

EL REGRESO

A DREAMER AWAKENS

"El Regreso is a reminder that no matter how far we travel,
our roots continue to shape our wings."
- **Samantha Ramirez-Herrera, Filmmaker**



ABOUT THE FILM

EL REGRESO (THE RETURN) follows filmmaker and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipient Samantha Ramirez-Herrera as she returns to Mexico for the first time in nearly 30 years after leaving as a young child. Set during Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), the film explores identity, belonging, family, memory, and healing as Samantha reconnects with relatives, confronts unresolved trauma, and reflects on what it means to be a Dreamer living between two cultures. Through personal storytelling, the film examines the emotional costs of migration while celebrating the power of ancestral connection and cultural remembrance.

CONTEXT FOR THE FILM

EL REGRESO (THE RETURN) uses vivid imagery to tell the story of Samantha Ramirez-Herrera, a filmmaker and DACA recipient who returns to Mexico for the first time in nearly 30 years after immigrating to the United States as a child. Samantha is one of many individuals known as "Dreamers," a term commonly used to describe undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children and have grown up navigating life between two cultures. In 2012, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was established to provide work authorization and temporary protection from deportation for eligible Dreamers, but it does not provide a pathway to citizenship, leaving many individuals and families facing ongoing uncertainty about their future and the future of their families.

Through Samantha's personal journey back to Mexico, the film explores how reconnecting with family, cultural roots, and ancestral traditions can help individuals navigate the emotional complexities of identity, belonging, healing, and self-discovery. As she learns more about her family's history, Samantha develops a deeper understanding of the difficult choices her parents made and begins to see them not only as parents, but as individuals with their own dreams, struggles, and experiences. In doing so, the film humanizes migration, revealing the complex personal, cultural, and economic realities that shape people's lives and decisions. At the same time, EL REGRESO highlights the resilience of immigrant communities who continue to build lives, preserve cultural traditions, and strengthen family bonds despite the challenges of displacement, uncertainty, and living between worlds. The film reminds viewers that identity is not defined by borders, but by the connections, stories, and communities that sustain us.

USEFUL TERMS

Ancestral connection: The relationship individuals feel with previous generations, family histories, cultural traditions, and inherited stories that shape identity and belonging.

Belonging: The feeling of being accepted, valued, and connected to a community, culture, or place.

Cultural identity: A person's sense of self based on their cultural background, traditions, language, values, and lived experiences.

Cultural tradition: Practices, celebrations, beliefs, rituals, and customs that are shared within a community and passed from one generation to the next.

DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals): A U.S. immigration policy established in 2012 that provides work authorization and temporary protection from deportation to certain undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children. DACA does not provide a pathway to citizenship and must be renewed periodically.

DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act): A longstanding proposed U.S. law that would create a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children and allow them to earn legal status if they meet specific requirements. Although the proposed legislation inspired the term "Dreamer," it has repeatedly failed to pass into federal law.

Dreamer: A term commonly used to describe undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children. The term originated from proposed federal legislation known as the DREAM Act.

Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead): A Mexican tradition held on November 1 and 2 that honors deceased loved ones through storytelling, remembrance, food, music, and altars known as "ofrendas" (offerings). Rather than focusing on mourning, the celebration emphasizes memory, connection, and the continuation of family bonds across generations.

Heritage: The traditions, values, customs, stories, and cultural practices passed down through generations that help shape individual and collective identity.

USEFUL TERMS

Identity: A person's understanding of who they are, shaped by their experiences, relationships, values, culture, beliefs, and communities.

Immigration: The process of moving to another country to live permanently or for an extended period.

Migration: The movement of people from one place to another, either within a country or across international borders, for reasons such as work, education, family, safety, or improved opportunities. Migration may be temporary or permanent and can occur voluntarily or as a result of conflict, environmental change, or other circumstances.

Oral history: The sharing of personal memories, experiences, and stories passed down by word of mouth that help preserve history from the perspective of those who lived it.

Solidarity: The recognition of our shared humanity and the commitment to support others, especially during times of challenge or injustice. Solidarity means refusing to let people face difficulties alone and working together to foster understanding, empathy, and positive change.

Storytelling as advocacy: The use of personal experiences and narratives to raise awareness, challenge stereotypes, influence public understanding, and inspire social change.

DRIVING QUESTIONS

How can reconnecting with our histories, cultures, and communities help shape who we are, as well as our understanding of home and our sense of belonging? How can sharing our personal stories foster empathy, strengthen connections, and inspire positive social change?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Identity and Belonging

1. Samantha's experiences in both Mexico and the United States have shaped how she understands herself and the world around her. The film explores how identity can be shaped by experiences across cultures, communities, and generations. What influences helped shape Samantha's understanding of herself? What strengths emerge from embracing multiple parts of one's identity?

2. How does the film challenge common assumptions about immigration and what it means to call a place "home"? What does "home" mean beyond a physical place?

3. People find connection and community in different ways. What people, places, traditions, activities, or experiences help you feel most connected to who you are?

4. Language is one of the most visible expressions of culture in the film as Samantha moves between languages and communities throughout her journey. Why do you think it was important for Samantha, as the filmmaker, to include Spanish throughout the film? How does this use of language deepen your understanding of her connection to her culture, family, and sense of self?

Rebirth and Transformation Through Ancestral Connection

1. The title of the film, EL REGRESO ("THE RETURN"), suggests a journey back to a place, person, or memory. Samantha's return becomes a form of rebirth, helping her reconnect with herself, family history, and heritage. What scenes illustrate this transformation, and how do they show that she is not the same person who left Mexico as a child?

2. Identify specific moments that show Samantha reconnecting with her family, cultural traditions, memories, identity, or sense of belonging. Beyond returning to a physical place, what different types of "returns" occur throughout the film?

3. Why do you think Samantha, as the filmmaker, chose to set her journey during Día de los Muertos, a celebration that honors loved ones while also affirming the continuity of life? How does the holiday deepen the themes of past memories, healing, identity, and personal transformation?

4. What moments in the film suggest that identity is shaped by both the past and the present? How does the film show the important role that memories and family stories play in preserving identity across generations?

5. Throughout the film, Samantha reflects on how her family history, cultural traditions, relationships, experiences, and communities have shaped who she is. What people, places, traditions, memories, or experiences have helped shape your own identity, values, and understanding of yourself?

Storytelling as a Tool for Visibility and Change

1. Samantha's decision to tell her own story allows audiences to see immigration through a personal lens. How can personal stories influence public understanding of social issues?

2. Why is it important for people from underrepresented communities to have opportunities to tell their own stories? How can storytelling challenge stereotypes and create greater empathy across different communities?

3. Throughout the film, vibrant colors appear in clothing, landscapes, altars, flowers, and celebrations. How do these colors contribute to the film's themes of culture, memory, identity, and renewal? (E.g., Día de los Muertos is often associated with bright colors rather than mourning.)

4. How does the film's use of color, visual contrasts between locations, poetry, historical photos, and imagery help communicate Samantha's emotional journey? What emotions, ideas, or themes did these artistic choices evoke for you, and how did they influence your understanding of her experience?

5. How can sharing personal, family, or community stories become an act of healing, courage, or advocacy for both the storyteller and the audience? What stories from your own experience or community do you think are important to preserve and share?

Community, Solidarity, and Collective Action

1. Healing often does not happen alone. What moments in the film show that understanding ourselves often involves understanding our connection with others? What role do family, community, and shared experiences play in helping people overcome challenges?

2. The film highlights the resilience of immigrants while also revealing the emotional complexities of living between cultures, including feelings of displacement, uncertainty, and the search for connection. Think about a time when you felt out of place, uncertain, or disconnected from those around you. What helped you feel supported or connected? How might those experiences help us better understand small ways that we can show support to immigrant communities?

3. What responsibilities do communities have in creating spaces where all people feel seen, valued, welcomed, and included? What responsibilities do immigrants have in building bridges and creating community?

4. Solidarity is more than agreement; it is the willingness to stand with others during challenging moments, recognizing our shared humanity across differences in culture, background, or lived experience. How is solidarity demonstrated throughout Samantha's journey, and how can our everyday acts of empathy and understanding contribute to creating a stronger, more supportive society?

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EXTENDED LEARNING ACTIVITIES — Translating Insight into Action

The following activities invite participants to extend the themes of EL REGRESO beyond the screen through reflection, storytelling, cultural exploration, and community engagement. Learners will examine how family histories, cultural traditions, and personal experiences shape identity and belonging while considering the ways that individual and collective stories can foster empathy, strengthen connections, and build more inclusive communities. These activities encourage participants to recognize the role each person can play in honoring diverse experiences and creating spaces where everyone feels seen, valued, and connected.

- **Roots and Routes Reflection Map:** Create a visual map of your own "roots and routes," highlighting the experiences, communities, cultural influences, and places that have helped shape who you are today. Your map may include family history, cultural traditions, meaningful relationships, important memories in your life, neighborhoods, schools, or communities that have influenced your identity. Reflect on how these connections have contributed to your understanding of self, your values, and your place in the world. Include a brief reflection on what you learned about yourself while creating your visual map.
- **Storytelling for Change Project:** Identify an issue that matters to you or your community. Create a short personal narrative, poem, digital story, podcast, or video that raises awareness and helps others better understand the issue through lived experience.
- **Memory and Legacy Interview:** Interview a family member, elder, mentor, or community leader about an important life experience. What lessons, traditions, or stories do they hope future generations will remember?
- **Exploring the Meaning of EL REGRESO:** The film's title translates to "The Return." Create a visual journey map that illustrates the different ways Samantha experiences a return throughout the film, including:
 - Return to family
 - Return to culture
 - Return to memory
 - Return to place
 - Return to self

For each category, include images, symbols, quotes, or brief descriptions of moments from the film that illustrate Samantha's journey.

EXTENDED LEARNING ACTIVITIES — Translating Insight into Action (cont.)

- **Write a "Letter Home":** Inspired by Samantha's journey, write a letter to a place, person, culture, or community that has shaped your identity. Reflect on what you have learned from that connection and how it continues to influence your life.
- **Understanding DACA and the Dream Act:** Research the history of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and the proposed DREAM Act. Working individually or in groups, create a timeline, infographic, presentation, or policy memo that explores:
 - What led to the creation of DACA?
 - What protections does DACA provide?
 - How does DACA differ from the DREAM Act?
 - What questions remain unresolved for Dreamers today?

The following resources provide a starting point for understanding DACA, the DREAM Act, and the experiences of Dreamers. Use these sources to begin your research, then expand your investigation by exploring additional reliable sources and perspectives.

- **Library of Congress Research Guide.** [Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors \(DREAM\) Act & 2012: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals \(DACA\)](#).
 - **Library of Congress Primary Source Set.** [Mexican American Migrations and Communities](#)
 - **Congress.gov.** [S.365 – Dream Act Legislation of 2023](#)
 - **Library of Congress – Ask a Librarian:** Submit your research questions to the [Caribbean, Iberian & Latin American Studies](#) reading room to receive guidance from Library of Congress specialists and recommendations for primary sources.
 - Search the **Library of Congress: Carol Highsmith archive** for relevant photographs such as
 - Mural by Artist Linda Hinojos dedicated to "Dreamers" in Phoenix, AZ
<https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/highsm.54305>
 - Explore the **Library of Congress: PALABRA archive** of recorded poetry and literature.
<https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/audio-recordings/the-palabra-archive/>
- **Mapping Community Support Systems:** The film highlights the importance of connection and community networks. Create a community map identifying organizations, individuals, and spaces that provide support, connection, and resources within your community.

Discuss:

- Who helps people in your community feel connected?
- What resources already exist?
- What gaps remain?

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology:** <https://dictionary.apa.org/>
- **Chirla:** <https://www.chirla.org/>
- **Define American:** <https://defineamerican.com/>
- **Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act & 2012: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).** Library of Congress Research Guide: <https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/dream-act-daca#s-lib-ctab-25530173-0>
- **Divided By Immigration Status: Brothers Reflect On Their Bond.** StoryCorps: <https://storycorps.org/stories/divided-by-immigration-status-brothers-reflect-on-their-bond/>
- **DREAMer's Roadmap:** <https://www.dreamersroadmap.org/>
- **Educators Supporting Immigrants Resource Site:** Resource site for K-12 educators <https://sites.google.com/view/teacher-resources--immigration/home>
- **El Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) Resources.** National Museum of the American Latino: <https://latino.si.edu/learn/teaching-and-learning-resources/day-dead-resources>
- **Freedom University:** <https://www.freedom-university.org/>
- **FWD.us:** Policy organization working to advance better and more politically resilient solutions on criminal justice and immigration. [FWD.us](https://www.fwd.us)
- **Honoring Hispanic Americans: Celebrating Mexican American Contributions.** Library of Congress Blog: https://blogs.loc.gov/inside_adams/2021/09/honoring-hispanic-americans/
- **Justice Action Center:** <https://justiceactioncenter.org/>
- **Know Your Rights.** American Civil Liberties Union: <https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights>
- **Library of Congress Blogs.** Hispanic American History: https://blogs.loc.gov/inside_adams/category/hispanic-american-history/
- **Library of Congress.** American Folklife Center: <https://www.loc.gov/research-centers/american-folklife-center/about-this-research-center/>
- **Library of Congress: Carol Highsmith archive.** Search the archive for relevant photographs. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/carol-m-highsmith/>
- **Library of Congress – Ask a Librarian:** Submit your research questions to the [Caribbean, Iberian & Latin American Studies](#) reading room to receive guidance from Library of Congress specialists and recommendations for primary sources.
- **Library of Congress: PALABRA archive** of recorded poetry and literature: <https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/audio-recordings/the-palabra-archive/>
- **Mexican American Migrations and Communities.** Library of Congress Primary Source Set: <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/mexican-american-migrations-and-communities/>
- **Narrative Initiative:** <https://narrativeinitiative.org/>
- **National Immigration Law Center:** Resources and information on immigration policy and immigrant rights. <https://www.nilc.org/resources/> and <https://www.nilc.org/>
- **National Museum of the American Latino:** <https://latino.si.edu/>
- **!Presente! Immigration Stories.** National Museum of the American Latino: <https://latino.si.edu/exhibitions/presente/immigration-stories>
- **Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage:** <https://folklife.si.edu/>
- **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:** <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/solidarity/>
- **StoryCorps: Tools and resources for preserving family and community stories.** <https://storycorps.org/>
- **StoryCorps Historias:** <https://storycorps.org/stories/?taxonomy=initiatives&term=historias>
- **TheDream.US:** The nation's largest college and career success program for undocumented immigrant youth. TheDream.US
- **United We Dream:** <https://unitedwedream.org/>
- **U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.** Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Information: <https://www.uscis.gov/DACA>
- **Voice of Witness:** <https://voiceofwitness.org/>