

# 1 Salvadoran Transnational Families

AT SIXTEEN YEARS OLD, Daniel was only about four feet, eight inches tall. His faded school uniform, bony arms exposed, was evidence of his family's dire economic situation.<sup>1</sup> We spoke for over an hour in an empty, dusty room in the public school he attended in San Salvador, El Salvador. Tears welled up in his eyes as he passionately described his father's many failed attempts to cross into the United States and the injustices he faced during U.S. detention. Daniel was most emotional, though, when he reflected on how the situation affected him personally. With tears streaming down his face, he admitted that he had even considered suicide. Daniel had not seen his father, Rodrigo, in years. Without the financial support the family hoped would come from Rodrigo's migration, they were overwhelmed by poverty. Unable to make enough money to eat three meals a day, Daniel, a once-promising student, was frequently going to school hungry. At school, he tried to focus on the subjects that were once so exciting to him, but stress overcame him, and high grades eluded him. And, to make matters worse, malnutrition had stunted his growth to the point that fellow schoolmates regularly made fun of him, "At your height, you should be in kindergarten!" Daniel remembered them taunting. "I feel so bad, so ashamed. I should be taller, I should be stronger, but life has been bad to me."

Across the city, in a spacious home with modern appliances, I interviewed twenty-one-year-old Xiomara. She was dressed fashionably, with dangling earrings and carefully applied makeup that complemented her reserved, yet confident personality. Her mother, who had always been her closest confidant, had migrated to the United States three years earlier, following the 2001

earthquakes. The natural disaster was devastating for her family. Xiomara's mother lost all of the merchandise in her neighborhood store and acquired an immense debt overnight. Migration became the only realistic solution to their financial problems. After three years of separation, the consistent monthly sums from her mother had reduced the debt while allowing Xiomara to graduate from a private high school and excel at a private university. She looked forward to completing a college degree in a few years and was generally optimistic about her future. But financial stability came at great emotional cost. As she reflected on the family separation, she articulated the great tension that weighed her down, "Given the context, let's say that it's going well . . . The only thing is my mother's companionship. That's something no one can replace."

The transnational family strategy is, at its core, a response to economic circumstances. Parents migrate in search of better wages to send as remittances to their children.<sup>2</sup> Collectively, remittances have become a mainstay of the national economies of several developing nations—including El Salvador. Migrants work hard to send sums of money that add up to relative stability for their country as a whole. At a more intimate level, remittances are also the realization of a families' survival strategy. Amid dire situations, migration became the most plausible solution for parents. They left children behind because they were hopeful that opportunities for work and higher wages would allow them to *sacarlos adelante* (uplift their families) from afar.

But not all families fare equally well. Some, like Xiomara, can thrive. They have access to greater academic opportunities and live more comfortably than ever before—even if they have to pay an emotional cost for such stability. Others, like Daniel, cannot catch a break. Here, too, children miss their parents terribly, but they have nothing concrete to show for the family's sacrifice. This book examines *why* there are disparate experiences of family separation. It uncovers some of the ways U.S. immigration policies and multiple gendered processes intersect and move fluidly across national borders to stratify transnational families, creating differential economic and emotional experiences for both parents and children.

In the twenty-first century, transnational families are not uncommon among U.S. immigrants from Latin America. Thousands of migrant parents negotiate family life and responsibilities across borders. Yet it is rare to hear people discuss the challenges openly and lovingly in shared community spaces. This

is precisely what happened in May 2003, when I sat in the audience at an art space in Los Angeles to witness the coming together of several artists who, like me, are children of Central American immigrants. Among the various moving performances about ethnic identity and the ever-present search for “home,” the piece titled “Prosperity”<sup>3</sup> was especially touching. In it, Salvadoran writer, filmmaker, and performance artist Carolina Rivera portrayed the role of an immigrant mother in Los Angeles whose children remain in El Salvador. With limited props, she transported the audience into the world of this mother who lived by herself in a tight studio apartment with few belongings. Rivera poignantly revealed the economic and emotional pain of family separation through this mother who sacrificed a great deal in the United States—a country where she felt extremely lonely. She found courage and energy in knowing that at least her family in El Salvador was doing well. But the painful separation was most evident when she received graduation photographs of her children, whom she no longer recognized. Much of the audience was in tears.

In the decade that has followed, transnational families have appeared more frequently in U.S. political discourse and been more visible in the public eye. In the spring of 2006, hundreds of thousands of immigrants and their supporters marched in cities throughout the United States advocating for immigration reform. Los Angeles, home to the largest concentration of Latin American (and Salvadoran) immigrants, witnessed two of the most massive demonstrations. In four miles spanning Pico-Union to Miracle Mile, the record-breaking multitude flowed through the city streets carrying signs calling for “*Legalización para los indocumentados, reunificación familiar, soluciones humanas para problemas humanos*” (“Legalization for the undocumented, family reunification, humane solutions for human problems”). The historic marches helped suspend a draconian immigration bill in Congress. But the issue of family reunification, articulated so vividly in these demonstrations, continues to be at the heart of Latino immigrants’ daily struggles.

Representations of transnational families have also captured the hearts and minds of moviegoers and readers. The movie *Bajo la misma luna* (*Under the Same Moon*)<sup>4</sup> portrayed the heartbreaking experiences of a Mexican transnational family, and the best-selling nonfiction book *Enrique’s Journey*<sup>5</sup> documents the agonizing attempt of a Honduran boy to reunite with his mother. Like these portrayals, *Sacrificing Families* also captures the tragedy of these families’ living arrangements, but it delves deeper and uses a wider lens to

situate transnational families in a larger structural context and to shed light on the patterns of inequality in their well-being. Why do parents choose to leave their children? What are these families' experiences of long-term separation? And why do some fare better than others?

### Transnational Families and Inequalities

It is not immediately evident why discrepancies arise in transnational families' well-being.<sup>6</sup> From the work of various scholars, it is clear that most transnational families seek migration and family separation as survival strategies that take advantage of global inequalities in wages;<sup>7</sup> mothers and fathers practice parenting from afar through remittances, gifts, and weekly phone calls;<sup>8</sup> children play a role in supporting or challenging these arrangements;<sup>9</sup> and the bulk of the care work in both sending and receiving regions falls on women.<sup>10</sup> It is still unclear, however, whether and why some transnational families fare better than others.<sup>11</sup>

As a first step in examining inequalities, scholars have uncovered transnational families' *internal* discrepancies in quality of life and subjective experience of time apart. In her important study of Mexican transnational families, for example, sociologist Joanna Dreby<sup>12</sup> teases out some central incongruities within these families—particularly how time flies for migrant parents who work long hours in the United States but goes slowly for children who grow up awaiting reunification with their parents.<sup>13</sup> This mismatch in time leads to painful and prolonged separations when families yearn to be reunited. Sociologist Leah Schmalzbauer points to another internal inequality as seen in the class formation of migrant Honduran parents and their nonmigrant children; while parents live in poverty to remit, their children use remittances to attain more comfortable lifestyles.<sup>14</sup> Not willing to share the details of their sacrifices so as not to worry their children, parents inadvertently create a superficial prosperity that their children come to expect, no matter how unrealistic its maintenance. These are important details about the experience of family separation across borders, but their emphasis on inequalities *within* transnational families largely misses the structural forces that contextualize family separation in the first place. This book aims to extend the vibrant scholarly discussion on transnational families by examining inequalities *across* transnational families. What are the various patterns of inequalities and differentiated experiences of transnational families? And what processes create and sustain these?

One logical place to begin this inquiry is in the work of international migration scholars who examine why some immigrants fare better than others in the United States. Three of the most commonly cited explanations for inequalities in socioeconomic integration of immigrants are human capital, “the skills that immigrants bring along in the form of education, job experience, and language knowledge”;<sup>15</sup> social networks;<sup>16</sup> and length of residence in the receiving country.<sup>17</sup> How much they know, whom they know, and how long they’ve lived here all help determine how quickly and how favorably immigrants move up economically in the United States.<sup>18</sup> With higher levels of education, for example, immigrants should qualify for better-paying jobs; the more friends and relatives they know in the United States, the more people they can rely on to help them find housing and work; and the longer they live here, the more they have learned about how to navigate opportunities and challenges in this country. By extension, these factors should also explain transnational family members’ economic well-being.

Like other immigrants, parents in transnational families rely on economic opportunities in the United States. The difference, however, is that much of their earnings is earmarked for remittances. Those remittances, in turn, make up the majority of their families’ monthly budgets in the home country.<sup>19</sup> One way to examine inequalities across transnational families, therefore, is to focus on variations in the flow of remittances.

In the Salvadoran case, scholars and practitioners in the field of development certainly look closely at the macro portrait of remittances. Collectively, international migrants reliably send portions of their wages to loved ones in their home countries, establishing what some see as a “migration-development nexus.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, some policy makers are pursuing the idea of using these monies for development.<sup>21</sup> This makes sense considering that, in 2012, remittances to Latin America totaled nearly \$64 billion—\$3.9 billion of which went to El Salvador.<sup>22</sup> These monies are a significant source of external funding; they exceed the combined sum of foreign direct investment and official development assistance to several Latin American countries, including El Salvador. From the perspective of government entities and aid institutions, remittances are untaxed, “free” funds that should be used more productively for national development. This book argues that part of the problem with this approach is that not all migrants remit evenly, and not all recipients benefit equally.<sup>23</sup> An analytical lens that focuses on inequalities across transnational

families will demonstrate that the efforts of governments, the banking industry, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to streamline the uses of remittances cannot presume a minimum baseline for any family. Furthermore, is it fair to expect transnational families to bear the burden of development?

Although these families often conceive of separation as mostly an economic strategy, the realities of long-term separation also have profound and undeniable emotional effects on parents and children.<sup>24</sup> Like most families, transnational families are expected to provide emotional support for their members, but the geographical distance between parents and children can make it very difficult to demonstrate love. Children are especially pained by their mother's absence,<sup>25</sup> but do other dynamics also shape their emotional well-being? What are the affective tolls on various members of these families? And under what circumstances do some children learn to cope with long-term separation? Because the emotional consequences of a parent's absence may lower academic achievement,<sup>26</sup> it is important to understand differences in emotional well-being and the processes that contextualize these patterns.

The work of bringing in the state to explore intimate and gendered aspects of migration is already under way. In her beautifully written analysis of transnational Mexicans, anthropologist Deborah Boehm uncovers the multifaceted ways that U.S. policies produce and reproduce family intimacy and gendered experiences of transnational life.<sup>27</sup> As she traces the shifts in gender ideologies and practices with every migration and return, Boehm underscores the fluid nature of these processes, even within single families. Similarly, geographer Geraldine Pratt compellingly reveals the role of Canadian policies in forcing Filipino families apart.<sup>28</sup> In this case, the distance that separates migrants and their children proves to be quite painful and negatively consequential, even through what are deemed just "temporary" separations. In *Sacrificing Families*, I draw on and extend these rich insights to better understand economic and emotional inequalities across transnational families. I demonstrate that beyond the most widely cited explanations of why immigrants fare as they do, immigration policies and gender are also influential and complementary processes that complicate, amplify, and sometimes trump the effects of more traditional explanatory factors (that is, level of education, social networks, and length of residency). A lens that focuses specifically on immigration policies and gender, therefore, reveals a more complete picture of why some families fare better than others.

## The Production of (Il)legality

Although public debates about immigration in the United States implicitly assume that immigrants' legal status is an innate and static characteristic, the truth is that nothing about an immigrants' position within or outside of the law is natural. On the contrary, illegality—the condition of immigrants' legal status and deportability—is historically specific and socially, politically, and legally produced.<sup>29</sup> In its contemporary form, illegality has come to have an intimate and deep impact on all immigrants, as the potential for deportation is high, even if it is impossible to deport all undocumented immigrants.<sup>30</sup> With very restricted paths to legalization, undocumented immigrants and their loved ones must grapple with the fear of deportation at every turn; this is a heavy burden that millions carry.<sup>31</sup>

There have been moments in U.S. history when, in practical terms, undocumented status had little meaning. For various periods of mass immigration, undocumented immigrants were able to obtain a driver's license and work without the intense fear of deportation that now permeates immigrant communities.<sup>32</sup> But, in the last few decades, undocumented status and illegality have gained broader significance. Immigrants categorized as “undocumented” or “temporarily protected” are targets of progressively more harsh laws and ever more hateful speech, all of which work together to criminalize and dehumanize them and their families.<sup>33</sup>

Beginning in the 1980s, at approximately the same time that massive migration of Salvadorans began, the United States changed its contemporary immigration enforcement policies. No longer focusing only on relatively inconsequential apprehensions at the border, the Reagan administration militarized border enforcement. These changes thwarted circular migration patterns and increased the settlement of entire families in the United States.<sup>34</sup> For Salvadorans, who had to travel through multiple border crossings passing through Guatemala and Mexico en route to the United States, the new border policies added yet another layer of barriers between migrants and their families. The Reagan administration also gave states more power to implement immigration policies locally and, with the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986, established highly symbolic employer sanctions that for the first time made it a crime for undocumented immigrants to work.<sup>35</sup> These changes set in motion the production of illegality in its current form.

Immigrants were further disadvantaged through the congressional overhaul of immigration law in 1996 with the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA).<sup>36</sup> Along with increasing border enforcement, the new law made it more difficult for immigrants to obtain legal permanent residence; it eliminated legal mechanisms previously available to immigrants who were fighting deportation and also made legal permanent residents deportable (even retroactively) for a vastly expanded set of noncriminal offenses.<sup>37</sup> As a result, deportations have markedly increased every year since.<sup>38</sup>

After the attacks of 9/11, legal changes to criminalize undocumented immigrants further magnified and accelerated when the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was reorganized into the Department of Homeland Security with the purpose of safeguarding the country against terrorism.<sup>39</sup> This move explicitly linked immigrants with criminals at a time when programs such as 287(g)—in which local police are deputized to act as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents—and Secure Communities—which allows the FBI to communicate to ICE about anyone arrested or booked into custody throughout the country—increased their chances of deportation.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, such programs have led to record numbers of detentions and deportations, through sweeping workplace raids and because even routine traffic stops can quickly lead to ICE's involvement.<sup>41</sup>

Although undocumented status has until recently been largely a matter of civil or administrative law,<sup>42</sup> mainstream media images tend to portray undocumented immigrants as criminals.<sup>43</sup> The image of undocumented immigrants at the moment of apprehension, handcuffed and treated as dangerous felons, is common on network news. These repeated images are rather convincing to the general public, even when official statistics confirm that the majority of immigrants who are deported do not have criminal records.<sup>44</sup>

The record numbers of deportations, alongside the wave of hateful speech and growing animosity against immigrants, inevitably affect immigrants and their families' well-being, whether or not all members are undocumented.<sup>45</sup> Contemporary immigrants have made a home and settled in the United States under this cloud of illegality. Meanwhile, employers (who have little to risk under the selective enforcement of the law) willingly hire undocumented immigrants, usually as low-wage workers and easy targets for exploitation. Knowing that workers have everything to lose if they are detained and deported, unscrupulous employers threaten to call ICE as a way to control employees and undermine their rights.<sup>46</sup>