

RETURNED: GOING AND COMING IN THE AGE OF DEPORTATION

Deborah A. Boehm

Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016

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In *Returned: Going and Coming in the Age of Deportation*, Boehm uses over a decade of field work in both the United States and Mexico to describe the dislocation and violence (sometimes physical and sexual but also legal and psychological) that is experienced by Mexican-born migrants who have been deported from the United States. It is a timely work of ethnography, given not only the rabid xenophobia that is transforming U.S. immigration policies but also the hardening of borders around the world.

Most of Boehm's data come from interviews and observations she has made in rural Mexico, where she has been studying family and gender dynamics among transnational Mexican migrants since the early 2000's. As removals (which are involuntary and involve a 5-10 year ban from reentering) from the U.S. have increased starting with the Obama administration and continuing under the Trump presidency, the impact on migrant individuals and families has been devastating. Migrants, many of whom have been in the U.S. for long periods of time and many who came as young children with no memories of their birth country, are not allowed to tie up loose ends or even say goodbye to family and friends. Their removals are processed in court proceedings that they often don't understand, held en masse with numerous other migrants simultaneously. With little due process they are taken still handcuffed to a border town and dropped off, sometimes in the middle of the night, and must figure out their own way to get to family or friends who can help them acclimate to life in Mexico. This is a painful and disorienting process that Boehm captures in stories and quotes from migrants. Using these stories she is able to pull back the curtain of immigration enforcement laws and policies that have a veneer of predictability and order but in actuality produce unpredictability, chaos, and a sense of lawlessness and lack of rights and human dignity in the lives of migrants who experience enforcement.

Boehm divides her book into chapters that describe the lived experience of deportation. In the prologue titled "Chaos", she sets up the book by describing the experience of Artemio, who was arrested after a minor violation and driving without a license. He spent two weeks in a county jail, was moved to an immigrant detention facility, and then in the middle of the night without any prior warning U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers barged into his room, shackled his wrists and ankles, and took him along with about 50 other migrants to the border town of Laredo, Texas where he was directed to walk over a bridge into Mexico. It was about 3:00am, and as the crowd of deported migrants entered Mexico, they were greeted by a large group of people shouting offers of bus tickets, hotels, taxi rides, and even coyote (smuggling) services to get them back into Mexico. Artemio was confused and exhausted, and he found the experience terrifying.

The chaos that Artemio experienced was emblematic of what deportation has become in the U.S. In chapter 1, "Destinations", Boehm describes the shift from more voluntary returns to increasing the number of involuntary removals and the larger proportion of non-criminal migrants who have been removed. In chapter 2, "Alienation", she describes how migrants are increasingly framed in public discourse as alien and unworthy of human dignity, which is used to justify not only their deportation but the harsh methods increasingly used in immigration enforcement. One aspect of these harsh methods is the collective court hearings used to process removals. Migrants are shackled during court proceedings (which Boehm, quoting a defense attorney, notes is usually reserved for the most dangerous criminals) and brought in front of the judge eight at a time to receive their verdict. Called "Operation Streamline", the process ignores any individual circumstances and instead is a way of making deportation more efficient for the U.S. government but more alienating for migrants.

In chapter 3, "Violation", Boehm describes the circular nature of violence and the ways that different forms of violence are interwoven with one another in the process of migration. Violence in Mexico has motivated many people to migrate to the U.S. in search of more political stability in which one can make a living without worries over drug cartels and paying bribes to police and government officials. However, in the U.S. immigration enforcement apparatus the migrant often finds another form of violation, with the threat of deportation always looming, causing migrants to be afraid to be in certain public places and always worried what will happen to them or their family if they are apprehended by ICE agents. If they are deported, it is often back to violent communities in Mexico. These different forms of violence, both from private actors and state apparatuses, are not distinct but rather part of the same system of violation that makes migrants' lives so precarious.

In chapter 4, "Fragmentation", describes the family dynamics that result from the fear and the actual experience of deportation. Mexican men are more likely than Mexican women to be deported, but women and their children are intimately affected by deportation of a male partner. In chapter 5, "Disorientation", Boehm describes the experiences of deported children, many of whom have spent the better part of their childhood in the U.S. but now must try to survive in a country that they do not feel a part of. And in the final chapter, "Reinventions", Boehm describes how forcibly returning to Mexico produces the opposite feelings of hope and optimism that drove migrants to enter the U.S. in the first place, and how many are motivated to return to the U.S. again without authorization in order to rebuild the lives they once had, despite the risks and the costs of living in the U.S. illegally in the age of deportation.

Boehm's ethnography is a powerful indictment of the denial of human rights of unauthorized migrants in the U.S., and how the idea of the United States as a country of lawful order is a ruse that belies migrants' experiences of violation and lawlessness. There is an unfortunate absence of Boehm herself in this monograph, a non-Hispanic white woman who has spent a great deal of time in Mexico but is not Mexican herself, and more reflexivity on her own position vis a vis her research participants would have benefited the book. In fact, while she wove in the description of her methods mostly within chapter 2 in a way that minimized disruption of the story she wanted to tell about deported migrants' lives, more details of her methods should have been included, and could have been added into an appendix in order to answer questions that social scientists would typically have about research methodology while

still maintaining the novel-like qualities of the book. Because of that weakness, it may not be the best exemplar of an ethnography for the purposes of teaching research methods. However, as testimony of the violence that is embedded in immigration law enforcement in the U.S. (and increasingly many other countries), it is a moving and disturbing piece of scholarship.

