# Offshore Migrant Workers: Return Migrants in Mexico's English-Speaking Call Centers

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*This article examines the offshore bilingual (English/Spanish) call centers in Mexico City that serve as the entry into the labor market for young Mexican return migrants. Thanks to the English skills and cultural capital they gained from their experience in the United States, they are able to compete with more-skilled workers and are better suited to manage the cultural dimension of this transnational labor. Return migrants become stuck in this economic niche, however, owing to a lack of professional possibilities outside of the sector.*

**Keywords:** return migration, Mexican 1.5 generation, offshore call centers, labor market incorporation, life stories

In joining the "new immigrant labor market niches" debate in the United States, this article analyzes an economic niche on the other side of the southern border: offshore call centers in Mexico City. It is well known that American firms make use of offshore call centers' services to fulfill a wide range of purposes: customer assistance, contact centers, banking, marketing and sales activities, technical support, and even health care services. With information and communication technologies (ICT) putting customers and workers separated by thousands of miles in direct contact, we are forced to rethink national and international divisions of labor (Freeman and Soete 1994; Richardson and Belt 2001).

In the late 1990s, ICT permitted India to become "the call center to the world," a role now filled by the Philippines (Lee 2015). Meanwhile, a strong call center industry developed in Latin American countries to offer bilingual services to an English-speaking market that increasingly includes a demand for Spanish-speaking services. To compete with India and the Philippines, Latin American call centers promote their higher cultural proximity to the United States. In Mexico, the majority of employees in call centers are students and graduates of the local universities (Da Cruz and Fouquet 2010; Micheli Thirión 2007, 2011).

How are offshore call centers in Mexico relevant to the debate in the United States about new immigrant labor market niches? Recently, one group of employees has been growing in size and even becoming, in some call centers, the main workforce: Mexican return migrants

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from the United States. These are people who have been expelled from the United States and who, after returning to Mexico, enter this labor market niche and work directly with American customers located in the United States. Indeed, offshore call centers in Mexico can be considered extensions of the U.S. labor market beyond its political borders.

In this article, I examine how Mexican return migrants from the United States become workers at offshore call centers that cater to the U.S. market. I show that certain attributes of this migrant group account for their expertise in the skills necessary to participate in this labor market niche: their life experience in the United States, their mastery of the English language, and their knowledge of the cultural aspects of everyday life in the United States. This knowledge of U.S. culture compensates to some degree for their lack of educational qualifications for jobs that, despite being considered nonqualified, require high-skilled workers (Frenkel et al. 1998).

The article draws from research I conducted in Mexico City from 2010 to 2013, during which time I interviewed forty-three young return migrants employed in English-speaking call centers. I used a mixed method—a combination of biographical interviews, group interviews, and participant observation of everyday life with a select group from the sample. Observation took place during interviewees' free time. The biographical interview—an established method in migration studies (Rivera Sánchez 2015)—is the "method par excellence" when it comes to grasping such "lived experiences" (Demazière 2008, 16). It allowed me to understand the three phases of our interviewees' migration process: their life in the United States, their return to Mexico, and, above all, the pivotal process of deciding to return (for those who were not being deported). Life stories allow us to locate and understand such an important moment in the life trajectory, which can be identified as a "turning point" or bifurcation: the key moment when individuals question perhaps their entire life trajectory (Hughes 1997; Bidart 2009). This method also allowed me to collect in-depth descriptions of the labor insertion process in Mexico and call center work activity.

My sample is divided into two groups: those who migrated to the United States as adults and those who migrated as minors with their parents. The latter group is defined as the 1.5 generation of migrants (Rumbaut 2004). The young people in my sample had lived all their lives in the United States as undocumented immigrants, and they experienced their arrival back in Mexico as more akin to emigration than to a "return." The life trajectories of both those who were forced to return and those who decided to leave instead of accepting the conditions of life as an undocumented adult in the United States were highly subject to U.S. immigration laws (Gonzales 2011).

I set the stage by discussing the literature on return migration and labor market integration and the specific case of the Mexican 1.5 generation. I then explore features of offshore call centers in Mexico and Central America, focusing on the cultural component of this transnational labor. After describing my research method and the characteristics of my sample, I review empirical data on return migrant labor incorporation into Mexico City call centers. The article concludes with some final observations.

## THE LABOR MARKET INCORPORATION OF RETURN MIGRANTS

Return migration is not a new topic in migration studies in Mexico, but it has never been more than a minor field of study, one that up until recently was limited to analysis of the return phenomenon in rural areas. However, the increase in unemployment in the United States due to the Great Recession, which led an unprecedented number of returns to Mexico, has prompted a need for further study.

From 2005 to 2010, 824,000 migrants returned to Mexico, three times more than the period between 1995 and 2000 (Giorguli Saucedo and Gutiérrez 2012) This sudden growth in the number of returns has renewed interest in the topic (Gandini, Lozano-Ascencio, and Gaspar Olvera 2015), especially with regard to the high number of people who have returned since 2008 and their reinsertion into the professional Mexican labor market (Mendoza Cota 2013; Padilla and Jardón Hernández 2014). These studies aim to understand the ex-

tent to which return migrants invest savings in their original community and invest skills acquired from their migrant experience in the United States. This approach is limited, as it has examined data on return migration from a geographic perspective only; in other words, it mainly focuses on migrant communities of origin. Such a focus may not account for return migration to someplace other than the point of origin of the migration process.

Return mobilities can be much more complex than the original migration (Cassarino 2004; Rallu 2007). People do not always go back to the place they came from, and their movements can also be influenced by the state of the labor market in their country of origin. Additionally, research on small cities and rural areas often depicts return migrants as entrepreneurs. This bias becomes evident in the high percentage of business owners emerging from these studies. Consequently, I decided to focus in my study of return migration, not on the community of origin, but rather on a labor sector characterized by a significant number of returnees: bilingual call centers offering English/Spanish service.

Before describing the population I studied, it is important to review the theories that draw an analytical link between return migration and professional reinsertion. Despite the fact that return migration is viewed less and less frequently as the final step of the migratory process, it is still analyzed under the prism of failure or success (De Haas, Fokkema, and Fihri 2015). This view generally conceives of two outcomes: lasting settlement in the community of origin or remigration (Rivera Sánchez 2015). What determines an individual's outcome? According to the structural approach, it is the context of the society of origin, more than competencies acquired and earnings accumulated during the migratory experience, that shapes the possibility—or the impossibility—of making use of them (Cassarino 2004). From Cerase (1974) on, it is understood that if the social or economic context is not receptive to innovation (whether economic or social), a return tends to lead to failure.

Therefore, transnational ties show their importance in that the longer migrants are absent from their community of origin, the more remote their expectations will be from the current context, owing to the changes that have occurred during their absence (Gmelch 1980). This is why successful return migrants tend to be those who regularly visit their homeland to keep in touch and remain socially visible in their community of origin (Conway, Potter, and St. Bernard 2009; Massey et al. 1987). These two aspects—the context in the home country and the duration of the migration or absence—determine whether the migrant will be able to transfer the human capital acquired during the migration experience back to the homeland (Battistella 2004). Together with the situation in the home country (security, politics, the economic situation, and so on), the local context of migrants' point of origin and the duration of their absence are the three main factors to consider when determining a good "return preparedness" (Cassarino 2014). It is also important to consider migrants' capacity to mobilize other resources such as tangible resources (such as financial capital), intangible resources (such as contacts, relationships, skills, and networks), and social capital (ibid).

## THE MEXICAN 1.5 GENERATION IN THE UNITED STATES AND THEIR RETURN TO MEXICO

Most of the studies about return migration analyze "traditional migrants": those who emigrated as adults to work abroad and who later come back to their home country. The issues associated with return become increasingly complex when the migrants returning are those same migrants' children. Whether they are second- or third-generation, and whether or not they emigrated as children with their parents, the issues are not the same.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the return of later-generation migrants has been at the center of a vast scholarly production. Their returns have been defined as next-generation returns (Conway, Potter, and St. Bernard 2009), transgenerational returns (Durand 2004), ethnic returns (Tsuda 2003), and counter-diaspora returns (King and Christou 2011). These studies show that even after two generations, people still migrate to the country of their parents or even their grandparents, not to a random other country. The reasons they cite for this decision

range from sentimental affection and idealization of their country of origin and culture (Tsuda 2003; King and Christou 2011) to more pragmatic economic and social concerns.

The main economic and social concerns motivating their decisions to return are factors related to the difficulties they face in the United States: unemployment, racism, lack of family support, and so on (Conway, Potter, and St. Bernard 2009; Phillips and Potter 2009; Potter, Conway, and St. Bernard 2009; Reynolds 2011). In other words, they decide to return to their own or their parents' homeland in search of a better "quality of life" (Phillips and Potter 2009). These young people are ill prepared for return migration, mainly because of their weak ties with their origin country. But for some of them, the decision to return is a response to a more structured mobility strategy, especially among the university graduates, who take into account the lower competition in their country of origin (Conway, Potter, and St. Bernard 2009). The returns of these migrants tend to be more successful because they are better prepared and they have visited their origin country more frequently before they return.

This article analyzes a previously unstudied category of return migrants in Mexico: the 1.5 generation (Rumbaut 2004). This concept encapsulates the singular socialization experience of those who neither were born in their host country nor immigrated as adults. This distinction from the second-generation group is particularly relevant among Mexican migrants to the United States because the migratory status of Mexico's 1.5 generation is very often marked by its irregularity. As a consequence, these migrants' socialization is different from that of the children of Mexican immigrants born in the United States, who have American citizenship. Thus, it is relevant to distinguish 1.5-generation migrants from those who arrived as adults (first-generation) and whose socialization has been mainly linked to work. For the 1.5 generation, by contrast, school has been a central part of their socialization.

The Mexican second generation in the United States experiences numerous social and economic disadvantages: high college dropout rates; low rates of mastery of the English language compared to other immigrant communities; racism; a high incidence of incarceration; and one of the lowest rates of economic mobility. These disadvantages can be explained in part by the disappearance of the blue-collar jobs that once helped immigrants transition to more-qualified jobs (Waldinger and Feliciano 2004; Waldinger, Lim, and Cort 2007). The 1.5 generation suffers from these same difficulties, but these immigrants must also cope with the critical problem of irregular migratory status.

Their schooling experience also does not differ from that of their documented peers. Protected during their K–12 education by the Supreme Court's 1982 ruling in *Plyler v. Doe,* they adopt the same meritocratic American values transmitted by the school system as their schoolmates (Abrego 2006; Rojas García 2013). The sixteenth birthday marks the rupture of this protective sphere: as 1.5-generation migrants seek their driver's licenses and their first jobs, they have their first experiences as adults outside of the schooling system. These are the first moments when the young undocumented 1.5-generation Mexicans experience through praxis the implications of their migratory status.

In his study of the undocumented Mexican 1.5 generation's transition to adulthood, Roberto Gonzales (2011) calls this moment the phase of "discovering." He identifies the next phase as "learning to be illegal," a stage marked by drastically reduced social and economic expectations—especially for those who were academically successful and were planning to attend college (Gonzales 2011; Gonzales and Chavez 2012). The last phase, identified as "coping," is the moment when individuals once and for all abandon their expectations of upward social mobility and cope with all the implications and limitations of their illegal status. In my research, I identified return to Mexico as an alternative to the dashed hopes of the phase of coping; many 1.5-generation migrants saw return as an opportunity to break the glass ceiling they faced in the United States (Da Cruz 2014).

Before exploring the experiences of the 1.5-generation return migrants in the Mexican labor market and comparing them to the experiences of first-generation return migrants, let

us first consider the role of offshore call centers in Mexico and Central America.

## OFFSHORE CALL CENTERS IN MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA: NEITHER ETHNIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP NOR PLANNED MIGRANT ECONOMIC NICHES

The call center industry in Mexico and Central America experienced constant growth from the mid-1990s until the present, becoming one of the principal sources of job creation in the region (Da Cruz 2014). There is strong competition between these countries to attract call center companies because call centers not only create many new jobs but offer a solution for those countries facing crisis in the job market for educated youth. However, with the exception of El Salvador (Da Cruz 2013), the sector has never shown a direct interest in employing return migrants.[1]

This explains in part why the workforce of Latin American call centers is made up mainly of local university and high school students (Da Cruz 2013; Da Cruz and Fouquet 2010; Del Bono and Bulloni 2008; Micheli Thirión 2007, 2011). This type of local workforce is a common feature in other developing countries, such as India and the Philippines (Holman, Batt and Holtgrewe 2007; Messenger and Ghosheh 2010). It is also interesting to note that in these countries the education level of call center workforces is generally above the national average. Mexico is no different from other Latin American countries: the vast majority of call center employees are high school students, university students, or recent university graduates (Da Cruz and Fouquet 2010; Micheli Thirión 2007, 2011).

Call centers maneuver to attract young employees and combat the high turnover common in the industry (Da Cruz and Fouquet 2010; Hualde, Tolentino, and Jurado 2014). As a growing sector in constant need of workforce renewal, the largest call centers use various strategies to target this population, including installing their facilities close to universities, awarding scholarships to their best employees, offering flexible schedules based on school timetables, and fostering a youthful atmosphere in their workplaces. Salaries for employees providing these outsourced bilingual services can also be considered high compared to many local qualified jobs. This is the context in which young return migrants find an entry into the Mexican labor market.

One question arises: considering the characteristics of the call center sector, particularly the level of workforce qualification, how have much less qualified young return migrants managed to enter this sector and compete with the existing workforce? My hypothesis is that, despite their lower level of qualifications, young returnees from the United States and Canada have other skills that give them a competitive edge over their coworkers.

While the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1979) derived from a migratory life can compensate for a lack of formal qualifications, there is some question as to the level of prior education that in fact is necessary for employment at a call center. Studies of call centers have reached the singular conclusion that there is a significant contradiction in this industry between its employment of a qualified workforce and the unqualified nature of the work, which is robotic and repetitive and offers no space for autonomy or creativity (Cousin 2002; Stanworth 2000). Call centers seek employees with high-level communication skills, which they attribute to university graduates (Belt, Richardson, and Webster 2002). At the same time, call center work is considered emotional labor: employees must be able to empathize with the client, convey a sense of good mood, and

1. The program "Meet Your Roots," led by the Export and Investment Promotion Agency of El Salvador (PROESA), which tried to attract young Salvadorans from the United States using the cultural argument and offering "well-paid jobs" in English-speaking call centers, was a great failure. Meanwhile, the call center Teleperformance promoted its Salvadoran services by arguing that the Salvadorans it employed had "English-neutral" accents owing to their time in the United States and ongoing links to it. Also, I interviewed some call center employees who had been deported to El Salvador and who told me that, in the professional orientation flyers they were given by American migratory authorities on the plane back to Salvador, call centers were listed first (Da Cruz 2014).

"smile on the phone." This aspect of the work probably explains the prominence in call center of women workers, to whom such skills are commonly attributed (ibid).[2]

Offshore outsourced services have these same requirements for employees, but with an additional dimension: an ability to close the cultural gap between the call center agent and the client. The quality of offshore call center service lies in the ability of the agent to make the client feel that the interaction is taking place "here and now" (Mirchandani 2012; Poster 2007; Puel 2003), with the "here" being the most crucial aspect. To mimic local flavor, call centers in India make use of a large panel of intercultural management skills, such as accent neutralization, cultural lessons, and an ability to express an interest in American baseball and football scores. To exhibit these skills, the employee needs to be immersed in clients' culture and everyday life. Winifred Poster (2007) defines the practices that firms implement to bridge a cultural gap as "national identity management." In North African call centers serving the French market, another common practice is to "Frenchify" the names of local employees (Nyobe 2015).

The quality of call center service partially depends on these assumed cultural similarities. Within the global outsourcing market, in fact, reducing cultural distance between operator and client is crucial and in the long run has a measurable economic impact. For example, in the Philippines and El Salvador, the need for workers with these skills among employers offering outsourced services has led to the creation of national educational programs that explicitly train the local population to be competitive in this arena (Da Cruz 2013; Friginal 2007). That these countries have undertaken such national measures can be easily understood when we consider that business processing outsourcing (BPO) activities may account for up to 10 percent of their GDP, as is the case in the Philippines (Lee 2015). With so much at stake, employers are glad to avoid the use of these cultural management tools by hiring young Mexican returnees from the United States—and to an even greater extent, the 1.5 generation who grew up there—because they can meet these job requirements with no such training.

## RESEARCH SAMPLE

My study is based on forty-three in-depth biographical interviews with Mexican return migrants from the United States and, to a lesser extent, from Canada. At the time of the interview, they were between nineteen and thirty-five years old and employed by call centers in Mexico City. The ages of the migrants from the 1.5 generation corresponded more closely to the average age of call center workforces.[3] The returnees who had migrated to the United States as adults were older on average. (Almost all were older than thirty.) They had returned to Mexico between one and five years prior to the interview; most had come back two to three years earlier.

This sample is a snowball selection. Since I did not work in a call center, I gained access to the respondents through two gatekeepers—one male and one female—who were working in two different call centers.[4] From there, I asked each interviewee to provide a list of contacts, ideally individuals who did not work in the same call center.

Most interviewees (thirty-one) were male. Return migration to Mexico is predominantly a masculine phenomenon. The census data

2. The same gendered assumptions are made in services that predominantly employ male workers, such as help desks, which see men as more likely to be techies (Belt, Richardson, and Webster 2002).

3. All 1.5-generation interviewees were between eighteen and twenty-seven years old. Sixty-six percent of the Mexican call center workforce are younger than twenty-seven. Only 12 percent are older than thirty-five (IMT 2012).

4. I decided not to conduct the field research directly from a call center for two reasons. First, and most prominently, was that my oral English skills, and particularly my strong French accent, disqualified me for the job. Second, if I had taken opportunities to conduct observation from inside the call center, I would have risked misrepresenting myself; my respondents insisted that they would have reconsidered giving the interviews if they had believed that I was linked with company management.

show that 72 percent of returnees from the United States are male, and the percentage of males among those returning because they were deported is even more dramatic: 90 percent or more of these involuntary returnees are male (Gandini, Lozano-Ascencio, and Gaspar Olvera 2015). As such, the fact that all of my interviewees who were deported were male is not a surprise. At the same time, most of them worked in predominantly masculine services, such as sales and help desk activities.

Eleven U.S. states are represented in my sample, two of them most prominently: thirteen interviewees had lived in California, and eight in Texas.[5] Compared to the return migrant population I interviewed in Monterrey—almost all of whom had returned from neighboring Texas (Da Cruz 2013; Da Cruz and Fouquet 2010)—my Mexico City sample shows an uncommon variety of origin states. Likewise, their original provenance in Mexico is scattered. Almost one-third of the interviewees were from a Mexican state other than Mexico City and the neighboring Estado de Mexico. These data reinforce my initial position that studying return migration only from origin communities is limited at best. With only three exceptions, these migrants' period spent abroad had always exceeded five years.

To better understand how returnees had entered the Mexican labor market, I gave priority to interviewees with longer experience working in call centers. When I interviewed them, all but two interviewees had spent more than one year working in the industry in Mexico, and I was thus able to analyze the processes of professional insertion in greater depth. With this goal, I also chose respondents for the sample who represented different call center activities because they worked in different positions, from customer service to technical support and sales.

My sample is divided into two main categories. Young return migrants who had emigrated to the United States or Canada as adults (eleven males and four females) and 1.5-generation return migrants (twenty males and eight females). In the latter group, the great majority (twenty-six) had arrived in the United States before they were ten years old, and seven of them before they were six. I chose to study these two categories of migrants—who were socialized in distinctly contrasting ways—in order to understand the differences in how they found work and mobilized their specific skills when they arrived in Mexico.

The 1.5-generation interviewees were fluent in English; indeed, most of them considered English their first language. When they lived in the United States, they tended to speak Spanish with their parents and English with their brothers and sisters, cousins of similar age, and friends. There were many different reasons for their return to Mexico, depending on whether they had been deported or had made the decision themselves. The portrait painted of the global Mexican 1.5 generation in the United States (Chavez 2015) is very different from the circumstances of those in my sample: they were good students (two of them had graduated from college), with a high level of English fluency. They had experienced the glass ceiling, either in school or in their professional careers. Their choice to return to Mexico was generally the result of a variety of factors, but among the most important were the impossibility of upward social mobility and family separation. The desire to reunite with a loved one (a sibling or a partner) who had already returned to Mexico or been deported was a decisive factor for all but one interviewee. It is important to note that, even if this group was much more qualified than the average return population, six of the twenty-eight 1.5-generation respondents did not finish high school, five of them because they had been deported.[6]

The respondents who had emigrated to the

5. The other states were New York (four respondents), Georgia (four), Arizona (four), North Carolina (three), Illinois (three), Michigan (two), Utah (one), Missouri (one), and Tennessee (one). Four respondents had lived in Canada, and three had lived in more than one state.

6. In 2010, of all return migrants in the Mexican population, only 26.5 percent of the women and 17.7 percent of the men had finished high school (Gandini, Lozano-Ascencio and Gaspar Olvera 2015). In my sample, only eight of the forty-three interviewees had not finished high school.

United States or Canada as an adult corresponded much more closely to the traditional Mexican migration pattern. Their migratory experiences in these two countries were related to work—in sectors such as construction, the restaurant industry, and agriculture. It is important to note that, with the exception of two respondents, all had concluded their preparatoria (high school) before leaving Mexico. Again, family reunification after relatives had been deported or "voluntarily" returned for economic reasons (unemployment, health issues) were catalysts for their own return.

## "THIS IS MY COUNTRY AND I DON'T EVEN KNOW IT!": ADJUSTING EXPECTATIONS AND PREPARING TO LOOK FOR WORK IN MEXICO

The first question that begs to be asked about the presence of young return migrants in Mexico City call centers is: how did they manage to penetrate this sector? With the exception of one interviewee who had been employed in a call center in Vancouver, Canada, no interview subject had previous call center experience before arriving back in Mexico. Moreover, only one was even aware of the existence of call centers before arriving in Mexico. So how did they make that jump? My research revealed that the majority of the interviewees were ill prepared for their return. Their accounts—especially those of the 1.5 generation—showed very little knowledge (if any at all) of the Mexican labor market reality. Most of them had imagined that their mastery of English would give them an edge in the labor market and afford them certain job opportunities, such as teaching English. The first problem they faced, however, was their lack of educational credentials, which are highly valued in the Mexican labor market. Then, like twenty-five-year-old Gloria, they realized that fluency in English would generally not be sufficient:

> This is the picture we have of Mexico in the United States: that it is Tierra de Nadie [No Man's Land] . . . that you can come here, do whatever you want, and nobody will say anything to you. This is the erroneous image they have of Mexico in the United States. Even for me, a Mexican, but well, because I lived there so many years, I came here myself with this idea, "I come from the United States, I speak better English than everyone else!" And suddenly you arrive here and, "What is this accent?" and a thousand things like that. "Where is the proof? Where is the certificate that shows you worked there?" And suddenly you realize you are inexperienced. . . . I didn't know what was a good or a bad salary here in Mexico. Well, I came from the United States, and of course I knew that I would not earn the same. So I was thinking that if they paid me more than a thousand pesos [about U.S.$60], it would be fine, no? [*laughter*] And in my first job, I was earning five thousand, they were giving me five thousand, so I thought, *Well, that is not so bad... It's great!* . . . And then Teletech called me: "Gloria, I offer you nine thousand pesos." And I was like, *Wow! I'm earning five thousand and now I will earn nine!* [*laughter*] (interview by the author, Mexico City, 2013)

Gloria's testimony is particularly illustrative: having lived in Dallas, Texas, from ages eight to twenty-two, Gloria had overvalued the importance of English-language skills in the Mexican labor market and was unable to gauge the cost of living and salary values in Mexico. The distance between her professional expectations and the reality in Mexico can be attributed to her weak transnational links with Mexico. A widening breach forms between members of the 1.5 generation and their families left behind when they were young because their illegal status carries too many risks; they and their families become increasingly unwilling to run those risks by making return visits. In fact, except for three of my 1.5-generation interviewees, none had previously returned to Mexico since immigrating to the United States. Another reason for their lack of preparation for the labor market may have been that, even with plenty of family support available—uncles, aunts, and grandmothers being cited most often—they did not have information about the labor market. This is easily explained by the low educational backgrounds of most of them and the lack of knowledge among their family members about the qualified job sector.

Migrants who left Mexico after the age of

eighteen encountered different problems upon their return. Most of them had labored in manual industries in Mexico before leaving for the United States, such as construction, food service, and agriculture. Upon their return, they tried to find jobs in which they believed they could reinvest the professional skills they had acquired in the North. Yet they quickly gave up when confronted with the much lower pay offered in these sectors in Mexico. This account from thirty-three-year-old José, who lived in Ann Arbor, Michigan, from ages nineteen to thirty-one, is representative:

> When I arrived here, my mom had taxis. But I came here with the idea of staying only two or three months before going back to the United States. So my mom said, "Hey, why don't you work with one of the taxis?" I told her yes. I got my driver's license and went to discover Mexico City, because I was very young when I left. And a lot of people were afraid, like, "This guy doesn't know what he's doing, he must be drunk!" I worked like one month, one month and a half. But the truth is that it wasn't enough money. My mom told me, "Don't worry. Take care of the car, gas it up, and be careful." . . . But then she began to say, "Hey, don't worry too much, but I do need you to bring me money!" She began to ask me to help with the bills, and it didn't seem fair to me. So she put me in touch with Sanborns, and I worked there for a month, but it was the same![7] The job didn't seem good to me. There was no possible comparison with the dollar. (interview by the author, Mexico City, 2012)

In light of such frustration, one can imagine how someone like José ends up at a call center. The call centers are visually omnipresent in urban hubs like Mexico City and Monterrey. This is an economic sector in constant search of workers, and advertisements, written in English, can be found in many public spaces, like buses, subway stations and trains, and on the streets. Another path to the call centers is the Internet. Putting great stock in their language competence, many began their job search with keywords like "English-speaking," "job," and "Mexico." The resulting list of job offers is dominated by call centers. Others published their curriculum vitae online. We learned from these interviewees that after publishing their curriculum vitae, they would almost immediately receive a call from a call center expressing interest. Very few interviewees found their first job in a call center through personal networks. The only ones who did so had a sibling who had returned before them. For instance, Miguel, who was twenty-seven years old and had lived in San Jose, California, from ages eight to twenty-five, had a brother working in the industry:

> And then I arrived here. . . . And fucking cultural shock, man! And then I saw my brother and it was like, "What the fuck, Jay? What's going on?" And then he told me what happened. And I saw that my brother was working. He had two jobs. . . . But when I arrived here I was like, "No kidding, you're working two jobs!" I thought it was going bad for him, you know? And him: "Yes, I've got two jobs. But here, as long as you speak English, you get a job at a call center like that!" [*snaps his fingers*] And I was like, "Not bad, you know?" And I asked, "And how much can you make?" And he told me, "I only make. . . ." How much did he tell me? 3,600, 3,800 . . . he was probably making $300 a fortnight. I was like: "Fuck . . . are you serious, man? No kidding . . . can you survive with that?" And he told me, "Yeah, everything is way cheaper here, the economy is way down in Mexico." He told me that, yeah, there are some places as expensive as in the United States, nice spots. But, well, you've got plenty of really cheap places! (interview by the author, Mexico City, 2013)

Applying for a job in a call center is simple: it consists of a phone interview and the furnishing of a requisite preparatoria diploma. Returnees who had not finished high school did not find this to be a stumbling block:

7. Sanborns is a well-known Mexican restaurant and pharmacy chain owned by the Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim.

when they mentioned that they had grown up in the United States and presented themselves as native English speakers, human resources departments waived this formal requisite. Interviewees said that just mentioning these details to recruiters would get them very interested.

As nineteen-year-old Juanito, who lived in Provo, Utah, from ages nine to eighteen (interview by the author, Mexico City, 2012), explained to us, "No curriculum [vitae], no cover letter, just your phone number and your email address." Having prerequisites waived eased an otherwise complicated professional transition for many returnees who did not have cover letters or proof of past employment. With other jobs, however, prerequisites were not waived for returnees; in fact, "they ask you [for] an arm and a leg," said Israel, a twenty-seven-year-old who lived in Atlanta, Georgia, from ages seventeen to twenty-six. "They ask you for so much stuff" (interview by the author, Mexico City, 2013). In call centers, by contrast, all of the subsequent recruitment filters were presented as formalities, particularly for the 1.5-generation returnees. If the interview in English was very easy, the basic computer knowledge test was also very simple for young people who had attended American schools and passed "half of their lives in front of a computer," as Gloria put it.

## THE INVISIBLE DIMENSION OF CALL CENTER WORK

The "invisible dimension" of the work also explains the presence of young returnees in call centers. For some of our interviewees, their appearance was a strong handicap to finding a job once they had come back to Mexico. Call centers appeared to be their only employment opportunity. Many young return migrants who were part of Latino gangs in the United States carried on their bodies the marks of this previous association; upon returning to Mexico, these tattoos became stigmata (Goffman 1975), which foreclosed many job opportunities for them. The bad reputation that tattoos have in Mexico and Central America is directly related to their association with criminal organizations such as the Maras in El Salvador, where tattoos have even become sufficient reason for arrest within the framework of the Mano Dura law.[8] But not all of our tattooed interviewees were members of gangs. As they informed us, tattooing is a very common practice in the United States. They all mentioned how hard it was for them to find a job when, as Jorge said, "people don't trust you." Twenty-nine-year-old Jorge, who had lived in various U.S. states from ages nineteen to twenty-eight, added, "As soon as they see your tattoos, they think you're a criminal" (interview by the author, Mexico City, 2012). Gloria, whose arms are completely tattooed, described the problems her tattoos caused her even when she was employed in low-qualifying jobs:

GLORIA: And I came back, but in San Luis [Potosi], people are even more . . . narrow-minded. So when I got off the bus, I had a T-shirt on, and everyone saw my arms. And they were looking at me like this. . . . So I got here, and I'm someone who works, you know? So I looked for a job as soon as I arrived. And I found that the only available jobs in San Luis were in factories. And if you have tattoos, they don't give you the job.

AUTHOR: Did your tattoos bother you a lot?

GLORIA: I never told my boss [in her job previous to the call center], but you have to imagine: in this job I had to wear heels, with nice trousers and a shirt with the sleeves down to here [*she shows her wrist*]. So it was really hot, and I was there with my shirt. . . . Everyone rolled up their sleeves, but I couldn't because it would have meant losing my job. . . . In the U.S., you can wear whatever you want and people won't say: "Uh, this one's a gangster!" First, they see who you are, how you behave, and based on that, they judge you. In Mexico, on the other hand, if you don't dress correctly. . . . The "how you look" is very important: "What will they say if I employ someone with tattoos? What will they say if I employ someone with purple hair?" Things like

8. Mano Dura (literally "firm hand") is a law of exception (2003) to fight against the criminal activities of gangs; it allows police to arrest individuals based on their physical appearance alone.

> that. . . . And that didn't happen here at Teletech.

Interviewees who lived in more problematic neighborhoods encountered more than work-related difficulties because of their tattoos: their security was threatened as local gangs, assuming their appearance was the result of a gang experience in the United States, tried to recruit them. Tattooed young people were not the only ones who mentioned discrimination. The testimonies of gay returnees were very similar. The presence of these two minorities in Mexico City call centers has even given rise to jokes about alternative names for one of the main call centers: "Telegay" or "Homietech."[9] As a result, Mexican call centers have become places where "people that in the past didn't look at each other, or could even hate each other," now work together and sometimes become friends.

## THE EMERGENCE OF A LITTLE UNITED STATES IN ENGLISH-SPEAKING MEXICAN CALL CENTERS

During their orientation, one particular practice left a mark on the returnees who were hired by call centers: the "circle reunions." This ritual seems to be very common in Mexican call centers. All the new members of a new recruitment wave are brought together to introduce themselves to each other and start getting acquainted. Nineteen-year-old Juanito found it be a positive experience:

> I remember that I felt at home very quickly. They organized these meetings in which everybody gets in a circle and each one tells the others who he is, what kind of music he likes [*imitating one of these conversations*]: "I'm Fulano, I like this kind of music, I like to go for walks, etc. etc."[10] I felt like I was home, because in the United States we always did this kind of thing the first day of school. . . . I think they do this kind of thing because they know well the backgrounds of the people they employ. (interview by the author, Mexico City, 2012)

Like Juanito, who lived in Provo, Utah, from ages nine to eighteen and was deported just before finishing high school, many 1.5-generation interviewees mentioned this practice in the call centers where they worked. It is a practice directly inspired by the American school system. Like Gloria, most of them found the circle reunion "kitsch," but it gave them a "homey feeling" that they had not felt until then since returning from the United States. In fact, with the exception of those who joined brothers or sisters who had already returned to Mexico, most of the interviewees had arrived in Mexico feeling that their migratory experience was an isolated case.

Even if most returnees had the support of their extended family when they arrived in Mexico, they quickly discovered a strong cultural gap between them and their Mexican relatives, and cohabitation rarely lasted long. This was especially true for the 1.5-generation interviewees. As a result, many felt isolated, misunderstood, and even discriminated against because of their appearance or the way they spoke Spanish, and some felt judged because of their behavior. In this context, call centers were more than just an employment niche: they played the important role of providing a place where for the first time young returnees could meet people who shared their background. Call centers became the place where they could rebuild what Marcelo Suárez-Orosco (1998, 52) calls a "safety background"—a place of shared meanings. It is easy to see this re-creation of a "Little United States" when walking past call centers like Teletech in central Mexico City; one can hear young Mexicans speaking fluent English together at lunchtime and after work in nearby bars.

As discussed earlier, the general requirement that applicants have at least completed high school was often waived for the returnees who were employed in these enterprises because call centers valued other skills they had acquired through their migrant experience—most obviously their mastery of the English language. Like other returnees, Gloria distin-

9. *Homie* originally meant "buddy." Here it refers to youngsters identified as being "from the hood" because they wear baggy pants, oversized shirts, and so on.

10. "Fulano" is the Mexican equivalent of "John Smith."

guished between the classroom English her local colleagues had mastered and her own more "natural" spoken English:

> Well, with English, it's not that I want to say that "I am wow!" but concretely, the English that they [local employees] speak and mine are very different. A big difference. And the difference is not only "my English is better," no? The problem is also that, let's make an example, I can tell you that I write better in English than in Spanish, and I often express myself better in English than in Spanish. But if you ask someone who studied English here what is past perfect and why you say it that way and not this way, they can explain it to you because they studied English like this at school. But I can't, because my English is native. So I can tell you when you said it wrong, but I can't explain why. . . . For me, it's something very natural! . . . So it's complicated. . . . I have a disadvantage in this way, but in the end I have an advantage because they can't pronounce correctly, sometimes they don't understand, there are lots of sentences they don't get.

With their facility in English, 1.5-generation employees are the best at posing as American employees. Miguel was amused by some of his interactions with American clients:

> No, people speaking with us [*mentions his own case and that of two of his friends*] sometimes think that we're in the United States. Sometimes: "Oh, are you in New Jersey? Where in New Jersey?" [*laughter*] And I [say]: "I'm not in New Jersey, dude. . . . I'm in Mexico." And they're like: "Wow! Really? But you don't even have an accent!" "Yeah . . . I lived like twenty years over there . . . so I guess that's why." [*laughter*]

Since English was generally their first language, returnees, unlike their local colleagues, spoke the same English as their clients—or at least a form of English familiar to these clients. This ability to hide from clients that they are speaking with an employee located in another country plays an essential role in the quality of call center services. Interviewees noted that this aspect of the work was one of the most important when it came to understanding client dissatisfaction. Thirty-year-old Paloma, a local worker, described how her young returnee colleagues, particularly the ones who had grown up in the United States, could convey this sense of security to clients:

> The thing is that a lot of these people coming back from the United States are very pochitos.[11] They have this slang from the United States, and they even have this tone when they speak, and this can create a lot of insecurity for the American [client]. Because of the bad reputation, because of cultural references, they won't trust the person they are speaking with on the phone. But go figure: if a person calls and I, who have difficulties speaking English . . . he won't call back. He won't call back because I will not be able to transmit to him the same security, that I really understood his problem. . . . But them (the pochos), even if they have this slang, they understand everything: "Okay, I understood you." (interview by the author, Mexico City, 2012)

## MORE THAN A LANGUAGE: MASTERING THE GRAMMAR OF CULTURAL CODES

English fluency is not returnees' only advantage in call center jobs. As twenty-eight-year-old Ricardo, who had lived in Dallas from ages twenty to twenty-six, told us: "Speaking English helps you to do your job. But if you want to do your job correctly, or with quality, you need to know your clients, you need to have had some contact with them before so you can understand their forms of thinking. This helps you. A lot!" (interview by the author, Mexico City, 2011).

In this exercise of "presentation of self" (Goffman 1973), the activity is more than a basic linguistic exchange: it is a total cultural in-

11. Diminutive of pocho. The term referred originally to Mexican Americans, Chicanos, Mexicans who lost their culture. Today Mexicans use it more commonly in reference to young Mexicans who grew up in the United States and are assimilated to gang culture or urban cultures like rap or hip-hop.

teraction, one that is all the more significant for taking place on an international scale (Mirchandani 2012; Poster 2007). After mentioning the linguistic dimension of their work, all of the interviewees agreed that their life experience in the United States had given them an advantage over local workers: they had mastered the cultural codes of their clients and could manage the diversity of these clients. Their familiarity with these cultural codes gave them a considerable advantage in their interactions, for example, with some Puerto Rican and African American clients.[12] Local employees were often simply unable to comprehend these clients' accents.

On this subject, one of our interviewees told us that when African American clients ("from the hood") called, local employees commonly transferred the call to him. For some of the returnees, this was one of the dimensions they most valued in their job: their work briefly taking on a social dimension that they were the ones most capable of attending to successfully. Indeed, their ability to manage what might have been problematic situations for other workers conferred on them a particular status, which became a driver of self-esteem for some of them. This dimension of the job helped them experience a solidarity link with these client communities, in contrast to the negative attitude of their local colleagues, who did not understand, as Ricardo said, "what it is to live in the United States":

> Another thing is that [the local workers], they study [English], but they don't have relations with these people, the daily problems people have there. When these people talk to you, they ask you . . . or they tell you their problems: "I couldn't pay my bill because. . . ." You understand because you've been there. At best, the ones who are undocumented and who do have services like AT&T, they can't get welfare and so they have to pay all at once and medical care in the U.S. is so expensive! And you can understand them, no? It's not only a matter of getting rid of these people for work, no? You understand their problems better because you experienced the same situations. The truth is that it is very different. They [the local workers] take their job as very mechanized, and you, it is like you are a little bit more involved. . . . Let's say you understand them. When you have the experience of how it is there, you understand everything.

## OUTSIDERS AMONG THE OUTSIDERS: RETURNEES WHO EMIGRATED AS ADULTS

For return migrants who had moved to the United States after reaching adulthood, the situation was somewhat different from the experience of the 1.5-generation returnees. They did not have the same skills as the 1.5 generation, especially the latter's mastery of English and computing skills. As such, they can be considered outsiders even more so than the 1.5 generation returnees in that they related even less to the standard qualified workers who normally made up the call center workforce. Many of them had never envisaged themselves working at an office job: "I never imagined that one day I would work at a desk job," said José.

The main difference in the discourse of these returnee migrants can be seen in their argument that, more than the cultural capital gained in the United States and mentioned by the 1.5 generation as their main advantage, they acquired the competencies that gave them access to this kind of job through their migration experience and what they learned about American work values. To them, their migratory experience was an educational experience that allowed them to acquire new skills and become "better workers," and they were now applying these new skills in their current job. Like their 1.5-generation colleagues, they insisted that their life experience in the United States, living among the American people, gave them a serious advantage in their job by enabling them to understand aspects of American culture. One of those making this argument was Mario, a thirty-two-year-old who had lived in New York City from ages twenty to twenty-nine:

12. Puerto Rican and African American clients were the examples most often cited by the interviewees and even by the local employees.

> They ask you what the weather's like. I don't know why Gringos love to know about the weather so much. If there were no Weather Channel, they'd all die! And in conversation, it's something they bring up without even thinking about. They ask you: "Hey, how's the weather?" It's a way to start the conversation. So you tell them, "Around seventy, eighty," something they like, you know? Whatever . . . these little things help you a lot. These little guys who learned English at school but who never lived with the raza, they don't understand.[13] There are some things, like, that a Gringo doesn't like you lying to him. If you lie to him and he realizes it, he doesn't insult you, but he doesn't let you escape until you tell him why you lied to him. A Gringo doesn't like you to apologize. A Gringo, after hearing "I'm sorry" three times, is like "Wow, this guy is crazy." Once is enough. One "I'm sorry" is the max. So when you know all that, it's way easier, of course! (interview by the author, Mexico City, 2012)

Although they had not moved to the United States until adulthood, these returnees did not consider themselves local workers, and they emphasized the strong differences between themselves and the local workers, especially with respect to work values. They tended to make dichotomous comparisons between "here and there," opposing Mexican values (which characterized the local employees) to American values (which characterized themselves). Males who had emigrated as adults were particularly prone to refer frequently to American values, citing American punctuality versus Mexican lack of punctuality, the merit system versus the old-boy network, pride in work done well versus a blasé attitude, and believing that the "customer is king" versus mocking American values. They believed that their adherence to American work values was the reason why, even though they were not as proficient in English as their 1.5-generation colleagues, their work was particularly valued by their employers.

## FINDING AN ECONOMIC NICHE IN OFFSHORE CALL CENTERS

One of the reasons for the preponderance of returnees in the call center industry is that it offers what can be considered good salaries. For the university-educated employees entering the labor market in markedly increasing numbers in the last ten years, call center jobs are attractive because they offer higher salaries than the salaries offered in some other qualified jobs (Micheli Thirión 2007). Although taking a call center job represents a move into another professional sector, these returnees, with their lack of educational qualifications, have few well-paying alternatives. Some interviewees had held jobs outside the call center sector, but the incomes were lower, a fact that was even more relevant to those who lacked educational qualifications: "For someone who only finished high school, it's good money," said Mario. "In other jobs, you can get six or seven [thousand pesos]. Eight is a lot. . . . I looked for what paid best. And I only finished high school, and if you have only that here, the truth is that those jobs are badly paid. That's why, since I came back, I've only worked in call centers. You speak English and that's it!"

We received many testimonies from interviewees who had tried to work in other sectors but ended up coming back to the call centers, mainly because of the income. There certainly are jobs that offer equivalent or superior incomes, but they may require higher qualifications or have inferior working conditions (in particular the number of working hours required): "I think all these people who come back from the United States, well, they find themselves in a place where they don't get their hands dirty and where they're well paid," said Roberto, a thirty-two-year-old who had lived in California and Missouri from ages twenty-two to thirty. "Look, for me, who was working as a builder, they're paying me the same amount of money and I am not killing myself" (interview by the author, Mexico City, 2012).

Roberto, who had worked double shifts in

13. *Raza* is a Mexican term for the common people, or the folk. It differs from the meaning attributed to it by Mexican Americans, who use it specifically to refer to Mexican people.

the construction sector and the restaurant industry when he was in the United States, stressed an important point: a lot of the interviewees had worked in "3D" (Dirty, Dangerous, Demanding) jobs while living in the United States. Therefore, many of them considered their current position a step up the social and professional ladder, from 3D jobs to a desk job. They also maintained that their current call center jobs offered them good working conditions in comparison with other jobs that they could find in the Mexican labor market. Mario and twenty-eight-year-old Adrian, who had lived in Chicago from ages eight to twenty-five (interview by the author, Mexico City, 2012), had this lively exchange:

MARIO: This is the advantage compared to other jobs. Here, you work from seven to four, with one and a half hours for lunch, and it's from Monday to Friday. You get out at four and "see you!" This is one of the advantages: you have a good salary, and it doesn't kill you. No, really, it doesn't kill you. How can you kill yourself sitting in a chair?

ADRIAN: In the worst-case scenario, you get fat! [*laughter*] . . . Look, my girlfriend earns like 12,000 [pesos] a month, with vouchers.[14] But no kidding, she works twelve hours a day, she's always tired. She does nothing after work because she's tired. And she's also bilingual. She also worked in Teletech, but only for two months. But now, in the hotel, she earns 12,000 pesos, sometimes even more with tips. But no kidding, she works twelve hours a day, six days a week.

At the same time, these young returnees found themselves in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, they were able to earn a salary that was hard to match in other jobs with equivalent qualifications. On the other hand, they were stuck in the call center sector because they would have run the risk of lowering their income or encountering inferior working conditions if they moved to another sector.

As a consequence, they tended to develop careers in the call center sector, which is not a uniform sector. Some call centers pay more but offer less security, featuring short campaigns and short contracts; others give employees the opportunity to augment their salary with many bonuses; other call center jobs are lower-paid but come with a wide array of social security benefits (permanent contract, medical care, vouchers, housing credits, and so on). Each return migrant seemed to prefer one or another type of call center, according to their own individual needs. Thus, young single men tended toward the less secure jobs, which enabled them to earn more money more quickly, while older men with children tended to take more secure positions whose benefits were better aligned with their family's security and long-term plans.

The female return migrants were different; indeed, they showed the highest inclination to choose ascendant careers in the call center industry. There seemed to be two main reasons for this tendency. Female respondents stressed the importance of the age factor, which made career changes more difficult for them. They were more aware than men of the impact of getting older faster in the Mexican labor market. The women were also much more likely than their male counterparts to speak about their desire for independence.[15] In addition to age and desire for independence, the stigma of tattoos in Mexico made call centers appear to be the only option for those who had them. Gloria was glad that remaining with the call center was a career option for her:

> I learned a lot. Really. I never thought I would get it so easy. I learned a lot, and I like it. . . . It's not what you plan to do when you're a kid (*laughter*): "Ah, I want to work in a call center!" I don't know, perhaps it sounds bad, like

14. If they earned the bonuses (a fixed salary of 10,000 pesos plus 2,000 pesos in bonuses), Mario and Adrian would also earn about 12,000 pesos in the call center.

15. Among eight 1.5-generation female interviewees, five said that they had suffered conjugal violence within their first relationship after returning to Mexico. This experience—as described in off-the-record testimonies—was heavily related to their desire of independence.

other employees say to me: "You sound really whiny! How can you want to stay here?" Well, I want to stay here, and the reason is that I am very aware that I have tattoos, that I'm not so young . . . that to pursue a career now, it would be complicated.

## CONCLUSION

Call centers appear to be the principal entry into the labor market for young returnees when they arrive back in Mexico. Some of the deported migrants I interviewed even reported that U.S. migration authorities pointed them toward this labor market sector. Although their language skills make them suitable for employment in English-speaking call centers, most returnees cannot aspire to jobs that require higher education as well as English skills because they lack formal qualifications. This explains why the majority of interviewees, after imagining that call center employment would be a transitional situation for them, were stuck years later in the same sector: it offered a higher salary than other nonqualified jobs. Last but not least, the invisibility of their work receiving calls allowed tattooed individuals—some of them former gang members in the United States—to enter the formal labor market after their previous attempts at employment had been met with rejection because of their stigmata.

The cultural capital that these return migrants accumulated during their lives in the United States had put them on a par with a local workforce of university students and graduates, who were more qualified but lacked the returnees' unique capital. Mexican call center employees are generally expected to have at least completed high school, but even returnees who lack this prerequisite are employed in these enterprises. As anticipated, call centers value more highly the other skills possessed by returnees, which are closely tied to their migrant experience. Besides a mastery of English, their knowledge of American culture is a crucial skill that they bring to the call center workplace. Confronted with American customers, they can understand a wide range of situations that are unfamiliar to their local colleagues, such as American regional accents and slang and day-to-day situations that they themselves experienced in the United States. Additionally, values learned in the American labor market are highly prized by call center employers: punctuality, the idea that the client is always right, and pride in "work well done." The interviewees felt that these attributes run counter to the Mexican way of working. Returnees reinvest the human capital they acquired during their U.S. migration experience as a set of skills in this economic sector, despite their weak preparation for call center work. This confirms that the structural context in the origin country is the main factor in human capital transferability.

Return migrants consider their jobs in call centers financially and socially rewarding: they have a formal job rather than the informal jobs they held in the United States; in progressing from "3-D" jobs in the United States to a desk job in Mexico, their status has been elevated; and they earn a good salary compared to what nonqualified jobs, and even some skilled jobs, would offer in Mexico. Finally, job security is not a concern in a sector that is continuously looking to renew its workforce; some even move from one call center to another, according to the benefits that they can obtain.

Nevertheless, returnees experience the paradox of occupying an advantageous position, considering their level of qualifications, while also being trapped in one labor market niche. Their lack of skills would make it difficult to find a better job in another sector, and any such job they found would most likely offer a much lower salary.

The young returnees working in English-speaking call centers in Mexico reflect the complexity of the international division of labor in a time of economic globalization and intense human mobility. New communication technologies, beyond their capacity to compress space and time, have allowed the creation of unprecedented forms of "migrations" of work without the bodies (Aneesh 2006) and created an unexpected scenario: an expelled migrant can find himself working, from within his country of origin, for the very country from which he was expelled.

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