



Soy de aquí, soy de allá: DACAmented homecomings and implications for identity and belonging

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Abstract

This article is based on in-depth interviews with deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA) beneficiaries from California and Arizona who traveled to Mexico, their country of origin, for the first time since they had immigrated to the US as small children. Although DACA travelers have acculturated to the US, this article begins to uncover the complexities of national identification and belonging in the US, a country that has not allowed for a legal pathway to citizenship for them. We show how visiting their homeland served to highlight their American markers of identity and their hidden privilege, as DACA travelers were often treated as foreigners while in Mexico. However, encounters with their home country and family members in their hometowns allowed for reflection and reconciliation of both their Mexican and American identities.

Keywords 1.5 Generation · Undocumented immigrants · DACA · Identity · Belonging · Advance parole

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Soy de aquí, soy de allá: Los regresos DACAmentados y sus implicaciones para la identidad y la pertinencia

Resumen

Este artículo parte de entrevistas detalladas con beneficiarios de la política de Acción Diferida para los Llegados en la Infancia (DACA, por sus siglas en inglés) de California y Arizona que viajaron a México, su país de origen, por primera vez desde que habían emigrado a los Estados Unidos cuando eran pequeños. Aunque los viajeros de DACA se han asimilado en la cultura estadounidense, este artículo comienza a revelar las complejidades de la identificación nacional y la pertenencia en los Estados Unidos, un país que les ha negado el camino legal a la ciudadanía. Mostramos cómo las visitas a su país natal revelaron sus marcadores de identidad americana y su privilegio oculto, ya que a los viajeros de DACA a menudo los tratan como extranjeros en México. Sin embargo, los encuentros con su país y con sus familiares en sus pueblos de origen les permitieron reflexión y reconciliación con sus identidades, tanto la mexicana como estadounidense.

Palabras clave Generación 1.5 · Inmigrantes Indocumentados · DACA · Identidad · Pertenencia · Permiso Adelantado

“It was frustrating because you want to feel like you belong. You’re like, ‘Oh, I’m going to Mexico. That’s where I’m from.’ Then you go down there, and you’re really not from there.” (Andrea)

“I think one of the things that I’ve heard during this trip was this idea we’re from here, we’re from there. I think we always say ni de aquí, ni de allá [not from here, not from there], but that’s not true. We cultivate our lives in both places one way or another. ... Home is the US, but Mexico is also home, but not in the way that the US is.” (Yesenia)

DACAmented homecomings

Andrea and Yesenia, two DACAmented youth who traveled to Mexico for the first time since immigrating to the US as minors, provide a unique lens with which to investigate feelings of belonging as they intersect with nationality, legality, and context and connection to their ancestral land. These youth—who were born in Mexico but grew up in the US without legal status—learned what it is to be American through attending public school, but at the same time, school is also where they learned that they were not really fully American (Flores-González 2017; Kasinitz et al. 2008). Even though in school they learn American history, customs, and values, and the English language, they also have the strong influence of their parents’ cultural background and language. Because they share characteristics with both first- and second-generation immigrants, they make up the 1.5 generation (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Rumbaut and Kenji 1988). Overall, 1.5- and second-generation immigrants integrate within the US well, but have a multitude of identities upon reaching adulthood, depending on various factors of incorporation (Portes and



Rumbaut 2001; Flores-Gonzales 2017). However, unlike second-generation Mexican American youth prior to DACA, undocumented youth have never been allowed to travel outside the US and therefore have been cut off from interacting face-to-face with people in their home country. This is an important distinction, because their identity formation has been constrained by a US context and a US racial hierarchy.

This article captures a unique and an ephemeral experience in the history of undocumented youth who became DACAmented through Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which has allowed for protection from deportation and access to work permits. From 2012 to 2017, DACA recipients could also apply for special permission, called Advance Parole, to travel outside the US for educational, work, or humanitarian reasons (Hipsman et al. 2016). Since 2012, 800,000 undocumented youth have enrolled in DACA (Lopez and Krogstad 2017) and, as of June 2016, approximately 22,000 had received Advance Parole (Hipsman et al. 2016). The investigation of the ability to travel merits still more attention, since the majority of the focus has been the educational, social, and economic mobility of the DACAmented (Gonzales et al. 2014; Martinez 2014; Pope 2016; Terriquez 2015). For the respondents interviewed for this article, their first trip outside the US was to their country of origin, Mexico. In 2017, the current administration rescinded DACA, but multiple lawsuits were filed from across the country to reinstate it, and the program has resumed, for those who already possess DACA, until the courts decide its fate (NILC 2018). Currently, those who already had DACA can apply for renewals, but no new applications are being accepted, and DACA recipients can no longer apply for Advance Parole (NILC 2018). We therefore had the unique opportunity to document what this travel experience meant for the DACAmented youth.

In this article, we focus on the students' travel experience and how it helps us understand their sense of belonging in the US by expanding our analysis beyond the context of living in the US. In other words, national identification and belonging are not only shaped by the interactions that take place in the US, but also, our research shows a surprising outcome after their short visit to Mexico. Andrea and Yesenia, cited above, help us better understand this process. Andrea recounted how she was not seen as Mexican while traveling in Mexico, and Yesenia shows how, independent of structural forces that reject them both in the US and in Mexico, people like her accept belonging to both places. We demonstrate how traveling and experiencing the country they left as children helped them recognize their American markers of identity and the hidden privilege that living in the US has afforded them that they did not know they had prior to their trip.

The narratives presented here come from Mexican-descended DACA recipients who have spent a majority of their lives in California and Arizona. Each of our thirteen participants received permission to travel via Advance Parole and returned briefly to Mexico for educational purposes. The respondents had not been back to their home country since migration as young children, and the majority did not remember much of their homeland. During their trip they had time to visit family and explore some of Mexico's larger cities. We begin to tease out national identity and belonging by answering the following question: How does returning to the country of origin and reconnecting with their ancestral culture affect their national



identification (e.g., identifying as Mexican vs. American) and sense of belonging among undocumented youth who grow up in the US?

Although deciphering identity is a complex process that incorporates intersections of a variety of factors, we argue that traveling to Mexico helps clarify their national identity and that the visit home allows for a reframing of belonging in both Mexico and the US. For our participants, rather than feeling like they are from neither place (“*ni de aquí, ni de allá*”), the visit to Mexico allowed for a reflection on both places and, ultimately, accepting and embracing that they have both cultures.

Immigrant identity and legality

Undocumented immigrant children have the legal right to attend K-12 public school within the US (*Plyler v. Doe* 1982). Research shows that immigrants who come to the US at an early age and live here for a long period of time are more acculturated than those who come here later in life (Berry 1997). Attending school has been shown to be the primary source of immigrant acculturation (Gibson 1998; Suarez-Orozco et al. 2008; Zhou 1997).

Some variables used to measure acculturation include language acquisition and use, cultural identity, personal relationships, family beliefs, values, and practice of cultural traditions (Cuellar et al. 1995; Magaña et al. 1996). The process of acculturation includes learning the new behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that are necessary to integrate into daily life in order to function in a new culture, and it is done through formal, public education (Berry 1997). Thus, it is usually easier for second-generation youth, which includes the 1.5 generation, and subsequent generations to acculturate. However, what does acculturation have to do specifically with identity and belonging?

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) show that, for members of the second generation, ethnic self-identification is rather complex and involves defining themselves in reference to multiple groups including two countries, two languages, peers, ethnic community and the greater society as a whole. The longer they spend in the country, the fewer immigrant youth identify as solely American. Rather, depending on various factors of reception, the majority adopt a national, hyphenated-American or pan-ethnic identification once becoming older and demonstrating an awareness of ethnic background. Further, being born in the US and/or possessing US citizenship tends to have an influence toward adopting hyphenated-American identities.

It is important to note the distinction between self-identification and identity. The analytical term “identity” can be quite problematic, as it tends to essentialize groups, giving them a monolithic, static sameness (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). However, as Brubaker and Cooper highlight, self-identification can change over time and is “fundamentally situational and contextual” (p. 14). Furthermore, identification is an ongoing process that can change with interactions of everyday life (Jenkins 2014). How we view and categorize those around us influences how we view ourselves and vice versa (Jenkins 2014, p. 12). Nonetheless, Jenkins argues that identification matters because it is how humans categorize and understand themselves and others, on both individual and collective levels. Therefore, in this paper, we are concerned with how DACA



recipients renegotiated their self-identification to the greater collective and national identity of Mexican and/or American. Specifically, we investigated how they were perceived and categorized by individuals from their “home” country and how they renegotiated the identities they learned as children growing up in the US.

It is also in the school setting that children are racialized and treated as outsiders by teachers and their peers. Nancy López (2002) narrates how this process is also gendered. The Latino boys in the school she studied were treated by teachers as troublemakers. Mary Waters (2001) documents a similar racialization process among Black immigrant students who are treated and racialized as Black Americans. Waters notes that first-generation Black immigrants from the Caribbean try to retain aspects of their culture in order to stand out as immigrants and avoid being racialized and discriminated against as Black Americans. They do this by highlighting their accent and wearing clothes from their country of origin. Members of the second generation, on the other hand, are unable and unwilling to highlight their ancestral background and simply pass as Black Americans, since they do not have an accent and they dress like their peers. Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, in a recent study (2017), finds a different identity formation that occurs to Latino millennials in Chicago. Unlike the Black immigrants in Waters’s study, Latino millennials are not of one phenotype: “They do not fit in the white or black racial categories that are imposed on them, but also do not have an officially recognized racial category to claim as their own” (Flores-Gonzalez 2017, p. 4). She concludes that the youth in her study appropriate ethnic and pan-ethnic terms such as “Mexican” or “Hispanic/Latino” as racial identification or as their “ethnoracial categorization.” It is important to make clear that the respondents in her study are all US-born and are part of the second and even third generation. Hence Latino millennials are US citizens, but they do not feel they are accepted as Americans.

The respondents in this study, however, are not US citizens, but they experience the same “ethnoracial categorization” as their US-born, Latino counterparts, which is complicated by lack of legal papers. Children who grow up without legal documentation experience their lives in limbo. They eventually transition from a quasi-legal status, while in public school, into illegality upon graduating high school and approaching adulthood (Gonzales 2011, 2015). They also live their identities in limbo and often self-identify as “in between” two different cultures—the host country and their parents’ country of origin (Torres and Wicks-Asbun 2014). The lack of legal documentation coupled with being raised in the US often leads to a hybrid identity that incorporates both their cultural heritage and US cultural norms (Castro-Salazar and Bagley 2010). Furthermore, legal status affects immigrant children’s ability to identify as American, even though they may feel Americanized (Cebulko 2014). How is it that traveling to Mexico makes them feel more American and more Mexican? In other words, how do they come to accept that they are “*de aquí y de allá*” (from here and from there)?

Return migration and identity

Numerous studies look at return migration and how those encounters intersect with ethnic identification and belonging. Some look at first-generation immigrant homecomings (Ni Laoire 2007; Saloutos 1956; Stefansson 2004; Useem and Useem 1955;



Wyman 1996), whereas others focus on second- or older generations' return to their ancestral homeland (Christou 2006; Phillips and Potter 2005; Potter 2005a, b; Tsuda 2003, 2004). Members of the first generation, upon return to their home county, oftentimes have difficulty being accepted and are considered different. These returnees can bring with them different ideas and customs from the host country where they were living, as well as speak and dress differently than others in their home country (Stefansson 2004). The citizens who remained living in the home country frequently ascribe a stigmatized identity to those who left and then came back. For example, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, return migrants to Europe from the US encountered being called "American" even though, while living in the US, they were considered Poles, Italians and Irish (Stefansson 2004, p. 63; Wyman 1996, p. 197). The second and subsequent generations face even more difficulties upon return to their ancestral homelands.

Second-generation return migrants to the Caribbean—who were born and raised in English-speaking countries such as the UK and the US—had complications adjusting to their ancestral country (Potter 2005a, b). In their home society they occupied a "hybrid" or "in-between" position and carried characteristics from two societies (Potter 2005a, p. 44). As a result, they were considered outsiders because of their different English accents and had difficulties adapting to a new society. Upon return to their home countries, returnees often confront what it means to be their ethnic/cultural selves and also to be American. For instance, a second-generation Greek woman was always considered different when growing up in the US, but upon moving to Greece she encountered comments and treatment from Greek citizens that implied they felt she was not truly a Greek national. She stated, "Being in [Greece] has caused me to be more American whether I want to be or not" (Christou 2006, p. 1049). Thus, encounters within the ancestral homeland can cause self-reflexivity of national self-identification and belonging within the host country where these individuals grew up.

Ethnographic research of second- and third-generation Japanese-Brazilians return migration to Japan shows that these returnees experience identity dissonance upon arrival to their ancestral homeland (Tsuda 2003, 2004). While living in Brazil, Japanese-descended residents develop a sense of what it is to be Japanese because they look phenotypically distinct from the majority population, which is descended from white European and/or African lineages, and are treated differently than other Brazilians. But once they return to Japan, as part of a labor migration, Japanese citizens do not consider them Japanese. Furthermore, upon return to Japan, residents easily single them out as not-Japanese by their talk, their dress and their demeanor. After living in Japan for a time, they concede to identifying as foreigners and reconnect with their Brazilian identity. As a result, they create an immigrant enclave in Japan and assert their Brazilian identity by frequently participating in culturally Brazilian activities such as speaking Portuguese, eating Brazilian food, wearing Brazilian clothes and dancing samba at festivals. Therefore, they are able to embrace the culture and identify as Brazilians once they realize they are not solely culturally Japanese.

In the US, undocumented Mexicans are among the group that has endured the longest period of undocumented status. In 1965, for the first time, the US placed



numerical restrictions on the Western Hemisphere affecting the long and established immigration flow of Mexican workers (Alba and Nee 2003). These numerical restrictions did not curtail immigration from Mexico, they only made it illegal. In 1985, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) had a tremendous impact on Mexican immigration. Although it provided amnesty to 2.7 million undocumented immigrants in the US (the majority of whom were Mexican), it also increased the national budget for border enforcement. These immigration policies did not stop immigration from Mexico, but they did interrupt the circular migration flow that had, until then, been characteristic of Mexican immigrants, who would work temporarily in the US and then return to their families in Mexico. As an unintended consequence, these policies forced undocumented immigrants to settle in the US.

Placed in a historical context, the trip to Mexico is significant for the DACA travelers, to their parents and to their relatives who reside in Mexico. It should also be of interest regarding policies that stem from neoclassical perspectives. Immigration policies have kept immigrants from returning home and, for a short period of time, this invisible yet tangible wall was temporarily lifted for the children of immigrants who were DACAmented. The experiences presented through our research begins to highlight the complexities of national identification and belonging for immigrants who have lived extensively in the US but have cultural and ethnic backgrounds from Mexico. In our study, undocumented youth in the US grow up feeling that they have hybrid or in-between identities, uncertain whether to identify themselves as either Mexican or American because they feel as neither fully is true. We show, however, that leaving the US to reconnect with their ethnic homeland allows for the reconciliation of both identities, despite still not being able to legally call themselves American.

Conducting research with DACA travelers

Data collection occurred in the summer of 2016. We conducted semi-structured interviews with DACA travelers from Arizona and California who had traveled to Mexico within the prior year for educational purposes. The sample consisted of thirteen respondents, eight women and five men, all born in Mexico. Their ages ranged between 22 and 32 years, with an average age of 26 years. The range of time since they had last returned to Mexico was between eleven and 26 years, with the mean at 20 years. Only two participants arrived at the age of thirteen and had been living in the country for 11 and 13 years, respectively; the remainder of the sample had arrived before the age of 9 years old, with the mean age of six for the entire sample.

For the participants from Arizona, the four respondents (two women and two men) traveled to Mexico to be guest panelists regarding immigrant rights and social justice issues at a university in central Mexico and spent a little less than 2 weeks in the country. They were all able to visit their families for a short period of time before returning to the US. A single key informant, who traveled to Mexico as a panelist and whom we interviewed first, aided in the recruitment of her fellow travelers. Recruitment of nine Californian DACA travelers took place with the assistance of a community collaborator and co-author, the creator and manager of the



California-Mexico Dreamers Study Abroad program—the first program designed specifically for DACA recipients to gain academic credit while reconnecting with their home country. The program required that participants spend 24 days in Mexico, where they were able to have independent family travel, as well as participate in an educational program for college credit. The curriculum included lessons on Mexico's political, educational and economic systems as well as field trips to historical and archeological sites focusing on Mexican culture. Students funded their trips partially, and some costs were offset by donations from Mexican-related organizations and a scholarship fund. Three recruitment emails were sent out to the California study-abroad alumni and a total of nine responded. In general, most of the participants are civically engaged within the immigrant community (something that the application for the California program valued, but did not require) and have fought for the rights of undocumented youth.

Our California community collaborator helped with recruitment, but he did not participate in the data collection or the preliminary analysis. The two principal investigators have extensive experience working with Latinx communities in the US and with Mexican communities in Mexico. Both speak Spanish and have lived in Mexico during different periods of their lives. The first author, a white woman from Arizona who has lived in Guanajuato for 2 years, has extensive professional and familial ties to Latinx (a gender neutral term to refer to those who have Latin American descent) community and undocumented youth in Arizona. The second author is a Mexican American woman who was born in California, but grew up in Mexico and returned to the US at the age of 17. The third member of our interview team was a bilingual Mexican American graduate student raised in the US with familial ties to undocumented immigrants. These forms of cultural and human capital helped us recruit and establish rapport with the DACA youth and their parents. However, we were also aware of our outsider status and positionality in terms of our levels of education, citizenship and race (Zinn and Thornton Dill 1996). We strategically composed our three-person interview team to include a range of identities with transacting deep knowledge and contact with both Mexican and American cultures.

We conducted one-on-one, semi-structured, in-person interviews with each of the participants in public spaces, such as coffee houses or libraries. Participants had the choice of completing the interviews in either English, Spanish, or both languages. Only one participant spoke Spanish the majority of the interview, while the others sporadically spoke Spanish. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in the language that was spoken. The interviews ranged from 76 to 197 min, with an average duration of 108 min. Interview questions included how their life changed after receiving DACA, their visitation to Mexico, intergenerational dynamics, ethnic and national identity, and their thoughts on returning to Mexico. Using the software program MAXQDA, we systematically coded and analyzed the data based on the themes of reception in their home country, feelings of identity and belonging, and the possibility of permanent return migration. At the request of some participants, we use real names in the write-up of the results. Permission to do so was approved through the institutional review board. For individuals who chose to remain anonymous, we have used pseudonyms and ensured to not include any personal identifying information.



American markers of identity: “We were treated like foreigners”

Once DACA travelers arrived in Mexico, they encountered a variety of emotions, from feeling culture shock to not fitting in. Sociologists have noted that immigrants’ identities are shaped by the ethnic markers that “otherize” them (Jiménez 2008; Vallejo 2012). In the US, ethnic markers of identity such as an accent, an ethnic-sounding last name, or even clothing items make an individual stand out as foreign (Garcia-Lopez and Segura 2008; Waters 2001). Ethnic markers of identity have real-life implications for immigrants who stand out from the mainstream. In their study of Latina lawyers, sociologists Garcia-Lopez and Segura (2008) found that Chicanas negotiate and manage their presentation of self at work and in their communities. They argue, “The unwritten rules of the workplace convey that she should erase, conceal, or subdue certain cultural adornments” (Garcia-Lopez and Segura 2008, p. 242). For DACA travelers, the issue was not about hiding their Latinx ethnic markers while traveling in Mexico. Instead, they faced a new dilemma. For the first time, while in Mexico, the markers that made them stand out as American took on more importance in their interactions. This was a new dilemma for them, since in the US they were never fully seen as just American. For example, Eduardo stated, “You adopt American culture, principles, ideas, mannerisms, but there’s somebody out there, because of your lack of documentation, that’s going to tell you, ‘You’re not American.’” In Mexico, these learned and adopted mannerisms and principles were very easy to spot.

Before traveling to Mexico, some DACA travelers also tried to conceal their ethnic identities in the US for self-protection. Many, like Eduardo, actively tried to adopt American culture. For example, Andrea, a mother of two small children and an elementary school teacher, discussed how, before returning to Mexico, she experienced shame in being from Mexico. She stated this feeling mainly came from the limitations that her undocumented status provided her, such as not being able to work legally and attend college. Andrea further mentioned how her return allowed her to experience her culture and have a more positive view of where she came from. She said, “I am more proud of being Mexican. I have more value of being in the US while being a part of a culture that I have seen and experienced as an adult and not as a kid.” Laura also discussed that, before the trip, she would not tell people she was born in Mexico, but rather that she was from the US so she would fit in. She said, “Well, before the trip, being Mexican had a negative connotation to it, like you don’t really want to say you’re Mexican. Going on the trip and really experiencing Mexico, now I can feel like not only am I from the US, but I’m Mexican too.” Revisiting their home country helped many participants reflect on and accept their American identity. While in Mexico their families treated them well, but the greater population and sometimes their families treated them like outsiders because of their language ability, Americanized mannerisms, and perceived US privilege. We call these *American markers of identity*, which were hyper-visible in Mexico, but remained invisible when in the US.



Language and mannerisms

One of the ways that DACA travelers' American markers of identity were first apparent was their language ability while in Mexico. All the respondents had different levels of fluency in Spanish, but most spoke better English than Spanish, having grown up with formal language instruction in English. This is very common for second- and third-generation children. Scholars agree that the issue for new immigrants is not whether they will learn English or not, but rather, if they will retain their mother tongue (Bean and Stevens 2003). Our participants were all fluent in Spanish and English. Stefany, who arrived to the US at the age of five, commented that, before going to Mexico, many of the participants discussed how they felt they spoke Spanish fluently. However, she said that, once there, they were questioning what Spanish-language conversations exactly meant and commented that "It's a totally different language once you're there." These participants also have the ability to code-switch, that is, the ability to switch back and forth between Spanish and English fluently (Timm 1975). In a study of language attitudes, code-switching was negatively perceived by Mexican nationals, and speaking pure Spanish was equated to a stronger Mexican ethnic identity (Hidalgo 1984). Thus, this too caused problems for them fitting it, as Andrea, the schoolteacher and mother of two, discussed in her interview.

It was frustrating because you want to feel like you belong. You're like, "Oh, I'm going to Mexico. That's where I'm from." Then you go down there, and you're really not from there. You had people making fun of us, because we're talking Spanish and English at the same time with our friends. They're like, "Pick a language. You're either talking this or you talk Spanish." But we just switch back and forth without thinking that we're switching back and forth. It's very hard for me to stay in one language with someone that I know speaks both languages.

Although many of the participants easily code-switch between Spanish and English, which was evident in our interviews, most discussed how they tried to fit in by speaking Spanish. Nonetheless, their efforts were rarely successful, as they were often identified as not being from Mexico.

Mariana reiterated how many times people in Mexico would automatically ask her where she was from because they picked up on her different accent and would state that she was not from Mexico. In another interview, Abel said that he felt less accepted because of his language ability. Other Mexicans often told him that he had an American accent when speaking Spanish and immediately would ask if he was from the north. Abel remarked that Mexicans would say to him, "*Eres del norte, la tienes fácil, tienes dinero*" ("You are from the north, you have it easy, you have money"). Even some of their family members in Mexico assumed they were very fortunate. For instance, Yesenia stated, "I remember here I am coming out with my iPhone 6. It's so common here. ... [When] I pulled out my phone [in Mexico], I had my cousins say 'Oh my God, you have an iPhone 6?' and it was shocking. Like oh my God, I'm so privileged, right?" Yesenia said this last



statement with a sarcastic tone, but without skipping a beat, she reaffirmed in a more serious tone that she was indeed privileged to be able to afford a new phone, nice clothes and a better lifestyle in the US.

A hidden privilege

Their American markers of identity not only make the travelers stand out as foreign in Mexico, but also forced them to reflect on and recognize a hidden privilege that they did not realize they had before traveling to Mexico. None of our respondents would say that their life in the US was easy, and all worked to help with the family economy. The assumption that they had money and an easy life, although not completely true, it is also contextual. In other words, being able to live in the US and earn dollars, when the average income in Mexico is the equivalent of US\$15,000 per year (OECD 2018), is a privilege that they did not recognize before their trip.

This hidden privilege was evident in certain contexts. Abel went on to discuss that people would treat him differently depending on the situation. For instance, if he was at a restaurant, the waitstaff would attend to him better because, customarily, tourists from the US tip well. Others also had examples of being treated differently when engaging in economic transactions. Many mentioned that they tried to speak only in Spanish so vendors and taxi drivers could not easily take advantage of them, but this did not always work and merchants often charged them more money. Although this is a common experience for many American tourists who travel to Mexico, this was the first experience for DACA travelers. For them, this was the first time that the American markers of identity they had tried so hard to learn and adapt were recognized and, in a way, used against them in their own country.

For many, the trip back to Mexico allowed them to reflect on their American markers of identity. In addition to being singled out as foreigners because of their language ability, they realized how US culture influenced their preferences and mannerisms. Maria commented that, once in Mexico, she realized, “Wow, we’re very Americanized.” One experience that reinforced this was when Maria and other students went to a diner that served hamburgers and milkshakes in Mexico, and they were all commenting on how they missed In-N-Out Burger, a famous hamburger chain that originated in California. Yesenia also commented that she felt “American” because her formative years of life were in the US, and it is where her education happened and where she created all of her friendships. Yesenia went on to discuss that, while in Mexico, she often encountered people asking where she truly was from. Ironically, this question is similar to one that Latinx youth are often asked in the US as well (Flores-Gonzalez 2017). When she responded that she was from Guadalajara, they questioned where she “really was from.” She then reflected,

I was like oh, that’s very interesting. They can automatically spot us. I don’t know if it’s the way we were dressed or the way we speak our Spanish. Because I don’t speak fluent middle class Spanish, and I think we do a lot of slang.

Yesenia further commented that these encounters reinforced that she did not fit in there and did not belong in Mexico. But do they really belong in the US? In her



book, *Citizens but Not Americans*, Flores-Gonzalez (2017) highlights that Latino millennials do not have a full sense of belonging in the US because of ethnic and racial markers that make them stand out as foreign. How others see you matters. One of her respondents stated, “They see me as a Mexican. So I guess that’s why I don’t see myself as American, because others don’t see me as an American” (Flores-Gonzalez 2017, p. 1). DACA travelers experience this same exclusion in Mexico, where, similar to the youth in Flores-Gonzalez’s book, the DACA travelers are citizens of Mexico and look phenotypically Mexican, but are not seen as Mexicans.

As these narratives illustrate, despite DACA travelers looking physically similar to Mexicans, their different American markers of identity, such as language, mannerisms and a presumed US privilege, would intersect, making them feel like outsiders. In essence, many felt as though the people who did not know them treated them like foreigners. Mariana said, “I felt like to other Mexicans we were like white people status, but we were not white. We’re just like them, but they treat us like we’re outsiders.” This comment highlights how “racial” identification, very important in the US when distinguishing in- and out-groups, does not equate to national recognition by the in-group—in this case, people perceived to be fellow Mexicans. Mariana, who clearly did not perceive herself as “white,” was shocked to be considered the equivalent, especially from others with whom she had been conditioned to identify while growing up in the US. That is, she was clearly identified as nonwhite by other Americans, but in this instance, she received the opposite feedback. In another instance, Maria recounted how, at a restaurant in Mexico, the waitstaff rolled their eyes at someone in the group’s requests and called them *pochos*. This term is often used pejoratively by Mexicans to describe those who have left Mexico for the US, and it can also infer that the person lacks fluency in Spanish (Weaver 1994). These negative encounters were shocking, but they created an opportunity to reflect on where they felt they belonged. It was through this short visitation that they were able to process and renegotiate their identification with both Mexico and the US.

Reconciliation: Soy de aquí, soy de allá—I’m from here, I’m from there

Among popular and artistic culture within the Mexican immigrant community, the concept of *ni de aquí, ni de allá* (neither from here nor there) is used to describe Mexicans who migrated to the US and have spent a lot of time outside their home country, or those born in the US who have strong ties to their Mexican heritage. In fact, this has been a topic of discussion throughout the past century. For example, *corridos*—popular poetical songs that often refer to socially relevant topics—from the 1920s referred to the mistrust and dislike for Mexican Americans, as their not being true Mexicans, and cited *ni de aquí ni de allá* as a common adage when referring to Mexican Americans and Chicanos (Perches 2002, p. 95). More modern thematic examples of this concept of not belonging can be seen in India Maria’s¹ 1988

¹ Famous Mexican comedian known for her character (India Maria) that stereotypically depicts an indigenous woman who gets in and out of various difficult situations based on her naiveté.



film and Latino Rapper Jae-P's 2003 song, both titled "Ni de Aquí, Ni de Allá." The notion of from neither here nor there has been applied to both documented and undocumented Mexican-descended immigrants living in the US. In fact, we encountered this theme among undocumented immigrant youth who grow up in the US, but we also found an embrace of both cultures and narratives of belonging to both places, especially after visiting their families in their Mexico hometowns.

Nestor stated that he loved the experience in Mexico—the ability to reconnect with his culture and meet his family allowed the opportunity to examine his background and have a greater approbation for his multiple identities. He said, "You get to appreciate what you have here and then also what you have there, so you get to appreciate both sides of the border. You grow a lot as a person just because you reflect on so many things." It was in this context that their American markers of identity began to take on a different meaning. Instead of guilt for an unknown and newly discovered US privilege, students such as Nestor took a stance of appreciation for their privilege of living in the US.

In another instance, Maria, who spoke mostly Spanish during her interview, said, "Before the experience, I was Mexican, both inside and outside. But you really do not know how Mexican or how American you've become until you're there." Maria further discussed that, from the trip, she felt both Mexican and American, and then said, "*soy de aquí, soy de allá* [I am from here, I am from there]. ... We're technically from both places." Yesenia also reiterated the reconciliation of both countries by stating,

I think one of the things that I've heard during this trip was this idea we're from here, we're from there. I think we always say *ni de aquí, ni de allá* [not from here, not from there], but that's not true. We cultivate our lives in both places one way or another. ... Home is the US, but Mexico is also home, but not in the way that the US is.

Although the study-abroad curriculum did not focus on identity studies, the students themselves did identity work with one another. Their shared experience during the trip created a space to share their feelings of belonging both in Mexico and in the US.

In yet another example, Laura stated, "You can't really deny me both worlds because I am from both worlds. Going on the trip makes you realize that it's okay to be from two different worlds." Thus, for many participants, the idea that they could be both Mexican and American was reiterated through their experience with the opposite culture, regardless of legal status. When they were in Mexico, they were seen as American, and when they were in the US they were seen as Mexican. However, in this case, because of this trip, individuals who have been emphatically told they are not from the US because of a lack of legal papers, embraced the feeling of belonging in both places rather than highlighting the rejection of both.

My home is here: Privilege of living in the US

We are also interested in understanding how their short visit shaped their thoughts about the possibility of returning to live in Mexico. Having grown up as undocumented and only recently receiving DACA, many faced, and still face, adversity



in their daily lives. However, recent research finds that 64% of DACA recipients feel that they belong more in the US after receiving DACA, and 90% stated they would become citizens if they could (Teranishi et al. 2015; Wong and Valdivia 2017). Moreover, since receiving DACA, many beneficiaries have been able to further their education, work legally, open bank accounts, get credit cards, receive driver's licenses and have access to health insurance (Gonzales et al. 2014). Our research builds on this body of research and shows that traveling to Mexico for the first time after immigrating to the US as children helped solidify their desire to remain in the US and see the US as their home. We found that, once participants in this study traveled to Mexico, they were able to reflect on how fortunate they were to live in the US. Before their trip, they knew of their parents' pre-migration struggles only through their parents' stories. This trip allowed them to see for themselves how their lives would have been if they had stayed in Mexico. Their new frame of reference for this was their close family members, including their cousins, who highlighted for the travelers a privilege they did not know they had.

Our respondents acknowledged their privilege, once seeing some of the life conditions in Mexico and the opportunities living in the US afforded them. For example, Yesenia told us, "They [family in Mexico] see we're in the US, that we have all these benefits and are living—even though we're marginalized, we live better than some Mexican families." Many participants discussed how Mexican citizens and their family would comment on how lucky they were to be able to now work legally and travel outside of the country. The DACA recipients initially rejected the assertions that they were "lucky" because they have fought so hard, but upon seeing and reflecting on what their lives may have been if they had stayed in Mexico, most felt extremely fortunate to have grown up in the US. For instance, when asked if Mariana ever saw herself moving back to Mexico, she said "Hell no. I can't see myself moving back there. I think it's really hard. It's not what you expect in life." She had an especially difficult trip and discussed how the poverty and feeling unsafe affected her. Another participant said, "I guess going to Mexico and coming back to America, just makes you realize and be grateful to have lived in this country or to be living here because it is where dreams come true. Yeah, we are lucky to be here." In yet a different example, Stefany stated,

I would not be able to see myself back in Mexico. I guess especially also because it's not as easy even if you were to migrate back. I think, unfortunately, here there are more opportunities. I've been blessed with different opportunities that continuing my education here, it's going to benefit me more than going back. ... Here, the little struggles are nothing compared to the struggles over there.

Most commented that they could live in Mexico if they had to, but that with DACA they can continue their education, find legal work, support themselves and provide opportunities to their families and their current or future children.



Reflections on DACAmended identities and future directions

In this paper, we had the unique opportunity to show how DACA travelers, who briefly returned to their home country of Mexico, expanded their sense of belonging in the US despite not being legally recognized as belonging to the US. The DACA travelers ultimately preferred to live in the US. These DACAmended young adults clearly showed that their ancestral homecoming offered an opportunity to reflect on both their Mexican and American identities, something only a minority of DACA recipients have been able to do. Many connected with family they had not seen in decades and with a culture that most could not remember experiencing firsthand. However, they also encountered people who did not accept them as authentically Mexican, and this experience also reinforced their Americanness. Through these encounters, they discovered their American markers of identity, including their language proficiency, English accent, the ability to code-switch, their mannerisms, and a newly discovered US privilege that made them realize how Americanized they really were.

This article also highlights how these DACA travelers were able to reflect on the opportunities they have in the US that most likely would have not been possible if their parents had not made the sacrifice to immigrate to the US. This fostered a greater appreciation for the US, even though they were still lacking legal documentation. It also enabled them to better understand their parents' decision to immigrate to the US and bring them along when they were just children. Returning to the motherland offers the opportunity for reflection and acceptance of two previously seemingly divided identities. Although these young adults did not refer to themselves as American during our interviews, they were able to reconcile with their American identity and claim the US as their home.

Identification is ascribed; we see how others categorize us (Jenkins 2014). Latino millennials who have darker skin see themselves as Mexican even when they are US citizens because in the US they are seen as Mexicans. This research has highlighted how this process operates in different contexts, both in the US and in Mexico for DACAmended individuals. The trip back to Mexico helped codify their identity and assert their belonging *aquí* and *allá* (here and there). This is important because research informs us that an overall negative state of well-being is linked to lack of belonging in the context of undocumented individuals. It is well established that undocumented youth have increased anxiety and stress, which can lead to many other negative outcomes (see Gonzales et al. 2013).

Traveling to Mexico helped the youth assert their sense of belonging in both countries, but the fact is that their rights in the US are in constant jeopardy while possessing DACA. However, many DACA recipients who traveled on Advance Parole were able to legally reenter the US "under inspection," a requirement needed to adjust their legal status through an immediate relative who is a US citizen (see Graber and Magaña-Salgado 2016 for adjustment of status information). Thus, those with such relatives may be able to adjust their status and eventually become citizens. For other DACA recipients, Advance Parole is no longer an option, and the currently DACAmended can no longer travel outside the US. Nonetheless, many questions are



still unanswered about how varying legal statuses, as they intersect with other factors, affect national identity and belonging.

This study helps illuminate how, for these DACA recipients, making a trip to their home country influences national identification and belonging, but other DACA recipients also warrant attention. For example, some recipients have not been able to travel to their home country; others traveled on Advance Parole for humanitarian reasons, such as having a severely ill relative or attending a funeral; and some have traveled for work. Future research could investigate how their experiences compare and contrast with those of our group of travelers. Moreover, California and Arizona are both situated along the US-Mexico border and not only receive large numbers of Mexican immigrants, but also were formerly part of Mexico and have their own unique borderlands identities. As such, many Mexican cultural influences like food, festivities, shopping places, music stations, Spanish language, and communities persist there. Therefore, it could be argued that these immigrant youth are more easily connected to their ethnic heritage.

Other ethnic groups of 1.5-generation immigrants throughout the country, from Central and South America as well as Asia, may experience similar or different contexts of reception and therefore have opposing views of identity and belonging. Lastly, many DACAmented people have or are eligible for adjusting their status to legal citizens through different mechanisms. Future research could investigate how these new citizens identify and how their legal status influences their feelings of belonging to both the US and their home countries.

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