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**Migration as a Matter of Time:
Reasons for Migration and its Meaning for Children and
Youth**

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Studies of immigrant children and youth rely upon limited temporal and spatial frameworks of analysis. These narrow frames present a fragmented view of children's immigrant experience that is limited to life after arrival in the U.S. and to their experiences within schools. These frames also assume an unproblematic journey of migration and ignore what children experience prior to migration. Using transnational literature about immigrant families and motherhood as well as fictional work, I demonstrate the weaknesses of these narrow frames, and argue that in order to understand the complexities of immigrant children's lives, analysis of the process of migration must include a consideration of their lives beyond the school and their experiences before they physically make the move.

Introduction

There are two limited frameworks that appear repeatedly in immigrant studies on children and youth. The first is a narrow temporal frame that documents the migration journey of this young cohort with a focus only on their life stories after their arrival in the United States. The second is a narrow spatial frame that focuses exclusively on the experiences of children and youth at school, due to the assumption that “better education” is the sole reason for migration. The narrow temporal frame provides a fragmented view of children’s lives, presents migration as an unproblematic journey, and ignores what children experience prior to migration. The narrow spatial frame perpetuates what Victoria Robinson (2005) calls the “two sides of the same coin” model so prevalent in immigration studies: the immigrant is presented as either a success story or as a failure.

These narrow frameworks limit our understanding of what children and youth experience, both prior to and after arrival, as well as within and outside of school. In this paper I argue that, where children and youth are concerned, migration and the transitions it requires comprise a much more complex process that demands a broader frame of study. The limited temporal and spatial frames used in immigrant studies must be expanded to allow for a more complete understanding of the experiences of migrating children and youth. I use transnational literature about immigrant families and motherhood, as well as novels and short stories, to examine the life histories of immigrant children and youth. I explore the reasons for migration, the meaning migration holds for children and youth, and the ways in which migration is a process in children’s lives that often begins before they are born. In doing so, I attempt to move beyond a narrow analyses that focus on how well children and youth adapt to schools, or whether they

succeed or fail in school, and look at the totality of their lives, including the social realms that children and youth inhabit and the lessons they learn within these realms, both before and after arrival. My study reveals the rich complexity of the migration experience and presents a new, broader, and truer analysis of immigrant journeys.

I begin the paper with a critique of transnational literature on immigrant families that migrate in stages and the various ways in which motherhood is stretched across geographical boundaries. An analysis of this literature illuminates (1) the multiple strategies used by mothers to negotiate motherhood; (2) the impact of separation and stage migration on children and youth; and (3) how “waiting” functions as a recurrent feeling in immigrant life. Specifically, I draw upon the scholarship of Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994), Susan Williams et al. (2002), and Marjorie Faulstich Orellana et al. (2001), as well as on the fiction writing by Loida Martiza Pérez (1999) to show how we can begin to extend the temporal frame in immigrant studies.

In the second section of the paper, I review immigrant studies of children and youth and show how they are organized around a spatial frame that focuses solely on children’s experiences in schools and in relation to peers and teachers. I argue that there is an urgent need to move beyond this narrow spatial frame since it assumes that education automatically leads to some sort of happiness or success for immigrant children and youth, which is not necessarily the case, and ignores the places and spaces beyond the school that children and youth also must negotiate. A study of the life stories of immigrant children and youth beyond the school grounds problematizes the narrow spatial frame that is often used in immigrant studies.

Following in the tradition of scholars such as George Lipsitz, Lisa Lowe, and José Saldívar, among others, who incorporate cultural works into their analyses, I use the fictional works of Loida Maritza Pérez (1999), the memoirs of Esmeralda Santiago (1993), and the short

stories of Helena María Viramontes (1995) to show how to widen the narrow temporal and spatial frames so prevalent in sociological studies of migration¹ in order to allow for a broader understanding of the migration experience of immigrant children and youth. Although I am largely concerned with the immigrant journeys of Mexican immigrant children and youth, I draw from Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Filipino experiences with the larger aim of producing comparative analyses among these groups.

Moving Beyond Narrow Temporal and Spatial Frameworks

In *Home Bound*, Yen Le Espiritu (2003) writes that when she asked Filipino immigrant parents why they decided to move to the United States, they answered, “We did it for the children” (179). In *Crossing Over*, Rubén Martínez (2001) explains that the Chicanos place their hopes and aspirations in the American education their children would receive upon migration (66). These authors demonstrate the importance of children in decision-making processes about migration. They also prompt one to ask, If children assume so much importance in the reasons for migration, why are their lives and stories before migration largely invisible in immigrant studies? What roles do children play in the decision making process before migration?

Temporal Framework

Even though children are often cited as the reason for migration, their migrating experiences are nearly invisible in scholarly literature on immigration. Most immigration studies focus on children’s experiences in school and after their arrival. Why and how choices to

¹ As someone trained in a multidisciplinary field, I am able to use cultural works in structural analyses and vice versa to present a more thorough account, in this case, of the immigrant experience.

migrate were made, at what point they were made, and the roles that children and youth played in the decision-making process are questions rarely asked by immigration scholars.²

Transnational literature on immigrant families that migrate in stages provides a glimpse into what children and youth endured prior to migration. In *Children of Immigration*, Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (2001) present new data showing that “the immigrant journey into the United States is a highly fractured, phase-specific process that results in psychosocially complex patterns of family fragmentation and reunification. Children are often left behind in the country of origin in the care of grandparents or other relatives” (6). Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) explores these fractured stages of migration in *Gendered Transitions* and highlights three different kinds of migration movements within the family: family stage migration, family unit migration, and independent migration. Hondagneu-Sotelo writes that family migration “occurs in stages, with the husbands migrating before the wives and children” (39). If not left under the care of the mothers, children are often left with relatives that range from grandparents to aunts and/or uncles. Migration, then, becomes much more complex. It is not only a matter of movement for the children’s sake, but a process where families are stretched across geographical locations and boundaries, often for several years, which can lead to severe consequences for both the child and the parent. What this means for scholars is that families, or what scholars understand as family units, need to be conceptualized differently since in the case of family stage migration, separation across geographical locations can take up to several decades.

² One exception is Orellana et al. (2001), who, rather than seeing children as luggage to be carried around, explores how children “may aid and encourage the settlement and assimilation of immigrant families, even also playing an important role in keeping parents connected to the homeland” (588). Unlike most scholars, Orellana et al. view children as active subjects who encourage permanent settlement and transnational ties between the sending and receiving countries.

The consequences for children of family stage migration and separation are explored in the novel *Geographies of the Home*. In the novel, Loida Maritza Pérez (1999) presents the migrating journeys and family stage migration of sisters Rebecca, Marina, and Iliana. Rebecca, as the oldest sister, is the first to migrate to New York City from the Dominican Republic. At the young age of 21, she finds herself working hard to earn money needed to pay for the cost of transporting parents and eleven siblings to the United States. Marina and Iliana, along with Beatriz and Gabriel, are left behind in the Dominican Republic for longer than the other children. Marina, in particular, feels a strong resentment towards her parents, especially her mother Aurelia, for leaving her behind. What or how Marina and Iliana's lives were like prior to joining the rest of the family is not as clear, but Pérez suggests that one consequence of this separation is anger expressed by Marina in arguments with her mother. In one of these arguments, Marina says to Aurelia, "...so I'm supposed to feel sorry for you, the great-self-sacrificing mother who left me in the Dominican Republic when you came here?...[y]eah, that's right. Think about it...Take all the time you need" (32). Pérez describes Aurelia's reaction to Marina's words:

At this, Aurelia's eyes shifted from her daughter's. With painful clarity she recalled the February day when not only Marina but also Beatriz and Gabriel arrived in New York wearing wispy cotton clothes and too-tight shoes, their arms hanging thin from sleeves, their feet wrinkled, their toenails a fungus-green because they'd been made to pail water from her sister's repeatedly flooded yard. She also remembered the parasites which had grown snake size in their intestines to later wriggle free as each child strained to defecate, and her guilty, angry pain at discovering that despite the dollars she and Papito had sent for their children's care-money converted into more pesos than they themselves had ever in the Dominican Republic—her sister, whom she had trusted to do right, had housed all three children in a chicken coop and barely clothed or fed them (32).

This brief description provides a quick glance at what Marina and Iliana had to endure in the Dominican Republic as they waited for their parents to send for them. This waiting period had severe consequences for them, which continued to affect their lives after arrival. In order to

understand how or why Marina reacted to the family and became ill, a temporal analysis that includes her life back in the Dominican Republic is needed. Marina's journey of migration began before she arrived in New York City and before she was left under the care of her aunt. This passage in *Geographies of the Home* points to a space that must also be explored by immigration scholars. It shows there are consequences associated with migration that impact the family differently – consequences that persist even after borders are crossed and families are reunited.

One scholar who has begun to apply a more extensive temporal analysis to studies of immigrants is Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo. In *Gendered Transitions*, Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) shows how mothers who stay behind in México manage to survive and care for their children while their husbands work in the U.S. and send money home. In “‘I’m Here, but I’m There’: The Meanings of Latina Transnational Motherhood,” Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ávila (1997) explore the lives of mothers who leave their children behind. The authors research the various strategies used by Latina mothers who live and work in the United States and try to raise their children from afar, the way Aurelia tried to care for her children, who were still living in the Dominican Republic, from New York. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ávila refer to these women as “transnational mothers” who adopt various strategies for continuing in their role as mothers. For example, a young Salvadoran mother “maintained her mothering ties and financial obligations to [her children] by regularly sending home money. The exchanges of letters, photos, and phone calls also helped to sustain the connection. Her physical absence did not signify emotional absence from her children” (557-558).

As we saw with Aurelia and her daughter Marina, however, this kind of mothering, can have negative and disruptive consequences. Orellana et al. (2001) also identify negative

consequences that arise from this kind of mothering. One of their informants, Señora Martínez, states:

Look, something happens. Beyond the fact that they stop loving you, and all, let me also tell you that what also happens is that you lose your love for them. Because, look, I tell you that I love this girl (her daughter in Los Angeles) a lot, and I won't be separated from her. Because the other one, I did leave. And with time, you start losing your children's love, and also losing your love as a mother (580).

Again, a temporal analysis of what the children and youth endured before migration would lead to a more thorough understanding of the consequences of migration – one that moves beyond the issue of how well children succeed in school after arrival. Both worlds, the one departed from and the one arrived at, have consequences for children and an analysis of these two worlds needs to be linked.

The transnational practice of motherhood is also explored in Marije Meerman's (2001) *Chain of Love*, a film that documents the lives of Filipina domestic workers in Europe and shows the multiple strategies Filipina mothers employ to support and maintain contact with their children in the Philippines. In this documentary, mothers' love and care travels across geographical locations, enacting what Rhacel Parreñas (2001) refers to as a "transnational flow of love," expressed through gifts or commodities. As Parreñas explains, these can include clothes, watches, toys, or even a private school education in the home country. *Chain of Love* features a child who is well taken care of by his aunt. He has toys, clothes, and goes to school daily, but the lifestyle the child enjoys can only be possible if his mother is away from him. A temporal frame of analysis is required to understand the consequences of this trade off.³

³ As previously mentioned, some scholars have begun to explore the consequences of migration on children. See Parreñas 2001 and 2005.

In other cases, children are left alone to fend for themselves. This was the case for Nora in “A Village Apart” by Fletcher and Taylor (1990). Seventeen year-old Nora lives in the town of Napízaro in México with her 16-year-old brother. She looks after the four-bedroom house her family has successfully built from remittances sent from the United States. Nora and her brother anxiously await each winter break to see their parents. Though once they both went eight years without seeing their father, their family makes an effort to visit their parents once a year. Nora and her brother are constantly waiting for winter and for the family to decide that it is their time to migrate and join their family up North. Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) found that in the family stage migration process, the fracturing of families across geographic locations could last as long as 30 years (xxv). In the Mexican case, however, children and youth tend to be separated mostly from their fathers and are usually left under the care of their mothers.⁴

This review of transnational literature on immigrant families and strategies of motherhood provides a glimpse into the lives and experiences of immigrant children and youth prior to migration. It suggests that a wider temporal analysis is needed to present a more complete understanding of how children and youth experience the consequences of migration. A framework of analysis that takes into account the lives of children and youth before migration is necessary to understand their lives after arrival.

⁴ I do recall that when I was growing up in Zinapécuaro, one of my friends, Horacio, was under the care of his aunt. His parents were in Michigan and had been there ever since he remembered. Though he was a U.S. citizen, his parents wanted him to be raised in México. They would come visit him every other year. Horacio had plenty of toys and was even enrolled at the only private Catholic school in the town. When I last heard from him, he had just turned seventeen and joined his parents in the United States. Migration for him took a bit longer.

Spatial Framework

Studies of immigrant children and youth not only tend to overlook the “prior to” as part of the story of migration, focusing instead on the young cohort’s experiences after their arrival. They also adopt a narrow spatial frame by focusing on immigrant children and youth’s acculturation and assimilation to the United States within schools, but not outside of them. Education is often the reason given for migration. Acquiring a good education is seen as the “ticket out” of poverty for immigrants’ children and as the point of entry into middle class America. Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (2001) explain, “Schools are where immigrant children first come into systematic contact with the new culture” (130). María Patricia Fernández-Kelly and Richard Schauffler (1996) write that in schools, especially, “immigrants learn how they fit in the larger society” (49). These and other researchers study the experiences of children and youth within the schools to see how well children adapt and if they are able to acquire the good education that made their families move in the first place.

In immigrant studies, schools are viewed as key sites that help to explain how and why children and youth succeed or fail. In their LISA study (Longitudinal Immigrant Study Adaptation) Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (2001) explain, “Doing well in school is more important today than ever before. In this era of global economic restructuring well-paid jobs that allow for advancement require education well beyond high school” (124). Aside from preparing students for a “better” tomorrow, Susan Williams et al. (2002) argue, schools function as “sites where class privilege is reproduced...[and]... as institutions with structural power to impede or facilitate integration” (566). Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (2001) found that the schools immigrant children and youth attend “range from high-functioning schools with a strong culture of high expectations and a focus on achievement to catastrophic institutions characterized by

ever present fear of violence, distrust, low expectation, and institutional anomie” (132). For this reason, “success” is not simply a matter of how well immigrant children and youth perform within the schools. It also depends upon the kinds of schools available to these children and youth when they arrive.

In their study of Mexican immigrant adolescent girls in the Midwest, Williams et al. (2002) contend that because teenage transmigrants (the term the authors assign to immigrant children and youth) are “[f]aced with communication difficulties, limited instruction, and [are] isolated from English-speaking peers, the LEP [Limited English Proficiency] teenager is at high risk for dropping out of school” (564). Williams et al. therefore question if these students are actually receiving the “American Education” hoped for by their parents. When examining parents’ understandings of what their children encounter in schools, Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (2001) found that,

for immigrant parents, their admiration and trust of the schools turn out to be double-edged. Some immigrant parents, especially those escaping very poor and violence-ridden countries, come to believe that their children are succeeding in school simply because they are able to attend school daily without the interruptions brought about by warfare or lack of funding. For others, the fact that school is free and children are given books and sometimes breakfast and lunch is proof positive that they live in a bountiful country where opportunities will be provided for their children (150).

This finding further complicates scholarly assumptions about the reasons for migration, what is hoped for the children, what the parents think their children are receiving, and the actual reality in which the children find themselves.

Though scholars agree that schools do not automatically guarantee opportunities for all, immigrant studies continue to offer explanations of children and youth who “make it” in terms of

their schoolwork.⁵ Students with good grades are considered to be “successful” immigrants who may take the four-year university route, while students with poor grades are described as just the opposite. These studies compare the immigrant experience across racial and ethnic lines as well as across generations and always within the schools. Immigrant children from México, Cuba, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Haiti, Vietnam, and China, among others countries, are compared to see who or what groups tend to succeed academically and why. What has been found is that immigrant children and youth, because they come with a strong motivation, generally tend to do better in school than children of immigrants. Fernández-Kelly and Richard Schauffler (1996) found that immigrant children use their status and reasons for migration as a motivating factor by stating, “We’re immigrants! We can’t afford to just sit around and blow it like others who’ve been in this country longer and take everything for granted” (49).

Within the schools, however, immigrant children and youth face various cultures that may facilitate or impede a smooth adaptation. Portes and Zhou (1993), for example, discuss the various groups that Mexican immigrant children encounter after arrival: Mexican immigrants, Mexican oriented students, Chicanos/as, and Cholos (88). Similarly, in *When I Was Puerto Rican*, Esmeralda Santiago (1993) describes the various types of Puerto Ricans she confronts upon arriving in New York City. She writes, “I didn’t feel comfortable with the newly arrived Puerto Ricans who stuck together in suspicious little groups, criticizing everyone, afraid of everything. And I was not accepted by the Brooklyn Puerto Ricans, who held the secret of coolness” (230). In *Immigrant America*, Portes and Rumbaut (1996) examine the significant roles played by the different communities with which immigrants come into contact and argue that immigrants experience “segmented assimilation.” While Portes and Rumbaut focus their

⁵ See Suárez-Orozco 1995 and 2001, Portes 1996, and Trueba 1998.

analysis on adults, their concept of “segmented assimilation” also characterizes the experience of immigrant children and youth. As the experience of Santiago, who was faced with not one but various Puerto Rican communities,⁶ suggests, the communities these students encounter can facilitate or impede their acculturation within the schools.

In addition, the experiences of immigrant children and youth are impacted by their treatment from teachers who praise or discourage them. Teachers, according to these studies, prefer immigrant children to their non-immigrant students of color. Carola and Marcelo Suárez Orozco (2001) interviewed teachers who described their newly arrived students as “better disciplined, more eager to learn, and more appreciative of their efforts than nonimmigrant students (127).” But they also found the teachers who said, for example, “They give me kids with IQ’s of 60 or 70 and they expect me to help them raise their grades. What am I, a miracle worker?” (127). The hard work and motivation immigrant children and youth display is not enough to assure success within the schools since success depends on multiple factors.

Moreover, children and youth’s lives do not only take place within the schools. Immigrant studies that exclusively focus on schools ignore the wide range of realities, hopes and dreams that children and youth come into contact with outside of the school environment. These studies assume that school and a good education will bring success. The notion of success within the schools, however, usually means good grades that can lead to going to college, earning a degree, having a good-paying job, buying a car or a home, getting married, and passing on middle class values and traditions to their children and future generations.

Although the right to a college education and the right to have a job that pays enough to live comfortably is important, the reality of who has access to these things is a very different

⁶ This is also true for Mexicans in the Southwest.

matter, particularly among immigrants.⁷ Success measured in this manner focuses solely on the student. It does not take into account the structures that place limits upon individuals and make it almost impossible for immigrant children and youth to succeed within the schools. As Portes and Zhou (1993) note, immigrant children, particularly those of color, “may not even have the opportunity of gaining access to middle class white society, no matter how acculturated they become (96).”

The idea of looking at how well immigrant children adapt to schools contributes to a narrow view of immigrants and assumes a particular understanding of success. In *Fragmented Ties*, Cecilia Menjívar (2000) questions the way researchers and even media commentators measure success among Salvadoran immigrants. Is it someone who owns a home, a car, and has a stable job? Or, is it someone who no longer fears to be murdered by the military or paramilitary groups of El Salvador? (Menjívar 2000, 1). Menjívar focuses on elderly Salvadoran migrants and their social networks, yet her questions about immigrant success and the ways it is measured are important and can be applied to immigrant children and youth.

The fact that immigrant children and youth arrive into multiple environments (which include but are not limited to schools) that challenge and change them in various ways, is also reflected in fiction. The character of Iliana in *Geographies of the Home*, for example, attends an Ivy League university in upstate New York. When Iliana returns home for winter break, she is forced to confront the ways in which poverty, migration, family conflicts, race and racism, and religion, among other factors, affect the daily lives and struggles of her family. The fact that Iliana went away to college did not necessarily change her situation at home. The story centers on Iliana’s family, which is falling apart. It is not a success story about Iliana who made it out of

⁷ See, for example, Grace Chang’s (2000) *Disposable Domestic*, which stands out as one study that questions the extent to which immigrants truly have access to the “American Dream.”

the *barrio* to attend an Ivy League school. The story does not end with her going away to college. The *barrio* stays there, waiting for her with its beauty and its illnesses. In this novel, Pérez presents a complex portrait of the struggles that poor Dominican immigrants face in New York, and the ways that Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and Whites further marginalize their place in the city. To only focus on Iliana's path to college would be to ignore the challenges that she faces in the other areas of her life. For Iliana, rather than representing the culmination of success, attending college marks the beginning of her quest to understand her family.

Similarly, Helena María Viramontes's (1995) "The Cariboo Café" follows the lives of immigrant children outside of their school and into the dangerous world the main characters are forced to traverse daily. Viramontes presents the story of Macky and Sonya, two undocumented children, who get lost in the midst of the city. Because their undocumented status always places them in danger, they needed to be extra careful at all times, and therefore were given three house rules to remember by their parents: "Rule one: never talk to strangers, not even the neighbor who paced up and down the hallways talking to himself. Rule two: the police, or 'polie' as Sonya's popi pronounced the word, was La Migra in disguise and thus should always be avoided. Rule three: keep your key with you at all times..." (65).

One day, on their way home from school, older sister Sonya makes the wrong turn after realizing she did not have her key to get into their house. When tracing her steps back hoping to find the key, Sonya becomes lost. She does not seek assistance, especially from the police, because doing so would violate her parents' second rule, and she had already violated rule number three. Instead, Macky and Sonya stumble upon María, a Central American woman who lost her five-year-old son Geraldo to the warfare in Central America during the 80s. María, still traumatized by the death and loss of her son, believes Macky is Geraldo and drags Macky and

Sonya along with her. The three of them end up at “The Cariboo Café” where the owner recognizes the faces of Sonya and Macky in a “missing” picture on the side of the milk carton. At that moment, the I.N.S. comes into the Café for their usual raids, and María, re-living the traumas of Central America, grabs Macky and attempts to run away. Sonya, who never lets go of Macky, is paralyzed to see la Migra. Throughout the novel, Viramontes presents immigrant children who are faced with a reality different from the one faced by native children. Success for these children means not losing the key and getting home safely. Their strategies for survival extend well beyond the school grounds.

These fictional works provide a frame that can be applied to understanding the complexities faced by immigrant children and youth. The works of Carola and Marclo Suárez-Orozco and others add different layers to the stories of immigrant children and youth that can further represent the complex and dangerous spaces they inhabit. Together, these novels suggest that to focus exclusively on schools when studying and explaining the success or failure of immigrant children and youth presents an incomplete understanding of their lives. The story does not end with the immigrant child or youth going away to college.

Conclusion

This analysis of transnational literature as well as fictional works and the concept of family stage migration has shown that the lives of children and youth who migrate to the United States are complex, and the temporal and spatial frameworks traditionally used to understand their migration are incomplete. To capture the richness and complexity of their lives and their migration experience, scholars must move beyond narrow temporal and spatial consideration of

the experiences of children and youth – after they migrate and in the schools. The family who migrates in stages does not conform to conventional notions of the nuclear family, and therefore, a different understanding of family is needed, one that encompasses the various changes the family experiences. In addition, moving the frame of analysis beyond the schools reveals a different story of what immigrant children and youth endure. Widening the temporal and spatial frameworks used to analyze children's migration experiences will result in greater understanding of the fractures and reunions that make up a central part of an immigrant's journey.

As the daughter of immigrant parents, I myself am a product of family stage migration. My mother and five sisters were separated from my father for 10 years. At the age of 10, I/we moved to Napa, California and the family as we understand it, reunited. I went away to college at the University of California, San Diego in La Jolla, California to complete my Bachelor of Arts degree. Three of my sisters were also in different cities working on their B.A.'s, attending UCLA, UC Davis, and UC Santa Cruz at the same time. This, once again, fractured my family in a different way. My immigrant journey therefore began before I was born. Once I/we arrived in Napa, my experiences went beyond Shearer Elementary School, Silverado Middle School, and Napa High School. The immigrant studies I have read capture only a fraction of the negotiations I experienced and the kind of family I grew up with. I realize that a different story needs to be told.

In this era of perpetual movement of labor, goods, capital, and people, families are deeply affected. For this reason a different approach to migration – one that moves beyond the nuclear family – needs to be developed. We need to understand the complexities of how this migration in stages within the family affects children and youth in order to know how best to assist them once they have arrived in the United States.

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