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There and Back Again: Processes of Mexican Migration in the 21st Century: An Interview with Deborah A. Boehm

Deborah A. Boehm
University of Nevada, Reno, dboehm@unr.edu

Sharrah Lane
University of Kentucky, sharrah.lane@uky.edu

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**There and Back Again: Processes of Mexican Migration in the 21st
Century: An Interview with Deborah A. Boehm**

Dr. Deborah A. Boehm
University of Nevada, Reno

Sharrah Lane
University of Kentucky

Sharrah Lane (SL): Could you tell me about your most recent projects? What was your methodology?

Deborah Boehm (DB): The book that I most recently published is *Returned: Going and Coming in an Age of Deportation*, and that came out of earlier work I had done... I had been doing work with transnational families from my doctoral studies forward and in that first project, I was interested in how family was structured across borders: How does the border – the U.S.-Mexico border in this case – divide families but also how do they transcend that border and how are policies playing out on intimate levels? When I was doing that research, as I was getting ready to publish the book [*Intimate Migrations: Gender, Family, and Illegality among Transnational Mexicans*], people started to be deported to these communities I was working in small, rural communities in Mexico, in the states of Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí. The state of Zacatecas says that half of Zacatecanos live in the U.S., so this is part of Mexico that has been heavily impacted for many generations by migration. However, I had never met someone who had been deported. Then suddenly, in these very small communities of only a few hundred people, there were 4, 5, 6 people who had been deported. This coincided with the Obama administration's increase in deportations, for which activists gave him the label "Deporter-in-Chief," because it broke records in terms of the number of people [being deported]—almost 400,000 a year at its height.

I shifted gears and my research actually came out of a conversation with a woman in a community. She said, "You know, this is what you should be studying now. You should be studying deportation because you're government is sending folks back." As a result of that conversation, I started to focus on deportation and had similar questions and interests as in my earlier work: How is it that family life is structured, but in this case, in the aftermath of deportation? And how do communities cope with or adjust to or manage this very disruptive process of someone being deported? The project looked at the chaos that comes after deportation, because it is chaotic for the individual who is deported and it also has this ripple effect and affects so many more people. I interviewed a number of families – individuals and their family members – in the U.S. and Mexico, and another theme that came out of that was citizenship: How is it that membership, something that seems stable, like legal citizenship, could become not stable or contingent or slippery? How can that category then become something else? I was interested in the experiences of U.S. citizens who are "deported" after a family member is deported, drawing on the work of legal scholar, Daniel Kanstroom who talks about "*de facto* deportation." How is it that a U.S. citizen child or partner is also deported after a family member is deported? And on the other end, how is it that undocumented immigrants, people with *de facto* citizenship, experience the expulsion or displacement that happens through deportation? Sometimes it might be their own deportation, sometimes it might be the deportation of a family member. For example, someone who immigrated as a one year old and came to the U.S., has grown up here and knows no other life... I'm thinking of one young woman whose father was deported, and she then stayed [in the U.S.] for a while after he was deported, but she, too, ended up "coming back" [to Mexico]. We really do need to problematize these returns. In a case like that, how voluntary really is her return? I question if this was a forced form of movement. I think it is a kind of forced displacement that she experienced as a result of this state sanctioned expulsion that happened to her father. And so, in her case, she was also in a sense "deported" even though she didn't go through a legal deportation or "removal" proceedings, which is a term the government uses. This is very telling, the idea that someone can be "removed" from a place... I was interested in that, how are families affected? How are these categories of citizenship contingent?

I was also interested in deportation from the perspective of transnational migration. As migration scholars, and certainly as anthropologists, we have looked at migration as circular, as being in different directions and not being predictable. Still, this is something distinct when migrations are forced from the North to the South. What does that mean for individuals on the ground and

what does it also mean for the way that we think about global movement and transnationality? And so I have also been interested in understanding, what is this? Is this a new migration flow? When U.S. citizens are going to Mexico to reunite with family, are they now immigrants? Yes, in many ways they are, even though they can return to the United States. Again, I think a lot of these categories are blurred; the divisions between these categories are blurred in this particular case, and maybe that underscores the fact that they are blurred in all cases. For example, another family I worked with had a three-year-old U.S. citizen son. He ended up coming with them, obviously, when they came back to Mexico. But they themselves had not been to Mexico for 20 years... because they were undocumented, they were unable to go back and forth, so their movement in many ways was a new migration. In the case of the man who was deported, he hadn't been there since he was 14 years old... In that case, what I'm interested in is what's happening to this three-year-old and his family? I think in many ways he's like an exile, living life as an exile outside of his nation of origin. That's not to say he doesn't have ties to Mexico as well – he can get legal status [in Mexico] because Mexico recognizes dual nationality – but he was born in the U.S. and he can some day go back. So I also wonder, looking down the path a decade from now or 15 years from now, should he decide to go to the United States for school, for example, what will that be like? And what kind of migration will that be? And how do we as scholars understand movement that takes a very different form from his parents' initial migration, but in other ways parallels it? In the region of Mexico where I work, there's a long history of movement beginning with and even before the Bracero Program... the Bracero Program established male-led migration and now you have a male-led wave of deportations. It's been primarily a masculinized migration in many ways, even though there are women and children who have migrated, and now primarily masculinized returns.

SL: Would you say, expounding upon this point of gendered migration, since men are being deported at a higher rate, that's because Brown men have been more criminalized in the justice system in the United States? Therefore, not only do we have this idea of Brown and Black men as criminals, but also when we think of people from Mexico for instance, there's been a lot of talk from certain politicians that they're dangerous. Could you expound upon that point?

DB: Yes, certainly. A lot of the people I interviewed articulated it in precisely that way, even saying, "I was basically driving while Brown." They weren't typically in the criminal justice system. They went, except for a few cases, straight into the immigration control system. In other words, they did not

commit a crime, even though in public discourse, especially in the current moment, migrants are cast as “criminals.” But, in fact, through U.S. practices and policies, “the law” has been constituted. In other words, there certainly are moments when the law criminalizes migrants in racialized ways, such as legislation in the 1990s under the Clinton Administration [The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996]. This legislation upped the ante and... re-entry became a felony, for example, and that paved the way for the distinctly racialized criminalization of immigrants that we see today... Another reason men [are targeted] is due to the fact that labor migrations from the region of Mexico where I work have been primarily male migrations. That’s not to say that feminized migrations are not occurring around the globe – for instance Filipino migration to Europe and to the U.S. tends to be a feminized migration flow – but in this region deportation directly impacts men, and this has an effect on home communities. In my research I interviewed women who had been living without their male partners – this is in a heteronormative context – for decades and then suddenly their husbands were deported. What does this mean for their relationships, for the dynamic of the family, for how day-to-day life is going to unfold when a man who has been gone for 25 years is now back?

SL: And how do you see that in your research? How did it affect family structure when men were returning to their families?

DB: I think it has been and continues to be a challenging situation for families and communities. The communities where I’ve done a lot of my research are primarily agricultural communities. They are bean farmers, but their farming life – while it’s very important to them and people connect to it – is essentially subsidized through migration. So remittances from the U.S. are enabling or sustaining their farming because it isn’t enough to be their primary livelihood, even with subsidies from the Mexican government. Nearly everyone there is a pinto bean farmer but when men come back to the community it is very difficult to economically support a family, even if they have plots of land. These challenges are what initiated their migration [to the U.S.] in the first place. So now... men are saying, “I have to go back even though I’ve been deported.” They are going back [to the U.S.] even after deportation, and again this is part of different returns that are happening. There were also many women who said to me, “If something doesn’t work out for us, I think I’m going to have to migrate. I’m just going to pick up and go. At this point I’m not going to wait for my husband to give me permission to do so, I’m going to have to go to provide

for my family.” I think there is the potential for lots of changes in terms of gender dynamics.

SL: Have you seen a lot of female migration from these communities as you’ve conducted your research?

DB: For most of the women I’ve interviewed who have migrated, it has been a male-led and male-facilitated migration... so a man will go, and after a few years he’ll make arrangements for his partner or his daughters, women of different ages, to migrate—it’s male orchestrated in that sense. I have also observed marriages and partnerships that were under strain. Often, men were having problems with alcohol, drinking quite a bit, depressed, feeling like they were unable to provide for their families. Deportation is putting a strain on families and on their networks because there are not opportunities for them to provide for themselves economically. There are limited opportunities in Mexico and it is increasingly difficult to come to the U.S.

SL: Do you see, with female migration to other places, not even necessarily to the U.S. but maybe to Mexico City, where people could work as housekeepers for example, with other migratory patterns, that they are able to substitute what the male migrant or partner was able to bring home or do you think that’s also changed the economic situation of the families?

DB: In some of the families I worked with, the women stayed; if the male partner was deported, the female partner stayed in the U.S. and continued to work for precisely this reason, to provide for the family. That’s one pattern. And the younger generation of women, teenagers and young adults, are also migrating more. Whereas before they probably wouldn’t have migrated – they might have married and stayed in Mexico – now they are being driven by economics and are making the decision to go.

SL: How do you see this affecting the communities, especially with female migration to places outside of the home community?

DB: You mention going to other places in Mexico. In the past that wasn’t very common in these communities. Most people hadn’t been to Zacatecas or Monterrey, even though it’s 1 to 2 hours in one direction and 4 hours in the other direction. Instead, they’d been to L.A. or they’d been to Dallas, so there wasn’t a lot of internal migration in the communities. There was some, but it wasn’t as prevalent as going to the United States... But now there are young

women whose path is a little different. They are studying in other parts of Mexico and then going into different types of work. I haven't formally studied that but in some of the families I worked with, that pattern tends to be more common among young women. That's a shift that would be interesting to look at.

SL: Just a final question. How do you think your work can inform other disciplines?

DB: I have a joint appointment in Anthropology and an interdisciplinary program, Gender, Race, and Identity. In migration studies, I have connected with colleagues around feminist analysis and feminist theory to think about migration from a gendered perspective. Also, in Latin American Studies, we have a lot to gain from having interdisciplinary conversations about migration because we have different perspectives that we can bring to the discussion. Also, you were talking about literary perspectives... we can draw on humanistic disciplines to think about discourse around processes of migration and to look at the tropes that people express. That's what led me to the project about return in the first place. People would say "¿quién sabe?" or "si Dios quiere"—uncertainty was the way that they were framing migration and "uncertainty" directly informed my analysis. Also, anthropologists are interested in language, and other fields can give us additional tools to think about language in a deeper way.

SL: Thanks so much for your time today and interviewing with us!