

# Going North, coming South: Guatemalan migratory flows

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## Abstract

Understanding the return aspect of international migration is vital because returnees replete with new ideas, perceptions on life, and monies affect every dimension of social life in migrants' places of origin. Yet, return migration remains uneven and an understudied aspect of migratory flows because migration scholars have privileged why individuals migrate, the underlying motivations for their moves abroad, and how migrants assimilate and succeed in their destinations abroad. Drawing on ethnographic research, this article addresses the migratory flows of Ladino and Mayan Guatemalans: those who go North, but in particular, those who come South. And in doing so, it highlights their similar and divergent responses towards migration processes.

**Keywords:** Return Migration; Transnational migration; Guatemalan migration

"I always had the desire to open up a mechanic shop. I always had that dream—it was my goal. I dedicated myself to that all my life...so when I returned home that's what I did....It took me nearly two years to come back home after living there [Los Angeles] for twelve years. Little by little I would be sending things home. I brought my car and on my final trip I brought back a whole bunch of other stuff—everything I would need to set up my shop and run a business."

Estuardo, a return migrant in his mid forties from Guatemala, had traveled to the United States with a visa, but overstayed the time period granted.<sup>1</sup> As in Pessar's (1995), "A Visa for a Dream," Estuardo truly accomplished his dream. Eventually, he acquired legal papers and became a U.S. resident, but still was bent on returning to his native land. Like for many others, Estuardo's story clearly highlights the steadfast commitment that some hold to permanently return home.

Going North to the United States is a theme much explored in the literature addressing Latin-American emigration. Little work examines, however, those who stay, the immobile (but see Hammar and Tamas 1997; Malmberg 1997) and the migratory flows coming South, that is return migration. Out-

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<sup>1</sup> Ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted includes participant observation, fieldnotes, personal journal, multiple informal interviews, and in-depth, semistructured tape-recorded interviews lasting two to three hours each. In all, I interviewed 30 females and 24 males (migrants and non-migrants). The age of interviewees ranged from 20 to 82. See Moran-Taylor (2008a) for a more detailed account on methods.

## GUATEMALAN MIGRATORY FLOWS

migration is difficult to calculate, but return migration is even more challenging to estimate. Return migration is typically defined as the movement of individuals back to their places of origin. Historically, this aspect of migration has received less attention and instead migration scholars have privileged why individuals migrate, the underlying motivations for their moves abroad, and how migrants assimilate in their destinations abroad (e.g. Gmelch 1980; D'Innocenzo and Sirefman 1992; Guarnizo 1997). Understanding the return aspect of international migration is vital because returnees replete with new ideas, perceptions on life, and monies affect every dimension of social life in migrants' places of origin. Empirically, I rely on the lived experiences of Guatemalans in their homeland. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork that I have conducted in Guatemala with migrants and non-migrants for the past decade, this article highlights the migratory flows of Guatemalans: those who go North, but particularly, those who come South. While one of the goals of this work has been to examine transnational migration processes, especially their effects on gender, class, and ethnicity in culturally and regionally distinct sending communities, my primary concern here lies on the socio-spatial mobility of migrants.

### Northbound Guatemalans

International migration constitutes one of the most significant social, cultural, and economic phenomena that impact Guatemala today. As elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean, Guatemala has shifted from a "breakfast economy" (exporting cash products such as coffee, bananas, and sugar) to a remittance-based economy (exporting cheap labor). Even though increasing numbers of Guatemalans emigrate North, relatively few studies examine this outward movement. Estimates suggest that out of a population of nearly 14 million over one million Guatemalans reside in the United States (Migration Policy Institute 2006). Addressing the Guatemalan case is important because many individuals left their home country under conflictive conditions (nearly four decades of state terror), consequently, this may impact their particular ideas and attitudes about return.<sup>2</sup> Tavo's story aptly captures this scenario. At first, somewhat coyly, he began narrating his account—a story about his travels North and six-year stay in the United States. Then, as we continued our conversation, giving me a solemn look, he paused and in a broken voice uttered:

I left searching for work and I left fleeing my country—the Army wanted to kidnap me too. When my father *disappeared*, I searched for him everywhere. He was taken from his house and never found. He worked for the government, you know—with the railroad as a manager. But, because politics here are so *chucas* (dirty) and my dad belonged to one political party and another opposed it, they did away with him. That's why I

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<sup>2</sup> See Rodman (2009) for an insightful discussion on Guatemala's genocide during the civil war that lasted nearly forty years.

left, because I prodded about his disappearance and then the Army later on would regularly stalk me. *Esos condenados hicieron averías aquí* (those baddies did horrors here).... But, as I was telling you, because here it's so difficult to save up to buy a machine...for example, that industrial sewing machine cost about \$20,000. My thought was always to set up a tapestry shop here to stop being a laborer and become an employer. Since I didn't have the economic resources, I went over there to the States. Then, after years of work and saving, I managed to buy what you see here.

Tavo's journey took him first to Los Angeles and later Chicago. As Tavo reminisced about his return to Guatemala and the political trepidations he had about coming back, wiping his tired, damp eyes he continued, "sending money to your family is not the same as being with them...it's sad...you know. I wouldn't do that again; it's just not worth it. I make a good living here. Now my children are grown up, and I did what I wanted to do and that's that." Like Tavo, many other Guatemalans embark on the northward venture—mostly illegally and with grand dreams and aspirations of striking a better life. They work a few years in the United States and then return to their *patria* (homeland), their community, and to their families left behind. Clearly, the social and emotional costs of emigration are many. And many do pay the high price at home and abroad.

Other macro-level factors that heavily intensified U.S.-bound migration, particularly during the 1990s and thereafter, include the country's deteriorating rural conditions and grinding poverty that many endure, and more recently, an escalation of social violence due to drug trafficking and gang activity (Moran-Taylor 2008a). Moreover, the ethnic character of Guatemala's population (it is about half Ladino and half Maya) makes their case ideal for exploring how distinct ethnic groups may respond to migration processes.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding their cultural differences, both ethnic groups must grapple with the gut-wrenching decision to leave their land and loved ones behind, even if this means taking huge risks to get North.

### Southbound Guatemalans

Return migration seldom unfolds in a clear-cut process. How this migratory movement is conceptualized becomes slippery because the moves that migrants make are never really set in stone. Many Guatemalans go North, after a few years abroad some come back home, and others engage in recurrent migration. Herein I refer to recurrent migration as the process in which migrants may complete multiple journeys (typically two to five trips in

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<sup>3</sup> Ladino is a social category that is fully loaded and many Guatemalans would not self-identify in such terms. Generally, it is used to refer to folks who speak Spanish and wear Western clothing. The Ladino ethnic group is also one that has European heritage and through time has been culturally Hispanicized. With respect to the Maya, 21 different Mayan indigenous ethnic groups exist in Guatemala, most of which reside in the western highlands.

## GUATEMALAN MIGRATORY FLOWS

their lifetime).<sup>4</sup> A significant part of this process is that individuals who engage in this back and forth movement do so with the intent to return home and the idea is to root themselves there as the ultimate stage. Generally, recurrent migration takes place due to the local systems (i.e., the poor economic structures migrants encounter) at home and because individuals have a better grounding and knowledge of wages and employment opportunities in the United States. Although return migration and recurrent migration unfold as divergent movements (because of the permanence feature), both processes develop within a context that is increasingly transnationalized (see, e.g., Espinosa 1998; Klimt 2000; Moran-Taylor and Menjívar 2005). In other words, migrants and non-migrants incorporate ideas, practices, activities, and expectations from both the community of origin and destination—what Levitt (2001) calls social remittances.

### Who Returns?

Massey, Durand, and Malone (2002:145) observe that one of the basic facts about immigration is that “migrants who enter a developed country for the first time generally do not intend to settle there permanently,” but do through time. While previous research demonstrates that many migrants do settle, we must not neglect that others actually act upon those initial intentions. In the Guatemalan case, permanent return migration is mostly evident among Ladino and Mayan couples who migrate together (either as a step migration process or together) and older folks who return and retire at home. This pattern is also true among Guatemalan females, particularly when mothers go North and leave their children behind with caretakers (Moran-Taylor 2008b). By contrast, both single and married Ladino and Mayan males largely characterize recurrent migration, folks who after a mere year or two back home itch for U.S. dollars and venture off in multiple trips—North and South and vice-versa.

### Why Return Home?

#### ***Macro and Micro Level Forces and Return Migration***

A combination of broad structural and local-level forces influences an individual's choice to remain or return home. In addition to global media forces, broader structural processes such as stringent immigration policies, xenophobic sentiments among native-born Americans, local labor markets, and racial discrimination in the workplace help foster a return home. To illustrate, Elvin is a Ladino returnee in his early twenties who returned to Gua-

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<sup>4</sup> Past studies use the term *transmigrant* to capture the movement of individuals who regularly go back and forth across borders (e.g., Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton 1992). Rather than using the term *transmigrant*, which often lends itself to great confusion in the literature, throughout, I stick to recurrent migration. Also, see Mahler (1999) for a discussion of recurrent migration among Salvadorans.

temala after a stay of three years in Los Angeles. What impelled him to go home was the highly publicized Rodney King incident in Los Angeles in the spring of 1992—an event that ruptured inter-ethnic relations between African Americans and Latinos in that city. Finding work in the United States during this social eruption became difficult. The economic factors did not persuade Elvin's decision to come back South. Rather Elvin's choice related to the non-economic issues he faced in that city—the racial tension, stress, and discrimination.

In some U.S. localities, migrants may experience higher levels of competition among themselves, other foreign-born, and/or native-born Americans. In the case of the Central American population—who comprise one of the newest and largest Latino U.S. arrivals, namely Salvadoran and Guatemalan—tension prevails between them and other more established Latino groups (e.g., Mexicans, Cubans, Dominicans). Mexicans, for example, look down on Central Americans. Contentions also emerge with their own *paisanos* (fellow country people). When talking about his employment relations with compatriots during his stay in Los Angeles, Estuardo, a Ladino returnee that I mentioned earlier, remarked: “I experienced more discrimination from my own people over there than from others. They see to it that you earn a lower salary or make it difficult for you to move up in your job.” Undoubtedly, poor working conditions and the racial discrimination that migrants endure in the United States sway their views and attitudes towards their destination places and promote firm ideas of return.

### ***Non-material Motives and Return Migration***

For the most part, it was the non-material concerns that propelled a permanent return home, such as the nostalgia individuals maintain towards their family, culture, traditions, and native land.<sup>5</sup> The idea of nostalgia simply refers to any longing for something far away or long ago. It is an ardent desire that drives Guatemalan migrants to go home—a “*nostalgia por la tierra*,” that is, feeling homesick for the homeland. It is holding on to strong place attachments that are enveloped with subjective images, values, and meanings that may prompt folks to return and others not to even consider migration an option (Malmberg 1997). And it is feeling homesick for loved ones left behind.

Some returnees also mention that they come back because of the great loss of prestige and poor humanizing treatment experienced in the United States (e.g., being an employee versus employer or becoming a number versus a person). Don Armando, for example, a Mayan returnee in his six-

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<sup>5</sup> This tendency also rings true for returnees among other migrant populations (see Gmelch 1980). In his detailed review of return migration, Gmelch (1980:139) notes that the social and cultural advantages of life in migrants' home country offsets “the economic costs—the expense of moving and the decline in earning power—of returning.”

## GUATEMALAN MIGRATORY FLOWS

ties echoed that while in his community, he was somebody, in the United States he was invisible. Additionally, others returned home because they were tired of living in limbo and waiting for their “papers” (legal migration documents).<sup>6</sup> A personal crisis (e.g., health, death), failures, and successes may influence decisions to go home as well. Equally important, the presence or absence of kin in the home country looms as a central concern among some Guatemalan migrants to plan a permanent return home.<sup>7</sup>

Prior to 9/11 and to the more restrictive immigration enforcement implemented thereafter (see, for example, Brettell 2006), locals mention several underpinning factors that provided the stimulus for recurrent migration. Once back in the home community some returnees became spendthrifts (or show-offs) and drank up their earnings. Others lacked entrepreneurial creativity in setting up new businesses or simply disparaged the low-paying jobs available at home. A few returnees stayed long enough only to find a marriage partner. And, a great many others grew anxious and could not adjust to their community’s way of life. Paradoxically, while some Guatemalan migrants went South due to a “*nostalgia por la tierra*” (nostalgia for their homeland); others ventured North because of their “*nostalgia por el dólar*” (nostalgia for the dollar) (Moran-Taylor 2001).

### ***Gender and Generational Factors and Return Migration***

Gender and age also figure prominently in decisions to permanently return home. Age is specifically important. For instance, both Ladino and Mayan older male migrants rather than young men are more likely to return. The U.S. pensions and social security checks of older, legal migrants enable return because, locals say, these funds stretch more back in Guatemala. And plainly, older migrants aspire to spend their very last days to die in their native land. While generational factors may influence a return home, gender also governs migrants’ decision to come back home. Those who favor a return home are Ladino and Mayan migrant men rather than women. Several dimensions help explain this male preference. First, the kinds of views women maintain on life back in their home community as opposed to their adoptive country. As many locals commented, “they prefer the comfort experienced over there.” Moreover, like many past studies show (e.g., Pessar 1995), women fear losing the economic independence gained while working abroad. Other female migrants consider that wage work for women is particularly scarce for them back home. Additionally, for female migrants who have established families in the United States this feature strongly precludes them from making a decision to return home, especially when migra-

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<sup>6</sup> Such non-material motives to return reveal that they represent both structural and ground-level reasons to head back home.

<sup>7</sup> With respect to this factor scholars point, for example, that forming families in the United States and/or having several family members settled in the same locality mitigates people’s decisions to return home (e.g., Browning and Rodriguez 1985; Chavez 1988).

tion is viewed as an opportunity to better the future of their children.<sup>8</sup> Women opt to go home when they leave their children behind for a long period or as they reach retirement age and their children grow older.

### Staying Home after the Return

Feeling a sense of accomplishment and, importantly, owning something tangible to display back home to corroborate the hardship years spent abroad becomes the success story—a story (real or imagined) that reinforces and encourages Guatemalan northward flows. Take for instance Miguel. He is a soft-spoken Mayan returnee in his thirties and father of two youngsters who returned home after working in Los Angeles for five years in a clothing factory. When I asked Miguel about his return, he proudly commented:

*Pues fijese* (well, you know)...because I had already reached my purpose—I had built my house, that was my dream...a piece of land. Before heading to the United States, I rented and didn't have a piece of land to build my little house. Before we paid Q75 (\$10) a month for a room—there the four of us slept, cooked, and that was the only room we had. And now, with the work I did over there [in the United States], I managed to build a three-story house and own two *cuerdas* (plots of land that are twenty by twenty meters each) where I grow maize. The change that I had in my life because of the years I spent in the United States is great!—as long as you really take advantage of it.

Clearly, for Miguel, as for most other Guatemalan migrants, his earnings from working in the United States were employed primarily to raise his family's standard of living. But, while doing so, he managed to alter his social status and to join a new social class—one created from the *migra* dollars brought back and one increasingly pervasive at home.

Ileana's case also vividly demonstrates how she and her husband, both Ladino returnees, maintained firm commitments to return and remain home. She said:

I never thought about leaving my country because we had jobs here, we had a home, and we had a way of making a living. Yes, we lived difficult times here, but we never dreamt of leaving. But then my husband got very sick. So, we left [Guatemala] seeking better medical care... But we had a goal to return, we never thought of staying abroad even from the beginning. On what we did falter a little, however, was on the length of time we stayed. We planned on only two years...but ended up staying longer [six years]. When we began our return, we decided to purchase a

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<sup>8</sup> These observations are also underscored in other migration studies (see, e.g., Georges 1990; Hagan 1994).

## GUATEMALAN MIGRATORY FLOWS

house, we secured a loan from the bank ... And then, the objective was to pay off the loan *over there* [Canada] for the house *over here* [Guatemala]. When we finished paying off our debt, we said...OK we're ready to return. So, when we decided to head back it was because we already had a place to come back to.

Ileana and her family initially migrated to Los Angeles during the mid 1980s. Thereafter they traveled cross-country and relocated in Montreal, Canada.<sup>9</sup> Although Ileana and her husband earned decent salaries working in a factory, had a Canadian-born daughter, and overall enjoyed the stability of life that Canada offered, their continued aspiration throughout their years abroad was always to go home. Upon their return she and her husband set up a couple of novel businesses—one specializing in real estate and the other in renting equipment and furniture for festivities. The real estate business exemplifies the ways in which community members and compatriots abroad maintain close-knit connections and how their community becomes increasingly transnationalized. Because no formal real estate agency or realtors operate in town, Ileana scouts out prospective buyers by contacting townsfolk she knows have relatives in the United States. Following this strategy provides her the opportunity to target potential homebuyers who may have the financial means and desire to invest back home. Essentially, she identifies migrants who hold strong commitments, if not aspirations, to return one day to their community. These tactics, then, allow Ileana to expand her local business into a transnational project.

Indeed, to make the (permanent) return a successful move, entrepreneurial creativity is fundamental. And it is especially important when it comes to the economic development migration brings in the home communities.

### Conclusion

Throughout I examined the inner workings of the socio-spatial mobility of Guatemalan migrants, with an eye on return migration (both permanent and recurrent). Migration may be viewed as a once-in-a-lifetime event that develops due to a variety of micro/macro conditions. However, what I illustrate here, and following Malmberg (1997:23), is that the moves that individuals make emerge because of “many strategic decisions that form a life course of various types of mobilities through time-space.”

With the flagging economy in the United States some fundamental questions arise: Will we begin to see a bigger migratory flow hailing South—one that becomes more permanent of both legal and unauthorized migrants in the North. And with the “status quo on steroids” (whereby the interior of the

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<sup>9</sup> Due to more lax immigration policies found in Canada than in the United States, Guatemalan communities emerged in that country, especially in cities like Toronto and Montreal. For a recent analysis of the Guatemalan flight to Canada, see Nolin (2004).



United States and U.S.-border have become so militarized since the Bush administration), will migrants turn their back on the United States or prospective migrants decide to not journey North at all? It is still too soon to tell. Certainly, if Latino migrants begin to look South more seriously, a pressing issue that will need to be considered are the full gamut of ramifications fueled because of a large southbound migratory flow—at both the receiving and sending end.

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## GUATEMALAN MIGRATORY FLOWS

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