

Preface

AFTER SEPARATING FROM MY GRANDFATHER, my maternal grandmother could not bear to see her children go hungry. Not unlike many poor and single mothers in El Salvador, she had been toiling in domestic jobs for a couple of years and made barely enough for transportation but not enough for food; so she came to the United States in the mid-1960s. Penniless and driven to fulfill her responsibility to her children, she left all four of them with her mother. Initially, she worked in the United States without legal authorization to live in the country. After becoming a legal permanent resident, it took many years for all the paperwork to be processed through the complicated bureaucracy that was known, back then, as Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS). Not until she received the last piece of paper from the federal agency was she able to reunite with her children, some fourteen years after her departure. Three decades later, and although they see each other weekly, my mother, who is now in her fifties, still cannot hold back the tears when she recounts the many times in her childhood when she longed to be close to her mother. She and her sisters are grateful to their grandmother for her care, and they would have appreciated their father's presence in their lives, but it was their mother's absence all those years that continues to pain them.¹

In general, as a society, we accept and try to adhere to the notion that parents and children reside together—at least until the children get old enough to move out on their own. Of course, families are very diverse. The social expectation, however, is that children will share a home with at least one parent

(biological or not). This book is about families for whom this expectation is an unattained privilege. It is about mothers and fathers who feel that they have run out of economic options, who then make the heart-rending decision to go thousands of miles away to another country in search of jobs and greater wages for their children's survival.

In the Salvadoran immigrant community, family separation is relatively common. Everyone has a sibling, cousin, uncle, or neighbor who lives or has lived away from their children or from their mother or father—what scholars refer to as “transnational families.” In conversations with youth from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico about their educational trajectories in the United States, several students shared stories of painful separations and challenging reunifications with their biological parents.² Their narratives reveal that family separation has life-altering repercussions for countless Latino immigrant families.

Sacrificing Families draws extensively on the voices of parents in the United States—largely driven by a desire for survival—and the children who remain in El Salvador. Their narratives expose the many economic and emotional experiences of children and parents who are in the midst of long-term separation. Most notably, the stories uncover profound emotional suffering, varied economic realities (that is, not all of these families are thriving economically), and underlying structural constraints that determine how families fare.

I want to clarify a few key points about language and social constructions as I employ them analytically in this project. Throughout the book I use the categories “migrant” and “immigrant” to refer to the parents in these transnational families as seen from the perspective of their children in El Salvador versus the standpoint of someone in the United States. The word “migrant” captures movement in flux and therefore best underscores how those who stayed behind in the homeland perceive their parents. The word “immigrant,” on the other hand, better captures the more long-term settlement and incorporation that often unexpectedly becomes the goal once these parents arrive in the United States. I also reluctantly call family separation a “strategy.” Although the term implies full cognizance of and control over the situation, in most of these cases, parents are initially hesitant to undertake migration and pursue it only when they are convinced it is better than local possibilities for survival. Given the macro political and economic realities of the country, it is safe to assume that their chances for economic success or upward mobility are rather limited in El Salvador. This is why, in their own narratives, migrant parents take ownership of their decision to leave.³ Also, I did not ask study

participants about their sexual orientation, and nobody discussed their experiences or perceptions of family outside of the heteronormative model. El Salvador continues to be a socially conservative place where LGBT people's human rights are denied and LGBT activists' work is marginalized.⁴ For these reasons, while transnational families may certainly include gay parents, this experience was not reflected in the narratives.

One of the goals of my analysis in this project is also to reveal the constructed nature of "illegality" and its consequences for Salvadoran transnational families. Some may find my use of the term *illegality* offensive because, if read superficially, it has the potential to reproduce the dehumanizing effects of terms like *illegal* to refer to immigrants and, in the contemporary moment, pejoratively racialize U.S. Latinas and Latinos.⁵ I am sensitive to this form of violence and therefore consciously use the term to point the analytical lens to the structures that create vulnerability in immigrants' lives.⁶ That is, contrary to using language of illegality to brand human beings, I draw on the same language to underscore how laws, enforcement practices, and discourses produce categories with grave implications for human beings.

Staying true to the stories, *Sacrificing Families* is not just about the suffering of families and individuals. What happens to these families is too complex to be portrayed only negatively. In many cases, parents are able to achieve their families' goals and children reap the rewards of separation through educational and economic gains. Others, however, suffer greatly through the lengthy separations. They feel abandoned and disconnected from the world around them. My aim is not merely to repeat their words. Instead, the focus shifts back and forth between their actions, goals, and understandings and the larger public discourses, structural barriers, opportunities, and expectations. This expanded context reveals that transnational parents' behaviors are at times encouraged or restrained, made possible or impossible by forces outside of any single person's control.

In the process of researching and writing this book, I have come to understand my own family history in that larger context. This allows me to better appreciate why any parent would seemingly willingly leave his or her children for a decade or longer and why, even when parents claim to be doing it all for the sake of their children, the children's lives do not always improve. And in conversations with my mom about my findings and conclusions, she, too, has found herself in many of these stories. It is my hope that others will be able to do the same.