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## Retiring Home?

### House Construction, Age Inscriptions, and the Building of Belonging among Mexican Migrants and their Families in Chicago and Rural Mexico

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#### Abstract

The vacant retirement house has become a central feature of many areas of the Global South. Over the years, migrants' savings are invested in the building of conspicuous houses for retirement in their areas of origin. But despite these substantial efforts, a number of migrants postpone their return or do not return at all. Their houses remain empty, their purposes shifting as their owners reach old age. This stretching of time does not only affect the migrants' livelihoods and ideas of home. Furthermore, kin-scripts as conceptualized by Stack and Burton (1993) are being reconfigured substantially. This goes hand-in-hand with the reframing of culturally prescribed responsibilities, meanings, and social roles attached to certain stages of the migrants' lives. Based on long-term and multi-local ethnographic fieldwork in rural Mexico and urban Chicago since the 1990s, we analyze how remittance houses are tied and untied with their owners' life courses in the later stages of life. Furthermore, we examine how kin groups on both sides of the border deal with the new challenges this entails.

**Keywords:** *Mexican migration, Chicago, house building, kinship, retirement*

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## Retiring Home?

### House Construction, Age Inscriptions, and the Building of Belonging among Mexican Migrants and their Families in Chicago and Rural Mexico

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## Introduction

Imagine a house. Imagine a house with its façade painted in a bright fuchsia color, its windows ornate and made of etched glass. Imagine this house as two stories high, columns framing its entrance, its two balconies facing the street and a carport right next to it. Imagine this house with its two garages opening with a remote control, a corrugated iron fence shielding it from the street and a lavishly spacious patio that has a fountain in its middle and can be illuminated at night. Imagine this house empty.

This house is our starting point for telling the story that is to follow.<sup>1</sup> It is located on a dusty, potholed street in a relatively small village in the State of Mexico, three hours by car from Mexico City and about twelve hours from the Mexican–U.S. border. With all its carefully selected features and shining appearance, the house forms quite a stark contrast to some of the buildings surrounding it. It stands out both from those that are significantly smaller (only one story high and made of adobe) and from the houses that employ a similarly grand style but are only halfway finished. Unlike those places of the second category, our house, as well as a number of similar other ones in the area, clearly exudes the air of an inhabited place, although no one lives in it for most of the year. Sometimes, however, mostly for a few weeks during summer or Christmas time, the house awakes from its slumber and springs to life. Weddings have been celebrated here, family gatherings have taken place, SUVs with U.S. license plates have kept the house company and amenities and furniture have filled it after having been transported all the way from Chicago. Just like the people who live in it every now and then, the house has grown older gradually over the years, maturing through all the extra elements with which it has been equipped. The dimmable patio lights constitutes its latest upgrade. While the house's proper owners only pay it a visit once in a while (they used to come and see it on a more regular basis in the past), during which they spruce it up, proudly present it to the neighbors and take pictures to show at home in the U.S., the house has other caretakers. Family members—parents and siblings—have overseen its building and extension process and kept it in good shape as it is supposed to someday, in the near future, host the people who own it and have steadily sent the money to make it grow.

Houses like these have become a central feature of many areas in the Global South. Intending to return to their country and area of origin someday, at the latest after retirement, many migrants worldwide

are investing their remittances in conspicuous house constructions back home. These houses represent a “proxy-presence” (Dalakoglou 2010) of the migrant, demonstrating that he or she truly belongs to a family, community and place, despite being bodily absent. Belonging has turned into a key category to explore the lived experiences of migration and transnationalism (Drotbohm 2008; Lattanzi Shutika 2011; Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin 2011). The central meaning of houses for articulating, building and maintaining belonging and social relations over space and time and for asserting one’s rising status within transnational livelihoods has been demonstrated in a number of anthropological studies. Migrants’ housebuilding practices have been analyzed for various Mexican (e.g. Cohen 2004; Fletcher 1999; Lattanzi Shutika 2011; Lopez 2015; Magazine and Ramírez Sánchez 2007; Pauli 2008; Sandoval-Cervantes 2017) and other transnational contexts, e.g., the Philippines, Ghana, Peru and Ecuador (Aguilar 2009; Coe 2016a; Leinaweaver 2009; Pribilsky 2007, 106-115). Despite the great geographical range, all of these studies describe the substantial sacrifices migrants are willing to make to construct a house in a place where they do not live. Fran Markowitz writes this “call to home” is “a desire for reterritorialization in the homestead or homeland of past generations – still beckons as an antidote to partial belonging and unfulfilled dreams” (2004, 22). Migrants often endure substantial humiliations and ‘dignity assaults’ (Coe 2016a) while living and working away from ‘home.’ ‘Home’ in these contexts has become a cipher for security, comfort and belonging (Markowitz 2004; Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran, and Vieten 2006). Building a house at ‘home’ and as a ‘home’ is an important way to maintain self-worth and to deal with feelings of only partially belonging in the migration contexts.

Yet despite all the dreams, dollars and efforts migrants and their families invest in such houses, a substantial number of people never come to live in them, but they postpone their return or do not return at all (Bedorf 2014a; Brettell 1979; Sandoval-Cervantes 2017). There is a remarkable research gap on this group and topic. While there is a growing body of research on how building and belonging are related in the first years after migrating, not much is known about the ways migrants’ *casas de sueños* (Fletcher 1999) or “dream houses” are connected or disconnected from their—and their kin’s—life courses, especially their aging and their deaths. In her meticulous study of how remittance-generated house construction has changed the Mexican countryside, Sarah Lynn Lopez concludes, “The topic of transborder migrants’ strategies for coping with old age and the effects of age on identity, migrant clubs, and the spaces and landscapes of migration remains largely unresearched” (2015, 168). One reason for this empirical lacuna may be that in the majority of the above studies migrants have not yet reached retirement and old age. Old age, kinship, migration and house construction are linked, and studies tend to either describe (future) retirement plans of migrants (Bedorf 2014a; Lattanzi Shutika 2011) or migrants’ care for their aging parents through the building of new houses or old age homes (Lamb 2009; Lopez 2015, 61-67).

Additionally, Lopez hints at another reason for this research omission. She suggests that discourses on the building of houses by migrants and belonging in their areas or origin are generally too hopeful and optimistic, envisioning remittance-building projects only as improvements: “Remittance space is largely about building aspirations, desires, and hopes into the Mexican landscape” (2015, 171). In contrast, as Lopez (2015, 184-194) vividly demonstrates in her analysis of a remittance-financed retirement home in the Mexican countryside that ends in ruins, research paying attention to aging, death, migration and housebuilding will also have to grasp the “inherent paradoxes and contradictions of remittance space” (2015, 171). These paradoxes can be painful, as some of the stories of built disillusion presented by Lopez clearly show. Her analysis is particularly illuminating in that it highlights the temporal dynamics of remittance building projects and the shifts they frequently undergo and signify.

Taking the remittance house as a point of departure, we will build on these insights and explore how such homes and their changing purposes affect the people on both sides of the border who are in one way

or another related to them: the ones building the houses, the ones owning the houses and also those who take care of the houses and who live in them while the owners are absent. In particular, we will focus on dynamics linked to the later stages of life of both the houses and their owners, thereby foregrounding the temporal dimension of migration (Coe 2016b). Looking at the remittance houses not as static entities but as subjects that might be transformed in their meanings and tell different stories at different points in time will allow us to grasp how responsibilities are reconfigured, roles reframed and aims adjusted as migrants age and postpone their return.

Employing the concept of ‘kin-scripts’ introduced by Stack and Burton (1993), we will discuss how new scripts have emerged as to who cares and who is being cared for (what Stack and Burton call ‘kin-work’), who is (made) responsible (‘kin-scription’) and when (‘kin-time’). Additionally, we want to add ‘kin-place’ as the spatial ordering of family transitions, i.e., specific places like remittance houses that family members are expected to build in order to fulfil their responsibilities. In contexts of enduring high mobility as in Mexico and the U.S., reconfigurations of order and belonging of kin through place making (Appadurai 1996) can be as important as temporal orders. As we intend to show in the following sections, these evolving patterns often clash with existing norms and practices associated with specific stages of the life course and constitute ad hoc solutions. They may be temporary and unintended and at times cause conflicting social roles in their turn. In that respect, they constitute what Cati Coe and Erdmute Alber in the introduction to this special issue suggest are ‘age-inscriptions’ (Coe and Alber 2018). Since “kin-scripts” specifically refers to orders of social relations, we consider them an overlapping category with these more comprehensive age-specific roles and meanings that structure time and encompass care patterns.

In more general terms, we posit that the vacant remittance houses and the transformations in age-related roles and responsibilities linked to them have far reaching effects on the reproduction of kin groups in transnational spaces. Before international labor migration from Mexico to the U.S. became an ever more widespread phenomenon in the second half of the twentieth century, kin-scripts in rural Mexico were framed by a Mesoamerican version of Meyer-Fortes’ ‘development cycle of domestic groups’ (1971 [1958]). Our discussion of rural Mexico will show that the building of remittance houses initially fit neatly into this cycle. The transformations we trace that took place within the vacant retirement houses however, have led to ruptures within this household system.

## Ethnographic Work in Rural Mexico and Urban USA

When we were conducting our research on different sides of the U.S. - Mexican border, we both found remittance houses to recurrently play a central role in the settings and narratives we encountered. Since the end of the 1990s, Julia Pauli has observed a boom in house construction in the Spanish-speaking, mestizo village of Pueblo Nuevo, valley of Solís (Estado de México), about three hours away from Mexico-City. Pauli started her long-term fieldwork in this village in 1995 and has returned to the “field” regularly over the course of twenty years (Pauli 2000, 2002, 2008, 2013; Pauli and Bedorf 2016).

The village Pueblo Nuevo is located in the valley of Solís and is part of the state Estado de México in the central highlands. Within the last eighty years, national and international migration has played an important role in transforming the economic foundation of the village from subsistence-oriented land cultivation of maize and beans into a mixed economy of remittances and agriculture. As figures from two ethnographic census collected by Pauli show, the number of households in the village has increased from 165 households in 1997 to 195 households in 2013 (Pauli 2015). There are hardly any families in Pueblo



Nuevo that have not been affected by transnational migration. Almost half of all adult men (fifteen years and older) in 2013 had migrated to U.S. destinations. The building of conspicuous houses in *'estilo del norteco'* (Lopez 2015, 51) a U.S. American style, is tightly connected to this tremendous increase in international, mainly male labor migration to the United States. Pueblo Nuevo's appearance changed considerably from being a 'traditionally looking' Mexican village characterized by one-story houses made from adobe bricks (see Photo 1) to a place where buildings compete with each other for the boldest and most flamboyant architectural designs and adornments (see Photo 2).



Photo 1: 'Traditional' House in Pueblo Nuevo, Mexico (Photo property of Julia Pauli)

Bedorf, too, was amazed by those buildings when she, in 2010, accompanied Pauli and her husband and fellow anthropologist Michael Schnegg to the region, working as a scientific collaborator in Schnegg's and Pauli's then new research project on aging in transnational spaces between Mexico and the U.S.<sup>ii</sup> For two months, Bedorf conducted her doctoral fieldwork in Pueblo Nuevo and other villages of the valley of Solís, seeking to explore people's rationales for returning or not returning to Mexico upon retirement. However, it was when she continued her multi-sited ethnographic research in Chicago that she came even closer to those constructions. Although they had been built in Mexico, they sprang to life in rich detail in her interlocutors' accounts as well as in the pictures they showed her, thus forming part of people's Chicagooan lifeworlds as well. While such houses were frequently discussed in the Chicago setting, not everyone there owned a house in Mexico. Since migrating to Chicago between the 1960s and 1980s, Bedorf's interlocutors had built and inherited houses, but they also had sold and gradually neglected places in Mexico.



Photo 2: New House Design in Pueblo Nuevo, Mexico (Photo property of Julia Pauli)

In both field sites, remittance houses had a story to tell. We originally intended to link the two field sites by exploring where older migrants from the rural Mexican valley of Solís who were living in Chicago and close to retirement were planning to spend their old age. However, this idea turned out to be only partially feasible. Most migrants from the area living in Chicago were younger than expected and not close to retirement. We thus decided to extend the Chicago ethnographic sample and include people from other parts of Mexico. Hence, our cases do not describe one transnational community, but we investigate the context and repercussions of the same phenomenon—the vacant remittance house—for both the Mexican and the U.S. side of the border. This also leads to a certain asynchrony of our cases. Whereas the people Bedorf interviewed in Chicago reflect upon their own retirement and how this is related to specific houses and spaces, migrants from Pueblo Nuevo have not yet reached retirement age and are more occupied with caring and housebuilding for their elder parents.

Ethnographic data about Pueblo Nuevo stems from several years of participant observation, life and migration histories, network data and repeated ethnographic census collections (Pauli 2000, 2013). Pauli conducted fourteen months of fieldwork from 1996 until 1997. Shorter field stays of only a month or two were done in 2000, 2001, 2010 and 2013. Ethnographic data about Chicago was collected in 2010 to 2011 and is based on twelve months of participant observation, semi-structured and structured interviews on migration histories, dimensions of life and belonging in Mexico and Chicago as well as network data (Bedorf 2014a, 2014b).

## Age-Inscriptions in Rural Mexico: Long-Term Exchange, Care and House Building

Until recently, elder people in rural Mexico have depended on a specific household system bound to the peasant economy for security in old age (Pauli 2008; Robichaux 1997). This household system can be interpreted as a kin- and an age-script (Stack and Burton 1993; Coe and Alber this issue). Importantly, it is only a model. Even before the rise of international migration and the sending of remittances, there have been variations of this rural household system (Pauli 2002).

In his comparative analysis of household and inheritance patterns throughout Mesoamerica, David Robichaux has described this “Mesoamerican household formation system” in detail (1997, 2005). The starting point is the so called nuclear stage (Magazine and Ramírez Sánchez 2007; Robichaux 1997) consisting of parents and their unmarried children. The so called extended stage starts with the marriage of the first son and the move of his wife into his parents’ house (patri-virilocal residence). As time passes, more sons marry and live with their wives in their parents’ house. Thus, households in the extended stage can be quite large. If a married son has acquired sufficient funds he will start building his own house, often on a parcel of land given to him by his father, and finally leave his parents’ house. The final stage of the household system, the replacement stage, is reached when only the youngest son and his wife reside with his elder parents in their house. The youngest son (and rarely the youngest daughter) and his or her spouse are mainly responsible for the care of his older parents. In return, they will eventually inherit the parents’ house (ultimogenitur). All siblings, however, support their youngest brother in caring for the elder parents and will also inherit some land from their father. With the death of the parents, the cycle begins anew.

This household system provides a frame of reference for rights and obligations to care for and being cared for, or what Stack and Burton (1993) call ‘kin-work’. It goes hand in hand with a specific form of recruitment, meaning particular members are assigned responsibilities for care (‘kin-scription’). The intergenerational transactions (Lamb 2009) within this system are gender specific and change over time. First, the parents care for and raise their children, giving them shelter, food, education and love. During the extended stage, young women move (are being ‘recruited’) into their mothers-in-law’s houses and support and often serve them for many years. They give them their labor and their respect but rarely their affection. Finally, in the replacement stage, the younger generation provides care, affection and respect for the elder parents. In previous publications (see Pauli 2008), we have unraveled the substantial tensions resulting from this kin-script. Sons/husbands are mostly at ease with the script and often enjoy the continuous exchange with their brothers and their father. But wives/daughters-in-law express unhappiness and frustration about living with their mothers-in-law. Many mothers-in-law humiliate their incoming daughters-in-law. Elsewhere Pauli has described the many abasements daughters-in-law have to endure (Pauli 2000, 2008, 2013, 2015).

Housebuilding, household composition, kinship and age-inscriptions are thus intrinsically linked. Those living together under one roof (have to) care for each other. Thus, within the Mexican context, there exists a certain script as to when *and* where specific kin are supposed to reside together and care for each other. This script also frames what is considered good aging, i.e., living together with kin under one roof, and bad aging, i.e. living alone (Pauli and Bedorf 2016). Consequently, we suggest to extend Stack and Burton’s (1993) kin-scripts, i.e., kin-work, kin-scription and kin-time, by a fourth dimension that we call ‘kin-place’. To understand the contemporary remittance landscape, the new dream houses built from money earned through migration, one has to unravel these links and how they have transformed due to migration. The saying “la casada casa quiere” (“a woman who marries wants a house”) is widespread in Pueblo Nuevo and throughout Mexico (Hirsch 2003, 67-68; Monto 1994, 102). With the massive influx of



cash earned across the border since the 1990s, young couples have been increasingly able to reduce the time of co-residence with the husband's parents or even move into their own house right from the start (Pauli 2008). Consequently, it is not only 'the' male migrant who wants to construct a house in his place of origin to build his belonging and maintain his self-worth. His wife is as eager to build a house, albeit for different reasons, especially to leave her mother-in-law's house (Pauli 2008). This gender dimension of the remittance landscape is often overlooked. However, it is essential to understanding the emerging age-inscriptions in rural Mexico.

Obviously, the spread of neolocal residence has substantially changed kin-work and kin-scription. A shift in power has occurred between the generations, reframing intergenerational transactions. While the younger generation used to depend on the elder generation for support, shelter and land for much of their life course, today, the elder generation often depends on the remittances sent by their sons and daughters from early on in their life course. Social security and pensions remain almost non-existent in rural Mexico.<sup>iii</sup> Without the help of their kin, elder people could rarely survive in rural Mexico. Consequently, incidences of isolation and nuclearization of families, a process described for Europe and North-America where the state is largely responsible for old age care (Bedorf 2014a), are until now rather rare. The elder generation is still being supported by the younger generation. But the age-inscriptions are changing. As we have argued elsewhere (Pauli 2013) there is a reconfiguration of care and support away from the wife's affines and towards maternal kin of the wife, especially the wife's mother and her sisters. While many women today decline serving their mothers-in-law, they are very much willing to support their own kin. This is also expressed in new forms of 'kin-place'. Women try to build their houses as far away as possible from their in-laws and as close as possible to their own kin.

Regarding the third dimension of Stack and Burton's (1993) kin-script, i.e. kin-time, it is important to note that during the first years of international migration and housebuilding kin-time did not really change. The remittance houses fitted neatly into the overall household script and the embedded timing. However, when increasingly sons and even couples or daughters postponed their return to the village and into their dream houses, kin-scripts and with them age-inscriptions started to fracture. Comparably, 'kin-place' remained largely intact as long as absent children continued to build houses in the village and returned to the village. But at least for some of the migrants, the ties and places that bind have loosened.

## Adjusted Age-inscriptions and Networks of Kin and Remittance Houses in Rural Mexico

By comparing types of houses over time, we can assess how much the village's landscape has changed and the associated kin- and age-inscriptions. In a 1997 census, Pauli collected information on types of houses (Pauli 2008). She differentiated three types of houses. Of the 163 houses surveyed in 1997, seventy-five houses (46%) were dwellings made of local materials, especially adobe and *teja*, a roofing tile. Another forty-four houses (27%) were built using local materials like *teja* and adobe, but also included new construction materials like corrugated iron sheet and cement. In local perceptions, houses in these two categories were rather similar. Thus, when taken together, 119 houses (73%) followed this building scheme. Houses in a third category, however, were perceived as substantially different. In 1997, forty-four houses (27%) were built in U.S. American style with money from U.S. migration. The local landscape was thus already shaped by migration in the mid-1990s.

However, sixteen years later, another housing census revealed a more extensive transformation of the landscape. Out of the 119 houses Pauli summarized under categories one and two in 1997 (i.e., local



materials and hybrid materials), only seventy-two are still in use in 2013. The other houses have been either torn down, making space for the building of new remittance houses, or are in varying states of decay. There are 128 new houses permanently inhabited and another forty-nine new houses not permanently inhabited. These forty-nine houses, "*casas vacías*" (Lattanzi Shutika 2011, 68-90), or "empty houses," are the retirement dreams we have described previously.

Finally, there are a substantial number of remittance houses in all stages of construction. Given the flux of the situation it is difficult to calculate percentages for different house types. Nevertheless, what these distributions clearly show is a shift in the built environment, away from simple peasants' dwellings towards fancy, conspicuous migrants' mansions.<sup>iv</sup> Although ostentatious consumption varies from house to house, some trends can be deciphered. Like the house we described at the beginning of our article, most remittance houses in Pueblo Nuevo have two stories, a spacious layout, columns, brightly colored walls and large panoramic windows. Some remittances houses are hidden behind large walls and gates. Importantly, finished remittance houses with absent landlords are not being used or occupied by relatives or other caretakers. They are cleaned but remain empty until the owner and his nuclear family return. This almost sacral, shrine-like treatment of empty remittances houses has also been reported for other areas of Mexico (Lattanzi Shutika 2011; Lopez 2015) and the Philippines (Aguilar 2009). The different houses in Pueblo Nuevo thus summarize the migration history of the village.

How is the emergence of a remittance landscape (Lopez 2015) connected to changing age-inscriptions and a transformation of the household system? A look at the history and use of some houses gives some answers. Pauli met Sandra Bolaños<sup>v</sup> in June 1996. Sandra, then in her early twenties and with two small children in tow, approached Pauli and asked her about life in the U.S. Sandra's husband had left the village several months earlier to do construction work in South Carolina. Sandra and the kids were living with Sandra's mother-in-law. With the remittances from her husband Tonío, Sandra was busy building a house. At the end of Pauli's first long-term stay in July 1997, a small one-bedroom, turquoise painted house adjacent to Sandra's in-law's house was finished. Sandra moved in and was very excited about having her own house. It was built using local materials like adobe with a few more extravagant elements, especially a larger window and two columns at the entrance.

When Pauli returned to Pueblo Nuevo in 2000, Sandra and her children had left the village and had followed Tonío across the border. By then, their turquoise house had been shut down for two years and was already starting to decay. A year later, Pauli learnt that Sandra was sending money to her mother and her sister to start building a new, much larger and more conspicuous house, clearly a dream house, on a plot she had bought close to her mother's plot. The initial layout of the house was very impressive. Another nine years later, in 2010, while walking down the village's main road, Pauli spotted what was left of Sandra's second attempt to build belonging in the area. Sandra's dream house was never finished and the still impressive ruins now served as a stable for her mother's goats. This usage also indicates that the left-behind mother had lost all hope that Sandra would ever permanently return to the village and finish her house. If Sandra's remittance house had been finished, her mother would have guarded and cleaned it but certainly not used it (and especially not as a stable). And indeed, Sandra and her family hardly ever returned to the village. Sandra's initial plan to retire in her own dream house in Pueblo Nuevo had disappeared.

What implications does this fading of transnational ties and remittance belonging have for aging and age-inscriptions? Sandra clearly wants to stay in the U.S. Two of her four children were born there. All her children want to live on that side of the border and Sandra does not want to leave them when she grows

old.

But how does the elder generation, i.e., Sandra's parents and her parents-in-law, cope with losing a daughter, a son? Sandra has ten siblings and her husband Tonío has eight. Both of them are in the middle of the birth order. Almost all of their siblings have migrated for work, either within Mexico or to the U.S. Some of them, like Sandra and Tonío, have started building remittance houses that they have left unfinished or uninhabited. However, two of Tonío's brothers have returned to the village and their wives who had remained there. Now they make a living from farming and local construction work. One of them, the second youngest brother, is taking care of the widowed mother, who has moved into her son and daughter-in-law's house. Sandra's mother is by now (i.e., 2013) also a widow. Two of her daughters are living in the village in remittance houses. One of them has offered to take care of the elderly mother. But Sandra's mother has preferred to leave her own 'traditional' house and move in with her youngest son and his wife, also living in a remittance house in Pueblo Nuevo.

As this brief description indicates, a remittance house almost never stands alone. To understand its 'life' and even its 'death' one has to embed it within the wider social landscape. Thus, Sandra's two remittance houses belong to a larger network of at least ten houses in the village, all of them in different states of construction and use. These networks of kin and houses enable the elder generation to cope with the non-return of a child. But they also hint at new vulnerabilities. Previous age-inscriptions implied that the elder generation lets the younger generation into their house. Now, this movement is reversed and the younger generation offers space and care to the elder generation. The two widows, being invited to spend their last years in the houses of their children, have to be grateful for this help. This reversal of gratitude clearly leads to new vulnerabilities and uncertainties, especially for the elder generation (Pauli and Bedorf 2016).

Further, since the 1980s, fertility has substantially declined in Mexico (Pauli 2000). Sandra and Tonío, both born in the 1970s, still have many siblings. But the age of 'demographic abundance' is gone. It is unclear how 'small' families with few siblings will come to terms with providing old age care and houses in rural Mexico while living on the other side of the border.

## Building Mexican Dream Houses from Chicago: Imagining Return and Fulfilling Expectations

In Chicago, Felipe and Rosa have been meticulously planning their dream house in Mexico for more than a decade. Their property is situated in the village of Tinguindín, in Michoacán, México, where both are originally from, and it remains vacant for large parts of the year. Over the years, their house has been growing from a modest structure into a stately home in the "colonial style of the village"<sup>vi</sup> as Felipe proudly put it.

Both Felipe and Rosa are in their late 50s and have spent the better part of their lives in Chicago. Felipe's position in a steel manufacturing company in Chicago enabled them to buy a two-story brick house in Pilsen shortly after migrating, a formerly Czech neighborhood where Mexicans have been accounting for the majority of the population since the 1970s. The couple has four children, aged between fourteen and twenty-one. Their oldest daughter started college in California in 2010 and only spends the holidays at home. For the last ten years, Felipe and Rosa have devoted a large amount of money, time and energy to carefully remodeling the property they bought in Mexico into a house that would incorporate all kinds of modern amenities, while at the same time, reflecting the classical 'colonial style' of the village of

Tinguindín. The underlying goal had always been to return to Mexico and move into the perfected home as soon as Felipe would be able to retire at the age of 62 and receive part of his Social Security. With the help of Felipe's relatives in the village, who supervised much of the construction on site, the couple had been building for their expected future in Mexico.

When Bedorf, Felipe and Rosa were sitting in the couple's Chicago living room one warm July evening in 2011 and looking at pictures of the most recent additions to the house, however, Felipe dropped a startling remark: "Well, we still want to finish the house, although we are not going to live there anymore." Felipe seemed to be trying to make sense of this surprising statement himself while explaining why their goal for old age did not fit the outlined path any longer; he pondered, "with time passing, the plan is changing." The couple's four children played a major role in that respect since their lives were firmly anchored in the United States. It had become clear that none of them would be eager to follow their parents to Mexico. Besides, Felipe was concerned about the effects that moving into their own house in Mexico might have on his wife's old aunt who had been hosting them whenever they spent time in Mexico and may "get ill if we do not stay at her place anymore." Although it was out of question to go back to Mexico for good, Felipe struggled with the feeling that he was neglecting his responsibilities for family there. Both he and his wife still have relatives living in Tinguindín and Felipe is especially concerned about his mentally challenged brother whom his mother had left in his care when she died.

Just like Felipe and Rosa, a considerable number of the generation of Mexicans who had moved to Chicago between the 1960s and 1980s and whose life histories and future plans Bedorf traced during her fieldwork had built houses for a future life in Mexico after migrating. Almost all of them were not going to live in these houses. Their life courses had become disentangled from the remittance homes as they approached old age.

To understand the situation of this particular generation of migrants (Mannheim 1952), it is important to note that migration patterns from Mexico to Chicago, and to the United States in general, had assumed a different character in the 1970s and 1980s and hence at the time when our interlocutors came to Chicago. Since Chicago's flourishing industries had brought the first Mexican workers to the city at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Chicago's Mexican population, in line with general migration patterns from Mexico to the U.S., had steadily increased (Arredondo 2008; De Genova 2005). Large parts of these cross-border movements had occurred on the basis of labor contracts and been of a seasonal character, with mainly male family members working in the U.S. for part of the year and spending the rest of it in Mexico (Gomberg-Muñoz 2011). Consequently, migration at that time did not profoundly affect the migrants' and their families' aging trajectories and kin-scripts. However, in the 1970s and 1980s due to altered legal regulations and changed economic circumstances both in Mexico and the U.S., undocumented migration started to prevail while border security was enforced at the same time. As a result, more and more Mexican workers did not engage in seasonal migration, but moved to the U.S. permanently, often with their families (Gomberg-Muñoz 2011; Massey 2002; Massey and Pren 2012).

It was within that context that our interlocutors moved to Chicago. They had crossed the U.S. border in search of work, attracted by the stories they had heard and following already established networks (Wilson 1998). Out of the sixty-six people included in the Chicago sample of our study, two thirds had lived in the U.S. as 'unlawful entrants' (Gomberg-Muñoz 2016) for a number of years or even decades. Regardless of what motivated their decision to go north, almost all of them had been certain to return to Mexico someday, and to thus fulfil what George Gmelch referred to as the "natural completion of the migration cycle" (1992, 284, cf. Levitt 2001; Rothstein 2016; Serrano 2008). People differed as to how long

they sought to stay in the U.S., but had no doubts about their goal of going back after a few years, at the latest upon retiring. These plans fueled sustained connections to the home regions through the construction of remittance houses, thus “consolidating transnational social fields” (Sinatti 2011, 154)

People’s intention to return was in line with the culturally prescribed norms regarding the roles and obligations they were expected to assume at certain stages of their life trajectories. The same was true, by and large, for the act of migration itself. Going to the United States for some years had come to constitute part of the ‘culture of migration’ (Cohen 2004), of what a young man was supposed to do at a certain age in order to “*seguir adelante*,” meaning “to advance” as many of our interlocutors put it, or at least in order to contribute to the household income. Since work opportunities in Chicago were favorable until the mid-1980s, the money migrants earned in the U.S. allowed for performing the roles of dutiful sons and daughters by sending remittances back to Mexico. If sustaining ties to the Mexican home regions physically proved difficult due to the migrants’ unlawful status that impeded traveling back and forth, remittances presented an accepted (and expected) means to comply with the scripted role of supporting family members in Mexico.

Another common way of both maintaining relationships and confirming one’s intention to ‘complete the migration cycle’ and retake one’s spot in the household in Mexico in the future was to invest money in constructing a house in the area of origin the way Felipe and Rosa did. These constructions not least represented future kin-places, promises of caring for the aging parents built in stone as well as places where the migrants’ own old age and care was supposed to overlap. Today, half of the people from our Chicago sample, like Felipe and Rosa, still own a house in Mexico that they either constructed or bought and refurbished after leaving the country. Yet, contrary to people’s original goals, many of these houses will never serve as retirement homes.

### Leaving Behind What Was Built: Conflicting Roles, New Age-Inscriptions and Retiring in Chicago

As Felipe and Rosa’s example illustrates, the empty houses are often an expression of the fact that migrants have gradually abandoned their plans of returning to Mexico, either entirely or partially. Of the sixty-six Chicago-based people included in the research—roughly half of whom were already retired—only eight, a little more than ten percent, still planned to move completely back to Mexico in the future.<sup>vii</sup> Twenty people (or 30%) sought to spend parts of the year in Mexico and parts of it in Chicago, whereas the remaining approximately 60% did not consider Mexico as a future place of residence at all. Their houses, apart from being used as occasional holiday homes and in some very few cases by family members who were living there until the owners return, would remain vacant. Similar cases of return plans turning into a ‘myth’ have been documented for other migration contexts (Anwar 1979; Şenyürekli and Menjívar 2012). In previous publications (Bedorf 2014a, 2014b), we have analyzed these transformed return intentions and how they were closely linked with people’s life courses, changing notions of belonging and fading transnational ties.

The numbers above indicate that people’s realities in many ways clashed with the goal of moving back to Mexico they had been pursuing. As for Felipe, who tried to reconcile the pre-set scenario of a return to Mexico on the one hand with changed circumstances in both Mexico and Chicago on the other, this was often related to new age inscriptions that emerged for many of the migrants who were approaching old age in Chicago. Such nascent scripts concerned reconfigurations of the aims the migrants pursued, where the norm of returning was challenged by other conflicting aspirations like advancing further and adjusting to American life (Bedorf 2014a). Furthermore, new individual solutions, but also more overarching patterns,



evolved regarding the age-specific social roles and responsibilities people assumed, both towards the family in Mexico (most notably the parents) and in Chicago (as parents and grandparents). Related to these transforming kin-scripts were reconfigurations of residence models as well as of the implications of retirement.

For Felipe and Rosa, their children constituted the main reason for ruling out the idea of returning to Mexico. All four of their children will probably have moved out and be leading independent lives by the time Felipe retires, but both Felipe and his wife consider it important to spend ample time with them as well as with possible grandchildren. Even if caring for one's children—including grandchildren at a later stage, and also the idea and hope of being cared for later—is in compliance with the kin-scripts stipulated by the household system we described earlier, in cross-border situations this tends to conflict with the care work people are supposed to undertake for aging parents or other family members. This tension caused by multiple responsibilities might be compatible when all family members live in one place, but it becomes difficult to reconcile in the context of transnational migration when there are not one but several physical kin-places people are expected to occupy. People are then only able to comply with one of the care scripts and most of our interlocutors prioritized their children (in Chicago) over other family members (in Mexico). In some of our cases, care responsibilities for grandchildren also played a role in that respect, albeit less so than in other cases of transnational migration (e.g., Dossa and Coe in press). To a certain extent, remittances and houses built for the parents in Mexico constituted a form of replacing personal care, but the pain of leaving one part of the family behind remained nevertheless. "I left the family, I left everything,"<sup>viii</sup> is how María described the frustration about not being able to be there for her parents after migrating to Chicago in the late 1960s.

María, 75 years old in 2011, was born into a middle-class household in Mexico City and followed her husband to Chicago when she was thirty-two. Bedorf met her at a *lotería* (the Mexican version of Bingo) afternoon in the Little Village neighborhood in Chicago. Her as well as Felipe's struggles to follow the kin-scripts on both sides of the border, which resulted in partially neglecting both the responsibilities and the house in Mexico, tell only one part of the story of how vacant remittance houses and emerging age inscriptions are related.

When Bedorf visited María at her home in Crest Hill, a gated community of mostly retired residents outside Chicago, a few days after the *lotería* afternoon, they not only talked about the challenges of balancing the obligations towards her family in Mexico with her life in Chicago, but also about María's current situation. She was always looking forward to activities like *lotería* and attended them regularly, María said, since she was "often burdened by loneliness." She had three children and three grandchildren who she was very proud of. Her two sons and daughter all lived in the Chicago area, but they had their own lives, "their duties, their professions" and María had to content herself to "seeing them when they have time." Although María, due to her children and security issues, has no intentions of moving back to Mexico City and into the house she co-owns there with some of her siblings, she reminisces about "being with the family there, united." Similarly, when Felipe indulges in memories of the family's trips to Mexico to finish yet another part of the house, his home there becomes a symbol of a world where norms are still in order. In both cases, the houses in Mexico represent idealized kin-places where family would still form the nucleus of daily life and care.

Even if such images might be imbued with nostalgia, they clearly point to new age inscriptions characterizing the lives of older Mexican migrants in Chicago. Although most people had lived in bigger households in Mexico, their living arrangements in the U.S. looked very different. Since the adult children

(and grandchildren) rarely shared one home with their parents, the mean household size of our interlocutors was, at 2.55 members, comparatively small. This usually implied less family time and tasks, such as looking after grandchildren, than would have been common in Mexico. On the other hand, as María's example illustrates, this model also created room for new activities, such as gathering with friends and playing *lotería*. Senior clubs providing all kinds of entertainment were very common in this respect. Besides hosting dance, English, computer and drawing classes as well as the popular *lotería* sessions, the senior clubs functioned as social spaces. By doing so, they contributed to the emergence of new practices and meanings related to retirement, which were less characterized by family duties and more by social ties outside the family and leisure time.

Neolocality hence both reflected and gave rise to new notions of old age, regarding the responsibilities as well as the freedoms associated with this stage of life. Institutions such as senior clubs, senior centers and retirement communities like the one where María lives played a substantial part in reframing the role of the elders, while at the same time also replacing the family as 'social care givers.' María's children urged her to move to Crest Hill for the comfort and care. She appreciates the events the community organizes, María says, "but when I am alone, it takes a lot to bring myself to attend."

Part and parcel of how people's roles – the ones of the older generation of migrants as well as the ones of their children and grandchildren – are being reframed is their greater economic independence. Unlike the older people in our Pueblo Nuevo example who depended on their children's support, our correspondents in Chicago received or were going to receive Social Security. Additionally, most of them would be able to draw on other income sources such as employer pensions, savings, rental income or the sale of a property upon retirement.

## Conclusion

In this article, we deciphered how the emptiness of remittance houses characterizing large parts of the Mexican countryside are connected to their migrant owners' life courses, particularly in the later stages of life. We looked at the changing meanings of remittance houses for both the people in a village in central Mexico, Pueblo Nuevo, and older Mexican migrants who were living in Chicago and had constructed homes in their home regions in Mexico. Our examples also cast light on slightly different stages in the life of remittance homes. While the cases illuminate how the purposes of such buildings are reconfigured over time due to changing kin- and age-inscriptions in the context of migration, our Mexican example explores metaphorically speaking the mature stages of 'adult' houses, whereas the houses we discuss in our Chicago example have already reached old age and sometimes death.

Our cases show that the considerable number of vacant houses characterizing the remittance landscape is tightly linked with changing norms and practices regarding care responsibilities and rights as well as, more generally, with meanings and expectations attached to certain stages of the life course, in our case particularly old age. These changes seem to be so fast that it is becoming very difficult for transnational families to plan their futures. Thus, envisaged futures materialized in the construction of remittance houses for later phases in the life course are turning into ruins while still under construction (see Sandoval-Cervantes 2017). 'Traditional' household-scripts that used to provide frames of references for kin-work and kin-scription in Mexico lose their power both in the rural Mexican and the urban U.S. setting. Instead, new forms of dwelling, 'kin-place', such as neolocal residence in Mexico and living in old age homes or smaller households in Chicago, emerge. The future plans of migrants diverge from the expected 'completion of the migration cycle' in that the idea of returning to Mexico is often abandoned or translated into back and forth

movements between the two countries. What all of the emerging practices and norms we have described have in common is that they are evolving, leading to clashing with each other and existing norms. As people try to reconcile different expectations and responsibilities, the construction of houses reflects one envisaged future that is often overturned by conflicting aims and involvements in the U.S., giving rise to alternative scripts.

One issue we have touched upon here, but which begs further investigation, are the challenges that these new arising age-inscriptions that are crystallized in the transformed meanings of remittance houses dotting the Mexican countryside pose in terms of old age security (see also Lamb 2009, Pauli 2008, Pauli and Bedorf 2016). Our examples illustrate that kin-centered ideas and practices of caring for older people have in both places largely been replaced by different forms of care taking. This concerns both the economic and the socio-emotional aspects of care. While the older generation in our Mexican example primarily subsists on the remittance money sent by their children who have migrated to the United States as well as on larger family support networks, it is the state and the city who step in as the main providers in the U.S. setting. Most of the migrants in Chicago do not rely on the support of their children during the later stages of life. They are economically independent due to the social security payments and possibly further pensions they receive as well as apartments and other assets they own and live, if not by themselves, in old-age homes. Both in rural Mexico and in the urban United States, however, the fact that old age has become gradually disconnected from the family, not taking place in one common kin-place anymore, but rather as kin-work over a distance, creates new vulnerabilities (Pauli and Bedorf 2016). Apart from leaving emotional voids, these nascent scripts also cause economic and health uncertainties. With shrinking family sizes in Mexico, it is unclear in how far the younger members of family networks will still be able to provide for the older generation in the future. Similarly, in the United States, where significant demographic shifts have led to a growing aging Mexican migrant population that is projected to substantially increase in the upcoming decades, it remains to be seen in how far the state will manage to meet the health and social security needs of this rapidly increasing group.

We have dealt with issues of gender and generation in depth, but we have not tackled class and economic stratification in detail in the article. However, class does frame our two cases and could be explored further. While the Mexican case presents a “peasantariat” (Griffiths 1997, 24-25), i.e., a group of people having to survive on a mixture of economic strategies, involving agriculture and unskilled wage labor through migration, the informants from Chicago have a much more diverse class background. They also come from a wider geographical spectrum, i.e., from villages, towns and cities throughout Mexico. These different class and geographical backgrounds might influence how much people feel obliged to adhere to specific kin- and age-inscriptions, a point also raised by James Ferguson (1999) in his work on rural return migration of urban mine workers in the Zambian Copperbelt. Remittance houses by themselves are expressions of class status and the increasing economic stratification that has been unleashed by migration.

An interesting extension of our analysis of remittance houses is looking at another form of built belonging, at tombstones. Even if migrants might leave the houses they have constructed behind, thus severing ties of belonging to the home country, they often want to be buried there. Migrants hope to resolve the difficult question of where they belong with this final decision (Lopez 2015, 166-175). According to a 2008 estimation, one out of every six Mexican migrants who dies in the United States is buried in Mexico (Lopez 2015, 172). Among our participants in Chicago, one quarter wished to be buried in Mexico. Their reasons were comparable to the one for constructing migrant houses in Mexico — sustaining belonging. In that sense, conspicuous tombstones might take over the role of remittance houses. Even the tombstones, however, might continue to mirror the many ambivalences and challenges attached to migration and the building of

belonging in more than one place. Some of our Chicago correspondents had already bought the plot for their final resting place in Mexico. However, they were uncertain whether they would really want to be buried there. Even if their parents were there, they would deprive their children in the United States of the opportunity to visit their graves.

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## NOTES

- <sup>i</sup> The place we have just described does not exist as such, but constitutes a combination of several houses we found during our fieldwork and that we have assembled to build this imaginary prototypical house.
- <sup>ii</sup> The project has been funded by the German Science Foundation (grant SCHN 1103/3-1) and was led by principal investigators Julia Pauli and Michael Schnegg equally. The project has ethically and scientifically been approved through the research foundation.
- <sup>iii</sup> Since the mid-2000s the state run program *Oportunidades* is also active in Pueblo Nuevo. As my 2013 census data show, state support for older people nevertheless remains minimal. Most older villagers only receive a monthly food basket.
- <sup>iv</sup> Consumption habits have also changed. For example, in 1997, only 34% of the households had an indoor toilet and 26 percent owned a fridge. In 2013, 83% of the houses have a bathroom and 76% own a fridge.
- <sup>v</sup> All names have been changed.
- <sup>vi</sup> Interview Felipe Gayón, July 28, 2011. The interview was conducted in Spanish, translation into English by Bedorf.
- <sup>vii</sup> The sample does not capture migrants who came from Mexico to Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s and already went back to Mexico at an earlier stage of life, but focuses on migrants who still lived in Chicago when they were approaching retirement.
- <sup>viii</sup> Interview María Romero, May 2, 2011. The interview was conducted in Spanish, translation into English by Bedorf.

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