

# A Mother's Heart is Weighed Down with Stones: A Phenomenological Approach to the Experience of Transnational Motherhood

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**Abstract** Although recent scholarship on transnational mothers has rigorously examined the effect of migration on gender constructs and ideologies, it neglects analysis of the lived experience of separated mothers and children. In privileging the exploration of transnational separations through the single analytical lens of gender, such research reduces the embodied distress of mothers and children to mere “gender false consciousness.” This paper calls upon anthropologists to redress this oversight by undertaking a phenomenological analysis of the lived experience of transnational motherhood. Eschewing an analysis of mothers and children as isolated social roles, I show that the suffering of mothers and children is profoundly relational. Through analysis of the narratives of undocumented Salvadoran mothers residing in the U.S., I show how the strain of such mothers’ undocumented status is lived and shouldered within the intersubjective space of the family.

**Keywords** Migration · Transnational families · Phenomenology · Gender · Illegality

## Introduction

Elisabeta speaks about her son with the sparkling eyes of a new mother, although she has not seen him for 2 years now. She came to the United States after her marriage broke up and left her unable to support him and her elderly mother. She carries two photos of her son in the front of her wallet—the one she brought with her when she left him and the one her mother took of him on his fifth birthday—and regularly sends him money and gifts. As Elisabeta describes it, the transnational

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space her family inhabits is not one of liberatory subversion—either of gender norms (Parreñas 2005) or of national borders (Rouse 1991)—but is rather an intimately shared space of loss and grief. As she puts it, “I work here but my heart lies there.” This compartmentalization of Elisabeta’s life—a worker “here” but a mother in El Salvador—speaks to a division at the very core of her personhood. While women such as Elisabeta have become the new *braceras* of the twenty-first century (see Hondagneu-Sotelo 2002), their children’s lives continue to unfold in El Salvador in their absence.<sup>1</sup>

Undocumented immigrants who have left their children at home endure a compartmentalized citizenship—serving as physical laborers “here” and mothers “there.” This embodiment of the global division of labor in one individual is perhaps the ultimate contradiction, even irony, of a late capitalist economy that separates reproduction from production. Yet while scholars have portrayed the trend of transnational motherhood as a vivid symptom of the injustice of the global division of labor (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2002; Sassen 1999, 2001), it has rarely been fully explored through an *emic* perspective. Abundant scholarship has plumbed the way transnational family forms affect gender roles and ideologies, yielding insight into both the transformation and the reconstitution of gender roles through transnational mothering (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2005). Yet little research examines the embodied distress of transnational mothers, and few studies provide experience-near accounts of family life stretched across national borders.<sup>2</sup> Responding to the call for “densely descriptive and textured interpretive representations of [the] everyday life” of the undocumented (De Genova 2002, p. 421), this article explores the way that family separations are lived and negotiated within the intersubjective space between Salvadoran mothers and their children.

Most research on transnational families has narrowly focused on the effects of migration on gender and generation as ideological constructs (see Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Parreñas 2005), or on parents and children conceived of as occupying isolated social roles. Yet the self emerges within social relationships, and thus the family, may instead be conceived of as a space in which notions of “self” and “other,” or of “child” and “mother,” are coproduced. Arguing for a phenomenological anthropology, Jackson (1996) writes: “The task for anthropology is to recover the sense in which experience is situated *within* relationships and *between* persons if the lifeworld is to be explored as a field of intersubjectivity and not reduced to objective structures or subjective intentions” (p. 26). In short, transnational separations cannot be viewed solely as affecting mothers and children as isolated individuals but, rather, as impacting the intimately experienced bond

<sup>1</sup> Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo calls transnational mothers who serve as domestic workers and nannies twenty-first century *braceras*, literally meaning “disembodied pairs of arms.” The term is the feminine version of *bracero*, denoting the Mexican immigrant men who lent their physical labor to help build the U.S. agribusiness industry and railroads during the twentieth century. Under the U.S. Bracero Program, the United States officially imported 4.2 million Mexican temporary workers, largely men, to offset a domestic labor shortage.

<sup>2</sup> Exceptions include work by Suárez-Orozco (2001, 2002) and the rich account of Salvadoran family life by Menjívar (2000).

between them. Echoing Jackson's critique, Arthur Kleinman urges anthropologists to avoid dissecting our subjects' narratives into reified academic categories that ill fit lived experience. He writes: "Anthropological analyses (of pain and passion and power), when they are experience-distant, are at risk of delegitimizing their subject matter's human conditions" (Kleinman 1995, p. 96). It is ethically incumbent on anthropologists to provide experience-near accounts of human suffering as a means of "moral engagement" with the "Other," he writes (Kleinman 1999, p. 413). If transnational migration is one of our century's most pressing dramas of "pain and passion and power," then surely experience-near accounts of transnational family members are both warranted and urgent.

Recent research suggests directions in which a phenomenological study of transnational family life might proceed. In her analysis of the experience of "illegality," Willen (2007) bridges the fields of phenomenology and political anthropology as she explores how "illegality" affects migrants' experiences of being-in-the-world (p. 10). Arguing for a more richly descriptive field of migration studies, she urges scholars to examine "illegality" not only as a sociohistorical construct but also as embodied experience. Willen shows that migrants' undocumented status intimately shapes their subjective experiences—in particular, their experiences of time, space and embodiment. Careful not to essentialize the condition of "illegality" as uniform at all times and in all nation-states, Willen situates the experiences of African and Filipino migrants against the backdrop of Israel's pursuit of mass deportation policies in 2002. She presents an admirably grounded and "thickly" described account of how "illegality" produces migrants' somatized distress, fear and anxiety as they struggle to evade detection.

Willen does anthropology the service of introducing the analytical lens of phenomenology into migration studies—a development long overdue. Yet she leaves the matter of how "illegality" is intersubjectively experienced largely unexplored. As I suggest here, "illegality" does not structure individual experience alone, but sets in motion a concatenation of shared vulnerabilities and intimate interdependencies between family members. Mothers' very undocumented status within the United States not only produces their own embodied distress, but also produces a continuous feedback loop between their children's grief and their own. The topic of mother–child separations brings to the fore the way in which "illegality" is lived within the intimate space of the family—even a family no longer physically copresent. With our anthropological lens trained on lived experience rather than gender ideologies, then, how does the picture that emerges of transnational families change? How might an analysis of the way transnational families experience their cross-border immobility contribute to our knowledge of how "illegality" is intersubjectively experienced?

### **The New *Braceras***

Recent scholarship has documented the way that the increased transnational migration of women has reconfigured the shape of the immigrant family. Theorists have long noted that immigration often occurs in stages, with one family member,

once established, sending for a spouse or children (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Structured by the demand for an industrial and agricultural workforce, the classic pattern of Latino immigration had long encouraged the migration of single Mexican men. Exemplified in the *Bracero* Program, many such men were “temporary sojourners” who returned to Mexico after their work was over; others stayed and eventually sent for their wives. Yet the growth of the high-tech sector of the new postindustrial economy has instead led to an increasing demand for women—the “*braceras*” of the new service economy (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2002; Sassen 1999, 2001). As women are increasingly migrating alone to find work, this is reconfiguring the shape of the immigrant family and transnationalizing the very meaning of motherhood.

The feminization of migrant labor has coincided with changes in border enforcement policy to dramatically alter the shape of immigrant families. The 1996 passage of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (or IIRIRA) doubled the size of the Border Patrol over 5 years and increasingly criminalized the act of immigration (Andreas 1998). This act paved the way for increased deportation and family separation in border communities; for example, Hagan and Rodríguez (2002) illustrate how the policing of the border enforces physical separation among families with mixed citizenship statuses. Yet the heightened militarization of the border not only serves to divide American families in the United States, but also prevents the circular migratory flows that had formerly allowed immigrants to maintain “a transnational circuit” (Rouse 1991). In this era of heightened border militarization following IIRIRA and September 11, then, we may speak less of an unhindered mobility of people and things (Appadurai 1996) and more of the ironies of migrants’ immobility in an era of cross-border flows (see Sassen 1996). The coincidence of these two changes—the increasing inflow of women and the heightened militarization of the border—has served to increasingly separate immigrant mothers from their children.

A few studies illustrate how pervasive transnational motherhood has become among Latina immigrants. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) notes in her sample of Mexican and Central American domestic workers in Los Angeles that 40% had left behind children in their homelands. Indeed, transnational motherhood may be particularly common among Salvadoran immigrant mothers.<sup>3</sup> Salvadorans face a triple border crossing to enter the United States, each increasingly policed by governmental authorities since September 11. Many Salvadoran women migrate without their children to avoid endangering them (see Mahler 1995, pp. 54–82; Menjívar 2000, pp. 58–76). While the Salvadoran mothers I interviewed had migrated after the earthquakes that devastated San Salvador in the spring of 2001, the more stringent border enforcement after September 11 precluded their ability to send for their children. Not only were they concerned about the danger of their children’s undocumented crossings, but the very treacherousness of the border had boosted the price tag of reunification to \$6,000 per child. Meanwhile, once in the

<sup>3</sup> Among children from China, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Mexico, Carola Suárez-Orozco (2002) found that those from El Salvador and Haiti were most likely to have faced such a separation. Eighty percent of children from El Salvador had been separated from both parents during the process of immigration.

United States, mothers' tenuous legal status (Menjívar 2006) and inability to return after exiting only prolonged family separations.<sup>4</sup> Thus although many Salvadoran mothers originally envisioned their separations as only temporary, their separations have dragged on longer than either they or their children had intended.

### The Project and the Local Context

Elisabeta is one recently separated mother I met while conducting research at a Latino mental health clinic in a New England city. Now that Elisabeta can no longer hold her son, Carmelo's photo instead accompanies her wherever she goes. Yet there appears to be no risk of Carmelo's ever escaping her mind; in his absence, he occupies her as thoroughly as he did when present. She says that each weekend, when she speaks with him on the phone, she feels an aching in her chest where his infant body used to fit. His absence hurts, she says; it throbs (*palpita*) like a heart.

While Elisabeta had suffered the strain of her son's absence for 2 years, the situation deteriorated when her son became seriously ill. Each time I met with her, Elisabeta would recount her everyday struggles to make good on her promise to send him money and to eventually reunite. Having lost her job, Elisabeta now feels an acute sense of failure at her inability to perform the one role she had promised him—that of provider. Unable to return to visit her son, she is simultaneously unable to pay for the operation he needs. Her immobility and Carmelo's illness compound each other in a recurring cycle of distress. When they speak on the phone, he cries for her in his illness. As she lies awake at night, unable to sleep, his words and tears reverberate through the silence of her empty room. Elisabeta's narrative vividly evokes the embodied distress of transnational mothers, as well as the relational nature of their suffering.

I first became interested in the experiences of Elisabeta and of other transnational mothers while conducting a previous project at this clinic on disparities in mental health for Latino immigrants. While interviewing clinicians about the mental health problems their Latino immigrant patients faced, I found that many underscored the role played by family separation in precipitating immigrants' depression and anxiety. They told stories of families fractured and reconstituted through the contingencies of immigration, leaving long-standing legacies of hurt, mistrust and trauma. Family separation has long characterized the family stage mode of migration, in particular, and yet scholarship is only beginning to recognize separation as an independent source of stress on immigrant mental health (see Suárez-Orozco 2002). Recent research in mental health has suggested that trauma

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<sup>4</sup> One study of immigrant children in the Pico-Union area of Los Angeles found that half the Salvadoran children in a first-grade class had siblings in El Salvador (cited by Hondagneu-Sotelo 2002, p. 260). Marcelo and Carola Suárez-Orozco found that 96% of Salvadoran children in their sample had been separated from one or more parent during the process of immigration, and 80% had been separated specifically from their mothers. They found that such separations also often last longer for Salvadoran children than for children from any other immigrant group. Forty-nine percent of the Salvadoran children in their sample had been separated from their mother for 5 years or more (Suárez-Orozco 2002, p. 631).

may be transmissible intergenerationally, yet the dearth of ethnographic studies of family life make it particularly difficult to speculate on what causal mechanisms are at work (as an exception see Dickson-Gómez 2002). Since analyses of mental health are frequently positioned at the individual level, they neglect the broader ethnographic picture of how such changes are lived and endured in the intersubjective space between parent and child (see Kleinman 1999, p. 358; Kleinman et al. 1997). Apart from a few rich portrayals in film and in literature, there has been little analysis of the emotional toll of such separations on immigrant families, and how family members cope with them.

With the help of clinicians, I began formulating a research project on recent immigrants' experiences of the separation from their children and its role in their mental health history. Clinicians identified fathers and mothers within their practices who were currently separated from one or more child, and whom they believed to be resilient enough not to be further traumatized by discussing the issue. I also recruited potential participants from English classes at a local social service agency. To gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in individuals' own terms, I conducted multiple interviews with individuals over the course of 6 months. I asked them to explain the circumstances in which they became separated from their children, how they made sense of the separation, how they dealt with it, how it affected their daily lives and how it affected their relations with their children.

This paper is based on intensive interviews with 12 Salvadoran mothers about their experiences of separation from their children. I interviewed six recently separated Salvadoran mothers in the Northeast who had been in the United States less than 5 years, supplemented by interviews with six Salvadoran mothers who had since reunited with their children in the United States.<sup>5</sup> I specifically analyze the narratives of recently separated mothers, as these were the ones who were currently living their separations and thus provided the most detailed accounts. Because I received many of my referrals through clinicians whom the women knew and trusted, the interviews were rich in discussions of the emotional issues family separation causes and the way the burden is shared between parents and children.

Salvadoran mothers' experiences of living apart from their children must be contextualized within the particular history of Salvadoran migration to the Northeast. Salvadorans have been migrating to the region in high numbers since the early 1980s, when the civil war between the Salvadoran state and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) began. Although the civil war officially ended with a peace accord in 1992, gang violence, unemployment, and high rates of poverty and hunger continue to haunt the country and its citizens (Dickson-Gómez 2002). Moreover, a series of earthquakes struck El Salvador in 2001, leaving more

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<sup>5</sup> I also conducted interviews with five fathers who had been or currently were separated from their families in El Salvador. I found that separated fathers expressed their pain over their separations from their children through different emotional registers; their interviews were less rich in discussions of their relationships with their children. I focus on the experiences of mothers here not out of an essentialized idea of the bonds of motherhood—that is, because I presume them to have closer bonds with their children—but, rather, because gender clearly shapes the manner in which such family separations are experienced and expressed. For a rich discussion of the way that undocumented Latino men's experiences of occupational injury are refracted through their own roles as transnational breadwinners, see Walter et al. (2004).

than 1.5 million people without adequate shelter and tens of thousands without jobs. Thus while the women I interviewed are officially deemed “economic” rather than “political” migrants (see Pedraza-Bailey 1985), they suffer from *nervios* and other somatic symptoms due to the structural violence of poverty and trauma, compounded by long-standing conditions of political violence (Jenkins 1991).

In 2001, the United States extended Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Salvadoran immigrants in recognition of the severity of the earthquakes. TPS is a temporary immigration status granted those immigrants deemed unable to safely return to their countries of origin due to war, natural disasters, or other “extraordinary and temporary conditions.” It enables immigrants to legally work in the United States for a maximum of 18 months.<sup>6</sup> While TPS allows the bearer to legally live and work in the United States, she is required to be continuously physically present and thus cannot legally return after having departed. Thus although only one mother I interviewed had TPS, this did not enhance her ability to visit her children. For both undocumented mothers and those with TPS alike, the irony of the coincidence of the Salvadoran earthquakes and the terrorist attacks of September 11 tightened the border and radically diminished the possibility of their family’s reunification.

Popular articles on immigrant families often instrumentalize family ties, converting the emotion and affect of childbearing into calculative ploys for American citizenship. Portraying “welfare migrants” and mothers planning “anchor babies” (see Cosman 2005), such media suggests that immigrants are outside the bounds not only of the nation (Chavez 1991, 1994), but of humanity.<sup>7</sup> I suggest that the dearth of existing scholarship on the issue may stem in part from what Laurence Kirmayer (2003) calls a “failure of imagination”—or a failure to fully grasp the moral ambiguity inherent in the difficult choices presented to immigrant parents. Many Salvadoran parents inhabit a local moral world defined by a paradox in parenthood unfamiliar to many Americans, as they must make a dichotomous choice between financially supporting their children and physically serving as their caretakers (see Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Although the Salvadoran mothers I interviewed had expected to reunite with their children within months after their departure, they found that the tightening of the border and their inability

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<sup>6</sup> The United States granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to an estimated 290,000 undocumented Salvadoran migrants living in the United States after the earthquakes of 2001. This initial TPS was due to expire in 2002, but the U.S. government has since extended it several times. In the fall of 2007, the U.S. government extended the TPS status of such immigrants for the fifth time. This extension of TPS for Salvadorans is now due to expire on March 9, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Some ethnography has explicitly challenged such damaging stereotypes. Debunking the myth of the “welfare migrant,” for example, Chavez et al. (1992) show that there is little evidence that immigrants migrate to the United States in search of health or welfare services. The authors instead show that undocumented immigrants underutilize health care services, often forgoing both preventive and acute, even emergency, care (21). They purposely avoid seeking public health services due to their fear of being labeled a “public charge” and being deported (Chavez et al. 1992, p. 8; see also Ku and Freilich 2001). Moreover, in rare cases in which the undocumented receive medical insurance through their employers, many are afraid that using it would upset them (Chavez et al. 1992, p. 18). Under the Immigration Reform and Control Act, even legalized immigrants cannot use health or welfare services for a period of 5 years after their legalization.

to reach their economic goals had indefinitely prolonged their separation. These parents do not tell their stories with a sense of righteous victimhood but, rather, with a sense of profound moral failing, their perceived inability to serve as proper parents only extended and reinforced by their inability to succeed economically. Placing issues of “choice” and “decision making” against the backdrop of a context of limited agency, I examine how parents’ immobility and powerlessness due to their “illegality” in the United States reverberates through the space of a family stretched across borders.

### **Worlds Reshaped by Trauma**

Gloria’s narrative illustrates the causes of such separations. Gloria is an immigrant from Departamento Cuscatlán, an area of El Salvador hard hit by the devastating earthquakes of January and February 2001. Gloria vividly remembers her thoughts in the first few minutes after the quake hit. As her eyes widen and her hands tremble like the walls that crumbled around her, she relives the events that changed her life. “I was working in my business and the walls began shaking, the ground began moving. Then I looked across the street and saw a building collapse.” The first thought that flashed across Gloria’s mind was which child to retrieve. She was faced with a dichotomous choice. Her daughter was across town at school while her two baby boys were at her home with their babysitter. Gloria first retrieved her daughter from school and then ran to find her two sons—then 1-year-old and 4 months old—alone in her house, the babysitter having fled. This sense of irreconcilable family obligations continued to haunt Gloria, prefiguring her sense of conflicting obligations when she left her children in El Salvador to support them from the United States.

For Gloria, the earthquake had left her birthplace a space of death and scarcity. As she remembered, “There were dead bodies everywhere.” Not only did the quake radically transform a familiar place, but also set in motion her need to migrate. The small businesses she and her husband had established had been destroyed, and she and her husband could not survive on the pittance the Salvadoran government gave families affected by the quake. Her husband found a meager salary in helping the government rebuild houses. Her mother was unable to work because of a case of nerves, exacerbated by her own anxiety during the quake. It was after the second quake hit El Salvador just weeks after the first that Gloria decided to leave: “There wasn’t enough food to give the kids. There was no way for me to keep them alive. And so I came here,” she says.

Rosa, from the town of Zacatecoluca, experienced a similar ordinary trauma that led to her own decision to leave, a trauma she also continues to carry with her. While Rosa was not affected by the quake, she inhabited a part of the countryside where peasants scarcely had enough to eat. After she had been married for 4 years, her husband left for the United States, promising that he would earn enough money to build the family a house. He had been in the United States for a year when she stopped hearing from him and he stopped sending their three children money. “He forgot them,” she says. Rosa spent another 3 years waiting for him. During this



time, she was barely able to feed her children from her own plot of land; her stepfather, who had once worked the land, grew ill, and her mother suffered nerves.

When there was still no word from her husband and feeding her children became even more difficult, she decided to immigrate herself. Rosa found out later that he had left El Salvador with another woman, with whom he was cohabiting in Washington, D.C. In her mind, her husband's departure necessitated her own. "If he hadn't left with another woman, then all of this would never have happened," she says. Thus for Gloria and Rosa, like the other women I spoke to, traumatic events reconfigured familiar places and people and precipitated their decisions to migrate.

### *El Corazon de Madre es un Montón de Piedras*

If life in El Salvador had become impossible for Gloria and Rosa, the circumstances surrounding their departure were no less wrenching. Mothers such as Gloria and Rosa remember the days preceding their departure as full of strained conversations in which they attempted to explain to their children their decisions to leave. They were confronted with a conflict in their parental obligations—providing for their children necessitated being physically absent from them—and yet such adult choices make little sense to children. In their explanations to their children, these mothers attempted to shield them from the emotional strain of their predicament. They reinscribed their decision to leave within a framework of continuing parental care, stating that they were exchanging their physical presence for their children's wellbeing and livelihood. Yet suffering is intersubjective, and children and parents negotiate the shared burden of survival together. Children may be sensitive to the strains felt by adults (Miller 1996; Perez-Foster 2001) and often attempted to challenge the very grounds of the necessity for the exchange.

The days leading up to parents' departures were frequently filled with intense bargaining between parents and children, bargaining in which children attempted to take on adult sacrifices so that parents would stay. Gloria's case provides an example. When Gloria told her children that she would have to leave for the United States, Angela, the eldest, was 7. Gloria remembers her pained exchange with Angela as if it had occurred yesterday, laboriously narrating each verbal block and parry. Gloria told Angela that she was not able to earn enough to feed her and her siblings if she stayed in El Salvador. Angela responded that she wanted to come along. Gloria told her she couldn't bring her because of the danger involved in the month-long trek. Angela responded that she wouldn't eat for a month to save money so that her mother could stay. In this way, Angela attempted to help shoulder her mother's burden of providing for the family in order to prevent her departure.

If Angela offered her mother the sacrifice of starving herself to secure her physical presence, Rosa's eldest daughter offered her mother her own ability to labor. Rosa's difficulty in saving money had prolonged her separation from her children, a fact of which her eldest was well aware. Unable to find a job in a restaurant or as a cleaning lady, Rosa had instead decided to put her mothering skills to work by caring for another's child. The recipient of Rosa's attentions is Loreni, the 2-year-old daughter of Rosa's Mexican immigrant neighbors. Every day, from

their departure at 6 a.m. until their return at 4 p.m., Rosa cares for her ward. She works a total of 60 h a week for the modest sum of \$75.

Rosa's eldest daughter, Luisa, jealously seeks details about Rosa's ward during their phone calls, concerned that this "new child" might supplant her place in Rosa's affections. Like Angela, she offers to shoulder adult burdens to secure her mother's physical presence. Rosa remembers the pleas of her eldest as she bargained with her. "Mami, bring me along, I will study and get a good job to help you out," Luisa had said. Rosa remembers: "She says, 'Take me. I will stay home and take care of Loreni so you can go out and work.'" Rosa has to remind Angela of the original reason at the root of her departure—that she has exchanged her ability to be physically present with her children for her ability to secure their material sustenance. When her children tell her they miss her on the phone, Rosa reminds them of the very reasons she left. "Do you want me to return so we can all eat *tortillas con sal* [tortillas and salt] together?" She asks them sharply. "Then they tell me no, that I shouldn't leave what with the little I am able to send them," she says. Rosa's reference to having to eat tortillas and salt—the bare minimum of food necessary to withstand starvation—serves as her reminder that family unity would come at the price of hunger.

Such negotiations establish a pattern in which mothers feel profound moral failure in not being able to serve as physical caretakers for their children, a failure they've exchanged for securing their children's financial and physical wellbeing. As children challenge their mothers' absence, mothers attempt to situate their migration in a context of continuing love. Yet children respond to what they perceive as their mothers' withdrawal of love with their very own withdrawal. When Gloria told Angela that she would not permit her to sacrifice by not eating for a month, Angela was forced to resort to the only bargaining chip left her. This is the conversation that runs through Gloria's head every morning and every evening before work, the conversation that prompted her to seek help at the mental health clinic. "My daughter then told me she had erased me from her heart, and that she didn't love me anymore," Gloria remembers with heavy words. According to Gloria, this statement turned her heart to stone. "*El corazon de madre es un monton de piedras*," she says. ("A mother's heart is weighed down with a mountain of stones.") This reference to the heavy weight of motherhood evokes the burden Gloria has assumed in suffering the anger of her children while only wishing to protect them from hunger. The day that Gloria was to leave her home, she did not say goodbye in order to prevent further recriminations. "They were already dead," she says.

Gloria's statement that a mother's heart is weighed down with stones, and Rosa's defensive image of eating *tortillas con sal*, conjure up the failure that parents feel when confronted with the ramifications of their "choices." They attempt to reemphasize the original reasons for their departure, reminding their children that the separation is only temporary. Yet despite mothers' attempts to shield their children from the pain of their own decision, children in turn attempt to shoulder adult burdens to prevent their mother's departure. These exchanges vividly demonstrate that suffering is always relational—it has social causes, is experienced in social ways and damages social relations (Kleinman et al. 1997). Transnational

separations strain the bond between mother and child, as mothers' relative immobility reverberates throughout a family stretched across borders.

### **Transnational Families: Gender Ideologies and Lived Experience**

Recent research on the phenomenon of “global childhood” has taken a different approach to transnational motherhood, focusing narrowly on the way that patriarchal gender ideologies shape children's experiences of the transnational family. Parreñas (2005), for example, examines how the migration of women in the Philippines has the potential to transform the institution of the family, as mothers' new assumption of a breadwinner role conflicts with deeply ingrained gender norms. She shows that the media and religious institutions blame motherless families for a variety of moral and familial pathologies, including incest and child abuse. Yet she suggests that such powerfully normative gender ideologies also play a large role in shaping the distress of children of transnational mothers.

While the data in Parreñas's book focus on her 69 interviews with children in transnational families (2005, p. 8), her analytical gaze remains resolutely locked on the gender ideologies that constrain transnational mothers and their children. Both parents and children, she argues, vigorously work to “reconstitute” normative gender roles threatened by mothers' new status as breadwinners located across oceans. While mothers attempt to follow traditional gender roles through “intensive mothering” from afar, she argues that children's “cries of abandonment increase the more their families deviate from the conventional gender scripts of the Filipino family” (p. 11). Largely ignoring the real distress produced by immigration policies that prolong family separations initially imagined as temporary, Parreñas dogmatically points to the ideal of the patriarchal family as the culprit of such distress. She views the more strident cries of children of mother-away families as evidence of the continued grip—indeed, the “ideological stranglehold” (p. 125)—of the idea of the nuclear family among transnational family members.

Parreñas notes that scholars often take one of two scholarly approaches to analyzing the family—either as a structure of experience or as an institution. If they take the first approach, scholars typically explore the daily lives and experiences of individuals who share material resources and provide each other with material, physical and emotional care. If they take the second, they instead view the family as an institution embedded within particular social meanings and constructed by ideological norms and power relations (Parreñas 2005, p. 33). Parreñas's analysis of transnational Filipino families clearly privileges the latter approach. While neatly dissecting the Filipino gender norms that inform dominant constructions of the family, she pays less attention to mothers' and children's experiences of their separations. Indeed, when Parreñas does examine the emotions of Filipino children in mother-away families, she reduces their distress to a reactionary response to mothers' troubling of the patriarchal gender norms that structure the family. In short, the family-as-institution triumphs over the family-as-experience in Parreñas's analysis, and children's distress is ascribed more to unbending patriarchal gender ideologies than to rigid immigration policies.

While children's complaints may indeed reiterate patriarchal assumptions about gender, their emotional distress surely cannot be ascribed to normative gender ideologies alone. By analyzing the transnational family through the single lens of gender hegemony, Parreñas's analysis does a form of epistemological violence to human distress. Privileging her distanced theoretical lens over her subjects' narratives, she reduces children's complaints of abandonment to what may be seen as a form of "gender false consciousness." As the cases of Angela and Luisa have shown, however, children's concerns lie far from the reconstitution of normative family roles; they each indeed offer their own gender and age trespasses to secure their mothers' continued presence. In short, an analysis of transnational families that neglects the shared dependencies and vulnerable intimacies between mother and child fails anthropology's legacy of holism. It illustrates the "estranging effects of conceptual models" which—phenomenologist Michael Jackson argues—"disqualify and efface the very life one wants to understand" (1996, p. 3).

To fill in the lacuna on the lived experience of such separations in the anthropological literature on transnational families, I aim to understand the experience of separation in immigrant parents' and children's own terms. While Salvadoran mothers' distress may be magnified by their perceptions of themselves as deviating from prescribed gender roles, their narratives of grief overwhelmingly underscore the relational and shared nature of their suffering. As the weight of mothers' economic insecurity and liminal legal status is shouldered by a family stretched across national boundaries, such emotional distress is borne by mothers and children alike.

### Substitute Parents

We have seen that mothers attempted to situate their decision to migrate within a context of continuing care, noting that their ability to support their children precluded their ability to be present with them. Within the logic of this exchange, gifts and remittances become a strategy of "mothering at a distance" (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Because of the relative ease with which they cross international borders compared to their donors, gifts and remittances become the currency of transnational love (see Horton 2008). They must substitute for parental affection, commodities whose very interestedness (Bourdieu 1977) lies in the assuaging of loss and guilt.

Most separated mothers I interviewed recounted the goods and luxuries they were able to provide for their children because of their migration, goods intended to assure their children of the continuity of their love. Gloria and her husband sent their children toys and luxuries they had never before enjoyed—a color TV, a VCR, a freezer, brand-name clothing, jewelry, comforters, and toy cars. As Gloria thinks back on the comforts she provided her children, her face lights up in a smile. She rattles the objects off in a long list, each item punctuated by the phrase "which we never had over there." "*Casi todo*" ("Almost everything"), she says. Her children wear the bracelets and new clothes to school; they are popular and receive invitations for playdates from friends who wish to share in their good fortune.

“Their friends tell them that they have the best mother in the world,” she says, laughing with pride. Gloria’s goal for her children is that they become educated and successful; she wants to “give them everything that I couldn’t give them before when I was living with them.” Each time Gloria sends them gifts she feels a sudden surge of happiness with the fulfillment of her aim of financial support.

Before her husband followed her to the United States, the youngest had asked him to bring him back toy cars he could drive. “*Grandotes*” (“Big ones”), he had said, specifying the length with his hands. Three months later, after he had found a job in the United States and had accumulated a small savings, Gloria’s husband made good on his promise. When her son opened the package, he was “jumping, shouting” with glee; “My happiness can’t fit in my chest,” he told his parents over the phone. But for Gloria, her pride at fulfilling this goal is soon tempered by her remembrance of the void such gifts attempt to fill. Her smallest children tell her they are happy with their toys, but when will she come and walk them to kindergarten like the other children’s mothers do? “I feel so happy when I hear their joy and know I did well,” she says. Yet when the recriminations begin, her heart sinks. “But then the sadness comes over me.”

For Gloria and Rosa, gifts serve to bridge national borders; they yoke together “here” and “there.” In a framed photo in her living room, Rosa’s youngest son in El Salvador beams from underneath an oversized Boston Red Sox cap. Such gifts justify parents’ decision to migrate, carrying with them the newfound power of parents as transnational breadwinners. As Gloria notes proudly, her gift of two dollar bills is worth close to 20 dollars in El Salvador. “American dollars multiply more over there,” she says. This idea of the increased potency of American money further illustrates the gift as a transfer of parental power—power that is simultaneously personal and political economic. Through gifts and remittances, immigrant parents convert the greater earning power they are able to derive from the American economy into benefits for their Salvadoran children.

Yet such gifts are not only of material significance, but carry with them the spirit of the benefactor (Mauss 1990). For Gloria and Rosa, gifts are the only means through which their presence can cross international boundaries. They carry promises of the continuity of parental love, their power derived from a conflation of the object with the parent (p. 20). In each letter Gloria sends her children, she adds a photo of herself and her husband, accompanied by the coveted dollar bills. These gifts serve as substitutes for parental presence; the very logic of exchange converts parental emotion—both love and guilt—into material support.

Yet if material goods are a proxy for parental love, then children themselves refuse the logic by which a parental presence is transubstantiated into possessions. Gloria knows that to Angelia, her gifts are double-edged; they both symbolize her love and justify her absence. On the one hand, Angela is thrilled with her new toys—a wristband with her name engraved on it and a doll that can speak in both English and Spanish. Yet there are days when, for Angela, such gifts cannot fill a void. Gloria says: “There are times that she screams at me over the telephone. She says that there are other things than earning money. She says she prefers poverty to all her pretty things—so long as she never has to be alone again.” In fact, Gloria

now worries because Angela has become adverse to being alone; she refuses to walk to school by herself, even though it is a mere two blocks from her home.

Similarly, Rosa's eldest daughter, Luisa, reproaches Rosa for having missed her 13th birthday. While Luisa's cousins visited her from Honduras, Rosa was unable to make the trek without forfeiting the temporary work permit that allows her to stay in the United States. But Luisa does not understand this. "You only send me things; you don't visit and you barely call. How can I know you love me?" Luisa asks her mother. Thus if such goods attempt to substitute for parental presence, children's acceptance of them is often conditional; they accept the goods while refusing the transubstantiation.

### **"Luisa" and "Louise": Starting Duplicate Families**

While others have examined the sending of gifts as a common strategy of "mothering at a distance" (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2005), the strategy of women forming "duplicate families" to be able to support their families "back there" has been less fully examined. For women whose breadwinning efforts fell short of their targeted earning goals, starting new families was a means of obtaining the security of a male breadwinner who might help their Salvadoran children. In starting another family, such women perhaps aimed to salve "an ambiguous loss" (Falicov 2002, p. 274) of their initial families by more resolutely establishing their ties to the United States. Yet such "duplicate families" in turn create strains within immigrants' original families, as they lead to contestations of maternal loyalty.

Rosa's case provides an example. Two photos of children occupy her living room—each symmetrically balanced on either side of her television. Dominating the center of the wall, they serve as a shrine to her dual family loyalties. One photo features her two children born in America—a girl of 3 years and a baby boy of 4 months. Opposite it stands a photo of her three children in El Salvador—a girl of 13 and boys of 11 and 5. Rosa has tucked a Western Union stub into the bottom of this photo frame—a sign, in her words, "that I have not forgotten them."

Since her husband had left her for another woman when she was only 23, Rosa has long been in search of another breadwinner who will help her support her three Salvadoran children. Yet this task has become even more urgent once Rosa migrated to the United States and accrued the new expenses of rent and food. When she first came to the United States, Rosa's only family—her stepfather's sister—took her in. She allowed Rosa to stay with her provided that she cooked and cleaned. During the day, Rosa worked in a restaurant washing dishes, and at night she served her stepfather's sister. But when this woman began requiring that Rosa sign her paycheck over to her (see Menjívar [2000, pp. 115–156] on such perceived family betrayals), Rosa decided she had to leave the house. Rosa blames this occurrence on her "bad luck." Yet, significantly, it prevented her from obtaining her main goal in immigrating to the United States—that of "sending money home to my children."

Rosa found herself alone in the area, with no kin and no men on whom to rely. Shortly afterward, she began dating a Salvadoran whom she had met through her kin—a man who helped pay her rent and provide for her children. Within a year, they had begun a family of their own. While this new husband may have partly helped Rosa solve the dilemma of how to provide for her children in El Salvador, he also brought Rosa new dilemmas. When her new baby girl was born, Rosa named her “Louise,” after her own Salvadoran daughter, “Luisa.”

This duplicate family has been a source of both comfort and guilt for Rosa, who must deal with the jealousy and recriminations of her children back home. She did not tell her children back home that she had met a new man until she was pregnant, 4 years after they had first begun seeing each other. When she did tell her children she was pregnant, the criticism began. “Soon enough, you’ll forget about us,” Luisa, her eldest, told her. When Rosa—in a gesture of affection—told Luisa that the new baby was named after her, Luisa felt as though she had been replaced. “*Mami, me robaste un pedazo de mi nombre,*” she said (“Mommy, you stole a piece of my name from me”). This reference to the child’s name as a “theft” of her own indicates Luisa’s view of the name “Louise” as a violation of their unique mother–child bond through the attempt to create an “American” version of the child who could not be present.

Soon the gifts that Rosa had sent her children were not enough to appease them. The knowledge that Rosa had two new children who received her maternal devotion made the money and gifts she sent to El Salvador appear a poor substitute. “They say that we give these kids everything, but it’s not so. They say that these kids go around with expensive clothes, everything brand-name, that we too wear expensive clothes,” she says. Thus Rosa’s Salvadoran children question her loyalty through the only means available to them—the logic by which material things substitute for maternal love.

### **Death and Illness: Concretizing Ambiguous Losses**

As Celia Falicov writes, although the experience of leaving one country and moving to another has been compared to the loss incurred by death and bereavement, the mourning involved is instead “incomplete, postponed, ambiguous.” While immigration involves the loss of familiar people and places, the mourning of such losses is often deferred, as “everything is still alive but is just not immediately reachable or present” (Falicov 2002, p. 274). Yet the experience of death in the family back home or the experience of extreme illness of a young child concretize such ambiguous losses, making them suddenly both immediate and urgent. Two women among those I interviewed faced situations in which a death in the family and an illness of a child brought an overwhelming immediacy to the loss of family separation, one that prompted them to seek clinical attention.

Carmen began coming to the clinic for therapy in November, when conflict with her new husband seemed to threaten the viability of the marriage. For her, this conflict recalled her earlier struggles with her former husband in El Salvador, who had later abandoned her, raising fears of a second abandonment and a separation

from this second set of children. She began reliving her prior separation at night, unable to sleep. Compounding this sudden immediacy of her prior separation were two recent deaths in her immediate family in El Salvador—that of her brother and that of her grandmother. Unable to return to El Salvador for their funerals, she felt unable to properly discharge her family obligations. “I think of my grandmother and am sad I could not be there to honor her, and sad I cannot be with my family to support them.”

Similarly, Elisabeta first visited the clinic shortly after her son Carmelo became gravely ill. For 3 months he had been sallow and refused to eat; Elisabeta’s mother told her he would only drink milk. Her mother took him to a doctor in the city for an exam and was told he had a “blood problem.” The doctor said that the operation Carmelo needed to ameliorate his condition would cost 3,000 pesos. Exacerbating this already-difficult situation, Elisabeta had been out of work for 2 months and was no longer able to send home money. When she called her mother, she hoped for reassurances, but her mother was herself distraught. For Elisabeta, Carmelo’s illness has driven home the ramifications of her own immobility. “We’re struggling for him to get better. He cries and says he wants to be with me. But I can’t,” she says. Now she stays up nights worrying about him, frustrated that her main goal in being in the United States—to earn money—has failed. “It makes you feel very powerless, very ineffective. And the most difficult part is not being able to return; being stuck here and then not being able to work,” she says.

### “Illegality” and Social Suffering

Elisabeta’s and Carmen’s sense of powerlessness in the face of family members’ illness or death illustrates the sociolegal context within which distress is produced. Following Willen’s (2007) “critical phenomenology” of “illegality,” one might say that their undocumented status produces a gendered form of embodied distress. In his analysis of the social production of “illegality,” De Genova (2002) urges anthropologists to work to denaturalize the category, revealing it as an “abstraction produced as an effect of the practical materiality of the law” (p. 424). It is incumbent on scholars, he argues, to examine exactly how sociolegal structures produce the category of the “illegal” and create their material effects. He notes that to study “immigrants” or “illegal aliens” conceived of as apart from the very legal structures that produce them would naturalize this social category, reproducing the very epistemological violence inherent in the ideological constructs of the state. He urges specificity in the studies of “illegality,” enjoining scholars to attend to the “historical specificity of contemporary migrations” (p. 421). By situating this study of transnational mothers against the specific backdrop of Salvadorans’ “liminal legality” in the United States (Menjívar 2006), this paper examines the very gendered ways in which the strains of undocumented status are experienced (see also Walter et al. 2004).

Yet at the same time that he calls for specificity, De Genova (2002) notes the historical complicity of social scientists in producing studies of the undocumented that are of primary interest only to the state, obscuring the “densely descriptive and



textured interpretive representations of everyday life that sociocultural anthropologists tend to relish” (p. 421). He calls for an ethnography of the undocumented that will challenge such dominant representations. De Genova thus describes the contours of a serious ethical dilemma for the ethnographer—one in which the “ideological conceits” of the state eclipse the “perspectives and experiences” of the undocumented, and all the while analyses of the “undocumented” as such serve to perpetuate a form of “epistemic violence.” Yoking the study of subjective experience to political anthropology, I suggest that an examination of the everyday dilemmas caused by “illegality” is one way to skirt the contours of the ethical quandary that De Genova has outlined for us. Sociolegal and subjective analyses are conjoined, and indeed necessarily so, in the study of family relations that are severed due to migrants’ varying legal statuses. The lived experience of undocumented status—in particular, the immobility and uncertainty it implies—is thrown into sharp relief by the dilemmas of family separation during family-stage migration. Bridging the gap between objective structure and subjective experience, this paper has examined families’ lived experiences of separation within the context of immigration policies that enforce such separations.

In calling for a phenomenological account of transnational family life, this paper follows in the vein of studies of “political subjectivity” that show how sociopolitical inequality shapes individual affect and produces specific patterns of social suffering (Good and Good 1988; Good et al. 1988; Jenkins 1991). This school of thought suggests that, rather than seeing transnational mothers’ distress through only a psychodynamic lens, we examine it within a broader framework of social conditions that reproduce powerlessness and disadvantage. Moving beyond a simplistic attribution of distress to structural factors without specifying the concrete pathways through which structural violence works, sophisticated work illustrates the very gendered ways that undocumented immigrants may experience the distress of strained family ties (see Walter et al. 2004). In a similar manner, transnational mothers’ feelings of demoralization and depression stem from broader sociolegal structures that in turn produce their specifically gendered experiences of vulnerability.

However, in a departure from studies that have focused on the sociopolitical patterning solely of individual distress, I have foregrounded the way that mothers’ distress is both relational and shared. Any “critical phenomenology” of the experience of “illegality” must take into account how this “marker of disadvantage” and relative powerlessness (Kleinman 1999, p. 390) affects social relations as well. Analyses of the way in which “illegality” affects the experience of families would not be complete without attention to the intersubjective dimensions of this form of social suffering. In short, the embodied distress of Salvadoran mothers stems from a sociolegal system that renders them “illegal,” producing an immobility and powerlessness that can be felt across borders.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, Salvadoran mothers experience a compartmentalized citizenship—their work and motherhood responsibilities unevenly distributed across

national spaces. They endure the absent presence of their children—children they can hear but never see and never touch. All made it clear that the heightened border enforcement since 2001 had precluded the possibility of their return to El Salvador, and had increased the expense and danger of attempting to send for their children through *coyotes*. Thus, while scholars had once celebrated the “transnational circuits” through which migrants and goods flowed (Rouse 1991), seemingly unfettered, the women I interviewed instead spoke of immobility and fractured family ties. Physically absent but recognized and remembered in El Salvador, they are physically present yet invisible and disavowed in the United States. Neither citizens nor transnationals, they are noncitizens whose very noncitizenship is immobilizing.

And yet, such mothers do not bear the strain of their immobility alone; suffering is not merely individual but, rather, shared and intersubjective. As we have seen, mothers and their children together shoulder the burdens of poverty and undocumented migration. In the days before their departures, mothers’ negotiations with their children illustrate the shared distribution of their social vulnerability. Mothers attempted to reinscribe their decision to leave within a framework of continuing parental care, stating that they were exchanging their physical presence for their children’s wellbeing and livelihood. Yet their children attempted to strike their own bargain, hoping to assume adult burdens to ensure their parents’ continued presence. Within the logic of the exchange that mothers have negotiated, gifts and remittances become the currency of transnational love; they are the only means through which parental presence can cross international boundaries. Yet children often contest the grounds of this exchange. As mothers’ undocumented status indefinitely prolongs family separations, their social vulnerability reverberates within the intersubjective space of the family, an intimate space stretched across national borders.

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