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Notes From the Field
Mexicans in New York City

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Abstract
New York City witnessed a substantial growth of Mexican immigration in the post-Cold War Era. This paper reviews the research literature on these changes across the urban landscape in light of the sociology of human rights in the contemporary era criminalizing migration. The number of births to Mexican mothers in New York City’s hospitals between 1985-2006 documents a near ten times growth in the number of Mexican American babies born in New York City for the twenty-year period between 1985-2005. Additionally, ethnographic data examine the lived experiences of Mexican immigrants in New York City during this era. The research offers a narrative of a Mexican family that migrated to New York City during the post-Cold War period defined by the heightened policing of migrant communities.

Keywords
Mexican, Migrants, New York City

Andrea and Martin come to New York City

What did you know about New York City in the years before you knew you were going to come here? What perceptions did you have of NYC? Did these change when you realized you were coming here?

[Andrea] In my case, my father didn’t want to bring us here because it was too hard to work here. To pay rent… We were told different stories. Mostly what stood out were the pictures of everybody so well-dressed. We were never shown pictures of the reality of what one confronts here. Real life is different…

~80~
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[Martin] For me, not much. Only that there was much money to be made here, but nobody told me that I’d have to work six or seven days a week, twelve to fourteen hours a day. Once I got here, I spent two months without work. My brother left at four in the morning and got home at six at night, too tired to talk about where or how I can find work. I was alone. Alone.

What is the experience of recent Mexican immigrants in New York City? I wanted to know what images Mexican immigrants had of the city prior to making their decision to migrate here, particularly considering that the first Mexicans migrating to the city did so at the height of the so-called crack wars unfolding in the outer boroughs and upper Manhattan. I set out to create a life history of one family to document the lived experience of an under-analyzed immigrant group in New York City. Martin and Andrea migrated to the New York City from the Mexican state of Puebla in 1988 and 1990. They met in New York City had children, returned to Mexico in the early 1990s only to return to New York City shortly thereafter. In the narrative offered by Martin and Andrea we can catch a glimpse at the hopes and desires of all immigrant communities, as well as extract in vivid detail the anxieties en route to America and struggles of daily life in the era of great migration of Mexicans into New York City.

Articles 9-13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) apply directly to the experiences of recent migrants to the United States. These articles speak to the issue affecting migrant populations within the United States since the 1990s, namely, the “attrition through enforcement” strategies implemented in the 287(g) program and Secure Communities, which grant local and state level law enforcement agencies to identify suspects for immigration-related law violations and detain for deportation by order of removal (Vaughan 2006, cited in Parrado 2012:19). Someone who is deported by order of removal is defined as a criminal on subsequent reentry owing to the fact of the removal, as opposed to someone who is apprehended at the border and returned to country of origin, primarily Mexico (Parrado 2012:36). Arizona’s SB1070 and Alabama’s HB 56 are the most popular and vilified attrition through enforcement, or
counterparts. However, local county level enrollment in the 287(g) and Secure Communities programs has increased significantly with twenty-six new jurisdictions participating in the program since 2007, another thirty-four jurisdictions in 2008 (Parrado 2012:20). The City of Danbury, CT, Monmouth County, NJ, and two counties from South Carolina joined the 287(g) task force in 2009 and 2010 (Department of Homeland Security ICE Fact Sheet, http://www.ice.gov/news/library/factsheets/287g.htm). While the 287(g) and Secure Communities program differ in some respects (see Waslin 2012), the trend is consistent toward the criminalization of migrant populations in direct contrast to articles 9-12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. My research here adds to the emergent literature on the sociology of human rights wedding it with the movement for a public sociology (see Frezzo 2011; Frezzo 2008; Iyall Smith 2011; Iyall Smith 2008; Iyall Smith 2007; Bueno de Mesquita, Downs, Smith, and Cherif 2005; Burawoy 2005).

As recently as October 19, 2012, the Associated Press released a memo justifying continued use of the term “illegal immigrant” in favor of more accurate terms like “undocumented” or “unauthorized” migrant to describe persons living in the United States without explicit permission to reside here (Kent 2012). Tom Kent, the Associated Press editor who authored the memo, rationalizes his decision in support of the term as description of a simple legal reality. In fact, the laws regulating the free movements of people is much more complex than a simple legal-illegal binary suggests. “Calling an immigrant ‘illegal’ before the conclusion of an immigration proceeding is like calling a defendant ‘guilty’ before a jury has rendered a verdict” (Winogard 2012). Public debates over appropriate terminology to describe migration flows reflect the current anxieties about the proper role and status of migrants within the United States. For Golash-Boza, the official pronouncement about legal truths distorts the lived realities experienced by migrants in the contemporary criminalization of migration (Golash-Boza 2010; see also Golash Boza 2009). Other social scientists document the racial politics driving nativist sentiment (Doane 2006), or the overrepresentation of immigrants in the criminal justice system (Preston and Perez 2006). Here I review more closely the criminalization of migration in the context of the migration of
Mexicans to New York City since the 1990s.

In the aftermath of the civilian atrocities in New York, Madrid, and London, public discourse about the free migration of people has become less benign, as state policies became more restrictive. Mainstream politicians “have seized on the moment afforded by the terrorist threat to question” the legitimacy of the free movement of people across international borders (Cohen 2007:217). To speak of unauthorized migration into the United States is to speak of Mexicans. “Mexicans not only dominate migration flows but also drive U.S. policy debates about international migration…” (Bean and Lowell 2007: 71). In this century, Mexican migration is the new perceived scourge across the communities that Latina/o writers call ‘Gringolandia’ (Augenbraum and Stavans 1993). Compared with immigration from Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century, into the early decades of the twentieth century, Mexican migration was relatively small (Bean and Lowell 2007: 73). The new wave of Mexican immigration differs from that of the earlier decades of the twentieth century. Today, Mexican settlements are more permanent and spread into areas with little or no Mexican presence prior to the 1990s (Camarillo 2007: 511-513, 515; Castañeda 2007:6-8,133-134). The case of New York City illustrates this point. Mexican migration to New York City traces back to the 1920s. This early migration, however, died off for several structural reasons, among these is the fact that only a small number of Mexicans from the Mexican state of Yucatan moved to the United States and many of those who stayed “quickly intermarried, often with Irish immigrants and did not continue to organize themselves mainly as Mexican” (Smith 2005: 224). The first phases of Mexican migration to New York City, from the 1940s-1980s remained comparatively small. Smith characterizes Mexican migration to New York City in the late 1980s “as an explosion” (Smith 2005:224). In the following, I review this significant transformation.

Latinos, in general, are a particularly difficult population to count, given the quality of available data sources. In the American context, there does not exist a consensus about the racial, ethnic, or national identity of Latinos. Are the different populations from Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and other Latin American countries, as well as their descendants who are born and
raised in American society similar enough to count as belonging to one racial or ethnic group? Undocumented migrants, residents living within the borders of the United States without proper legal documentation, are even more difficult to document. Past researchers rely on surveys of various types (Marcelli and Cornelius 2001:108-110), U.S. Census data and the American Community Survey to document the size and settlement patterns of immigrant groups in the United States (Lobo, Flores, and Salvo 2002; Salvo and Lobo 2006). Surveys suffer from the limited scope of the analysis and questionable generalizability of the findings. U.S. Census data has many drawbacks as a data source for counting immigrant populations, particularly undocumented immigrants. Undocumented immigrants aim to avoid detection, spending much of their existence living below-the-radar of government detection, especially in the current hypervigilant climate demonizing dark bodies and codifying social prejudices. Among the limitations of the U.S. Census data, two are of utmost significance for this study. These are its failure to document legal status and its inability to find a place for Mexicans in its black-white racial dichotomy or generic ethnic categories (Rodriguez 2009). To make up for these shortcomings of official U.S. government sources for counting the undocumented immigrant population, other researchers explore data made available by official Mexican government sources, Mexico’s Matrícula Consular program (Massey, Rugh, and Pren 2010). The Matrícula Consular program “offers information on the place of origin of nearly one million undocumented migrants who came forward in 2006 to register at one of Mexico’s fifty-three U.S. consulates” (Massey, Rugh, and Pren 2010:130). While this data source is surely a step in the right direction for research on the Mexican undocumented population in the United States, it, too, possesses one basic disadvantage, of the “roughly 12 million unauthorized non-American-born individuals currently in the United States; at least 6 million are Mexican” (Castañeda 2007:xiii). Given that Mexico’s Matrícula Consular program offers data on “nearly one million migrants” in one year, we need better estimates of the undocumented Mexican population in the United States.

In the 1990s, there was a “232-percent increase in the Mexican birthrate” in New York City (Smith 2005:225). Since the 1970s, Mexican migration to the United States has been more
permanent, younger and comprised of a higher proportion of females (Marcelli and Cornelius 2001). In order to see the full magnitude of Mexican migration to and scale of Mexican presence in New York City we can look at the number of babies born to Mexican mothers since 1985. This data is available for public viewing on the New York City's Department of Health website in the yearly Summary of Vital Statistics. In 1985, the borough of Queens had the fewest number of births to Mexican mothers of the four larger boroughs in New York City. Staten Island is least populous of the five boroughs in New York City. Yet, even Staten Island witnessed a sudden boom in the number of children born to Mexican mothers, from 10 in 1985 to 562 in 2006, then a drop to 527 in 2009. The rise in the number of children born to Mexican mothers is even larger in Queens. There were a total number of 100 births to Mexican mothers in Queens in 1985. This was one-third less than the total number of Mexican births in the borough with the greatest number of babies born to Mexican mothers, which was Brooklyn with 320. A mere ten years later, Queens catches up to Brooklyn in welcoming Mexican American newborns into New York City. In 1995 Mexican mothers delivering babies in Queens give birth to 1,590 babies, while in Brooklyn Mexican mothers give birth to 1,690. Fast-forward another fourteen years to 2009 and the steady growth continues. In 2009, 2,494 babies are born to Mexican mothers in Queens. Brooklyn welcomes 2,627 babies born to Mexican mothers in 2009. The data shows a near ten times growth in the number of Mexican American babies born in New York City for the twenty year period between 1985-2005. Among all Latino/as in New York City, babies born to Mexican mothers in 1985 were higher only than babies born to Cuban mothers who gave birth to 529 babies throughout all of New York City’s five boroughs. All other Latina/os in New York City, which include Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Ecuadorians, Colombians, and Cubans had greater number of births than did Mexicans in 1985. By 2000, Mexicans trailed only Puerto Ricans and Dominicans in the total number of babies born to Latina/os in New York City. Puerto Ricans and Dominicans are two groups with long histories tracing back several decades in New York City. By the year 2009, at 8,688, births to Mexican mothers in New York City nearly equaled the number of babies born to Puerto Rican and Dominican mothers, whose numbers were 9,958 and 10,585 respectively. Table 1
below presents the data on births to Mexican mothers in New York City for select years from 1985 to 2009.

**Table 1. Births to Mexican Mothers in NYC for select years since 1985**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>777</td>
<td>839</td>
<td>1,150</td>
<td>1,754</td>
<td>1,820</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>1,040</td>
<td>1,690</td>
<td>2,124</td>
<td>2,335</td>
<td>2,534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queens</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>642</td>
<td>1,590</td>
<td>1,946</td>
<td>2,284</td>
<td>2,371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staten Island</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Residents</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence Unknown</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>799</td>
<td>3,045</td>
<td>5,071</td>
<td>6,539</td>
<td>7,986</td>
<td>8,386</td>
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These numbers matter because by the turn of the century, the old law-and-order politics of division gave way to a new collective sentiment expressed in pseudo-intellectual diatribes (Huntington 2004) and within the halls of congress (see Castañeda 2007:166,130-133) that can be characterized as anti-Mexican and Hispanic loathing. Much like the law-and-order fetishism of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which was driven by real changes concentrated in New York City open drug markets, the new nativism is a reaction to demographic changes across communities unaccustomed to sharing city space with Mexican lives. To consider the structural demographic transformations across New York City in the past twenty years, one must note that Mexican women of child-rearing age may possibly be
the smallest demographic group entering the city during this period. While migration to the United States at the turn of the century becomes proportionally more female, it remained predominantly male. “Whether one looks at Mexican migration data from Mexico or from the United States, males appear to continue to dominate the flow” (Marcelli and Cornelius 2001:110). Traditionally, Mexican immigrants groups consist of young men who only later send for their girlfriends or wives and families to join them in the United States in pursuit of the American Dream. Dreby (2006) documents the experiences of undocumented Mexican families living in the United States. Many maintain strong family ties with children, parents, and/or siblings in Mexico, torn between competing destinations, working hard to reach the American dream as they also yearn for the comforts and culture of their Mexican homes. The changes unfolding in the lived experiences of native residents and newcomers are quite profound when we consider that for every child born to a Mexican mother in New York City between 1985-2006, several men who did not father any children and grandparents who came to join their children and grandchildren already born in Mexico also settled in Mexican communities across New York City, particularly in Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. In other areas at the periphery of the New York metropolitan region, Mexicans already are the largest minority (Smith 2005:221). In other words, if we multiply the total number of babies born to Mexican mothers in New York City by five we may approximate a closer figure to the actual number of Mexican lives calling New York City home for the first time each year since 1985. The U.S. Census Bureau’s data on Mexican migration into New York City is unreliable for several reasons. Namely, Mexicans do not fit neatly into the prepackaged racial categories the United States government officially recognizes. Second, most Mexicans migrating into the city in the last twenty years did so surreptitiously, and thus exercised much effort to avoid detection. Nevertheless, real changes are taking place in terms of both the bodies living in New York City’s communities today and the discourses giving voice to the anxieties Americans experience at the browning of America (see Smith 2006; Zuñiga and Hernandez-Leon 2005; Castañeda 2007; Durand and Massey 2004). What follows is the narrative of a Mexican family’s migration to New York City.
My research consists of a series of interactions with a Mexican family in New York City that began its migration to the city in 1988. Over a period of five years, I attended birthday parties for their American-born children, visited their family-operated bakery in Queens, and generally intermingled with them on a weekly basis as if we were all extended family. For my interview conducted on Saturday, March 29, 2008, I created fourteen interview questions to serve as the basis for my narrative in this paper. The interview questions appear in the appendix. The interview was conducted in Spanish. What I present next is my translation into English the story of one Mexican family’s migration to New York City.

On a Saturday morning I attend a neighborhood bakery to meet with my informants and request an appropriate time to set up an interview of Andrea and her husband Martin. They both spend busy mornings behind the counter in this neighborhood bakery. In fact, their struggles in America are paying off. They are the owners of the bakery I’ve been going to for my breakfast sandwich and coffee every Saturday morning. Mornings are always very busy here on any day of the week. The neighborhood is in Queens, New York in a mixed Italian and Greek community, which is witnessing a rise in the number of Latina/os moving into the community, as well as many recent college graduates. I know already from previous conversations with Andrea and Martin that they have lived in the Bronx, Jackson Heights, Astoria, and now Brooklyn. After having my breakfast and morning coffee at the bakery, I talk with Andrea and ask what would be an appropriate time to conduct the interview of her and her husband’s experiences in New York City. She goes to the back to ask Martin and returns nervously suggesting a 3:00 pm appointment for us to meet. I agree to return then.

It is now three in the afternoon when I return to the bakery. We all sit in one of the three tables that serves as seating area for patrons who prefer to eat their food inside the bakery. The bakery serves many functions in the community. It is a restaurant serving everything from American hamburgers and fries to Philly cheese steaks to Mexican tacos. It is a convenience store where one can purchase any of the variety of canned goods and Mexican salsa. It is also a meeting area for the community’s elderly residents that come here at different times of the day for food and companionship. I begin
my interview by presenting Andrea and Martin the demographic shifts which have unfolded across New York City in the past twenty years. They are shocked to learn the rate at which the number of Mexicans living in New York City has grown. Then I explain the purpose of my study: to give them the opportunity to share their life story with the aim of better understanding the experience of Mexican immigration to New York City.

Andrea and Martin did not migrate to the city together. Martin came in 1988, two years before she did. They are both from the state of Puebla, but from different towns. She is from Atlixco, Puebla. He is from the very small village, Tulcingo del Valle, Puebla. Martin notes that most of the homes were made with adobe walls and roofs that were made from palm tree branches. His home had dirt floors without any electricity. The roads remained unpaved in 1988. In Martin’s own words: “We had only dirt, pure dirt as our roads… My grandparents didn’t know anything about electricity. They used a lamp… a gas lamp.” The year that he left, a sizeable group of young men in his age group also left. He jokes that most of the residents still living in Tulcingo del Valle are elderly and women who stayed behind. Martin comes to join his half-brother in the Jerome Avenue section of the Bronx. Andrea leaves Mexico to join her father who was also living in the Bronx.

Before getting into their details of their journey to New York City, I ask them to relay their sentiments of New York City prior to coming here. Neither, Andrea or Martin knew of the drug trade that would come to define law and social order debates for at least the next ten years of their lives in the city. Martin speaks of his older half-brother who is already in the United States. They both talk warmly of seeing pictures of relatives in America and hearing the boasting of fancy clothes that they can now afford and the lavish lifestyle these images presented.

“We came here because we already had family here. In other places (where Mexicans live in the United States) we didn’t have family.” (Martin)

“Well, because of family, no. They were already here.” (Andrea)
Naturally, both Andrea and Martin express deep longing to join their relatives in America despite the warnings from other family members back home, and those already in the States. Later in the interview, I casually asked her many from their hometown in Mexico also left to the United States.

“The majority is already here. Let’s say maybe around eighty percent are here in New York City.” (Andrea)

“All that stayed behind are older people and women.” (Martin)

“There are people who have a wife there and a wife here.” (Andrea)

Andrea and Martin describe a large-scale social change. There is a deep understanding among people left behind in Mexico and amongst Mexicans living in New York City that a dramatic transformation has occurred. Surprisingly, however, Martin finds himself feeling lonely and isolated in New York City. In Martin’s words: “Since coming to New York City, my brothers and sisters don’t really interact much… America changes families.”

It’s 1988 and Martin is approaching adulthood. He decides then that New York City is the place where he’s going to come of age. In his first trip to the United States, Martin gathers the requisite $1,400 to pay a coyote to smuggle him across the Tijuana border, eventually all the way to the Bronx.

How did you get from Mexico to New York? (interviewer)

“In my first trip, I came on airplane. Crossing the border, through Tijuana, we crossed in car and were taken to a house in Phoenix, Arizona. That’s where the majority of us arrived. From there we got on a bus to Los Angeles to get on a plane to fly to New York. Before that’s how everybody did it. Now it’s all on train or automobile. It was all covered by the fee we paid the coyote… Well, the
first trip, I crossed Tijuana by running to a car that was waiting for us. From there we went to Phoenix. The second crossing was walking, walking, walking.” (Martin)

Andrea is a beautiful young thirteen year old, going on fourteen in 1990 when she goes against her father’s wishes and organizes for her trip to join him in New York City. The fee that Andrea must pay her coyote is slightly higher, $1,600, in 1990. We debate if this two hundred dollar increase is the result of inflation or whether females are forced to pay higher price. We settle on the inflation explanation for the difference in cost. A coyote is the Spanish term used to refer to people involved in the business of human trafficking. In most criminal justice discourse, human smugglers are often equated to drug lords. Yet, in Andrea and Martin’s explanation, the coyote is a family friend, or a known neighborhood entrepreneur who is well respected in the community. Nonetheless, all Martin could think of at this time is making his way out to the big city in El Norte. The same applies for Andrea. She wanted nothing more than to escape what she felt was the dull life in Atlixco. The human smuggler that is deemed a criminal in professional criminological lexicon is viewed more as a general acquaintance during this trip. The network of human trafficking spans across the U.S.-Mexico border. There are various cities across the United States where coyotes operate safe houses for immigrants awaiting long travel. All expense is paid up front. Contrary to American newspaper reports, Andrea and Martin report no abuse on the part of the coyotes.

Both Martin and Andrea, though in different years, embark on their journey into the United States during the hours of darkness. In groups of up to 40 at a time, they are instructed to run at their coyote’s orders.

“We were twenty, and all of us were from the same town.” (Andrea)

Run! They are told to just run in the general direction which is San Diego. They are told they will find a large vehicle waiting for them in
But first, remember to run. While they are running in the darkness they soon realize that there other groups of Mexicans brought here by other coyotes. They are also running, and not too far off in the distance. By Andrea and Martin’s recollections there must have been approximately one hundred bodies running in the darkness. In the most memorable mayhem of his life, Martin recalls hearing a voice in the darkness while he was running. Apparently, his group had to run through some urban neighborhoods in San Diego where people were helpful in guiding his group in the appropriate direction.

“There are people, strangers, who help. Not many, but I was surprised that there were people who helped along the way.” (Martin)

Again, contrary to popular myths these were the homeowners who grew tired of the heavy-handed Border Patrol treatment of migrants, perhaps almost as much as they despised the changes in immigration policy that resulted in more frequent clandestine crossings. These kind strangers informed the border crossers of the time of the latest Immigration patrol in the area, in addition to offering water and welcoming them to America. Once Martin reaches his destination, a car parked in a 7-11 parking lot, four of the men from his group squeeze in and prepare for the long ride to Phoenix, Arizona. Andrea follows the same trajectory into San Diego, then to Phoenix. The safe house in Phoenix functions as a temporary stop on the way to Los Angeles, where they board a flight to JFK.

Martin arrives in the Bronx to stay with his half-brother. For the first four months of his stay here, Martin is unable to find work. Since his brother has to leave for work at four in the morning and doesn’t return until late at night, Martin has to find ways to keep himself busy with no money and unable to speak English. When Andrea in the Bronx, her father has already set her up with an American family that will give her temporary work cleaning their home throughout the week. Martin eventually finds work in a restaurant in upper Manhattan, first washing dishes, then waiting tables. Martin and Andrea meet at a neighborhood party in 1991. They give birth to their first child in the Bronx in 1992.
For the next six years, they spend their time working long hours, six or seven days a week and moving from apartment to apartment. Not quite the life of luxury the old photographs their relatives used to show them before they themselves came to New York City. In the midst of the constant daily struggle, Andrea learns she is pregnant. Missing the female companionship of her immediate family, she decides to return to Mexico while he stays working in the United States. Martin promises to send remittances to his wife and now two daughters as often as he can. Andrea gives birth to their second daughter in Mexico. The oldest daughter is now eight years old. Having spent these first formative years of her life in America, the oldest daughter convinces Andrea to return to America. Once again, Andrea commences to make that long journey back to New York City, this time, however with a small infant by her side. Neither Andrea or Martin go into much detail about this period, but it is readily apparent that the memories are painful.

It is now 2002, Andrea has returned with her two-year-old daughter to join Martin and the older daughter who is now ten years old. This trip lands them in the Jackson Heights neighborhood of Queens. The joy of the reunion produces a third little girl to join the family. Andrea and Martin welcome a third daughter to the world in Queens Elmhurst Hospital. Today, all three girls are enrolled in school, fluent in Spanish and English.

The family is a deeply rooted part of the local community where they run the bakery, in addition to their apartment complex in Brooklyn. Andrea now has her entire nuclear family living closer to her in New York City. The only members of Martin’s family to come are his younger sister who migrated only about 2003 and his older half-brother who has been here since the 1980s. Their daughters all have Mexican godparents who live throughout New York City’s outer boroughs. They occasionally hold small fiestas in the basement of their building or the basement of their bakery. Although both confess these don’t happen as often as they wish, since most of their acquaintances are frequently too busy working excruciatingly long hours every day of the week. Andrea and Martin also feel obligated to provide the elderly residents of the community a place they can feel at home.
During parts of the interview I ask Andrea and Martin to recount their experiences with crime and violence since moving to New York City. I also ask them whether they think their lives are safe here or in Mexico. Safety in Spanish translates to security, which can mean economic or personal security. Andrea and Martin relay their thoughts on both types of security. First, Martin notes crime is not a part of his experiences in New York City. Although, he does admit to having been a victim of muggings at least three times. Once, though, he admits to being robbed while he was drunk in Manhattan, which he says shouldn’t count since he believes he virtually asked for it that time. None of the muggings resulted in violence, nor did he report these to the city police when they did occur. Andrea also recounts experiences with specific types of crime at neighborhood parties. Here party crashers would show up and attempt to mug Mexicans they believed to be carrying cash from the week’s work. In these instances, fights would break out, neighbors would call the police, but the victims would never come forward. Beyond these instances of unreported victimization, Andrea and Martin could not recount any experiences with violent crime since coming to New York City.

Andrea and Martin had mixed feelings about life security in New York City. They both believe that their personal safety is not in danger living in the city. However, the thought of immigration officials forcibly separating them from their communities is a constant nightmare. They wish they could spend more time with their girls on family outings, but maintaining their bakery requires them to remain open seven days a week, at least twelve hours every day. Andrea and Martin do believe their lives are better off here in New York City than they would have been back in Puebla, Mexico. The biggest wish is to cease having to live in the shadows, at the margins of society.

DISCUSSION

Since the bursting of the housing bubble in 2007, migration to the United States from Mexico has declined across many local areas. There has been an average “drop of 1,615 men between 2007-2009” across most local metropolitan areas (Parrado 2012:24-29). In Parrado’s analysis, economic conditions played a much more significant role in the decreasing population size of Mexicans across local municipalities than “attrition through enforcement” strategies.
Nevertheless, the policing of migrant communities clearly remains the government's preferred policy action. President Obama's record in office “includes 1.5 million deportations, divided families, thousands of U.S.-born kids of deported parents dumped into foster care, battered wives deported after calling the police, and an expansion of Arizona-style” criminalization of immigration (Navarrette 2012). Even as border crossings dipped to a 40-year low, “immigration agents deported 391,953 foreign-born people during the 2011 fiscal year” (Preston 2012). In direct violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, according to the Homeland Security Department’s own report, ICE expelled “about 324,00 foreigners back to their countries without formal court proceedings” (Preston 2012). The official story is that the American government is redirecting resources to focus on removing criminals (Farley 2011). Yet, the fact remains “that nearly 79% of individuals deported through the program from October 2008 through June 2010 had no criminal record or were arrested for minor offenses” (Ruiz 2011). The Department of Homeland Security’s own website statistics report a total of 6,967 convicted criminal removals for the crimes of homicide or sexual offenses, which represents only 1.8% of the total 396,906 deported population that includes removals, returns, and Mexicans returned as part of the Mexican Interior Repatriation program (MIRP). MIRP is a bilateral agreement between the United States and Mexico to return back to Mexico those Mexican nationals found crossing the border in the Sonora desert region of the United States. The rest of the convicted criminal removals resulted from drug-related (44,653) or driving under the influence (35,927) convictions, among other presumably less serious offense categories (http://www.ice.gov/removal-statistics/). The untold story is that the “attrition through enforcement” strategies criminalizing immigration drives our policy decisions.

Recent research by MacDonald and Sampson point to the ways that new immigrants help reduce crime in poor urban communities (MacDonald and Sampson 2012a; MacDonald and Sampson 2012b). Immigrant youth and their parents want to enter into the mainstream of the American social fabric. A sociology of human rights asks social scientists to classify “racial profiling as human rights abuses” (Frezzo 2011:210). The dilemma arises when we
recognize that “human rights violations occur within state boundaries” (Iyall Smith 2011:112). In the first world countries where human rights violations regarding the policing and criminalization of migration flows occur, second generation rights, or rights protecting minorities are a relatively recent historical developments, and third generation rights, or rights extended to indigenous groups are only now emerging (Iyall Smith 2008:1820). Extending basic human rights to migrant populations requires giving voice to the voiceless, claims-making in the public sphere extending the right to human dignity to populations living beneath the radar of public detection.

In the year and half that passed since my interview with Martin and Andrea, they lost much of what they took pride in. The downturn in the American economy towards the end of 2008 resulted in them losing their neighborhood bakery business where our meeting took place. In the summer of 2010, Martin operates a variation of a taco truck, selling Mexican food in Manhattan. Andrea mostly works from home and helps take care of daily chores for elderly residents in her neighborhood. Both still struggle with the idea of navigating the barriers of living daily life under-the-radar.

New York City is the ideal laboratory for witnessing the processes sparked by the interactions shaping human behavior. In light of the demographic transformations that unfolded across the urban landscape in the past thirty years, Martin and Andrea feel that their lives are not much different that they would be in Mexico.

“Our lives are much the same that they would be back in Mexico. We wake up and make out way out the door and confront a daily reality of living daily life.” (Martin)

The law and order dictum and new nativism of America’s reactionary politics are superficial expressions of deep structural changes unfolding throughout the country. I ask towards the end of our interview about their hopes, dreams, and fears currently living in the United States.
“Our preoccupation, or fears is to be caught by the immigration patrol. Our hope is to become legal residents. Always, always that has been the biggest hope, to live here with legal papers.” (Martin)

It seems that the way New Yorkers experience daily living is at odds with the media representation of how it ought to be.

Nevertheless, changes in how we interpret reality affect the policies we put in place to alleviate our anxieties. That these anxieties are the product of structural changes beyond our immediate control is without doubt. A more engaging approach suggests a greater need for public sociology, a way of making sense of social change which listens to communities targeted for government action. Naturally, the story I present here does not tell the whole story of the experiences Mexican immigrants encounter in their daily lives here in New York City. The story is a tale with many elements that resonate with other Mexicans who came to New York during the era of the great Mexican migration to New York City.

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Endnotes
Appendix: Interview Questions for Chapter 5 (translated to Spanish for interview)

1. Where are you from?

2. Can you give me a fictitious name that I can use to describe you in my study?

3. What is your age?

4. Why did you come to New York City of all places, given the large numbers of Mexicans throughout California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, and Nevada?

5. What did you know about New York City in the years before you knew you were going to come here? What perceptions did you have of NYC? Did these change when you realized you were coming here?

6. What have your experiences been since coming to NYC? (with work, neighbors, friends, family, leisure, joy?)

7. How did you get here? (airplane, train, bus, auto?)

8. Where did you cross into the U.S.?

9. What are your experiences with the police, border patrol/immigration, courts in the U.S.?

10. What are your experiences with crime and/or violence in the U.S.?
11. Do you think your life here is safer, the same, or less safe than in Mexico?

12. What are your concerns, fears, hopes in the U.S.?

13. Is there anything you would like to share that I did not ask you about?

14. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

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