

# Deportation and Redefining Masculinities on the Northern Mexico Border

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“It’s like being dropped off on the other side of the world... Here, I’m nobody. I’m nothing,” Carlos murmurs, searching for words to describe deportation to Nogales, Sonora, Mexico after living in the United States for thirty years, since age four. We lean against an abandoned cement house on a narrow street for one of many conversations. Carlos’s faded black and red flannel envelops arm and neck tattoos in Old English script: Phoenix street gang, list of years incarcerated, “Forever Blessed.” Carlos is taking a break from the bustling U.S.-Mexico pedestrian crossing where he “hustles” providing informal guide services to border-crossers to earn small tips. Deportation presumably aims to expel unauthorized “aliens” to so-called countries of origin—ostensibly a return home. Yet for deportees like Carlos, deportation constitutes exile from home.

Carlos’s experiences reflect the U.S. government’s focus on deporting “criminal aliens”—177,960 in 2014 alone, most to Mexico, often from U.S. state and federal prisons. Many are long-time authorized and unauthorized U.S. residents whose lives are culturally and socially embedded in U.S. communities. After release from prison and expulsion to the United States, how do men adapt to everyday living in unfamiliar communities? How might gendered identities be a resource for mitigating, at least minimally, the hardship of social and physical displacement? How might deportees’ masculinities themselves be reconfigured? And what might these men’s lives reveal about legal-political and sociocultural citizenship and the consequences of the U.S. deportation regime? These questions animate my research with deported men who were brought to the United States years or decades earlier as child migrants before deportation to Mexico.

Five months of street ethnography and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty-five deported men, twenty-three of whom were incarcerated, suggest that redefined masculinities help mitigate precariousness. Gendered social identities are complex and contradictory. Deportee masculinities, although multidimensional and contingent, often accentuate an affable solicitude that diminishes hard gang or prison self-expressions. These masculine self-expressions enable “hustles” (provision of informal services for small amounts of money) near public tourist areas, and, in small shared living spaces, foster everyday practices of material and emotional care among deported men that allow them to create family-life together. Additionally, deportees’ cherished personal narratives of “making it” on tough Phoenix streets or in Arizona prisons reinforce a sense of masculine resilience—a resource for surviving deportation to northern Mexico.

Carlos’s background reflects the deeply entwined histories of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. His family’s migration is framed by both the U.S.’s frenetic need for cheap labor and the minimal acceptance of those who provide it. In 1981,



To protect confidentiality, the author changes names and other details of the lives of his vulnerable subjects. Top: Abandoned house in Nogales, Sonora, shared by men deported from Phoenix, Arizona. • Next: Nogales tourist area within one block of the U.S.-Mexico international boundary. The heart of “hustle” space, where deported men deploy English language skills to provide informal guide services; sell snacks, drugs, and kitschy Mexican crafts; or ask passersby for “a little help” / photos by Tobin Hansen.

Carlos moved with his mother and two sisters from Chihuahua, Mexico as she sought low-paying service work in east Phoenix, Arizona. Carlos describes life growing up in the racially segregated east Phoenix projects (public housing) where “it’s all gangs.” Carlos says, “It’s real hard not to be in gangs. I was real heavy into all that gang shit.” In 2006, Carlos was convicted of multiple weapons possession and drug charges when police raided a house his gang used for storing guns and drugs. After prison, Carlos was deported to Nogales in 2011. Not wanting to go back to prison for felony reentry, clandestine return back home to the United States seems too risky. Carlos has no contact with family in Chihuahua, an unknown place now.

For men in this study, deportation is a disorienting social, economic, and physical dislocation. They have few or no social ties in Mexico, are isolated from family and homes in the United States, and are socially and economically marginalized in their receiving communities. Carlos slept on a sidewalk bench upon arrival in Nogales after midnight. Now he squats with another deportee from Phoenix in an abandoned house. Carlos

has yet to find formal employment at any of the many manufacturers where he has applied in Nogales. He also started wearing long sleeves to cover his tattoos and stopped shaving his head bald to reduce association with gangs. Carlos says, “I’ve changed my ways. I’ve been crazy in my life [prone to violence]. I can tell you I’m not crazy. I’m different now.”

Carlos and other deportees reconfigure masculine self-expressions, “changing their ways,” as they navigate social and economic precariousness. Affable public personas allow “hustles” near the international border. Carlos, for instance, makes pocket change helping border-crossers carry luggage or locate pharmacies or restaurants. Whereas most passersby look at his bedraggled clothing and partially covered tattoos with disdain, some value his shy sincerity and local knowledge. Moreover, deportees’ close interpersonal networks become central to the circulation of material and emotional care. Carlos spends hours with other deported men from Phoenix discussing work opportunities, telling stories, and occasionally swapping clothing or cans of soup. “That’s the thing you need, someone you can trust... It doesn’t matter what’s happening on the streets; [with other deportees] it’s all good.” Lastly, deportees draw strength from memories of prison and gang experiences to cope emotionally and psychologically with post-deportation hardship. Carlos has abandoned street gang drug dealing and left his prison gang behind, yet he gains hope from this earlier part of his life history. He views his gang and prison experiences as evidence of inner strength and the ability to survive the precariousness of Nogales “as a man.”

Moves to mitigate precariousness after deportation underscore the fluidity and mutability of masculinities. But despite deft adaptations, deportees can only minimally ameliorate the hardships of family separation, embodied outsider identities, and permanent dislocation. Deportees’ lives reveal the deeply dehumanizing character of permanent social displacement. Their experiences expose the inadequacy of legal-political categories, such as “criminal alien,” that ignore sociocultural citizenship. Moreover, they challenge assumptions that membership and belonging naturally align with birthright citizenship and nationality. To be sure, migrants are convicted of crimes at rates lower than native-born U.S. citizens. But when sociocultural U.S. citizens like Carlos are convicted of crimes, incarcerated, and then released from prison, is deportation, “being dropped off on the other side of the world,” warranted? ■

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