

As Time Goes By: Social and Physical Immobility in the Lives of Undocumented Immigrants in California

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Abstract:

Contrary to popular belief, the current financial crisis has not made the undocumented immigrants residing in the United States leave the country. Accordingly, it continues to be of scholarly interest to investigate how life evolves for these almost 11 million immigrants of predominantly Latin American origin. Focusing mainly on women from Mexico and Central America, this article shows that not only physical but also social immobility is a predominant feature of undocumented, migrant women's everyday life in the United States. Based on anthropological fieldwork in California and drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, this article focuses on the way time is experienced by undocumented immigrants as they struggle to obtain social mobility while dealing with the consequences of their illegal status.

Keywords: Undocumented immigration; social and physical immobility; the experience of time; United States; Mexico; Central America

Introduction

Every day, thousands of undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrants attempt to cross the heavily guarded US-Mexican border in order to find work in the United States. Far from everyone manages to cross the border, and those who do succeed are often relegated to live in the shadow of American society (Chavez, 1998; Sabogal, 2005), living in a 'space of non-existence' (Coutin, 2006). The US authorities estimate¹ that in 2010, 10.8 million immigrants were in the country illegally; a number which has tripled over the last two decades, increasing from 3.5 million in 1990. Mexicans alone are believed to comprise as much as 62% of the undocumented population, which has led the US authorities to operate with two principal categories: 'Mexican' and 'Other than Mexican' (De Genova, 2005: 91). Altogether, immigrants from Latin America account for 79% of the entire

¹ Department of Homeland Security: "Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population: 2010"

undocumented population², which may explain why *Latinos*, in general, and Mexicans, in particular, have become synonymous with illegal immigration in the United States (ibid. 90). Likewise, the undocumented migrant has until recently been synonymous with a male since, historically, very few females have immigrated without the required documents. This, however, has changed during the last couple of decades (Hagan, 2008: 10), and according to estimates³, 43% of all undocumented migrants in the United States are now women. Even so, few studies have focused on female, undocumented migrants (an exception is Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1997), which is what this article does.

Contrary to the widespread belief that the current financial crisis would make the undocumented immigrants leave the US, it seems that the clear majority are not going anywhere. As a matter of fact, nine out of ten undocumented immigrants have been in the country for more than four years⁴, pointing to the long-term duration of their stay in the country. This raises some significant questions, such as: how does life in fact turn out for the migrants? Do they achieve upward social mobility as envisioned? And what kinds of consequences does their lack of physical mobility, in consequence of living a life in the shadow of society, result in? In exploring these questions, I intend to show how not only physical, but also social, immobility is a predominant feature of undocumented migrants' everyday life, bringing about what seems to be two contradictory experiences of time: on the one hand, 'empty time' that has to be 'killed', and, on the other hand, the time that flies by without one noticing it.

The main focus of this article, then, is the way time is experienced by undocumented, migrant women, as they struggle to find work and get ahead in life; that is, obtain upward social mobility while coming to terms with their physical immobility. The expression, 'to get ahead in life', is my way of rephrasing some of the most common expressions used by the migrants themselves when explaining their motives for immigrating to the United States – *salir adelante* being the most commonly used⁵. These expressions all revolve around the adverb *adelante*, implying a movement forward in time and space. Social immobility, then, is defined here as the feeling of *not* moving forward, but rather standing still, getting nowhere.

The ethnographic fieldwork which this article is based upon, took place in 2010 and was carried out in the Bay Area, California; more specifically, although not exclusively, in the Mission District in San Francisco, which is – or, at least, used to be – the *Latino* barrio of the city (Pamuk, 2004: 294). In total, 21 undocumented women coming from, respectively, Mexico, Guatemala and Nicaragua have been

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Other common expressions are *sacar adelante* and *seguir adelante*.

interviewed. Most of them are married, living together with their husbands who share their illegal status. With the exception of one woman, all of the migrant women have children, although they do not necessarily live with them, as some of the women have left behind their children in the country of origin. The time they have spent in the United States differs considerably, ranging from less than a year and up to 25 years. On average, the women have been in the country for nine years.

As observed by Nicholas De Genova, there are no communities of undocumented migrants (De Genova, 2002: 422) and one should therefore be cautious not to treat them as a homogeneous group. Being aware of this, I do believe, however, that it is justifiable to write about the undocumented migrants as a collective, given that their illegal status makes them share some central experiences – e.g., as regards the experience of time, which is the focus of this article. Another aspect which is worth keeping in mind is the fact that the fieldwork was carried out at the height of the current financial crisis, causing a general decline in employment opportunities. This, combined with recent enforcement of the social security system, has made the desire for social advancement increasingly difficult to fulfill. As a matter of fact, I did not initially set out to study social and physical immobility, but ended up focusing on these issues, because given the economic circumstances this was what seemed to preoccupy the migrant women the most.

Theory

Within the anthropological literature on illegal immigration, three anthropologists in particular have had a considerable influence on the theoretical perspectives developed⁶. First, Leo Chavez (1998) has found inspiration in the anthropologist Victor Turner's theory about the liminal period in *rites de passage*. Chavez argues that undocumented immigrants in the United States – much like the initiates which Turner studied – find themselves in a position of being 'betwixt and between', as their undocumented status prevents them from being fully incorporated into American society (Chavez, 1998: 175-186). Next, Susan Coutin (2006), being inspired by Michel Foucault, describes how immigration law is inscribed upon the bodies of the undocumented immigrants (ibid.: 174), who at the same time are being excluded from society, as they have to reside in what she terms 'a space of nonexistence' (ibid.: 27). Finally, although Nicholas De Genova (2002, 2005, 2010) also finds inspiration in the work of Foucault – especially his idea about discipline – it is to Karl Marx that he is most deeply indebted. While

⁶ The notion of 'transnationalism' has had quite an influence on the anthropology and sociology of migration, ever since it was introduced in 1992. I do not make use of this concept, however, because the undocumented women do not even remotely 'live their lives across international borders' (Glick-Schiller and Fouron, 1999: 344).

arguing that the state acts on behalf of the economic interests of capital (De Genova, 2010: 48), De Genova focuses on how the state creates what he calls 'migrant illegality' (De Genova, 2002: 419). He introduces the concept of 'deportability' to describe how the state – on the behalf of capital – makes undocumented immigrants *deportable* instead of actually deporting them, thereby creating a cheap and vulnerable labour force (De Genova, 2005: 8).

However, in order to explore how social and physical immobility expresses itself in the everyday life of the undocumented migrants, I have chosen a somewhat unorthodox analytical perspective by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theorisation about the subjective experience of time. According to Bourdieu (2000: 208), the experience of time is closely related to the link between the present and what he terms the 'forth-coming', which is the expectations and hopes one holds for the future *in* the present. A paradox exists, he notes, since time is rarely experienced as long as this link remains intact; that is, as long as the expectations and hopes one holds seem plausible. Consequently, time is only 'really experienced' by the powerless who are no longer able to retain their hopes and expectations for the future (ibid.: 224), albeit it is an experience of time with decidedly negative connotations – a 'dead', 'empty', and 'alienated' time (ibid.: 222-237). On an empirical level, Bourdieu lists several relations to time which can be observed; specifically, waiting, impatience, regret, nostalgia, and discontent (ibid.: 209). In what follows, the analysis will revolve around these experiences of time as they reveal, I argue, something important about the obstacles the migrant women experience when trying to get ahead in life; that is, obtaining upwards social mobility.

Historical and Political Context

In 1924, the first immigration law in the United States was signed as a means to halt the steady flow of Europeans and Asians coming into the country (Ngai, 2004: 3). In the 1920s, Mexicans were still allowed to enter the country, but they had to apply for visas, and since this was both a bureaucratic and costly affair, most entered without one. This paved the way for the still prevailing notion of associating Mexicans with illegal immigration, at the same time as it created a new kind of legal and political subject – the illegal alien (Ngai, 2004: 7; see also De Genova, 2005). As Mae Ngai explains: 'Restriction meant much more than fewer people entering the country; it (...) produced the illegal alien as a *new legal and political subject* (...) – a subject barred from citizenship and without rights' (Ngai, 2004: 4, original emphasis). The making of this new legal and political subject soon proved to be convenient for the US administration. During the Great Depression in the 1930s, 400.000 Mexicans were 'repatriated', i.e., deported, in order to prevent Americans from being left without work at a time when jobs were

in short supply (Ngai, 2004: 8). However, as soon as the economy improved, which it did in the forties, the government contracted ‘strong men’ from Mexico in the national *Bracero*-programme. This programme was of great importance, because it institutionalised the labour migration from Mexico to the United States on a hitherto unseen scale, laying the ground for migratory networks which new migrants were to make use of many years on (Andreas, 2009: 33). In 1965, the *Bracero*-programme ended and new immigration restrictions meant that only a small number of Mexicans could enter the United States legally. However, Mexican immigrants kept crossing the border without permission, and on the other side they were welcomed by employers who needed cheap and flexible labour (*Ibid.*: 34). Unlike migration from Mexico to the United States, which has a long history, it was not until the late 1970s that migration began in earnest from Central America, as refugees from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala tried to escape their civil war-ridden countries (Garni, 2010: 316). By the time the civil wars had ended in the 1990s, migratory networks had been established, and these have laid the ground for future migratory flows (*Ibid.*: 317).

Whereas the issue of illegal immigration received little attention during the 1960s and early 1970s, it changed with the high numbers of Central American refugees⁷ beginning to arrive in the United States, and this, combined with the rising number of undocumented Mexicans, made the issue one of the most hotly debated topics of the 1980s. It is important to notice, however, that it was not until the end of the 1970s that illegal immigration was defined as a problem calling for political action (Andreas, 2009: 37-39). The ‘Immigration Reform and Control Act’ was passed in 1986 as a response to the growing public concern over illegal immigration, and with this reform amnesty was granted to two million Mexicans (*Ibid.*: 38). However, as part of the same reform it became a felony to hire undocumented immigrants, thereby obliging all workers to demonstrate work authorisation when applying for a job (Coutin, 2006: 14-16). Today, a nation-wide database has been brought to bear on the task of verifying work authorisations (better known as ‘social security numbers’), making it almost impossible to use false work authorisation unlike earlier (*Ibid.*: 14-15). Because of this, the range of jobs open to the undocumented migrants is limited, and the jobs actually available are often located within the informal sector, where a valid social security number is not required. In consequence, the migrant women often work in the domestic sphere, cleaning houses while receiving their salary in cash – an act Veronica, a 53-year old Nicaraguan, referred to despairingly as *otra cosa ilegal* – ‘yet another “illegal thing”’. As Hondagneu-Sotelo reminds us, ‘Domestic work has always been reserved for poor women, for immigrant women, and for women of color’, and this, she argues, is still the case today (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, 14). Whereas

⁷ Only the Nicaraguan refugees were recognized as refugees. Refugees from Guatemala and El Salvador were considered economic migrants until the beginning of the 1990s (Coutin, 2006: 15-16).

domestic work in the United States used to be performed mainly by African American women, now it is almost entirely performed by Latina, Caribbean, and Filipina immigrants (*Ibid.*: 23), resulting in a certain pattern of gendered immigration to the United States, in particular from Mexico and Central America (*Ibid.*: xii).

Closing Doors

As observed by Henrik Vigh, ‘migration becomes a technology of the imagination, as an act through which people come to imagine better lives in other times or places’ (Vigh, 2009: 94). This is the case for most of the migrant women to whom, quoting Vigh again, ‘the possibility of gaining an adequate life is seen as temporally and spatially distant’ (*ibid.*: 96). What constitutes ‘an adequate life’ is a tricky question, and, to begin with, it is most easily defined in relation to its opposite – an *inadequate* life. This is defined by a lack of access to stable and relatively well-paid jobs, education, material goods, and health care. Reflecting upon the differences between her country of origin, Guatemala, and the United States, the recently arrived Maribel explained: ‘It is as if you live in two worlds. It is as if here [in the US] you live the present, but there [in Guatemala] is the past. You consider returning to this past one day, but this time you will not return to the same level that you used to be at’. As this quote suggests, different temporalities – past, present, and future – are closely associated with places and the possibilities they offer – or do *not* offer. The United States represent the present due to Maribel’s belief that a certain future is being made possible there; a future which, nonetheless, is located in Guatemala. Guatemala at-the-present-moment is being situated in the past, since the country, in the eyes of Maribel, offers no promise of prosperity and a better future; hence the need to migrate in order to obtain social mobility. When asked about her main objective, she would simply answer ‘work, work, work’. Interestingly, Sarah Mahler has pointed out that ‘they [the undocumented immigrants] are perhaps the firmest believers in the ideal that hard work, perseverance, and sacrifice (...) will yield success’ (Mahler, 1995: 228-229). Clearly, this is also the case with Maribel who believes that as long as she works hard enough, she will be able to attain her goals in the United States. Social mobility may, however, not be as easily obtained as expected by Maribel. The experiences of the 40-year old Carmen from Mexico illustrate some of the obstacles the undocumented migrants have to overcome when trying to get ahead in life.

Regretting that she decided to migrate 21 years ago, Carmen finds herself torn by the dilemma of whether she should stay or return to Mexico. For many years, Carmen has been struggling to find a ‘good job’ – defined as something which does not wear her down physically, the way domestic work does. This, however, has

been made ever more difficult due to the recently heightened control of social security numbers. For almost two years, Carmen was quite satisfied working at a nation-wide juice franchise, until one day she had to give up her job. One of her colleagues, who used to be her friend, knew that she was in the country illegally, and following a disagreement between the two of them, the colleague decided to tell the manager about Carmen's undocumented status, and, consequently, she lost her job. Worth noticing, undocumented migrants seldom try to defend themselves in these situations, as they assume, like Carmen did, that they are in no position to fight back (Coutin, 2006: 58), and trying to do so might even worsen their situation. The fact that Carmen lost her job over an argument with a former friend points to the vulnerable position 'migrant illegality' leaves the women in (cf. De Genova). As for Carmen, she is close to giving up: 'I have had two good jobs, and each time they have asked me for papers, and then you cannot work. At times, it feels as if doors are being closed to me (*me cierran las puertas*), because every time I believe I have a chance to get ahead in life, this is what happens'. The expression 'doors are being closed to me', serves as a useful metaphor describing how social immobility is experienced. Immobility, however, is more than just an experience – it *materialises*. For more than two years, Carmen had been living in an apartment infected with mould. Taking the health of her children into account, Carmen is aware that they ought to move to a new place, but since they *might* move back to Mexico in the near future, they have yet to do something about it. Feeling impatience, she believes that if she and her husband are to start over in Mexico, they have to make up their minds soon if they are to avoid that in ten years' time they will regret, once again, the decisions they have made.

Depression, Dead Time and Distraction

Due to their undocumented status, the migrant women have to settle for the 'dirty work'; that is, the 'degrading, dead-end, and low-paying jobs' nobody else wants to do (Cole and Booth, 2007: 1). As noted by Kristen Maher (2004: 132, my emphasis), 'citizenship comes to be defined in part as the right *not* to do "dirty work"'. For this reason, it is often the undocumented migrants who end up doing this kind of work, which supports the point that 'citizenship is not only a legal status but also a social standing' (Maher, 2004: 145). However, as the example with Carmen suggests, the main concern of the undocumented women these days is not so much the status ascribed to the work, but whether or not there actually *is* any work to do at all. As their economic situation rarely allows them to decline a job offer, the women are left with little choice as to whether they will accept a job or not. As Emelina, a 42-year old woman from Mexico, explained: 'Sometimes they don't pay us very well, but if it is that or nothing – there we go'.

Accordingly, Carmen is far from the only migrant woman who feels that doors are being closed to her. Since stable work is difficult to find, the single most important feature of the migrant women's everyday life becomes the struggle to find work, and often the undocumented migrants are hired on a daily basis, causing uncertainty as to whether or not one will have work in the week or even the day to come. In consequence, the phone is hardly ever turned off, as it is not uncommon for employers to call either late in the evening or early in the morning. Waiting, then, becomes a central aspect of everyday life, and during fieldwork I would often just sit and wait with my informants, doing nothing in particular while they would keep an eye on the phone in case an employer should call. Waiting, however, is not without its issues. Although none of the migrant women participating in this study have been officially diagnosed by a medical advisor, a major concern among them is that they will become depressed (*deprimirse*), which is what happens when one feels locked up (*encerrada*) at home, waiting for a job opportunity to reveal itself. In situations like these, to distract oneself (*distraerse*) becomes of vital importance. As Alma, a 33-year old Guatemalan, learned: '[I had] better distract myself, because I started to get sick. My nerves started to bother me, because... not having work, not having money, and on top of it all comes the rent'. Going for a walk, strolling in the local mall, not necessarily buying anything, or participating in English classes, are the most common activities to distract oneself with.

Of relevance in this respect, Bourdieu distinguishes between, on the one hand, the 'busy' person who is in a position to *give* time, and, on the other hand, the person with 'empty time that has to be killed' (Bourdieu, 2000: 224). In fact, killing the 'empty time' is exactly what Alma and the rest of the women are trying to do when distracting themselves. This is important, because 'powerlessness (...) makes one conscious of the passage of time as when waiting', and it is this feeling of being powerless which the woman are trying to escape (ibid.). Following Bourdieu, then, the time spent waiting could be interpreted as a kind of 'empty time', preferably avoided, because as he (ibid.: 222) writes about the unemployed: 'They can only experience the free time that is left to them as dead time, purposeless and meaningless. If time seems to be annihilated, this is because employment is the support, if not the source, of most interests, expectations, demands, hopes, and investments in the present'. This point, I believe, is illustrated by the way Elena, a 53-year old Mexican woman, responded when asked how she felt whenever she was out of work: '*Hijole!* When there is no work, I feel... oh, so desperate. I tell myself, "I *have* to search for a job, I *have* to send money for my daughters". It makes one feel so powerless (*impotente*), because one cannot get ahead in life (*salir adelante*)'. According to Bourdieu, the experience of being powerless is closely related to the experience of time, as powerlessness 'breaks the relation of immersion in the imminent' (Bourdieu, 2000: 224). In other words, the feeling of being powerless makes it difficult *in the present* to align oneself with an

imagined future, and perhaps this explains why it is so important for Elena and the other migrant women to search for a new job, as this is a way of preventing a detachment of the future from the present. Being out of work, their time could be interpreted as 'dead' or 'empty time', since the migrant women are not able to 'invest' in the present, that is, earn money, which is a prerequisite for making sure that they can get ahead in life.

Nostalgic Narratives

Distracting oneself when feeling 'locked up' at home, however, is not uncomplicated. The US-Mexican border is far from being the only border which is guarded. On an inter-state level, immigration officers patrol the lines separating one state from another, thereby making it unsafe for undocumented migrants to travel outside of California. Even inside California, my informants would be reluctant to travel around, if not strictly necessary, as when driving to work. Although the risk of being detained might be lower in the Bay Area than in other parts of the country – e.g., in towns closer to the border – there is nevertheless a fear associated with leaving the 'safe' private space, the home, and entering the 'dangerous' public space (Heyman et al., 2010: 171). In writing about undocumented *Latinos* in Texas, Heyman et al. (2010: 173) observe that the fear of being apprehended by the immigration authorities 'often leads to isolation and alienation', while adding that as a consequence 'many undocumented immigrants expressed sentiments of loneliness, despair, anxiety and depression'. Something similar could be said about the migrant women in California and, in consequence, 'killing' the 'empty time' by distracting oneself becomes difficult as the fear of leaving home limits the kind of distractions the migrant women can engage in.

Feelings of nostalgia tend to arise in these situations, and this, I argue, should be interpreted in relation to the physical immobility the migrant women experience, being unable neither to travel around freely nor to return home for shorter visits. Reflecting upon the general experience of being a migrant, Michael Jackson notes that 'migrants travel abroad in pursuit of utopia, but having found that place [...] they are haunted by the thought that utopia actually lies in the past' (Jackson, 2013: 221). This, I believe, is even more pronounced in the case of undocumented migrants given that it is more difficult for them to return to this 'past', i.e., their country of origin. As an example, nostalgic feelings permeated the way Julia talked about life in the United States: '[Here] one always feels... well, sad. One feels [depressed]. And in Mexico, it is not like that. There we are free (*allá somos libres*)'. Partly as a reaction to her physical immobility, Julia forms a narrative about being free in Mexico, in contrast to being trapped in the United States; a narrative I heard many times during fieldwork. Turning off my recorder after finishing an interview, one of my informants suddenly burst out 'Mexico is

freedom!', explaining that in Mexico her daughter would be able to run around in the countryside, climbing trees and being free. Similarly, Theodora, a 42-year old Mexican, also remembered being free in Mexico: 'I believe that you are more happy in Mexico, even though you don't have anything. Life is more tranquil. You went around freely, without being afraid of anybody'. Worth noticing, when talking about being free in Mexico, the migrant women have a tendency to forget why they decided to emigrate originally. For a moment, the lack of social mobility, which made them emigrate in the first place, seems irrelevant, as when Theodora proclaims that 'you are more happy in Mexico, even though you don't have anything'. Instead, what is emphasised in these moments is the *physical* mobility they associate with the country of origin – running around freely and going wherever they please – which is then contrasted with their feeling of physical *immobility* in the United States. Significantly, the narrative about being free in the country of origin is not a particularly 'Mexican' narrative. This is clear from the way Veronica, a 51-year old woman from Nicaragua, talked about life in the United States: 'To me it is like being in a Gold Cage. The Gold Cage is [made of] beautiful gold! But it is a cage, because I cannot leave it. I am not in my country. If I went there, I would have freedom'. Although Veronica relates the feeling of physical immobility to the question of not being able to cross the border, she also speaks about having freedom in Nicaragua, in contrast to being trapped in the 'Gold Cage'. Afraid of not being able to re-enter, Veronica has not left the United States since she came to the country 25 years ago; hence, the metaphor of the United States as a cage which she cannot leave. Returning to Bourdieu, the nostalgic narratives of the migrant women could be seen as expressions of the 'dissatisfaction with the present that implies the negation of the present and the propensity to work towards its supersession' (Bourdieu, 2000: 209). The way the migrant women supersede the present is by romanticising the past. Phrased in a different fashion, the dissatisfaction they feel with their present condition of being physically immobile, makes the women remember the liberties they enjoyed in the past through the narrative of being free in the country of origin.

Losing the Track of Time

Paradoxically, although the everyday life of the undocumented migrants is characterized by the experience of empty time that has to be 'killed', this does not exclude the experience of time as something which flies by without one noticing it. Interestingly, several of my informants found it difficult to remember how many years they had been in the United States, illustrating that it is not uncommon for one to lose track of time, as the years pass by. In time, most come to realise that it is quite difficult to save up money due to the costliness of living in California. As stated by Rosario, a 49-year old Mexican, 'the problem is that you also pay in

dollars', and so, a substantial part of the earnings are spent on household expenses, the rent exerting the most severe drain. In consequence, original intentions about the duration of one's stay in the United States rarely endure. As Lucia, a 41-year old Mexican, explained: 'Sometimes you spend all the money on the utilities. You don't notice when one year has passed, and suddenly you realise that ten years have passed without you noticing'. Having spent the last ten years in the United States, Lucia and her husband were still far from fulfilling their dream of buying a house in Mexico; a fact that made Lucia conclude that 'it is better not to look back, because if you do so, you get sad; because you tell yourself, 'wow, ten years have passed, and I haven't fulfilled my dreams'. The comment that 'it is better not to look back', indicates that it is not only the forthcoming, which is being suspended when one feels discontent with the present (cf. Bourdieu), but also the *past*; albeit a specific part of the past – the time spent in the United States. And this, I believe, points to something important. Although, on the face of it, they seem like each other's antitheses, the experience of 'empty time' and the feeling that 'time flies by' are actually related, in so far as both experiences of time are symptoms of social immobility.

In consequence, as time 'flies by', parents grow older and weaker and close relatives and friends, who were well at the time one emigrated, may now be suffering from fatal diseases. When leaving Mexico four years ago, Julia, a 55-year old Mexican, had feared that her father, who suffered from cancer, would pass away during the two years she had planned to be gone. This did not happen, but instead her mother died unexpectedly: 'She [her mother] asked me, "my daughter, when will you be back? You said that you would only be gone for two years". I told her that time had just flown by. And this is the kind of sorrow you will go through when leaving your country and coming here: when you return, the family members you left behind might not be there anymore'. At the time of her mother's death, Julia had to decide whether to attend the funeral or not. In these situations, one has to decide whether to take the risk of crossing the border once again, deliberately ignoring the danger and uncertainty which it entails. Worth remarking on in this connection, everybody knows somebody who has had a bad experience when crossing, and this, combined with the media's intensive focus on crimes committed along the border, makes the migrant women hesitant to return home temporarily to participate in funerals, or to say a last goodbye, even though the urge to do so is very strong. Following the death of her father, Lucia felt torn between staying with her husband and daughter in the United States and returning to Mexico for the funeral: 'You feel like running [home] and holding close to you the people you love. It was very painful for me to go through this, and I tell you, this is one of the pains which you have to overcome. You have to tell yourself: "It is over; my father is no longer here. I have to keep carrying on (*seguir adelante*)"'. As is apparent from this quote, the urge to return home is something that has to be

overcome, and in trying to do so, Lucia tells herself that she has to keep carrying on. In this context, *seguir adelante* is a moral obligation to endure the pain of losing a loved one and avoid giving in to the immediate impulse of returning home, that is, accepting one's physical immobility.

Time Sacrificed

In coming to the United States, the migrant women hoped that they would get ahead in life, but this does not necessarily happen – at least not at the pace they expected. It could be argued that this is purely the migrants' own fault and that they are to blame for not being realistic. In fact, this is what they often do themselves, as when they emphasise that they had too many illusions or were too naïve in coming to the country. There might be some truth to this, though by blaming the migrant women one risks making the mistake of neglecting the condition under which they try to obtain social mobility. This could also explain why some undocumented migrants, as time goes by, lose faith in the American Dream (Mahler, 1995: 30), given that social mobility may not be as easily acquired as otherwise imagined. For those migrants, 'empty time' does not only describe the time that has to 'be killed' while waiting for a job opportunity to arise; 'empty time' is also the time which has flown by unnoticed, bringing about some kind of *prolonged* empty time. Important to keep in mind, however, even if time seems to be wasted, as the promise of social mobility remains unfulfilled all the while that time flies by, this may not be the case. There is more to *salir adelante* than this. It is not just a question of getting ahead in life; it is also a moral obligation not to give up, but rather to keep carrying on – the obstacles on the way notwithstanding. As Mahler makes clear, 'though most fall short of realizing [their] dreams, they [the undocumented migrants] do not see their efforts as in vain' (Mahler, 1995: 5).

The migrant women may not be in a position to *give* time the way Bourdieu describes it, but they do insist that what they do is *sacrificing* their time. This brings about a changed perspective on time (Jackson, 2013). As Jackson explains, 'rather than standing still (waiting) or going around in circles (getting nowhere), one can see the way ahead, one is getting somewhere' (Jackson, 2013: 131). As an example, Ana, a 28-year old *de facto* single parent, considered the benefits as well as disadvantages of living as an undocumented immigrant in the United States, in the following manner: 'for every benefit, a sacrifice' (*de un beneficio, hay un sacrificio*). For Ana, the benefit of being in the United States is that her 3-years-old daughter gets the chance to 'become someone important' (that is, hopefully getting an education), whereas the sacrifice consists in not being together with her husband, who, desperate because he was unable to find work, went back to Mexico some years ago.

Concluding Remarks

This article has focused on the way time is experienced by Mexican and Central American migrant women, as they try to get ahead in life while living as undocumented immigrants in the United States. By drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, I have endeavoured to make clear how social and physical immobility is a predominant feature of everyday life, bringing about two different and, on the face of it, contradictory experiences of time.

Metaphorically speaking, social immobility has been described as the feeling that 'doors are being closed', preventing one from getting ahead in life. On a daily basis, social immobility gives rise to the experience of 'empty time', which – according to Bourdieu – has to be 'killed'. Killing the 'empty time' is not easy, however, as the migrant women have to come to terms with the limitations imposed by their undocumented status. This restriction of their physical mobility, I argue, makes the women construct a nostalgic narrative about being free in the country of origin; a narrative in which the migrant women tend to forget the *social* immobility they tried to escape initially. As regards the long-term perspective, social immobility speeds up the passage of time which results in an experience of time as something which has flown by unnoticed. Accordingly, I have suggested that the years which have passed by unnoticed without the migrant women becoming socially mobile, should be viewed as a kind of prolonged 'empty time'. Even so, I argue, time has never been wasted. In order to overcome the experience of social and physical immobility, a changed perspective on time is required; that is, a changed perspective on time from 'empty time' and 'time flying by' to 'time sacrificed'.

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