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Place and presence within Salvadoran deportees’ narratives of removal

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Abstract
Based on life history interviews conducted with 1.5 generation Salvadorans who were raised in the United States and then deported to El Salvador, this article examines the displaced subjectivities being produced through intensified deportation regimes. Current theorizations of deportation are extended by examining the transition to illegality experienced by youth who may have thought their place in the United States was secure. Youths’ narratives of removal construct alternative measures of belonging and suggest that the inscription of places within persons cannot be undone merely by removing a person from a particular territory.

Keywords
Citizenship, deportation, El Salvador, territory, United States

In the 21st century, the intensified use of deportation as an immigration enforcement tactic is increasingly removing youth from the country where they were raised. Although deportation appears to be a routine, administrative procedure, scholars of deportation have stressed its destructive nature, likening deportation to structural violence, a natural disaster, and the now-defunct criminal penalty of banishment (De Genova and Peutz, 2010; Kanstroom, 2012; Peutz, 2006; Willen, 2007). Furthermore, deportation’s reach has expanded such that in the United States, even legal permanent residents who have been convicted of relatively minor crimes can be deported (Kanstroom, 2012; Morawetz, 2000). Deportation’s adverse impacts are perhaps most severe for child migrants who may have imagined that their futures were secure but instead discover them to be fixed outside of the country where they now live. Based on life history interviews conducted with Salvadorans who immigrated to the US as children and were deported as adults, I analyze the nature of place within the new displaced subjectivities that are being created by deportation regimes.

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Analyzing displaced subjectivities extends current theorizations of irregularization, that is, the ways that people are made illegal (Squire, 2011), to the broad population – legal as well as undocumented temporarily authorized immigrants – subject to deportation. De Genova (2002: 439; see also Willen, 2007) has argued that deportation is key to irregularization in that, instead of actually deported the undocumented population, deportation policies produce deportability, that is ‘the possibility of deportation, the possibility of being removed from the space of the nation-state,’ a possibility that makes illegalized migrants vulnerable to exploitation. Yet, youth who immigrated as children and were raised in the United States experience deportability differently than do adults. Undocumented children are somewhat shielded from their status. Only when they apply for college, drivers’ licenses, and employment do undocumented children undergo a ‘transition to illegality’ (Gonzales, 2011: 607; see also Abrego, 2011). This transition takes yet a different form in the case of noncitizen children who had temporary legal status or even legal permanent residency, and who become ‘illegal’ after having been convicted of a crime. If such youth are in custody, then irregularization may entail being removed and barred from re-entry.

For deported youth, irregularization is spatialized in at least two respects. First, youth are caught up in what Elana Zilberg (2011: 3) terms ‘neoliberal securitascapes,’ that is, the ‘patterns of circulation that result from the effort of states to police and control the mobility of subjects considered to be dangerous, in this case gang youth and immigrants.’ In the U.S., minority neighborhoods are heavily policed by officers with new authority to investigate immigration violations, while in El Salvador, deported youth have been subject to employment discrimination, social stigma, and police abuse (Decker et al., 2009; Dingeman-Cerda and Coutin, 2012; Eagly, 2010; Rodriguez, 2008; Varsanyi, 2008; Zilberg, 2011). In a neoliberal model of immigration, in which migrant ‘entrepreneurs’ are to finance their home communities through remittances, deportees represent ‘friction’ or failure (Hernandez and Coutin, 2006; Varsanyi, 2008, 2010; Zilberg, 2011). Second, the rights that deportees may have enjoyed in the United States are extinguished with removal. As legal scholar Dan Kanstroom (2012: 167) asks, ‘If a deportee abroad is in “no better position … than any other alien,” does this mean that a sort of legal black hole surrounds the individual, in the way that someone once described Guantanamo Bay detainees?’ The securitascapes that results in policing is thus also, in some respects, a void.

Attending to deported youths’ movement through this void makes two contributions to the literature on children and forced migration. First, it details ways that ‘legally sanctioned’ societal violence is reproduced generationally (Menjívar and Abrego, (2012: 1412; see also Dickson-Gómez, 2002). Many children who immigrated to the United States during the 1980–1992 Salvadoran civil war were separated from family members. When they were deported as adults, they were separated from their own children who were left behind in the United States. As Dreby (2012) notes, such separations produce a ‘pyramid’ of harm, ranging from family dissolution to widespread fear. Second, attending to deportees’ accounts of their own experiences reveals ways that youth have agency. As Orellana et al. (2001: 588, emphasis in original) warn, ‘Scholars who ignore children’s presence and participation in processes of migration, framing them as baggage that weighs down adult migrants, neglect a central axis of family migration, and an important reason why families move across national borders and sustain transnational ties.’
Youths’ accounts of removal destabilize common understandings of the fixity and fluidity of persons and places. For immigrant youth, places become key components of selves, and persons transform the landscapes that they occupy. Deported youths’ narratives of exile articulate an ongoing connection to places and times before deportation, a connection that takes them back psychologically, and in some cases physically, regardless of legal prohibitions on presence. While all individuals, not only those who are deported, may long to revisit places and times to which they no longer have access, for deported youth, articulating knowledge of particular schools, neighborhoods, and street names provides evidence of a prior presence and claim to membership, even though, under current US immigration law, this claim can rarely be granted legal recognition. In youths’ narratives, removed landscapes – that is, landscapes that are key to youths’ lives but to which they no longer have access – continue to record almost a ghostly presence of youth who are no longer there. Landscapes are revealed to be both fluid and fixed, in that they too move, even as they remain part of youths’ selves.

Methods

My analysis is based on life history interviews conducted in 2008 in El Salvador with 42 adult Salvadoran men who immigrated to the United States as children (defined as under 18, though most were pre-adolescent), and then were deported to El Salvador. The majority of individuals interviewed left El Salvador during the 1980–1992 Salvadoran civil war, which resulted in the deaths of 75,000 (PNUD, 2005), the internal displacement of over a half million, and the emigration of another 1 million (Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001). The Central American Resource Center and Homies Unidos, two Salvadoran non-governmental organizations that provided assistance to migrants, helped to recruit interviewees. All interviewees received a small monetary compensation for their time.

On average, interviewees were 10.6 years old at the time that they left El Salvador, and had lived an average of 16.2 years outside of El Salvador before being deported. Approximately half of the interview sample had become legal permanent residents, while the other half was undocumented, temporarily authorized, or of unknown legal status. Most had been convicted of a crime prior to being deported. In some cases, the crime was quite serious, such as homicide, but most often convictions were for fighting, drug possession, joy-riding, petty theft, gun possession, or driving while intoxicated – activities that, unfortunately, are part of youth culture in some communities. The majority of interviewees were deported between 1996 and 2008, a period when immigration reforms in the United States expanded the number deportable offenses (Kanstroom, 2007; Morawetz, 2000). Interviewees thus were caught up in the intensification of immigration enforcement that has occurred over the past decade and a half.

To protect interviewees while conducting research on sensitive topics, only individuals over 18 years of age were interviewed, hence interviewees described their childhoods, but were not themselves children at the time of the interview. Pseudonyms have been used throughout, to protect confidentiality. Interviewees were advised that they did not have to answer questions that they considered sensitive, and were also invited to introduce topics that they felt were important. Finally, in the interests of reciprocity, I
answered any questions that interviewees had about my own background. Interviewees appeared to appreciate the opportunity to talk about their experiences, and to view the interview as a chance to denounce the inhumanity of deportation policies.

‘I was there’: Biographies in place

Interviewees’ life narratives were replete with references to sites, knowledge, and experiences that appeared designed to counter the erasure of belonging that had occurred when they were ordered to be removed. Sitting across from me at a table in the offices of a San Salvador-based NGO, Herbert Osorio, who was deported in absentia after failing to attend a court hearing insisted, ‘I was there. I could be American, I could be from North America’ (emphasis added). Collectively, such markers of ‘having been there,’ narrated by youth who had formally been removed, who were forbidden to legally re-enter the United States, and who were struggling to adapt to life in El Salvador, underlined that belonging ought not to be invalidated by the unauthorized entry, undocumented status, or criminal convictions that had resulted in these individuals’ deportation. The measures of belonging suggested by interviewees formed part of an alternative evidentiary grid, one that is not entirely without legal significance, given that in the past, some immigration proceedings assessed whether a noncitizen’s equities in the United States outweighed the social harm associated with a criminal conviction. Nonetheless, as of 1996, US immigration law has elevated criminality or a technical violation (such as failing to attend a hearing) above consideration of such equities. It was this elevation of legal measures above other connections that deportees particularly challenged.

A key form of ‘evidence’ of presence proffered during interviews was the naming of particular locations that were important in interviewees’ childhood and young adulthood. For example, when Edgar Ramirez described his elementary school experience, he named each school that he had attended: ‘I was in 4th grade in elementary school. It was called Walgrove Elementary school. On Venice [Blvd]. … [Then] I went to Kittridge. Kittridge elementary school. I started 6th grade. And then, I finished that and went to Jr. High. Madison Jr. High.’ This recitation of schools, which evokes a résumé, locates Edgar’s childhood not only in Southern California, but also in public institutions that teach children about the United States. Jorge and Pablo Ramirez, two brothers who had been carpenters prior to being deported for minor offenses, stated proudly that they had performed custom finishing on a number of important buildings in Georgia, including the state capital building, the Atlanta courthouse, an aquarium, and Georgia Institute of Technology. These buildings presumably still bore the traces of their carpentry skill, even though Pablo and Jorge had been removed.

In addition to citing places, interviewees also recalled their localized US knowledge. Amilcar Mejía, Pablo Ramírez, and Jorge Ramírez laughed at their shared memory of the buses that they had ridden in kindergarten:

\[A:\] ESL [English as a Second Language] came in [to the schools] when I was in kindergarten. I used to go, like they said, I used to ride the bus for 20 minutes.

\[J:\] The little buses?
A: The little buses. [P and J laugh] To go to ESL. The yellow ones with the tinted windows.

David Mardoqueo, Enrique Lemos, and Carlos Alas shared memories of childhood games they had played in school, particularly those that involved teasing girls:

D: I liked messing around, especially with the girls. I remember we’d [he touches E to demonstrate] ‘I got you!’ And we’d run off! And play around. The girls used to get mad. But I enjoyed it.

E: Do you remember ‘Bloody Mary in the Mirror’?

D: [all laugh] ‘Bloody Mary in the Bathroom.’

C: ‘Give me your lunch ticket.’ [They laugh.]

Interviewees also placed themselves in the United States by citing details of their arrivals there. Lorenzo Gómez recalled the date of his arrival: ‘So we finally got to the US. We were in San Diego. And in San Diego, a black Regal, a black car picked us up. And a lady drove us to Los Angeles. And that was on October 31, 1978. Halloween day.’ Victor Castillo actually brought his US documents to the interview, to show me. Victor had been adopted by a US citizen father at the age of 8, an act that generated a new birth certificate but that did not prevent him from being deported almost 40 years later. My notes from the interview read, ‘He handed it to me. Sure enough it was a birth certificate issued in California, with his adoptive father listed as the parent, and with El Salvador still listed as the birthplace.’ To Victor, this ‘rebirth,’ documented by the state of California, placed him legally in the United States.

The gap between perceiving oneself as almost a US citizen and being deportable baffled interviewees, who articulated deep connections to place. US childhoods, cultural knowledge, memories, relatives, and language skills were all cited as indelible markers of belonging. Francisco Ramírez stated, ‘I actually grew up in New York … I had grown up in the States, basically. I went through elementary school, high school, junior high, having my first daughter there, being married there. My entire life was basically there. … I had grown up there, my culture was there, I had adapted it to be my own, because I had grown up there.’ Likewise, Amilcar Mejía insisted, ‘We thought we were US citizens. Our life is over there. Everything, our memories, our childhood is over there. We don’t have no childhood over here. We don’t know what it is to play with a top [as some children do in El Salvador]. With marbles. Why? In the States, we don’t play with things like that. What memories do we have here?’ Roberto Orellana explicitly rejected birth as a basis for nationality, stating, ‘I don’t think being an American is where you were born. It’s where you were raised and the memories you have and most of your life.’ Numerous interviewees referred to the United States, rather than El Salvador, as ‘back home.’

‘Every day they taught us US history’:

**Inscription and extrication**

According to the alternative measures of belonging cited by interviewees – arrival, presence, localized knowledge, deep connections to place – youths’ childhoods had *inscribed*
them in US communities to the point that their lives were in many ways indistinguishable from those around them. As Norberto Manzano, who had moved to the United States in 1988 at the age of 17, explained, ‘I became adapted to US culture, because I went to school and every day they taught us US history, I pledged allegiance to the flag. I was forgetting that I was a Salvadoran.’ Nonetheless, their inscription in particular schools, neighborhoods, and institutions also became the basis for their eventual extrication, as most were located in low-income, racially segregated, heavily policed communities where key aspects of youth culture, such as gang membership, drug use, and petty theft, were criminalized. Some of the very practices that made these migrant youth part of communities therefore also put them at risk of being removed. As they assumed adult responsibilities, youth found that the sense of normalcy they had enjoyed as children was disrupted as the legal differences between themselves and their peers became only too clear (Abrego, 2011; Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales and Chavez, 2012).

Interviewees’ descriptions of their childhoods in the United States stressed the normalcy of their daily lives, even as some mentioned that, as recent immigrants, they were set apart. Interviewees characterized their US school experiences, such as hanging out at the YMCA, playing basketball in the public parks, joining sports teams, earning trophies, being on the honor roll, dating, and making friends, as typical. Carlos Alas, who grew up in Houston, described himself as ‘an average kid.’ Yet, even as they became joined US communities, interviewees were also set apart in key ways. Yago Javier Ayala who moved from El Salvador to Los Angeles when he was in elementary school, recalled feeling completely lost: ‘I remember the first day of school, I cried! Everything was strange to me. I went to Vermont school. I saw the buildings, and everything. I was lost!’ Jorge and Pablo Ramírez marveled that their New York school, which, at the time of their arrival in the early 1990s, was predominantly African American, had created an English as a Second Language program for their benefit. Jorge recalled, ‘After a while the school put us in a program to teach us English. ESL. They didn’t used to have ESL in that school, it was all Black people. They put us in ESL, and we were like, “Dang!”’ ESL classes treated Jorge, Pablo, and other youth as community members who deserved services, but also as ‘different,’ in that they could not speak English.

Unfortunately, part of the normalcy experienced by these migrant youth was crime, gang activity, racial tensions, and a police presence. As Portes et al. (2005: 1000; see also Portes and Rumbaut, 2001) note, ‘The central question is not whether the second generation will assimilate to American society, but to what segment of that society it will assimilate.’ Many interviewees described becoming part of schools and neighborhoods riven by ethnic rivalries, gang relationships, petty delinquency, and encounters with the police. These narratives, though obtained in El Salvador, provide something of a social geography of US urban neighborhoods. Victor Castillo, for example, described how the lack of parks in his neighborhood forced youth to gather in other youths’ territories, creating hostility:

It was a barrio. … And you could only enter through Rose Hills. On the border of Whittier and Pico Rivera. … They jumped me in when I was 13, into the gang of that barrio. … And because the police, the Pico Rivera sheriffs entered, and there were no parks. Our barrio was the only place that had no parks. So to go somewhere else to go to the park, we ran into problems [due
to gang rivalries]. So we were concentrated there. And there were a lot of us. So that’s where I lost myself, in drugs, the police bringing me to jail.

As they became inscribed in urban neighborhoods, and sometimes also in gangs, many youth also acquired a criminal record. Manuel Urquilla, for example, described his own petty offending as part of ‘hanging out’ with friends and as ‘not uncommon.’ Youths’ localized knowledge of neighborhood dynamics included a familiarity with the youth authority, juvenile hall, and second opportunity high schools; the result of limited opportunities in the inner city and of the criminalization of youth – particularly racialized minority and immigrant – cultures.

Juxtaposed with interviewees’ accounts of being caught up in neighborhoods where crime was common and where they acquired criminal records, were narratives of entry into the workforce, education in US schools, and training in particular vocations. These narratives appear to claim a moral worth that, interviewees contended, had been inadequately recognized. These accounts were also citational in that, much like résumés, they listed well-known occupations, employers, and institutions, thus further linking interviewees to US landscapes. Victor Castillo, for example, named the retail outlets where he worked, the crafts he mastered, and the county where he worked: ‘I’ve done everything. McDonalds, when I was 16. K-Mart, selling with a tie. Unloading trailers. Warehousing. Mechanic. Various things. But I went to a technical school for drafting. And carpentry. I liked it and was trained. When I worked in South Orange County.’ Likewise, Lorenzo Gómez re-enacted his job as an AT&T operator for me during an interview.

Citing jobs they had held at recognized US businesses, the services they had provided to others, and the positive responses that they had received put forward indirect membership claims and challenged the rationale behind their deportation. Reynaldo Rivas, for instance, spoke of his educational achievements: ‘I’m a graduate. I went to junior college, De Vry. And then because of my intelligence and football experience, they sent me to Penn State.’ Language skills acquired as youth were also a focus in some interviews. Lorenzo Gómez particularly stressed his English skills:

I have very good grammar, and I can speak English fluently. That helps me to get a better job here. Or work as an English teacher. Because I can write good too. I have very good spelling and grammar. And that is something that, as a child, when I was growing up in elementary, I started to notice … that I was in love with the English language at that point. You know? And I was so fascinated with it that, I became a little book worm. I would grab books, go through them, and read them.

English language skills are a prerequisite for naturalization and are sometimes used as a measure of acculturation in immigration cases (Coutin, 2003), while ‘English-only’ initiatives have been used by nativists to challenge the alleged corruption of US culture by foreigners (Chavez, 2008; Perea, 1997; Sánchez, 1997). Given the association between English skills and US citizenship, Lorenzo’s depiction of himself as a bookish child who was in love with English stakes a claim to belonging. Why, interviewees asked, had they been removed given their past contributions and future potentials? Such questions challenged the notion that they were criminals or aliens and once again emphasized their value as persons – a value that was denied through deportation.
‘They just uproot you and send you away with nothing’: Exile

Interviewees’ narratives of exile highlighted both the integration that they had achieved as children and the unjustly destructive capacity of deportation. Deportation, these interviewees contended, does not merely relocate people; it also destroys lives, disrupts relationships, and devalues or even erases histories lived in the United States. In emphasizing the violent character of deportation, interviewees depicted deportation as illegitimate and as disproportionate to their misdeeds. Deportees thus echoed the notion, circulating in some legal circles, that deportation is a punishment rather than a mere administrative action (Kanstroom, 2007). This punishment was intensified by a general rejection that they encountered as deportees in El Salvador (Dingeman-Cerda and Coutin, 2012; Zilberg, 2011). At the same time, some interviewees described overcoming at least certain aspects of removal by recreating something of their US lives. Such accounts suggest that deportation removes not only persons, but also something of the landscapes to which they are attached.

During interviews, deportees struggled to articulate the depth of the losses that they had experienced due to being deported. Victor Castillo, who had lived in the United States for 41 years before being deported, did so both physically and verbally. When he arrived at the offices of a community organization where our interview was to take place, he asked me how long I had been in El Salvador. When I told him that I had arrived two days earlier, he said, ‘Excuse me,’ and, to my surprise, leaned over and smelled the sleeve of my shirt, saying, ‘Ah! The smell of home!’ Later, during the interview itself, he explained how unbelievable it was to him that he had been deported:

My heart was in the United States. … I was ready to serve my country, I was a registered voter, I voted for governor of CA, I voted for presidents, my whole life was over there, my wife, my kids, I was a total American, I was American in my heart, my mind. And for them to just uproot me, and just throw me [away]. … In my heart, I think that I’m never going to be able to accept it. Because 41 years there? A whole life! And paying taxes, everything there! Social security. And suddenly, nothing. What happened to all of that? How did I go wrong? They just uproot you and send you away with nothing.

Similar accounts of being discarded arose in other interviews. Marcus López was apprehended by Immigration officials during a visit to his probation officer. Although he had been complying with the terms of his probation, and trying to turn his life around, he lost everything that he had worked for:

I lost everything. My car just got thrown in the streets. … I had two cars. They were under my name. They just disappeared. The house, all the stuff in the house, my brother had to just throw it away. … I had achieved so many things. They just basically got torn up.

Likewise, in a story that echoed the experiences of other deportees, Pablo Ramírez described the literal destruction of his legal permanent residency card by the immigration officials who detained him at his home, after he had been convicted of possessing a concealed weapon:
We had papers. We had our green cards. And we thought with the green card, we were citizens, basically. I remember that when ICE came to pick us up at the house, they said, ‘Where’s your green card?’ And usually, I used to carry it in my wallet. I took it out and said, ‘So what’re you going to do now?’ And he’s like, ‘Well, you ain’t an American citizen. So you’re going back to your country no matter what.’ And right then and there, he just, boom! Flipped it over and broke it in half. Just grabbed it, and flipped it over, and pffft, ripped it.

These accounts highlight the destructive aspects of deportation, the ways that youth who conceptualize themselves as ‘citizens, basically’ and who were going about their lives, accumulating homes, cars, and relationships, being ‘total Americans,’ find their experiences in the United States erased, converted into something like ‘trash,’ that is expendable. Their identity documents, achievements, and even families were ‘torn up.’ Furthermore, in stressing their losses, deportees cite the sorts of ties to spouses, children, and country that they believe should not be severed. For example Norbert Manzano said, ‘I was accustomed to the town where I lived. Like a stable citizen. I didn’t plan to ever move from there. My children were born in that town.’ How, he seems to ask, can someone be sent away from the town where his children were born? Likewise, Edgar Ramírez stated, ‘My country was the US, it wasn’t El Salvador. I learned to speak English, to get along with people, it was another atmosphere. I had friends, relationships with other people, friendships. And suddenly, to be sent away? … I felt alone, abandoned, destroyed.’ These comments link lives, locations, and histories in ways that, to these deportees, cannot be disconnected without simultaneously destroying the persons who are being displaced.

The sense of being uprooted was exacerbated by hostility that many deportees encountered in El Salvador, as Zilberg’s notion of the securit scape conveys. To give one example, Lorenzo Gómez entered the United States in 1978 at the age of 8. Despite becoming a legal permanent resident in the early 1980s, he was convicted on felony drug charges in 1989, and, in 1996, when he was picked up for a speeding ticket, Lorenzo learned that he had retroactively become deportable. In 2000, when he was again arrested on drug-related charges, the order was executed. Between 2000 and 2008, Lorenzo returned to the US twice, only to be prosecuted for unlawful re-entry and deported again. Lorenzo described his precarious circumstances:

I don’t know anybody in this country. No friends. No family, no support. I live in the streets. I’m homeless. If I could keep my clothes clean it’s because some guy is helping me out where I can wash my clothes and shower. But other than that, I don’t have a place of my own. I’m going through an extreme and exceptional hardship. It’s what I told the judge! ‘Sir. This is what I’m going to go through. Please, help me.’ They don’t want to listen. They think everyone can go back home and live happily ever after. It doesn’t work like that! I have my daughters back home. My mom, dad, brothers, sister, and I’m the only one here. So I would like to go back home. I really would.

The ‘irregularization’ that Lorenzo experienced in the United States was reproduced in El Salvador, but in another form. Through deportation, Lorenzo was separated from his own children just as, at a younger age, he had been separated from his own relatives through emigration.
A few deportees recreated something of their US lives and thus tried to transport the landscapes from which they had been removed. For example, Roberto Orellana told me that he was able to imagine that he was still in the United States:

At the house, it’s totally 100% English. My sister-in-law, she was raised in Kentucky too. Her husband, he was raised in L.A. So her family and me, when we get together, we speak nothing but English. The baby? We don’t talk to him nothing but English. … And sometimes, I don’t know if you remember, there’s a lot of helicopters [in Los Angeles] at night. Tch-tch-tch-tch. [Roberto’s imitation of the sound of helicopters.] So right here, sometimes when one passes by, I just close my eyes and I feel the breeze at night. I could picture I’m [there]. I miss the whole thing a lot.

Deportees who had secured jobs at call centers located in El Salvador proudly cited instances when their customers had recognized their Americanization, as in the following exchange:

Pablo Ramírez: Sometimes people call me, and they say, ‘Thank God I’m speaking to someone in the States!’ And inside of me, I’m laughing out loud!

Amilcar Mejía: And I’m not in the States.

Jorge Ramírez: They ask you, ‘Where’re you located at?’ And I say, ‘I’m in Central America. El Salvador.’ They’re like, ‘What? I’m calling over there?’

Pablo: They’re like, ‘Am I being charged for calling over there?’

Likewise, Ed Casals and Frank Sandoval, who also worked for US companies’ call centers located in El Salvador, recounted instances in which they surprised customers with their cultural knowledge:

Ed Casals: The other day, this customer called me, right. I answered the phone. The dude was like, ‘Where are you located? Central America?’ I’m like, ‘Naw, downtown San Salvador.’ ‘Where the f—— is that at?’ I’m like, ‘Central America, El Salvador, Sir.’ ‘Man, you guys don’t know nothing about the States.’ I’m like, ‘Alright, let’s hear it, right.’ I was like, ‘Do you know anything about my nation?’ He goes, ‘No.’ I’m like, ‘I know pretty much everything about your nation.’ He goes, ‘Tell me the Pledge of Allegiance.’ Boom! And it came right away; like, ‘Where the fuck have you been that you know it like that?’ ‘It’s where I’ve been all my life, in California, Sir. I was there and now I’m in this different country. This is my nation and I’m proud to actually take your culture.’ You know and that’s why he always asks for me.

Susan: So, you really impressed him. Wow.

Ed: You know, a lot of people actually call me and tell – and sometimes I tell them, ‘Where you located?’ I never say ‘Central America, El Salvador.’ I say ‘Downtown San Salvador.’ And they like, ‘What part of the States is that?’ I’m like, ‘No, it’s not in the States, dude. Central
America, El Salvador, back into Guatemala and Honduras. And they go, ‘Man, your English is good!’ And I’m like, ‘Thank you!’ No, but sometimes it happens, and I told my wife that, sometimes. And they are like, ‘Dude, you sound like a gringo!’ Damn! We actually, we still took our culture from the States.

By citing their cultural knowledge, their English language skills, and others’—especially Americans’—recognition of their Americanization, these deportees counter the rejection that they experienced through deportation. They also attest that rather than being aliens or foreigners, they *belong* in the United States. By asserting such ties, speaking English, and ‘taking’ their culture from the States,’ these deportees defied removal, giving landscapes and territories a degree of portability and permeability.

**Conclusion: Displaced subjectivities**

These narratives pose a deep challenge to the assumptions about space and movement that underlie deportation policies. Deportation is usually thought to move people while keeping territory intact, but there is a sense in which territory itself is removed through deportation, while the people who are deported also remain, in some sense, present. Landscapes are ‘removed’ from the lives of deported youth, but as their social relations are disrupted, as quasi-citizens are exiled, and as diasporic US communities form abroad (Kanstroom, 2012), the vividness of these landscapes intensifies for those who are deported. Landscapes become part of memories, part of testimonies, part of stories that are recounted not only to visiting researchers but also to peers and family members, and that therefore become components of social capital that can damn or uplift the teller. Though these spaces were inhabited in the past, removed landscapes are reinvoked in the present. As interviewees insisted, they were there. And because they were there, something of these removed individuals was left behind, a trace of their former presence, perhaps a child, a school transcript, a discarded possession, a building on which they left their mark. As through that trace, something of the territory that they inhabited travels with them. Deportation produces lacerations of the land, skin, and psyche. Gangs named after US streets — Diececoho or the 18th Street gang — inhabit El Salvador (Baker-Cristales, 2004; Zilberg, 2011), people recreate spaces in which English is spoken and US holidays are celebrated. Understanding the geographic realities to which migration and enforcement are giving rise requires attending to such dynamics.

Deportees’ accounts also highlight the punitive nature of spatial tactics of removal. After having been lulled into thinking that they had a permanent place in the United States, deportees experienced a ‘transition to illegality’ (Gonzales, 2011) that involved stripping them of any legal status they had been granted in the United States, and abruptly removing them to a territory that they experienced as foreign. Indeed, the deep losses that deportees describe suggest that deportation should be placed alongside other forms of removal, for example, of Native Americans to reservations, or of displaced persons during political upheaval (De Genova and Peutz, 2010). As a spatial tactic, deportation shares features of these other removals. These include disregarding family relationships, erasing ties to a homeland, and defining the removed individual as ‘foreign,’ and as
indicated in some of the narratives, as less than human (see also Mountz, 2010). Since 2008, when the data for this article were collected, the hardships associated with deportation have likely intensified. Under the Obama administration, deportations have reached record highs (Kanstroom, 2012). While some undocumented youth have been able to qualify for Deferred Action – a stay of deportation and temporary work authorization – on the basis of the years they have lived in the United States and their educational achievements, the continued focus on apprehending and deporting so-called ‘criminal aliens’ has meant that other youth are being permanently removed. The ‘legal violence’ (Menjívar and Abrego, 2012) of emigration is reproduced generationally through deportation.

Finally, the resonance across these narratives, recounted by individuals who, in many instances, had different legal experiences, came from different parts of the United States, and immigrated at different times, also highlights the key role of territory in shaping children’s subjectivity. The landscapes that deportees incite haunt them, but they also haunt these landscapes. Their accounts record their continued, almost ghostly presence, in the places they once were. Elana Zilberg (2004: 774) observed that after she interviewed deported gang members, for her, ‘Los Angeles’s urban landscape became saturated with the narratives of these people whom I had encountered in El Salvador, and – even more hauntingly – by those who had since died in the streets of San Salvador. I felt this not just as time warp but also like space warp.’ The removal of the youth whose words appear in this article is a trauma that leaves a mark. It is thus not unlike the presence that continues to haunt places where violent acts took place. Allen Feldman (1991: 67) describes such haunting as a ‘disordering of space’ that ‘is registered in its divorce from linear time.’ He writes that through such transgression, the future leaks into the present and the past returns. Similarly, the landscapes that are revisited through deportees’ narratives defy linear notions of time, resulting in spatial disorder. Youth who are displaced through deportation do not merely disappear, rather, their continued presence, through the narratives that they recount and the traces they leave behind, constitutes an ongoing challenge to the morality and legitimacy of spatial tactics of enforcement, especially when applied to those who immigrated as children.

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**Notes**

1. Although deportation is experienced as highly punitive, it is not technically a punishment, but rather is an administrative procedure. Legal scholars have argued that, particularly with the increased confluence between immigration and criminal law, removal ought to be considered
a punishment and subject to the same due process requirements – such as the exclusionary rule and the right to state-appointed legal counsel – as are criminal proceedings (Chacon, 2010; Eagly, 2010; Kanstroom, 2007).

2. Exceptions include attempting to travel outside of the United States, being apprehended by immigration authorities, or accessing public benefits.

References


