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Expressing “lack of freedom” among Mexican migrants of La Loma, state of Mexico in the United States

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In the context of a long history of Mexican migration to the United States and against the background of studies on transnational communities, a group of migrants from La Loma, a town in central Mexico, emphasize the “lack of freedom” in their lives in the United States, which they attribute to excessive working hours and self-imposed restrictions. Through an ethnographic study (interviews and participant observation), this article shows how these individuals—first- and second-generation Mexican migrants—organize and participate in *fiestas* (parties) during visits to their hometown, where they experience what appears to be a collective catharsis, enjoying a sense of freedom they cannot experience in the United States. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* and the notion of the transnational social field, the analysis explores how migrants understand their roles in both their country of origin and their destination, and how they use their capital—mainly symbolic, economic, and social—to implement strategies of social reproduction and maintain their status, with a view toward an eventual return.

KEYWORDS

capitals, collective catharsis, freedom, habitus, migration, surveillance, transnational habitus, transnational social field

1 Introduction

The Mexico–U. S. migration corridor is one of the oldest, largest, most important worldwide, and most studied in the Western Hemisphere. In 2023, an estimated 11 million people from Mexico had been living in the U. S. for decades. These numbers makes the corridor the largest in the world, followed by the one between Syria and Turkey, with nearly 4 million people who have settled in Turkey in recent years due to the large-scale displacement caused by the civil war in Syria (IOM, 2024). The durability of the Mexico–U. S. migration corridor rests on three intertwined factors: geographic proximity, deep economic asymmetries, and a century-long pattern of institutional responses on both sides of the border. The closeness of the two countries and the perceived better quality of life in the U. S. have motivated some Mexicans to settle across the border since the late 19th century, even as U. S. immigration policies have become increasingly strict over time. U. S. policies alone have never diminished Mexican labor migration, but they have reshaped how it is conceived and controlled. From a historical context in which people moved without barriers (Paik, 2020), different programs and policies have been introduced to manage migration over the years. Unlike initiatives like the *Bracero Program* (Mexican Agricultural Workers’ Agreement), in place from August 4, 1942, to December 31, 1964—which illustrates an era of binational management—the post-1965 era reflects unilateral

enforcement with limited legal pathways. This tendency has forced people on the move to choose more difficult and politically contentious options (IEHS, 2019).

Although the wage gap between the native population of the United States and the migrant population is 6.2% in favor of the native population, Mexicans continue to migrate to the neighboring country. There are 11,214,896 Mexicans living abroad, and 96% of them (10,820,514) reside in the United States (IME, 2021; *Fundación BBVA México AC*, 2022).

Border crossing between the two countries is a controversial issue that has not favored migrants. This includes the 22 years during which the Bracero Program was in effect, from 1942 to 1964, when Mexicans were recruited to work in the United States due to labor shortages long after World War II. When the program was terminated, a period known as “undocumented migration” followed, from 1965 to 1986, during which thousands of Mexicans crossed the border without documents validating their presence. The flow of migrants from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean to fill unskilled and semi-skilled occupations is not only the result of the end of the Bracero Program but also of structural changes implemented by U. S. administrations since the 1960s. These changes transformed the labor market from a pyramidal structure into an hourglass-shaped one, in which migrants continue to occupy the bottom tier (Portes and Rumbaut, 2024). In 1986, an amnesty was granted to migrants who had arrived before January 1, 1982, under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), allowing nearly 3 million people to regularize their immigration status (Durand, 2016; Portes and Rumbaut, 2024). This event was followed by more restrictions. From 1987 to 2007, several laws and enforcement initiatives were introduced: border control operations began 1993; a new law for controlling irregular immigration¹ (Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act, IIRIRA); Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was established; and the National Security Strategy was implemented in 2001–2002 following the September 11 attacks. From 2007 to 2014, immigration reform continued to influence the migration corridor between the two countries (Durand, 2016; Barraza, 2020). Recent years have been marked by mass deportations during Barack Obama’s two terms, and the failed construction of a border wall proposed by Donald Trump (Paik, 2020) during his first term, and the speeding constructions of walls, barriers and related infrastructure during his second mandate (CBP, 2025; Chiacu, 2025) among other immigration enforcement strategies. Joe Biden’s attempts to address migration through contradictory policies. On the one hand, his administration has sought to protect migrants’ human rights, which has coincided with unprecedented numbers of undocumented migrants—posing a significant political challenge (Cason and Brooks, 2024). On the other hand, it has implemented restrictive measures, such

as the June 2024 executive order barring undocumented migrants from applying for asylum until daily crossing fall below 1,500 (*Department of Homeland Security*, 2024). These events illustrate the contentious nature of the border, where dramatic stories continue to unfold every day.

The border has manifested itself as an element that goes beyond the physical distance between the two nations. This is due to:

“[...] how the United States has been defined by exclusion and exploitation based, among other things, on race, gender, citizenship status, and labor. [...] The ban declares a threat: you will be excluded and kicked out if you try to enter. The wall backs up this threat with its physical barriers and accompanying border guards. The raid reinforces the threat with the physical action of forced removal. [...] Indeed, bans, walls, and raids represent the instinct to exclude and remove people who are deemed outside the United States’ desired, idealized society” (Paik, 2020, p. 3).

In recent years, immigration to U. S. territory has become increasingly dangerous for Mexicans, especially when attempted irregularly. Immigration policies have become stricter since September 11, 2001,² and as a result, human trafficking networks have expanded. According to De León (2024), the journey has become more perilous for migrants: assaults, kidnappings, extortion and even murder are now common. He emphasizes that many traffickers also live in poverty and are exposed to many of the same dangers migrants face, in a world of human smuggling that is more complex and less internally organized than is commonly assumed. He notes that smuggling is:

“exploitative and violent [...] [b]ut it is not the problem. The monstrous injustices created by capitalism that drive migration are the problem: poverty, political corruption, the drug trade, transnational gang violence, climate change, patterns created by the richest countries and disproportionately felt by the poorest. These are the things that make undocumented migration (along with its ugly symbiote, smuggling) a lifesaving necessity.” (De León, 2024, p. 329).

Nevertheless, crossing the border to work irregularly has become an undertaking that many Mexicans have normalized over the years. This is the result of a difficult process in which the legal requirements are not easily met:

“[According to the municipal chronicler of Acambay] [...] Since the 1960s, despite not having papers that legalized their stay, the inhabitants of this area of the State of Mexico have continued to emigrate for work. Thus, in Acambay—and particularly in La

1 Drawing on the work of various scholars (See De Genova, 2002; Paik, 2020; Walia, 2020; Ellis, 2021), we will use the terms “irregular” and “undocumented” to describe the experiences of migrants in relation to the State (laws, regulations, etc.), which often contribute to the production and perpetuation of migrant precarity—in other words, migrant “illegality.” This is achieved through processes of irregularization, in which border governance strategies, bans, raids, discursive control and other mechanisms are deployed as active legal-political processes—involving the actions of rulers, agents, employers, and other social agents—designed to control and surveil the population, with a specific focus on migrants.

2 Although post-9/11 securitization intensified border militarization, the true legal watershed in contemporary U.S. immigration enforcement was IIRIRA in 1996. Enacted under the Clinton administration, this legislation expanded the grounds of deportability, introduced mandatory detention for a broad range of offenses, and created expedited-removal procedures that limited judicial review—measures that transformed deportation from an exceptional sanction into a routine administrative practice (Kerwin, 2018; Meissner et al., 2019). Subsequent administrations have built on this framework through technological surveillance, cross-agency coordination, and deterrence programs, making 1996 the structural foundation of the present enforcement regime.

Loma—a deep-rooted migratory tradition was consolidated, supported by a network of networks that, over time, has facilitated the flow of people, remittances, goods and information—sometimes even intensifying it.” (Castañeda Díaz, 2023, p. 52 our translation).³

As mentioned, although individuals are aware that they may face dangerous situations when crossing the border irregularly, they continue to make the decision to leave. They mainly rely on social networks established over the years. In doing so, they reproduce a model that begins by establishing contact with a *pollero* or *coyote*—usually for a high fee, around \$3,000 according to information from our informants—who will guide migrants across the border.

Social networks play a fundamental role in initiating migration projects. Generally, it is family members or acquaintances—already established in the United States and part of these social networks—who are responsible for paying the coyote. After the newcomers settle, they repay the loan, which is considered a debt based on honor (according to informants during interviews).

Since there is no official record of whether Mexicans leave for the United States irregularly or not, figures from Jalisco, Michoacán, Guanajuato, Estado de México, and Zacatecas are only partial. However, it is estimated that 45 percent of all migrants in the United States originate from these states (Ordaz Díaz and Albo, 2011). According to statistics from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), the State of Mexico—located in the center of the Mexican Republic—ranks second nationally in terms of the number of emigrants. Between 2015 and 2020, 43,459 people left the state to live in another country, and of these, 70 out of every 100 went to the United States (INEGI, 2020).

In the northern area of the State of Mexico lies the municipality of Acambay de Ruiz Castañeda.⁴ According to the 2020 Population and Housing Census, this municipality registered a total of 67,872 inhabitants (INEGI, 2022). According to Acambay municipal documents, migration:

“is largely due to the lack of jobs, which has forced residents to seek employment, mainly in the United States [...] a situation that has both negative and positive repercussions for development. [...] most of the people who migrate are young and in the prime of their physical and mental capacity. This often entails abandoning their studies, leading to social stagnation. Additionally, the abandonment of agricultural activities (the main economic activity in the municipality) has contributed to an aging rural workforce. On the other hand, since most migrants maintain their residence in the municipality and migrate temporarily, their remittances have brought foreign currency into the region, positively impacting the social welfare of families” (Ayuntamiento de Acambay, 2004, p. 24).

In the northeastern part of Acambay we found the community of Santa María La Loma, which had a population of 1,188 individuals in 2020. This figure indicates a population decrease of 15.5% over

15 years (1,420 inhabitants in 2005) and 49.6% over 30 years (2,358 inhabitants in 1990), primarily due to migration to the United States.

Individuals from La Loma who decided to migrate usually do so irregularly and, over time, attempt to regularize their status through various strategies, such as marriage. As time passes, they understand and adapt to their new environment in the United States while simultaneously reaffirming their status in La Loma by demonstrating their ability to improve the family’s and community’s economy through remittances. This creates a dual task: (1) to establish themselves in the United States and consolidate their economic situation, enabling them to support their families and assist the arrival of other compatriots; and (2) to maintain a hybrid presence in their homeland. This “being without being” in their native place is sustained for most of the year through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), such as WhatsApp and other social network applications.

To maintain their presence in La Loma, migrants return to their village once or twice a year. This is the place of origin of their main socio-cultural references and the location of their social networks. During their visits—what they call “*visitas de regreso*” (return visits)⁴ to their homeland—they not only experience a sense of freedom but also benefit from an implicit social status (not openly recognized) that would be difficult for them to attain in the United States.

In this article, based on ethnographic work carried out in the community of Santa María La Loma,⁵ we explore the profound meanings that a group of first and second generation Mexican migrants attach to their experiences during their return visits to their locality: (1) the opportunity to confirm, through their presence, the social status they maintain in the village; and (2) the chance to briefly experience the freedom they feel is lost in their everyday lives in the United States. As we will explain, this is the result of a life largely dedicated to work and the self-imposed rules of conduct meant to maintain a positive image among the American population. This case departs from other studies on transnational communities in Latin America. Prior research has shown how Dominican migrants sustain ties through social remittances (Levitt, 2001), how Oaxacan organizations and rituals like Guelaguetzas rebuild collective belonging (Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004), and how Zacatecan hometown associations and the 3 × 1 Program use collective remittances for economic, moral, and political ends (Goldring, 2002; García Zamora et al., 2018). What distinguishes La Loma, however, is its explicit focus on a “lack of freedom” and its ritualized catharsis, which symbolically rebalances a disciplined habitus. Rather than centering economic reciprocity or ritual prestige, this case highlights an affective and moral labor that manages everyday tensions between control and release, refining comparative understandings of transnational experience.

Following this contextualization of the migratory phenomenon in Mexico and the description of the characteristics of the locality of

4 This expression does not exist in Spanish and was coined by migrants.

5 This article includes information obtained during the doctoral thesis project of the Graduate Program in Political and Social Sciences at the National Autonomous University of Mexico: WhatsApp and Transformation: Digital Transnationalism in La Loma, Acambay, State of Mexico.

3 Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article are by the authors.

Santa María La Loma, section two presents a brief literature review and a theoretical framework, in which Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and capitals are employed. The methodology section is then followed by the presentation of results and the discussion.

2 Literature review and theoretical framework

In the vast literature on Bourdieu's theory, the concept of *habitus* has been mobilized as a useful tool for studying migration and its different aspects, such as settlement and cosmopolitan identities (See [Nedelcu, 2012](#); [Jung et al., 2017](#)). For instance, some scholars have coined new concepts such as “asylum-seeking habitus” to examine the interdependence between asylum-seekers' agency and their structural-cultural environment ([Shum, 2022](#)) or “traveling habitus” to explain “the gradual shifts in behavioral dispositions, mannerisms and tastes, and bodily styling(s) of those in the move” ([Alloul, 2021](#), p. 179). Following a similar line of thought, authors such as [Arellano Gálvez et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Ramos Gallardo and García Ortega \(2021\)](#) argue that “in migratory situations, agents introduce, adapt, or abandon their practices as a result of tensions between their original *habitus* and their present context” ([Ramos Gallardo and García Ortega, 2021](#), p. 19). This idea is closely related to what Bourdieu explained with the notion of *hysteresis*, which refers to an incongruence between the habitus and the field ([Bourdieu, 1979, 1980](#)). A key element of the habitus is its durability—thought not eternal; in other words it can change over the time ([Bourdieu, 1994](#)). Various authors highlight the malleability of habitus ([Gu and Lee, 2020](#); [Mulvey and Mason, 2022](#)) and its relationship with the environment/context, the individual's specific situation, and the effect these have on the choices they can make, even when equal capital is present ([Mahbub, 2021](#)). Indeed, scholars explain that “in the whirlwind generated by the displacement, migrants are forced to innovate and invent practices that allow them to adapt” ([Pintor Sandoval, 2011](#), p. 183). *Habitus* is mobilized to make sense of how practices are generated, based on specific conjunctures and contextual circumstances.

Other authors such as [Gaspar Bojórquez \(2006\)](#), reiterate that the concept of *habitus* can be a useful tool for understanding how groups and individuals appropriate social, historical, and economic phenomenon—eventually “integrating” them as part of their own construction. *Habitus*, he says, is a socialized subjectivity that, on the one hand, reproduces social conditions and, on the other, generates social practices. Following this idea, [Jiménez \(2010\)](#) agrees in considering the importance of *habitus* as a generator of practices and representations that result from the internalization of structures and that can develop within a transnational social field. In this regard, it is important to distinguish between: (1) the *transnational habitus*, which is considered the subjective dimension of transnationalism—in other words, how individuals internalize their own transformation and relate to their community on this basis; and (2) the *transnational social field*, which represents the objective dimension, taking into account collective actions and identity. In this context, [Diossa](#) summarizes the distinctions as follows:

“Levitt and Glick Schiller suggest that, within transnational fields, it is possible to differentiate between “ways of being” and “ways of belonging.” The former are used to designate “the relationships and social practices actually existing in which individuals

participate,” and the latter refers to “practices that indicate or represent an identity, which demonstrates a conscious connection with a specific group” (2004, p. 1010). This distinction is fundamental for understanding the deep and dynamic interweaving that exists between the positions of the transnational field and the dispositions of transnational habitus. Interweaving that is [...] the main foundation of the world of practice.” ([Diossa Jiménez, 2012](#), p. 64)

In our study, we observe how the path taken by first-generation migrants (from arrival to settlement in the host country) can be analyzed from the perspective of *habitus*, defined by Pierre Bourdieu as socially acquired embodied dispositions or “enduring ways of being or doing that are embodied in bodies” ([Bourdieu, 2009](#), p. 29). These dispositions orient individuals to live in ways similar to other members of their social group. From this perspective, to speak of *habitus* “is to propose that the individual—even the personal, the subjective—is social, collective. *Habitus* is socialized subjectivity” ([Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2005](#), p. 186). Bourdieu argues that *habitus* cannot be understood in isolation from the concepts of *field* and *capital*. The *field* refers to relationships that are not interactions between individuals, but rather objective relationships that exist independently of individual consciousness or will ([Bourdieu, 2006](#)). To be more precise, Bourdieu defines the concept as follows:

“Fields present themselves to synchronic apprehension as structured spaces of positions (or posts) whose properties depend on their position within these spaces, and which can be analyzed independently of the characteristics of their occupants (which are, in part, determined by them). There are general laws of fields: fields as different as the political field, the philosophical field, and the religious field have invariant laws of functioning [...] But it is known that in every field one will find a battle—the specific forms of which must be investigated each time—between the newcomer who tries to break down the barriers to entry and the dominant player who tries to defend the monopoly and exclude competition.” ([Bourdieu, 2009](#), p. 113)

Here, we expand on this concept in discussing the lives of migrants, who are part of a transnational social field—understood, following Bourdieu, as a space where different fields can be reproduced or transformed. [Goldring and Landolt \(2009\)](#) define the transnational social field as a relational space or network that enables the study of online relationships, connecting those who have left their homeland with those who remain. The transnational field is also interpreted, based on Bourdieu's ideas, as a relatively autonomous social microcosm—a space of objective relationships “with a specific and irreducible logic and necessity to those that regulate other fields” ([Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2005](#), p. 150), but with the key difference that it transcends physical borders. Following Bourdieu, we also consider his notion of *capitals*, defined as “[...] social relations of power. Capitals are the resources, knowledges, objects, practices, and skills relative to any particular field that a person utilizes to advance his or her position in the social order through their acquisition and distribution” ([Hancock and Garner, 2009](#), p. 179). Thus, our theoretical framework is built upon the transnational social field and its three basic elements: *capitals*, *habitus*, and *social reproduction strategies*, the

components of which are outlined in Table 1 (Bourdieu, 1979, 2006, 2009; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2005; Jiménez, 2010).

The transnational social field is based on the idea that migrants' lives unfold simultaneously across several countries, linked by family, work, and communication networks. Inspired by Bourdieu and studies of transnationalism (Schiller et al., 1992, 1995; Levitt and Schiller, 2004; Schiller and Çağlar, 2011), this approach portrays a web in which actors negotiate their sense of belonging and social position beyond borders, relying on ties that enable the circulation of resources and meanings.

Within this field, three interdependent pillars operate: *habitus* as bodily internalized schemes that guide everyday practice; when people migrate, these schemes readjust to new norms and hierarchies, steering decisions such as those related to paperwork, employment, or the use of technologies to maintain ties. *Capitals* encompass economic, cultural, social, and symbolic resources, whose value shifts according to context: a professional degree may lose value abroad, while a network of fellow countrymen can open doors to jobs and housing. The unequal distribution of capital generates hierarchies both in the locality of origin and in the locality of destination, shaping migratory trajectories. Finally, *social reproduction strategies* are sets of actions—conscious or not—aimed at preserving or enhancing patrimony and class position. These strategies include investing remittances in real estate, regularizing migration status, reinforcing family cohesion via digital platforms, or forging advantageous marital alliances. These strategies are crafted “astride” two or more nation-states, taking advantage of wage differentials and regulatory gaps. Taken together, *habitus*, *capitals*, and *social reproduction strategies* form a dynamic system: *habitus* orients perceived opportunities for action, *capital* helps determine their feasibility, and *social reproduction strategies* materialize the reproduction or transformation of social position. While this illuminates the logics that perpetuate—or challenge—inequalities in contemporary migratory circuits, it does not clearly address how migrants exercise agency within or against structural constraints. To this end, Giddens (1984) structuration theory is helpful, with its insight into how social practices are recursively shaped by both agency and structure. For Giddens, human agents draw upon recursively organized sets of rules and resources (structure) and, through their situated actions or activities, they also

reproduce—and subtly transform—those very structures. This perspective prevents an overly deterministic reading of habitus and clarifies that dispositions do not simply constrain action; they also orient creative and adaptive responses to changing contexts. As Giovine and Barri (2024) observe, individual and collective agency can have multiple effects; even strategic actions can produce unintended consequences (positive or negative) in other interactional contexts.

3 Methodology

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted to understand the logic of communal life, social practices, and the actors' worldviews. The ethnography included, in addition to participant observation, 15 semi-structured interviews using intentional non-probabilistic sampling (snowball technique), which contributed to understanding “how people make sense of everyday life and social processes” (Peralta Martínez, 2009, p. 35). These interviews allowed for lengthy conversations with some La Loma migrants, during which they freely expressed their opinions. They not only narrated their life experiences in the destination country but also shared their experiences and, above all, expressed the emotions they felt during their visits.

Interviews were conducted from 16–22 October 2021 in the town of La Loma, with a second set taking place from 9–17 July 2022, during the “Fiesta patronal” of Santa María La Loma. The decision to conduct the interviews during the patronal festivities of *La virgen del Carmen* was intentional: the period concentrates temporary returns, religious rituals, and an intense flow of symbolic and material remittances. This allows us to observe festive practices, family exchanges, and local hierarchies “at their most expressive point.”

Rather than using a survey, the research combined participant observation with interviews. This format balances a thematic script with the necessary openness to capture emotional narratives and unexpected events, for example, memories of first crossings without papers or feelings of relief when returning to the town. The snowball technique facilitated access to trusted participants in a context where social capital and reputation define who speaks and what is revealed. Field access was

TABLE 1 Habitus, capital, and strategies of social reproduction.

Habitus	Capital	Strategies of social reproduction
<p>Generators of practices and representations.</p> <p>Result of the internalization/embodiment of structures.</p> <p>They are apprehended based on conditions of existence.</p>	<p>“[...] social relations of power. Capitals are the resources, knowledges, objects, practices, and skills relative to any particular field that a person utilizes to advance his or her position in the social order through their acquisition and distribution.” (Hancock and Garner, 2009, p. 179)</p> <p><i>Economic capital</i> refers to the total value of income, rural and urban properties, stocks, industrial profits, wages, salaries, etc.</p> <p><i>Cultural capital</i> comprises properties related to knowledge, sciences, art.</p> <p><i>Social capital</i> consists of current or potential resources linked to the possession of a network of inter-knowledge and inter-recognition relationships (belonging to a group, whose agents are united by permanent and useful ties).</p> <p><i>Symbolic capital</i> is defined as the form that different types of capital take when they are recognized as legitimate. It is denied capital, that is, not recognized as capital. Because capitals are unevenly distributed, hierarchical relationships are established in different fields.</p>	<p>Set of actions ordered with a view to objectives, long-term, and not necessarily framed as such, which are produced by the members of a collective (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 33).</p> <p>Empirically different practices through which individuals or their families tend, consciously or unconsciously, to preserve or increase their wealth and, correlatively, to improve or maintain their position in the class structure.</p>

achieved primarily through personal contacts, which gradually led to the identification of community leaders and key participants. These relationships provided the basis for trust and facilitated entry into both the public and private spheres of daily life. Participant observation extended beyond formal events to include everyday interactions such as family gatherings, preparations for local festivities, and informal conversations in domestic and communal spaces. The research involved multiple visits in 2021 and 2022 during both ritual and non-ritual periods, allowing for sustained engagement rather than isolated attendance. This prolonged immersion informed decisions about sampling, guided the rhythm of the interviews, and enriched the interpretive process. Reflexive field notes documented how the researcher's positionality shaped access, interpretation, and rapport.

Among the migrants interviewed, 12 are between 50 and 60 years old and left La Loma without documents. However, after the 1986 amnesty, they were able to return frequently, especially during the “Fiesta patronal” in July and the year-end festivities in December. The remaining three interviews were conducted with bilingual young adults aged 15 to 29. Born in the United States, they grew up in a bicultural environment, interacting with the Mexican community in the United States (mainly in the state of Illinois) and visiting their parents' homeland since childhood. The profile of the participants offers a generational window: twelve are first-generation migrants who embody the figure of the “successful countryman,” returning on key dates to reaffirm ties and redistribute resources. The remaining three are bilingual young people, born in the U. S., with bicultural experience and a desire to belong in La Loma.

Participant observation allowed for the collection of data that reflect the spectacle of the visit, during which economic remittances are concentrated to finance bands and food, as well as symbolic remittances (clothing, music, etc.) that re-signify belonging.

Information about incomes was impossible to obtain. Although it is evident that their purchasing power surpasses that of their relatives and friends residing in La Loma, this topic was not primarily addressed due to the prevailing insecurity in the area. La Loma is considered a high-crime zone, and individuals with higher resources may become targets of theft or kidnapping.

The participants to our study, first-generation migrants, have an average of nine years of education or have completed secondary education. Among them, six managed to complete college in the United States, while the rest dedicated themselves exclusively to work. Of the three second-generation migrants, two are students, and one works in a restaurant. All participants have dual citizenship (Mexican and U. S.). They all speak and understand Spanish and English, but those who did not complete college did not specify whether they have English literacy skills.

The analysis process involved transcribing, labeling, and classifying the information according to logical criteria and categories proposed in the thesis. The data used in this article emerged from a process that included discovery, i.e., organizing and recording the information; coding, which involved concentrating information related to similar topics or ideas and analyzing it, and finally, relativization, i.e., interpreting the information in the context in which it was obtained (Taylor and Bogdan, 1992).

After conducting the aforementioned process, which includes the experiences and knowledge obtained in the interviews and information recorded in the field diaries, it was found that individuals consistently and spontaneously discussed the lack of freedom they

perceive in their lives in the United States and the possibility of relief they believe exists when participating in both the “Fiesta patronal” and private parties. It should be noted that all the information presented in this paper was obtained through formal interviews. Additionally, during the interviews, participants spontaneously expressed that, in Mexico, they have the opportunity to engage in leisure activities without limitations on time or place. This information became the data we present and analyze in this article.

4 Results

4.1 An American career: establishment, stability, and return

La Loma is representative of the reality in some places where migration has become a habit that sometimes passes from one generation to another, where absences and returns—sometimes forced—are part of everyday life. Although motivations may vary in each particular case, Claudia's testimony is representative⁶. She is a 47-year-old teacher who experienced her husband's migration process; he went undocumented to the United States and remained there for ten years during the 1990s. She explains that, in general, the goal of those who leave is no longer just to send remittances to meet the basic needs of the family but to pursue “the American career.” This refers to the fact that, with the money sent, relatives “first build the house, then buy the car, and then start one or more businesses or make investments” (Interview excerpt, October 16, 2021). According to the gathered testimonies, this “American career” is more of a long-term plan, as the final return of those who leave their hometown is often planned for when they have retired and have a pension.

It should be noted that most people who have left La Loma for decades have settled primarily in the state of Illinois, where their main social networks are located. Although there is no formal record of migrants originally from the community, according to Pedro, a 54-year-old migrant who has lived in Chicago since he was 15, the established community there is composed of more than 1,500 people born in La Loma, most of whom left in the 1980s without documents and have built their lives in the neighboring northern country, where their children were born. This predominantly Mexican community is made up of entrepreneurs, ranging from automobile distribution agencies to gardening, construction, cleaning companies, and factories in various sectors (Interview excerpt, July 15, 2022).

Pedro, who left without documents in the 1980s and is now the owner of a nutrition products factory, mentions that his generation is the second to decide to migrate. Before them, their parents participated in the Bracero program, and when it ended, they continued to migrate, this time irregularly to the United States but never chose to settle permanently. Pedro considers himself and his contemporaries to be first-generation immigrants because they decide to stay in the U. S.

In general, as Pedro explains, La Loma migrants, who are now over 50, left without papers and regularized their status with the

⁶ All the names that appear in this article have been changed to respect the anonymity of the individuals.

abovementioned 1986 amnesty, although they also did so by marrying people of Mexican origin born in the United States or with American citizenship, many of whom are from the states of Jalisco, Michoacán, and Durango.

Another way to regularize immigration status has been through children born in U. S. territory who are enlisted in the Army, as was the case with one of the participants interviewed. Another group within La Loma community in the United States deserve special mention: the second generation of immigrants, who are the children of those who left in the 1980s.

As mentioned earlier, once they obtained regular migratory status, many migrants began returning annually to their hometown—especially during two key periods: religious festivals (*fiestas patronales*) in July and the December celebrations. Although some return on their own at other times of the year, it is during these two occasions that their return is most significant, as their presence in the community becomes highly noticeable. In addition to participating in public *fiestas*, they organize private gatherings that allow them to be with family and friends and to reaffirm their status in the community. Generally, they attend with their families, and their children and grandchildren interact in the town with local youth of similar age, with whom they gather during these periods. This situation in the locality contradicts the idea expressed by some scholars that “the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of migrants [...] no longer have as many commitments to the villages” (Arias, 2011, p. 172). During fieldwork, it was observed that the younger generations did interact—even if they spoke exclusively in English with the locals. On the other hand, the observations also confirmed that the significance of the *fiestas* is “far removed from traditional religious significance” (Arias, 2011, p. 172), as local youth and migrants focused on events unrelated to the church, such as bull-riding, street parades, car drag races, dancing, and the traditional soccer match.

4.2 Contributing to and participating in the fiestas: reaffirming identity and belonging to the community

The patron saint festivities include both a religious aspect—such as processions, rosaries, novenas, masses, pilgrimages—and a secular component, which features fairs, popular dances, gatherings in the town square, and other activities that are less directly tied to religious beliefs but still carry “individual, family, and social meanings that have changed over time due to the intense and irreversible changes that have affected rural communities” (Arias, 2011, p. 180).

In communities with migratory traditions, those who have left their homeland also participate—regardless of the distance that separates them from their hometown—in the organization of the “*Fiestas patronales*.” In the case of La Loma, there is a group of approximately 100 people in the United States who voluntarily contribute to the fiesta. This same group is even raising funds to build a chapel in honor of the patron saint, the Virgin of Carmen. To carry out these actions, they rely on the constant contact facilitated by digital social networks—primarily with WhatsApp, an application that allows them to communicate daily, not only with their families but also with other groups created within the application to stay informed about what is happening in the transnational community.

The traditional fiesta has transformed, becoming a stage where situations related to the social, familial, and individual aspects of

migration can be observed. During its celebration, the relationship between those living in the community and those who have left becomes both apparent and tangible. Although younger generations no longer view the symbols, meanings, and traditions associated with the patron saint festivities in the same way (Escalante Góngora, 2011), they have attributed new, shared meanings to these periodic gatherings.

The fiesta (referring not only to the religious celebration but also to the private fiestas organized by migrants) is a ritual in which both locals and visitors reaffirm their identity and confirm their belonging to La Loma. Those who have left and are only in town for a few days seek not only to be present but also to maintain economic and social status in their place of origin. They demonstrate that status by investing significant economic resources in the celebrations. Access to these economic resources is not easily available to their compatriots who live in La Loma year-round.

During the fiestas, migrants and locals share values and attitudes. They converge on a common “holiday code”: a system of informal rules that prioritizes coexistence, reciprocity, and expenditure over ordinary legal norms. During the “Fiesta patronal,” the returnees invest economic capital and live according to the shared value of mutual hospitality. Drinking together in the square, allowing minors to taste tequila, or singing until dawn are practices that express their trust in one another. These practices also imply a shared sense of “collective license,” where everyone agrees, for those few days, to overlook the rules that normally prohibit such behaviors. In doing so, migrants transgress social agreements that are otherwise unbreakable for them at any time in the United States. Although these actions are prohibited by law in La Loma, they are tolerated due to the exceptionality of the festive period, during which even the authorities turn a blind eye—intervening only in truly serious situations.

This can be described as a collective catharsis⁷ in which migrants have “[...] a safety valve, [...] a moment of ritual transgression in which everything begins anew” (Martínez Montoya, 2004, p. 352). In this sense, during the fiestas, it is possible to observe how many activities involve intentional or unintentional communication and interaction, where “colors, sounds, discourses, smells, and ways of doing things are undoubtedly permeated with traditional and added meanings” (Martínez Montoya, 2004, p. 352) by those participating—meanings related to “traditions, customs, ethnic identity, religious attachments, popular culture, family gatherings, among others” (Martínez Montoya, 2004, p. 352). In these situations migrants reaffirm—through a presence that also reflects their status—that they remain part of their community. The reaffirmation of belonging is also achieved through their daily digital presence, via applications such as WhatsApp. However, it is during the main fiesta that migrants most strongly reinforce their belonging and prestige by transforming their economic capital into symbolic capital: they finance, for example, music bands and free food, and support religious projects from the USA. They act as pillars for the local tradition. At the same time, they exhibit their success through imported cars, branded clothing, and ostentatious celebrations—generating a scene where residents and returnees share rituals and values, but where the asymmetry in economic capital,

⁷ For Aristotle, catharsis is the purging of passions or the evacuation of strong or repressed emotions during a dramatic performance. See Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

which favors migrants, is implicitly recognized and help reconfigure community hierarchies.

4.3 Identity shaped by migration and a feeling of freedom

The participants unanimously and spontaneously mentioned that their lives lack freedom in the United States. For them, this is a factor that limits them in certain ways—especially in terms of leisure activities—but they also believe it helps them improve their lives. Indeed, it represents a form of control (sometimes self-imposed) that they do not perceive in Mexico, and they seem convinced that it does not exist in their home country. This is demonstrated, for example, in the case of Vianey, a 15-year-old teenager born in the United States. She has been making annual and even semi-annual visits to La Loma since she was 4 years old. July 2022 was especially significant for her, as she decided to celebrate her *Quinceañera* fiesta in the city she calls her “happy place.” She explains: “In Mexico, I feel the freedom that I do not feel in the United States. I can go out on the street without worrying, I can go to events without my parents” (Interview excerpt, July 11, 2022). When asked how she defines that freedom, Vianey responds that she specifically refers to the possibility of drink alcohol and staying out late while in La Loma. She says Americans “are not fun, their atmosphere is very calm, and it’s not what I like, I like to party.” However, she also believes that, from other perspectives, life in the United States is better, because “even in household matters, there is a difference,” since in La Loma “sometimes there is no hot water or there is not enough food.” Despite these inconveniences, she chose to have her *Quinceañera* in the Mexican locality because she did not have to end it early—“and also because here I have my family and more friends.” She also mentions feeling more affection among the people living in Mexico, in addition to economic reasons: “[.] in La Loma are the people I love the most. Besides, organizing the party was cheaper.” About 30 members of her family attended the fiesta, most of whom live on *the other side*.

The teenager was born in the United States and is the youngest of three siblings. Her 52-year-old father, who works as a laborer, emigrated at the age of 16 and was unable to return to his hometown for ten years. Although she was born in the United States, Vianey clearly states that her country is Mexico, and she asserts that she does not have true friends “over there” because she hardly speaks to anyone. Moreover, she says she likes to show that she is Mexican “in the way I dress, in the way I speak, in what I eat, in the music I listen to, which is northern or *banda*, but not in English”—partly because her parents have influenced her, and partly because, she says, it comes naturally to her. Like her, her siblings view Mexicanness as a choice shaped partly by their family environment and, apparently, by closer interaction with the Mexican community, with which they feel more affinity than with the American one. Vianey and her family live in Indiana and interact with other people from La Loma who live there. Furthermore, the young woman confirms the usefulness of transnational social networks. She explains that when a new migrant arrives in the area, her family supports them by buying what they need to survive the first few days and by offering their home as a place to stay while they search for work (Information from interview excerpt, July 12, 2022).

Lauro is 17 years old and was born in the United States. His parents had previously immigrated to Chicago, and after returning to La Loma

and lived for ten years, his father embarked on another migration journey in 2021—again as an undocumented immigrant, just like the first time. On this second occasion, however, Lauro’s mother chose not to return to the United States. In early 2022, Lauro decided to migrate to the United States. He says that the idea of migration was instilled in him by his parents, and he is convinced that “there” (the United States) is a safer place where he can earn more money, while in La Loma it is more difficult to find work. Although being born on U.S. territory makes it easier for him to migrate, he insists that even without documents, he would have left anyway because, he says, “there are more possibilities there, they are more advanced.” Although he has only recently started his migration journey, he is already aware of the differences between the two places and says he misses “family, friends, parties, and food.” He also knows that his current life is focused entirely on work, without time for leisure. Still, he finds comfort in knowing that he can return to La Loma whenever he wants, with the money he is already earning—something he has already done, just a few months after beginning his migration project (Information from interview excerpt, July 15, 2022).

Eduardo, a 19-year-old student born in the United States, points out that the main difference between Illinois, where he lives, and La Loma, a place he visits with his father and brother—natives of the Mexican town—is that in the neighboring northern country, he cannot, under any circumstances, drink alcohol in public. If he does, he would be immediately sanctioned, since in the United States he is considered a minor until he turns 21. In contrast, in La Loma, he enjoys “the freedom to drink and fiesta” (Interview excerpt, July 15, 2022).

Among the testimonies collected in La Loma, two foreign individuals who visited the town during the fiestas stand out. They are León, 38 years old, of Vietnamese origin, and Anastasia, 40 years old, born in Russia. León has lived in Illinois for 28 years and is a friend of Pedro (mentioned earlier), with whom he has visited La Loma five times. He explains that “Mexico is better than the United States because there is more freedom to fiesta.” He asserts that Mexicans form a closer-knit community, whereas Americans are more individualistic: “They like to show off their homes and show what they have. That does not happen in Mexico, where they have a better way of building community” (Interview excerpt, July 17, 2022).

Anastasia has lived in Toluca since she was a child, and it was there that she met her husband, who is also from La Loma. She is the daughter of Russian migrants and has rarely returned to that country. Regarding her perception of the migration of La Loma natives, she asserts:

“[...] life there is about working and not having time. People go to the United States because they have no resources, and there they earn a lot of money, but they lose much more because they do not have freedom, they do not have a social life. Migrants seek a status and do not realize that they earn money at the expense of something that is worth much more” (Interview excerpt, July 17, 2022).

4.3.1 Hybrid identity

During the interviews, it became clear that multiple identities where at play. Pedro explains what he believes many people from La Loma living in the United States think:

“We are American citizens. We were born in Mexico, but we are Americans, because if you don’t identify yourself somewhere, you never grow. And if you spend 30 years in the

United States and always continue to think that you are a Mexican citizen, you won't progress, because every time you want to do something, you'll have that confusion. Most of us already speak English and we went to school there, so I think most of us feel like Americans. And we come here, and we are totally free to act just like Mexicans." (Interview excerpt, July 15, 2022).

The return to the homeland sometimes seems to represent an act to reclaiming a part of themselves that they do not consider while living in the United States. Pedro explains:

"Being in La Loma helps us recover our customs, our culture. One of the things we miss the most there is socializing. In the United States, people are colder [...] in the cities, you drive into your house and go out of the car to work, and very few people take the time to greet their neighbors because of the type of schedules we have. Here, people are a bit more social, more hospitable, and that's what we like about it here." (Interview excerpt, July 15, 2022).

This reflects an identity construction shaped by their socialization and the different interactions they have experienced over time since migrating north.

4.4 Work and lack of freedom

As mentioned, the participants have expressed a connection between work and lack of freedom. Often, this feeling resembles an obligation they feel in the United States, which causes them stress, as expressed by Jorge, who left without documents in 2012 when he turned 18 and has since worked in the hotel sector: "I feel happier, less stressed when I'm here [in La Loma]" (Interview excerpt, July 12, 2022). After marrying a U. S. citizen, he regularized his immigration status and has since visited La Loma at least twice a year, as he believes he lacks freedom in Illinois, where he spends all his time working. He believes that otherwise, he would not be able to build economic capital—and that is his main aspiration.

On the other hand, Victor, 47, speaks about the differences between the two countries that he has experienced during his 28 years of his life as a migrant:

"In the United States, we always have to work. There is no time to rest, no relaxation time, because you always have to be on the clock—work and work—between 8 and 11 hours per day, sometimes seven days a week" (Interview excerpt, July 13, 2022).

Gustavo migrated in 2006, forced by his father, who, after going the United States without documents, was able to obtain citizenship thanks to the 1986 amnesty and soon after arranged for his family to reunite with him. After 17 years as a migrant, and now 32 years old, he is convinced that in the United States, work takes away his freedom. Like other migrants, he directly associates this with the absence of leisure: "Parties in the United States must be planned six months in advance, with the intention that those who participate request the date off from work" (Interview excerpt, July 14, 2022). He also laments that, in most localities, the time limit for celebrating is midnight.

Valentina is 43 years old and has lived in Illinois for 33 years. Her parents began a migration project without documents and later brought the entire family to join them. Now, she works transporting children in a kindergarten and has regularized her immigration status through marriage. She visits La Loma two or three times a year and considers that, in La Loma, "life is also beautiful, but there is a lack of job opportunities" (Interview excerpt, July 15, 2022). She states that if she had had employment at the time, she would hardly have left the town. However, her years as a migrant have made her accustomed to life in the United States:

"[...] Most people come with the goal of working and making money and returning, but then they stay because they have a better life—although there is a bit of lack of freedom, because there are people who work six or seven days a week and even have two jobs." (Interview excerpt, July 15, 2022)

Celina, 35 years old born in La Loma, left for the United States when she was 10 and has been working in the cybersecurity field at a company for the past ten years. Her parents migrated without documents to California, then returned to La Loma. When her father left again, she and her mother joined him by crossing the border with a coyote. Eventually, her father regularized his immigration status through amnesty and was able to regularize his family's status as well. Celina is convinced that the United States offers more opportunities for employment and economic development, but she also acknowledges a significant lack of freedom for leisure. Still, she believes that it is precisely this intense work that will allow her to carry out her plans to build a house for her retirement—because she wants to return to La Loma, a place she is proud of and visits up to three times a year "to experience the fiestas" (Interview excerpt, July 17, 2022).

Hugo, 34 years old, has lived in Chicago for 20 years, where he owns two Mexican food restaurants. He believes that in La Loma, "there aren't many rules," unlike in the United States, "where there is a lack of freedom. [...] For example, here [in La Loma], nothing happens if you drink alcohol in the car. There [in the United States], you cannot do what they do here—play loud music and smoke on the street; in the United States, the police would have already come" (Interview excerpt, July 17, 2022).

For Hugo, the rules in the United States are excessive, and more tolerance is needed:

"[...] We have different customs for eating, dressing, driving our cars. I feel that it would be good if they were more accessible like us—more open—and didn't have so many rules. For example, to go to work or to drive a car, the rules there are very strict. That's what would have to change for there to be more comfort for everyone, of all races. I believe that sometimes Mexicans do things that are not right, and everyone ends up paying for one person's mistake. But if the rules in the United States were more accessible—forget it—it would be ideal." (Interview excerpt, July 17, 2022).

5 Discussion

First-generation immigrants consider working long hours each day to be the main factor that takes away their freedom, as they believe

they could otherwise dedicate more time to *fiestas* in Mexico. According to the interviews and discussions, recreational activities exist more freely in the Mexican territory because, from their point of view, there is greater permissiveness. This perception originates from both their experiences and the belief that such permissiveness is a characteristic of Mexican society during religious celebrations—specifically, the exceptional flexibility in the enforcement of laws. However, Article 318 of the current Municipal Code in Acambay—the jurisdiction to which La Loma belongs—clearly outlines infractions related to disrupting public order. For example:

“A fine of up to fifty days of the Value of the Unit of Measurement and Update (UMA) in force (17,797 pesos, just over 900 US dollars), for anyone who, among other offenses, disturbs or disrupts public order in the streets or public places; causes noises or sounds (even within their homes, schools, or workplaces, or commercial premises) that disturb, harm, or affect the tranquility of one or more neighbors; consumes toxic, narcotic, stimulant, or depressant substances in public; participates in or provokes fights in public places, public events, or gatherings; or consumes alcoholic beverages in public places where it is not allowed” (Ayuntamiento de Acambay, 2022).

However, although the rules are clear, it is true that the authorities may sometimes overlook them—especially during large events such as “Fiestas patronales” or private celebrations. In the United States, according to the participants interviewed, parties are restricted by strict regulations, including rigid rules and schedules. It is worth noting that, during the interviews, migrants mentioned that the parties they organize are more likely to be monitored by neighbors and are at greater risk of being reported than those organized by native-born individuals. Although many migrants from La Loma already have U. S. permanent residency or citizenship, they still fear police intervention. They believe that even a minor infringement could complicate future legal procedures or reactivate existing migration files. They also perceive a surveillance bias—racialized policing—that leads to stricter monitoring of their gatherings compared to those organized by non-Latino Americans. This perception often prompts them to return to La Loma to celebrate without such risks.

In this context, the festivities in La Loma become transnational events that allow migrants, for a period, to relax and feel less stress. By temporarily suspending the restrictions they self-impose in the American environment, migrants regain their “festive agency”: they drink in the square, play music until dawn, and display their economic and social status to the community. In return, the locals accept these behaviors as part of an informal agreement rooted in tradition and sustained by the continued flow of remittances to the community in La Loma. The recursive nature of these social practices indicates the presence of a social structure (a recursively organized set of rules and resources) at the transnational level.

Although they criticize this lack of freedom and understand that they must maintain behavior that distances them from the stereotypical image of migrants in the United States, they also believe that dedicating more time to work than to leisure enables them to achieve an economically comfortable life. They recognize the power of their economic capital, as seen in their purchasing capacity shown in their hometown, which allows them to preserve both their economic and social status there.

The freedom that young adults describe—illustrated by examples such as of alcohol consumption and parties that last late into the night—is deceptive. By law, neither Vianey nor Lauro is permitted to consume alcoholic beverages in La Loma. Since they are under 18 years old, they are considered minors in Mexico. Article 198 of the Municipal Code of Acambay de Ruiz Castañeda specifies the regulations regarding the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages by minors, as well as the permitted time frame for parties in which they may participate:

“The entry of minors to all high-impact economic units is prohibited, except when afternoon events are held. In such cases, the sale or distribution of alcoholic beverages, tobacco products, or any other psychoactive substance is not allowed, and the events must take place between 11:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. on the same day.” (Ayuntamiento de Acambay, 2022, p. 82).

The perception among young participants to the interviews that alcohol consumption and parties in Mexico are less regulated is also shared by many Americans—particularly minors who take advantage of the country’s proximity to engage in extreme celebrations. Mexico is often seen as a space where breaking the rules is more tolerated. During spring break, American students—especially those under 21—flock to Mexican tourist destinations and engage in excessive alcohol consumption, drug use, and even high-risk sexual behavior. These activities can be linked to the social, economic, cultural, and, above all, legal context of Mexico, where laws, “especially those related to alcohol consumption and drug use, may be applied with less rigor [...] alcohol restrictions are less stringent, rules are very flexible, and there are no established sanctions” (Monterrubio Cordero and Equihua Elías, 2011, p. 83).

What happens in La Loma is not that society is always more permissive than in the United States, nor that there are no established rules. Rather, during the “Fiestas patronales,” despite existing legislation, minors under 21 are allowed to drink and stay out late as part of an exceptional period. This does not seem to happen in the United States, where they are immersed in a different daily dynamic of their life.

We can argue that young adults who visit their parents’ homeland are, in many ways, similar to the American spring breakers vacationing on Mexican beaches. In both cases, they find themselves in a “liminal zone,”—a space in which people let go of the behavioral rules they usually follow because they are in an environment that permits unusual activities related to the ‘other self’ that remains latent in them” (Black, 2000).

When they return to La Loma, migrants experience moments of enjoyment that are different from—or entirely absent in—the United States. This is not because they do not organize parties and gatherings there, but because when they do—albeit infrequently—they know, or at least believe, that the natives of the country that “hosts them” will be surveilling their actions. If this belief is related to the idea of “whiteness” discussed later, it is important to point out that recent ethnographic work in Mexican and Central American diasporas (De Genova and Peutz, 2010; Hernández, 2022; Chavez, 2025) confirms that racialized surveillance permeates everyday interactions in workplaces, neighborhoods, and digital spaces, compelling individuals to enact self-discipline even after regularization or citizenship. This dynamic aligns with the concept of transnational habitus: migrants

learn to navigate not only bureaucratic constraints but also racialized expectations that persist across borders. Recognizing this continuity helps explain why discretion, self-monitoring, and emotional restraint endure as adaptive strategies long after the formal attainment of legal security. This underscores that racialized surveillance is not a transient condition but a structural feature of transnational modernity.

It is important to highlight that those who migrated without documents experienced a period in which even the route from home to work was an unsettling journey due to the constant fear of being detained and deported. However, interviews indicate that regularizing their migration status does not completely change how they perceive themselves, nor does it change the *habitus* developed during that time to avoid serious consequences. Even if some of their *habitus* has modulated over the time, they still dedicate most of their time to work and continue monitor themselves to avoid disturbing their surroundings with parties or drinking. These *habitus* can reinforce the idea that fun and celebrations should be reserved for moments shared with their family and acquaintances in their place of birth.

We can argue that this *habitus*, according to the interviews and the participatory observations carried out in La Loma, corresponds to the practices and representations migrants maintain in relation to two different realities that converge in their social world: the transnational social field. This symbolic space includes both the country of origin and the country of destination. When we speak of transnational *habitus*, we refer to the set of dual values and norms that migrants develop as they move between two normative contexts: the social norms of the Mexican rural environment and the disciplinary social norms or behavioral patterns established in the United States. This “double compass” guides their behavior depending on the setting: in Illinois, it promotes public prudence, while in La Loma, it activates exuberance and festive sociability.

The “Fiestas patronales” (patronal festivities) and the sending social and collective remittances offer an opportunity for economic capital to be invested in the community: through organizing and participating in festivities, developing infrastructure, building houses, etc. These actions strengthen the migrant’s symbolic and socio-economic status within the locality, as they maintain both a digital and *in situ* presence during their visits. The result is a mixed *habitus* that simultaneously reproduces traditional hierarchies and introduces new tokens of distinction, derived from the cultural and economic capitals acquired in the U. S. These include, for example, language skills (English and Spanish), formal education or training, and distinct ways of dressing or eating. These transform festivities into a stage on which the transnational identity of migrants is updated and legitimized. This interpretation is inspired by the performative perspective of Goffman (1959, 1972), particularly the emphasis on the “maintenance and creation of impressions during interactions, as these allow for the preservation of norms and social ties” (Frozzini, 2021, p. 3). This mixed *habitus* also reflects the transformative capacity of their collective agency, which reshapes social practices in La Loma.

During their years in the United States, migrants have experienced certain conditions of existence—as we have mentioned, often influenced by precarious migration status—that lead them to adopt behaviors aligned with an identity, in the U. S., centered on work. This suggests that they have internalized the behaviors developed during periods of greater precarious conditions (such as an undocumented migrant). As a result, they understand the need to maintain a social and work-related image—defined by consistent efforts to work and by

avoiding any kind of trouble—which contrast with the negative stereotypes held by some sector of American society that often portray foreigners as a nuisance, as a group to reject.⁸ Our participants’ experiences tend to indicate that having internalized and/or embodied the perceived *migrant gaze* in the U. S. leads them to believe that behaving in ways even remotely associated with the stereotype of the “bad migrant,” could pose a risk to their social and economic stability.

When in Mexico, their *habitus* leads them to engage in practices that help maintain and display their social status, as previously mentioned. However, it is also important to understand that migrants hold a vital position within the community’s survival and development: they support their families in meeting basic needs and invest resources to pursue the aforementioned “American career.” At the same time, these actions serve their interest in preserving a privileged social status within the community.

It is important to note that the social capital of members of this transnational community of La Loma lies in their networks. These networks function because they operate simultaneously on both sides (Illinois/U. S. and La Loma), and because they are nurtured over time. The result is the consolidation of a migratory tradition that has persisted in La Loma since the time of the Bracero Program. This social capital reflects relationships based on mutual knowledge and recognition (inter-knowledge and inter-recognition), which are the foundations for building networks and fostering a sense of belonging to the transnational community: there are bonds that facilitate the initiation of new migratory projects grounded in solidarity. Ultimately, the combination of these elements constitutes symbolic capital—recognized as legitimate and valuable by members of the transnational community.

Turning our focus to the strategies of social reproduction observed, we can say that, on the one hand, migrants from La Loma use the capital they possess to maintain their position (i.e., social standing) within the transnational community. This is because, in addition to seeking social recognition during return visits, many expressed the medium or long-term goal of an eventual, almost definitive return. In fact, they wish to reside in Mexico during the winter, when the climate in the United States becomes unbearable for them.

The idea of returning and the actions migrants take to achieve it manifest as strategies of social reproduction. According to our participants, many plan to return to their hometown once they can benefit from pension schemes. However, in order to resettle in La Loma, they consider it is necessary to make structural modifications to certain parts of the town. As a result, they direct collective remittances towards projects they deem important for the infrastructure now and for the future development. These include remodeling public spaces to resemble those in the neighboring United States, paving streets, and even proposing investment plans—such as developing a call center to provide employment opportunities for local youth. This last initiative is intended to help reduce migration and ensure continued economic contributions to improve living conditions in La Loma.

To implement these strategies, La Loma migrants leverage their different forms of capital and activate their *habitus*: they know how to

⁸ Unfortunately, this image is currently being promoted by the Trump administration as we write this text.

behave to maintain a positive image abroad, but they also understand what is required to retain the recognition and respect of their compatriots in their place of origin. These migrants have transformed their visits and their online engagement into a strategy of social reproduction. They do not limit themselves to displaying economic success; rather, they contribute through visible, concrete work in La Loma (e.g., remodeling the town square, paving roads, installing LED lighting). These actions modernize the town, consolidate their moral authority, and simultaneously create the necessary infrastructure for a comfortable retirement in Mexico. It can be argued that their collective agency has a positive consequence for La Loma, with the transformation of the well-established social practices—such as the self-centered family remittances—to include forms of social investment that are more visible within the town.

These initiatives are supported by a transnational habitus that combines the discipline and prudence learned in the U. S. with the value of prestige and the norm of solidarity promoted in La Loma. By measuring when to exhibit prosperity and when to redistribute it, migrants mobilize economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital to maintain their status both in the eyes of their northern peers and in their community of origin. Thus, the visit for the festivities functions as a socio-cultural device that reproduces their privileged position within the social field that connects La Loma with Illinois.

The concept of *habitus* is a useful tool for understanding the structures that operate on both sides of the border. When coupled with the idea of transnationality, it helps us to theorize the hybrid identity that migrants in this study have developed over the years. A clear example is the testimony of Pedro (see section 4.3), which illustrates how such a hybrid identity is created and maintained. As previously mentioned, returning to the homeland—perhaps because it is a brief and temporary—can represent a reclaiming of a part of themselves that is not fully considered while they are in the United States, as shown in the testimony of Pedro (see section 4.3). According to the experiences of our participants, migrants appear to socialize more with fellow countrymen and to construct their self-image in relation to the expectations they imagine locals have of them: to be disciplined, obedient, and to avoid—as much as possible—any form of transgressions. What is established and embodied, then, are elementary rules of conduct which, in their case, correspond to self-imposed restrictions that eventually form a *habitus*—one that allows them to ‘become invisible’ in order to avoid being singled out. This, in turn, helps them maintain a sense of stability (feeling of security, a good image [or facework]) in the host society. Despite having U.S. citizenship, they may still feel the need to demonstrate their ability to comply with the rules; the less noticeable their presence, the more peace of mind they seem to experience. The *habitus* demonstrated in both contexts—origin and destination—also carries a fundamental emotional experience of loss and disorientation that migration can produce. Here, Sayad (1999, 2004) notion of “double absence” can help us capture the paradoxical condition in which migrants evolve and feel while developing their hybrid identity. Sayad explains that migrants belong neither fully “here” nor “there,” since migration entails a displacement that is simultaneously spatial, social, and ontological: to emigrate is to be absent from the society of origin while feeling incomplete within the host society. This dual rupture produces an enduring feeling of in-between-ness that shapes both identity and emotional responses. Within this framework, participating to the festivities in *La Loma* can be understood as a

temporary suspension of that double absence—a socially sanctioned moment that symbolically restores continuity of self, family, and community. Through this lens, collective catharsis is not mere leisure but a socio-moral necessity, a ritual repair of the fractures that transnational life continually reopens. Indeed, while patronal festivities function as collective spaces of release for the entire community, their symbolic and emotional resonance differs for migrants. For local residents, these celebrations reaffirm continuity, reciprocity, and territorial belonging, echoing what Turner (2004) described as the *communitas* generated by the ritual suspension of social hierarchies. For migrants, however, the fiesta represents not only communal participation but also the temporary suspension of the self-disciplinary habitus acquired in the United States—a form of embodied control tied to racialized surveillance and economic subordination. As evidence show (Besserer, 2004; Valenzuela Varela, 2011), the ritual return produces an affective inversion: migrants move from invisibility and restraint abroad to visibility and generosity at home, enacting a socially recognized catharsis that restores dignity and symbolic capital. This differential experience explains why the same festivity operates as a shared cultural event for locals yet as an emotional and moral rebalancing for returnees—a reassertion of agency within the moral economy of transnational life.

The migrants from La Loma who live in the United States build a community, maintain and strengthen their social networks, and strive to remain connected and gather, even to return to their homeland. They are organized within a system of social cohesion sustained by both *horizontal and vertical alliances*—a structure formed and reinforced over time, which has facilitated the continuity of their migratory projects. Migrants from La Loma support their projects through two relational axes.

Horizontal alliances, mainly between family and friends, function as a network of daily support: they share housing, job opportunities, migration loans, and are connected through WhatsApp groups or digital social media pages that help coordinate social life and make decisions about the use of collective remittances. This horizontal network ensures that newcomers are able to cross the border and start their new life with immediate financial and logistical support. *Vertical alliances* link the fabric between peers and authorities—mainly in La Loma—providing legitimacy and the capacity to manage public works and productive enterprises. Thanks to this dual structure, the community can finance activities, build community and transform individual success into collective prestige through visible projects in the village. Thus, *horizontal links* offer operational solidarity, while *vertical ones* convert that solidarity into investments that reinforce the transnational habitus—one that articulates identity, mutual support and economic stability. They are together as a community, perhaps aware that:

“[...] the gaze of the other becomes a weight so difficult to bear that the person tries to avoid it. To do this, they wish to become invisible. This individual invisibility is possible through an approach to others, merging with a compact mass that does not allow the differentiation of people” (Frozzini, 2011, p. 47).

By respecting the rules, migrants build a ‘positive image’ in a country where— even though they are citizens—they do not fit the dominant social image of who belongs (See Hage, 2000). This is evident in the testimony of Marlon, a 58-years-old who left La Loma

without documentation at age 19 and later obtained citizenship. For him, being in his homeland matters because “obviously I’m not light-skinned, I do not have green eyes, and I’m not white, so when I arrive in La Loma, I feel like this is my life and this is where I belong” (Interview excerpt, July 13, 2022). Migrants construct a Self through their relationship with the environment—one that emerges from their experiences in the social environment (Frozzini, 2011). In their case, maintaining before the host society a measured and respectful attitude aligns with Goffman’s explanation of how individuals perform in a moral world:

“[...] as performers, individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged. Because these standards are so numerous and so pervasive, the individuals who are performers dwell more than we might think in a moral world.” (Goffman, 1959, p. 251)

Therefore, natives of La Loma who live in the United States behave as they believe they are obliged to, so that locals can maintain a favorable perception of them—thus avoiding being singled out or stigmatized. However, as we have demonstrated, this ‘good behavior’ results in what many migrants themselves call “lack of freedom,” a price they feel compelled to pay to be treated and valued on equal terms with those automatically associated with the territory: namely, white people. In Hage’s terms, white people use their ‘whiteness’ to self-appoint themselves as the true owners and managers of the territory, thereby exercising a form of hegemony that excludes other inhabitants. In this context, whiteness becomes a form of capital. Hage explains:

“[...] Suffice to say here that I consider ‘Whiteness’ to be itself a fantasy position of cultural dominance born out of the history of European expansion. It is not an essence that one has or does not have, even if some Whites think of it and experience it this way. Whiteness is an aspiration. It is not an essence that one has or does not have, even if some Whites think of it and experience it this way. Whiteness is an aspiration. One of my key arguments in the text is that Whiteness and Australianness of which Whiteness remains a crucial component - are not governed by an either/or logic, even if some people experience them this way. Rather, I argue Whiteness and Australianness can be accumulated (up to a certain point) and people can be said to be more or less White and Australian. How White they can be depends on the social attributes they possess.” (Hage, 2000, p. 20)

Migrants who chose the United States as their place of residence are subject to the scrutiny of a society that might disqualify them if they engaged in behaviors associated with their ethnic group/background. This pressure is intensified by rhetoric that has labeled Mexicans in a negative way as “*bad hombres*”—most notably by Donald Trump, who as President of the United States stated:

“When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (Hughey, 2017, p. 127)

The testimonies of migrants from La Loma align with that kind of discourse. Even though they are American citizens, they are deeply concerned with maintaining appropriate behavior, and in doing so, they protect their prestige and image in the eyes of Americans. They do not want to be categorized as “*bad hombres*” and subsequently despised or marginalized in the society that hosts them. For this reason, they prioritize work and reserve leisure for moments when, outside the territory where they live, they can celebrate with a freedom that is excessive—even beyond the rules. Through their participation in the fiestas, they also engage in a form of collective catharsis.

Thus, while in the United States they seek invisibility, in La Loma they do everything in their power to stand out—to be visible. When migrants are in their homeland, they suspend what they perceive the “lack of freedom” and engage in the fiesta, which they view as a space and time in which they can fully express themselves. As one participant described it, it is their “happy place.” Without idealizing La Loma or Mexico—being fully aware of the many problems these places face, including socioeconomic hardship and recurrent incidents of theft, assault, and property crime, consistent with broader patterns of rural vulnerability in the State of Mexico—the participants in this study demonstrated creative and adaptive responses to changing contexts, thereby subtly transforming existing social structures. We can argue that participants’ agency operated through two complementary registers that articulate the dialectic between the habitus of discipline and the habitus of expression in transnational life. First, their agency, displayed through their habitus of discipline and prudence, refers to the forms of self-restraint, discretion, and moral vigilance that migrants cultivate to navigate surveillance, racialization, and economic dependence in the United States. Such agency is neither passive nor imposed; it reflects an active effort to preserve dignity and social legitimacy within constraining contexts. Secondly, the agency displayed through their habitus of expressiveness becomes visible during the fiesta in *La Loma*, where migrants reclaim public visibility and reaffirm their moral and affective ties to the community of origin. Through music, ritual, and collective monetary investment, they transform symbolic hierarchies and temporarily suspend the discipline that structures everyday participants life in the United States. Seen together, these dual modalities of agency through habitus of discipline and of expression illustrate that migrants do not simply reproduce existing structures—they negotiate, reinterpret, and selectively transform them across the transnational field, crafting continuity amid displacement.

In our study, migrants demonstrated that the work discipline they follow—even if it entails extraordinary effort—is not only desirable but also necessary to access a materially comfortable life. The benefits this discipline provides—namely, access to goods and services that are not available in their hometown—come at the cost of a self-imposed restriction to their freedom. For this reason, the fiesta becomes a form of liberation. The migrants, in our fieldwork, require this catharsis in order to maintain psychological and emotional stability. The need is so profound that, even from a distance place such as the United States, they actively invest in organizing the traditional celebrations of their community. As we have demonstrated, their agency is exercised through the mobilization of their capitals and habitus to attain—even for a short period of time— an experience that allows them to feel free. Their return to the town, solely for the purpose of participating in these celebrations and sharing them with their fellow countrymen, also enables them to reconnect with a sense of Mexicanness that remains, for them, liberating.

While the analysis underscores the restorative and cohesive dimensions of festive life in La Loma, it is essential to temper this depiction by acknowledging the tensions that coexist beneath its apparent stability. As Bourdieu (1979) reminds us, symbolic practices are always embedded in fields of distinction where actors compete for recognition and legitimacy. In the context of return migration, status competition and uneven access to resources—particularly among families with differing remittance capacities—shape hierarchies of prestige that become visible in the scale of offerings, sponsorships, and conspicuous donations during the fiesta. Studies of transnational communities in Mexico (Goldring, 2002; Escala Rabadán and Rivera Salgado, 2018; García Zamora et al., 2018) have documented similar dynamics, showing how festive participation operates simultaneously as a mechanism of solidarity and as a terrain of moral dispute over authenticity, generosity, and display. Recognizing these frictions does not diminish the fiesta's integrative power; rather, it situates its emotional efficacy within the contradictions of class, migration, and moral economy. This nuance preserves the reading of celebration as repair and belonging while avoiding romanticization and acknowledging the complexity of local coexistence. Acknowledging these contradictions situates the effective power of celebration within the broader ambivalence of transnational modernity.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Comité de Ética en Investigación y Docencia de la Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

MC: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, JF: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing

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The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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