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Transnational parenting and immigration law: the case of Central Americans in the United States

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***Abstract:** In recent years, many immigrant receiving countries have implemented increasingly restrictive immigration policies that include tighter border controls, more temporary worker permits, increased threat of deportation, and greater restrictions on the ability to acquire permanent residence and to petition for family members. Thus, family separation seems to be built into new immigration policies and long-term and indefinite separations are not the exception. In this paper I examine the case of the largest Central American immigrants – Guatemalans, Hondurans, Salvadorans. Many of these immigrants are not fully “undocumented” nor “documented” but straddle both statuses through a series of temporary permits that have spanned more than a decade. These immigrants’ legal instability profoundly affects parenting across borders – both in terms of relations between parents and children who are separated, as well as with relation to the links between these immigrant families and institutions in the host society. Thus, the experiences of Central Americans present a special opportunity to reflect on the effect of current immigration regimes on families separated across borders.*

***Keywords:** Transnational parenthood; Guatemala; El Salvador; Honduras; United States; Immigration policy; legislation*

Introduction

In recent years, many immigrant-receiving countries have implemented increasingly restrictive immigration policies that include tighter border controls, more temporary worker permits, increased threat of deportation, and greater restrictions on the ability to acquire permanent residence and to petition for family members. Thus, family separation seems to be built into new immigration regimes and long-term and indefinite separations are not the exception. And there is a growing body of literature on the multiple ways in which families separated by migration, particularly parents and children, deal with the challenges of living apart, from sustaining emotional bonds through di-

verse forms of communication (Baldassar 2007; Dreby 2006; Parreñas 2005a; Wilding 2006), to ways of handling child-rearing and issues of identity (Whitehouse 2009), parenting and co-parenting (Pribilsky 2004; Whitehouse 2009) with important gender angles (Parreñas 2005a), and difficulties that arise from the separation and reunification (Falicov 2007; Ramirez, Skrbiš, and Emmison 2007). And as Parreñas (2005b) notes, these family dynamics and their formation across borders are shaped by the larger systems of inequality and power within which they take place.

An important aspect of this larger system within which relations between parents and children across borders are enacted is immigration policy. As the immigration scholarship has demonstrated, immigration policy, an important component of the context of reception, is crucial in shaping immigrants' lives (Menjívar 2000; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). It determines who stands inside or outside the law, and whether immigrants qualify as full participants of society or become some of its most destitute members, as it dictates whether they will have access to regular employment (Fortuny, Capps, and Passel 2007; Uriarte et al. 2003), to health and educational resources (Abrego 2008a; Holmes 2007), and if they do, to what kind. Thus, the political-economic context into which immigrants arrive can translate into a favorable reception -- relaxed or even friendly immigration laws and a viable economy -- or an adverse one -- stiff immigration laws and low-paying jobs, with serious implications for the immigrants' lives.

In this article I focus on how the legal aspect shapes the dynamics of parenting across borders. I center my examination on relations between parents and children as well as the families' links to social service institutions, which in my view are two integral aspects of parenting that are brought into sharp relief by the challenges of indefinite physical separations and legal uncertainty. However, I do want to emphasize the links with other aspects of the context of reception, such as the economy, which shape labor market opportunities. I have singled out immigration law and immigrants' legality because they emerge as central for the Central American immigrants in my studies in Phoenix, regardless of specific nationality group. The effects of immigrants' legal uncertainty on parent-child relations in the context of transnational parenting is heavily pronounced, as it exposes vividly the challenges that these parents and children face in dealing with the logistics of temporal and spatial separations. Immigration policies impinge on parent-child relations when they live across borders as well as

when they reside together as immigrants. This examination shows that parenting is no longer contained in one physically demarcated space. Thus, this focus also permits examination of a facet of transnational parenting that does not receive as much attention, that is, the parenting of children who live in the United States as an integral part of parenting across borders. Immigration law redefines the status of family members and marks family members in various ways, shaping their access to resources, mobility, and lifestyles. Thus, I also examine these families' links to institutions in the host society and how families respond to contextual constraints, so my analysis does not present only a unidirectional effect of the macro structure to the individuals' lives. In doing so I recognize that gender strongly influences how the effects of legality play out; thus, when appropriate I will note gender differences, particularly in perceptions of parenthood that are informed by gender ideologies, and how individuals act on these views.

Empirically, I focus on the experiences of Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran immigrants who arrived in Phoenix, Arizona in the period between 1998 and 2008, complemented by the views of women who stayed in Honduras. The aspects of family dynamics I examine here -- family separation and links to institutions in society -- exemplify how broader structural forces, such as the political decisions that fashion immigration law, shape the immediate worlds of individuals and families. This examination helps us to reflect on the powerful position of the state -- in an era when the nation-state is believed to have weakened in the context of globalization -- on the lives of immigrants who find themselves in similarly precarious legal situations in immigrant-receiving countries around the world. Indeed, the receiving states' border enforcement and the barriers they enact through immigrant policies impact vitally on the ability of immigrants' relations with those close to them. The work of Parreñas (2005ab) among Filipinos, of Schmalzbauer (2004) among Hondurans, and of Calavita (2005) among immigrants in Spain and Italy also expose the consequences of the tightening of legal and physical borders on immigrants' families.

The migration of Salvadorans, Hondurans and Guatemalans to the United States has been shaped by global events and forces, from the export and commercialization of agriculture in the early 20th Century to political upheavals and civil wars in the region in the past few decades. Even though Hondurans, Guatemalans and Salvadorans have been migrating to the United States since the turn of last century, large-scale migration

from Central America to the United States took off in the late 1970s, when long and tumultuous civil conflicts and militarization in the region also complicated natural disasters. These conditions propelled many to emigrate, and the profound economic and social dislocations that accompanied these human-made and natural disasters have maintained the pace of these movements to this day. While Guatemalans and Salvadorans migrated internally or to refugee camps in adjacent countries, together with Hondurans, many of them also crossed several international borders to reach the United States, where friends and family members resided. According to the 2000 US Census, there was a 760 percent growth in the Salvadoran, 740 in the Honduran, and 642 percent in the Guatemalan populations between 1980 and 1990; approximately 85 percent of these immigrants arrived in the United States in the 1980-2000 period (U.S. Census, 2000).

Salvadorans and Guatemalans who migrated during their countries' political strife would have fit the classic profile of refugees; however, every Washington administration during the two-decade period during which most arrived -- from Reagan to Clinton -- consistently refused to grant them blanket refugee status as they did with other groups fleeing similar situations. Although Hondurans did not experience the same level of political strife as their neighbors, Honduras was a site of military bases and bellicose operations in the region. Therefore Portillo (2008) notes that Honduran migration also increased exponentially during the conflictive years in the neighboring countries for reasons linked to the (largely silent) and unrecognized effects of the violent conflicts in the region. Hondurans were granted temporary protection to remain in the United States but only after Hurricane Mitch destroyed a substantial part of the infrastructure of the country in 1998. All this means that many of these Central Americans became undocumented immigrants or were protected only temporarily; their legal reception was shaped by the intersection of immigration and refugee policy on the one hand, and foreign policy on the other. Thus, these Central Americans were denied the government assistance normally available to officially recognized refugees, and were left on their own to cope with the consequences of political flight. Classified as undocumented (and thus legally excluded) with sporadic and irregular access to legal protection (Menjívar 2006), these immigrants' opportunity structures in the United States have been severely limited. Thus, it is informative to examine these immigrants' legal reception and the consequences it has had on various aspects of their families' lives

and relationships.

After a brief background to contextualize these immigrants' family experiences, I present the methods and data. I then turn to an examination of the two areas that permit a close up look at parenting across borders among Central Americans: family separations and reconfiguration, and links to institutions beyond the family. In the first I focus primarily on parent-children relations as informed by long-term separations and legal uncertainty; in the second I shift the angle of vision to these families' links to institutions that provide social services. I end with a broader discussion of the effects of immigration law on parenting across borders.

Contextualizing Central Americans' Lives: Legal History

The United States has received Central Americans as depoliticized labor migrants who do not need political protection. As such, with important differences between and within these groups to keep in mind, these immigrants share key aspects regarding their legal reception in the United States that merit their treatment in this article as a single group. My discussion highlights the roots of the legal instability that permeates all aspects of these immigrants' lives, particularly their families' organization and reconfiguration, as well as the often confusing and intractable deadlines, applications and procedures that contribute to accentuate their precarious legal situation.

Guatemalans and Salvadorans have applied for political asylum, but historically they have not fared well in asylum applications. Immigrants' rights groups lobbied on their behalf, and eventually Congress granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) from deportation to all Salvadorans who arrived prior to September 19, 1990. This temporary protection was not extended to Guatemalans; U.S. officials argued that Guatemalans did not deserve protection. TPS allowed Salvadorans to live and work in the United States for a period of 18 months; it was extended a few times under Deferred Enforced Departure and it expired in December 1994. President Clinton extended it for nine additional months until it ended for good in September 1995. El Salvador suffered two devastating earthquakes in early 2001 that exacerbated many of the problems left by the years of civil war. Thus, Salvadorans who arrived after the earthquakes were granted TPS for a period of nine months, a dispensation that already has been extended several times for 18 month periods at a time. At the time of this writing it is

supposed to expire on September 9, 2010. These extensions are not automatic. For each one applicants are given a 90 day period of re-registration that requires forms and fees in order to obtain a work permit, a benefit that this dispensation offers. Once again, this is a temporary, not a permanent status and for technical purposes, official statistics do not include TPS cases in the documented population.

Even though Guatemala also endured the destruction of hurricane Stan in late 2005 (as well as three decades of state terror and political violence), at the time of this writing Guatemalans still had not been granted TPS, even when Guatemalan heads of state themselves have personally interceded and asked U.S. presidents for this provision for their citizens. On the other hand, Hondurans have been granted TPS for 18-month renewable periods since Hurricane Mitch in 1998; it is set to expire on July 5, 2010. As in the case of Salvadorans, only eligible Hondurans can apply for re-registration, meaning those who obtained TPS in the previous period are eligible to reapply.

In 1990, as a result of the settlement of a class action suit (*American Baptist Churches vs. Thornburgh* [ABC] legislation) that alleged discrimination against Guatemalans and Salvadorans on the part of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Salvadorans and Guatemalans were allowed to resubmit asylum applications. Initially, the success rate of Salvadoran applications increased to 28 percent and those of Guatemalans to 18 percent in fiscal year 1992 (National Asylum Study Project, 1992). Salvadorans and Guatemalans who arrived in the United States prior to January 1, 1982 -- the cutoff point to apply for amnesty under the *Immigration Reform Control Act* (IRCA) -- applied for this benefit (Menjívar 2000). However, a relatively small percentage of these Central Americans in the United States arrived prior to 1980; thus, the thousands who arrived at the height of the political conflicts in their countries in the 1980s and 1990s were ineligible for amnesty under this provision.

Some Salvadorans and Guatemalans were included as beneficiaries of the 1997 *Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act* (NACARA). Salvadorans who entered the country before September 19, 1990 and Guatemalans who entered before October 1, 1990, and registered under the ABC settlement (or who had filed an asylum application before April 1, 1990), could be granted a "cancellation of removal" (cancellation of deportation). Immigrant rights groups have lobbied on behalf of these immigrants so that the benefits NACARA confers to other nationals included in this Act -- adjustment to permanent residence without a hearing on a case-by-case basis -- would

also be extended to Guatemalans and Salvadorans. However, since October 1998, Congress has consistently denied these immigrants such benefit. And the prospects of obtaining this benefit have decreased sharply due to further tightening in immigration law after the attacks on September 11, 2001. Importantly, the Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran immigrants' legal concerns are further aggravated by a generalized restrictive immigration regime embodied in the IIRIRA (Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act) of 1996, as Rodríguez and Hagan (2004) document. Additionally, state and local ordinances and propositions across the United States have had the effect of intensifying the effects of the different federal immigration laws, which have given way to raids and deportations coordinated by local-level governments. Arizona is a prime example of this.

Therefore, a large proportion of Salvadoran, Guatemalan and Honduran immigrants has been and remains in the United States in an uncertain legal status. Although the 2000 U.S. Census estimates that approximately one quarter of Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Guatemalans are naturalized citizens, 73 percent of Salvadorans, 75 percent of Hondurans, and 76 percent of Guatemalans are foreign born. El Salvador and Guatemala are among the top three countries in undocumented population (after Mexico), with 540,000 Salvadorans and 500,000 Guatemalans (Kang 2008).¹ Significantly, it is not an undocumented status per se that matters, but the perennial instability of temporary permits, multiple and confusing deadlines, and lengthy waiting times for cases to be adjudicated, which give these immigrants the hope that their statuses will be regularized one day. In the meantime, they must plan their lives, marriages, their children's lives, and make a host of short- and long-term decisions that are inevitably shaped by these immigrants' long-term legal ambiguity, "liminal legagility" (Menjívar 2006).

Methods and Data

The data for this paper come from a multiple-year (ongoing) study of new Latin American-origin immigration to the Phoenix metropolitan area conducted between 1998 and 2008. With my assistants, we have contacted study participants in churches, sports and social clubs, community organizations that aid migrants, and neighborhood shops and restaurants, places where we also conducted participant observation. These multiple points of entry have helped us to avoid reaching a socially homogenous group. Study

participants have been selected according to two general criteria: They must have been at least 18 years old at the time they left their countries, and they must have arrived in Phoenix in the 1990s, so as to capture “new” arrivals to the area. Informants normally choose the location and all interviews have been conducted in Spanish and lasted on average one-and-a-half hours, and except for four, all were tape-recorded. At least one third of the participants have been re-interviewed in the course of this research.

The 56 in-depth interviews include 23 Salvadoran immigrants, 3 Hondurans, and 31 Guatemalans (including 6 indigenous), as well as with informal conversations with their relatives, friends, coreligionists and neighbors. Data also come from a small qualitative study that one of my assistants and I conducted with 18 women in a small rural town in Honduras which allowed us a window into the complexities of family relations across borders from the perspective of the sending country. More than half (or 57 percent) of the study participants are women, their educational level on average is about 9 years, their average was 29 years, and none of them were fluent speakers of English, though among the Guatemala indigenous several speak more than one Maya language. Several of the study participants have arrived from other states, particularly California and Florida, to Phoenix within five years of the interviews, but more and more are coming to Phoenix directly from their countries. Legal status is not easy to capture, as study participants changed from being on a temporary status to a permanent (or to an undocumented one) during the course of the study, but at the time of the initial interview, some study participants had obtained permanent legal status and one (a man) had become a naturalized citizen. The majority, however, either had a temporary permit or were undocumented without any legal basis to regularize their status to that of a permanent resident, with no striking differences by gender.

And although these immigrants’ occupations in their homelands were varied -- electricians, plumbers, agricultural workers, clerks, housekeepers, owners of small businesses, market vendors, students, soldiers, and factory and maquiladora workers, and small business owners, these immigrants’ U.S. occupations are strikingly homogeneous. With the exception of four Salvadorans and two Guatemalans who own businesses in Phoenix, the rest of the studies’ participants worked in the low end of the service sector, such as hotel chambermaids, cafeteria servers, janitors, cleaners, baby-sitters and caretakers of the elderly, or in construction.

Family Reorganization

Sociologically, the family is a primary social institution constituted by a series of relationships bound by an ideology of shared kindred that engages in social production and reproduction, care giving and feeding work (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Parreñas 2005a). Such activities are not evenly divided among the members, as the distribution of resources and labor are hierarchically organized around gender and age. Furthermore, as Li notes (cited in Landolt and Da 2005), this network of individuals is embedded in a set of economic, social, cultural, and political arrangements that shape the organization of the family. Thus, in this article I do not refer to a static institution synonymous with the nuclear family, as the institution of the family has gone through many transformations in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, and other family forms have co-existed with the idealized class-based notion of a nuclear unit. I would also like to note the adaptive power and malleability of this institution in the face of economic and political change in these countries' histories. Also, women have had a long tradition of internal migration for work in the households of middle and upper class families. And in the late 1950s it was estimated that "free unions" in El Salvador accounted for 50 percent of all unions, and families regularly included children from previous unions as well as adult relatives (Menjívar 2000: 47). Thus, this discussion should be placed within this broader historical context. This optic permits a more complex approach to the study of these families. An apt assessment that reflects both broader historical and politico-economic trends as well as the immigrants' own views and desires seems to be that many have been reorganized or redefined, responding to changing structural demands. Importantly, the legal context that receives them in the United States plays a key role in these families' internal dynamics as well as these families' links to other institutions in society.

Parent-Children Relationships.

Hondurans, Guatemalans and Salvadorans in the United States have varied forms of family arrangements. Some of these immigrants have come to the United States single and have established families here; others arrived alone and left their families back home. In some cases the siblings and the parent or parents live in the United States and other siblings live in the home country. Some have established other families in the

U.S. and thus have two immediate families in two (or more) geographical locations. Many could not bring their children because traveling undocumented and by land would put children in great danger. Some Guatemalans and Salvadorans brought their children, but given the high crime rates and drugs in some of the neighborhoods where they settled, the parents have sent the children back. Children also have been deported in increasing numbers. Hondurans, having started arriving in high numbers later, have begun to follow similar patterns. Thus, it is not unusual for Central American immigrant families to include multiple arrangements and be separated by great distances.

However, the effects of immigration policies on these families are not unambiguous or easy to categorize. Whereas there has been dislocation, tension, and pain among the family members who are forcibly separated as a result of stiff immigration laws, study participants do not mention that they do not have a family or that their family “has disintegrated” in the context of migration.² Particularly with reference to parents and children left in their countries, study participants always reference their sacrifices, their actions, their ups and downs in life, dreams and plans to those family members (PNUD 2005). Indeed, it is perhaps this *idea* they have of family relations and perceived obligations in spite of time and distance, together with weakened economies and increasing trends of inequality in the home countries, which accounts for the large volume of remittances these immigrants send to their loved ones. Salvadorans send approximately \$2.5 billion (El Salvador Central Reserve Bank, 2005), Guatemalans sent \$2.6 billion (USAID, 2005), and Hondurans sent \$2.3 billion (La Tribuna 2008) a year. As Zelizer (2007) notes, remittances not only provide essential resources for those in the home countries but also mitigate the trials and uncertainty of long-term separations between parents and children (as well as between partners in couples). Remittances in this context also reflect what Bryceson and Vuorela’s (2002: 14) mean by “relativizing,” that is, “the variety of ways individuals establish, maintain, or curtail relational ties with specific family members,” which in the case of families split due to immigration policies “relativizing” also refers to “modes of materializing the family as an imagined community with shared feelings and obligations” (2002: 14). Remittances therefore have an emotional side that helps immigrants keep a sense of family.

Moreover, social position, such as gender, informs immigrants’ perceptions and obligations toward their families within the context of declined face-to-face contact. For instance, mothers who leave their children behind rarely stop remitting, and send

money and gifts for longer periods of time than their male counterparts do (Abrego 2008b), even though the women's U.S. earnings tend to be lower than those of the men. Women have been shown to even *increase* remittances when they formed new unions in the United States (Menjívar and Abrego 2009). Dreby (2006) and Schmalzbauer (2004) observed similar gender differences in expectations of parenting across border among Mexicans and Hondurans, respectively.

Immigrants find many other ways to remain connected as well, such as telephone calls. These observations notwithstanding, it does not mean that cohesiveness predominates over conflict, or that family relations are devoid of tension, or that reunifications between parents and children are easy. Rather, they underscore the complexity inherent in these families' reorganization, redefinition, accommodation, and change (as well as the continuity) across borders. As such, family separations can have detrimental consequences as well. And given these immigrants' legal uncertainty, the possibility of an imminent deportation shapes many decisions that individuals make. According to the Department of Homeland Security, in 2005 there were 7,235 Salvadorans, 12,529 Guatemalans and 14,556 Hondurans deported (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2005). Thus, many of these Central Americans must confront decisions about where their children should live and given the insecurity of residence they experience, many find it more secure to leave or send their children to live with relatives (usually female) back home. An important gender angle emerges here as well, as gender ideologies position women at the center of the challenges that arise from the separation between parents and children. In a dramatic case that underscores this point, a Salvadoran mother tried to put up for adoption her 12 year-old son in hopes that doing so would improve his chances of staying in the United States, as she had had TPS for over ten years and was not hopeful that it will become permanent (Wright 2005). The boy had been living in El Salvador with his grandmother, and had traveled to the United States alone at the age of 10 to be reunited with his mother. Central American children have been observed to be the protagonists of their own migration (see Orellana et al. 2001); long term, uncertain separations from their parents play a key role in the children's decision to migrate alone.

The legal predicament of many Central Americans and their precarious financial situation make it difficult for them to see their families regularly or to reunite permanently; while they hold temporary permits they cannot travel back home because, al-

though technically possible, it involves a cumbersome process that can easily jeopardize their temporary status. To be sure, the migration experience among other groups is also characterized by one family member migrating to work while the rest of the family stays in the home country (see also Parreñas 2005ab). However, due to the Guatemalans', Salvadorans', and Hondurans' legal instability, temporary disruptions often turn into indefinite, long-term separations. The immigrants wait and hope that their temporary permits will become permanent, that their asylum applications will soon be approved, or that there will be an amnesty that will guarantee them the right to live and work in the United States on a permanent basis. Their relatives in the home countries hope and pray that their loved ones do not perish during the journey, that they would not be deported, and that one day they will return home to enjoy the fruits of their hard labor in the north.

However, these dreams and hopes become harder to realize as time goes by. These immigrants' legal predicament makes trips back home highly costly physically and economically and thus they put off family reunifications indefinitely.³ Owing in part to the pressure immigrant women feel to compensate for supposedly "abandoning" their children back home, a Salvadoran woman decided to work almost around the clock, holding three jobs seven days a week, so that she would be able to send more money home to her children. However, she confessed that this strategy also helped her because she did not have time to think about how much she missed her three children who remained in the care of her mother back home. In her words, "My strategy was to get exhausted so I didn't have to think how much I miss my kids. Being busy makes me forget my deep sadness." What gets her is that when she calls her children, her 13 year-old son cries every single time he comes to the phone. Her sadness increases when she thinks about how long she will be separated from her children because her political asylum application has been in process for several years and there are no signs that it will be approved anytime soon. Another Salvadoran woman said that she misses her family above all during the holidays. "For New Year's, at church the priest said that people should greet each other and hug their families. I started to cry. I had no one to hug. And it's the most horrible moment when you see couples hugging, children hugging their mothers (crying) and you're just standing there alone, with no one to hug. It's terrible, terrible." However, she was not sure how many more New Year's she would spend separated from her children as given her Temporary Protected Status

there are very slim chances for her to ever be able to apply for permanent residence.

For the most part, the women tended to break down and cry during the interviews when they narrated how much they missed their children; however, none of the men cried. Perhaps it is not that the women missed their children more, but that women are given more license to express emotions more openly. The women always worried about whether their children were being cared for properly, but the fathers whose children lived back home seemed satisfied to know that they were in the care of grandparents, particularly grandmothers, or aunts. This parallels Dreby's (2006) observation about the difference between Mexican women's maternal roles as sacralized and Mexican men's roles as the providers. The Central American women also seemed to feel guiltier about having left their children back home. It did not help that for their part, their children reproached the mothers more than they did their fathers, and seemed to understand better their fathers' inability to travel to see them, particularly when the migration (and separation) enabled the fathers to fulfill their breadwinner obligations. In the case of the mothers, in some cases even when they sent gifts and money to support the children, the children still accused them of abandoning them. These attitudes reflect gender ideologies that place different expectations of fatherhood and motherhood, which are accentuated in parenting across borders.

Many of these immigrants establish new families in the United States, as during these separations no one is exactly sure when or how they will reunite. Women and men sometimes form new unions and thus end up with partners and children both in their origin countries and in the United States. At the other end, those who stay behind, particularly the women, are often concerned about the fate of their relationships and what it means for the children, above all when telephone communication (usually initiated by the immigrants in the United States) is irregular or when packages and monetary remittances do not arrive on time. In Honduras this was an important topic of conversation. Toña, an active and well-respected woman in her mid fifties stressed the importance of communication: "It happens in the community. There are families that have disintegrated...if there isn't communication." Thus, after long and uncertain separations during which many changes take place, it is not uncommon that when parents and children reunite in the United States that they often find little semblance of a family in each other and sometimes cannot even recognize each other physically. Armando, a Salvadoran, mentioned maintaining a sense of family even though he could

not recognize physically their loved ones due to the long-term separation. He recounted how lucky he had been to take his brother with him when he went to pick up his 20 year old son at the Mexico-Arizona border. Armando had left his son a toddler in El Salvador, and if his brother, who had visited El Salvador recently, had not been there to recognize the young man, Armando would have returned to Phoenix empty handed. He then asked for photos of his family in El Salvador as he was preparing for his first trip there in 17 years, because, he said, "if I didn't know they were my family, they would be like complete strangers to me."

The particularly lengthy separations between parents and children that Central Americans experience often create tension when they are finally together, as the two feel like strangers and ultimately find little to share as a family.⁴ Although the material and financial lot of the children left in the care of relatives improves when the parents (or parent) send money and gifts from the United States, this betterment often comes at a great cost (see Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). And Leslie (1993) notes that family reunification for Central Americans can be problematic due to unrealistic expectations that parents and children have of each other. The children often reproach the parents, particularly their mothers, for having left them "abandoned," a situation also observed among other groups (see Parreñas 2005a). Eduardo, a young man in Phoenix who is half Salvadoran and half Guatemalan, felt "robbed" of a sense of family because he had grown up in the care of his maternal grandmother in El Salvador, "with comforts and everything I wanted materially, but without my parents." In his words:

What do you think is worse, to share poverty here with my half-siblings and mother and father, or not having learned how to love them because I never saw them? What would I have given for a goodnight kiss from my mother, for instance, or even for a fight with a sibling! You know? That's what makes a family a family. But instead, I don't know who these people are! I am sorry if you feel I'm an ingrate because you're Salvadoran and you and everyone else think my parents are great and you're going to tell me about their sacrifice and blah blah blah. I know the story. And I'm sure you'd side with my mother because she's such a hard worker [rolling his eyes] and loves me and all that. But I am not and will not be grateful to them for having sent me back.

Leticia, his mother, mentioned that he reproaches them for having "abandoned" him, something that is particularly painful for her. In her words,

Do you know how much it hurts that he thinks I abandoned him, when all I did was killed myself working three jobs so that he could have a good education there, away from all the bad things here? I wanted the best for him; I'm his mother, not a stranger. I have asked him

to stop reproaching me because it is too painful (voice quivering, teary eyes) ... during all those years he was there [in El Salvador] I used to miss him so much, I used to cry at night, but I kept thinking, no, this is good for him. And then look what he says to me now? Is this fair?

A significant aspect of these family reunifications is that often the parents who are in the United States miss the years during which the children grow up faster and change the most, which highlights the importance that stage in the lifecycle makes in separations as well as in reunifications. Although the parents are cognizant of their children's growth, they only realize the impact on their relations with the children when they are reunited. Sometimes the children develop tastes in clothes or in music that the parents do not approve of, which can be a source of tension when they are finally together. To be sure, such tensions can easily arise among non-immigrant families as well as among immigrant families who are together in the place of arrival. But such tensions are more pronounced when parents and children are reunited after decades-long separations. A Salvadoran mother said that she only realizes that her children are growing up when she talks with her teenage son, whose voice is changing but she still keeps an image of him as a small boy. "I have an image of my children as babies, not as teenagers. To me they are my little kids. Can you imagine when we are together what it will be like?" And a Guatemalan woman who left three children under the age of three, when the youngest one was just newborn, cannot envision what it will be like to live with her children again. In her words, "I don't really know them, especially the youngest, because he is now three and talks and the last time I got a photo from them was one year ago. I would like to be there with them. But I have to put up and stay here." Again, it is important to note that it is women who seem to bear the burden of these separations more intensely due to gender ideologies and expectations of motherhood.

During times of indefinite separations telephone communication becomes key in attenuating the effects of physical distance. My study participants reported calling their loved ones regularly as it provided them about the only way to retain a "sense of family." However, not everyone could do this; some study participants' relatives back home did not have a home telephone, a situation we observed among the Maya Guatemalans. A Guatemalan man said that when he left his children they only spoke his language, Mam, and now that they are going to school they all speak Spanish, a major

change in them that is reflected in phone conversations.

When we asked a Guatemalan mother what she talked about with her three children back home when she phones them, she said, "No, no, no, I never scold them, ever. I only tell them that I love them, that I miss them, that I need them, that I want to see them, and that soon we will be together to never be separated again. They tell me that they love me and that they are grateful for what I do for them. And they know that we'll be together again soon. They miss me and ask me to go back. But they know that I'll see them when God permits." She explained that this has been going on for three years and that frankly she was not sure when she would see them again. The last time she saw them was through an internet connection two years prior to the interview. At the other end, women in Honduras reported talking with their husbands and sons in the United States from daily to every few months, but the majority talked with their loved ones weekly. Most of these conversations revolved around external goings-on. My assistant often overheard, and interviewees typically related, conversations regarding day-to-day chores and responsibilities, such as household maintenance and land care, as well as financial matters. He rarely heard, and women almost never reported, conversations about fear, loneliness, and stress, feelings he observed were always present in the women's conversations with others in town.

As the words of the immigrants in Phoenix indicate, attempts to romanticize these family separations in the context of transnational conceptualizations should be tempered by the numerous costs, dislocation and alienation that such separations produce. Even though the children may be left in the care of maternal grandmothers or other female relatives who dot on them and who indeed become "second" mothers to them, in the eyes of the children these relatives' care is no substitute for the presence of a parent, particularly a mother, given ideologies of motherhood. Efforts to sanitize the pain and suffering resulting from these separations with celebratory images of family cohesion should be reassessed. At the same time, for those involved, a *sense* of family is the engine that keeps them going, even if this can only be realized through rapid communication technologies.

Links Beyond the Family.

U.S. immigration policy reconstitutes immigrants as they cross national borders and

channels immigrants and their children into different paths. And it is not unusual for immigrant parents and other adult immigrants who live in precarious legal situations to avoid contact with schools, the health care system, and police authorities. With stiffer immigration laws, the militarization of the southern U.S. border, and new initiatives for service providers to work in conjunction with immigration authorities to detect and then deport undocumented immigrants, it is not surprising that immigrants will be reluctant to approach such institutions.⁵ Many undocumented parents fear sending their children to school, even if the children are U.S.-born, to avoid detection when filling out school forms. Similar situations have been found in other U.S. cities (c.f. Uriarte et. al. 2003), but in Arizona, where several laws targeting undocumented immigrants have passed in the past few years, this is a major concern for the immigrants. In addition, the Sheriff's office and volunteer posses have conducted raids as part of a federal agreement to aid in targeting undocumented immigrants. As a result, a climate of fear has been created in which undocumented immigrants and those who are not fully documented are particularly afraid. When immigrants remain in uncertain legal statuses for undetermined periods of time, their relationship to different social institutions can have long-lasting and serious consequences for the immigrants as well as for their U.S. born (or raised) children, and for the children who were left in the home country (or have been sent there). In the current context of fear, particularly in destinations such as Phoenix, it is not surprising to find parents making life-altering decisions about where children should live based on their experiences with accessing benefits and social services, as well as the omnipresent threat of deportation.

As a result of the Central American immigrants' legal uncertainty, many of them live in what Fix and Zimmerman (2001) refer to as "mixed-status families," that is, undocumented parents or children living with documented (mostly U.S. citizen) children or siblings, or several members of a family each having a different legal status, a situation found among other immigrant families as well (Capps et al., 2005). In the same families there are children who have the privilege of citizenship -- and thus access to goods and benefits in society -- those in the process of regularizing their status, and undocumented ones who lack even the most basic rights, such as access to education and health care, and who can be deported at any moment. Membership in such mixed-status families can have unforeseen consequences for the children, as within the same family legal status can channel siblings to different paths. The immigrants' and the

children's relations with different institutions in society will be equally dissimilar.

For instance, immigrants often risk their own health and, potentially, that of their children as they avoid public health workers to avoid the risk of detection. By virtue of their legal status, immigrants in tenuous statuses' lack of access to social services is particularly damaging because the kinds of jobs they tend to obtain do not provide benefits, like health insurance; thus, they are left with few, if any, social service resources. And there is an important gender angle here. As gender ideologies place women in charge of caring for their families, when immigrants do not have access to these social benefits, such as health care (particularly for the children), it is women who take charge in locating medical treatments for their family members (Menjívar 2002b). Thus, Central American immigrant women often attend community organizations to obtain information about free clinics or about food distribution programs, places where they have the opportunity to meet other immigrant women or individuals who put them in touch with sources of assistance. A Salvadoran woman was particularly anxious about not having health insurance for her children, and she tried to avoid any contact with health professionals; she had heard that these workers can contact immigration officials and have her deported.⁶ She was unsure of how long this situation will last, as her Guatemalan husband petitioned for her to immigration, but her application has taken almost one decade to process and she still had not been called for an interview. When asked about her health situation, she said:

I feel fine now. Insurance? Our insurance company, we call it Our Heavenly Father Company [laughing]. You know why? Because we simply pray to God that we don't get sick. We wouldn't know what to do if we did. So He keeps us healthy. We try not to go to the doctor often; as you know, we cannot expose our [legal] situation to everyone. So if anyone gets sick we use medicines that people bring from Mexico or El Salvador, you know, a little penicillin here or there. Stuff like that. But mostly I just try to eat well and once in a while I'll have an aspirin. Do you understand me? It's one day at a time.

A Guatemalan indigenous woman makes sure to exercise, riding her bike daily around her block, so that she keeps healthy and thus will not need to see any physicians or go to a hospital. In other cases immigrants are reluctant to call the police when they needed help, a particularly troublesome situation for women in situations of domestic violence, who mentioned that while they were aware that they had "more rights in the United States as women" in case their partners abused them, they were not sure that calling the police would solve the situation. Recently in Phoenix there have been a

series of assaults on Guatemalan immigrants, mostly on those of indigenous decent, apparently by other Latino residents who see them as particularly vulnerable because many of these immigrants do not speak Spanish well and can be identified easily by their phenotype and appearance. These Guatemalans are regularly assaulted, robbed, extorted, but do not call the police because although they fear the criminals, they fear deportation even more (Gonzalez 2008). The general crackdown on undocumented immigration in Phoenix has made these Guatemalans even more afraid than only the threat of deportation. A Guatemalan man we interviewed said that he just does not leave his house when there are raids in his neighborhood, "As long as you don't leave your house, there is the fear, right? As long as you don't leave your house and you are locked in, you're fine." He said he recognized that Americans were law-abiding people and that is why they enforce their laws by conducting raids.

Some scholars argue that U.S.-born children of undocumented parents are the most vulnerable because they are a class of citizens who live subject to the disadvantages of their undocumented parents (Fix and Zimmerman 1999). Their parents' legal status keeps them from obtaining benefits to which they are entitled. In fact, there are many eligible citizen children with non-citizen parents who do not participate in benefit programs because the parents are unaware that their children are eligible or are afraid of the consequences of benefit receipt for their legal status and eventual legal citizenship (Hagan et al. 2003). Thus, the legal instability of the adult immigrants affects their children's potential for success. New border enforcement and stringent legal strategies will undoubtedly affect immigrants' links to different institutions, particularly when the immigrant parents are unsure of when or if they will ever become permanent members of society as citizens. A question remains about the effects of the devaluation of permanent residence itself, codified in immigration law, on these families and on links to other forms of citizenship, such as rights and belonging (Menjívar 2006). And although many of these children are resilient and are contributing in meaningful ways to the communities in which they live, it remains a question what effects their current predicament will have for the future of these families here and there.

Discussion and Conclusion

The case of Honduran, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan immigrants highlights the com-

plexities of parenting across borders. Many of these Central Americans migrated within the context of militarization or civil strife or its aftermath, or natural disasters, exacerbated by increasing trends of inequality worldwide. Their reception in the United States has been shaped by political decisions beyond immigration law, which has left many in legal limbo for almost two decades. This tenuous legal status influences these immigrants' parenting, both of children left behind (and family reunifications) and of children who live with them in the United States, decisively shaping parent-children relationships within the family as well as links between the family and social institutions. And whereas these immigrants' sense of parental relationships and obligations – in their countries as well as in the United States – are strongly influenced by their legal constraints, factors such as social position, like gender (and stage in the life cycle), play a significant role in the relations they maintain, the nature and degree of contact, and the expectations that both the children and the parents have of each other.

Thus, given gender ideologies that inform perceptions of motherhood and fatherhood, children have dissimilar expectations of their mothers and fathers, both when they are separated as well as when they are reunited after long separations. In the process, parents and children redefine, reorganize, and rework their relationships in ways that may not always agree with the receiving state's legal definitions of the family and in a manner that reflects the fluidity of their predicament. Individuals in families interact with institutions, such as the health care system, authorities, and schools, dealings that underscore the fragility of their social position, particularly in the context of increasingly hostile immigration regimes. As a result, the parents' and children's experiences are not easily classifiable and are more akin to blurry pictures than to black-and-white sharp images because joy and sadness, rapprochement and love, and sacrifice and fulfillment are all intertwined and can be present in these relations – both here and there.

Although some scholars have noted the corrosive effects of migration on immigrant families because sometimes it leads to the breakdown and dissolution of these units, and scholars observe that families maintain transnational ties that attenuate the negative effects of separations, I would like to note that these debates misdirect our attention from key issues regarding parenting within regimes of high international migration. As Gamburd (2000) correctly observes, when discussing the negative consequences that migration has for families, it becomes easy to blame family breakdown

simply on migration, disregarding the structural conditions that give rise to migration in the first place. Thus, the important role that factors beyond individuals' control play in parenting across borders is often overlooked or treated as secondary in favor of attention to individual characteristics and motivations. And even though during the uncertain time of separation immigrants maintain vibrant ties and regular communication (no doubt shaped by immigrants' agency and individual motivation), one must note that these often-celebrated activities and expressions of agency are enacted within crucial structural constraints (laws that prevent frequent face-to-face contact through travel or family reunification) over which individuals have no control (and, thus, are not of their own choosing).

These cases I discussed here remind us that in the face of much movement across borders, the state continues to hold great power, as it delimits, constrains, and affords rights, privileges, duties and responsibilities. Importantly, these effects are not contained within the physical borders in which immigrants live and spill over to the countries where the immigrants' originate, particularly when close ones, such as children, still live there. At the same time, the experiences of the children who live with their parents in the United States are not limited to the physical spaces in which they now live, as the structure of immigration law situates their lives in temporary spaces that include removal (or exclusion from society's benefits) at any time. Among these families, inequalities among children (between those who live here and those who live there, as well as those who live in the same house but have differential access to resources by virtue of their place of birth or legal status) surface in striking ways. Thus, as people live out the contradictions embedded in immigration law and foreign policy, lengthy separations between parents and children transform and reorient conventional notions of the family, often in complex ways. Landolt and Da (2005) insightfully document the efforts of migrant families to negotiate the spatial challenges they face and note that distance and mobility are contentious sources of power and vulnerability within these families. Importantly, from the point of view of those involved, these reconfigurations do not necessarily mean disintegration.

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Endnotes

¹ The U.S. Census of 2000 counted 823,832 Salvadorans, 487,288 Guatemalans, and 287,470 Hondurans, but there are significant undercounts in these populations.

² I do not deny that separation, divorce, and abandonment happen. I argue for a more

nuanced understanding of these dynamics, which would question the simplistic notion that migration leads to family disintegration (a popular trope that conflates physical separation with the act of migration itself).

10. There are extensive ties that have developed between the immigrants here and their families there, but frequent trips back home are highly concentrated among those who provide a link (through the delivery of goods) to people at both ends. Thus, it is the inability of many to travel that has benefited the relatively few entrepreneurs.

13. This situation is not specific to Central Americans, as other undocumented immigrants also go through great lengths to avoid detection. However, it is an integral part of the Central Americans' experience and it has lingered for an indefinite period of time.

14. Arizona voters passed Proposition 200 on November 2, 2004 and enacted into law on December 22, 2004. This law requires that state and local workers report immigration violations to federal authorities in writing. Failure to do so or to not withhold benefits from individuals who fail to provide proof of eligibility will result in a misdemeanor charge. Immigrants in uncertain statutes may be more fearful of contacting social service providers and state officials.