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Challenging Borders

The physical and psychological journeys that the children of immigrants make for their families

By Alexia Raynal

One summer morning about two years ago, as I was finding my seat on a plane in New York that would take me to Mexico, I noticed a group of elementary-school children chatting excitedly across the aisle. There were no adults accompanying them, and I could tell by their use of Spanglish and their Mexican flags that they had been born to Mexican parents. Among the bustle there was a boy who looked frightened. "Is this your first time flying without your parents?" I asked. "No," replied the group leader for him. "Me and my cousins have done it many times, but this is *his* first time." The boy behind me sat quietly throughout the flight, but joined the rest of the group in their cheering and clapping when we landed. He grabbed his big nylon bag from the overhead cabinet and followed his friends down the aisle.

I was not the only one to be surprised by the group of unaccompanied children, or to notice the bulky bags they collected at the airport carousel. Their luggage (filled with toys and gifts in my mind) became a symbol of the work children do to assist their families as I analyzed the traveling experiences of other children born to Mexican immigrants in the US. When unaccompanied children carry these bags on their trips, they play important roles for their undocumented parents who fear traveling outside the US. Their luggage is not only

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physical, but also cultural and psychological, as they carry their parents' hopes to reconnect with relatives across borders.

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The last few years the mass media has paid increased attention to the tens of thousands of unaccompanied immigrant children who have been arriving in the United States to reunite with relatives who migrated before them.[1] I want to write here about an overlooked story: the work that some children born to immigrants in the US do to negotiate the divides of their families across borders. When successful, these efforts lead to temporary returns to the immigrant homeland and are also often made by unaccompanied children. Other times, however, children are left to wrestle with the psychological conflicts of family separation from their homes in the US. I approach this topic by writing about two elementary-school children—Sara and Vincent—who were born to Mexican immigrants in New York.[2] Sara and Vincent are expected to travel alone because their parents are undocumented. But their experiences are very different. Vincent has actually made a trip to Mexico. Sara has not yet. Vincent´s trip was challenging, but it gave him a sense of fulfillment as he was finally able to perform a parental expectation. Sara, on the other hand, wrestles with her family's separation from long distance because her parents cannot afford to send her to Mexico yet. Sara's and Vincent's stories illustrate a kind of childhood that is particular to some children born to poor and undocumented immigrant parents.[3] But these stories also speak about issues that concern children and families more generally, including how members communicate, how they help each other, and how it often falls on children to pick up where their parents have left off.

Though I focus on Sara and Vincent, it is important to bear in mind that all children perform roles within their families. These roles include being the peacekeeper, the joker, the star student, the comforter, the outstanding athlete, or even the emotional companion and provider when a parent is missing. While they don't speak of it explicitly, Vincent and Sara

[1] "Children at the Border," *New York Times*, October, 21, 2014.

[2] Vincent and Sara are pseudonyms used to protect children's identities.

[3] Traveling to the parental homeland (alone or with relatives) is a common ritual for the children of Latino immigrants. Seventy-three percent of all US-born Latinos in New York have visited their immigrant parents' homeland at least once and up to three times by the time they reach adulthood; several have done so up to nine times, and a smaller percentage have visited these places ten or more times in their lives.

think of themselves as mediators for their parents. They want to compensate for their parents' absences by visiting relatives in Mexico. This tacit contract relates to the "immigrant bargain," a term popularized by sociologist Robert Smith to explain how immigrant parents expect their US-born children to redeem their migration sacrifices (e.g. leaving relatives behind) by making it in the US. By looking at Sara's and Vincent's stories, I suggest an expansion of the immigrant bargain to include the work children do to nurture family ties across borders on behalf of their poor and undocumented parents who, because of their legal status, fear making the trip themselves.[4]

Sending clothes and money is one way in which immigrants do parenting from abroad.[5] When children visit Mexico alone, some of these responsibilities are passed down to them. The first thing Vincent remembers doing after getting his plane ticket to go to Mexico, for example, was "buying our supplies, buying *my* supplies, my bags, to take a lot of clothes with me for my family." These kinds of gifts are often distributed by children among relatives in Mexico, introducing them to transnational, semi parent-like roles as caregivers.

That so many minors are traveling alone is obviously disturbing, especially given the complexities of long-distance travel and all the strangers who may be encountered along the way. Yet on a different level, children's unaccompanied journeys can also empower them by allowing them to make meaningful contributions for their families. As one of the girls I interviewed explained: "I wish I could go again, cause I told my great-grandmother I was gonna take care of her.'" In fact, some children see their journeys as an opportunity to show love and care for relatives that were left behind.

Vincent's and Sara's stories and reflections, which I am sharing in this paper, were drawn from ethnographic data I collected during the summer of 2013 while interviewing eight children born in the United States to Mexican immigrants living in the South Bronx (the south tip of the poorest district in New York), and from informal conversations with families in similar situations. The experiences of these children offer us an opportunity to learn more about how children negotiate roles across geopolitical and intergenerational

[4] Parents' reliance on their US-born children is particularly salient now, as undocumented immigrants find it harder to move across borders than before. From 2009 to 2013, the US Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) branch conducted an average of 400,000 removals every year.

[5] "Separated from their children, mothers and fathers rely on the same three techniques to communicate with their children: weekly phone conversations, the sending of gifts, and regular remittances. Physical separation results in standardized mechanisms of transnational parenting." Joanna Dreby, *Divided by Borders*, 2010, p. 62.

borders. They show, too, ways in which families work together to try to feel at home. As Sara once put it, traveling to Mexico is a dream (*una ilusión)* because it would allow her to bring her parents "a little bit of memory" so that they may better endure life far from home.

Introducing the children

Sara was only 9 years old at the time we met. She was born and raised in the South Bronx, and has never been to Mexico. When I asked her to explain why her Mexican parents wanted her to go, but wouldn't take her there themselves, she thought carefully about the question. She knew they wanted to go, but that somehow they could not. Finally she theorized:

> because maybe [if they did go], then they will get sent back to Mexico and then they're not going to be able to come back no more. . . . All they want, all they want, is to make me and my brother meet . . . my parents' parents. Because we never met my grandpa and my grandma.

Vincent, age ten when we met, was also born and raised in the South Bronx. He is the only child of a couple's second marriage. His parents, Jesús and Lidia, had their own families in Puebla, whom they left in order to work in New York. When I asked Vincent to explain why his parents would not visit Mexico with him, he explained, "If [my mother] came, she would have to face the migration thing." Vincent is aware of what is at stake with international traveling. He knows that if his parents left the United States they might not be able to come back. He also knows that his parents' decision to stay in New York with him implies being far from the children that they left behind. Feeling for his half-siblings in Mexico, Vincent elaborated on his commitment to help bridge the two worlds:

> I don't want my brothers to feel like their mother doesn't care about them, but *I* also care about them.

Vincent's and Sara's comments reveal ways in which children take on roles that parents cannot fulfill, carrying on where parents no longer can.

Sara's love of languages

One of the things I first noticed about Sara was how proud she was to speak several languages. She speaks Spanish with her parents and English at school. She taught herself sign

language and practices French on a mobile app she downloaded from the Web. She often uses these skills to help her family and other people around her. When I asked Sara to elaborate on her love of languages, she said:

> Well, I'm interested because I want to communicate with other people and help people who need help . . . 'cause [my parents] got to travel around, throughout the borders and that stuff . . . And [if they knew other languages] they could communicate with other people without having to struggle, and then, I could learn their culture because I know how to speak with them.

Sara knows that learning Spanish will help her communicate with her relatives in Mexico. Her interest in mastering not only Spanish, but also sign language and French shows an effort to facilitate communication. Speaking several languages makes Sara more capable of mediating need and conflict. (Her mother, in fact, has considered enrolling her in a young diplomats program.) I think her skills with languages and mediation reflect Sara's interest in helping bridge different worlds.

Vincent's family divide

Vincent enjoys playing soccer and dreams about becoming an attorney to help straighten out his parents' legal status. Last summer, Vincent visited relatives in Mexico for the first time—including his half-siblings never before met. The experience was both reassuring and confusing. On the one hand, meeting relatives boosted Vincent's confidence in his cultural heritage, little appreciated in the South Bronx. He no longer felt out of place as the child of Mexican immigrants. But, on the other hand, he was exposed to the resentment by family members who felt abandoned by Vincent's parents. In these people's minds, Vincent was partly an obstacle keeping Jesús and Lidia from returning to their old families in Mexico.

Traveling to Mexico is a doubly sensitive topic for Vincent's family. One morning a couple of years ago, Jesús left home for work and did not come back. This put Vincent and Lidia through much anxiety, as they feared that Jesús had been deported. A couple of days later, however, Lidia found out that her husband had gone to Mexico to visit his old family. Jesús eventually came back, but the desperate decision he had made without informing Vincent and Lidia, and the threats he faced crossing the border again without documents

impacted the entire family's plans. Jesús promised never to leave again, adding—perhaps inadvertently—to Vincent's urge to travel, and not only to meet relatives, but also to mediate for his parents.

Sara and not talking

Sara's parents migrated from Puebla almost thirteen years ago while Rebecca (Sara's mother) was pregnant with Yamil, who is two years older than Sara. At that time, Sara's grandfather was also living in the South Bronx. Yamil remembers fondly the scary stories *el abuelo* (his grandfather) used to tell him, and this makes Sara wish he were still around. *El abuelo* got deported before Sara could even meet him, leaving a scar on their family life. As a result, both children have become much more aware of the threat of deportation, and of the importance of visiting relatives abroad while they're still around, of reaching out when their parents cannot.

Sara is interested in learning about her parents' migration journey and about the challenges she herself might face traveling alone back to Mexico. But her understanding is limited by her family's rules about what should and should not get discussed back home. Her brother Yamil resents the deportation of their grandfather and gets noticeably upset when the subject comes up. Feeling sympathetic with him, Sara explained:

> I'm not supposed to talk about [my family in Mexico, and] neither [is] my mom. Because it's kind of sad; she left the relatives and brothers and sisters and all that over there when she came over here. But I don't talk about it to not make them feel sad. Especially my mom, because she's the one who had the hard time. So, I don't talk about it because I don't want to make her cry and think about her mom, her sisters.

Sara is aware of the psychological borders that preserve family peace and avoids bringing back sad memories. Even I avoided such topics—when Yamil's eyes watered up as he spoke about his grandfather, I quickly switched subjects like Sara would have. It might be said that all families have sensitive topics that they work hard to avoid. Researchers say that for immigrant families migration is a particularly hard topic because it touches on family separation, violence, deportation, and other struggles that are difficult for parents and children to process.

How do Sara's family's rules about what is and is not to be discussed affect her ability to assist her family split across borders? They limit Sara's understanding of a place she feels curious about, making it harder to plan for her trip to Mexico. Sara will probably come to demand better explanations when she grows up, or she might even look for answers in different places. The lack of spaces where children like her can talk freely about these topics pushes children to seek information outside the home, without their parents' consent. This is not necessarily bad—it can enable the formation of private spaces where children's curiosity and own needs can thrive. But it is interesting to observe how certain borders protect family members (e.g. from painful memories) while threatening family harmony more generally by highlighting the differences between children's and parents' interests.

Sara's family rules resonate with other families' protective strategies. Most children I interviewed knew that speaking English in Mexico could be a threat to them. If the children of immigrants speak English while visiting relatives, they can make themselves targets of robbers and kidnappers. Therefore, immigrant parents discourage their children from speaking English during their journeys. Avoiding English can be especially challenging for younger children, or for children who are not as fluent in Spanish as they are in English. But fortunately, it is not so much a problem for Sara, Yamil, or Vincent, who have tried hard to gain the skills they need to blend in with locals in Mexico.

Vincent and the borders within families

Vincent's experience meeting his half-siblings in Mexico introduced him to a particular kind of family conflict and gave him an idea of the difficulties of mediating for parents across borders. Forcing a casual tone, he explained:

> I don't want to stay with [my dad's family in Mexico again] because my other brothers say that because of me my dad is over there, so I really don't want to stay with them.

Vincent's concerns are quite valid. Sadly, they also exemplify common experiences of children who visit relatives in Mexico. In *Divided by Borders*, sociologist Joanna Dreby documents how children who were left behind have trouble accepting relationships with step-parents and often view US-born children as a threat to their own nuclear families. This puts children like Vincent in a difficult position. When US-born children travel to their

parents' hometowns to fulfill a family role set out for them, they face resentment along with gratitude, suffering along with joy. Jesús's ex-wife, for example, refused to see Vincent when he tried to bring her gifts. He had to arrange to have them delivered by his half-siblings. Vincent's family conflict can be paralleled, as it often has been by scholars like Dreby, with the experiences of children who live with divorced parents. His story illustrates the broader challenges of children that deal with different households, with relatives who are practically strangers to them, and who may be caught up in the conflicts initiated by adults.

It is important to note that children like Vincent might conceal information about their journeys if they find it unfavorable to their role as mediators—much as immigrants conceal information from their native communities that they consider unfavorable to their identities as successful breadwinners. When I asked Vincent if he had spoken with his parents about the problems he had in delivering the gifts he had brought to Mexico, he looked away. He could have mentioned this fact to his mother when she called him during his trip, but he chose not to. Half excited about his journey and half hesitant about sharing negative experiences, Vincent did not take her calls. He was more worried about meeting parental expectations and displaying a successful image of himself than he was interested in his mother's guidance. By refusing to communicate the disappointments of his visit, Vincent mimicked a common immigrant behavior: suppressing the grim reality of migration in order to honor expectations.

Donkey Politics

One of the things Vincent treasured most about his trip to Mexico was the access he had to nature. When he arrived in New York, he could hardly stop talking about the farm animals he helped feed and walk during his stay. Most of all, Vincent spoke about a baby donkey he adopted after seeing him being born. (And this despite the donkey already having an owner: Vincent's grandmother). Many weeks after his return to the South Bronx, Vincent still spoke about the donkey as a dear possession of his. Whenever his mom talked on the phone with his grandmother in Mexico, Vincent would run and inquire about *mi burrito*.

In one such case, Vincent grabbed the phone and asked his grandmother how his donkey was doing. His grandmother replied, half seriously, that the animal had nothing to eat because Vincent had not sent any money. Her statement clearly expressed an economic

expectation, and 10-year-old Vincent resolved to save money so that the donkey could be fed. Whether he ends up doing this or not is irrelevant. What matters is that, through these kinds of situations, children like Vincent take on transnational roles as providers. Vincent has learned, through this donkey and his grandmother, to think of himself as someone who, like his immigrant parents, should care—emotionally and economically—for relatives who were left behind.

Final reflections

In many works of literature journeys serve as metaphors for personal transformation; they test travelers' characters and become rites of passage. Similarly, this paper overlooks the practical challenges for children traveling alone and focuses instead on the more psychological challenges of traveling—either literally or metaphorically—between the two worlds their families span. The fact that Sara has not yet visited relatives in Mexico has not lessened the challenges facing her while attempting to assist her family across borders. Sadly, however, not traveling has limited her ability to do what she feels she must. Her inability to bring back memories for her parents makes interactions at home especially stiff. Vincent's experience is the opposite. By visiting relatives in Mexico, he has found new ways to serve his family. He discovered that he can not only compensate for his parents' absence from Mexico, but that he can join in caring for his relatives abroad.

One thing I would like to note is how parents' openness about what they expect of their children can make their children's lives easier and improve their relationships. Since Vincent's and Sara's parents have made it so clear that they expect them to visit relatives in Mexico, the children know exactly what is expected of them. Such openness can create healthier relationships than in those families where parents—perhaps afraid of being rejected or being too imposing—refuse to directly state their expectations. Sara's and Vincent's burdens may not be light, but knowing so clearly what the tasks are makes the burdens easier to assume.

It is also important to note that all children do things for their parents that parents could not otherwise accomplish. Children care for younger siblings when parents are away, become emotional therapists when mothers feel down, and attempt to be the successful

professionals that father could not. When it comes to the children of immigrants, the work not only involves but is symbolized by the large bags they carry on their homeland trips.[6] Summer travelers flying from New York to Mexico may occasionally bump into groups of children carrying big nylon bags. By moving these bags (and the goods within them) across borders, the US-born children of immigrants make things—make parenting—happen for their families. In contemplating this situation, we must also consider the cultural baggage that children transport back and forth between families, the implicit and explicit messages they deliver through their visits and through the work they do from abroad. When the US-born children of immigrants connect with relatives in Mexico, they also re-distribute their parents' dreams that were trimmed by undocumented migration.

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