

ONE Sacrifice

Paula is lucky.¹ Paula has worked seventy hours each week since 2001, when she arrived in New Jersey. Each morning at 9 A.M. she leaves the apartment she rents near the train tracks in a small suburban town for her first shift at a fast-food restaurant. In mid-afternoon she crosses the street to her second job, at another fast-food chain, returning home around 11 P.M. most nights. Unlike the other five Mexicans who share her apartment, Paula can walk to both jobs and has not been out of work since she arrived. Paula's housemates have schedules as busy as her own; in any given week they rarely interact. Even when they are home at the same time, they usually do not spend time together. Paula and the others typically use their little free time resting or watching TV in their bedrooms, behind closed doors (or behind the sheet of the makeshift bedroom in the living room). The only common area, the kitchen, sits

largely unused. Paula eats most of her meals at work, and the men she lives with do not cook. When Paula lived in Oregon, she made extra money between shifts cooking for the family she lived with. But now, after working in kitchens all week long, cooking is the last thing Paula wants to do on her only day off.

Thousands of miles away, in Puebla, Mexico, the home where Paula's daughter, Cindy, lives with Paula's cousin and his family is quite different. The house is rarely unoccupied. In the morning, while Paula's cousin and his wife are at work as schoolteachers, fifteen-year-old Cindy is at home with her seventeen-year-old second cousin Lola. The two teenagers tend the family's storefront fruit and vegetable stand while doing homework. Around 2:30 in the afternoon, the adults return from work with their eight-year-old daughter in tow. Cindy sits down with the family to enjoy the midday meal before heading off to school in the afternoon. In the evening, Cindy watches TV with her "sisters" or talks on the phone with friends before going to bed. Though the three-story home is teeming with life, it is not overcrowded. Once the addition was added about five years ago, with the help of Paula's earnings, everyone got his or her own room. Cindy's weekend routine is also busy, but not hectic. She often helps shop for fresh food supplies for the store, and she attends Mass. Paula's cousin and his wife have many friends and often are invited to various social functions; Cindy attends most of these events with them as part of the family.²

The contrast between Paula's life and that of her family in Puebla may seem striking, but it is familiar to the nearly five hundred thousand Mexicans who migrated to the United States every year between 2003 and 2006.³ Tens of thousands like Paula have voluntarily left their children in Mexico to come across the international border to work.⁴ These migrants have made a remarkable but common parenting decision: they have chosen to move to places in the United States where they can earn more money for their labor while their children have remained behind in Mexico, where the cost of living is low. In this sense, migration is a gamble; by leaving their children, migrant parents hope to better provide for them. Their migration and hard work represent a sacrifice of everyday comforts for the sake of their children and their children's future.

Mexican migrant parents' commitments to their children may not be all that different from those of working parents in the United States. Like many others, Mexican migrants put in long hours on the job and entrust the care of their children to others.⁵ They expect that through continued participation in the labor force, they will be able to enhance their children's opportunities. They feel conflicted about their decisions over how to reconcile the demands of work and family life.⁶ But transnational parents work thousands of miles away from their children. They are unable to see their children at the end of every day, and the sacrifice involved in their work decisions is enormous.

How do migrant parents and children manage living apart? What are the costs of such a sacrifice? Drawing on interviews and fieldwork with more than 140 members of Mexican families and in schools in both central New Jersey and south-central Mexico, this book answers these questions. It is the first contemporaneous study of family members' experiences of separation that includes the perspectives of mothers, fathers, children, and children's caregivers. Although restrictive U.S. immigration policies and the rise in deportations at the turn of the twenty-first century may do their part to increase the forced separation of Mexican migrant families, this book focuses on the much more common experience of parents deciding, under such policies, that they must migrate without their children. I explore the lives of families in which married fathers and single mothers have migrated alone and those in which mothers and fathers have migrated together. I pay particular attention to the ways in which gender and family structure shape family members' experiences. I also include the perspectives of children, to evaluate the consequences such migration patterns have over a child's life course.

"International migration," asserts the social scientist Aristide Zolberg, "is an inherently political process."⁷ In this book I look at the other end of the spectrum: migration as an inherently personal process.⁸ By following the experiences of select families over a number of years, I provide an up close and personal account of private aspects of the lives of the Mexican men and women working in low-wage jobs in the continental United States, their hopes and aspirations, and those of their family members living in Mexico. Rather than in the workplace, street, or neighborhood,

I explore the migratory experience within the domains of family life, in what might be considered a “domestic ethnography.”⁹ In doing so, I reveal the impact that political processes of international migration have on the everyday experiences of families.

The interviews show the lives of parents and children divided by borders to be extremely difficult. Parents and children are tied to each other by the expectation that parents will make economic gains during their time abroad and that children will make their parents’ sacrifices worthwhile.¹⁰ Yet the lives of parents and children divided by borders are essentially unequal. Parents and children live in different worlds, with different daily routines, different opportunities, and different sources of tension. As their lives unfold in the United States, parents are unable to meet the expectations of migration as quickly as they had hoped. Unmet expectations, particularly of migrant mothers, cause tensions and hurt feelings in parent-child relationships. Meanwhile, children in Mexico feel resentful of parents’ absences. They have a difficult time proving their parents’ sacrifices worthwhile. The emotional fallout of parents’ work decisions is a great source of hardship in families.

Over time, however, parents and children show remarkable resolve to overcome such hardships. Unmet expectations are not absolute. Parents cling to their parenting roles even when those roles are difficult to fulfill. They often adjust their goals and aspirations in reaction to their children’s negative experiences of family separation, and children are able to influence their parents’ subsequent migration decisions. Parent-child relationships at a distance are constantly in flux. The hardships arising from separation paradoxically reinforce family members’ commitments to each other. A story of both adversity and the intensity of family ties, this book depicts the ways in which Mexican families struggle and persevere in a global economy.

TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

The dawn of the twenty-first century marks what some consider to be the third major wave of global migration.¹¹ Today, men, women, and

their families are moving not from densely populated areas to frontiers, as was typical before the mid-twentieth century, but rather from less developed countries to highly industrialized nations, such as from Mexico to the United States.¹² Technological advances have enabled migrants to maintain more dense social and economic ties in home and host countries than in times past.¹³ Migrants from Latin America, for example, sent more than 50 billion U.S. dollars back to their home countries in 2006, accounting for significant portions of many countries' gross domestic products.¹⁴

Contemporary researchers describe individual families who are divided by international borders and who maintain significant emotional and economic ties in two countries as "transnational families."¹⁵ Transnational families are not new; international separations were also common in earlier periods.¹⁶ Yet today this migration pattern is most common among those moving from less wealthy to more prosperous nations. When the most economically productive members of the family—men and women in the prime of their lives—move to areas of concentrated capital in industrialized nations, and children and the elderly remain in developing areas with few resources, inequalities between contemporary wealthy and poor nations are reproduced and reinforced in individual households.¹⁷

The inequalities experienced by today's migrant households are different in another way. It used to be that men were the primary movers in families. Although migrant mothers were not unheard of during earlier periods, these cases appear to have been unusual.¹⁸ A study of family separation among U.S. immigrants in 1910 found that only 7 percent of mothers across ethnic groups had left their children in their home country when they came to the United States, compared to more than 50 percent of fathers.¹⁹ Among Mexicans, the *bracero* program (1942–1964) institutionalized male-led migration patterns by providing men with temporary agricultural work visas but offered no provisions for the migration of their wives and children.²⁰ When men left women and children to work abroad, migration accentuated gender inequalities within families.²¹

Today, however, mothers who migrate without their children are

increasingly common, suggesting a major shift in the ways families around the world fulfill individual and household needs. Transnational mothers have been reported around the globe: Turkish women in Germany; Sri Lankans in the Middle East; Ecuadorians, Colombians, and Peruvians in Spain; Filipinas in Canada, Hong Kong, and Italy.²² In some cases, women migrate before their husbands and children, radically reversing migration patterns of times past.²³ Among the more than 11 million Mexicans currently living and working in the United States, estimates suggest that 38 percent of fathers and 15 percent of mothers have children living in Mexico.²⁴ Although rates of male migration still outpace those of females, Mexican women, especially those who are unmarried, widowed, or divorced, are migrating at higher rates than ever before.²⁵ A mother's choice to migrate is often reluctant, with deep emotional repercussions; such choices mark the pervasive impact of global inequalities on individual families.²⁶ At the same time, some suggest that migrant mothers are "actively, if not voluntarily, building alternative constructions of motherhood. . . . Transnational mothers and their families are blazing new terrain, spanning national borders, and improvising strategies for mothering."²⁷ Migrating mothers simultaneously replicate global disparities of wealth and—albeit inadvertently—challenge gender-based inequalities within families.

Scholarship on today's migrating mothers and others divided by international borders categorizes them, for the most part, as a new class of "transnational migrants" who can be distinguished both from non-migrants in their home communities and from immigrants in receiving countries who have severed ties with family and community back home.²⁸ Researchers have found complex ideas of identity among this new class of citizens, who feel they belong to two or more nations.²⁹ Transnational migrants are often politically active in organizations from their hometown and support development projects there, and national policies and actions shape, and at times constrain, transnational migrants' activities.³⁰ Economic contributions of this new class of citizen may end up dividing communities of origin between those who have little or no access to remittances and those who have become the "remittance bourgeoisie."³¹ Transnational migrants also may forge different types of social relation-

ships, what some call “social remittances,” because they negotiate gender in their families in new ways, reconfiguring the rituals and expectations associated with courtship and marriage in a binational context.³²

Much of our understanding of the lives of transnational migrants comes from the experiences of Mexicans in the United States; perhaps no other immigrant group has as lengthy a history of transnational migration. Since the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848, migration of Mexicans to the United States has ebbed and flowed. During the upheaval of the Mexican Revolution (1913–1920), Mexicans moved north along the railroad lines to work both in agriculture and in the expanding industrial centers in the United States.³³ After the economic crisis of the Great Depression in the 1930s, Mexicans—U.S. citizens and immigrants alike—were rounded up and sent back to Mexico in deportation campaigns.³⁴ Between the 1940s and the 1960s, leaving their families, Mexican men moved north en masse to work seasonally on *bracero* contracts.³⁵ Many Mexican families, and even entire communities, became dependent on their laborers working abroad.³⁶ After the Mexican debt crisis of the 1980s, broader sectors of Mexican society, including urban dwellers and people from the middle class, have come to rely on migration to the United States.³⁷ Estimates suggest that today one in ten Mexicans lives in the United States, accounting for more than 30 percent of the U.S. foreign-born population.³⁸

The Contemporary Legal Context

Over the past twenty-five years or so, the circular nature of Mexican migration has begun to decline for the first time.³⁹ After an amnesty program was passed in 1986, U.S. immigration policy became ever more punitive toward undocumented immigrants. There are currently no legal pathways to permanent residency for Mexicans who have entered the country illegally. In addition, the militarization of the U.S.-Mexican border has made it increasingly difficult and expensive to come to the United States.⁴⁰ The cost of an undocumented crossing tripled between 1995 and 2001.⁴¹ Death rates on the border have also skyrocketed. Between 1994 and 2000, there was a 1,186 percent increase in deaths among unau-

thorized border-crossers in Arizona.⁴² Although United States immigration policies are intended to deter Mexicans from working in the United States illegally, they have had the opposite effect. Mexicans continue to come north, and they are not returning home, as they used to.⁴³

Meanwhile, labor demand has meant that Mexicans are moving to new destinations throughout the continental United States—to places such as Georgia, Nebraska, and New Jersey, where sizable Mexican communities did not exist prior to the 1990s.⁴⁴ Because of the difficulties in coming and going, Mexican immigrants are now settling in these communities at higher rates and in greater numbers than ever before. Family separation among Mexicans may have been the norm for years, but today separations are likely to be of a longer duration.⁴⁵ Mexicans in the United States have few opportunities to legalize their status and reunite their families. As they are also increasingly settling farther away from Mexico, return trips are even more difficult and costly. Prolonged family separations are common.⁴⁶

Despite mounting evidence about the lives of transnational migrants, we actually have very little understanding of how these contemporary legal structures shape migrant parents' sacrifices. This is particularly important at a time when the lengths of family separations among Mexicans, the largest immigrant group in the United States, are rising. A research emphasis on transnational processes and on transnational migrants as a distinct social class has obscured the systemic differences in the experiences of family members who are divided by international borders. Pioneer social scientists W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki recognized such differences in describing early immigrant families as internally divided between "new and old world values."⁴⁷ More recently, the sociologist Dalton Conley has proposed that "inequality starts at home" and that unequal outcomes within families are more pronounced among those who are racially or economically disadvantaged.⁴⁸ Even though contemporary transnational family members may move back and forth between two geographic spaces, the daily lives of family members residing in Mexico and the United States are fundamentally different.⁴⁹ At a time of increasingly rigid immigration policy, geographic separation—and the migratory status it entails—complicates gender

and generational inequalities within families. A true assessment of the ways immigration as a political process shapes families' lives must move beyond the treatment of transnational migrants as a homogenous social class. It requires an in-depth study of the experiences, not the values, of different members of families while they are living apart.⁵⁰

THE LIVES OF MIGRANT PARENTS

This book is based in part on fieldwork and interviews with twenty-three fathers and twenty-two mothers conducted between 2003 and 2006 in Central New Jersey.⁵¹ I met most of these migrant parents in one new destination for Mexican migrants: a city of approximately fifty thousand residents where the proportion of Mexican foreign-born individuals grew 869 percent between 1990 and 2000.⁵² It is also a city where I had lived and worked with Mexicans in numerous social service agencies, including as an ESL teacher, starting in 1997. I had developed lasting friendships with many Mexicans, some of whom helped me to locate parents to interview. Despite my community connections, I found the topic of family separation to be delicate. Many interviewees, for example, brought up issues of marital conflict or personal failures, such as problems of alcohol abuse. Snowball sampling did not work in the traditional sense; I generally gained parents' confidence one by one or via referrals from individuals without children in Mexico. Being accompanied by my young son, Temo, born in 2002, facilitated conversations about the sensitive topic of parenting from afar.⁵³ I ended up having multiple contacts with more than half of the parents, some of whom I have known for years.

The migrant parents in this study struggled economically before coming to the United States but were not living in abject poverty in Mexico. In fact, the poorest in Mexico usually cannot garner sufficient resources to move north for work.⁵⁴ The parents I interviewed came from a range of middle- to lower-class backgrounds. Five had some college-level training, ten had been to high school, fourteen had seven to nine years of schooling, and sixteen had been to school for less than six

years. The high concentration of mothers in the latter group is consistent with findings from a Pew Hispanic Center survey that transnational mothering is more common among women with low levels of education.⁵⁵ Among my sample, parents' prior work experience in Mexico also varied. Fathers had previously worked as farmers (eight), government administrators (three), a baker (one), a police officer (one), electricians (two), and an accountant (one). Most of the mothers had not been regularly employed outside the home in Mexico; however, two were college educated and four were working professionals prior to migration.

The mixed socioeconomic status of migrant parents is not surprising. The majority of Mexicans in New Jersey had previously lived in the three-state region of Oaxaca, Puebla, and Guerrero, with many from a relatively arid region known as the Mixteca. Although internal migration is a long-standing practice in the region, it was not until after the Mexican debt crisis in the 1980s and again in the 1990s that U.S. migration rates from the Mixteca swelled.⁵⁶ It is an economically depressed area with low returns on education. Researchers have found that Mexican migrants from such areas are more likely to have heterogeneous educational backgrounds than are those from other regions where migrants may be less educated than nonmigrants.⁵⁷

Once arriving in New Jersey, migrants of diverse class backgrounds find themselves on a relatively equal playing field. Legal status, in particular, prevents those with higher levels of education from gaining an edge. All but one of the forty-five parents I interviewed was undocumented at the time they first migrated without their children. Only three had obtained legal status by the time I interviewed them. Lack of legal status is a widespread problem among recent Mexican immigrants; it is estimated that between 80 and 85 percent of Mexicans arriving in the United States between 1995 and 2005 were undocumented, and that in 2008 nearly 55 percent of all Mexicans immigrants were undocumented.⁵⁸ Family separations are concentrated in this group.⁵⁹

Above all else, the migrant mothers and fathers I interviewed, regardless of educational background, came to New Jersey to work.⁶⁰ Men who had been both government officials and farmers found themselves working side by side in landscaping, construction, factories, or private

restaurants. Men typically earned between eight and twelve dollars per hour in such occupations. This is roughly ten times the typical rate of one hundred pesos per day that male laborers earned in the Mixteca at the time. The women I interviewed mostly worked in local fast-food restaurants and factories.⁶¹ They earned less than men did, averaging between six and nine dollars per hour. Since most had not worked for pay prior to migrating, women viewed such salaries as quite productive. Migrant mothers complained that women in their hometowns simply could not find work, and this was one of their reasons for coming north. One mother explained: "The people are so poor. There isn't any work for women. Sometimes the women work helping to pick fruit, mostly lemons, and sometimes they make candies from coconuts to sell in other towns. Mostly they do not work at all."⁶²

Work in New Jersey, however, is not always as easy to obtain as parents expect. Arising, perhaps, from the long-standing pattern of circular migration between Mexico and the United States, the impression that work is plentiful in the United States permeates many Mexican communities.⁶³ According to one migrant father, "I would say 75 percent of the people come fooled by this country. They are fooled by us immigrants who go back. We get a nice pair of shoes, good clothes and we say, 'I earn so much and I have a car.' . . . Everyone thinks that by coming they will make money quickly. They think coming here is living well."

Mexican parents may find it difficult to maintain a steady job. Most parents initially use temporary employment agencies that offer irregular jobs and deduct their services, including transportation, from workers' salaries.⁶⁴ Even once better established and able to obtain jobs directly with employers, migrants are frequently unemployed.⁶⁵ Many Mexican women work in factories that depend on a fluid labor force that fluctuates in size; the employers offer no benefits or job security. One mother I interviewed had worked for over two years at a factory, but she was fired when she took off too much time to care for a family member who had been diagnosed with AIDS. Ever since, she has moved from job to job, part of the temporary workforce. Work is also irregular in construction and landscaping, common jobs for Mexican men in central New Jersey. Work may be plentiful during the summer; some of the men I

interviewed earned between six hundred and nine hundred dollars per week in cash. But when it rained and during the winter, they did not work at all.

Health problems, coupled with a lack of health insurance, also affect migrant parents' ability to work. One mother, for example, had to leave her job when she underwent an emergency kidney stone operation. Others stopped working during and after pregnancies. A father, Armando, had health problems when he first arrived in New Jersey and landed a job in landscaping with his brothers: "I didn't think it would be so hard here. . . . I first worked mowing lawns. But I didn't last because my health wasn't good when I got here. . . . I couldn't last at that job. Instead I went to work in a factory." As factory work pays less than landscaping, the move meant a lower salary than Armando had originally anticipated. Work-related accidents were also a problem for the fathers I interviewed. Mexican men have some of the most dangerous jobs in the United States.⁶⁶ Even when health care for such accidents could be covered under workers' compensation (regardless of immigrant status), they affect workers' ability to economize and send earnings back home.

The Mexican parents I interviewed were extremely busy, mostly because of irregular and long work schedules.⁶⁷ A migrant father explained: "When you come to this country, you have things to do; you have bills to pay, and responsibilities. It is not like your country where you work normally and you have time, because here you have to work to get what you want. You come home just to eat, in a bad mood and tired, to take a shower and go to bed." As Paula described in the opening vignette, migrant parents work hard to benefit from the wage differential between Mexico and the United States. They hope to work as many hours as possible to take advantage of the time spent away from their families and to make the sacrifice worthwhile.

Migrant parents do not spend a lot of time or money on leisure activities. Those I interviewed typically used their one day off to shop, clean, and go to the Laundromat. Some migrant fathers play soccer or basketball at community parks in their free time. Mothers and fathers occasionally attend baptism parties, weddings, and birthday parties. They also attend local festivals organized around Hispanic Heritage month,

Cinco de Mayo, and Mexican Independence Day. Some participate in church outings. Migrant parents rarely take vacations. Only one family I interviewed took an extended vacation to the beach; it was their first vacation in nine years. Spending little in New Jersey enables parents to save money more quickly. They hope this will decrease the total time spent away from their children.

Parents' primary strategy for economizing is to minimize their housing expenses.⁶⁸ Migrant parents share apartments with other Mexicans to save money. A few rent their own room in a house or apartment, usually spending about three hundred dollars per month. Most, however, split these costs further by sharing the room with someone else, often a spouse or romantic partner. Unattached fathers skimp even more. One man I interviewed occupied a shed at the nursery where he worked. Another slept on a mattress in the living room of a two-room apartment; a couple and their two daughters occupied the other room. Some fathers rented out space in unfinished, unheated basements (a safety hazard for them, because they slept so close to the homes' furnaces). The single women I interviewed had a hard time finding people with whom to share rooms. When Elsa separated from her husband, she rented an unheated basement room for a few months until she met a man and moved in with him. The few single mothers who remained unattached lived with their siblings. Overcrowded housing for migrant parents is the norm.⁶⁹

THE LIVES OF CHILDREN IN MEXICO

The lives children lead in Mexico are quite different. Children may not have access to running water or a flush toilet as their parents typically do in New Jersey (regardless of the overcrowded housing). Children may even live in unfinished houses that are slowly added on to as parents send money for improvement projects. But children do not lack space. I visited the homes of the children of twelve parents whom I had interviewed in New Jersey. Some lived in urban centers, others in small cities, and yet others in small towns. I also interviewed an independent sample

of thirty-five children of migrants and twenty-seven of their caregivers. These families lived in a small town of approximately twenty-five hundred residents in the lower Mixteca region of Oaxaca that I call San Ángel, where I lived for seven months. All of these children lived in homes with larger patio spaces than available in the homes of parents in New Jersey. Although most neighborhoods do not have multiple public parks like those in New Jersey, children frequent the streets and neighboring homes and patios. In San Ángel, children often play by the river and in the downtown plaza in the evenings. Neighbors typically keep an eye on other people's children. When my two-and-a-half-year-old son, Temo, and his three-year-old playmate decided to go out alone to buy candy at the corner store, I was quickly alerted to his whereabouts. All in all, the children I met in Mexico were less confined than were the children I met in New Jersey. In Mexico, children have greater freedom in what Roger Hart calls their "experiences of place."⁷⁰

Children in Mexico most often live with caring family members, usually grandparents. Media portrayals of the plight of unaccompanied minors crossing the border suggest that they are the abandoned children of migrants and have experienced abuse prior to migration.⁷¹ Although many children of migrants do end up migrating themselves, I found that most were not neglected or in physical danger in their homes in Mexico. Indeed, a 2008 study shows that 92 percent of unaccompanied migrants in U.S. custody lived with family members prior to migration and that none reported escaping abuse as their reason for leaving home.⁷² Most of the children I met not only lived with family but also had a number of extended family members nearby, such as cousins, aunts, and uncles, who were a daily presence in their lives.

Although surrounded by family, children's caregivers in Mexico do not typically take in boarders as is so common in New Jersey. Families for the most part own their own homes. In fact, housing construction is one of the primary goals of migration.⁷³ They do not pay rent and do not have mortgage payments; therefore they do not depend on income from boarders to meet the costs of living in a given month. In 2003, only five of San Ángel's 510 houses were rented. I met only one family who took in a boarder; Doña María told me she deliberated for months before deciding



A main street in San Ángel, which stays relatively empty until the school day ends, when children are frequently seen outside playing. Photograph by Joanna Dreby

to let a young man rent one of the extra rooms in her house. “They keep asking me about the other two rooms in the back,” she explained. “I tell them I don’t want to rent them until the house is in better shape. People say they don’t care. But, you have to be careful because, you know, we have things, and you don’t know what someone might want to take.”

In some ways, the children of migrants experience greater prosperity than do their friends without access to remittances. Studies have found, for example, that child and infant health in some Mexican communities is better among families with U.S. migrants than among those without migrants, presumably because of the overall economic benefits of migration.⁷⁴ I surveyed more than three thousand children in the Mixteca and other regional schools and found that in the Mixteca, 90 percent of children of migrants reported receiving money from abroad, compared to 77 percent among those with migrant relatives, but not parents.⁷⁵ The average amount of remittances reported by children of migrants was more than twice that reported by children without migrant parents (3,393 pesos per month compared to 1,478 pesos per month).⁷⁶ Access to remittances may give children of migrants greater social standing than their peers.⁷⁷

Often, however, children of migrants told me they felt too embarrassed to show off the material advantages of having a parent working abroad. When I asked one fourteen-year-old who had just joined his father in New Jersey if he used to take things his dad sent him to school, he explained: "Some of the kids do that, but it is *mal visto* [looks bad]. The other kids make fun of them for it. When I was in grade school, I never took things from the U.S. to school and they never made fun of me." In reflecting back on her childhood, a young woman remembered a backpack her father had sent her. "Oh how I wanted this backpack for school. But once he sent it, I was too embarrassed to take it with me to school. It just hung there on the shelf." For children of humble backgrounds, displays of wealth from migration are perceived to be snobby and pretentious. Children do not want parents' migration to differentiate them from their peers.

If migrants' lives in the United States are organized around their busy workweek, children's lives revolve around school. To be sure, children's schooling is central to parents' sacrifices.⁷⁸ Parents hope their economic support from the United States will give their children the opportunity to have a good education in Mexico and not have the same economic difficulties as an adult that they have had. For example, single mother Paula, who had less than a sixth-grade education, dreamed her two children would become professionals in Mexico. She paid for private school with her remittances. Migrant father José explained: "My son wants to study at *Las Américas* [a prestigious private college in Mexico]. And that university is very expensive. I have to be here to pay for it. . . . And my daughter, she wants to be a military nurse. I have to send money there for that."

Providing children with educational opportunities in Mexico requires substantial economic resources.⁷⁹ Tuition for public schooling through the university level is free in Mexico, but parents often have difficulties with the costs associated with attendance past the ninth grade. Most of the younger children I met attended schools in their home communities for kindergarten (three years, starting at age three), grade school (grades one through six), and middle school (grades seven through nine). Parents of young children described regular contributions for fees,

supplies, and uniforms. Migrants said they varied remittances according to the expenses related to their children's schooling. But because children attend schools near their homes, the cost of young children's schooling is manageable. Caregivers walk a midday snack to children at school during the recess period, and children are home a little after 2 P.M. for lunch. In contrast, most children who attend high school (grades ten through twelve) have to travel to other communities to do so. Siblings Cassandra and Fernando, for example, both studied in the city closest to San Ángel, which was a 3½-hour bus ride on an unpaved road at the time. They lived in the city during the week, returning home on weekends. Cassandra recalled: "I remember how uncomfortable it was to ask for money to go to school." By the time their younger brother Paulo attended high school, a new school had opened in the neighboring town. The expense for Paulo's education was less, but transportation costs to this school were still significant. One eighteen-year-old I met in San Ángel attended the same school and nearly dropped out because she worried that her attendance strained the family budget.

Indeed, a common complaint among the fifteen teachers and school administrators I interviewed in the Mixteca was school retention. In one middle school I visited, enrollment dropped from 220 in 1985 to 27 in 2005. Some students were lost because of the addition of schools in three nearby communities that used to send their young people to this school. But this development cannot explain all of the population decline, for I visited one of these new middle schools and found only fourteen students enrolled. The director attributed the school's severe drop-out rate to students' aspirations to migrate to the United States. At the beginning of the year, ten first-year students had preregistered; only two remained in December when I visited. Of the eight dropouts, the director reported that only three had subsequently migrated. The other five remained in town but told him they were planning to leave soon. Retention problems are not unique to middle schools. In this same town, 260 students were enrolled in the primary school in 2001. When I visited in 2005, only 70 remained.

In the Mixteca, children may simply not see any concrete benefits to staying in school. For students in rural areas, teachers are often the best-

educated role models they have. Yet teachers' salaries have not recovered from losses in real income incurred after the Mexican debt crisis of the early 1980s, particularly in rural areas and in the southern state of Oaxaca. Although I was in rural Oaxaca before conflicts erupted in the teacher's strike of 2006, teachers said that skilled masons in their communities earned more than they did.⁸⁰ In fact, it is relatively common for these well-educated community members to migrate north, just as children's family members have done.⁸¹ A social worker I interviewed told me: "My biggest illusion is to go there [to the United States]; the problem is I cannot." She then complained that the students had no aspirations other than migration. And a teacher in San Ángel explained that he earned approximately 250 dollars every two weeks:

I don't know [how much that is per hour]. We are supposed to not work that much. But here I work as much as I did when I was in Texas, which is like forty hours a week. . . . And, it isn't enough. . . . Our president did it; he went north. So did Francisco [another teacher in town]. They took a year sabbatical to go north to pay off their debts. That is what happened to me. I did the same. I had a debt here to pay off, and I had to go and do it. And you know, on my salary here I could never buy a car. I had to go north in order to bring back a car.

Although migration to the United States from Mixtecan communities like San Ángel is not as long-standing as in other parts of Mexico, an undeniable orientation toward *el norte* permeates communities where many children's parents have migrated.⁸² The economic contributions of migrants are vital to what some describe as a "culture of migration."⁸³ Aside from remittances to individual family members, migrants paid for fluorescent lights on the main thoroughfare in San Ángel. They paid for renovations of the central plaza. Migrants' financial contributions even change the pace of life. The year I was in San Ángel, a party or wedding was held nearly every weekend between December 12 (the celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe) and the *feria*, or festival of the town's patron saint, in mid-February. Return migrants paid for these private parties, participated in them, and often took videos to share with town members living in the United States.⁸⁴

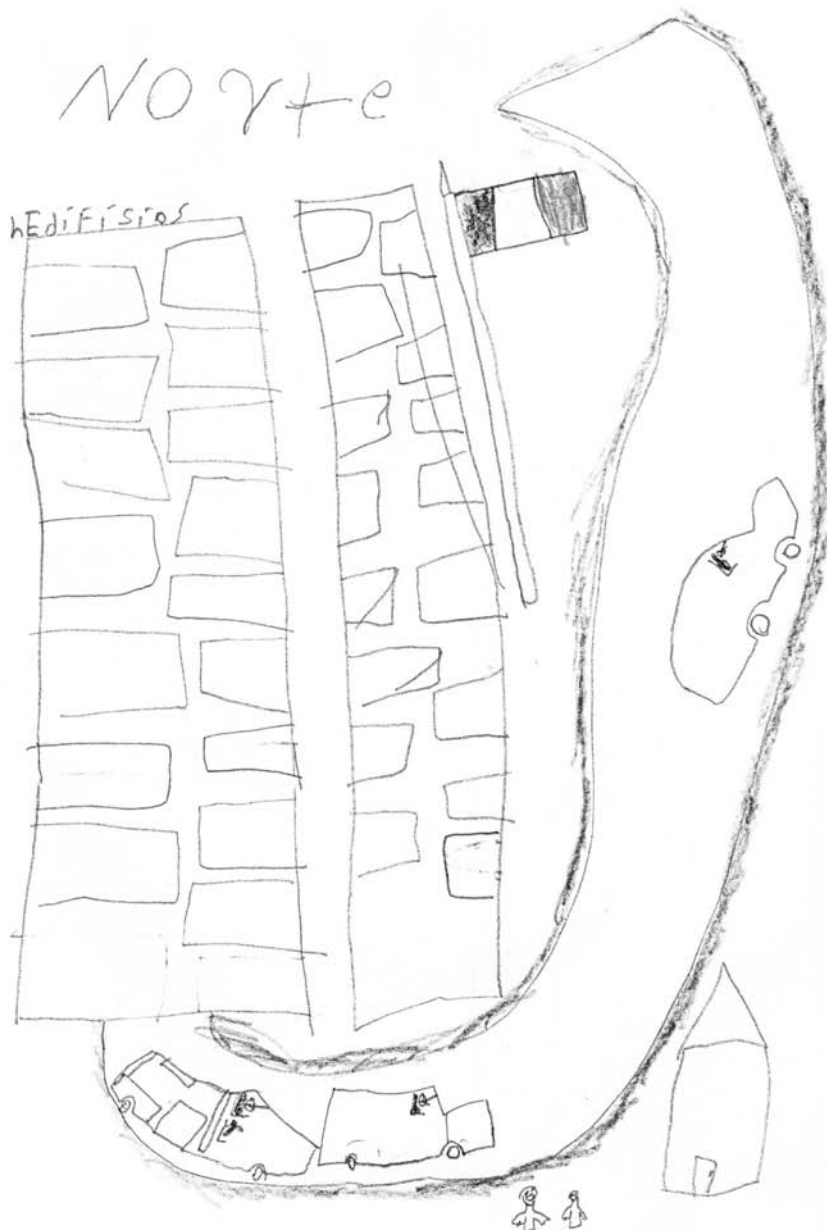


Migration in this region of the Mixteca is so prevalent that even a local D.J. service refers to the other side of the border with its name “Luz y Sonido Manhattan.” Photograph by Joanna Dreby

Children are aware of migrants’ vast contributions to their communities. Ideas of the north pervade children’s imaginations. Indeed, 81 percent of students I surveyed in the Mixteca said they would like to visit the United States: 72 percent were motivated by curiosity, saying they wanted to see the United States because they thought it would be a beautiful place, they wanted to learn about it, or they wanted to travel to a new place or meet new people. One fourteen-year-old girl explained that she wants to go “to see what it’s like there. I would like to know if it is really nice there, because some of my friends told me it is, so I want to go see.” A twelve-year-old boy wrote: “I want to discover new things not found in Mexico”; he also said he imagines the United States to be “like a city of gold.”

Even young children have clear ideas about the United States. I had children in three primary schools draw pictures of their families and of the United States: many drawings depicted *el norte* as a place of tall buildings, elaborate roads, snow, and Christmas trees and presents.⁸⁵ Some students even included symbols of the United States in their drawings, such as the American flag and the Statue of Liberty.⁸⁶

A game children played in San Ángel illustrates how U.S. migration shapes children’s ideas of place. I often took my son, Temo, to the playground in town, always empty during the hot mornings. The seesaw



A third-grade boy's drawing of the United States.



The merry-go-round at the playground in San Ángel. Photograph by Joanna Dreby

was broken, as were parts of the metal swings, and a number of steps on the three slides were missing. Not until the sun began to set and the temperature cooled did other children come out to play. They rearranged the long metal bar of the former seesaw to climb the steep slides or balanced it between the steps of the monkey bars. The most popular game was always on the merry-go-round. Children as young as four years old positioned themselves on the circular seat while older siblings and friends pushed them round and round as if on a super-fast airplane. The children would say that spinning around a few times took them to the next nearest city. A little faster would transport them to the state capital of Oaxaca. The next stop was always—and I never heard it played differently—the United States. The young children on board would laugh and shout, “Spin it fast, real fast! Send us to *el norte!*” The older spinners interjected: “Wait, wait, wait! We have to stop in Tijuana first.”

Children in the Mixteca grow up oriented toward the north. If for migrant parents opportunity lies in what they can do with their paycheck in Mexico, for their children, opportunities are unilaterally in the United States.

LEAVING CHILDREN

The vast difference in opportunities between Mexico and the United States are part of parents’ rationale for leaving their children in the first place. Parents want to take advantage of employment opportunities abroad, but they anticipate that their lives as migrant workers will be difficult. They use a migration strategy that they hope will bring the greatest benefit and have the least impact on their children. Essentially, inequalities between parents’ and children’s lifestyles are at the heart of parents’ sacrifices.

Yet such decisions are further complicated by parents’ gender. Since mothers appear to be migrating without their children at higher rates than in the past, differences between mothers’ and fathers’ migrations are key. I find three types of family separation among those I interviewed: (1) migrant fathers who come alone, (2) migrant fathers who are

subsequently joined by their wives (i.e., both parents are in the United States), and (3) single mothers who migrate alone.⁸⁷ Among the schoolchildren I surveyed in the Mixteca who had a parent in the United States, 73 percent had just a father abroad, 20 percent had both parents abroad, and 7 percent had only their mother abroad.⁸⁸ Parents' migration patterns are significant because each corresponds to a slightly different rationale for leaving children in Mexico.

Married Fathers

Nearly all the fathers I interviewed were married to the mothers of their children at the time of migration (although a handful had also migrated before getting married). One study estimates that male-only migration accounts for approximately 81 percent of migration events among Mexican couples.⁸⁹ Married fathers primarily view their labor migration as a straightforward path to fulfilling their role as economic provider for the family. Fathers come north after becoming unemployed in Mexico or when they see friends and family do better economically abroad. One father's description of migration as an escape from financial difficulties in Mexico is typical. The forty-year-old father was born in a very small town in the outskirts of a small city in Oaxaca. "We were very poor." Until the age of twenty-four, he worked as a farmer cultivating corn, chiles, and beans. When his three children were six, four, and two, he and his entire family moved into the city (including his parents, sisters, and brothers), where he worked unloading trucks. He earned about a hundred pesos a day (equivalent to ten dollars at the time of the interview), which was barely enough to feed his family. "I had no land or anything else in my name." Frustrated at his lack of opportunities, he decided to go north when a friend who had been once before offered to take him.

Many fathers described the pressure they felt from family and friends to migrate. Pedro said it was his brother who encouraged him to migrate. "I never wanted to come, but I was working in Mexico City in a factory, and I had a brother in California who sent me the money to migrate. Since he sent the money, I had to go." José, the first in his family to

migrate, also felt compelled to leave owing to his relationship with his siblings: "I was a manager at the company, but it was a very stressful job, and I had a hard time working with my supervisors. But I also felt a lot of stress because I was not as successful as my brothers and sisters. We come from a humble background. They all have done well, and their houses were nicer than mine. I felt like the one most behind."

Wives also pressure their husbands to migrate.⁹⁰ Daniel, who had been to the United States before he was married, had wanted to stay in Mexico after he returned home. He agreed to migrate again as a newlywed only because his wife was adamant that she wanted to live in the United States. Armando said that he was reluctant to leave his family. Although many of his brothers were already working in New Jersey and he had been offered the opportunity to go north before, Armando decided to migrate at his wife's insistence.

Regardless of the source of pressure to work in the United States, fathers' decisions to leave children hinge upon the expectation that migration will lead to greater economic opportunity and that they will be able to better economize without their children present. Migrant fathers express qualms about the quality of life in the United States for their children. Many have strong opinions as to why it is better that their children be raised in Mexico. When I asked one father whether he thought about bringing his children to New Jersey, he said, "Definitely not, because here there is no family life." Another said he did not want his kids to be raised in the United States, because "here the kids forget they are Mexican." A father of two teenagers in Mexico explained: "I am not the kind of person who likes this life for my children. Here there is too much freedom for them. It is not really a safe environment." Married men plan to work hard and return to Mexico, where their children are raised by their wives, as soon as possible.

Married Mothers

Although also fundamentally related to work aspirations, mothers' motivations for leaving children are more complicated. Single mothers and married mothers often have different expectations of migration.

The married mothers I interviewed all joined their husbands who had already been working in the United States.⁹¹ Married mothers described migration as affording them personal benefits in addition to being advantageous for the family unit. Many explained that their decision to migrate was prompted by curiosity. One mother said, "I wanted to know what it was like." Even husbands described their wives as being the primary movers behind family migration. A father living with his wife and U.S.-born daughter, with two more children in Mexico, told me: "It was her. She told me she wanted to come and see what it was like here." Another who lived with his wife and newborn son said, "I didn't want her to come, but she insisted."⁹²

Married mothers may orchestrate their migration because of the negative effects their husband's migration has had on their marriage.⁹³ When husbands leave, women like Yolanda, who cultivated the family's peanut and bean crops on her own, may work harder performing both unpaid and paid labor.⁹⁴ Gabriela explained that when her husband is away, "When I lie down at night, I am exhausted. What is most tiring is having the responsibility for the children. It is much better when he [Angelo] is back visiting, because he takes over looking after the children. . . . I feel like it is a load off my back when he is here." The wives of migrants do find some benefits related to their husbands' absences. "At times," explained one woman in San Ángel, "there is a lot of freedom, because when he is here you cannot do anything. But if he isn't here, you can go out and come back whenever you want." However, their activities while husbands are away are closely monitored by their families and neighbors. Conflict with in-laws is common.⁹⁵ Accusations of women's infidelities while husbands are away are widespread.⁹⁶

Aside from an increase in work and the intensified relationships with in-laws, the separation of wives and husbands during migration enhances the dependency of wives on their husbands, which may prompt women's migration to the United States. When a woman's husband migrates, she is disconnected from his daily life; she does not prepare his lunches, wash his work clothes, or relax with him after a long day, as she may do when living with him in Mexico. Her only link to her husband's work is via the money sent home. In Mexico,

the wives of migrants anxiously await phone calls or other news of their husbands. Gossip about men's infidelities in the United States is common.⁹⁷ At a distance, phone communication becomes even more crucial to sustaining what would otherwise become a purely economic relationship. Yet because of the high cost of making international phone calls from many places in Mexico (eighty cents per minute where I lived in Oaxaca, as compared to the ten cents per minute for the same phone call from the United States), migrant husbands almost always initiate contact.⁹⁸ Physically divorced from their spouse's everyday activities and economically dependent on them, these women are less able to influence their husbands. For some, the separation means greater freedom of activity in Mexico. For others, it results in feelings of passivity. For married mothers, migration is not only a way to make money; it is a way to regain control over their family life.

Single Mothers

Single mothers who migrate to the United States do not experience the uncomfortable dependency on migrant husbands before leaving home. Their trouble with men came prior to migration. Yet, like married mothers, single women also migrate out of a combination of economic and personal motivations. In most cases, the economic situation of single mothers is more acute than that of married mothers. When marriages end, it is very difficult for women to provide for their children. One mother could not make ends meet after her husband left her for another woman. Her siblings in New Jersey offered to help and sent her the money for the border crossing. Zelia had to move in with her parents after she left her alcoholic husband, who "liked to go around with other women." Although she was able to work part time in town and had enough to eat, she lamented: "It is difficult because there isn't any work. The children ask for things, and we don't have anything to give them." Zelia's siblings helped her come to New Jersey. Migration places these single mothers in the position of family breadwinners.

Single mothers also find that migration gives them the opportunity to reinvent themselves. Young unwed mothers in particular feel they

have few opportunities to get married in Mexico. In many Mexican rural towns, brides are quite young. In San Ángel, one nineteen-year-old daughter of a migrant mother told me that all her friends were already married with children. "I feel like I should already be married." Another nineteen-year-old woman, who had been married at age seventeen to a twenty-six-year-old man who had previously been in the United States, explained why she felt glad to be married to a migrant. "At my age, no one would even look at me. They all want young girls." The preference for young brides leaves single mothers out in the cold. Not only are they described as *masisa*, or overripe fruit, but since they are no longer virgins and have already been "eaten," they are no longer marriage material.⁹⁹ A twenty-year-old single mother I met in Mexico hoped to migrate within the year and eventually remarry. In Mexico, she explained, "They [men] don't think of you as a real thing; they see you as easy. And if they want me and love me, it has to be the whole package." In New Jersey, only one single mother I interviewed lived alone; the other seven, as well as the three mothers who divorced their husbands after migrating, lived with boyfriends. Migration offers single mothers a chance to start over.¹⁰⁰

Mothers Leaving Children

As married and single mothers come to the United States expecting economic and lifestyle changes, they are typically more open to the idea of bringing their children to the United States than are fathers. Yet mothers feel they cannot do so immediately. For one, knowing they are migrating primarily to work, they worry about child care. One mother, for example, explained why she left her children: "Well, you also have to have a place to put them." Some married mothers are determined to take their children with them, until family members dissuade them. Ofelia said her mother reminded her that she did not know where she would live or who would be able to take care of her two-year-old son. Migration with children adds greater uncertainty not only about child care but also about health care and the educational system, particularly for the undocumented. Migrant parents are aware that U.S. immigration policy has become increasingly strict and punitive since the terrorist attacks

of September 11, 2001.¹⁰¹ Mothers believe they will be more prepared to bring their children into a new and potentially hostile environment once they have learned to navigate life abroad.

Mothers also worry greatly about the undocumented crossing.¹⁰² One said, "I wouldn't risk taking them via the mountain." Crossing the U.S.-Mexican border without papers is considered to be more dangerous for women than for men.¹⁰³ When women's physical safety is entrusted to paid smugglers, the risk of rape, either by smugglers or by other men crossing with them, is omnipresent. The crossing is, however, even more dangerous and expensive for children.¹⁰⁴ Young children may be confined to small spaces, or even given medicines to make them sleep, in order to facilitate the crossing.¹⁰⁵ Risks for children at the border include experiencing human rights abuses, getting lost, sustaining injury or death, and being caught by officials.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, border enforcement policies have made the crossing even riskier for minor children, with the number of children returned to Mexico by border officials skyrocketing over the past few years.¹⁰⁷ As one mother summarized: "I didn't know what the crossing would be like. For me, I knew I could do it, but not for them."

Aside from the difficulties related to the border crossing and child care, technological advances may make Mexican mothers more willing to leave their children for a temporary period. The immediacy of communication means that mothers know they will be able to wire money via services like Western Union in response to minor crises, such as children's illnesses.¹⁰⁸ In addition, despite practical difficulties, most migrants can arrive home by air after a day of travel, and some do when their parents or children become seriously ill. New technologies foster migrant parents' ability to respond to family emergencies even from abroad. Satellite technology also makes communication possible for families living in even the remotest spots (without phone lines) through cellular phones.¹⁰⁹ Knowing that they can talk to their children over the phone at any time may make mothers more willing to endure a temporary separation, whether by reuniting with a spouse already abroad or, for single mothers, by becoming the primary family breadwinner.¹¹⁰

Migrant mothers and fathers who leave their children in Mexico are

not acting impulsively out of desperation. They are proactive. They weigh the economic opportunities available in the United States, as well as the personal benefits they may gain from migration, with the costs of bringing children with them. But mothers and fathers arrive at the decision to leave their children in different ways. Men reason they can best fulfill their economic roles by migrating. Knowing their lives will be all about work is enough reason to leave their children in Mexico. For mothers, the decision to migrate arises out of a combination of economic and family considerations; a busy work schedule, the border crossing, and the insecurity of living in the United States without legal documents is not enough to deter migrating with their children except temporarily. Mothers make the choice knowing they will be able to communicate regularly with their children in Mexico for what they expect to be the short time before they are reunited.¹¹¹

UNEQUAL LIVES

When parents move to the land of opportunity without their children, they purposely divide their families with the idea that doing so is the best economic strategy for the family as a unit. It would be a mistake, however, to consider the family as a discrete unit of analysis during the time parents and children live apart. Parents' and children's day-to-day experiences are not equal. Inequalities within families are not straightforward.¹¹² Geography complicates families already stratified by gender and age distinctions.

On the one hand, parents live difficult lives; they have busy schedules and live in uncomfortable, overcrowded places. Many parents reside in unsafe neighborhoods where their movements, and particularly those of children, are restricted. Working all the time, parents have little time to enjoy themselves or spend time with their families and friends, as is common in Mexico. Because of their legal status, they lose everyday privileges they had enjoyed in Mexico. They cannot easily drive and obtain car insurance. They cannot take a trip on an airplane. Men, in particular, may feel less free to frequent public spaces than they were

in Mexico.¹¹³ Migrants' lives are constrained. In this sense, as low-wage, undocumented workers in the United States, parents experience a drop in social standing and in quality of life when they migrate.¹¹⁴

On the other hand, when parents migrate, they have access to resources not available to their children who remain in Mexico. At a very rudimentary level, parents enjoy amenities associated with life in an industrialized nation, even if to a much lesser degree than enjoyed by U.S. citizens. No one I interviewed, for example, washed clothes by hand in New Jersey; they used Laundromats. In San Ángel, most families washed by hand, or—if they were able to purchase a washing machine with remittances—rinsed by hand and hung the clothes out to dry. Parents I interviewed also had access to hot water, something few families in San Ángel enjoy. Most parents lived in heated homes and had room air conditioners in the summer months. While heaters are not necessary in San Ángel, where temperatures in the summer months often exceed 100 degrees Fahrenheit, when I was in town no one had air conditioners. Parents also have access to employment opportunities that are nonexistent in Mexico (even if the opportunities can bear fruit only in Mexico). At the lower rungs of the social ladder in New Jersey, parents are optimistic that improvements in their lives are possible. They feel, for example, that by working hard and learning English, they may find a sympathetic employer or a job with benefits. They are hopeful that Americans will recognize their contributions to the economy and that eventually immigration laws will change, allowing them to regularize their legal status. Parents feel that with time, opportunities will increase. Children, in contrast, feel that their lives in Mexico are stagnant. Benefits from their parents' remittances are ultimately limited. In this sense, parents' prospects are more optimistic than those of their children living in communities whose economies are dependent on those working in the United States.

Such differences in the lives of migrants and their nonmigrant children are not surprising, particularly in Mexico, where patterns of labor migration to the United States are long-standing.¹¹⁵ Yet there are reasons to suspect that disparities between the lives of migrants and nonmigrants have increased over the past twenty years or so, now that so

many Mexican migrants live in urban and suburban areas of the United States, as in central New Jersey. In the past, when Mexican migrants were farmworkers or lived in border communities in the Southwest, their living conditions may not have differed so much from those of their communities of origin. Compare my descriptions of parents' lives above to the comment of a Oaxacan woman, also from the Mixteca region, whom Leo Chavez interviewed in a canyon campsite in San Diego in the early 1980s: "I had imagined the United States very differently. I thought it was one big city. I never imagined it was the same as there [Oaxaca]. In Oaxaca we live in a small village, and we live the same here. In our house there is no electricity, no water. We must haul water to the house the same as here. We use candles instead of electricity the same as here. There is no stove. . . . Our house is wood like these. It is the same. The same living there as it is here."¹⁶

The Mexican migrant parents I interviewed work in a service economy and live in urban and suburban areas near their employers; their children remain in places that depend on an ever-shrinking agricultural base. Consequently, parents' and children's daily lives are drastically different. Moreover, because family separations are of longer duration than even just twenty years ago, inequalities between migrants and their children are likely to have more long-term consequences.

The rest of this book focuses on precisely this question: what are the consequences of divided lives for Mexican families at the start of the twenty-first century? Drawing on a combination of the stories of specific families and my larger sample of interviews, each subsequent chapter focuses on one aspect of the inequalities between parents' and children's lives that affect family members' relationships over time. While chapters draw primarily on interpersonal experiences, social structures including the labor markets in the United States and in Mexico, immigration policy, public programs such as Social Security, and the Mexican educational system contribute to the context in which these relationships develop.

I start in chapter 2 with one of the most devastating consequences of parents' decisions to migrate without their children: separations are almost always longer than originally anticipated. Drawing extensively on the experiences of migrant mother Ofelia Cruz and her son, Germán,

I describe how such prolonged separations unfold and are more often than not the product of the temporal mismatch between the structure and pace of migrants' lives in the United States and those of their children in Mexico.

In chapter 3, I turn to a discussion of how prolonged separations are managed by both mothers and fathers who live apart from their children. Comparing mothers' and fathers' experiences as low-wage workers in New Jersey, I examine how gendered expectations subsequently shape parent-child relationships from afar. I show that in the transnational context, families "do gender," or ascribe meaning to their interactions, according to rather traditional gender role expectations. This is not always the case. As I show in chapter 4, when parents divorce after migration, fathers may seek new roles in the lives of their children during periods of separation. Drawing on the experiences of one father, Armando López, I describe the conditions under which men may redefine fatherhood.

In chapter 5, I shift the focus to how children react to parental migration at different ages and how parents attempt to be responsive to their children's changing needs. I describe young children's expressions of loss after a parent leaves, and parents' redoubled efforts to show young children they care. I describe teenagers' outward displays of resentment and their lack of social support not only at home but also at school. Although parents send money home to pay for children's schooling with the hope that their sacrifices will result in intergenerational mobility, teenagers struggle in school while parents are away. This is one of the most disturbing aspects of the separation. Thus, by the time children reach young adulthood, their prospects of financial security in Mexico still seem limited. At this stage, many children decide to join their parents working in the United States, and parents must change their migration strategies accordingly. Family reunifications rarely come, however, when parents or children originally plan. Although not the ones to initially divide the family across borders, children are afforded power in their relationships with the adults in their lives as a result of the separation.

In chapter 6, I move to the roles of Mexican caregivers, whom I call

“middlewomen,” in mediating relationships between parents and children. Most often grandmothers whose access to migrants’ remittances is secured by caring for children, middlewomen have their own financial and emotional stakes in the caregiving arrangement. They are thus generally supportive of migrant parents’ sacrifices. Prolonged separation does not diminish expectations of parents to provide emotionally and financially for their children in Mexico. With the support of caregivers, parents’ and children’s reunifications are possible—and increasingly likely—as children, and their caregivers, age. When divided by borders, family members “do family,” or socially construct their families, in ways that reinforce parent-child obligation. In chapter 7, I narrate the story of Cindy Rodríguez, which illustrates the unintended consequences of family separation for young women and men. Children like Cindy experience instability even when living in stable home environments. They end up feeling caught between two families, not belonging to either, when families stress parent-child obligation during periods of separation.

Ultimately, the experiences of parents and children divided by borders result from a combination of family members’ relative participation in migration and their relative position in their families. As I summarize in chapter 8, in a legal environment that promotes and necessitates prolonged periods of family separation, the emotional aspects of separation are extremely difficult for family members. Women are critiqued more for migrating without their children than men are. And the emotional consequences of separation are concentrated among the least powerful members of the family: children. At the same time, children are not powerless. They are able to influence their parents’ decisions about migration. Likewise women show great resolve to affirm maternal ties to children despite the critiques of other family members and their neighbors. When both women and men are faced with economic difficulties in the United States, parents’ ties to their children back home become even more important. Separation is a source of great hardship. Yet separation, and the sacrifice it entails, also reinforces parents’ and children’s commitments to each other, at the very least during the time that parents and children live apart.



Exemplifying the mismatch between the lives of migrants and their nonmigrant children, this family portrait superimposes an image of the child living in Mexico on a painting of the family members living in New Jersey. Photograph by Joanna Dreby