From U.S. Immigration Detention Center to Transnational Call Center

Jill Anderson*

Intermingled with the sounds of a broom on the sidewalk, the loud engines of the peseros *driving by, the click of the orange juicer as it opens and closes on one plump orange after another, and the tiny birds flitting above us in the trees, are the sounds of a group of young men speaking English with each other. "I have to get out of* pinche México. *The next chance I get, I'm going." The others laugh in mixed tones of commiseration and ridicule. "Where the hell are you going to go?"*

Having moved to the bustling neighborhood in Mexico City's historic center over four years earlier, I was surprised by such conversations in English riding above the rumble of the busy streets. Who were these brazen English speakers spouting anger interspersed with jokes for all to hear? Did they have anything to do with the recent appearance of the new graffiti on the *panadería*'s walls "Latin King5 Corona L__K Rey Latino"? Originally from Texas, I noticed that many of the young adults seemed to carry themselves and speak with the Mexican-American or Chicana/o modes that I was used to hearing and seeing back home. I started to ask around, and I soon learned that the young people I had overheard worked at a transnational call center that moved to the *colonia* in 2009.

Working at the call center is initially an attractive option for bilingual Mexicans who have just returned to Mexico after living in the United States for many years. Incoming employees receive Mex$45 an hour, substantially better than the average wage for a young adult in Mexico City. They receive health benefits and, after a year, a week of paid vacation. For many, such benefits are new, given that they worked in the massive semi-informal/undocumented economy of the United States during their adolescence and young adult years.

Jill Anderson

Unlike Mexican universities, as well as many Mexican businesses, the transnational call centers do not require official re-validation by the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) of their certificates of primary, secondary, and preparatory education abroad, making for easier integration and re-entry into Mexican society.[1] The call centers also offer a kind of community, or cushion, in the midst of a jarring, if not traumatic, return to Mexico. A new employee finds a critical mass of other people who have lived in the United States for many years, if not most of their lives. Speaking English with co-workers

*Postdoctoral fellow at the CISAN, with a fellowship provided by the UNAM Humanities Coordinating Department.

The lack of viable options for work and study in the U.S. for young adults from racially segregated and impoverished areas, especially true for immigrant youth without legal papers, contributes to gang involvement and criminal activity.

comes as a relief. They get the same jokes. They are dealing with the same things.

I started to approach the call center employees as they stood in small groups outside on short breaks. After introducing myself in Spanish, I asked, often in English, "Where are you from?" Some would say "Mexico," mixed with laughter and a knowing glance at their co-workers. And then, seeing that I recognized that my question was much more complicated than that, the real story would spill out with an eagerness to clarify. "I am from Los Angeles. I've been back for 7 months." "I'm from outside of Chicago, and they deported me two years ago." "I'm from Houston, and my whole family is there." "I'm from Reno, but I live in Ciudad Neza now." Several of these talented and articulate young people agreed to sit down with me and tell me more about their lives in the United States and their experience of returning to Mexico.[2]

Deporting Generation 1.5

With a chuckle, Alberto says, "Since most of them there [his co-workers] have been to prison, or deported, most of 'em are a part of something," i.e., a gang. Alejandra, another call center employee who moved back to Mexico voluntarily in 2010, observes that "on average, the normal guy at [the call center] has spent at least a year in jail." Many of her new friends "were deported when they were 23, but they've been going to juvenile hall [in the United States] since they were 13." "Once they get here [to Mexico]," she observes, "they're all friendly, they're like 'Dude, I used to represent 18, I used to represent this, I used to represent *vida loca*. . . .' They're like, 'that's what we used to do in the States, now we represent each other here.'"[3] Growing more serious, Alberto describes how "I see it every day, in writings, in the walls, in bathrooms, even outside. . . . It's written on the walls, it's a very common thing . . . the gangs from the States . . . I can tell, people, they come here, and I guess they're still a part of that, and being at [the call center], most of us have been a part of that, and I guess they gather each other up." For his part, he tries to "stay as far as possible from them," but he empathizes too. "Some of 'em just feel like 'I have nothing to do, I'm already here, there's nothing more for me to do.'"

The United States Department of Homeland Security deported, removed, or returned 4.4 million Mexican citizens between 2005 and 2010, a record-breaking 15-25 percent of whom had lived in the United States for one year or more.[4] Furthermore, the percentage of deported Mexicans who had lived in the United States for five years or more rose dramatically from 2 percent in the previous decade to 17 percent between 2005 and 2010. Since 2001, the federal government's deportation policies have shifted from an emphasis on "extended border control" to "post-entry social control," Daniel Kanstroom's terms for the United States' systemic and historical deportation infrastructure that dates back to the nineteenth century.[5] The increase in "post-entry social control" deportation operates under the assumption that every immigrant is a potential deportee and criminal. Post 9/11 innovations within the deportation system of the Department of Homeland Security in the United States have resulted in increased detention of undocumented immigrants for extended periods (including children and families in privately-owned detention facility companies) and increased processing of deportations from regions far from the Mexico-U.S. border. An increasing percentage of deportees are bi-cultural and bilingual immigrants with deep ties to their families and communities north of the border.[6]

Although there are few extensive studies about who has been deported and under what circumstances, a 2006 study by TRAC, a research project housed at New York's Syracuse University, found that a staggering 70 percent of deportees charged as "aggravated felons" had lived in the United States for more than a decade.[7] Many of these recently deported men and women are returning to a country they barely know. Children who accompanied their parents across the border in the 1980s and 1990s, they grew up in Mexican and Latino neighborhoods in urban centers like Los Angeles, San Diego, Chicago, Houston, and Las Vegas, neighborhoods notable for high rates of poverty, under-funded school systems, and gang activity. The lack of viable options for work and study in the U.S. for young adults from racially segregated and impoverished areas, especially true for immigrant youth without legal papers, contributes to gang involvement and criminal activity. Since the creation of the category

of "aggravated felonies" in the 1988 Immigration and Nationality Act, which was later greatly expanded in 1996 and 2001, a broader range of such criminal activities leads to automatic detention and deportation without due process.[8] An entire generation of Mexican citizens, brought to the United States as young children and educated in the U.S. public school system, is coming of age in a context of heightened surveillance and increasingly severe penalization by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

For many, like Alberto, post-deportation employment at the call center offers community, resilience, and opportunity in the midst of a traumatic and alienating return to Mexico City. Alberto moved to Houston with his parents and his sister when he was four years old. Although he held a green card, upon serving five years in prison for an aggravated felony committed at 18, he found himself deported to Mexico the same day as his prison release.[9] In spite of a deep and daily pain caused by the separation from his family (the most common theme shared by all deported and return migrants), he expressed gratitude for his well-paying job at the call center —"the best I've found so far." He is saving up and looking forward to purchasing a car, and eventually a home.

American Dreams with a Mexican Address

Call center employees navigate the intense, repetitive, and demanding nature of their job because the call center promises the financial possibility to realize their dreams, as well as a tenuous but real community of other self-described "Americanized" friends. In 2011, however, the employee turnover at one call center was close to 100 percent.[10] Rogelio, who also served a prison sentence before deportation and who would like to be a mechanic but has not been able to find a job that "pays good" in Mexico, remains unsatisfied. "I'm bored and I want to do something different, and I am moving up in my job, which is cool, but . . . I get frustrated." These companies are in a constant recruitment mode, as employees burn out, get fed up, or move on. On average, they work eight-hour shifts, six days a week, with few breaks and a half-hour for lunch. Punctuality, call conversations, and call quotas are closely evaluated and critiqued by floor managers. Call center employees describe conversations with callers during which their accents in English, even the slightest ones, are criticized; or, callers become frustrated upon learning that he or she is talking to someone outside of the United States. The irony of such U.S.-based, nativist customer preferences for service operators who speak English without an accent and who are located in the United States is not lost on these close-to-native English speakers. Similarly, these savvy and educated young adults know that the Mex$45 they receive as a good wage in Mexico City underwrites an immense profit margin in dollars for transnational, U.S.-based companies.

Since 2000, transnational call centers, a key feature of the telemarketing service industry, have experienced a phase of exponential growth outside of the U.S., Canada, and Europe. Between 2000 and 2010, the call centers based in Mexico and dedicated to foreign markets grew from 8 631 to 18 701 locations, a 116 percent increase.[11] Utilizing cutting edge technologies to manage and record massive numbers of service calls within a context of geographic flexibility, call centers have evolved to provide the dominant interface between consumers and companies around the world. According to one Mexico City call center's online website, the company currently employs approximately 44 000 people around the world who complete 3.5 million interactions with customers *each day.* Based in the United States, this company operates call centers in Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Costa Rica, Ireland, Mexico, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Mexico City, Guadalajara, and León host the company's call centers in Mexico. The Mexico City call center clients include DISH Satellite Television and Time Warner Cable, companies based in the United States and who serve a predominately English-speaking population. Bilingual skills, and preferably U.S. American English with little to no accent, are a firm requirement for hire.

Given the high turnover requiring constant training and recruitment, considered a feature of the industry worldwide, transnational call centers that serve U.S. American clients have a vested interest in the current numbers and nature of deportations by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. In fact, transnational call centers employ bilingual adults via an axis of exploitation-opportunity within the same neoliberal, global economic system that structures massive un-

The deported Mexicans who had lived in the U.S. for five years or more rose dramatically from 2 percent in the previous decade to 17 percent between 2005 and 2010.

These young deportees were the classmates of the so-called "Dreamers" in the United States, undocumented youth who have bravely come out of the shadows to demand the approval of the Dream Act.

documented and underpaid immigrant labor within the United States, as well as the *maquiladoras* in Mexico's northern border zone. It is an effective and powerful geographical inversion of the region's political economy, the same political economy that motivated the irregular migration of the parents of the deported employees. The simultaneous emergence of these transnational call centers with the increasing deportations by the U.S. federal government (in addition to the related increasing numbers of return migration) demands further attention. Why are the turnover rates for call center employees so high? To what extent —if at all— does call center employment translate into long-term integration and stability for deported Mexicans once in Mexico? To what extent —if at all— do transnational call centers provide an effective alternative to continued gang and criminal activity? How are deported immigrants exploiting the transnational call centers to realize their own post-deportation dreams, or are they?

The Call Center as Crossroads

In my neighborhood, the transnational call center offers one path in the aftermath of deportation; the graffiti on the surrounding buildings testify to another competing course.[12] Alejandra and Alberto spoke of escalating gang activity in recent months, as more and more members of rival U.S.-based gangs seemed to be joining the ranks of the call center operators. Graffiti, marking territory around the call center location, testifies to the frustration and potential violence bubbling underneath the call center's slick recruitment posters. The future of young adult deportees in Mexico is a precarious one. Mexico's deported citizens are arriving in Mexico City every day with bi-cultural and bilingual fluency, a U.S. American high school education or higher, technological adeptness, and, for better and worse, the chance to start over.

These young people were the classmates of the so-called "Dreamers" in the United States, undocumented youth who have bravely come out of the shadows to demand the passage of the Dream Act in the U.S. Congress. On June 15, 2012, President Obama announced administrative relief through "deferred action" that closely follows the stipulations of the Dream Act, which has not become law despite three distinct but failed attempts before the U.S. Congress.[13] Over the past year, the "Dreamers" have gained notable visibility and legitimization as immigrants who arrived with their families, grew up as U.S. Americans in every way except on paper, and therefore should not be penalized as culpable under current immigration law.

Although there are otherwise eligible young people who were deported to Mexico before the June cut-off date, the majority of deported young adults in Mexico would not have met the requirements of the executive order nor the proposed Dream Act.[14] Most are former gang members and formerly incarcerated prisoners of the U.S. legal system, and the connection between criminality and undocumented immigration *seems* to be confirmed in their stories. However, the significant presence of call center employees who return with criminal records from the United States, offers a stark example that these young adults are returning with twenty-first century skills and the drive to use them, even under the most difficult of circumstances. It is abundantly clear that they are dreamers too.[15] VM

Notes

[1] The challenging circumstances that young adults, adolescents, and children face upon return to Mexico, including the obstacles to revalidation of U.S. educations, has received press coverage in the U.S. and Mexico in recent months. See Damien Cave, "American Children, Now Struggling to Adjust to Life in Mexico," *The New York Times*, June 18, 2012, Verónica Sánchez, "Frenan educación de los repatriados," *Reforma* (Mexico City), July 22, 2012.

[2] This article is based on a long-term research project with recently returned and deported Mexican citizens entitled "México y Estados Unidos ante la migración de retorno: del testimonio a la teoría."

[3] There are a number of large and small Mexican/Latino gangs in the United States and the U.S. prison system. Some of the largest, best-known ones include the 18th Street Gang, Barrio Azteca, Mexican Mafia, Sureños, Norteños, and the Texas Syndicate.

[4] These numbers are based on the PEW Hispanic Center's study entitled "Net Migration from Mexico Falls to Zero—and Perhaps Less," http://www.pewhispanic.org, accessed August 28, 2012. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the U.S. government body responsible for deportations from the interior of the country, deported 1.5 million, or roughly 30 percent of the overall total. These numbers include returns, repatriations, and enforced removals; http://www.ice.gov/removal-statistics/, accessed August 28, 2012.

[5] An overview of the legal infrastructure of the U.S. deportation system can be found in Dan Kanstroom's *Aftermath: Deportation Law and the New American Diaspora* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). U.S.

federal programs such as the recently discontinued 287(g) and the recently-expanded Secure Communities programs, which rely on database collaboration between local law enforcement and immigration officials, have been two pillars in recent U.S. federal policy.

[6] The aforementioned PEW Hispanic Center study reveals that return migration has doubled in recent years. U.S. immigration enforcement divides deportation into three different categories: returns (voluntary returns, voluntary departures, and withdrawals), repatriations, and removals. The timing, process of return, and the consequences of possible re-entry into the United States are different for each category, but for the purposes of this overview, a deportation refers to both returns and removals.

[7] TRAC Immigration Project, http://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/158/, accessed August 28, 2012.

[8] The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA) and the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) were passed in 1996 and the Patriot Act in 2001. The newer laws affect legal residents as well as undocumented immigrants, and they are retroactive. If a crime was not categorized as an immigration violation at the time of the crime, it can still be held as a cause for removal within federal immigration proceedings.

[9] Based on the grounds for removal (i.e., deportation) from the U.S., immigrants may face a five-year, ten-year or lifetime ban from returning to the United States.

[10] Based on a conversation in a meeting with a call center recruitment manager in March 2012.

[11] Jordy Micheli Thirión, "El sector de *call centers*: Estructura y tendencias. Apuntes sobre la situación de México," *Frontera norte* vol. 24, no. 47 (January-June 2012), p. 163.

[12] Although returning to the United States is on the minds of many of those I have interviewed, the threat of federal jail time and further bars on legal re-entry deters many in Mexico City from making the dangerous and expensive journey back to the United States without papers. Most are hoping that immigration reform, as well as increased stability in Mexico, will lead to a legal pathway back to their loved ones there.

[13] President Obama's executive order is a temporary measure that does not change the federal immigration legal code, and provides a temporary work permit with no path to legal residency or citizenship for eligible immigrants. The Dream Act was first proposed in 2001. It came up for failed votes in 2007 and 2010.

[14] The requirements for "deferred action" are: 1) entry into the U.S. before the age of 16, 2) presence in the U.S. for the previous five consecutive years, 3) graduation from high school or the equivalent, or honorably discharged as a veteran of the U.S. Coast Guard or armed services, 4) age of under 30 years at the time of application, and 5) a clean criminal record with no felony convictions, no significant misdemeanor convictions, and no more than two misdemeanor offenses.

[15] While the connections between the gang affiliations and criminal backgrounds of deportees and Mexican organized crime should not be underestimated, particularly along the border, an over-simplified connection between *la cholada* and criminal activity dominates in Mexico's popular discourse about return migration. See Ibán Trápaga de la Iglesia's "Cholos: ¿Comunidad transnacional o cultura juvenil fronteriza? Apuntes teóricos para repensar los flujos migratorios México-EUA," *Refundación*, July 2010, for an excellent analysis of deportation and return migration of self-identified *cholos* in northern Mexico, http://www/refundacion.com.mx/revista/, accessed August 30, 2012.