

Living Room and the Mexican Migrant Family Album

Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship 2019 - 2020

Final Report by Brian Orozco, Yale University, Class of 2018



I had the incredible fortune of being awarded one of the 2019-2020 Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowships in the Visual Arts; although my fellowship year was cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the experience I did have abroad changed my personal and artistic life forever. In July of 2019, I left for Mexico with the intention of spending a year making fine art photographs *of* and *with* the families of Mexican migrants who have stayed behind in Mexico, photographing them on their lands and in their domestic spaces. As the son of

Mexican immigrants who immigrated to the United States shortly before I was born, notions of home and belonging have always loomed large in my academic and artistic endeavors.

I grew up flipping through my family's glossy photo album, and each time I did, I thought to myself: *this is what my family and I look like—this is who we are*. My parents always seemed to understand the weight a photograph could carry; they always understood the power they could reclaim in crafting an image of their bright-eyed family as they searched for an Americanness within us.

I carry with me a childhood memory of my father's brother arriving at our doorstep in Portland, Oregon, on Christmas Eve one year after crossing the Mexico-United States border and making his way north to Oregon. He arrived by himself. His wife and two children had stayed in Mexico because it was safer to be brought across the border alone. Despite an arduous week's worth of travel, he still greeted my twin brother and me with a tender embrace. *Brandon, you're the one with the mole on your chin, and Brian, you're the one with the rounder face*, he told us with a proud grin. This wasn't a lucky guess. Our uncle had our family pictures to go by, family snapshots that my father routinely sent to his family back in Mexico. My father sent these pictures to Mexico to update his family members, loved ones he and my mother had left years before, on how their new life was unfolding in order to reassure them that their struggles to get here were not in vain. In many ways, I've been thinking about these pictures and this project my entire life; they left me thinking about the ways in which Mexican migrants send pictures to members still in Mexico, and with this, I started to think about the pictures the members in Mexico keep around their domestic spaces in order to honor, remember and bridge seemingly insurmountable distances.

My travels began in my parents' hometown of Tepeji, Hidalgo, a small town of about 80,000 people. My parents left their hometown when my mother's family left shortly before they did to begin a life in the United States. My father's family, however, stayed behind. My parents were never able to return to Mexico during my childhood, and because of that, I grew up with the immense and abstract longing they carried with them for a home on the other side of a border.

My father was able to accompany me on my trip to Mexico when I left for the fellowship, and in doing so, he reunited with his siblings after more than 20 years of not having seen them. I was there to bear witness.

My father and I were overwhelmed by the sites and faces the family members waiting for him wanted us to see. We wasted no time and promptly visited places around the town where my father spent his adolescence; we visited his father's burial grounds, which my father had not had a chance to visit when his father passed away shortly after my father arrived to the United States in 1994; we met adults who my father first met when they were toddlers; we paid respect to friends of his who had since passed away; we visited contested inheritances and unkempt lots my father once called home.

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My father and his family quickly became the focus of my project for the first few months. I learned of stories I had never heard before, stories that perhaps my father was uncovering or remembering thanks to his return. He attempted to rekindle relationships that had frayed due to his absence. In one particular moment, I watched him slip a note past the front door of his older brother's home, another brother who had attempted to begin a life in the United States much like my father, but was unable to after being deported only a few years after his arrival.







In meeting many of my father's family members, as well as their friends, I was able to establish connections with distant relatives before my father's returned to the United States. Those connections led me to Oaxaca and Mexico City, where I continued to photograph for several months at a time. I was invited into their homes and was allowed to audio record our conversations for later transcription.

In early March of 2020, when it became clear that the COVID-19 outbreak would soon become a pandemic, I made the tough decision to return to the United States to shelter in place. I returned not before making a substantial number of portraits of people I met who had family members in the United States. One of my objectives was to make photographic prints of these portraits to gift to their family members on the other side of the border.



Once back in the United States, I made the prints and shipped them out to their respective family members, many of which I'm still in contact with today. I began editing the other thousands of photographs I made during my time there and began making a maquette of a photo book that I hope to someday publish.

Since the end of my fellowship in 2020, I have enrolled and graduated from the Master of Fine Arts program in Photography at the Yale School of Art. This accomplishment was one of my lifelong goals, a dream I never imagined would come true; this sincerely would not have happen without the time I spent in Mexico, which was made possible thanks to the generosity of the Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Fellowship. This fellowship year was an absolute turning point. The year sparked within me the motivation needed to pursue a life in the arts, and my hope is to continue my practice and teach at the undergraduate and graduate level in the years to come.

This coming 2022-2023 academic year, I will be establishing a photography workshop for high school students in New Haven, Connecticut, through the Fredric Roberts Photography Workshop, and I will be teaching an undergraduate course in photography at Yale University in the spring of 2023. I cannot thank the Mortimer Hays family for their resolute commitment to artists and students like me.