactics of neoliberal impoverishment specifically dispossessed and displaced Indigenous communities in Mexico can be found in the Situating This Work in Oaxaca, Mexico chapter.

With neoliberal impoverishment and mass displacement came border militarization and mass deportation. Through several operations such Hold the Line in Texas, Gatekeeper in California, and Safeguard in Arizona, the overall "tough on immigration" strategy of the Clinton administration was officially implemented by US Border Patrol in 1994, the same year NAFTA was signed into effect (Walia 2021). With the passage of the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty and the Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Acts of 1996, both of which expanded the category of aggravated felony convictions and grounds for detention and deportation of legal permanent residents with minor convictions, normalized mass deportations – with deportations growing 37 percent after the passage of these laws, averaging 150,000 (Golash-Boza, 2015). In addition, with migration routes being funneled towards increasingly more dangerous zones since 1996, the total number of premeditated killings at the border from hypothermia, dehydration, drowning, and heat stroke is estimated at 8000, with thousands more migrants disappeared (Délano and Nienass, 2016). Such tactics of border militarization, mass deportations, and death at the border implemented by the United States and carried out by Border Patrol became key techniques for social and labor control. These strategies of racialized immobilization secured a compliant labor force for the United States through the expulsion of surplus labor, alongside the outsourcing of maquiladora labor and the insourcing of migrant labor. (Walia 2021) The US-Mexico border, and therefore the United States and Mexico, are sustained, thus, by a vicious cycle of state-sanctioned group-differentiated vulnerability to

premature death–to borrow from the words of Ruth Wilson Gilmore. Therefore, just and livable futures necessitate border abolition.

Border Abolition

The theoretical foundation of this project lies in Border Abolition. Abolitionist writer based in Canada, Robyn Maynard, in the back cover of *Border and Rule,* names border abolition as "the imagining and building of a world premised on freedom of movement–against and beyond the logics of the nation-state". Nation state borders are the excuse and the reality of violence done in the state's name; borders make up the common sense of what and who is to be governed and what and who is to be protected through its violent means. The state uses its border as sites of control and isolation of people from land through militarization. Thus, the carceral arrangements of the state, in this case the border, shrink and fix the choices and mobility of migrant peoples. Harsha Walia, abolitionist writer and thinker based in Canada, writes in her book, *Border and Rule,* that "all carceral regimes–police, prisons and borders–work through a shared logic of immobilization, containing oppressed communities under racial capitalism." That is to say that police, prisons, and borders function symbiotically to and by immobilizing oppressed peoples. Since the state and its carceral regimes factor into the lives of oppressed communities in such violent and traumatic terms of immobilization, that entails that the state is not meant to function as a solution to its own enacted violence. The Indigenous and return migrant peoples who participated in this project did not and do not wait on the state to protect them or guarantee them livable lives–what queer, feminist theorist, Judith Butler, defines as lives that are more than bearable, (2022)–, because they understand in their histories and bodies that the state is not intended to function that way.

Abolition is a prefigurative process of trying to build a just and livable future that requires imagination. Meaning, it entails living now in a way you hope the future to be–against and beyond the logics of the nation state (Kaba, 2021). The participants in this project are crafting and living their lives in the aftermath of return in the ways they hope their future and the future of their communities to be. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, abolitionist geographer and organizer based in the US, offers that “abolition is life in rehearsal”. For the participants, much like the project of abolition and border abolition, return was and is a rehearsal and an experiment. An experiment they were willing to live out because they know how and what they need to make themselves safe–to create and live full, livable lives. Oaxacan Indigenous return migrants understand their histories, the political formations and the socio spatial conditions that have shaped their lives. They continuously craft meanings for their movement back to their homelands, and thus, they hold agency over their returns. Although deeply traversed by the violences of the US and Mexican nation states, they understand what a livable life means for them and sought those livable lives in return. In rematriating to their homelands, Indigenous Oaxacan return migrants do not wait for permission of the state to live, create, and rehearse livable lives.

Livable lives hold an expansive meaning. Mariam Kaba, PIC abolitionist grassroots organizer and educator based in the US, explains in their book, *16 Guiding Axioms of Abolitionist Organizing*, that PIC abolition is “a vision of a reconstructed society and world. A world where we have everything we need: Food, shelter, education, health, art, beauty, clean water, and more. Always more.” The participants in this project were driven to return to their homelands by different forces and different visions of what a livable life and future means – whether that’s family reunification in Oaxaca after a deportation of a loved one, meeting and

living a relationship their with elders, taking part of their pueblo's festivities and ceremonies, distancing themselves from people who have harmed them, physically living out the kinships and obligations that sustain their pueblos, etc. Their knowledge of themselves, of their families, of their pueblos, and of how the state functions allowed them to decide they needed more than the lives they were allowed to carry out in the US–always more.

I know from my mother's, my sister's and my own experience of return that although our movement, choices, agency, and lives we built back in Oaxaca were all deeply traversed by the US and Mexico nation states and their tactics of immobilization, the nation states do not take center stage in our story of return–and the nation states are not center stage in the story of return of the participants in this project. My family and I returned to Oaxaca due to domestic violence by my father. Living in the US with him was no longer sustainable nor possible. Living in the US no longer meant a livable future. My father pushed us to return to Oaxaca and in doing so, dislodged us and took away access to the home and lives we had built in the US. Simultaneously, being pushed to return meant a means through which we could protect ourselves by returning to my mother's family and our *pueblo*. Returning to Oaxaca meant rehearsing a messy, yet livable future away from my father. There are complex family dynamics, ties to land, kinships that drive people to migrate back to their homelands. These motives do not always make sense through the logics of the state, whether through the criminalization of movement, neoliberal trade agreements, labor control, etc. and they do not have to.

The United States did not allow the Indigenous and return migrant participants in this project a future and world where they had everything they needed. Returning to live within Mexico does not automatically allow for such a world either. Both nation states enact violences and neither will offer a solution to their own enacted violence. Neither nation-state is prefigured

to guarantee livable futures, when in reality they are sustained and legitimized by making the lives and futures of oppressed communities unlivable. The testimonies in this body of work reveal how Indigenous migrant workers are subjected to conditions of chronic exhaustion as laborers in the US, how law enforcement in the US persecutes and harasses migrant communities in the US, how Indigenous pueblos' rights to self-determination is denied by the Mexican state, how extractive industries exploit Indigenous pueblos and lands, how the Mexican state has historically facilitated linguistic genocide of Indigenous language variants, how the Mexican state has facilitated conditions of impoverishment, which in turn have always led to displacement, etc. It is instead their pueblos, and not the Mexican state nor the US, that the participants in this project deemed as sites for building and experimenting livable futures. Return is not a simple, romanticized solution to the state's systemic enacted violence and tactics of immobilization. It is an embodied and continuous declaration of agency over them, even if partial. It is a rehearsal of a life against and beyond borders.

5. Cine Comunitario as Methodology

The testimonies in this thesis are all from Zapotec or Chinantec migrants who lived, grew up or were born in the United States, and who migrated back to their ancestral homelands in Oaxaca, Mexico. The participants were all recruited either through my social media, friends, or family networks, meaning this is not a randomized sample of return migrants. A flyer was distributed and circulated on social media by a closely-knit online community of Oaxacan people living in diaspora in the United States (particularly Instagram and Twitter, where the circuit is referred to as #OaxacanTwitter). It was thanks to that heavy circulation that the majority of the participants in this project were made aware of it and were able to reach out to me to take part in both the research and the documentary film. It is likely that this is also the reason why the

majority of participants are young adults and women-identifying, as they make up the majority of the Oaxacan in diaspora social media circuit I am in contact with. My family members residing in our pueblo, Ixtlán de Juárez, were also crucial in establishing contact with the participants who reside in my hometown, who differently from the one's recruited on social media, are middle-aged return migrants and parents.

The field work for this project was carried out in 7 pueblos and cities in the Zapotec regions of the Valles Centrales (Central Valley) and Sierra Norte (Northern Highlands) of Oaxaca Mexico. 8 out of the 10 interviews were conducted and filmed in person with a crew of independent artists and filmmakers based in Oaxaca: Luis Hernández (cinematographer), Carlos García (cinematographer), Mónica Arias (sound technician) and Mariana González (production assistant). The remaining two were conducted virtually through Zoom. In total, 10 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with Oaxacan return migrants, in which I had conversations with participants about the lives they formed in the United States, the factors that drove them to return to their ancestral homelands, and the ways in which they are crafting their lives in the aftermath of return.

The interviews, both how they were carried out thematically/theoretically and how they were filmed, were conducted with *Cine Comunitario* as a methodology. Cine Comunitario roughly translates to English as communal-filmmaking and is a form of filmmaking that emerged in the 1980's and 1990's from Zapotec communities in the Northern Highlands of Oaxaca, who at the time were contending with issues of land defense, regaining control and communal ownership over media channels and self-representation through radio, television, and film (Marán, 2019). Most of Oaxaca's municipalities are governed under *Sistemas Normativos Internos* (formally known as *Usos y Costumbres)*, a legal mechanism that allows for varying

degrees of Indigenous self-governance and self-determination within the Mexican state. Within it, community assemblies, formed exclusively by citizens of each *pueblo,* make collective decisions about the future of the community, and hold the highest authority. These assemblies are grounded in arduous, diligent listening and consensus practices. Members of the assemblies rotate serving every level of office, known as *cargos,* as an obligation to their communities, oftentimes without pay. Oaxacan Zapotec philosopher and musician Jaime Luna describes this way of life as *Comunalidad,* a form of kinship based on cooperative living, that permeates all aspects of daily life and is understood as the only way for our communities to function and preserve themselves. *Cine Comunitario* borrows from this mechanism of self-determination. It is a way to integrate the horizontal practices of community organization, listening and rotation of roles, and consensus into filmmaking. It emerges, according to the Zapotec filmmaker and one of the proponents of Cine Comunitario, Luna Marán, from the political urgency for audiovisual self-representation of indigenous peoples, which is almost nonexistent (2020). Marán argues that such self-representation is so urgent because it allows for Indigenous communities "to see ourselves as we are, to recognize ourselves, to imagine ourselves, to confront ourselves, to hold ourselves, and to project ourselves into the future, and to transform ourselves according to our own critical processes." (2020).

Cine Comunitario strives for collective creation where the film product is not necessarily the ultimate goal, but instead, the relationship building and struggles of creative processes in the community hold equal, if not greater, value. In the anonymous manifesto, "Otros Cines Posibles" (Other Possible Cinemas), practitioners of communal filmmaking argue that such relationship building necessitates the people in frame and in front of the cameras have authorship and agency over what happens behind them, since it is their testimonies that drive the story. In grounding the

interviewing process in these teachings, in terms of the technical aspect of the filming and interviews, each participant and I were able to collaborate in deciding where and how they shared their testimonies. There were participants who decided to have conversations take place online, because the crew and filming equipment would make them feel too vulnerable. There were participants who wanted their interview to take place in their living room with their family around, and there were participants who decided they wanted to be alone with the crew. Some opened their homes and rooms to us, while others saw it more fitting to give their interviews at sacred sites in their communities. With that came collaboration in deciding how their interview would be framed, how the lighting would reflect on them, what would be in frame and what would not.

In terms of the affective and experiential aspects of conducting and filming the interviews horizontally and in collaboration with the participants, grounded in the lessons of Cine Comunitario, it meant participants had the freedom to revert the spotlight back to me and ask me questions on my own return experience. One of the participants, who is the same age as me–and who I will name as Veronica for the purposes of this paper–at the end of her interview, asked me what my story of return was, because I had mentioned to her that I had also, coincidently, migrated back to Oaxaca when I was eight years old. After stuttering for a couple moments from the unexpected question, I shared with her that, unlike her own experience, I struggled heavily with adapting after my family returned. It took me several years to feel at ease with my family and in my hometown, of whom and of which I knew virtually nothing before returning. I told her I decided to develop this research and film as an excuse to connect and have conversations with other returnees, because growing up I didn't know any other migrants who had experienced something similar. I used to believe my mom, my sister, and I were the only ones in the whole

world who had returned the way we did. I reflected on how the interviews had allowed me to both see myself reflected in other people's stories, and also develop a deeper understanding that even within that reflection, our experiences were all vastly unique–that we had all experienced different degrees of reunification and estrangement upon return. So much so that someone like Veronica, who posed the question to me, who is the same age as me and returned at the same age as me, shared her testimony with ease and excitement, while I struggled to put my words together. While I was answering her question, the film crew all intuitively shifted the camera focus, microphones, and lighting to me. They understood it as a pivotal moment in the interview and made sure the technicality of the recording reflected the real-time, affective experience of it. Moments of horizontal dialogue and relationship building taking place and being captured on camera are possible within the politics of self and communal representation of Cine Comunitario.

Limitations and Tensions

Carrying out a project with such methodology within the many confines of the university poses its tensions and contradictions. For one, *Cine Comunitario,* as it is based in the rotational nature of fulfilling different *cargos* or functions, requires for the roles of the filmmaking process (i.e. directing, producing, photography, sound, editing, etc.) to be rotated and for the authorship of the film (and in this case, the thesis as well) to be collectively held–to "strip away a certain level of individual protagonism to strengthen collective protagonism" (Manifesto: Otros Cines Posibles, 2021). Collective creation begins when a collective decision is made as to what the story to tell and why tell it. Delegating and distributing the operative and aesthetic choices allows for responsibility and agency to be distributed as well. Yet, the university does not incentivize collective protagonism, but rather insists on individual work. So far in the life of this project, and despite my working with a crew of filmmakers and in collaboration with the participants, I have

held all the decision-making roles and responsibilities in the film production and research. I am the researcher, director, producer, editor, and writer, because that is how the university has allowed me and required me to carry out this project. The funding and institutional support that was granted to make this project a reality was granted to my name and for a discrete amount of time, not to the collective story being told nor to this particular, long-term, reiterative methodology. I find tensions and limitations in carrying out *Cine Comunitario* as a methodology within the university setting and timeline, for having the authority and labor of the film and research centralized in one person and completing a product in an arbitrary (meaning there was not a consensus) period of time contradicts the horizontal decision-making practices of *Cine Comunitario* and of *Comunalidad*.

If *Cine Comunitario* allows for film to become a mirror through which Indigenous communities can see and recognize their pasts, presents, and futures (Marán, 2020), then that mirror also allows for moments of looking away–for moments of pause and doubt. In practices of collective storytelling and self-representation it is assumed that the stories, bodies, joys and pains of those involved will be publicly exposed, even more so in audiovisual storytelling. Revealing and weaving together those stories, bodies, joys and pains to tell a story and to produce knowledge from it then necessitates a politics of care that considers "our how's, our why's, our for what's, our rhythms, our pauses, and our doubts." (Manifesto: Otros Cines Posibles, 2021) Such a politics of care grants time and space for those involved to reconcile with their decision to share a part of themselves and be a part of a collective–to reconcile exposing our stories and bodies through video, sound and written work to and with others.

In the life of this project so far, I have also not been granted that time or space for internal reconciliation with the labor necessary for this research and film. From its conception, I

envisioned weaving in my own testimony and that of my family both into the larger narrative on screen and the larger research on paper. I understood it as crucial in order to situate the project in conversation with the politics of self-representation of *Cine Comunitario* and to situate myself as someone who has lived return migration and is looking to explore and understand its complexities alongside my loved ones and other fellow returnees. However, I have found it extremely emotionally taxing and challenging to dedicate the time and labor necessary to documenting my family's and I's testimony of return to our own ancestral homelands–especially with the politics of care I need to afford them and myself so as to not cause us harm.

Future/Visions for this Work

Nonetheless, I also recognize and uphold the reiterative nature of this methodology and work. It is being constructed as we go, and it is not finished. I look forward to the life this project will have in the next year when it leaves the university, as it has been recently awarded the Judith Lee Stronach Baccalaureate Prize. The funds from the prize will allow me the time, space, and resources to continue this collective, creative, and reiterative process and relationship-building by co-writing the final film script with the participants, developing together the soundtrack and soundscape of the film, and carrying-out film screenings of the final film in our respective *pueblos*. Following the horizontal creation practices of *Cine Comunitario,* the participants, my mother, my sister, and I will co-write, co-direct, and co-produce the remainder of the film. Although by May 2022 I will have completed a senior honor thesis on this project, there will still be plenty of production and post-production work to be done for the film to be completed, and that work must be done collectively with the people whose testimonies will be on screen.

Note: In order to protect the privacy and anonymity of the participants in presenting the following findings, I will name them and quote excerpts of their testimonies using pseudonyms. In addition, most of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, and thus, the excerpts quoted are my own translations. Although I did my best to remain faithful to what was shared in Spanish, I recognize the possibility and likelihood of some meanings being lost in those translations.

The findings offered in the following chapters are the instances where I have been able to, so far, ground the generous testimonies of the participants in conversation, confrontation and lineage with the literature and frameworks explored in the chapters beforehand. However, I recognize and look forward to the life this project has ahead of today to continue exploring what the concepts of home, identity, ancestry, indigeneity and belonging mean to the participants and I through the communal production of the film–only this time outside of the university. These findings are simply where this evolving body of work finds itself today. There is a lack of finality and an abundance of inconsistencies and contradictions in it, in part because it is a work in progress as I have already named, but also because it is not my intention to offer any resolutions, categorizations, or absolutes when presenting this vast experiential landscape. Instead, I will set up the frameworks, questions and reflections that guide the possibilities that come into my mind of how I interpret and hear some of what the participants shared with me.

The United States' Unlivable Futures: Return migrant experiences of Anti-Indigeneity, Racial Capitalism, and Surveillance in the US.

The conditions of living in the US that participants describe in their interviews contradict hegemonic ideas of assimilation, upward mobility, and overall, the so-called promises of the "American Dream", and instead, in the case of some of the participants, they constitute the driving forces of people's returns. However, the white supremacy of the US nation state that

denied participants a livable future in the US is held up not only by state forces but is also sustained by everyone.

Anti-Indigeneity by other Mexican migrants

Consistent in most of the testimonies shared with me, participants describe being subjected to anti-Indigenous racism in their workspaces, at school, in their neighborhoods, etc. while living in the US. This was particularly prevalent in the spaces they shared with other Mexican migrants or the descendants of Mexican migrants, as Mexican peoples often violently project specific racializations of Indigeneity onto those of us who are from Oaxaca. These acts of anti-Indigeneity often took a toll on their bodies, sense of selves, and well-being, to the point that, in some cases, they constituted one of the central reasons for returning to Oaxaca.

Alejandra, who returned 10 years ago at age 9 to Oaxaca City, a year after her father returned, describes her memories of her dad while her family lived in Los Angeles, California:

"My dad in the US would work many hours, and obviously there was a lot of racism and mistreatment towards migrants, especially during those years, against Oaxacan people. So, my dad reached a point where he got tired of that kind of life." [Alejandra]

Susana, who returned when she was 16 years old, 12 years ago, shared that she grew up in Cottonwood, Arizona, a city where the overwhelming majority of the population is Latinx. She recounts how her Mexican peers in elementary school reacted to her sharing that she is originally from Oaxaca:

"I remember there was a cultural week, and I was asked where I was from, and I said Oaxaca. But I didn't know where on a map it was. I knew it was in Mexico, but I didn't know where. They made fun of me for that and told me that place doesn't even exist, you're crazy. [...] I became ashamed of saying I'm from Oaxaca. Those words come to affect you." [Susana]

Humberto, who returned 20 years ago and who migrated to the US for the first time when he was 18 years old due to the financial precarities he faced in pueblo, Ixtlán de Juárez, and then

again several times again after that, remembers what it was like being the only Oaxacan migrant working as a gardener for a company in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania:

"I didn't really have friends. Over there I realized that other Mexicans are often the ones who attack you instead of us supporting each other. We discriminate against one another. I was the only one from Oaxaca and they would call me Oaxaco and they would always treat me as less than. But I had to put up with it out of necessity." [Humberto]

Jocelyn, who grew up in Denver Colorado and returned at age 7, 15 years ago, to San Francisco Lachigoló, describes the alienation she felt from other children her same age:

"I suffered a lot of discrimination for being brown, dark skinned. Kids would say they didn't want to play with me. And so, I remember that a lot, that no one wanted to be my friend, no one wanted to talk to me." [Jocelyn]

These testimonies reveal how the white supremacy of the US nation state, and thus, the non-livability of inhabiting it, is held up not only by state forces, but also by those who inhabit and are traversed by them, such as other non-Oaxacan migrant communities. This reality also speaks to how Oaxacan migrants returning to the Mexican nation state does not in turn automatically free them of experiencing anti-Indigeneity. Instead, anti-Indigeneity is a settler colonial reality that follows Oaxacan migrants across multiple borders (Lynn, 2007) but one the participants in this project, to different degrees, decided to resist and reconcile with in their homelands as opposed to the United States.

Always in Debt: Experiences of Racial Capitalism in the US

When recounting the lifestyles, they led and labor they carried out while living in the US, participants often spoke on the ongoing indebtedness, both financially and, more precisely, in terms of the denial of livable futures they experienced as a result of racial capitalism's reliance on chronic exhaustion and financial debt.

Veronica, who returned at age 7, 15 years ago, to Santiago Matatlán, having been born and raised for the first years of her life in Los Angeles, California, describes the toll that working in the US took on her father and how he came to his decision to migrate back to their pueblo:

"My dad had a very stressful life and started getting sick, so he went to the doctor, and they told him that we needed to have a calmer lifestyle. But you know how life is so stressful over there, having to work to pay rent, and so many expenses. So, I think that's what made my dad want to come back to the pueblo, to be able to have a calmer lifestyle, and so we all came back." [Veronica]

Lorena returned at age 23, 9 years ago. She was born and raised in Santa Monica, California, and diligently planned and prepared for her return to Tlacolula de Matamoros for several years. She speaks on wanting a different way of life than what the economic constraints of debt in the US would have allowed her to live out:

"I never wanted to be attached in a lifestyle like there is in the U.S. Like, a lot of people are tied there due to credit cards, car payments, house mortgages. It's just a lot of payments and I never wanted that for myself." [Lorena]

Elena, who returned to Santa Ana del Valle at age 26, one year ago, after growing up in San Bernardino, California reflects on a similar understanding of living on borrowed land, time and money, and how it contrasts with how land and resources are communally held and protected in her pueblo:

"Whereas here, the land is yours. So, you are protected by your community here and over there no, everything is borrowed over there." [Elena]

Elena then went on to share the breaking point that led her seek a fuller, more livable life in her pueblo and through her work as a poet and actress:

"I was working online for a company, I won't say the name, but that job was very stressful for me. The stress was too high, and I got physically sick. I got sick twice and the last time I fell hard, and I said no! Not anymore. Is it worth it? My mental health, my physical health decayed a lot, and that when I had this epiphany, an epiphany that none of that was worth it. It was best for me to quit that job and find another one I like. And that's what I'm doing, focusing on my art and hoping I can sustain myself that way." [Elena]

Humberto recounts the overwhelmingly fast paced lifestyle he was subjected while working in the US:

"Time goes by too fast there. You have to work all the time. You hardly feel the weekend. It's so short, you spend the little free time you have with friends, you rest maybe a little, and then the next day you have to work again. There's no time for rest." [Humberto]

Rebeca, who experienced return to Oaxaca twice in her life, once when she was only 5 years old and again when she was 23, describes the working lifestyle her mother held when she was a child, and the one she had to have years later in order to sustain herself in the US:

"My mom tells me that when she separated from my dad, she started working at a cleaning company, at night, that was the way she was still able to be with us." [Rebeca]

"She [her mother] told me you need to work hard, get a job. If you want to go to school, that's on you. I went to school, and I worked at the same time." [Rebeca]

The ways participants recount how their bodies and emotions intergenerationally resented being constantly overworked reveals that return migrants understand how the state works, and how it will not facilitate full, abundant, livable lives, but will instead hinder the livable futures they know they need. In the US and under racial capitalism, the lives of return migrants were not considered to be precious. The participants name wanting, seeking, and building sites where life is precious, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes is the project of abolition (2020).

Surveillance of Culture and Compulsory Surveillance

Participants in this project also speak specifically to how their families and them were constantly policed and surveilled by law enforcement for falling outside of the norm of language and parenting while living in the US, and such surveillance often being facilitated by their neighbors and neighborhoods

Jocelyn describes living in Denver in a neighborhood where her family had the police repeatedly called on them, and where she was kept from speaking Spanish as to protect her family from retaliation:

"They would always call the cops on us whenever we were making noise. Or they would say they saw the kids outside or things like that, or that there was an emergency. But they would never ask us first what was going on. We had it sort of forbidden to speak Spanish outside[...] We weren't allowed to speak Spanish, at least in the area we lived in." [Jocelyn]

Rebeca recounts living in Los Angeles and how, since her single mom had to work most of the day in order to sustain her family, her sisters and her were often left under the care of a nanny. At times they would leave the house unaccompanied:

"There were two times that the police found my sisters and I in the street, one of those times was at the aquarium, we went there by ourselves as little girls. I was 5 years old, and my sister was six or seven. She said they found us twice on the streets. And you know how the laws are over there, very strict. They told my mom that if she didn't have anyone to take care of us they'd take her to court." [Rebeca]

The participants reflect on living under structures of anti-Indigeneity, exploitation, and punishment while living as migrants in the US, one that did not allow their families to live out their lives fully and safely. Their knowledge of themselves and of how the state functions allowed them to envision and rehearse futures outside of those structures and outside of the US.

Transborder Communality and Return

The participants in this project shared the vastly different transborder practices and modes of communality (Nicolás, 2021) that allowed for their families and communities to hold and sustain connections with their pueblos while living in diaspora in the US. These practices and epistemologies, I both ask and argue, are reliant on the possibilities and capacities of each pueblo in diaspora. Meaning, they are reliant on concentrated, established, and intergenerational infrastructures and resources, which vary from pueblo to pueblo and are constantly shifting. These are questions I will continue exploring as I conduct a second round of interviews and co-write the script of the film with the participants.

Adult experiences of transborder communality

The participants who migrated to the United States as adults speak of the connections, they held with their fellow paisanos who lived in diaspora and the communal obligations they carried out while living the in US.

Nestor, who returned at age 30, 20 years ago, explained how migrant folks from his pueblo, Ixtlán de Juárez, but who live elsewhere, are requested to contribute financially to the pueblo's festivities. A practice he understands as a responsibility to his community:

"The community always asked for support for the people living away, in diaspora, in Oaxaca City, in Mexico City, in the US. They ask for support to cover the costs of our festivities here in the community. So those obligations reach us. My brother was one of the organizers of the fundraisers. So, all the years we were there we supported the community." [Nestor]

Nestor and Humberto, both from Ixtlán de Juárez– a pueblo with relatively lower rates of migration to the US compared to the rest of participant's municipalities (See Patterns and Statistics of Oaxacan Migration to the US)–, also speak of the relationships they created and sustained with their paisanos during the years they lived in California and New Jersey, respectively, and in particular, to the networks of support for newly arrived migrants they built and experienced. This despite the few numbers of paisanos they were able to be in community with:

"As paisanos you value each other because anyone who gets there to the US, we organize to help, we welcome them and find a way to support them. There were a lot of those instances of support over there. There were few of us there together. You don't appreciate that bond when you're here [back in Ixtlán] and your friends are here and sometimes you don't even say hi." [Nestor]

"We arrived in New Jersey, where the majority of people from Ixtlán are at, we arrived there, and everyone's families were waiting for us and received us all in one house. We had a gathering where they welcomed us." [Humberto]

Rebecca, who is originally from Santiago Comaltepec and San Juan Quiotepec, both communities with high migration rates to the US (See Patterns and Statistics of Oaxacan Migration to the US) recounted the inter-pueblo basketball tournaments she participated in while in Los Angeles.

"During that time, I really enjoyed playing basketball and so that's what I would do every weekend. Oaxacan people in Los Angeles always get together and organize tournaments, whenever there's a festivity. I would participate and even had my own team." [Rebeca]

Youth/Children experiences of transborder communality

The participants who grew up in the United States recount the transborder Indigenous practices and epistemologies their parents carried out through them while living in the US, and

how those practices in turn shaped their sense of belonging to their pueblos and their sense of selves.

Fernando, who returned at age 19, 4 years ago, shared that he was grateful for the participation he had as a child in Southern California based festivals with paisanos from San Bartolomé Quialana, –the pueblo with the highest degree of migratory intensity out of all the participants' communities (See Patterns and Statistics of Oaxacan Migration to the US)–of which his father was one of the lead organizers:

"But now seeing it now, you know, it's I'm kind of glad, I'm super glad that, you know, we did it because, to a certain extent, it brought us closer, brought me closer to my community [Fernando]

Lorena describes how her father instilled in her and her sibling deep connections and belonging to and with their pueblo, Tlacolula de Matamoros, by taking them to visit during summers and teaching them their Zapotec ceremonies, histories, and foods:

"We came back often also. It was almost every year. When I was 12, when we came back and my parents got married the traditional way, like with all the Zapotec tradition, and it was about a weeklong. And my dad was always trying to immerse us, maybe like too intensely. [...] I think my dad's plan was making us come back every summer so that we would be strongly connected to our roots. He always told us we're Zapotecos, we're from Tlacolula. This is our history, and this is what we eat. It was always, this is who we are. We just happen to be living in the states." [Lorena]

Elena recounts how maintaining connections to her family's pueblo, Santa Ana del Valle, were foundational in the way her parents raised her and her siblings in the United States. Those traditions and epistemologies became critical in her growing understanding of herself as an artist:

"I am grateful to my parents for teaching us our traditions and customs since we were very little. So, even if we did not live in Oaxaca, my mom would still dress us in our traditional regalia, they would play traditional music, and we would practice traditional dances at parties to entertain everyone. I realize that influenced me a lot, as an artist to lose fear of performing in public since I was little. It's sweet how things connect now in the future." [Elena]

In transborder communality, Indigenous Oaxacan migrants hold strength against mechanisms of assimilation into the United States' settler colonial, white supremacist fabric, through different and shifting and intergenerational interpretations and capacities of what kinship might mean and look like for each community in diaspora.

Affective Geographies of Return

How the Body Experiences Return

The participants in this project explain how their bodies and memories processed the dislodging experience of return, recognizing the somatic relationships of their bodies and souls existing in a dramatically shifted environment as a result of their migration back to their homelands. There are those participants whose bodies resented their return deeply through manifested illness, those whose minds protected them by forgetting, and there are also those whose souls' felt peace and contentment in their return. This evolving body of work aims to hold all those vastly different ways our hearts and bodies try to reconcile with return.

Jocelyn recounts the physical experience of abruptly returning to San Francisco Lachigoló and to family she did not know, and how she stopped speaking for period of time:

"We arrived at night. I remember that whole time not knowing where we were going, my mom would just tell me that we were going to get to my grandma's house and that my uncles were going to be there. But when we got there, there was a time I wouldn't speak. My grandma died not long after we arrived. She wasn't someone I really knew. So, I went a while without speaking at all." [Jocelyn]

Alejandra describes something similar in terms of loss of memory when moving to Oaxaca City as a child return migrant, after growing up in Los Angeles for the first years of her life:

My mom tells me that, I don't know why, but something happened to me. I forgot everything, I forgot a lot of things, many memories, I just lost them entirely. [Alejandra]

Rebeca, who returned to Santiago Comaltepec as a young girl, and then again to Ixtlán de Juárez as a young mother, describes how her and her daughter's bodies reacted similarly to the dislodging experience of return:

"I'll never forget that my sister and I were very sick. We couldn't tolerate any food. We didn't eat for a long time. I think we were about to see pitch black." [Rebeca]

"It was like a coincidence. We brought our daughter when she was 6 months old, very little, and the same thing happened, she got very sick." [Rebeca]

Veronica remembers how she felt pure, genuine joy at the thought of return and reunification with her elders:

"They just told us we're going to Mexico, and I was so happy. When I heard about Mexico, I thought of all the animals, the dogs, and I was very excited to come. I wanted to meet my grandma too. I was very excited. [Veronica]"

Nestor recounts a feeling of ease when returning home and envisioning the life he was going to build again in Ixtlán de Juárez:

"When I came, I came with the idea and the vision that I had to adapt to my new reality, and I needed to start taking advantage of this way of life. It wasn't difficult for me." [Nestor]

Descriptions of Dramatic Shifts in Space

For some participants, the memory of the physical trip they made back to their pueblos in Oaxaca is one that is deeply seated in their minds and souls. For some, the shift in landscape was overwhelming to their senses and difficult to reconcile with, and thus they have many insights when reflecting on their moment of return, while others simply felt at peace sharing space for the first time in their pueblo.

Alejandra vividly describes the visual imagery she has ingrained in her mind of the physical movement and complete shift in space between Los Angeles and Oaxaca City:

"It is a huge impression on your eyes. When you change so suddenly, like, your life. Because I remember, I have this image saved in my mind from before, still being in Los Angeles and then being in Oaxaca. It is overwhelming how everything changes completely in your sight, from how the sky looks, how the houses look, how the streets are, everything changes completely. So much. So yes, it is a huge difference. I do perfectly remember everything that was going on in my mind. Thinking where am I and what am I doing here? I didn't understand much back then because I was little." [Alejandra]

Fernando recounts a similar spatial shift when migrating from Southern California to San Bartolomé Quialana and how the drastic shift makes him doubt, even briefly, his decision of return:

"Then I was looking at the streets and it was kind of like it wasn't what I was used to. You know, there was I wouldn't say it was fancy like, you know what I'm used to seeing, you know, well, kept streets or, you know, nice houses. It was kind of like what you see in the movies, what they portray in the movies? And I was like, I really thought to myself, like, was this really the best decision?" [Fernando]

Susana describes how the very first thing her family did when arriving to Santa Cruz Xoxocotlán was visit her grandmother's *tortillería* (tortilla making business), seeing her for the first time in years:

I remember that the first thing we did was go to my grandma's business [tortillería]. My grandma was crying and telling everyone these are my children, while her customers were in line waiting for their tortillas. She would say oh I haven't seen them in years, and she was crying. It was a very emotional moment. And I had never seen a tortillería, so even seeing how the tortillas were coming out of the machine like that, it was a totally different experience. [Susana]

Veronica remembers the celebration her family in Santiago Matatlán held for her, her father, mom, and sisters the same day they arrived:

"The first thing I remember we ate was barbacoa de borrego y su botana with my family, my grandparents. I was excited to be with the family, to meet them. [Veronica]

Shifts in Culture, Perceptions of Others, and Understandings of Self

In returning to their ancestral homelands, participants had to learn to navigate the ways of life and ways of being with one another that are often deeply, and conservatively held in their pueblos, while reconciling with the lives they held in the US and remaining true to the people they came to be while living in diaspora.

Elena describes how the people in her pueblo, Santa Ana del Valle, harshly reacted to her being tattooed, as it is not a well-accepted practice:

"You mark your skin, and they categorize you, they cross you out as someone bad, no? So that is one of the ways, also in the way of dressing. Showing so much skin here isn't seen right here as well. So, yeah, I've been called ugly things and people have said ugly things about me as well. But I say I'm not doing anyone any harm". [Elena]

Elena and Jocelyn also describe how people, whether family or classmates, guided them in navigating and understanding the new social cues they were encountering in their return to Santa Ana del Valle and San Francisco Lachigoló, respectively:

"I sometimes say things or act a certain way and thanks to my cousins or people close to me they tell me don't do that or that is wrong to do here, but we are also learning, it is a different environment, and we are learning." [Elena]

"There were two girls in school who helped me a lot. They would tell me don't do this here, or it's not normal for you to behave this way here." [Jocelyn]

Susana recounts the shock she experienced in her return when she was considered to be disrespectful for not following the community's practice of acknowledging everyone in the room despite her never learning that in the years she grew up in the US:

"In the US you can get to a place and just say hi to everyone and that's it. But where my grandma is from, in Sola de Vega, there you have to greet everyone one by one. If you don't, it's disrespectful, they would call you disrespectful and you wouldn't even realize it. So, it was small things like that that were really hard to get used to." [Susana]

Lorena reflected on how she has been mindful of the different social understandings she brings into Tlacolula de Matamoros after being born and raised in the US:

"Like, I'm very respectful. Also in my position, I'm the younger. I have less experience, so I'm learning more. I don't want to come here with ideas that are not that are foreign to Tlacolula." [Lorena]

Humberto describes how it was difficult for him to adjust back into the way of life in Ixtlán de Juárez after working and living in the fast-paced, restless environment of the US:

"Well, here I think, since one is in one's pueblo, one's community, nobody tells you anything. If you work or if you don't if you're at home. It's calmer. Over there it's all so quick, life over there goes by quickly. One gets used to that kind of life." [Humberto]

Language

Within all the drastic shifts returnees experience migrating back to their ancestral homelands, shifts in language constitutes one of the biggest vessels through which migrants experience return. For those whose pueblos have a large population of Indigenous language-speakers, (re)learning their language was the only way to inhabit it or to (re)create a sense of belonging to it. These testimonies are especially significant given the Mexican state's ongoing project of Indigenous linguistic genocide, hispanization and assimilation through the federalized education system that has systematically marginalized and endangered Indigenous language speakers since the beginning of the 20th century (Hernández-Díaz, et al., 2018). For others, having to learn Spanish and forget English when entering the Mexican school system was an extremely disorienting and alienating experience.

Rebeca recounts how her and her sisters had to learn the variant of Chinanteco of her pueblo in order to navigate living in Santiago Comaltepec after her return as a child, as the majority of the population only speak their Indigenous language, and being singled out as an outsider for not knowing the language:

“The majority of people there don’t really speak Spanish. So, it was very hard for us. I remember getting there to the community and people would stare at us because we were strangers and everyone know each other there [...] Communicating with others was very difficult because most people speak their mother tongue, Chinanteco, so we had to learn” [Rebeca]

Alejandra explains that she lost her fluency in English when returning to Oaxaca City because school and her entire environment became only Spanish speaking:

“We stopped speaking English entirely, because I had to speak Spanish with my classmates and my teachers.” [Alejandra]

Fernando describes how he seeks to learn the variant of Zapoteco of San Bartolomé Quialana to in order to feel a deeper sense of belonging to his pueblo:

“But there's also that part where, you know, this pueblo is Indigenous, where they speak Zapoteco, you know, they follow certain traditions. And it's kind of like, I guess, that part where I really didn't feel like I truly was part of it just because I guess the main culture and tradition is speaking it. And I like, until now, I'm barely learning. I like speaking it.” [Fernando]

Jocelyn remembers how difficult it was for her to return to San Francisco Lachigoló without knowing any Spanish, and how her peers at school would single her out as an outsider for not being able to communicate with them:

“It was very difficult for me to adapt because everyone was like, look at her, she doesn’t know Spanish and she’s from here.” [Jocelyn]

Agency in Return: Joys and Tensions in Separation, Reunification and Rematriation.

All the returnees who participated in this body of work have had their freedom of movement deeply traversed and violated by the state, its tactics of immobilization, and in some instances, by violent forces outside of the realm of the state. Simultaneously, and even if partially, we hold agency over our movements back to our ancestral homelands, our processes of rematriation, and the meanings we create from our returns. There is a process of creation and

making that comes with return and the threshold of pain of being displaced, and this project pays homage to those, at times contradicting, processes of creation.

Agency and Contradictions in Family Separation: Return as a Means to Protect Ourselves

There are those of us who return as a means to distance ourselves from people who have done us harm–a driving force for return that is often extremely strenuous for us to name. My mom, my sister and I returned because my father had made our lives in the US unsafe and unlivable. It took me 15 years, until the building of this body of work, to recognize and name out loud that that was the true reason for my family's return, as opposed to the several other short hands I and my family had developed over the years to respond to questions about our return. Fernando was generous enough to share his similar experience of returning to protect himself. In naming his reason for return, and the contradicting experiences that came with it, he unknowingly allowed me to name the reason and conditions of my own return–and for that I am incredibly grateful.

Fernando, whose interview took place in his grandparents' house in San Bartolomé Quialana full of his family, asked his cousins to leave the room to share with the crew and I the real reason for his return–his harmful relationship with his father:

"Well, the biggest factor why I'm here is because of my dad. I've never had the best relationship with him. And so, I was kind of in a constant war like within myself or like, you know, my ideals of him just because of who I was. I want to say most of my problems arise from him. He was definitely the number one reason why he came back." [Fernando]

Nonetheless, in returning to San Bartolomé Quialana, Fernando experienced family separation from his parents and sisters. The separation from his mother is one, he shares, they both deeply resent:

“My mom tells me, I have all these plants to distract myself from, you know, an empty hole that I kind of have. And that's kind of like what bugged me because I never wanted her to feel that, you know, it wasn't my intention for her, to have her all that depressed, [...] I guess one of the things that I think, I think you can't prepare for it. Either way, there's missing people. That's one of the things that kind of gets hard every once in a while, you know, with my mom. It's just you can't prepare to miss one, you know?” [Fernando]

Agency and Contradictions in Family Reunification

There are participants whose family returned in order to reunite with their fathers– fathers who were pushed back to Oaxaca by deportation or by the conditions of exploitation they experienced in the US. Despite their return not being categorized as voluntary due to their father’s violent removal by the state, participants and their families held agency in deciding that reuniting their families meant a more livable future then living separated by the nation-state border. That agency co-exists with the doubts and regrets that arise from such a decision to return.

Alejandra recounts when at nine years old, after her father decided to return to Oaxaca City first and her siblings, her mother and her remained in Los Angeles for a year, her mother asked her if she wanted to return to Oaxaca as well:

“She asked me what I wanted, if I wanted to go back [...] I remember I told her I didn’t care where Oaxaca was, but my dad is there. So, I want to be where my dad is.” [Alejandra]

Susana describes how she felt when her family decided to return to Oaxaca in order to reunite with her father, who had been deported the year before, after they struggled with housing insecurity and economic vulnerability living in Cottonwood without him:

“We came with the idea that at least here we’d be reunited, to have a new start after everything that happened. I wanted to be with my family, to not feel like we were alone. So it was very exciting for me.” [Susana]

Susana also remembers how when her family was about to leave the United States, they were asked to reconsider their decision at the airport, and how she experienced feelings of regret after getting off the plane:

"When we were about to board the plane to Oaxaca, they asked us if we were sure we wanted to travel, they said that we were illegal, so if we left, if we decided to board, we wouldn't be able to come back. The lady at the front desk repeated it to us, and I remember my mom was crying." [Susana]

"There I think it finally hit me, I realized we were in a different country. I started feeling regret, thinking we should have stayed, but it was too late, we were already in Mexico." [Susana]

Multiple Migrations– Need for Border Fluidity and Abolition

Within the agency I acknowledge and honor that the participants hold over their return and the lives they've crafted after return, it is imperative to recognize and honor the ways those who lived undocumented in the United States are differently affected and traversed by return. There are participants who, despite returning several years ago, wish and need to migrate back to the United States–or more precisely, to hold the freedom to move back and forth between their communities in Oaxaca and in the US–and yet are immobilized and kept from crossing the border again. The border is only to be crossed in certain ways authorized by the state, because the United States depends on illegality. These testimonies shed light on the need and want for a world premised on freedom of movement, for a porous border, and for the abolition of the structures of immobilization and confinement that the border constitutes.

Rebeca shares how her husband and her came to the decision to return to his pueblo, Ixtlán de Juárez, so he could reunite with his family, her family's reactions to her return, her feelings of regret, and her hopes to return to Los Angeles to reunite with her own family:

"It's complicated. I didn't think twice when he said we should leave, that we'll work hard over there. It was both our decision. He wanted to come back to his family. You just don't think of the after, you just think of the moment." [Rebeca]

"Since I got here, I've wanted to go back, to be with my family. [...] I think I'll wait for when I reach ten years of leaving the US [the bar]. I think then I'll have an opportunity." [Rebeca]

"I remember [my mom] told me to give it a lot of thought, don't go. [My sisters] also told me, how are you just gonna leave? If something happens to you there, we won't be able to be with you. It won't be the same. It's very difficult because if you have any problems or need support, your family isn't here really. Maybe your partner's family is, but the support isn't the same." [Rebeca]

Humberto recounts the several times he has tried to cross the border into the United States again in the 20 years after returning to his pueblo, Ixtlán de Juárez–as he is still seeking financial stability that is not possible in his pueblo. He also describes his last encounter with border patrol officers:

"I tried like seven or eight more times, and I would always get caught [...] by the seven or eighth time the migra told me, one of them who spoke Spanish, told me that if they were to catch me again they would put me in detention and make me do community service." [Humberto]

Humberto also shares how the relationship with his daughters was affected by his previous migration to the US, and how he tries to reconcile with them his possible future migration and family separation:

"The first thing I did [when returning] was basically be with my daughter. She would call me dad, but she wouldn't really come close to me. Even though we weren't separated for long, the distance was a lot. So yeah. The first thing I did was devote myself 100% to her, being together, being together with my parents. [...] I've talked to them, and I've told them I plan on leaving again. The older one tells me if you want to then go ahead. But the little one doesn't want me to go, she's very attached to me and tells me she doesn't want me to go. And that's what gets me thinking. It's like doing it all over again, suffering when I wasn't with my daughters. Because when you leave you are far away from how they grow up. I see that my oldest daughter calls me dad now, but I wasn't with her in her childhood. And that's what weighs on me right now." [Humberto]

Joys of Return and Rematriation

This body of work holds as sacred the joys, creations, and kinships that come with Indigenous rematriation to one's ancestral homeland. These are only a few instances where the

participants shared the (re)connections they have envisioned, built and rehearsed since their return:

Nestor describes the disbelief some had of his return, and the contentment he's found in the 20 years after returning to his pueblo and opening a community-run, self-sustaining trout farm and restaurant:

"I remember when I was working at an Italian restaurant called Da Vinci, in Beverly Hills, and when I told my boss that I was leaving, he said, I'll give you three months and then I'll have you back here. He said everyone says the same thing and they don't adapt to Mexico. Living there is different. They'll go to Mexico and then come right back. In three months when you spend all your money you'll be back. I told him I don't think so. I have a vision of what I want. In these twenty years I've been here since returning, many of those dreams have materialized. Maybe I'll go back with papers to visit, but I'm happy here." [Nestor]

Lorena shares how her family and her have sustained and slowly actualized a vision of return to their homeland, Tlacolula de Matamoros. She returned in 2013 when she was 23 years old, and her parents will join her soon:

"It was a plan, a family plan. So, my parents always told us that the U.S. wasn't our permanent home, or that we weren't there to settle [...] It was always like saving up for this home in Oaxaca, and that's what we're going to go back to. And my parents used to say, we'll go back in 20 years. Well, now it's been a little over 20 and they're moving. They're moving back in three years." [Lorena]

Jocelyn explains that she feels safety and ease living in her pueblo, San Francisco Lachigoló, surrounded by the family she once did not know, but since then as grown close to, and after the racialized violence she experienced living in Denver:

"Well to a certain extent I am grateful that we came and that we ended up staying, because I felt freer here, freer to go outside without being told that I couldn't speak Spanish or that I couldn't do something because I'm dark-skinned and they'll accuse me of something. I felt more at ease here knowing I had family here, because over there we were alone." [Jocelyn]

Elena speaks of how making the decision to migrate back to Oaxaca as a young adult has allowed her to reconnect with the way of life of Santa Ana del Valle and led her to a fulfilling life she could not experience while growing up in the US.

"Coming back here is when I felt I could build a life that is true to who I am. It is here that I've felt at home. Where I can feel I can be myself. Where I am nurturing myself of a way of life that makes me very very happy." [Elena]

For Veronica, return meant living out a close relationship and kinship with her grandparents, whom she had never met before returning to Santiago Matatlán, and for their ways of life and epistemologies to be passed down to her:

"So, when you go to your hometown you learn many things you didn't know before, things that are getting lost too. So, it's a beautiful thing to return to your homeland, to the homeland of your parents. To know its traditions, its customs, to be with your elders because you learn many things from them. One time I stayed over at my paternal grandma's house. And the clouds had a pinkish tone, it was around 6pm. And I told her look the clouds are pink, and she said that means tomorrow will be very windy. And I was like ok grandma. And she was right! The next day was very very windy. And I was surprised because how could my grandma know that. So, there are many things that they know and so it is a beautiful thing to be around them and to learn what they know, because unfortunately that knowledge gets lost." [Veronica]

Conclusions and Beginnings

As I have named throughout this paper, the vast, affective experiential landscape that is this body of knowledge and work is not resolute. Instead, this thesis is a pause for reflection and analysis of what has been created so far and what threads I have been able to pull out from the stories of return of the 10 participants, and my own, in the past two and a half years since I first began envisioning this project. Acknowledging the vast life it has ahead outside of the university, this body of work has revealed, crafted and honored, so far: a methodology of long-form listening and co-creation grounded in Zapotec methods of Cine Comunitario and Indigenous audio-visual self-representation, the power of rehearsing livable, full lives that Indigenous Oaxacan return migrants hold against and beyond settler-colonial, nation-state borders, understood through the praxis of Border Abolition, and the ever-growing, contradicting, bodily, soul, and heart experiences of rematriation to ancestral homelands in Oaxaca, Mexico. This is

what I have to offer the university, the participants, my mentors, my family, and myself of the work done so far. The epistemologies offered in this thesis will constitute the backbone and foundation of the film we will continue producing in collaboration and community.

I will conclude with a declaration, vision, and rehearsal that I commit to and one that has allowed me the strength and love to carry out this project:

May we imagine and build a world where all Indigenous peoples may experience a free and celebrated return to their ancestral homelands in their lifetimes.

Acknowledgements and Gratitude

I've come to understand this project as my life's work, and as something that holds such huge meaning to me, it must come with just as much gratitude. I recognize that this body of work is not something I came up with on my own, but rather is evidence of the generosity of my teachers, mentors, elders, ancestors, friends, collaborators, and loved ones. This work and I are both in lineage with you all.

To my mom and sister, you are my world. I love you immensely, and I thank you for your unconditional encouragement to pursue this project, even when our souls felt heavy from it at times.

To my mentor and thesis advisor, Professor Victoria Robinson, thank you for your patient and generous guidance, and especially for reminding me of the freedoms and possibilities I hold even within the university. I will dearly miss sitting in your office every week and working our way through the countless theories, frustrations, joys, doubts, pauses, reflections, and excitements that came with this work. I look forward to weaving our many conversations (past and future ones) into the film.

To my filmmaking mentor, Professor Raymond Telles, thank you for constantly grounding me and reminding me of the power and possibilities this film holds. We have plenty of work to do together, and I am very excited to get started!

To my amazing film crew, Luis, Monica, Mariana, and Carlos, thank you for betting on this project and on these stories with such enthusiasm and care. Your labor of love is what will make this film a reality.

To la bandita de Otros Dreams en Acción, our collaborations and friendships have allowed me the space to explore, process and embrace my own return while being in loving community

and lucha, which in turn gave me the strength to pursue this project. Words can't express how grateful I am for that.

To the participants in the project–this work is as much mine as it is yours. Within the university and outside of it, I am accountable first and foremost to you–to your stories, to the spaces we've shared with each other, and to the relationships we've started, and I hope will continue, to build with one another. I will be forever grateful that you chose to share your testimonies of return with me. I grew up feeling alone in my own return, so listening to and learning from you all has allowed me to slowly heal that wound. It's hard to put into words how full and lucky my heart feels to have met each and every one of you. I'm incredibly excited and joyful to find out what we can make of this film together <3

And lastly, I am grateful to myself for patiently and lovingly trusting my need to ask these questions and tell these stories–an overwhelming need I have felt since I was a kid. This project is a vast love letter to that younger version of me. I am proud and content to be pursuing this work and becoming a storyteller in her name.

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