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"You wanted norte:" Central American Families and the Ongoing Trauma of Migration, Separation, and Deportation

by
Floencia Rojo

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Sociology

in the

GRADUATE DIVISION

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN FRANCISCO

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For my grandparents:

abuelo Miklos & abuela Lisi (1935 – 2015)

abuelo Roberto (1925 – 2010) & abuela Eva (1932 – 1991)

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**“You wanted *norte*!” Central American Families and the Ongoing Trauma of Migration,
Separation, and Deportation
Florencia Rojo**

Abstract: Central America is one of the most violent regions in the world, and violence continues to be the primary driver of migration. With few options for legal entry into the US, Central Americans’ migrations expose them to additional traumatic events. Once in the US, Central American immigrants are subject to political, economic, and social exclusion after leaving countries torn apart by US-sponsored civil wars. Even in California sanctuary cities, despite perceived progressiveness regarding immigrant rights, Central American immigrants have long faced myriad challenges: discrimination, limited work opportunities, and violence. Although Central American immigrants in the US continue to experience extraordinarily high rates of exposure to violent events, few studies examine how past traumatic experiences affect immigrants’ daily lives and relationships once in the US—and how structural violence of daily life exacerbates trauma. This dissertation provides a sociological approach by connecting structural violence to trauma. In order to do so, this analysis centers on Central American immigrant families as a crucial site for examining experiences, ideas, and constructions of violence and trauma across place, space, and generations. Using in depth interviews and ethnographic observations in families’ homes and communities, the study applies grounded theory analysis to immigrant families’ collective experiences of violence, trauma, and im/migration—past and present. Ethnographic observations were carried out in 2017 and 2018 in San Francisco Bay Area sanctuary cities, and in depth interviews were conducted with 27 Central American immigrants. Additionally, this dissertation draws on ethnographic fieldwork from the summer of 2018 at a *casa migrante* (migrant shelter) in Central Mexico.

First, I reveal how changes in immigration policy, enforcement practices, and discourse at the federal level, shaped daily life for Central Americans at the local level, specifically, for immigrant families already contending with histories of violence and trauma, settled placed deemed relatively safe. Next, I examine the traumatic consequences of serial separations across generations of Central American families. Finally, I expand on previous research on in-transit migration, to argue the migrant condition is not spatially or temporally fixed, but rather a condition that extends beyond the migrant journey and away from the border. This project analytically synthesizes various forms of violence in the lives of Central American families by drawing connections between interpersonal violence and social systems, and between family histories and political histories, producing an innovative analysis of intergenerational and structural trauma.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

HONORING AMILCAR

My scholarship on Central American immigrant families was initially inspired by my community organizing work in response to police violence. In February 26, 2015, my next door neighbor, a 20 year old undocumented Guatemalan man named Amilcar Perez Lopez, was fatally shot in the back by two plainclothes San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) officers (Laughland 2015). I heard a series of gunshots that evening as I was walking home from the train in San Francisco's Mission District, on the way back from a sociology class in my second year of graduate school. Amilcar's housemates, also undocumented immigrants, witnessed the shooting. In a conversation on their front stoop the next morning, they told me what they had seen. From that moment, I offered my support to my immigrant neighbors, translating from Spanish to English during vigils, marches, community meetings, lawyers' phone calls, and victims' services appointments, and I became a lead organizer in the community's response to the shooting.

For many people in San Francisco and beyond, the police killing of Amilcar was a tragic example of the institutional racism and police violence that is epidemic in Black and Brown communities across the country (Hetey et al. 2016). Because of my connection to Amilcar as a neighbor and my involvement with his family and community during their struggle for justice, Amilcar's death and the work of uplifting his story became a catalyst for my research on the experiences of trauma from multiple sources in the lives of Central Americans living in the United States.

Organizing for justice

When SFPD held their mandatory town hall a few days after the shooting, then Chief of Police Greg Suhr¹ provided the police narrative of events: that the young man (Amilcar) was charging them with a knife, and out of fear for their lives they shot him. The police department constructed a villain out of Amilcar, describing him as a criminal and an outsider. This was part of a larger legacy of state discourses that demonize immigrant communities of color (Massey and Sánchez 2010), even in sanctuary cities like San Francisco. Before any of the lawyers, or the District Attorney's team, or the Office of Citizen complaints had even arrived at the scene, we, the neighbors, had started conducting our own "people's investigation." We gathered photos and witness statements and the police narrative was inconsistent with our findings. Eyewitness accounts claiming the young man was shot from behind belied the police narrative of events.

We mounted a campaign to expose the police's wrongdoing and people mobilized around the case, which resonated broadly at a time of heightened sensitivities around police use of force. Later, two separate autopsies, including the official San Francisco medical examiner's report, corroborated our claim that Amilcar was shot from behind, by two undercover officers who did not speak his language (KTVU 2016). This incident was one in a series of police killings of Latinx men in the neighborhood (including Alex Nieto and Luis Gongora Pat), a historically Mexican and Central American community facing rapid gentrification (Solnit 2016).

Attending to trauma

People in the neighborhood shared the traumatic impacts of the shooting on their lives. I listened to neighbors at community dinners tell me they were having nightmares, and fielded

¹ Chief of Police Greg Suhr eventually resigned in 2016 after a series of scandals including a leak of a series of overtly racist text messages between high-ranking officers and several officer-involved killings of people of color after Amilcar Perez-Lopez's death.

panicked phone calls when they saw police cars nearby. Those who were touched by earlier and subsequent police shootings expressed worry and stress for themselves and the young Latinx men in their lives, not knowing where to turn. I too, attended to the secondary trauma I experienced as a result of my involvement with Amilcar's community (Jenkins and Baird 2002). As the case brought the realities of trauma to my attention on a daily basis, it also highlighted the intersection of racist policing and gentrification with immigration-related fears and anxieties. Witnesses struggled to cooperate in investigations out of fear of deportation (Emslie, Terrazas and Reinert 2016). For some, the police violence that killed Amilcar was reminiscent of institutional and structural violence that they left behind in their countries of origin. On the whole, the Latinx community of the Mission seemed to be reeling from a collective trauma.

During this time I got to know Amilcar's loved ones intimately. I was responding to a call by a new generation of activists to center family members most impacted by police violence, those living with the trauma and loss, over other political agendas (APTP 2017). This would become a central and guiding principle of my community work and subsequent scholarship. I moved from political organizing to advocacy, supporting Amilcar's family and community in their trauma by accompanying them – sometimes going with them to interviews, appointments, and meetings, other times simply listening to their stories. I had regular conversations on the phone with his father, who lived in Guatemala along with Amilcar's mother and five younger siblings. I heard their happiest memories of Amilcar, which I relayed to the community, and their greatest pains.

The family was experiencing unimaginable grief. They had imagined a better life for Amilcar in the US, and he came to be killed by those charged with protecting him. It was a tremendous sacrifice to say goodbye to him when he left his home. According to his father,

Amilcar's mother had barely slept or eaten in the time he was migrating, as she waited to hear from him, hoping he made it to the other side. She experienced great relief when she finally heard from him, and they talked regularly, but she would not get to see her son in person again before he died.

In addition to the tremendous emotional loss they were experiencing, the death of Amilcar exacerbated his family's financial hardships. As is the case for many Central American families, Amilcar's remittances provided his family with basic needs like running water, electricity, and school fees for his siblings². He was a breadwinner for his family, a caregiver for his housemate living with cancer and his girlfriend living with addiction, a vibrant young man with a long future ahead of him.

We, Amilcar's neighbors and friends, with the support of local community organizations, successfully brought attention to this and other shootings – and provided support to Amilcar's loved ones who were experiencing the trauma of the event, coupled with the challenges of being undocumented and at the heart of a criminal investigation. But in this sanctuary city, there was no justice – at least not from the legal system. In his eight-year term as District Attorney, George Gascon never indicted a single officer involved in a shooting³. Over two years after Amilcar was killed, and despite the mountain of evidence before them, the District Attorney's office announced they would not indict the officers on any charges (Emslie 2018).

² One in ten Guatemalan households relied on US remittances at the time Pérez Ruiz, Esther 2018. "Impact of Remittances on Household Decisions in Guatemala." in *Dialogo A Fondo*. International Monetary Fund: IMFBlog.

³ San Francisco District Attorney George Gascon announced in 2018 that he would not be running for re-election. Gascon cited family obligations as the reason he would not seek a third term, though others speculate the criticism he received in his decision not to prosecute officers involved in shootings could have played a role (Sernoffsky, Evan. 2018. "SF District Attorney George Gascón decides not to seek re-election." in *San Francisco Chronicle*. San Francisco, California: Bill Nagel.)

From advocate to scholar

Throughout this experience, I got to know many Latinx immigrant family members and loved ones of people killed by police in San Francisco. I had previously worked in issues of violence prevention, but my involvement in this case pushed me to consider the structural conditions of Central American immigrants to the US in the context of violence scholarship. The families were the ones that first pointed out to me the unmet promises of the sanctuary city. One family made signs that said: “Police terror in the Sanctuary City,” calling out what they perceived as the city government’s hypocrisy and poor treatment towards immigrant communities. This work also forefronted trauma – and its structural production– in my mind, which would continue as I pursued my academic research. Through the Amilcar case, I witnessed the ongoing trauma of family separation, produced by the structurally violent conditions immigrant families were subject to, and reinforced, in this case, by state violence. The realities of his transnational family and community exemplified complexities of the migrant condition, and the false distinction between migrating and settling, particularly when one is never considered a full member of the receiving society. This experience also taught me the power of community support, solidarity, and holding space for a family’s grief by lifting up their loved one’s story. I honor and carry these lessons with me.

BACKGROUND

Central American migration

Central America is one of the most violent regions in the world (Muggah and Tobón 2018), and violence continues to be the primary driver of migration from the region. A recent

study of Central American immigrants found that 83% reported violence as the reason they left, and 90% were afraid to return to their country of origin (Keller et al. 2017). Another emphasized that the greatest predictor of migrating from the region to the US was not gender, age, or even economic situation, but rather whether the individual had been victimized by a crime multiple times in the last year (Raderstorf et al. 2017). Nonetheless, Central Americans are widely considered economic migrants in popular and scholarly discourse (Abrego 2017). Approximately 3.4 million Central Americans live in the US, a tenfold increase from 1980 when civil wars and economic and political instability began driving massive immigration from the region (Lesser and Batalova 2017). This earlier wave of migration in the 1980s, produced by conditions the US government had a significant role in architecting, set the stage for Central American immigrants' realities in the US henceforth.

Despite qualifying for protection under the 1980 US Refugee Act, Central Americans fleeing violence and natural disaster have been disproportionately denied asylum, and those who do seek asylum are often detained under harsh conditions in the US (Menjívar & Abrego 2012). The US government has had economic and political interests in the region and has intervened in these countries towards these interests, which produced or greatly contributed to the violence that many Central Americans have had to flee (Barry 1991; LaFeber 1993). Immigrants coming to the US fleeing governments supported by the US would be overlooked, and only those fleeing left wing or communist governments would receive assistance. For example, in 1988, a majority (68 percent) of Nicaraguans seeking asylum were approved, compared to only four percent of Salvadoran asylum-seekers (Barry 1991). Determining refugee status has often been a political process rather than a legal one (Abrego 2017). Central American immigrants, excluded from protections afforded by refugee or asylee status, became undocumented. Subject to political,

economic, and social exclusion after leaving countries torn apart by the US-sponsored civil wars, young people from these communities formed gangs, including Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Calle 18 (Dieciocho) (Wolf 2010). The US government responded through mass deportation of foreign-born gang members, expanding the gangs' violence to Central America (Abrego 2017; Wolf 2010), in a historic and transnational cycle of violence perpetrated by the United States. These criminal groups are now highly publicized and have been condemned by the Trump Administration as "animals" that must be kept out of the country, despite their US origins (The White House 2018b).

Although Central American immigrants to the US continue to experience extraordinarily high rates of exposure to violent events, few studies examine how experiences affect immigrants' daily lives and relationships once they arrive in the US (Keller et al. 2017). As a result, although the conditions they have experienced leave lasting emotional consequences, Central Americans are subsumed under economic rhetoric, rendering their trauma invisible before the law and in the minds of powerful stakeholders, including well-meaning policy makers.

Sanctuary Paradox

Twenty-eight percent of Central American immigrants to the US have settled in California (Zong and Batalova 2015), and the San Francisco Bay Area⁴ is one of the top ten destinations for migrants (Lesser and Batalova 2017). The Bay Area has a long history of Central American migration, and the city of San Francisco has the longest continuous history of Salvadoran migration to the US (Menjívar 2000). Central Americans first established a community in the Bay Area in the 1940s due to the commercial trade of coffee and bananas

⁴ Throughout, "The Bay Area" will be used to refer to San Francisco Bay Area Sanctuary Cities including San Francisco, Berkeley, and Oakland.

between the U.S. and several Central American countries (Menjívar 2000). In the 1960s there was a steady flow of Salvadorans and Nicaraguans to Northern California who were escaping violence in their countries of origin. By the 1980s a population surge of Guatemalans, nearly all of Mayan heritage, made their way to the area as well, primarily to Oakland, across the bridge from San Francisco (Jonas and Rodríguez 2015; Manz, Perry-Houts and Castaneda 2000). In the early 2000s, a second wave of Guatemalans, mostly Maya Mam from the Guatemalan highlands, settled in Oakland and throughout the Easy Bay (Jonas and Rodríguez 2015).

Despite the strong community and cultural impact of migration in the region, Central Americans have consistently faced structural challenges, and the area has been considered a somewhat paradoxical context of reception. The technology boom-bust cycles of the area have increased the cost of living and offer few opportunities for local Central American workers, most of whom do not have requisite education, training, or legal status to participate in the high-tech economy (Jonas and Rodríguez 2015; Vicino, Hanlon and Short 2011). Displacement and neighborhood change, under the discursive umbrella of “gentrification,” have disproportionately affected the Latinx community in the Bay Area since the late 1960s (Cordova 2017; Jonas and Rodríguez 2015; Menjívar 2000). In the 1980s, Cold War ideologies resulted in less favorable treatment to those fleeing right-wing governments. The California recession in the 1980s and 1990s created even fewer work opportunities amidst increased competition. Economic downturns in places of reception like these are often found to contribute to hostility directed towards immigrants, who are scapegoated for “taking jobs” (Massey & Sanchez 2010). Amidst these challenges, immigrant communities in the Bay Area mobilized around the federal government’s denial of asylum to Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrants fleeing persecution.

In response to pressures from the Central American-led Sanctuary Movement, The City of San Francisco passed the City of Refuge Ordinance in 1984, with the City of Oakland following soon after in 1986, to ensure that local police were not involved in the violation of immigrants' civil rights (Oakland City Council 2016; Ridgley 2008). The City of Berkeley, on the other hand, claims it is the first U.S. sanctuary city, after passing in a resolution in 1971 to protect sailors opposing the Vietnam war (Berkeley Mayor's Office 2016). In the 1980s a very small minority of Salvadorans and Guatemalans in San Francisco were granted asylum, meaning that many Central Americans in the region became undocumented (Ridgley 2008). Yet by the 1990s, San Francisco's federal asylum office lead the country in approving asylum cases for Central Americans (Jonas and Rodríguez 2015). Despite the visibility and political mobilization of Central Americans in the region, the community remained economically and politically marginalized (Jonas and Rodríguez 2015), and many Central American immigrant to the area are still undocumented today. The percent of an immigrant population that is undocumented can be difficult to track, but California is estimated to have the largest undocumented immigrant population in the country. San Francisco County is estimated to be home to 35,000 undocumented immigrants, and Alameda County, which includes Oakland and Berkeley, is estimated to be home to 129,000 (Hayes and Hill 2017).

The Bay Area has continued to position itself as a leader for immigrant rights. In 2013 San Francisco passed a "Due Process for All Ordinance" limiting when local police may give Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) advance notice of an individual's release from local jail. The ordinance also prevents local coordination and cooperation with ICE detainer requests (Office of Civic Engagement & Immigrant Affairs, 2016). In 2016, the City of Oakland passed a resolution re-affirming its City of Refuge status, and the mayor has continued to insist

Oakland will remain a sanctuary city despite threats from the federal government. In 2017, the State of California passed SB-54, commonly known as the “Sanctuary State Bill,” legalizing state-wide non-cooperation policies between California law enforcement and federal immigration agents (SB54, 2017). While there is not a universal definition of sanctuary cities across those municipalities who claim the title, they typically involve city level ordinances that aim to limit the cooperation of local law enforcement with federal immigration enforcement, though the details vary city to city.

Despite perceived progressiveness around the protection of immigrant rights, Central American immigrants have long faced myriad challenges in the form of discrimination, limited work opportunities, and violence. Although local sanctuary policies theoretically protect undocumented immigrants from federal law enforcement, relations between the local police and the Latinx immigrant community have often been antagonistic, particularly in light of several successive cases of fatal police shootings of Latino men (Laughland 2015; Solnit 2016; Talbot 2017). Further, the sheriff’s offices have historically cooperated with federal agents, a practice that continued recently in Alameda County (which includes Berkeley and Oakland), despite activists’ claims that they are violating sanctuary ordinances (Creighton and Neilson 2018). Together with rising xenophobia and anti-immigrant rhetoric at the federal level, these conditions have created a hostile context of reception at the local level for a population already contending with a host of traumatic experiences.

Today, a perfect storm of structural barriers is coalescing in the US in the form of ramped up removals, a rollback of existing protections against deportations, and federal attacks on sanctuary cities. Hate speech and anti-immigrant sentiment gain legitimacy as lawmakers reinforce ideologies that conflate immigration with criminality, deviance, and disease

(Kingsolver 2017). Since early 2017, the Trump Administration has expanded eligibility for deportation, ended the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, announced the end of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for some immigrant groups including Salvadorans and Hondurans (US Citizenship and Immigration Services 2018), and publically vowed to crack down on sanctuary cities, stating: “Our cities should be sanctuaries for Americans – not for criminal aliens” (The White House 2018). While some of these policies are tied up in courts, deportations continue to affect families. The convergence of these realities has resulted in a re-emergence of sanctuary rhetoric, in response to the overt attacks put forward by the current administration. While media reports show that these new policy realities and the rhetoric surrounding them are increasing uncertainty and anxiety for immigrant families, with some notable exceptions (Roche et al. 2018; Torres et al. 2018), few studies to date have documented the changing dynamics of *deportability* (De Genova 2002) for immigrant families under these new conditions.

Constructing Legal Status

Legal status has been constructed in the US as a natural and fixed category, tied to undocumented immigrants’ criminality (Dowling and Inda 2013). An undocumented person in the US has entered or stayed in the country without authorization and is therefore classified by the government and populous as “illegal” and in violation not only of the country’s laws but also social and cultural norms. Undocumented immigrants are therefore constructed as “irresponsible lawbreakers” (Dowling and Inda 2013, 6) and a “threat” to the country (Massey and Sánchez 2010).

What these conceptualizations fail to account for is how immigration policies, architected and enacted by state actors, determine who exists within or outside of the law (Menjívar 2006).

“Illegality,” therefore, is constructed by the state for the benefit of the state, and cannot be separated from citizenship (De Genova 2002). Discourses of “legality” espouse the virtues of legal immigrants and immigration – those who “follow the rules” and are “law-abiding” through supposed existing procedures, against those who are demonized as “illegal” immigrants. These discourses are leveraged by both immigrants-rights and anti-immigrant interests alike to a range of ends, such as criminalizing undocumented people, or pushing for rights of legal immigrants (Brown 2013). Racialized and politically-motivated policies make it nearly impossible for some immigrants to be in the country “legally.” Once immigrants are categorized as undocumented, they are subject to *everyday illegalities*, or “the routine ways that laws and institutional policies make it impossible for unauthorized immigrants to act within the law” (Armenta 2017).

Immigrants considered undocumented by the state are subject to a myriad of contradictions, such that acting lawfully can be a futile effort (e.g. a requirement to have an ID at all times, in a municipality in which undocumented immigrants are not eligible to obtain IDs) (Armenta 2017). Increasingly restrictive immigration policies exacerbate the boundaries between citizens and non-citizens, even those in the country with some legal status including legal permanent residents (Menjívar 2006). In addition, dichotomous conceptualizations of legality (“legal” vs “illegal”; “documented” vs. “undocumented”) leave out the gray areas of “liminal legality” that many Central Americans occupy (Menjívar 2006), which can offer some protection but also a great deal of precarity and uncertainty. One example that applies to many Central Americans is Temporary Protected Status (TPS), a temporary immigration status “provided to nationals of specifically designated countries that are confronting an ongoing armed conflict, environmental disaster, or extraordinary and temporary conditions” (American Immigration Council 2018). TPS provides a work permit and stay of deportation, but no path to citizenship. As of April 2019, TPS

for those from El Salvador, originally set to expire in September 2019, remains in effect as the result of a preliminary injunction issued blocking its termination. The government has filed an appeal of the injunction, which could reverse the preliminary injunction. For Hondurans, TPS is set to expire in 2020. Thus, for those who obtained some form of non-citizen “status,” the lines have once again been redrawn to exclude them from legality.

Even within the category of “undocumented” immigrant in the US, there is much variation. Undocumented immigrants are criminalized variably depending on the local context – some states/municipalities have harsher laws or greater infrastructure for criminalizing undocumented immigrants. Race and legality are co-constitutive in the US. As a white majority feels threatened by the population growth of a racialized “other” group, restrictive policies targeting immigrants also have been increasingly put into place (Brown 2013). Legal status is racialized, such that undocumented people in the US who are perceived as people of color will experience their non-citizen legal status more punitively (Asad and Clair 2018). For example, Latin American immigrants are more likely to be targets of deportation than other immigrant groups.

Legal statuses and their implications change over time. Many immigrants I spoke with who were not undocumented at the time had been at some point while in the US. Some, like those with TPS, worried about becoming undocumented in the future. Many were part of mixed documentation status families. Therefore, while this is not a study of “undocumented immigrants,” I pay close attention to the consequences of legal status and to the production of illegality as both shape immigrant families within a larger context of structural violence.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Sociology of Violence and Society: structural, symbolic, legal violence

Theories of structural and symbolic violence provide a starting point for observing relationships between individual stories and broader structural and global forces that shape them (Bourdieu 1989; Farmer et al. 2004; Galtung 1971; Galtung 1990). Structural violence refers to the harm that individuals, families, and communities experience from the economic and social structures, social institutions, and relations of power that prevent people from meeting their basic needs (Pinderhughes, Davis and Williams 2015). This concept, with its roots in anticolonial resistance movements, was later elaborated by sociologists and anthropologists to explain how structures have tangible impacts on people's health and bodies, and how historic political, social, and economic forces are the root causes of illness (Farmer 2003; Farmer et al. 2004). Violence therefore is not only present in interpersonal relationships, but also built into structures that produce social injustices and put people in harm's way (Galtung 1969).

Guatemalan sociologist Torres-Rivas argues that structural violence is "rooted in the uncertainty of everyday life" of the immigrant (as cited in Menjivar & Abrego 2012:1384). Immigration law as a form of violence has become a focus of sociologists who examine how government policies cause harm, sustain poor health, and control the conduct of immigrant populations (Dowling and Inda 2013; Kline 2017; Menjivar and Abrego 2012). The threat of deportation, for example, is a source of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety for non-citizens and their families. These threats are most immediate and pointed for undocumented or unauthorized immigrants, but exist for all "liminally legal" immigrants (Menjivar 2006), including permanent residents (Golash-Boza 2016). Furthermore, legal status is racialized, such that even those who are authorized to be in the US face negative consequences of immigration enforcement and citizenship regimes (Sabo et al. 2014; Asad & Chair 2017). Racial discrimination and other

forms of structural violence exclude Central American immigrants from full social citizenship (Bosniak 2006; Asad & Clair 2017).

Although the violence research base treats different types of violence (such as intimate partner violence, gang violence, etc.) as distinct problems and experiences affecting distinct populations (women, youth, etc.), emerging research highlights the importance of examining multiple forms of violence together (Auyero, Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes 2015; Fleming et al. 2015; Pinderhughes, Davis and Williams 2015; Wilkins et al. 2014). Building from these foundations, this project analytically synthesizes various forms of violence in the lives of Central American families by drawing connections between interpersonal violence and social systems, and between family histories and political histories, producing an innovative analysis of intergenerational structural violence. Through empirical examination of the intergenerational transmission of trauma on immigrant families, this study offers new insights to the study of violence in society.

Sociology of Trauma: collective trauma, critical trauma studies, and historic/intergenerational trauma

Extant studies show that negative health consequences of trauma persist throughout the life course (Felitti et al. 1998) and linger across generations (Yehuda et al. 2000; Yehuda et al. 2001; Sangalang & Vang 2017). For many years, the study of trauma was believed to be the domain of psychologists, who view trauma as a natural response to an objectively traumatic event (Stein 2009). Sociologists have traditionally developed new understandings of seemingly individual psychological troubles in their connection to “public issues of social structure” (Mills 1967:395) as far back as Durkheim’s work on suicide (1897). This dissertation engages with

collective, cultural, and historic approaches to trauma in order to create new theoretical linkages between structure and violence in the lives of Central American immigrants.

The wounds of a trauma are as collective and social as they are individual. A cultural trauma, which extends beyond the traumatic event or experience itself, is defined by how the trauma undermines, reorganizes, and redefines a culture and cultural identities (Alexander 2012; Alexander et al 2004; Eyerman 2013; Sztompka 2000). For a collective trauma, such as a national tragedy or a natural disaster, the representations, symbols, and narratives around a trauma can provide an understanding of the traumatic meaning and impact of said events. Striking examples can be found in diverse forms of cultural representations, such as the words of the revolutionary Salvadoran/Panamerican poet Roque Dalton “...*Todos nacimos medio muertos en 1932/ser salvadoreño es ser medio muerto*” (All of us were born half dead in 1932/to be Salvadoran is to be half dead) (1998:128). Cultural traumas therefore can be examined as a site of loss of meaning and identity, as well as identity formation, social cohesion, and transformation. The ways in which personal, individual traumas are remembered are linked to and shaped by the social world that the individual is embedded in. Memories of state violence and impunity experienced by many Central American immigrants to the US can be carried over even by those who did not live through specific events, through recounting and retelling.

Intergenerational trauma refers to a psychosocial process of transmission of trauma from a generation of trauma survivors to second and further generations. The study of intergenerational transmission of trauma has gained some prominence and has positioned trauma as a collective, rather than individual, experience. Intergenerational trauma has been measured psychologically, through the post-traumatic stress symptoms of descendants of Jewish Holocaust survivors (Adelman 1995; Epstein 1979; Sigal and Weinfeld 1989), historically oppressed

indigenous peoples (Brave Heart and DeBruyn 1998; Duran 2006), and American slaves (DeGruy 2005). It has also been measured biomedically; biomarkers of trauma have been found in the children of trauma survivors and those with symptoms of PTSD (Yehuda et al. 2000; Yehuda, Halligan and Grossman 2001). Nonetheless, there is a dearth of sociological approaches to the subject of trauma within families and across generations. Further, with few exceptions (Phipps & Degges-White 2014), the issue of trauma across generations has been largely neglected in the context of Latin American immigrant communities in the US. Evidence around trauma, its intergenerational transmission, and transgenerational impacts and implications, is needed to inform services for and policies regarding the continuously growing immigrant population in the US (Sangalang and Vang 2017).

This dissertation centers on Central American immigrant families as a crucial site for examining experiences, ideas, and constructions of violence across place, space, and generations. It also provides a sociological approach by connecting structural violence to trauma. In so doing, I build on a nascent literature foregrounding trauma among Central American immigrants. Beyond the psychological constructs of trauma, this study builds on and aims to advance social theories of trauma and violence (Alexander 2013; Alexander et al. 2004; Casper and Wertheimer 2016). The trauma transmission shown in this dissertation is not only psychological; I also attend to the cultural, institutional, and structural elements that reproduce traumatizing conditions. In doing so, I mobilize work on the cross-spatial and cross-temporal experiences of trauma that have been documented among Latin American immigrants (Phipps and Degges - White 2014) and put it in conversation with historical and transgenerational trauma. Drawing on and extending these and other analyses, I engage questions of violence as ones that are closely intertwined with historical and continued forms of subjugation.

DATA AND METHODS

This dissertation focuses on immigrant families from the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (referred to collectively as ‘Central American’) to the US who have settled in the San Francisco Bay Area. Using in depth interviews and ethnographic observations in families’ homes and communities, the study applies grounded theory analysis to immigrant families’ collective experiences of violence, trauma, and stress in the past and present. Grounded theory methods consist of systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to build middle range theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data (Charmaz 2000). Participants often hold multiple and possibly contradicting meanings around the sensitive, personal topics covered in this research (Clarke 2005). The methods employed therefore serve to answer the call to capture this complexity “rather than aiming at simplifications” (Clarke 2005:xxix).

San Francisco Bay Area

My research relies on ethnographic observations of Central American immigrant families carried out in 2017 and 2018 in San Francisco Bay Area sanctuary cities, and in depth interviews with 27 Central American immigrants. During observations in participants’ homes, I focused on routines, family dynamics, with a focus on familial practices around discussing and managing violence and immigration-related threats. This offered additional information by observing the specific ways families talked with one another about these issues in ways they perhaps would not bring up directly in an interview. In community spaces, observations centered on neighborhood conditions, Central American social, cultural, and political participation, and how participants navigated daily life as immigrants.

Between January and June 2018, I attended a community organization serving primarily immigrant families every Monday between 9:30am and 12noon when they conducted a weekly family program I call *Familia*. The family program supported parents to come in and participate in informal and loosely structured activities with their children. Approximately 15-20 families showed up each week. Many parents attended regularly, some came sporadically, and there were a few parents I met only once or twice because they were new or did not return. The program is part of a network of community organizations and groups that provide services to the immigrant community. In addition to weekly observations at the community organization I also attended immigration rights marches, immigration-related conferences, services at predominantly Central American churches, and social and cultural events. I wrote my observations in detailed field notes.

I initially met participants through the community program, and subsequently used snowball sampling to reach participants who were not part of the program. A few interviews were conducted in a private room at the organization itself, though in most cases I scheduled a meeting for a later date and conducted interviews in participants' homes. Interviews were conducted while participants were preparing meals, folding laundry, caring for children, and conducting other daily tasks. I often spent time talking informally with participants and their families before and after the recorded interview and wrote about these conversations and observations in my field notes. When possible and appropriate, I participated in the social life of the Central American immigrant families I interviewed, by attending church and social events when invited. All interviews and informal conversations in the field occurred in Spanish and were translated to English by the author.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews lasted between 1-3 hours. I began with a discussion

of the participant's personal history. Participants were asked to describe their family, place of origin, their own and their family's experiences of migration and settlement, and their experiences with interpersonal, community, and/or state/political violence. The second phase of the interview focused on the intergenerational dynamics of participants' individual and family histories. Participants were asked to describe how experiences of violence and migration, either direct or indirect, have impacted them, shaped their family structure, and their role in the family. Finally, participants were asked about their daily life in the U.S., including how they respond to and cope with the experiences they describe throughout the interview, both individually and collectively. For the purpose of building rapport and ensuring the participant's comfort, I did not ask participants directly to disclose their legal status. In all but one interview, descriptions of the participant and the participant's family's current and past legal status came up naturally throughout the course of the interview. Questions were modified based on the participant's age at time of migration and whether they migrated during the region's civil wars or migrated after.

Secondary field site: Central Mexico

While my dissertation relies primarily on my fieldwork in the San Francisco Bay Area, in chapter 4 ("*There is a lot to survive*"), I also draw on fieldwork and analysis with migrants in transit through Mexico. For seven weeks in the summer of 2018 I conducted fieldwork at a *casa migrante* (migrant shelter) in Central Mexico for migrants in transit, and around town in places the migrants frequented. The migrants included Central Americans and Mexicans traveling North for work in Mexico, those attempting to cross the northern border into the US, and those returning to their communities of origin after detention, deportation, and/or experiences of violence in transit. Over seven weeks, 35 migrants came and went from the shelter. Most (27)

were men; about half (16) were Mexican, mostly from Southern states, about half (17) Honduran, and one was Guatemalan. At the *casa*, migrants could shower, change into new clothes, sleep in a bed, and eat a hot breakfast, until they were ready to continue their journey. Some stayed for as short as a night, others stayed as long as a few weeks and established a routine with chores at the shelter.

There, I participated in daily activities with the shelter director and the migrants, ate meals, helped organize the pantry, clothes, and other donated items, received migrants who arrived during the day, joined events, and ran errands. In this time, I heard migrants tell their stories, witness their planning about when, where, and how to travel next, their dynamics and relationships with one another, and negotiating decisions as plans and circumstances changed. I recorded all observations in a notebook, and typed my fieldnotes and memos in the evenings.

Analysis

A grounded theory analysis was employed to characterize the themes that emerged from interviews and observations. I iteratively coded interview transcripts and fieldnotes, starting with open, unrestricted coding of the field notes and interview transcripts, beginning immediately to produce concepts that seem to fit the data. Throughout the coding process, analytic memos were used to elaborate the processes, assumptions, and actions that were subsumed under the codes identified (Charmaz, 2000).

Immigration Research In These Times

In the time that I began conducting this research, major political changes took place that impacted life on the ground in the field, as well as shaped the direction of my project. I began working, building relationships, and gaining entrée well before Donald Trump was elected, but

began collecting interview data in earnest after the election. Since Trump took office in 2017, there have been sweeping changes to immigration policy. The administration has enhanced immigration enforcement, reduced refugee admissions, increased obstacles for legal immigration, reversed the decline of non-criminal arrests of unauthorized immigrants, cancelled DACA, ended TPS for many and threatened Sanctuary Cities with withdrawal of federal funds and subpoenas to local law enforcement (US Department of Justice 2018). These changes had impacts on Central American communities in Sanctuary Cities, as detailed in chapter 2: *No such thing as sanctuary*. However there were also impacts on the research process itself, which are worth mentioning here.

As I developed my project, I noticed changes after the 2016 election. Immigrant groups that include undocumented and liminally legal community members have always been a challenging population to reach and ensure safety and anonymity to. In my personal experience with this project, there was a clear difference before and after the election. Organizations whose directors had enthusiastically signed on initially to be community partners in the project, shifted their priorities and expressed hesitation to participate after the election. Groups I planned to work with told me they were focusing only on top priority items, like processing visas. Several groups expressed that they were having a harder time reaching community members than before, and did not want to add another layer of intimidation by including a research component. Others told me “this moment is too traumatizing” to conduct a project relating to trauma. Colleagues conducting qualitative research with similar populations began to observe and report similar dynamics in other arenas.

These conditions presented ethical considerations as I entered the field. I excluded some preliminary observation data from my analysis, ensured I had extra protection for my data in the

form of an NIH Certificate of Confidentiality, and avoided interviewing recent arrivals to the US, among other things. Although the political changes slowed down my initial data collection, when participants did talk to me, they talked a lot; interviews were long and sometimes extended over more than one meeting. People had a lot to get off their chest. These responses raised questions about the consequences of knowledge production around the im/migrant situation right now, in light of the barriers to conducting qualitative research. These questions are outside the scope of this dissertation but I hope to explore them further in collaboration with other immigration scholars.

OVERVIEW OF DISSERTATION

Chapter 2: “No such thing as sanctuary”: How Fear and Uncertainty are Transforming the Lives of Central American Immigrant Families

The second chapter centers on the question of how changes in immigration policy, enforcement practices, and discourse at the federal level, shaped daily life for Central Americans at the local level, specifically, for immigrant families already contending with histories of violence and trauma, settled in places of relative safety. In this chapter, I show how Central American families in the San Francisco Bay Area under Trump interpreted contradictory information around new immigration policies and enforcement practices, and subsequently responded by making changes to their daily lives. I argue that the undercurrent of fear in Central American immigrant communities was, in part, a function of the current administration's approach to immigration policy and enforcement. In the current climate the sense of danger has intensified and expanded its scope with real impacts on immigrant families that are also new. Participants' emotional experiences, daily routines, and family dynamics were reorganized, even in a region considered the “best case scenario” for immigrant families. These various domains

reveal that despite the promises of protection, fear and uncertainty is structured into immigrants' daily lives in sanctuary cities.

Chapter 3: "The greatest pain": the Structural Violence of Intergenerational Immigrant Family Separations

In the third chapter, I examine the consequences of serial separations across generations of Central American families. This chapter centers on a detailed, in-depth case study of María to present an analysis of how the dynamics of trauma and family separation manifest and are consequential at multiple points in one person's life. The complex realities of family separations are pervasive and cyclical, with dynamics that repeat across generations, and whose destructive impacts are chronic. I show how even the acts family members take to escape violence can result in a new chapter of trauma in the intergenerational process and narrative within a family. The impacts of each successive experience of trauma frame and shape the experiences, relations, and the health of intergenerational transnational families.

Chapter 4: "There is a lot to survive:" The ongoing migrant condition

In chapter 4, I turn my focus to migration. By drawing on data collected with Central Americans living in the San Francisco Bay Area as well as with migrants in transit through Mexico, this chapter includes a combination of migration stories: remembered and recounted by people who experienced them years before, as well as stories from people in the middle of a migration, who told me about their current journey as well as previous migrations. Migrations are often circuitous, take unplanned turns, require returns before the migrant can continue, and are therefore nonlinear and on a continuum, rather than a continuous progression. Additionally,

migrants often have more than one journey, are tied to the journeys that preceded them, and implicated in the journeys that follow. Finally, ongoing migration-related trauma extended well into the stage of “settling” into a new country. I argue therefore, that the migrant condition is not spatially or temporally fixed, it is not simply a state of moving from one country to another, but rather a condition that extends beyond the migrant journey and away from the border.

Chapter 2: “No such thing as sanctuary”: How Fear and Uncertainty are Transforming the Lives of Central American Immigrant Families

INTRODUCTION

“No such thing as a sanctuary city anymore”

On Sunday, February 24, 2018, Oakland’s mayor, Libby Schaaf, made an announcement that rippled through the community: “There is potentially an [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)] activity planned in the Bay Area that could be starting as soon as today,” she said in a televised message, warning undocumented residents to take extra precautions in the coming week (Flynn 2018). The deputy director of ICE, Thomas Homan, with the support of the Trump administration, denounced Schaaf, saying her announcement was “irresponsible,” “dangerous,” and that it protected “criminal aliens” (Flynn 2018). Mayor Schaaf was unapologetic, rebutting that she was defending Oakland’s “sanctuary city” status. A year earlier, across the bridge in San Francisco, then-mayor Ed Lee proclaimed “we are a Sanctuary City, now, tomorrow, forever,” in response to the Trump administration’s executive order to cut federal funds from sanctuary cities (Martinez 2017). These are only two of several early standoffs between local politicians in Bay Area sanctuary cities and the Trump administration.

The day after Oakland Mayor Schaaf’s announcement about ICE, I visited *Familia*, a community program serving predominantly Central American and Mexican families where I conducted weekly observations. On a normal week, around 15 families attended the program, but on this day, there were none. The staff members sat around a table restlessly, checking their phones and looking at the clock on the wall. I spoke with staff members who conducted regular home visits with families as we waited. Over the previous several months, the staff had reported

to me that clients became increasingly hesitant to receive them in their homes and reluctant to participate in the programs. The program emphasized family and child well-being and was not specifically related to legal advocacy or immigration status. Nonetheless, staff noticed that the families that did invite them into their homes expressed immigration-related fears more frequently than in the past. The staff considered the mayor's announcement as a sort of tipping point for the community, thereby attributing the families' absence at *Familia* to fears of exposing themselves and being detained or deported by ICE if they left the house.

Well past the time latecomers usually trickle into the program, still no families had arrived, so the *Familia* staff decided to return to the organization's main office. I rode back in a car with Jenny and one of her staff. Jenny is a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipient who has been with the organization for a few years and worked her way up to program coordinator. She became visibly agitated as she talked about the changes she noticed in the recent months. She feared she could not protect the families in her program from potential ICE interaction and the possible violent consequences of those interactions: such as separation from their children during detention, or severe emotional, physical, and economic suffering that come along with a family member's deportation. Offering some form of protection is something she felt she is charged to do in her role, yet she expressed feeling unprepared to respond in the event that immigration officials show up at the organization. Jenny disclosed, "There's no such thing as a sanctuary city anymore," explaining that she used to feel she could confidently tell community members that they are safe, but this was not the case anymore.

Back at the office, staff members shared information and rumors. "My brother said he saw [ICE] yesterday, they were double-parked just waiting," a staff member told me. Another said she saw them herself—an ICE agent went into an apartment building where she was

conducting a home visit. The agent went to a different unit from the family's she was visiting, but having them in such close proximity was scary. The fear and anxiety in the office were palpable. Most of the staff members are immigrants themselves; several are part of mixed-status families, and some are DACA recipients and TPS holders. They worried about their clients, their communities, and themselves. Throughout that week, I checked in with staff and asked for updates and visited several participants' homes. People asked each other, "Who has seen ICE and where? Who has photos?" They also inquired if I have any new information.

For many immigrants living in the Bay, their worst fears have come to fruition. Three days after the Oakland mayor's announcement, the Washington Post reported that ICE arrested 150 "suspected undocumented immigrants" in the Bay Area and would have arrested more had it not been for the mayor's warning (Flynn 2018). Although many people were able to avoid contact with ICE because of the announcement, the warning and subsequent ICE presence sent a shockwave through the Bay Area, and the mayor was unable to prevent ICE agents from coming in, detaining, and deporting members of the community.

This is one of the several turning points I observed that marked a new era for the sanctuary city. In this chapter, I examine the various ways in which fear structures and becomes structured into immigrants' lives in new ways. First, in the new political climate, as sanctuary rhetoric re-emerged into the public imagination, uncertainty about sanctuary protections pervaded the Central American immigrant community in the Bay Area. Liminal legal participants expressed greater threats to their partial protections. Contradictions and mixed messages left families feeling uncertain as to what to believe, expecting the worst. Second, these fears have become routinized, shaping and rearranging daily life, from the moment participants wake up to the moment they go to bed. Finally, the pre-existing traumas participants carry

collide with their present realities in a loop of fear and trauma. Central American immigrants' past experiences of structural violence increased their fear of present threats, and the families' fear of deportation and separation exacerbated their pains from past traumas. This chapter reveals the rapidly changing dynamics of deportability in the sanctuary city for Central American immigrants at a collective and family level and across a spectrum of legality, as constructed by the state and by their lives, including mixed-status families.

The changing dynamics of deportability

Immigration law, as a form of structural and symbolic violence, has been a focus of scholars examining how policies cause harm, sustain poor health, and control the conduct of immigrant populations (Armenta 2017; Dowling and Inda 2013; Kline 2017; Menjívar and Abrego 2012). The threat of deportation, for example, is a source of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety for undocumented immigrants and their families (De Genova 2013; Luibhéid, Andrade and Stevens 2018). By re-examining the dynamics of structural and symbolic violence in the lives of immigrant communities in the context of so-called sanctuary cities, I offer insights into the structural violence in the lives of immigrants in unexpected places and in a new political era. These threats have been documented in immigrants' lives well before the Trump administration. Sanctuary cities, despite the protections they offer and the barriers they create for federal immigration agents, have never fully shielded immigrants from the possibility of deportation and separation. Nonetheless, the sense of danger has intensified and expanded its scope with new impacts on immigrant families. This chapter addresses how Central American immigrants in sanctuary cities who have endured high levels of violence in their countries of origin and during migration perceive and respond to changing immigration policies, enforcement practices, and discourses in their day-to-day lives under the Trump administration.

Living under the threat of deportation is both a legal and an emotional reality for many immigrants in the US: “Migrant ‘illegality’ is lived through a palpable sense of *deportability* [emphasis added], which is to say, the possibility of deportation, the possibility of being removed from the space of the nation-state” (De Genova 2002:439). The lived experience of deportability is produced by the state and reinforced through the immigrants’ daily practices (Luibhéid, Andrade and Stevens 2018). Furthermore, legal status is racialized such that even those who are authorized to be in the US face negative consequences of immigration enforcement and citizenship regimes (Armenta 2017; Asad and Clair 2018; Romero 2006; Sabo et al. 2014). Therefore, although all non-citizens in the US are legally subject to deportation, they experience deportability differentially (Golash-Boza 2016). Racial discrimination and other forms of structural violence exclude non-white immigrants (e.g., Central Americans) from full social citizenship regardless of legal status (Armenta 2017; Asad and Clair 2018; Bosniak 2008). Few studies examine how the experience of deportability exists not only for undocumented or unauthorized immigrants but also operates in the lives of “liminally legal” immigrants (Menjívar 2006), those who exist in a legal zone between “illegal” and full citizenship, including permanent residents (Golash-Boza 2016).

In this chapter, I examine how immigration policy, enforcement practices, and discourse at the federal level, shape the daily life of immigrants at the local level, specifically for immigrant families already contending with histories of violence and trauma now settled in places of relative safety. Central American immigrant community members’ experiences of fear preceded their lives in the US; however, the Obama administration’s approach to immigration enforcement focused on the deportation of those labeled *criminals*. While Obama is associated with high rates of deportations, and thus famously labeled “deporter in chief” by critics

(Waldinger 2018), his priority to target gang members, convicted felons, and people convicted of several misdemeanors produced a widespread belief that undocumented immigrants are relatively safe from deportation so long as they are “good” (Andrews 2018; Chishti, Pierce and Bolter 2017). Undocumented immigrants in sanctuary cities under Obama internalized the belief that being a “good immigrant” will protect them from criminalization (Andrews 2018). In contrast, the Trump administration’s approach toward more widespread deportation has rendered *all* undocumented immigrants criminals, creating a feeling that removals are more arbitrary and less focused on whether the immigrant is “good” or “bad.”

In the current climate, Central American immigrants experience uncertainty and confusion regarding their safety, producing and exacerbating deportation-related fears. This fear becomes routinized through daily chores; family dynamics are reorganized around the risk of deportation, even in a region considered the “best case scenario” for immigrant families, thus structuring fear into immigrant families’ lives (Quesada, Hart and Bourgois 2011). The histories of violence, corruption, and impunity in the participants’ countries of origin and during migration shape their perceptions and compound their fears around immigration policies and enforcement practices, creating a loop in which trauma heightens fear, and fear exacerbates and triggers past trauma.

UNCERTAINTY ABOUT SANCTUARY

As the Trump administration’s efforts began to take effect, both legally and symbolically, a contested conversation about sanctuary cities, what they represent, what they mean in terms of policy and day-to-day reality, and who has jurisdiction to enforce or disregard the parameters of sanctuary, ensued in the SF Bay Area and across the country. Even before the Trump presidency, there has not been a shared, universal definition of sanctuary city. After Trump took office and

began to enact immigration policies and talk publicly about sanctuary cities, the rhetoric of “sanctuary” returned to the forefront. As a result, immigrant families received contradictory messages from various state actors, including local politicians, federal politicians, law enforcement agencies, local institutions (e.g., schools), and community organizations and their representatives. They also received conflicting messages from members of their own communities through informal conversations, text chains, and social media groups. The overwhelming sentiment, however, was that conditions are changing drastically and rapidly for immigrants all over the country, in a way that undermined the participants’ trust in and understanding of their cities’ sanctuary status and the status of any of the legal protections they may have had as a result.

“We had more protection”: Feeling safe post-2016

Most participants I spoke with have never felt completely sheltered from the possibility of being deported or having a loved one deported. For non-citizens and members of mixed-status families, the reality of being forced to return to their country of origin or to be separated from a loved one preceded the changes described in this chapter. Nonetheless, for many, the sanctuary city represented, at least at one point, a site of *relative* safety, and nearly all participants who have lived in the SF Bay Area for many years described gaining a sense of relative stability in part because of the sanctuary status. Participants who have some form of legal protection (e.g., a U visa, asylum) expressed feeling it was more likely to be upheld in a sanctuary context. One of the many reasons immigrants settled in the San Francisco Bay Area is the belief that it is a safer option because of its sanctuary status.

Several participants feel that the relative safety of the sanctuary city is diminishing. Ana María, a 35-year-old Guatemalan-born woman, has been in the US for over a decade. She is a naturalized US citizen, but her husband is undocumented. When they first came to the US, her

family lived San Diego, a border city that does appear on some lists of sanctuary cities but is not widely considered as one (Griffith 2017; Libby 2017). The presence of immigration officers there motivated her family to move north. In the Bay Area, she found her routine and felt relatively safe. However, according to Ana María, life in the Bay Area is different under the new administration:

It changed drastically [this past year]. When we were in San Diego, we saw [immigration officers] grabbing people on the freeway. But by coming here, no, like, we felt more comfortable. We had more protection, and now with this new president, we have heard things;, we have heard that now the police can call immigration too.

When Ana María saw immigration enforcement officials stopping people on the freeway in San Diego, she was worried that her husband would be at risk of being deported and separated from her and their children. Living under this precarious reality is part of what motivated her family to move to the Bay Area, where she heard that undocumented people are safer under the sanctuary city status, saying, “we had more protection.” This feeling of protection began to wear off; when Trump was elected, she heard that the police in the SF Bay Area could call ICE. Oakland’s police department has policies that prevent cooperation between local police and federal immigration agents. Nonetheless, I heard claims similar to Ana María’s several times throughout my fieldwork; many people believed that the local police *would* cooperate with ICE.

Rumors spread about police calling ICE and local police arrests, setting off a chain of events leading to deportation, thus adding to the insecurity of many participants. Nearly all participants claim receiving contradictory messages about the risks of deportation from various

sources, including the news, representatives of community institutions (e.g., schools), friends, neighbors, and family. Discerning whether these rumors are true proved a difficult and stressful task and added to the general climate of uncertainty.⁵ Ana María attributes the changes she observed and the shift in her feeling of relative safety directly to “this new president.” Ana María’s perception that the police are newly complicit in immigration enforcement undermined trust in the sanctuary city to protect her and her family.

“We are in a sanctuary city... but when you go out to the street you are afraid”: Feeling at risk in sanctuary cities

Although the participants in this study live in sanctuary cities, this status did not provide certainty or ease as regards their safety. While local officials, such as the mayors of San Francisco and Oakland, have publicly insisted that their cities will uphold their sanctuary status, confusion remains about what sanctuary means exactly, and many immigrants question whether the protections associated with sanctuary cities still apply. I interviewed Sonia, a 48-year-old Salvadoran mother of four living in Oakland, the week after Mayor Schaaf’s warning. At the time of our interview, Sonia had an asylum case that had been open for several years, but while in process, she remained undocumented. She, like others I interviewed, struggles to discern conflicting information about emerging risks and available protection for immigrants. She disclosed,

I was watching the news, and they said that by 85th

[Avenue] and 14th [Street], like, there had been raids, I

⁵ This is true not only for participants and community organization staff, but for me as well. First, there is the issue of what actions fall within existing laws and policies (e.g., the Oakland Police Department Policy Manual states that local agencies are free to disregard ICE detainer requests, but not that they *cannot* cooperate with ICE requests). Second, there is the question of whether officers act within those policies. What is clear is that the confusion emanating from these has become a great source of stress in the community.

think on Sunday... The district says that the school district is a sanctuary, that we are in a sanctuary city and everything, but when you go out to the street, you are afraid.

In many immigrant families I interviewed, seeing reports of ICE raids on the one hand and receiving reassurance about sanctuary policies on the other created a condition of confusion and uncertainty. Ultimately for Sonia, her fear of being exposed to ICE agents superseded the promises of sanctuary. Despite hearing from the district that her children's school and the city are sanctuaries, Sonia was afraid; she did not feel safe picking up her children at school. Seeing that there had been ICE raids in her city cast doubt on the legitimacy of the local government's ability or honest desire to enact its sanctuary policies. In the face of contradictory information, Sonia was left to hope for the best but plan for the worst. Like many of his workmates and friends and several other people I spoke with during this time, Sonia's husband stayed home from work in the week after the mayor's warning. Although their Salvadoran-born children are asylees, Sonia said the children were so afraid that she and her husband allowed them to stay home from school for the day as well.

As reports of ICE activity subsided, some people began to return to work and school. Once again, families started attending *Familia*, although with declining enrollment. Some people I interviewed reported that things had "calmed down" but did not go back to "normal." Many still question the meaning of sanctuary. Six months after the mayor's announcement, I interviewed Camila, a staff member at *Familia*. Camila, who is also a Guatemalan immigrant herself explained, "Supposedly a sanctuary city is where we should feel protected, but now, we [immigrants] don't even feel protected here." A sanctuary, she described, is a place where, at

least according to the mayor, the police does not provide information about residents to ICE. However, she and her clients heard many rumors and saw news reports that the police and ICE are collaborating. As a social worker and a member of her church, she felt it is her responsibility to calm and reassure people. When she first heard these rumors, she reminded people of the sanctuary city policy. Over time, she told me, she stopped reassuring people. She described a number of first-hand experiences in which people she knew were stopped by local police and promptly deported. To Camila, these instances corroborated the claims she believed were only rumors and worried that no one is safe. Oakland had stopped feeling like a sanctuary.

In addition to immigrant families and the community organization staff doubting the ability of the sanctuary status to protect them, several participants were confused whether their city is indeed a sanctuary city and what that means. Nicole, a 28-year-old undocumented Guatemalan woman living in Oakland, California reflected about the current status of her city:

I no longer know if Oakland is a sanctuary. I think it was a sanctuary, but it's not anymore, I'm not sure anymore. What they do is that they take you out of here to the other side [of the border]. It's easier to get deported [now] because they know we do not have papers.

Nicole was not sure whether Oakland is still technically a sanctuary city, but she suspected that it no longer is. If it is easier than before to be deported, does this mean that Oakland is no longer a sanctuary city? Nicole heard on the news and from friends that it is more dangerous to be undocumented than it previously had been. Like many immigrants in the Bay Area, Nicole had both a heightened sense of deportability and a heightened sense of confusion. She was not sure if the information she has was accurate, but she discussed potential eventualities with her son and

other members of her family and community and planned for the worst-case scenarios. Calvin, a 39-year-old legal permanent resident (LPR) from El Salvador, said something similar:

Well, Oakland, because I understand that, like San Francisco, Los Angeles, [are sanctuary cities] I think.

Oakland, no, I do not know if it's a sanctuary city.

Unlike Nicole, who, like many participants, felt that sanctuary protections were being stripped from families, Calvin was not sure whether his city has ever implemented sanctuary policies. I met Calvin because he worked with another participant, and unlike Nicole, he was not connected to any community organization nor did he have school-aged children. It is possible that this shaped the information he received about his rights and protections both before and under the Trump administration. Participants often expressed that they did not know what to believe, and they were worried. The fear and anxiety participants faced contrast the message from the Oakland mayor who said, “We are here to protect all of our residents regardless of where they came from” (CBS SF Bay Area 2018).

“They can take your papers:” Precarious legal status

Most participants are part of families with mixed legal status—some family members are undocumented, while others have quasi-legal status. For instance, in one family, one parent is undocumented, another has Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and their children are US-born. In another, the parents are undocumented, their older children are asylees, and their younger children are US-born. Many immigrants exist in a liminal space between “legality” and “illegality” (Menjívar 2006), meaning they are not citizens nor LPRs but have some form of permission to work and to be in the country. For these participants, the protection they feel under these statuses has always been partial, and they are aware that not having full residency means

that their conditions could change. Now, most of them say that change feels imminent, and they fear the new reality that awaits them.

Like several other participants who occupy a liminal legal space between “undocumented” and “citizen,” Marco, a 40-year-old Salvadoran, has been through several legal processes since he first migrated to the US in the late 1990s. Despite growing up in the crossfire of the Salvadoran civil war, he was denied asylum but was eventually granted TPS. Then, in 2012, he was robbed at gunpoint and assaulted. A bystander called the police and Marco was taken to the hospital. Because of his cooperation in the police investigation, he was able to apply for and obtain a U visa. U visas are for victims of crimes who cooperate in related investigations, and Marco had this at the time of our interview. Marco felt somewhat protected by his U visa, which has given him confidence to go about his life, but also expressed some worry:

Because I have the U visa, I have the confidence that I have, that the U visa backs me. But if I had stayed with TPS, I would not feel that security that I have being here, and sometimes that even drives people to want to take their life or [to] take refuge in a deeper pain, to die faster, to drugs, to alcohol... People become more afraid, and even I feel that way. Even I, it’s even entered me. I think, well, things are terrible; they can take your papers.

Although Marco had a U visa, and therefore had a legal status and work permit, he witnessed how people around him were gradually losing their legal protections. Marco reflected on what his life might be like now if he still had TPS, a program the Trump administration announced in

January 2018 would be terminated for Salvadorans by September 2019. He explained that a friend of his with TPS had become depressed and turned to alcohol to cope with his new reality. While he described a relative feeling of safety compared to his undocumented family members or friends with expiring statuses, he was simultaneously aware of the precarity of his legal status, which he felt could be taken away at any moment. This theme emerged in several interviews and during informal conversations in the community: people feel that TPS holders are not the only ones at risk. Anyone's status could be taken away.

Several other participants echoed the notion that having some kind of legal protection does not actually mean that people are safer. In a few cases, people worried that those with TPS might soon be more vulnerable than those who have been undocumented all along. Calvin explained that with people's papers being taken away, TPS holders are not only stripped of their protection from deportation, they are also more vulnerable, having been in the government system:

It's difficult now... Those who have that permit, the TPS, the one that they want to remove, or they removed from the Salvadorans. It is going to be more difficult with them than with those who never had anything. Because for someone with the status, [the government] already knows who he is, they already know where he lives, where he works. And in the places where [people with TPS] work, they do not want to give them work because they already know that the permit expired. I think that for them, it is more difficult than for those who live in the shadows, so to speak,

because [the government] doesn't know they exist.

Calvin explained that people with legal protections, those who feel less scared than others who “lived in the shadows” are actually going to have a more difficult time now. These notions that those who have some legal protection are more vulnerable, that those who did things “the right way” may be more under threat, and that any status could be taken away have exacerbated immigrant communities’ fears that at any moment, something could drastically change their family’s life for the worse. For Central Americans in Bay Area sanctuary cities, the promise of sanctuary seems to be eroding and such uncertainty fuels their fears. Those who are undocumented feel that sanctuary policies would not protect them from deportation, and those with some liminally legal protection worry that the federal government would strip them of their status, a change the local sanctuary city government could do nothing to prevent.

ROUTINIZATION OF FEAR

In the face of new realities, including a heightened sense of deportability in the community, immigrant families rearrange their daily lives in new, specific ways to reduce their vulnerability. The immigrants I spoke with were staying home and minimizing their time outside, thus changing the way they conducted daily tasks and chores, increasing their awareness of routine movements, and rearranging family dynamics and roles. In this section, I discuss how immigrant families employed several strategies—limiting their physical exposure, withdrawing from social life, and sending their least vulnerable family members for necessary errands and trips—to reduce their vulnerability.

“You don’t leave the house for just anything”: Chores

The most common strategy that immigrant family members used to reduce their vulnerability was simply to go out less. Many participants affirmed feeling safest in their homes and only leaving when absolutely necessary. During an interview in her home, Janira, a 28-year-old undocumented Honduran woman, told me about being scared to leave. She did not always enjoy being home, and she often felt isolated, but to her staying in was her best option. She explained, “[Lately] I go out less. I practically spend all my time here; the whole week locked up with my children because of the fear of being caught and deported.” Like many other participants, Janira increasingly spent her time inside her apartment. Participants, particularly mothers, admit getting tired of being alone in the house or being alone with the children all day. Many said they missed casually going to the store but felt they had to be more careful than before. These concerns and strategies were particularly heightened during periods when the news networks report ICE activity nearby. However, like many others, in the seven months I visited and kept in touch with her, Janira preferred to stay inside whenever possible even when she felt a little safer because she had not heard nor seen ICE officers in the neighborhood.

Many participants described how they adopted new approaches to carry out chores and create new routines. There are some activities that participants simply stopped engaging in, but they had to be creative with fundamental chores, such as grocery shopping. Whenever the topic of rearranging routines came up, grocery shopping was always mentioned first, as illustrated by the following field note:

I spoke with a mother at her child’s preschool as we played Legos with her children. She told me about how things are different now since the current president took office. People are more scared, she said, not leaving the house as

much. She gave an example: It used to be that if you cooked a pork dish and you realized you needed an extra ingredient, say you forgot an herb, you went out to a store nearby to pick it up. Not anymore. Now, you don't leave the house for just anything. The new way, she explained, is to make a list of everything you need, go out once a week to get everything in order to minimize your time out and about on the street. If you forget something, you make do without it. In the neighborhood, she notices there are fewer people out and about. She said the storeowners notice it too.

Many people repeated a similar version of this “new way” of shopping. Camila, the Guatemalan social worker, told me that one of her undocumented clients would make a grocery list for the week and give it and the necessary cash to a neighbor with “papers” who would go shopping for her.

The option to stay home was not possible for everyone as some participants needed to fulfill work or family obligations (e.g., picking up their children from school). Even these participants reported minimizing their time outside whenever possible. During an interview in his home, Leonardo, a 37-year-old undocumented Guatemalan man, described how his worry of coming to contact with an ICE agent shaped every moment of his day from the moment he wakes up to the time he goes to sleep. Every day before leaving the house, he first peeks out the windows by the front entrance that faced the building next door; the curtains are always drawn.

He makes sure it is clear, checking for agents, before heading to work. He avoids being near the door when people are coming in and out to minimize being seen. When he and his wife come home, they park the car on the street, assess their surroundings, and gets out and walks home only when they have determined it is safe. Leonardo disclosed,

Now, I feel like more fear. Not before, when Obama was here; I wasn't as scared as I am now. Now, even though you wouldn't believe it, every morning when I leave, I leave at 5:50 a.m., the first thing I do is look out the window to see if someone is there. I open the door a crack; I go outside; and I turn around to see every which way, with the fear that [ICE] is nearby.

This new routine and way of moving around his home started after the current president took office. The fear of deportation became heightened for Leonardo and his family even though he has had a deportation order since 2001. He said he has been doing such routine, especially lately, because he has heard of raids in the neighborhood. His neighbor saw a man selling fruits on the street get detained by ICE and sent him photos, which he showed me. For many people like Leonardo, the fear that immigration enforcement is nearby seems inescapable.

Withdrawing

Limiting outside exposure means that many participants withdraw from social life and community activities that have previously been important parts of their lives. Notably, social support is one of the strongest moderating characteristics of trauma, and individual resilience is related to the social systems around the individual (Sippel et al. 2015). Several participants have a general distrust of organizations, institutions, and even individuals in the community. For

example, Janira, who has been driven to stay home because of her fear of detention and deportation, decided to get off food stamps with her husband because she did not want the government to easily find her. Like Calvin, who worried that those with TPS may actually be more vulnerable because of the government's knowledge of their status and whereabouts, some undocumented participants started to worry that the benefits they qualified for may actually come back to hurt them.

A few other participants described withdrawing from or avoiding services out of fear, even in situations where they would greatly benefit from them. Isabel, a 39-year-old undocumented Guatemalan woman, for example, said she needed therapy. When we spoke, she told me that a few years before, she found out that her daughter was molested by a family friend when she was only six years old. The daughter, who is US-born, has been going to therapy since her disclosure, and the abuser was convicted and is still serving his sentence. Because of their cooperation in the investigation, Isabel and her husband applied for a U visa, but it has not yet been approved at the time we spoke. She still felt traumatized by the events, but said she would not go to therapy "out of fear. As a Hispanic, it is scary... I do not think they will maintain confidentiality." Isabel did not believe that she could trust a psychologist to maintain confidentiality about her undocumented status and was not willing to take the risk. Participants like Isabel do not only worry about ICE officials or the police, they dread the fact that anyone could potentially put them at risk of deportation with a simple call.

Changing family dynamics

For many mixed-status families, the heightened sense of deportability has changed family and community roles and responsibilities. Families would sometimes elect the least vulnerable member to take on tasks that may potentially expose them to immigration enforcement officials.

Marco, for example, described how political changes affected his family and community. He rents his bedroom from a woman who is undocumented, and he noticed that she is now only leaving the house when absolutely necessary. The mother of his child is also undocumented. They do not cohabit, but they share parental responsibilities. She expressed concern that she could be deported, and this made her confused, withdrawn, and depressed. Marco, who has a U visa, started taking on more responsibilities, such as picking up their child from school and bringing him home, and grocery shopping:

Before, she was the one who was involved in everything.

She felt good, [but] not today. Now, there's a knock on the door and... she quickly turns the bolt and tells me 'you go see.' I just look through the little hole and tell her, 'it's nothing.' But she says, it's because of the child, that she does not want to leave the child without a mother. That's why.

The mother of Marco's child had become so afraid of being separated from their son that she found herself unable to complete tasks and carry out chores that were once her domain in family life. Like other undocumented immigrants I spoke with, even a knock on the door is cause for great anxiety. Similarly, Marco felt that although his U visa was keeping him safe for the time being, things could change.

Some families also described planning what they would do if one of the family members is deported or if their status changed. Lilian, a 38-year-old Salvadoran with TPS, has had many of these conversations with her mother, a naturalized citizen, and her teenage daughter, a US-born citizen. I interviewed Lilian at her office. For now, she has a work permit and a good job.

When we spoke about her concerns about legal status, she pulled her shiny TPS card out of the top drawer of her desk and handed it to me, pointing out the expiration date. Unless something changed radically, she would lose her status and subsequently lose her job in about a year. She said she plans to move out of town, possibly out of state, because the government knows all of her information, and she worries that she would be quickly deported. In the event that she is deported back to El Salvador, she plans to leave her 13-year-old child with her mother. She discussed this possibility with her daughter, who became upset with the idea of being separated from her mother. Making these plans create a lot of sadness, fear, and stress in the family, but like many other people I have spoken with, Lilian felt that it is necessary to have everything in order to ensure her daughter is taken care of.

TRAUMA-INDUCED EXPANSION OF FEAR AND FEAR-INDUCED EXPANSION OF TRAUMA: LIVING WITH LOOMING THREATS

The fear of deportation among immigrants in the US is exacerbated by the traumatic experiences in their countries of origin and their experiences of migration. Nearly everyone I have spoken with described living in a persistent state of fear at some point of their lives in their home country, whether or not it was the reason that ultimately precipitated their migration to the US. Although some described being in happy, healthy families and living in tight-knit communities back home, participants in the study grew up during the civil wars and armed conflicts that took place in their countries during the 1980s and 1990s or during the violent aftermath the wars left behind. Many also endured family violence, sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and gang violence before their journeys to the US. With the exception of three participants who arrived by plane with a visa, nearly all participants described the sometimes month-long journey north, during which they also endured the persistent and pervasive fears of

deportation, detention, extortion, exploitation, and assault. For many of them, these fears were realized. Some were detained and deported and had to make several attempts at the multiple border crossings on their journey. As conditions in the US changed for immigrant families, participants described emotional experiences reminiscent of their lives before arriving in California. The trauma of their past heightened their fears in the US as new threats bring back old memories. Their fears, in turn, exacerbate their traumatic responses, creating a heightened sense of hypervigilance and anxiety. In this section, I explain how the memories of past threats mirror the threats immigrants face amid a new political climate in the US.

“Something is going to go wrong:” Hypervigilance

As my interviews reveal, the participants’ fears do not quickly dissipate when they arrive in a new place. When they decided to migrate or were forced to flee, the participants left family, friends, and material possessions behind, but their memories traveled with them. Accordingly, the new and expanding threats at present collide with the fears of the past. The participants’ past experiences shape their interpretation of present events, including discourses around immigration politics. Ana María migrated to the US in 2005, her third attempt at the border. The first two times, Border Patrol apprehended and deported her, and she described feeling hunted like an animal. Like many other participants, Ana María described the persistent threat of violence in her life back home along with her sense of fear today:

That trauma that, that happened to me—*always, always I am thinking that something is going to go wrong* [emphasis added]. I think that something will happen to me, but in

reality, I thank God that I'm fine with my children, but I'm afraid.

[Growing up] we were afraid of the guerrillas because they would come in to kidnap people. They wanted people to go with them, but people did not want to... and if they joined the guerrilla, the soldiers came to kill these people. And if they said no, they were not going to join the guerrillas, the guerrillas killed people. It was a big problem.

Ana María's narration demonstrates how the violence of her past still lingers today. She said that as a result of her past experiences she "always think[s] that something is going to go wrong." In her interview, she talked about feeling paranoid and worried all the time. She went on to describe how the relative stability she has established for herself and her family has not shaken the feeling of precarity in her life. On the one hand, she said that she felt relatively safe and settled in Northern California. She has her children, and there are no people after her trying to kill her as in Guatemala. On the other hand, she was scared that she and her family could be deported and forced to return to that site of trauma, a threat that most people in her community perceived to be escalating. People in her community face deportation, and for Ana María, this was not an abstract possibility. She felt that any moment, things could change drastically for the worse—a reflection of both her realistic fear of deportation and her trauma-induced expansion of fear.

Many participants come from a context that required them to be constantly aware of the threat of violence. Anxiety persisted even in those who have been in the US for years. Another participant, a woman from El Salvador, described a similar feeling of persistent fear. Before

coming to the US, gangs in her area would extort and threaten her and her husband. She used to have nightmares about these experiences and described feeling paranoid— that she is always being watched. In the current climate, with growing fears of deportation, she told me that her bad dreams about El Salvador have come back. The hypervigilance resulting from the increased feeling of deportability also revived her memories. Several other participants explained that with daily news coverage of people being deported while going about their daily lives (e.g., driving their children to school or going to the store), they become more anxious about the possibility of returning to sites of trauma in their personal histories. These fears bring memories from the past into the present.

“No one knows the time and place”

Like Ana María, who explained that she always felt things could go wrong, many participants feel that, at any moment, something bad could happen. Ana, an undocumented Honduran woman in her forties, told me what it was like to be an undocumented woman. She explained that she had an ominous feeling about a looming threat:

I think that now, I think that yes, it’s difficult... No one knows the time and place, but imagine, since they have been announcing so much disaster, that this and that the other, I just don’t know.

Ana, like many other participants, affirmed that the constant warnings indicate that things are getting worse for immigrants. Ana’s words exemplify a sentiment shared by many participants: They are not sure where or when, but their lives can change at any moment. And while participants, particularly undocumented immigrants like Ana, are aware that they could be deported, the recent inflow of information regarding ICE activity has heightened the sense that this threat is imminent.

María, a Guatemalan asylum-seeker, lives with her husband and their second child. María's husband was undocumented at the time of our interview, and she feared for him. With her asylum case in process, María felt that she had some amount of protection in the US, but such is precarious. She said that despite having the said documentation, it would not be enough to keep her family safe:

Yes, since only I have [papers]. My husband does not have any. He does not have papers or a work permit. He doesn't have anything... it is more difficult. If immigration gets him now, he will be deported, and I'll be left alone.

María was concerned that because her husband “does not have anything,” he was particularly vulnerable; she worried that immigration officials would “get” her husband and deport him. This would leave María without the emotional and economic support of her partner. Moreover, she expressed concern about him having to return to violent conditions back home. Both she and her husband have been terrified of the prospect of being forcibly returned to their country since they arrived to the US. They lived through extreme and pervasive violence throughout their lives back home. While the fear of having to return to her country—the site of her past trauma—was not new, it has intensified for María and her family more recently as people in her community talk more and more about the threat of deportation.

CONCLUSION

Despite the promises of protection, fear is structured into the immigrants' daily lives in sanctuary cities. There is a great deal of confusion and uncertainty about the status of the sanctuary cities, the meaning of sanctuary, and the limits of various forms of protective mechanisms immigrant families have established to create a relative sense of stability pre-

Trump. Such fear and uncertainty are compounded by experiences immigrants bring with them, creating a complex convergence of realistic fears of tangible and visible threats (e.g., the presence of ICE officials in their neighborhoods) and a trauma-induced expansion of fear resulting from the immigrants' historically oppressive relation to the state, law enforcement, and other authorities, thus creating a loop of fear and trauma. Like a majority of Central American immigrants in the US, the families I interviewed come from extremely violent and abusive places. Once in the US, there are few avenues for these families' hardship to be legally and socially recognized. Today, options, such as asylum, which Central Americans have historically been at a disadvantage of receiving approval for, are becoming even more unlikely. National-level approval of asylum cases has plummeted from 47% in fiscal year 2015 to 25.7% in fiscal year 2018 (USCIS 2016; USCIS 2018a). In Bay Area sanctuary cities, asylum approval rates are hard to come by, and legal advocates reported to me that they struggle to get cases approved compared to previous years. Even with "friendly judges and asylum officers" in San Francisco, new pressures from the federal government make these cases increasingly difficult to win. As policies, immigration enforcement practices, and discourses become increasingly anti-immigrant, the consequences for families' well-being can be dire. Immigrant families live under conditions that are structurally and legally violent in and of themselves, and re-tramatising for immigrants with histories of extreme hardship by increasing fear, hypervigilance, social isolation, and distrust.

The dynamics of fear and uncertainty discussed in this chapter do not only impact individuals often thought of as "purely undocumented;" rather, they largely affect the immigrant community across a spectrum of legal statuses. Mixed-status families experience these threats, as do people with precarious statuses, such as TPS, which is set to expire. Even those who have

visas or are LPRs think, “If they can take away TPS, DACA, it could happen to us.” Immigrants are confused about the roles of local law enforcement, local politicians and policy makers, federal immigration enforcement, and national politicians—how they work together, or do not. This reveals a general uncertainty about which individual state actors and institutions have authority over whom, an uncertainty that is likely shared by individuals and collectives outside the Central American immigrant community. The uncertainty and confusion, more often than not, push immigrant families to organize their lives around the worst-case scenario, with the fear of deportation looming over them.

This fear is not only a by-product of existing and changing policies, it is shaping the conduct of daily life, family roles, and other mundane tasks. This *routinization of fear* intensified the participants’ hypervigilance. Central American immigrants of various legal statuses made modifications to their daily chores and routines to minimize their exposure and risk in public spaces. Depending on the conditions of the receiving society, the mental health impacts of pre-migration traumatic experiences can be ameliorated or exacerbated. The quality of post-migration social support has been shown in other contexts to shape mental health outcomes for immigrants who experienced trauma in their country of origin (Schweitzer et al. 2006). Everyday practices, such as grocery shopping, picking up children from school, and attending social functions, are changing in ways that often increase social isolation, which has serious effects on community health. The consequences of how the current political climate is shaping immigrants’ daily lives extends beyond their ability to complete chores and daily tasks and has serious potential implications for the collective mental health of an entire community.

These interviews did not take place in a border region or a new immigrant destination where anti-immigrant dynamics are most documented and practically expected to happen. On the

contrary, the San Francisco Bay Area is a place with both a longstanding history of immigration and a deep immigrant rights and social movement history. The promise of sanctuary and protection is part of what has pulled immigrants to the region and appeals to the progressive voting populations in the area. As such, the changing political realities are affecting not only the immigrants typically considered most vulnerable, such as those attempting to enter the country across a border with increased security measures or those actively going through deportation proceedings in conservative states, but also those with some legal protection in places of relative safety.

CHAPTER 3: “The greatest pains”: the Structural Violence of Intergenerational Immigrant Family Separations

INTRODUCTION

“The greatest pains”

I sat at a desk across from Flor, a Honduran woman in her 40s who had been in the US for nearly 20 years. We were in an empty office in the basement of her church in San Francisco, a large, mostly Central American Evangelical service. Flor was confident and direct, and open about the many challenges and accomplishments in her life during her interview. When it came to her relationship to her family, and specifically her children, the tone of the conversation shifted, from retelling stories of past hardship, to explaining the ongoing challenges of relationships she is still working to heal:

I got out of there [Honduras]. I left devastated by everything that had happened, by all the suffering I endured as a child, an adolescent, a woman, but what hurt me most was having left my children. I believe that one of the greatest pains a woman can face, a mother, is to abandon her children.

I did not leave them alone, I left them with my grandmother and an aunt, she could never have children, and she welcomed them like they were her own, and gave them affection and fed them while I was coming here and before I could send them [money]. That separation is very painful. I believe that most of us who come here do so in order to give our families, our children, a better life. At the same time we leave our hearts there, we leave everything there.

We leave our hearts there, because the most important thing gets left behind. When God created man and woman, He created them to form a family, and I left what I loved the most behind. I never knew the love of a father, nor a mother, my love was my children.

This was one of many times I heard parents, particularly mothers, talk about this “greatest pain,” or the “hardest things,” in reference to the pain of leaving a child behind. When Flor said “suffering,” she spoke from a place of authority. Like many Central American immigrants, the economic and political reality in her country created conditions that drove family members to make difficult and sometimes desperate decisions. Her mother died when she was a baby, and she was raised back and forth between the households of her grandmother and her father, who was not always able to provide for her and her two older sisters. When she turned 12 years old, according to Flor, her father gave them away to two aunts, who treated the sisters not like children in their care, but like domestic laborers in exchange for room and board. Throughout her adolescence and adulthood she continued to be subject to exploitation and experienced repeated sexual and domestic violence, including from her children’s father.

Like many mothers, although Flor was faced with the decision to leave her children behind, she was determined not to repeat the experiences she had of being separated from or losing a parent. She pointed to how her own children’s experiences of her absence were different. They were left behind with family members who were feeding and caring for her children without expecting them to work in return. By leaving her boys, who were five and ten years old at the time, with trusted family members, she hoped to avoid repeating some of the hardships she experienced in her aunt’s care as a child. But conflicts arose over amounts and who was entitled to remittances she sent back. According to Flor, her aunt expressed frustration at their limited resources, telling Flor’s children that their mother was not sending enough money home. Like many parents who leave their children behind, Flor felt she could not control the narrative her children were receiving about her from their caregivers. She also had incomplete

information about her children's experiences back home, some of which she only learned once she finally managed to bring them to the US.

Thus, despite her best efforts, Flor's separation from her children—her “greatest pain”—resulted in lingering wounds and enduring family trauma that seemed to recapitulate the pain she experienced as a child, that had its own lasting after-effects into her own adulthood. While she felt she did what she could to break the cycle of abandonment, her children grew up feeling she was not there for them, emotionally or materially. Ten years of being away from her boys produced a bitterness she said she was still working to heal. The ongoing pains of separation result of separation, created struggle and resentment within her family. Stories like Flor's illustrate the complex conditions of family separations among Central American immigrant and transnational families: that they are pervasive and cyclical, with dynamics that repeat across generations, and whose destructive impacts are chronic.

Family Separations as Intergenerational Trauma

When I initially set out to understand the intergenerational dimensions of violence and trauma among immigrant communities I had, somewhat naively, planned to interview members of several generations within a family. Most demographers tell us that Latinxs (immigrant and non-immigrant) in the US and are more likely than whites to have intergenerational households, as are immigrant families compared to non-immigrant families (Cohn 2018), and there are typically strong family bonds and community networks within immigrant communities. Thus I had hoped that by capturing the narratives of family events from several perspectives and multiple generations, seeing how stories were (or were not) passed down, and by observing

intergenerational family dynamics, I would learn something about how trauma is transmitted, or interrupted, within a family.

What I found instead was that I had misunderstood the structure of the family in this particular community. The conventional wisdom of the multi-generational Latinx family leaves out the transnational dimension of immigration, particularly for those who are fleeing poverty or violent conditions and don't usually have the ability or resources to migrate together. What I found among Central American immigrant families in the Bay Area was that few had several generations in one place. Immigrant and migrant communities are, by definition, fluid: there's often no single nuclear family, and within a family, generations cannot be easily delineated because of how and when the migration of certain members of the family shapes, interrupts, and restarts the family. Children are raised at different moments, by different parental figures and family structures, in different countries. Some children are reunited with their parents and have to learn to be part of a new family structure in a new context, often with younger siblings. Some children stay behind and never meet their US-born siblings. This reality—that seemed to touch the lives of all the participants in this study in one way or another—and the pain surrounding it, became one of the most salient themes in my interviews, one that must be understood within the context of multisided violence present in the lives of the majority of participants in their countries of origin (Walsh and Menjívar 2016), and the structural violence they face in the US.

In this chapter, I describe how “the greatest pain” of family separation is a core, critical element of how experiences of trauma become intergenerational in the lives of Central American families, from the perspective of those family members now settled in the San Francisco Bay Area. Extant studies show that family separation can have traumatic consequences (Miller et al. 2018; Pratt 2009; Suárez-Orozco, Bang and Kim 2011; Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012), and that

the negative health consequences of trauma persist throughout the life course (Felitti et al. 1998) and can be transmitted across generations (Sangalang and Vang 2017; Yehuda et al. 2000; Yehuda, Halligan and Grossman 2001). To my knowledge, however, no studies examine the consequences of serial separations across generations.

Family separation has occurred throughout histories of international migration. Migrants who have left their homes, like Flor, also leave behind community and loved ones. Although families and communities have historically migrated in stages, parents leaving children behind with other caregivers as they set off for opportunities in a new country is a growing phenomenon, and mothers of young children in particular are migrating at greater rates (Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012). These new realities and the increasing regulations of international migrations are creating longer periods of temporary separation, and sometimes near-permanent separations, which scholars have argued produce more emotionally damaging consequences for families (Dreby 2015).

This chapter reveals that these cases of immigrant family separations are the result of multiple forms of structural violence that converge in synergistic ways to inflict multiple layers of trauma and re-trauma. This structural violence, which instigated the flight in the first place, then reverberates as family separation inflicts collective trauma, and intergenerational trauma. The initial pain of separation is exacerbated and prolonged by structurally and legally violent conditions (US immigration policies, poverty, racialized labor markets, etc.) that prevent families from being unified sooner, and threaten new separation (through detention and forced removals). Thus, migration serves both to release a person from violent conditions at home only to be subject to new, protracted and sustained forms of suffering as a result of the separation.

Family Separations In These Times

While immigration experiences are inherently disruptive, the specific nature and consequences of family separation are variable and specific to sociopolitical context, in the society of origin, reception, and migration, and the global relations among those contexts. In the United States, immigration policy, specifically, has had a major impact on family structures and the subsequent well-being of families and children (Dreby 2015; Menjívar and Abrego 2009). Through enforcement practices and migration restrictions, policy realities shape the relationship between migration and family separation in direct and indirect ways. Certain immigrant communities have disproportionately borne the burden of these policies, which change over time and are enforced unevenly across immigrant groups (Armenta 2017). Families that are perceived to be in the country illegally, whether or not they politically fall on a spectrum of “undocumented status” or are racialized as being “illegal,” experience a threat of family separation as a result of deportation. Migration restrictions produce serious obstacles to entering the country through legally authorized means, and families from countries facing restrictions make migration decisions from a set of highly constrained choices around who migrates and how. Policies related to border security compound these realities, such as the US Border Patrol strategy of “Prevention Through Deterrence,” which deliberately leverages the hostile geographic conditions of the border region to prolong suffering (and increase fatalities) as a way to frighten and discourage migrants from attempting to cross (De Leon 2015). These sets of conditions have led many parents to migrate through clandestine means without their children (Dreby 2015).

Family separations that are prolonged by political realities become policy. Most recently, state-enacted forced separations became a national debate, as the Trump Administration carried

out a practice of separating families apprehended between ports of entry, holding children away from parents while adults face criminal prosecution for unauthorized entry into the country, as part of a “zero tolerance” approach to “illegal immigration.” This practice sparked national outrage as images of children in cages and sounds of babies crying and calling out for their parents flooded the news. However, violent family separations at the border – as immoral and inhumane as they were and continue to be – may divert attention from the quiet, chronic, pervasive separations that are happening all the time.

The participants in this study represent families who are subject to a convergence of several of the social, economic and political realities that produce and prolong family separations. Participants described tremendous barriers to entering the country, and obstacles to obtaining some form of legal status once they do, upon which their ability to send for their children is often contingent. Through their stories, we can begin to understand the role of structural violence in family separation, and how it shapes collective and intergenerational trauma.

MARÍA

In order to understand the chronicity and cyclical nature of serial family separations over the life course and across generations, I focus primarily on the story of one woman. In this chapter, I turn to María, who I introduced briefly in the previous chapter. Like with Flor’s story, it took zooming out from the various isolated themes that emerged from each interview in order to examine the phenomena within a trajectory of a life and over the length of a complicated family history. Providing a deep and detailed account allowed me to analyze how the dynamics of trauma and family separation manifest and are consequential at multiple points in one person’s

life. Like Flor, María experienced both being left behind as a child, and then subsequently leaving her own children behind when she came to the US.

I chose María's story not because it is exceptional; quite to the contrary, the life experiences María relayed to me typify the experiences of many of the families I came into contact with through my work. Each person's story is unique and each interviewee's life felt like a universe unto itself when I first held space for it. For that reason I point out throughout the story the ways in which María's experiences are representative of or unique to others relayed to me, and at times I interject other examples to corroborate or contrast her experiences within the context of the study.

Introducing María

María, an indigenous Mayan Mam woman, was born in Guatemala in the early 1980s, during the country's decades-long civil war. Because of the extreme violence and economic conditions, which were largely produced by US interventions in the region, Guatemala has long been a country of mass emigration to the US and Mexico (Barry 1991; LaFeber 1993). Remittances sent back from Guatemalans working in the US continue to make up a significant percentage of the Guatemalan GDP (O'Neil 2003). This is true of the region María is from: because of violence and economic instability, her parents migrated to and from Mexico for work, and she herself was part of a wave of migration to the US because of violence. The reality of migration and the resultant family separation, therefore, does not just impact individuals and families, but rather is happening at a community and population level in the country of origin, and therefore has collective impacts.

Oakland, California, where María has settled, has become a city of reception for many indigenous Mayan Mam. The community took root about 15 years ago, and now 10,000 Mayan Mam from Guatemala are estimated to live in Oakland, primarily in East Oakland (Morga 2018), where I met María. In the Guatemalan and Central American communities in Oakland, everyone I spoke to talked about the family members they left behind. Many immigrants leave parents, or children, or both. At *Familia*, where I conducted weekly observations, parents attended with their young, mostly US-born children. For many, this was their second round of parenting, their oldest back home in their countries of origin, left behind with family members.

I met María at her brother-in-law's home in East Oakland, a majority Black area stretching from the east side of Oakland proper into the neighboring southeast suburb of San Leandro, with a large and growing Latinx community, particularly in the Fruitvale neighborhood. Like several homes I visited in the area, the house was a duplex with a front yard and a metal gate. I stood apprehensively at the front gate assessing the strength of the leash a pitbull seemed to be pulling to its limit as it barked at me, until a woman in the upstairs unit told me in Spanish I was ok to come in, and she laughed as I skittered to the front door. Juana, María's *concuña* (brother-in-law's wife), greeted me downstairs and I was immediately at ease. She led me into a tidy and sparsely furnished living room where we sat and talked. Bible verses in Spanish hung on the walls, though the family spoke Mam to one another and attend a Mam-speaking Evangelical church. Juana and María both spoke Spanish as a second language, but well enough that we could have extended and intimate conversations about their life experiences and the emotions around them.

Juana and María were very connected. They knew each other through their husbands back in Guatemala, and helped each other out once they were in Oakland. María, along with her

husband and son, had been living with Juana and her family until not long before my interview with her. During my interview with María, she pointed out the room in Juana's home that her family had shared, now occupied by another recent arrival to the US. At a time when many families were becoming more isolated as a result of their increasing fears around deportation (see previous chapter), María remained connected to a network of support that extended beyond her family as well. She smiled when she talked about the people who have helped her since she arrived to the US: "Here [in Oakland] people help. If, for example, if I don't have work, I go in the corners and people help, there they give out potatoes, tomatoes at the church, it helps us a lot." María was connected to a Mam church that helped her with food and clothes for her young boy. Her Mam network assisted her in getting connected to resources, including a family program and legal support.

Attending to Trauma

María arrived with her two-year-old child, a cheerful, energetic boy elbow deep in a bag of Cheetos. He laughed and rolled around us and occasionally interrupted us, bringing levity in to the room as we talked about some of his mother's most devastating life experiences. Family members cooked in the adjacent, spacious kitchen, and they along with Juana's teenage son ambled around the house. But despite her comfort in the family home, and despite that it was her social worker, whom she trusted, who connected us, María was nervous to speak with me.

At the time, María was undergoing the lengthy and drawn-out process of applying for asylum. According to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, in accordance with the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), asylum interviews should take place within 45 days of the asylum application being filed, and a decision on the application should be made within 180

days (USCIS 2018b). However, several participants who had or were going through the process reported their asylum cases taking much longer. They also reported a great deal of confusion and uncertainty around the process, even for immigrants like María who had the aid of a legal advocate. The procedures of applying for asylum vary based on whether the process is initiated during removal proceedings (referred to as defensive asylum) or not (termed affirmative asylum), but all involve an interview with an Asylum Officer. According to María, who was applying through an affirmative asylum process, just months before our interview she had undergone the painful and retraumatizing experience of recounting every detail of her hardship over a four-hour asylum interview in order to establish her eligibility for asylum. She was apprehensive about our interview, not wanting to repeat the painful experience.

We spent the first ten minutes of our meeting talking about our interview and the feelings it was bringing up for her. We located her anxiety in her body. I asked what her *nervios* felt like. She pointed to her chest. I asked if it felt tight, or hard to breathe, she nodded. María was clearly living in her trauma, not just recounting it. Our interview, before we even began, was causing her distress. I asked if she would be comfortable telling me about the asylum interview first, instead of talking about her experiences back home in Guatemala. She explained the preparation she underwent in advance of the interview, and described the interview itself:

When my immigration appointment arrived, I don't remember what I had said, and sometimes I keep thinking about what has happened to me, and I could not remember what I should say. My mind no longer—I do not know how to explain it—sometimes it's like worry, and sometimes I feel shame. And that's when, that's why I feel the same with you, like nerves [trails off]. Even now when [they tell me] "Your appointment is coming up," I feel like something here [points to chest] that no longer I can stand it.

María was undergoing this asylum process in order to obtain legal status and protection for herself, but also because she hoped to be reunited with her daughter. As I explain further below, María required legal documents associated with asylum in order to bring her ten-year-old daughter, left behind in Guatemala, to the US legally and safely by plane. The legal process of obtaining asylum came at a great emotional cost for María, and it exemplifies the ways trauma is structured into the lives of immigrant families, and the trauma of family separation is reinforced and prolonged by the state. This structured trauma, in the form of María's asylum process, was also her greatest hope.

María and I discussed the several ways in which our conversation would be different from the asylum interview: primarily, while I would ask some questions, she would control the direction of the conversation. Beyond reiterating the fundamental aspects of consent, including reminding her that she could change her mind about participating and could decline to answer any question, I assured her that the life stories she shared or kept to herself would be up to her. I drew on my experience as an advocate and community organizer to attend to her body language and proceed with compassion. When I saw her breathing shorten, her hands tighten, or her body turn away, I slowed our conversation. By the end of the interview, her body language was more open, she faced me, and her answers became longer and more narrative.

As she guided the interview, she came back repeatedly to her daughter, and the great lengths she was going to in order to reunite with her. We continued, in a non-chronological fashion, through significant and mundane life events, including the many family separations and reunifications she experienced throughout her life. Eventually she told me she was ready to stop, so I thanked her for her time, and she told me one more anecdote, quoting her social worker who told her, “‘You can bring your daughter’, so I calm down a little. She helps me, she has helped

me a lot...[she says], ‘You are family, you will make it.’” But as we will see, this reassurance proved difficult for María to hold on to, through the repeated, cyclical pain of separation between parents and daughters, experiences and fears of neglect of children left behind, and the prolonged and unpredictable process demanded by the state to document deservedness for asylum and the possibility of reunification.

Early separations

María was raised primarily by her grandparents in Guatemala. According to María, the economic conditions in her hometown were dire, and there was limited work for the adults in the family. Her parents, as a result, would migrate to Mexico and spend long stretches of time working there. Migration has been a ubiquitous feature of life among Mayan communities of Guatemala for centuries (Lutz and Lovell 2000), and has played an important role in the recent history of many participants’ communities of origin; Central Americans have migrated not only to the US, but also to Mexico in search of work opportunity (Díaz and Kuhner 2009). As a result, like many other immigrants I spoke with, María was raised by members of her extended family, and by different parental figures at different times. She and her brother were left behind under her grandparents’ care, along with three other children from the community, also left behind by migrant parents.

Previous scholars have cautioned immigration researchers against applying Western cultural biases of parent-child relationships to communities that may have family models that differ from the Western nuclear family (Suárez - Orozco, Todorova and Louie 2002; Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012). Children who are raised by family members other than the biological parents who migrate have varied experiences of the costs and benefits of their parents’

migrations. The specific conditions I found surrounding these initial separations, for María and for most of the interviewees who experienced a separation from a parent as a child, however, supported the notion that these particular separations were harmful in lasting ways.

María described her own parents as neglectful, in their treatment towards her when they were together, and because of the way they left her behind and the conditions she was left in. She characterized her grandparents as abusive, which made for a difficult childhood. “When I was a child, I suffered a lot, with my parents, who did not take good care of me, and with my grandparents [who] sometimes beat me, and there were other children with them” María told me. Resources were scarce and there were many children to look after, and conditions were somewhat unpredictable – when her parents were away it was not necessarily clear for how long or how much money would come back. This situation was not unique to María: although some participants had close relationships with the people who raised them, several participants described abuse or maltreatment from the family members responsible for their care when their parents migrated. As I discuss further in the chapter, many parents who left their own children behind found out later that the conditions or treatment were worse than they had been aware of during the separation.

There were not many places for María to turn as a respite from her violent home life. Within her family, María was expected to contribute with chores and work, and her grandparents did not send her to school. The men and boys worked outside in agriculture when the weather produced crops, and the women and girls made *huipiles* (traditional garments). Several participants from rural areas did not receive a formal education and many were expected to work as children. Among resource-limited rural families, often only the boys or the eldest child would attend school. For a two-year stretch, when her parents were living with them, María’s father

sent her to school. She struggled to keep up with her schoolwork along with the responsibilities she had at home, however, and had to face strict teachers who would use corporeal punishment to discipline the students. “Sometimes out of fear we do not go back to school.” She recalled, “... I did not go, better that I left the school where they scolded us so much, they would tell us ugly things, that's why I did not finish my studies.” Thus the separation from her parents was not the only challenge María faced in her childhood, and the conditions of her childhood created an intersection of separation and neglect. The economic circumstances of María's childhood deprived her of having available and attentive caretakers in her parents, grandparents, and teachers. These early experiences shaped the way María thought of the decisions she later made as an adult and a parent.

“Out of fear, that's why I fled”

María explained that as she got older, a shift occurred in her town. Concerns related to poverty, lack of work, and food shortages expanded to include escalating violence. This shifting set of structural realities played a significant role in the subsequent separations in her family, both in how and why they happened in the first place, and also in how they impacted her.

María began noticing changes as a teenager, hearing that people in neighboring towns were being killed. This violence, which María attributed to gangs, became part of the broader context of her day-to-day life. Family discussions often revolved around incidents of violence and how to avoid them. At first, she felt the impacts at a distance, but after a couple of years, the threat became far more personal, as people close to her were falling victim to the killings in the area:

And when I was about eighteen, that's when I got together with my husband, and they killed people over there [in neighboring towns], but they were not from our family, we would just said "Oh so-and-so died," or "they killed him," and so on. But it was people distant from us that we would hear about. But when they killed one of my husband's brothers...is when we knew that someone is looking for us, who wants to kill us.

Extreme violence such as homicide became a normalized part of daily life back home in María's Guatemala. The violent conditions María's family was facing in Guatemala produced a series of painful separations that exacerbated and prolonged their traumatic impacts. The murder of María's brother-in-law and the realization her family was in serious danger precipitated these migrations and represented a turning point in María's family.

The details of exactly who was threatening and attempting to kill María and her husband and why were not clear from the interview. María did not want to provide specific details about these threats, actual violent encounters, or the people involved in them. These incidents were the basis of her asylum case, and she had therefore been questioned extensively about them during her asylum interview, a painful experience she did not want to repeat. Additionally, she, like other Central American immigrants I spoke with who had fled direct threats of violence, worried about the consequences on her family if she was caught speaking about specific gangs and gang members. Fear, and the traumatic impacts of violence, can present challenges to documenting it in retrospect. However, descriptions of the context of pervasive violence in post-war Guatemala, and the region María was from specifically, were corroborated and expanded upon by other members of the Mam community in Oakland, including María's *concuña* Juana, and by ethnographic accounts of Todos Santos, Huehuetenango (Sharp 2014b).

In María's case, her husband, who was facing the most direct threat of violence, left first, leaving her behind with her daughter. María would have preferred to migrate together as a family, but she explained that it was not a financial possibility for them, saying "We did not have money there to come together so I stayed for a long time and with my daughter." While parent-child separations were consistently described as the most painful experiences for immigrant families, separations from partners and other family members were also significant and often traumatic losses. For María, being left behind once again had several ramifications on her emotional and physical well-being. It meant dealing with the pain of separation from her husband, with whom she had formed a loving family in the midst of uncertainty. Simultaneously, she was witnessing the parent-child separation between her husband and daughter, a reality of her own childhood that she had wanted to avoid repeating.

Eventually, María's fears of violence materialized. Several years after her husband migrated, she was the victim of a near fatal attack. Her assailants, believing her dead, left her in the countryside where a community member found her. In the aftermath of that incident, some family members offered to pool money together to help her migrate, which she did a few days later as soon as she was physically able to do so, leaving her daughter behind. There were no legal mechanisms for addressing the pervasive violence her family was subject to. According to María, the violence and deprivation María and her family experienced were reinforced by corruption and discriminatory practices carried out by state agents.

Our people are very poor; we have nothing. The government never [helps], the police do nothing ... they do not value us [indigenous people] ... because they speak Spanish and do not speak our dialect. And sometimes the government does not help us. Or the mayors too, in our town there are mayors. But the mayor says, "Oh we're going to help your

people, bring water, you're going to have electricity, you're going to have this thing" and when they get their position, and they no longer help ... the government never helps.

María described her indigenous community back home as being in a widespread state of neglect, exemplified by politicians' unmet promises to create infrastructure that met their basic needs, such as potable water. Ethnographic accounts of María's region echo her description of widespread corruption and discrimination against indigenous communities of the Guatemalan highlands (Sharp 2014a; Sharp 2014b). These concerns came up also in relation to physical violence. When violence occurred, María explained, there were no authorities to turn to that would protect the community. When María's brother in law was killed, when her husband was being threatened by violence, when she was brutally assaulted and left for dead, her family did not believe there were legal mechanisms to seek out protection let alone justice. This meant fleeing was the only option they believed would take them out of harm's way: "out of fear, that's why I fled my country...so as not to go back again, to get caught again, that's why I ran away."

Several other participants shared similar experiences with law enforcement, describing encounters with police who were corrupt, discriminatory, dismissive of concerns, or simply absent. This was particularly true among women, whose complaints regarding domestic and sexual violence were treated as frivolous. For example, Amelia, another Guatemalan woman I interviewed, explained that domestic violence was so normalized and widespread that she felt abandoned by the government. According to Amelia, reporting domestic violence was not an option. If a woman did report, the response from authorities would be, "You have corn and you have salt, don't complain." In other words, if your very basic needs to survive are being met, that is enough – you are not entitled to more. This multisided violence, and the intersection of violence and impunity (Walsh and Menjívar 2016), leave parents, especially mothers, under

extremely constrained set of circumstances. This is one of the many ways the state functions as an agent of the structural violence that drives family separation.

The circumstances around the migration shape the conditions and consequences of the family separation. For immigrants like María, who are separated from their families when they feel they must flee a direct threat of violence, the conditions of migration exacerbate the trauma of separation. Many are not able to plan and prepare for the transition in ways that have been found elsewhere to ameliorate the trauma of separation (Suárez - Orozco, Todorova and Louie 2002). These separations are often abrupt, and therefore do not allow for the logistic and emotional preparation for migration. There is little time to make plans for loved ones left behind and to say goodbye, much less find the resources for families to migrate together. Migrating together did not feel like an option to María, both because there was not enough money, and also because the conditions of migration were too brutal, in María's calculation, for a child to endure. Additionally, those who flee find themselves in the painful situation of leaving loved ones behind in a context that is seriously unsafe. For parents especially, who express wanting to protect their children from dangers, leaving their children behind in violent contexts increases their worry and anxiety. Along with the conditions in the country of origin, and the conditions in the country of reception, the migration context itself also determines the choices that lead to separation, and prolong the separation once it occurs.

"I have a daughter in Guatemala and I want to have her with me"

When María finally did migrate to the US, her daughter was left behind in her grandparents' care. Once in the US, María did not want to send for her daughter to migrate like she and her husband both had – crossing several borders and traveling across Mexico by bus, van, and foot to

be smuggled in to the US. She felt the journey was too dangerous for a young girl, especially one traveling alone without her parents. Although María did not mention an increased border security explicitly, many other participants who I spoke with years after their most recent entry did, explaining that although they made unauthorized entries into the US, they were discouraging family members from doing so since they perceived the Trump Administration was making it more difficult. María had serious and legitimate concerns about the safety of her daughter, particularly given her own harrowing experience.

Instead, María decided she would attempt to bring her daughter by other means. She had been told by a judge her asylum was approved and had received a work permit. At the time of our interview she was waiting for her official, physical asylum documents to arrive in the mail so she could petition for her daughter to be granted derivative asylee status, and send for her by plane. Processing her daughter's asylum would involve several additional steps, but none of this could move forward until she received her paperwork, which was taking longer than she had been told. Thus, despite deciding to bring her daughter safely doing things "the legal way," the pain of separation was being prolonged and exacerbated by the legal restrictions and bureaucratic hoops María had to jump through in order to do so.

When María talked about being separated from her daughter for the past four years, she trembled, her voice shook, she cried. At different moments throughout the interview, she expressed her desire for the two of them to be reunited. When I asked her how it felt to wait, she told me it made her desperate. This desperation and uncertainty fed her doubt in the hope of gaining asylum at all. Although she had been informed that her asylum case was approved, and she had received a temporary work permit as a result, her official documents had yet to

materialize. As a result, her hope and aspiration in the possibility of a better life, one with legal protections, together with her daughter, was eroding:

I feel that they will not give me [asylum], or I feel more hopeless, because since they have not given it to me, if they had already given it to me, then I [would] feel more (trails off). Since I have my daughter there [in Guatemala], I plan on bringing her. Or I want them to tell me. I want her with me; *I do not want her to go through what happened to me*. But they have not given me [asylum]. I hope that they will give it to me soon. And my lawyer, she told me to go [to the San Francisco Asylum Office] and ask...But I need to take someone who can speak English and a California ID and since I do not [know] anyone, then I can't go ask and when or what is going on, why it is taking such a long time ... I have a daughter [in Guatemala] and I want to have her with me.

María vacillated between hope and uncertainty; describing the steps she was undertaking in her active efforts to reunite with her daughter, and her fear that she would be unsuccessful. She said, repeatedly, “I want her with me,” and was doing everything in her limited power to will that desire into reality. The challenges she felt were at times amplified by the powerlessness she felt to end the separation she once felt necessary, but had planned on being temporary. Returning to her country was not an option for María, and bringing her daughter to the US presented an unclear path. María expressed that she felt if her daughter was with her, she could protect her and prevent her from experiencing the hardships María experienced as a child. This desire drove her hope and her continued efforts. Although María had left her daughter behind, she remained determined to break a cycle of violence and separation, saying she did not want her daughter to

go through what she had gone through, and believed she could still offer her daughter a better life.

Fearing Future Separations

As María worked to bring her daughter to the US, the fear of another family separation loomed over her. Although María had a work permit and was in the years-long legal process of obtaining asylum and a visa for her daughter, her husband remained undocumented. This put him at a greater threat of being deported back to Guatemala, splitting up their family again. María and her husband were apart for nearly seven years between when he fled to the US and when she finally made the journey herself. When María and I spoke, the Trump Administration, associated with a major increase in anti-immigration policy and immigration enforcement practices, was a major topic of conversation, and increasing immigrant communities' ongoing fears of deportation, of themselves or a loved one. María contemplated what she perceived as a heightened threat of deportation and its potential implications on their family:

María: Yeah, since only I have [papers], my husband does not have any, he does not have papers or a work permit, he has nothing.

Florencia: That must be difficult.

María: Yes it is more difficult, if right now immigration grabs him, they will deport him and me, I am going to be left alone.

If María's husband were deported, she would be, as she says here, "left alone." She would have to provide for her US-born son economically and emotionally without his father. For María, this would also mean re-living the separation she experienced when he first migrated to the US and she was left behind with her daughter in Guatemala. And it would mean, once again, repeating

her experiences for her children she worked so hard to protect them from. In Guatemala, María raised her daughter with the help of her family but without her husband present as a father figure, while in the US, their US-born son had only ever known a household with the three of them—mother, father, and son—together.

Fear of family separation as the result of deportation played a crucial role in the family dynamics of many immigrant families in the study. Most participants feared that returning to their country of origin could put them in immediate physical danger. Nonetheless, they repeatedly stressed that it was not only fear of the conditions they or their loved one would have to return to, the danger they were most concerned about was the separation from their child and the dissolution of the family unit they had formed or managed to maintain.

For example, Ana María, a naturalized citizen from Guatemala, worried about her undocumented husband being deported, “if immigration manages to catch my husband, my kids will be left without a father.” Marco, a Salvadoran U visa holder, worried about his children’s mother, who was undocumented, “She doesn’t want to leave her kids without a mother.” Janira, an undocumented Honduran woman, made it clear that despite the violent conditions back home for her in Honduras, it was the prospect of leaving her children behind that most concerned her about the possibility of deportation. “And my children? It would be OK if they deported me but with my children, because according to [the US government] since they are born here, they don’t throw them out, but they do the parents.” Janira’s three children are US born and therefore not at risk of deportation themselves, she points out, but that is not enough to protect her from being separated from them. Like María, Janira had been left behind by her mother who first migrated to the US when Janira was a child. Now she faces the possibility of repeating that experience for her children. The trauma of separation is not over even once a family is together – it is not a

trauma centered on a single moment of separation or even a few. Layered on top of the chronic, lingering effects of separation is the pervasive threat of more separations.

The immigrants I spoke with had, against tremendous obstacles, formed cohesive families in the Bay Area. Some reconnected with partners from their countries of origin, others met a significant other once in the US. Unlike María, participants like Janira, whose significant others in the US were of a different country of origin, faced yet another complication when it came to the possibility of deportation and family separation. Janira's husband was Salvadoran, so keeping the family together in the face of deportation would be impossible.

“They will help me to bring her so that I will be complete”

María and I stayed in touch after her interview. I checked in with her a few days later to see how she was feeling, as I often did after a particularly emotional interview, and to follow up about her desire to go the Asylum Office with an English speaker. We also saw each other occasionally at *Familia*, the community organization where she and her son sporadically attended. A couple of months after her interview, she called me while I was at work. I couldn't pick up but we exchanged a few text messages and she told me that her asylum papers finally arrived in the mail. I felt overwhelmed with excitement and optimism for her, and for the prospect of her reunification with her daughter.

Despite María's relief, and mine, receiving her papers marked only the beginning of another long legal and bureaucratic odyssey to bring her daughter to the US. A year after our first interview, María and I checked in on the phone about what she had been doing and about her efforts to bring her daughter. She was working on overcoming the next barrier keeping her from being able to send for her daughter: her daughter's visa. María was told the visa could take six to

nine months to arrive, but the nine months came and went. A combination of hope and uncertainty surrounded this process. María's process for obtaining asylum had been arduous but ultimately successful. Her lawyer and advocate had been working on her case for years now, and María trusted her. All of this meant María had gained some amount of hope in the legal system, which gave her some strength to take on the next bureaucratic hurdle. As she approached the one-year mark of her asylum status, she was thinking of making the next step toward of applying for legal permanent residency.

Though María felt a bit more hopeful, another year had gone by in her young child's life that she could not get back. By the time of this phone call, her son was approaching the age her daughter had been when María left Guatemala for the US. Her daughter, now eleven years old, remained in the care of her in-laws in Guatemala. She told me, as she had in other instances, that she was meeting with her lawyer this week, to see what was going on and what could be done. She expressed a combination of optimism and resignation as she continued to press on, "let's see how much longer I'll have to wait." There were no clear answers about would happen next. The cycle of desperation, hope, elation, and then waiting and more uncertainty characterized María and others' efforts to bring loved ones to the US.

Many immigrant families I spoke with faced this uncertainty as they worked through the challenges of reuniting with their loved ones, particularly their children. This was true whether or not they were attempting to do so through clandestine means or "the proper way," within the boundaries of an ever-shifting legal process. Parents had to weight the dangers of migration by land and unauthorized border crossing (or presenting at a port of entry) against the dangers their children faced under the violent conditions in their country of origin while they waited for other options. María, like many parents who did not want to subject their children to long and

dangerous migration journeys, decided to try to obtain a visa for her daughter through her own asylum status. Some parents waited until they felt their children were old enough to migrate, or until someone trusted by the family could migrate with them. Sometimes the delay was economic, until the family saved enough money to send for the child. In some rare instances, a young child was sent for and made the long journey. Several participants who were now navigating these decisions as parents had also been subject to similar dynamics as children, left behind by migrating parents.

Parents who left their children back in their home countries did their best to maintain parental bonds with them, which was sometimes challenging. For María, staying in regular contact with her daughter was an important part of maintaining their bond. She called and spoke on the phone with her daughter, who was growing up quickly:

I talk to her. I ask if she is okay. She goes to school, because she lives with my in-laws and she goes to school every day, she is learning. Sometimes I ask in Spanish, because she does not speak Spanish, only Mam, I ask her, "how are you going to school?" and he says "Yes, very well", I ask him "Do you speak Spanish?" "*Poquito*", she says, "And how are you?" I ask her, "Well," she says. And that makes me feel a little happier. Since I hear that she is doing well in school, "do you read books?" I ask her, "Yes, I read books."

"Can you sing a song?" I say. "Yes, I already know how", " Which one?" and she tells me what, but we just talked on the phone and, hopefully very soon, they will help me to bring her so that I will be complete, with my family. Right now because she is not here, I feel sad. Because she is not with me.

Speaking regularly on the phone helped María feel connected to her daughter and feel like a good parent by attending to her daughter's needs from afar. It also helped María stay hopeful and

motivated. By checking that her daughter was attending school, learning, reading, and enjoying herself, María was working to ensure that her daughter, who was still in Guatemala, would nonetheless have a different childhood experience than María herself had. According to María, the remittances she sent home played an important role in the different opportunities her daughter had, to attend school instead of work, for example. The act of providing for her daughter is also a corrective to her own childhood poverty and neglect.

María straddled hope and uncertainty when it came to being reunited with her daughter, particularly around the legal and bureaucratic processes required to make that happen. On the one hand, the unexpected had already happened. She told me she never dreamed of receiving a work permit, but she did, and worked legally packaging salami. On the other, she would get exasperated talking about her asylum process and when her official paperwork would arrive. Although it was one of many steps in the process, these papers were her ticket to the next stage of sending for her daughter, and the waiting was becoming unmanageable.

Reunification

As I write this, María's family separation and reunification story is still unfolding, her daughter is still in Guatemala. Questions remain about how María's relationship to her daughter and their family relationships may change if she is able to bring her daughter to the US. According other families I have spoken with, it can take many years to repair relationships after a child is left behind. Although parents and children alike idealized reunification and coming back together as a complete family, the reality was often quite complicated. Families in the study who had experienced a reunification expressed challenges; some struggled to reconnect. Parents

felt permanently connected to their children back home, but children who were raised by other people had conflicting and complex feelings about who they considered parents.

These dynamics were a frequent topic of conversation among *Familia* staff. For example, during one of my observations, two social workers who conducted home visits for *Familia* were discussing a family they were concerned about. The mother, Rocío, was a Guatemalan woman who, after several years of separation, was able to bring her daughter to the US. When the young girl arrived, she missed her “Guatemalan mother,” the aunt who had been raising her back home and whom the little girl also thought of as her mother, along with Rocío who she knew from video calls. Once in California, the girl cried at night and video-called her Guatemalan mom over their tablet device – the same mode of communication Rocío, her birth “American” mother, would use to stay in touch while they were separated. Rocío, feeling unable to bond with her daughter, eventually banned the video calls with the Guatemalan mom in order to assert herself as the “real” mother. The social workers worried about this decision. They knew how much Rocío had suffered the separation and the great lengths she went through to reunite with her daughter, and they wanted to support Rocío’s efforts to reintegrate her daughter into the family and bond with her as a parent. They were also concerned that this strategy of withholding contact would in fact have the opposite affect and negatively impact Rocío’s relationship with her daughter. Additionally, they worried that the daughter, who was herself experiencing yet another separation from a maternal figure, would be further traumatized by being denied contact with her Guatemalan mom.

As this story highlights, reunification is challenging, and often more complex than a family can anticipate. For some families, like in Flor’s case, this can mean dealing with the bitterness and resentment children feel from being left behind, feeling abandoned, and sometimes

left in poor conditions under the care neglectful or even abusive caregivers, despite the parents best intentions and efforts. For others, like Rocio, it can mean tearing children away once again from a loved parental figure in order to reunite. Beyond the relationship to the caregiver they are left with, the circumstances around separation and reunification vary widely in several respects. For example, some children were left behind at older ages and have more vivid memories of life with their biological parents, while others are left behind before they had formed memories. Each of these conditions creates a unique, complex set of circumstances for the potential reunification and what that will mean for the reconfigured family. Nonetheless, across nearly all cases, the trauma of separation was not the result of a single moment or relationship. Rather, it was chronic and cyclical, involving several separations, and not easily resolved or healed by a reunification.

The participants I spoke with who were left behind by their parents described the reasons their parents left: that they were seeking a better life, trying to *salir adelante* [get ahead, or persist against the odds], and help their family. According to them, they understood the conditions that pushed their parents to make these difficult choices, and expressed gratitude and appreciation at the sacrifices they made. This knowledge and understanding did not erase the pain of abandonment, the memories of the life they were left behind to live, or necessarily heal their relationships with their parents.

CONCLUSION

As María's story illustrates, for Central American immigrant families, family separation is a consistent and persistent form of violence and trauma. For people who leave their countries in search of a better lives for themselves and their children, in some cases fleeing a direct threat of violence, even the acts they take to escape that violence results in a new chapter of trauma in

the intergenerational dynamics and narrative within a family. The same migration that serves to release a migrant from violent conditions at home simultaneously subjects them to new, ongoing hardship in the form of separation.

The trauma of separation is not driven by a single, acute separation. There are often multiple family separations within a single generation, and many across generations. Further, efforts towards family reunification produce new separations; by reuniting a parent and child, the child is once again separated from a parental figure, a “stand in” for the parents who nonetheless often forms a parental bond with the child. These separations also occur in the context of other forms of the structural and legal violence and multi-sided violence that families are subject to in the US and in their countries of origin. The impact of each successive experience of trauma frames and shapes the experiences, relations, and the health of intergenerational transnational families.

The immigrant family separations the US state is implicated in extend far beyond the ones occurring at the US-Mexico border. US interventions in Central America produced conditions that drove emigration from those countries in the first place. Once in the US, the bureaucratic and legal hurdles of obtaining a status that creates opportunities for family reunification (e.g. asylum) structures trauma into parents’ lives by perpetuating and prolonging separation, and forcing parents to relive their most painful memories. Even once reunited, and for families that are partially together, the fear of deportation creates another possibility of separation, a looming threat many families must live with. All of these conditions contribute to the trauma of ongoing migration related family separation. Family separation is therefore a form of structural, intergenerational violence and trauma that the state is not only reinforcing of reproducing, but also architecting.

CHAPTER 4: “There is a lot to survive”: The Ongoing Migrant Condition

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapters address the precarity that Central American families living in the Bay Area experience in their day-to-day lives. The pervasive uncertainty in the community, stemming from changes in immigration politics⁶ that increase a collective sense of deportability, is compounded by a trauma-induced expansion of fear. Painful experiences from immigrants’ home countries and during migration shape their perceptions of and responses to ongoing and new threats. Memories of painful events can become traumas, “link[ing] past to present,” both for the individual who experienced the original event and for family members who are also touched by it (Eyerman 2003: 3). Similarly, family separation as a result of migration can become intergenerational traumas, pains that are not fixated on a single separation and cannot be easily resolved by a reunification. Each of these analyses reveals that the immigrant condition cannot be understood or explained through the present context alone.

Turning my focus to migration, in this chapter, I argue that the migrant condition is not spatially or temporally fixed. It is not simply a state of moving from one country to another but rather a condition that extends beyond the migrant journey and away from the border. It is generally understood that a *migrant* is a person on the move and an *immigrant* is a person settled in a new country. The specific conditions and experiences of Central American families that I interviewed blurred the boundary between these two categories. The families interviewed in California were living and working in sanctuary cities, some for years or decades. They had successfully migrated and made it across the border to establish lives in the United States. However, in many cases, those families were not living the lives they had envisioned before

⁶ By *immigration politics* I refer to immigration policies, as well as the political rhetoric and climate surrounding those policies.

leaving their home countries. Upon arrival, they settled into harsher realities than they expected. Faced with additional, symbolic borders to cross (political, legal, social, linguistic), their *migration* stories would continue and form part of their *immigrant* experience. Migrants often have more than one journey, are tied to the journeys that preceded them, and are implicated in the journeys that follow. For many Central Americans settled in the US, migration is rarely “completed” or off the table. They or a family member may be deported and have to return to their country. Once deported, some are faced with the decision of whether or not to migrate again. Others negotiate the risks of bringing a family member who was left behind.

For Central Americans transiting through Mexico, their migration trajectories were often redirected or restarted because of their interactions with various actors on the way. Along the long routes from Central America, through Mexico, and into the United States, migrants navigated threats from state actors (e.g. police, border patrol), criminal gangs, private companies, and bystanders, which, bolstered by policies and ideologies, made up an interconnected system of migrant criminalization and commodification (e.g. through fines, bribes, and extortion). These encounters could prolong or truncate journeys; migration rarely followed a clear, predetermined plan. The violence from these encounters often left lasting physical emotional injuries on migrants. Together, these narratives trouble the distinction between moving and settling, showing the challenges of determining when one is “done” moving, especially in unpredictable times and in a context where deportability is at an all-time high.

This chapter centers on three cases: Leonardo and Angie, both living in the Bay Area, and Gabriel, while on the move in Mexico. These cases exemplify the realities of migrants’ journeys as they move in relation to the migrant condition and in the broader context of participants’ lives. Each individual describes the challenges of recovering from the physical and

emotional hardship of migration once in the United States, just an example of the ways migration transcends beyond the act of moving. The memories of migration, and resulting trauma, extend the migrant condition into the stage of “settling” in the country of reception.

Beyond “the Border”

To capture the spatial continuities of migration, this chapter emphasizes significant moments in participants’ journeys, many of which occur away from the border. The Mexico-US border has not always been the firm boundary it is today (Nevins 2001). Rather, it is a historically specific product of larger political, economic, social, and ideological forces. In the not-so-distant past, migrant workers passed more freely from one side of this border to the other (Durand, Massey and Parrado 1999), and Mexican/Mexican-American families and communities sometimes lived on both sides of it. Preceding those transnational border communities, much of the southwestern United States *was* still part of Mexico, spurring the popular Chicanx political slogan “We didn’t cross the border; the border crossed us” (Cisneros 2014). However, the confluence of larger trends in exclusionary immigration policy and the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment (Massey and Sánchez 2010) have produced increased border security on the US side (De León 2015) and increased organized criminal activity on the Mexican side (Casillas 2013; Treviño-Rangel 2018), in turn creating a hostile terrain for migrants. As clandestine crossings become more difficult and dangerous, and policies, government resources, and media attention fixate on the border, public discourses and conceptualizations of migration, writ large, become increasingly conflated with the border crossing. To be sure, border crossings were critical parts of all the participants’ migration stories.

Migration in this case is not just about the Mexico-US border; rather, there are multiple international borders as well as other legal, political, and symbolic boundaries that migrants must cross during migration. The interview participants who migrated by land through unauthorized means (all but three) crossed at least two borders, and sometimes three or even four, to arrive in the United States (Mexico-US, Guatemala-Mexico, Honduras-Guatemala, etc.). Their stories often involved multiple attempts to cross these borders. Furthermore, the migration stories themselves extended beyond those borders in many directions, from when migrants first start preparing for their journey in the community of origin (and earlier still for those in communities and families of pervasive emigration), through the middle of the in-transit countries, and beyond. This is not an argument to de-emphasize the border, which has been the subject of important and illuminating scholarly accounts (De León 2015; Durand and Massey 2004; Holmes 2013; Spener 2009) but rather one to expand understanding of migration beyond what migrants must do to cross. These aspects of the journey are often left out in accounts that conflate “migration” with “border crossing” and spatially limit migration to the Mexico-US border.

Despite the importance of border crossing, many significant events during migration occur *away* from the border. Migrations involve days, weeks, or even months of transiting away from or between borders. Even within one person’s journey, there are multiple migration stories—bussing, riding trains, riding in vans, hiking through the desert, detentions, deportations—many of which are not tied to the border, yet all contribute to the complexities of migration that are often collapsed in a singular migration narrative. Migrations are rarely linear trajectories from a known point A (the country of origin) to an imagined point B (a predetermined country and city of destination). Instead, migrations are often circuitous, take

unplanned turns, require returns before the migrant can continue, and are therefore nonlinear and on a continuum rather than a continuous progression.

Migration Data

In this chapter, I draw upon two sets of data: interviews with Central American families in the Bay Area (2017–2018) who have lived in the United States for several years (a couple years to over a decade) and ethnographic observations of Central American and Mexican migrants in transit at a migrant shelter in Central Mexico from the summer of 2018. This chapter, therefore, includes a combination of migration stories: those remembered and recounted by people who experienced them years before and those from people in the middle of a migration who told me about their current journey as well as previous migrations. The migrant shelter where I conducted observations in Mexico represents a point in the middle of many migrants' journeys. Fieldwork at the shelter provided a unique lens into the daily lives of migrants because it is a neglected point: it is not at the center of the migrant "crisis" or "crises" in Mexico because it is not one of the many shelters along border regions like the northern US border and the southern Guatemala border (Agren 2019). This space, and other places like it, are important because migrants going north to the US must go through Mexico and often spend, at the least, a month of their migration traversing the country. Through my talking with and observing migrants in one of the neglected points along the journey, this data offers a unique understanding of a migrant's daily life and realities beyond the border.

Likewise, the Bay Area is not a border region; rather, it is a significant destination for many Central American immigrants to the US and has a long history of Central American migration and immigrant enclaves. The families in the Bay Area represent, in some ways, the

lives aspired to by the migrants I met in Mexico—lives that very few of those migrants in transit will achieve. However, as these stories highlight, immigrants do not really feel at the “end.” The stories of immigrants in the Bay Area and migrants in Mexico, therefore, intersect and seem to touch one another. Each mirrors the other’s pasts and potential futures. Therefore, I put them in conversation in this chapter to reveal the continuities of migration.

LEONARDO

I met Leonardo, a thirty-seven-year-old Guatemalan man, in his home in East Oakland. I first introduce him in chapter 2, in which he describes the many ways fear shapes his day-to-day life in Oakland under the new immigration policy context. Here, I focus on his long migration experience. His wife, a Mexican woman who attended Familia, where I conducted weekly observations, introduced us. She told me he had a long story about his journey that I should hear for my project and introduced us so he could share it with me. Leonardo’s experiences exemplify the ongoing nature of the migrant condition. Migration for him started before he left his country, from when he began imagining going north and preparing for the journey. After he survived a harrowing border-crossing experience and detention, his migration continued well into the country, geographically further and further from the border, and into his life in the United States.

“I Have to Go North”: Imagination and Preparation

Migration preparation does not begin with a single person’s migration. Most participants described communities of origin with pervasive emigration. However, migration not only shapes the economy, politics, and culture in the country of reception, but it also impacts the country of origin. Thus, even before leaving and for those who stay behind, migration shapes their families, economic conditions, and community dynamics. Although I did not conduct observations in the

communities of origin, most participants described their migration preparation as occurring within a context where the possibility or need for migration was ever present. Conversations about pre-migration experiences often referenced the mythology of “*el Norte*” (“North”), a direction rather than a destination, with imagined opportunities or escape. This was certainly true for Leonardo, who came from a town he described as having limited work, widespread violence, and ubiquitous emigration.

For many men in particular, the mythology of going north is closely tied to a sense of honor and fulfilling familial duty. Leonardo told me he migrated in place of his father. His family was struggling financially, and the members were trying to decide how to manage their economic constraints given the limited work opportunities they had at home. Leonardo was in his late teens when he moved from his town to the capital of Guatemala City to study at the university. Although he was doing what he could to help his family with his part-time job in Guatemala City, he felt he was investing in his future and that his studies were not providing the immediate relief his family needed. When he heard that his father was deciding to go to the United States in search of opportunity, he offered to go instead:

When I was in the capital, [my father] said that there wasn't enough money, and because my other brother, he was studying too, and [my father] paid his school fees, and my sister's. ... so he said, “You know I have to go. *I have to go north* to look for other opportunities.” That's when I said, “Dad, why don't I go? Because at your age, it's going to be a bit more complicated to get a job.” Then he told me, “Would you really dare?”

“I'm telling you, yes.”

“And your studies?”

“Well, I’ll leave them.”

Leonardo was one of four children and the oldest boy. For many young men, familial duty is part of the mythology of *el Norte*. Throughout his interview, Leonardo expressed the sense of responsibility toward his family as a driving force of many of his decisions, and he told me several times that he sacrificed his studies to migrate in his father’s place. I heard many versions of this conversation from other migrants, especially from men who migrated in their adolescence, about “going north” to support the family or on behalf of a family member. The physical and emotional sacrifices of migration takes a toll, and fulfilling these duties once in the United States, if they make it, is no small task.

In preparation for the trip, Leonardo’s father helped him plan his journey. Because he was a student in Guatemala, Leonardo was able to obtain a student visa for Mexico. He migrated around the year 2000, when being an in-transit migrant in Mexico was still considered a criminal offense, and Central American migrants were particularly vulnerable to human rights violations (Trevino-Rangel 2017). In 2011, an immigration law was passed in Mexico as a result of pressures from human rights organizations to promote humane conditions for migrants in transit in accordance with international human rights standards, but widespread mistreatment of migrants continues there (Alba 2013; Trevino-Rangel 2017). Central Americans transiting through Mexico told me about the discrimination, harassment, and extortion they are subject to from state officials, criminal organizations, and bystanders. With his student visa, Leonardo could dodge some of these more extreme encounters but was nonetheless subject to and witnessed racial discrimination on his journey.

Leonardo said goodbye to his father in Guatemala City and from there took an eight-hour bus ride to Tecun Uman, a Guatemalan border town, where he then had to cross the Siuchate River into the Mexican city of Hidalgo over a bridge by foot. There, at Mexico's southern border, Mexican immigration agents stopped Leonardo: "They stopped me there, but because I had my visa, they let me through." This was the first of several points on the journey in which he had to show his visa to continue northward. Other migrants told me about being deported back to Central America when faced with similar encounters and completely restarting their physical migrant journeys.

"Every Two or Three Hours, There Were Checkpoints": Traversing Mexico

Leonardo made it into Mexico and from there began his several-day journey north to the US-Mexico border. He boarded a bus from southern Mexico to Puebla City in Central Mexico, where he took another bus to Matamoros at the Mexico-US border. Mexico's immigration law has historically been restrictive and racialized, and even as someone transiting through the country with a legal status, Leonardo was subject to several instances of questioning, harassment, and racialized profiling. While he was able to use his student visa to avoid some complications, he witnessed other Central Americans experience more intensive harassment:

... almost every two or three hours, there were checkpoints. So I would be asleep, and they would wake me up because then they would say, "No, this one's not Mexican." And then with my accent, it's worse. And they asked me for documentation and, as so, because I showed them the visa, they wouldn't say anything. "I'm a student, and I'm going to Puebla."

“Oh, OK, and what are you going to do?”

“To go some audit classes.”

“Oh, OK.”

And they would leave me alone. But they would always make people get off the bus; they would always make people come down and through the window. You could see that because they gave [the officers] money; they gave them money, and [the officers] would let them board. About two hours later, another one and so on. I lasted about four days on the bus until I arrived at my destination, which was Matamoros.

Leonardo’s account of Central American-looking passengers (including southern Mexicans sometimes perceived as Central American) being profiled based on skin tone, indigenous features, and accents on busses at checkpoints is consistent with other participants’ reports, as is the description of law enforcement agents taking bribes from migrants at the time Leonardo was migrating. Despite having a visa that facilitated his journey tremendously, he was hyper aware of the constant scrutiny he was under because of his origins. At each of these checkpoints, at each of these moments, the possibility of being turned around or redirected loomed large. Although he had a “legal status” in Mexico, he was not using it for its intended purposes. The visa could only go so far in protecting him, and he traveled with a fear of being found out. Moments of being seen as non-Mexican (“With my accent, it’s worse”), he explained, made him feel vulnerable to arrest, deportation, and exploitation throughout his migration. These feelings persisted and followed him into the United States well after his migration had supposedly ended.

“Ten Hours until We Reached the Rio Grande”: Extended Journeys

When Leonardo arrived in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, a Mexican border town across the river from Brownsville, Texas, he got in touch with the coyote a family member had recommended. This coyote could be hired to get Leonardo across the Rio Grande (known as the *rio Bravo* on the Mexico side of the border). Once in the border region, he was in the coyote’s hands. There, he waited about a week for “the moment to cross.” Many participants recounted their migrations involving long periods of waiting, of unknown timelines in in-between places.

The appropriate moment to cross was determined by the coyote: when “some Latino [border agent] was at the border, then it was the time to cross.” The coyote supposedly obtained this information from his contacts inside border patrol. However, the border is not just a line, and the crossing is not just a moment. On the day they were to cross, at around 6:00 p.m., the coyote gathered several migrants, and they all boarded a van. For a couple hours, they made their way away from the urban center and the designated port of entry and into the desert. Once they were there, Leonardo said, the coyote explained what would happen next:

We arrived at a desert-like place, and he said, “We’re walking the five hours.” He says, “Please let’s go at a fast pace. I do not want anyone to stay behind. I do not want you to speak, and if you have white shirts, throw them away and put on a colored one because the *migra* [border patrol] is going to see us.” And, yes, we started walking, fast, but it was not five hours; it was almost like nine, ten hours, like ten hours until we reached the Rio Grande.

Migrants were often given limited, fragmented, and inaccurate information by smugglers, which made it difficult to know exactly where they were and what to expect along the journey.

Leonardo's border "crossing" started nine to ten hours before the actual border. The uncertainty of migration—how long it would be, where they would sleep, and what they would eat—was compounded by the constant worry that they might not succeed, which could mean being caught and sent home, being detained indefinitely, or being seriously injured or even dying along the journey, concerns that loomed large as the physical demands of migration intensified.

A significant part of what makes migration unpredictable is migrants' dependence on the very people who may pose a threat to their safety. For their part, the coyotes, part of an interconnected political economy of migration along with state actors and other organized crime, were simultaneously constrained by the same border regime the migrants are subject to. The experiences and relationships migrants have with their coyotes or guides vary greatly. When migrants hire coyotes, they do so with great suspicion and hesitation. This is with good reason as many of the migrants I spoke to provided stories of exploitative, deceptive, and abusive coyotes. Others hire people in their networks (sometimes calling them *guías*, "guides," instead of *coyotes*), family friends or friends of friends who have managed to capitalize on their migration experience and networks, who were invested in the safety and well-being of the people they were taking north. All the participants I spoke to who migrated by land relied on them in one way or another, whether to smuggle them across the border or guide them through Mexico or longer trajectories of their journeys.

Migrants prepare themselves long before any journey by anticipating ways they need to protect not only against the actors along the way who are there to deter them (police, border patrol, etc.) but also those on whom they rely to move northward. When Leonardo and his group made it to the Rio Grande, the coyote instructed them to hand over all their possessions (rings, watches, cash, small bags) and place them in a bag for safekeeping because they "couldn't get

wet”; he said they would be redistributed on the other side. Migrants are often in a situations where they have no choice but to trust a coyote with their life—but not their watch or necklace. Leonardo, armed with the advice he had been given by friends and family who had migrated, and suspicious of the request, kept his only possession, five hundred American dollars, in the pocket on the inside of his boxers that his mother had sewn on for him for the journey.

The coyote handed each of them a black plastic garbage bag to use as a floatation device. Leonardo, who had grown up near a river, thought he did not need it. Successful crossings depend on many things, from the physical and mental state the migrants are in when they arrive at the border to their ability to swim. Leonardo was young and fit and knew how to swim: “So I said to myself, ‘I’ll cross it easily,’ I said, and I went in. And when I went in along the shore, I disappeared, right there on the shore. It was calm on top, but underneath was a strong current. I asked for my bag, better because many have died in that river.” Realizing he had underestimated the power of the river, he backtracked on his decision to swim across and took the makeshift floatation device available to him.

The Rio Grande crossing appeared in many participant interviews, through their firsthand experiences as well as the stories they had heard from people who crossed before them and after. For example, another participant, Anton, who migrated around the same time as Leonardo, grew up near a river in Honduras and also said he was a good swimmer. He told me he could hold his breath underwater for long periods of time from practicing at home and was comfortable moving around in the water. Compared to other groups, which included tired, hungry people who could not swim, he recounted that the group of men he crossed with managed to get across without as much physical difficulty.

One by one, Leonardo's group made it across the river. At the other side, most of them realized that the coyote they had handed their belongings to did not cross over with them, and their only possessions remained in Mexico. Feeling both accomplished and defeated, the group rested for about twenty minutes, barely having a chance to take in that they were in the United States, when the other coyote waiting on the other side instructed them to move again. Though they had technically "crossed the border," their journey was far from over. From there, they walked for another five hours, wet, tired, and downtrodden, when suddenly, Leonardo describes, "*la migra*" descended upon them.

"You Wanted North; Here It Is": American Dreams Deferred

Like with other actors along the migrant journey, migrants found themselves sometimes tied to border agents in complicated ways, relying at times for survival on the very people they described as hunting them like animals. For Leonardo, both of these realities rang true. After hours of walking in their wet clothes through the desert on the US side of the border, Leonardo and the group began approaching a town. The coyote told them to stay in the brush, and Leonardo, remembering the instructions he got from migrants before him to stay with the coyote at all times, followed closely behind him. Suddenly, beams of light shone down on them, the coyote slipped into the darkness, and the group found themselves being faced down by five border agents. "We've been waiting for you," they told the group in Spanish.

Migrants have to contend with threatening, sometimes corrupt and abusive, border agents on both sides of the Rio Grande. Participants told me about how *la migra* taunted, harassed, and abused them. For example, participant Sonia, recounting the moment of being caught, made a swirling motion with her finger as she described the devastation of watching the bit of rationed

water their group still had being poured out in front of them by a border agent who detained them. Simultaneously, in many cases, *la migra* is not merely a police presence but a humanitarian one. For some migrants, encountering *la migra* when they crossed would be the first step toward their asylum case. Border agents were gatekeepers, not only in the literal sense at the physical border but also in terms of the various political, legal, and symbolic hurdles migrants had to overcome next, determining how migrant trajectories would continue.

After being apprehended, Leonardo and his group were taken to immigrant detention, which they called *la perrera*, “the dog pound.” Leonardo was held there for fifty-six days, which he described as the worst time of his life. He told me that in detention, he cried every night, wracked with regret, asking himself, “Why did I come to this country?” In the morning, the guards would taunt them with this very question. At 4:45 a.m., the guards came in, banging on the metal bars with their clubs and shouting in Spanish, “Get up, get up! You wanted North; here it is.”

I heard this phrase *querias Norte*, “you wanted North,” in several participants’ stories. It’s a common saying that represents the unmet promises of the migration north and sometimes taunts the naïve migrant who believes in the American Dream. “You wanted North? Now get to work”; “You wanted North? Now suck it up”; “You wanted North? This is it.” I first heard it from another participant, Hector, who, like Leonardo, was a college-educated Guatemalan who tried his luck in the United States. Hector, who came from a relatively privileged family back home, spent his first couple years in the US as a day laborer under strenuous work conditions. “How can they treat us like this?” he would ask his fellow laborers. “*Querias Norte!*” They would laugh. “This is it.” This phrase exemplifies how the migrant condition extends into

migrants' lives in the US. Migrant conditions do not have geographic or temporal borders; even once they arrive, they do not necessarily feel they have made it.

During his detention, Leonardo worked, cleaning the facility bathrooms for a dollar a day. Each day, he told me, detainees were called in to an office to sign their deportation papers and get sent back to their country, and he watched as, one by one, people left detention.

Leonardo, still faithful to the advice he had received, refused to sign the papers, despite threats from officers that he would spend his life in detention. Many migrants under these conditions sign their deportation papers just to be released from the inhumane conditions of migrant detentions, and agents rely on coercive tactics to convince them. Another migrant, Marco, told me that when he was held at age nineteen, they made the cell he was in—or *hielera* (ice box), as many migrants call them—colder and colder each day to coerce him to sign his deportation order.

On day fifty-six, Leonardo recalled hearing his name over a loudspeaker, telling him to present himself at the office. He was being released with a court order. The legal details of this part of the story are somewhat unclear as they seemed to perplex Leonardo as he retold it. However, it is likely that this was part of the US immigration enforcement in which migrants deemed “low risk” were released into the community while they wait for an asylum hearing in immigration court as an alternative to holding them in immigrant detention.

Back home, along the continuum of migration, Leonardo's family was also feeling the effects of his journey. While Central Americans transit Mexico and cross the Mexico-US border, many have very little contact, if any, with their family members back home, who are eagerly awaiting news that they made it safely to the United States. For those who die along the way in the border region, their remains may decompose before they are found and have the possibility of

being identified (De León 2015). For family waiting back home, the uncertainty of migration can be interminable.

With the dollars he had saved cleaning bathrooms, Leonardo bought a calling card and reached his family in Guatemala. His mother gave him the address of an aunt in California, which he provided to the agents. Leonardo was released, and they returned his items: his clothes, which had been sitting, damp, in a locker for fifty-six days, along with the five hundred dollars his mother had sewn into his boxers.

Leonardo was released from detention, yet once in the US, his migration was far from over. Even for those who “make it”—survive the journey north, cross the border, and are released from detention—there are no guarantees of fulfilling the imagined notion of *el Norte*: shelter, a job and the ability to send remittances home, a better life. Leonardo still needed to make his way from Texas to northern California, where his aunt lived. With the money he had in his pocket, he made his way further north still, first with the help of a released Honduran detainee who had family in Texas picking him up and who took Leonardo to a bus station, and then with the help of a Mexican-American priest at the bus station.

Along the way, Leonardo told me, he lost the paper with his aunt’s address. He finally made it to Berkeley, feeling depressed and smelling terrible, with no money, no phone, and nowhere to go. Far from the border, and after a long and harrowing journey, he had arrived, geographically, to his destination, but this was far from the reality he imaged. Leonardo slept on the street, once again crying at night and asking himself, “What am I doing here? Why come here to suffer?” He told me that he slept on the street for a couple of weeks. In that time, he met some migrant day laborers and began standing on the street corner with them, picking up jobs where he could. Some of them, also living on the street, took him into their encampment, which

he called “homes made out of cardboard,” where they had makeshift beds and a little more protection.

One day, when Leonardo was walking on the streets in Berkeley, in what he described as a miracle, he heard someone calling his name. He turned around and saw a young woman he did not recognize but who seemed to know who he was. It turned out to be his cousin, who had been in the US her whole life. They had never met in person, but she recognized him from photos and, along with her mother, his aunt, had been anxiously awaiting his arrival since he was released from detention in Texas. He went home with her, called his mother, and, from there, began to build a new life in the US.

After reflecting on the journey, I asked Leonardo what he might say to someone who was thinking about coming to the US or preparing for the journey. He told me he had engaged in several of these conversations. In fact, six months after he arrived, he sent for his brother, who lived with him at the time of our interview, yet he told me he actively discourages people from coming now, despite the choice he made himself:

I tell [people back home], if there in Guatemala you have food, shelter, and you are living not as you would like but you are happy together with your family, don't risk coming. Life here in *el Norte* is not like it was ten years ago; now life is very difficult here. And they say, “No, but I see a lot of people who come every year and bring money.” Yes, if you are going to become a citizen and have your papers in order. But if you come *mojado* [“wet,” undocumented], the truth is very difficult; you will come to suffer. I tell them my experience, but they say, “Ah, you were unlucky” but *no*. “Look at your brother,” they say. “He [did] not suffer much”... [My brother] managed to cross [the Mexico-US border] on the first try,

thank God. But, yeah, he was suffocating inside the trailer he came in. That's another story.

Leonardo had long imagined what it might be like to go north and help his family. All the resources he would gather from his home, a place of pervasive emigration, would help him along the way (advice from experienced migrants, money gathered by the family, his student visa), but none would truly prepare him for what lay ahead. Even with the relative advantage of the student visa, his migration was extended and unpredictable, with several hurdles along the way. The border crossing itself was not the end of the journey but instead the beginning of another and another. His days in detention were long, and he was uncertain about whether and when he would be released—days he described as the worst of his life. Once released, he would find life in the United States to be a struggle. Leonardo had a hard time communicating this to people back home, who, like him when he was a teenager in Guatemala, dreamed of something better. However, for Leonardo, migration is harder than they think, and the border is only one part of the story. His brother had made it across, but that did not mean he did not suffer along the way. Even today, in the new political climate, there are still walls in front of him and his family preventing him from truly reaching “North.”

ANGIE

Angie, a Honduran U-visa holder, recounted her migration story like an epic. Her journey had several beginnings, several attempts at making it across borders, and several points that marked the beginning of a new phase of migration. Propelled by her husband's migration before her, and resulting in efforts to bring her son, Angie's migration extended years ahead of and beyond her physical movement from Honduras to the United States. Angie's *Norte* did not fulfill her imagination, but she pressed on.

Angie and I first met at a small Evangelical church service in Oakland. Janira and Lucio, a couple, and two other study participants, had invited me to their church, and I started attending somewhat regularly. A small group of Central Americans, about five families, attended services a couple times a week, on Mondays and Thursdays (off days because they rented the space from another church). Janira was a good friend of Angie's and had told her about me ahead of time. Angie approached me walking into church and asked me to sit next to her, sharing her Spanish-language Bible with me and commenting on the service from time to time. She was eager to participate in the study and share her story, so we arranged a time for me to come over to her home.

I interviewed Angie in the studio apartment that she shared with her partner, a Mexican man she met in Oakland after her first marriage ended, and their eight-year-old US-born daughter. The place fit their bed and a little couch, a small table, and chairs without much room to move around. The kitchen, the size of a step-in closet, had a refrigerator with a microwave on top and a sink. Family photos lined the walls and covered the refrigerator. I sat on the couch while she folded laundry and talked. She was watching Janira's youngest daughter, a baby who was crawling around and putting everything in her mouth. Angie joked about how she did not have young kids anymore, so she was not used to dealing with a baby.

"He Sent for Me": Migrations Preceding Migration

As was true in Leonardo's case, Angie's story demonstrates how migrations begin before migrants leave their hometowns. Migrations often precede migrations, with family members left behind in a state of waiting and anticipation. It is often not logistically and financially feasible

for a family in Central America to migrate together as families under other conditions might.⁷ A family member's migration and arrival can also determine whether and when the next person will make the journey. Once the first person sees how it goes, he or she sends for the family. I talked to many women who said they were "sent for" by their husbands and parents sending for their children and other extended family members.

Angie's husband first migrated to the United States in 2003. For three years after he left, she lived with her in-laws and continued to work at her job in the *maquiladoras*.⁸ Meanwhile, her husband sent remittances from the US to help the family, particularly their son, but also with the expectation that, eventually, they would save enough money for Angie to join him. There is documented evidence of the substandard working conditions women are subject to in *maquiladoras* in Honduras (Ver Beek 2001), and Angie described the work as being highly challenging. Nonetheless, she also said she enjoyed and took pride in her work making clothes, describing the clothing she made for different American brands and the difficult tasks, like complicated pockets, that she excelled at and was praised for. "They had many women trying," she told me, referring to a pocket. "They couldn't, they couldn't. Then they put me on it, and I got it." As we were talking, she lifted up the garments she was folding, turning pant legs and sleeves inside out, pointing out the stitching on the collars of her partner's shirts to show me details like the ones she would work on in the factories. Before he migrated, her husband worked as a welder. Between the two of them working, however, money was still not enough, and she said he decided to leave to give their son a better future. Angie did not cite the violence in

⁷ See a more detailed description of migration-related family separations in chapter 3.

⁸ *Maquiladoras* are factories where workers assemble duty-free raw materials into products for export. They originated in Mexico and are common throughout Central America as well. Maquiladoras are often criticized for their exploitative and abusive working condition. In Latin America, the majority of maquiladora workers are women.

Honduras as the primary driver of migration for her family; however, it is worth noting that she lived in a context of pervasive gang violence and that the structural violence of extreme poverty contributed to the ongoing collective and interpersonal violence she and her family were subject to.

In 2006, according to Angie, it was her turn to migrate. “*Me mandó a traer,*” she said (“he sent for me”). Although she described the decision as originating with him, when I asked her if she wanted to migrate at the time, she said that she did. She described these constrained choices throughout the interview with dignity and optimism. She loved her husband, she told me. She had been faithful to him for three years, and she was ready to be back together.

Central American migrants must consider how to prepare themselves for the various dangers along the way and brace themselves for the threats that lie ahead. Through these preparations, in the anticipation of the journey, migration takes up an emotional and temporal space before migrants leave their communities. Participants who described their preparations often talked to friends and family about migration experiences got advice about different pieces of the journey and gathered resources. Previous migrations can serve as a roadmap for those beginning their journeys (as they did with Leonardo), whose decision making along the way is guided by the advice they receive from more seasoned migrants, helping them through, especially at critical moments.

Many women, like Angie, were aware of the risk of sexual assault to migrant women along the way. Although few women told me personal experiences of being sexually assaulted during migration, several men told me about witnessing women being sexually assaulted. A few women told me, unprompted, that “that didn’t happen to me” or “I wasn’t touched like that,” implying an awareness, fear, and anticipation of sexual abuse, which has been reported as

widespread during migration. When I asked Angie how she prepared for the journey, she mentioned casually that she obtained birth control: “I went and I got an injection to not have children [birth control shot] because I didn’t know what was going to happen on the way.” Angie did not explicitly say she was preparing for the possibility of sexual assault or that she was warned about the possibility of assault, only that she “didn’t know what was going to happen” and that she wanted to avoid getting pregnant. Other women said similar things to me, discussing sexual assault in implicit terms and sharing ways they and their mothers anticipated or guarded against it. Although all Central American migrants were subject to violence, the sexual violence women anticipated was often reflective of the sexual and domestic violence they had experienced in their family lives (like Angie, who was subject to abuse from her father as a child) and would continue to be subject to in the US.

Angie’s husband and his family arranged for a coyote to take her from Honduras through Guatemala and Mexico and across the Mexico-US border. Most participants who could somehow access the resources to pay a guide to take them into and through Mexico would. Some went alone and only hired a coyote once at the border, but I never heard of or saw women traveling without a family member or a guide. The coyote who took Angie, nicknamed *el Flaco* (“Slim”), was connected to the family through friends of friends. She first met *el Flaco* at her in-laws’ house, where they all talked about what the journey would entail—again, marking the blurred “beginning” of Angie’s migration. While other participants recounted feeling suspicious and grudgingly dependent on their guides, Angie described an immediate connection between them, saying that she felt very drawn to *el Flaco* from their first encounter.

“Puro Titanic”: Riding the Trains with el Flaco

Migrants described moving between Central American countries as relatively easy compared to crossing the border into Mexico or the United States. These particular boundaries are somewhat permeable and “safer” to cross. Nonetheless, migrants must traverse unknown countries with uncertainty.

Angie, *el Flaco*, and their group set off for *el Norte*. From her town in Honduras, they first took a bus into Guatemala. Once there, they took a bus to the Guatemala-Mexico border. They crossed, but at Tenosique, a Mexican town near the Guatemala-Mexico border, they were detained at a checkpoint and held for three days. Angie, *el Flaco*, and the others in the group were deported, sent back to Guatemala rather than all the way back to Honduras. Deportation often creates yet another layer of migration, not an endpoint. Migrants often travel without identification, and several told me that immigration agents attempting to repatriate them, at the Guatemala-Mexico or Mexico-US border, find other ways to identify their nationality (such as asking people to name items, like a fruit, which is referred to differently depending on the country). Sometimes migrants try to learn these informal mechanisms ahead of time and pass themselves off as someone from another country to be deported to a country closer to their attempted destination. This, however, was not the case for Angie’s group. They decided to return to Honduras after being deported rather than going back into Guatemala. She did not specify why they were deported to Guatemala, but it is possible that it was simply easier for the Mexican immigration enforcement.

When she returned to Honduras, Angie prepared to restart her journey. She stayed with her father for a week before setting off with *el Flaco* for the second time. She giggled as she told me about the developments in her unconventional relationship with her coyote. By then, Angie had started feeling a romantic connection to *el Flaco*, and she avoided staying with her in-laws

so she could flirt with him. Her story took on all the drama of a *telenovela*—mystery, violence, and romance—but within it was a true story of a very real and harrowing odyssey. After the week passed, a group of migrants reconvened, and once again they bussed their way from Honduras to Guatemala, and Guatemala to Mexico, this time without being caught at the Guatemala-Mexico border. Once in Mexico, they took another bus and migrated through the border state of Tabasco into the state of Veracruz. There, in the city of Coatzacoalcas, the next phase of migration began.

In Mexico, an estimated half a million southern Mexican and Central American migrants ride atop freight trains, sometimes referred to as *la Bestia* (the Beast) or *el tren de la muerte* (the train of death) (Dominguez Villegas 2014). These cargo trains, not intended for passengers, carry products north for export. Migrants who ride the trains climb atop them, have nothing to hold on to, and risk injury, amputation, or death from falls. Angie and her group rode on top of several of these freight trains, about five according to her, that took them through Mexico northward to the Mexico-US border. Mounting the train is a risky process in itself, as Angie explained:

The train does not stop; it marches on. [*El Flaco explained*], “So you are going to grab like this [makes grabbing motion with her arms] and lift your feet like that [points to her feet],” and so he told us how, and then we all got on, but I tripped on a rail down there...and I had a big backpack, and they had said to get rid of all of that, and I ignored it, and I brought [my backpack]. And the train threw me over, it threw me over there; it even made a hole like that in my leg...and the train blew me over there. And *el Flaco* said, they all got on different train cars, and *el Flaco* said, “Everyone get off. Angie got left behind,” he said...well, because *el Flaco* loved me, and so they all got off, and then we waited for another train.

Angie experienced many of the extreme and inhumane hardships of migration: getting injured trying to climb on a moving train, riding atop a train for days on end, walking for days through the desert, drinking muddy water from a cattle trough—all experiences I heard repeated over and over by participants. However, her story is also surprisingly tender and uplifting. She recounted the migration journey like an epic romantic odyssey in which she fell in love with *el Flaco*, her coyote, who took special care of her and protected her throughout the journey. “He was very special with me; he helped me a lot along the way. He helped me; he helped me a lot because, more so with me than with the others. He helped me with my backpack, carried it for me, and was so very special with me.” She called the experience “*puro Titanic*” (“just like *Titanic*”). Angie became visibly giddy as she recounted one particular instance when she started menstruating during a three-day train ride without breaks. I asked how she managed, and she smiled and laughed, describing her coyote-lover’s grand gesture: ripping off the sleeve of his own T-shirt for her to use as a menstrual pad. Their relationship was a stark contrast to the many narratives of sexual assault of women during migration, assaults that Angie herself had partially attempted to prepare for through taking birth control and that she said *el Flaco* protected her from.

Eventually, there came a point on the journey when Angie and *el Flaco* had to part ways, and Angie felt pulled to go back to Honduras. Participants, like Angie and Leonardo, sometimes feel a pull to return to their home country, imagining a reality in which it was possible to go back, but they pushed forward, northward, nonetheless. Another participant, Sonia, an undocumented Salvadoran woman, expressed a similar inner conflict. Devastated at having left her children behind, Sonia explained that at each point of her migration, she wanted to turn back but felt she could not:

[Migrating] is my only option. Where else could I go? I had no other place; there wasn't anywhere I would feel safe [in El Salvador]... The thing was that when I got to Guatemala, I did not want to continue. Then when I got to Mexico, the same thing.

Throughout the journey, as she got further away from home, her feelings did not change. Sonia wanted to turn back; she did not want to continue further north. Yet back home, the level of gang violence had escalated to a point that was unbearable; several of her family members had been killed, and she felt she had no choice but to flee. For migrants leaving out of necessity or obligation, the migrant journey does not only go northward, to the destination, and forward, into the future, but also extends back into the past and the lives they leave behind.

In Guanajuato, in Central Mexico, Angie said goodbye to *el Flaco*. By then, she said, he was trying to convince her to abandon her journey and return to Honduras to be with him. She narrated their exchange with flourish: "He would say to me, 'Don't go! I want you to stay with me,'" but she declined, saying that she had someone waiting for her and she had to continue. She told me this with a smile and with her characteristic bravado. However, it echoed a sentiment shared by other participants that extended the migration story. *El Flaco* went back to Honduras, and Angie kept on with other migrants on the trains, stopping at migrant shelters along the way. That was the last time she saw him.

"It's Horrible to Go through the Desert": Crossing

When Angie and *el Flaco* parted ways, she had already been traveling for about a month. She was tired, her shoes were worn down, and she was hungry. Angie did not rely on regular meals while riding the trains. She survived, she told me, on the bags of food and water Mexican

volunteers would prepare and toss into outstretched hands reaching out from moving trains.⁹ By the time they reached the border, Angie and her group were well into their migration, having started, returned, and started again; crossed several borders twice; and ridden numerous busses and trains. It was time to cross into the US, another extended journey within a journey:

[We walked for] about three days. You die of thirst. We had to drink water for the cows, from where the cows lived. We saw vipers. Then we arrived at a place where there were some trees; I think it was the worms' paradise there. The trees were all covered in worms. Thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of worms that...well, I'm not afraid of worms. I do not care about worms.

When Angie described disturbing scenes of migration, she did so with strength and defiance, declaring, in this case, that she was not afraid of the worms that covered the trees. Despite the romance of her journey and Angie's tremendous fortitude, she did not sugar coat its realities: "It is horrible to go through the desert," she told me. She may not have been afraid of worms, but the worms' paradise was clearly a human hell. She and her fellow travelers were pushed toward the trees full of worms to avoid detection. "They call them mosquitos: the *migra* search helicopters. We hid under the trees." Numerous participants told me about feeling hunted like animals, about the fear they felt at the disturbing sounds of immigration helicopters overhead, or worrying about being caught at every turn. The border region itself can be confusing and disorienting, and some said they lost their sense of cardinal direction and worried they were going the wrong way. The conditions in the border region are indisputably horrific, and they are

⁹ For more on these volunteers, *Las Patronas*, see: Di Matteo, Angela. 2015. "Las Patronas: ángeles al borde del infierno. Una conversación con Norma Romero Vásquez.(10 de enero de 2015)." *Altre Modernità* (13):180-85.

especially disturbing when understood within the entire scope of migration and emotional, economic, and physical sacrifice that it takes for many migrants to arrive there at all, to take their chances and risk death.

Against the odds, Angie made it into the United States. Once across the border, she and her group still had a long way to go. They had a contact on the other side that they had arranged ahead of time. A van was waiting to take them to their next location, where they planned to get in touch with their contacts in the US. They packed in, one atop the other, so tightly that Angie said it was difficult to breathe. While riding in this van, the group was caught and detained in Corpus Cristi, Texas, but a few days later, Angie was released with a court date. Both she and Leonardo received legal protections granted to people entering the country who are considered vulnerable, which allowed them to go before a judge to determine if they would be granted asylum and permitted to stay in the US. In Leonardo's case, which was repeated by several other participants, this often came well after many attempts by immigration officials to coerce them to sign a deportation order. When they had the strength to resist the coercions, some were ultimately released with a court date. Today, the Trump Administration, referring to this practice pejoratively as "catch and release," has criticized this policy, contending that all immigrants coming into the country "illegally" are criminals, and has gone to great lengths to end the practice (The White House 2018a). Angie, who migrated in 2006, was released from detention and began her next journey.

"Another Long Trip": Migration Continues Beyond the Border

When migrants arrive in the United States, they often have a destination in mind where a family member or acquaintance resides. For many, this means being confronted with the vast

geography of the country and another set of obstacles to get where they are going. Traveling through the US is logistically and financially challenging and also frightening. Recently arrived migrants from Central America who entered the country through unauthorized means rarely speak English, presenting a different set of obstacles from traveling through Mexico (for those who speak Spanish). After long, clandestine journeys through Central America and Mexico, migrants can be conspicuous once in the US because of their clothing and hygiene. Angie made it into the US, out of detention, and was on her way to her new home, but now she had no guide and little sense of direction. She set off on another long migration after arriving in Corpus Cristi, boarding yet another bus, this time a Greyhound from Texas to Northern California:

Another long trip without telling one bus from the other, going from one bus to another, one bus to another, and another bus to another. That's how I came, without knowing, without speaking English, without even knowing how to buy something, I brought money because [my husband] sent me some money, but I did not know how will I buy something?

Angie described feeling disoriented on a journey that never seemed to end, worried about getting on the wrong bus, not sure who to turn to, who to trust, or how to do simple things like buy herself some food with the bit of money her husband sent her. She told me she eventually met a Mexican man on one of the busses who helped her buy a hamburger from McDonald's at one of the bus stops. He also helped her get a key to the bathroom, where she cleaned up. Like Leonardo, who traveled from Texas to California in the same musty clothes that had been sitting in a detention for nearly two months, Angie described feeling scrutinized; she stood out because of her hygiene. She had been traveling for a month without changing her clothes or having a proper bath.

I, as I said, my menstruation had come. I had stained my pants; by that time, they were hard. I had only had those for that month—one month, one pair of pants. My armpits, they wailed [laughs]. Just imagine... I went into the bathroom... I went in and saw that there was hand soap. I took that soap and cleaned my [points to groin]. It smelled very bad, a whole month without bathing.

In the McDonald's bathroom sink, Angie did the best she could to clean herself from the months-long journey. She explained that the migration had left her clothes and body in a state that she found uncomfortable and humiliating. According to the migrants I spoke to, when the migration moves from days of walking in the desert and crossing the Rio Grande into urbanized areas in the US, they become self-conscious and aware of their physical appearance. The stigma they carry from migration, the physical and material consequences of migration they embody, and the racialized stigma of being Central American are parts of the migrant condition that continue into their journey on the US side.

“It Was All for Nothing”: Reunification

Angie made it to Oakland, California, and, like nearly all participants I talked to, her “arrival” was nothing like what she expected. The reality that started to materialize around her was a far cry from the American Dream she had been sold on. She described her reunification with her husband as deeply disappointing, and she was confronted with the life he had made for himself. He migrated, she said, “for a better future for his son. But it was all for nothing because he only came to sell drugs. He came to sell drugs here.” Only when she arrived in the United

States and was reunited with her husband did Angie learn that he had been dealing drugs with a group of Hondurans he met in Oakland.

Even with accurate information from family members about the conditions in the United States, migrants are often surprised by the realities they encounter. For many, like Angie, who receive limited, fragmented, and sometimes inaccurate depictions of daily life, making it to the US can feel more like the beginning of another hurdle than arriving at a destination. Much-anticipated reunifications with loved ones can involve mixed feelings and can sometimes mean adjusting to a new relationship or family dynamic rather than returning to an old one or picking up where it left off. Such was the case for Angie, who was discouraged and scared, having left everything and everyone behind. After over a decade of being in the US, Angie was still working to send for her son back in Honduras. Nonetheless, she pushed on, continuing to search for *el Norte*.

GABRIEL, TIZOC, AND THE *CASA MIGRANTE*

I met Gabriel, a Honduran man making his way north, at the *casa migrante* in Central Mexico. He was at the shelter for about a month, and we spent a significant amount of time together. Gabriel was an educated man, and he was interested in my project, so he would sometimes direct me to put things he thought were important in my notebook. Over several weeks, while preparing and eating breakfast in the migrant shelter kitchen, Gabriel told me stories about his many migrations. He had crossed the Guatemala-Mexico border ten times and the Mexico-US border twice and had spent a good part of the last decade in transit. Sometimes his destination was the US; sometimes it was northern Mexico for jobs near the border. His destinations often seemed to change along the way.

Throughout my fieldwork in Mexico, I met migrants in various stages of their journeys. Some were going north for the first time; others had already done so a dozen times. Some seemed in a perpetual migration, going vaguely north and back, not returning home, not making it into the US, but always on the move. Being in Central Mexico meant we were in this strange middle point, where journeys seemed to have the potential to go in any direction. I heard several times about people arriving at the shelter who had passed through before. Some had chosen to return home; others had been deported and were trying to make it across the border again. Others, still, had returned after unsuccessful attempts to cross the border. In addition to being challenging, the migrations I observed were complex and nonlinear. For those in the middle of a migration, it was hard to make sense of the start and end points of their journeys. Though most were going north, the migrants I met were not all going in the same direction. A few were trying to get back home, like in the case of a Guatemalan man who had barely survived a kidnapping by criminal gangs near the Mexico-US border and decided the risks were not worth trying to get across. I met people who were unsure which way they were going, like two Hondurans migrating together, negotiating what to do next: one insisting they continue north, one saying he could not take it anymore and wanted to go back. The stories that the migrants I met at the shelter told me, and the decision making I observed, reflected the nonlinear qualities of their migrations and the significance of events that occurred away from the border(s).

Gabriel's many migrations were similar to and different from Leonardo's and Angie's migrations in several ways. Angie paid a guide who took her atop the trains, and I heard about others who did this as well. However, most of the immigrants I spoke to in the Bay Area who migrated with a coyote took vans and busses, much safer forms of transportation. Like Leonardo, Gabriel usually traversed Mexico without the help of a guide and only paid a smuggler to cross

him over the border once he was attempting to get into Mexico. Many of the migrants, like Gabriel, did not have the means (usually several thousands of dollars) to pay a coyote.

Gabriel and others I met in Central Mexico were experienced migrants who knew the terrain, how to navigate the trains, and how to get themselves north. I asked how they found out about the shelter and others along the way. Some heard through word of mouth, while others carried a map issued by the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Red Cross of America, Mexico, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Panama. On the front, it showed a map of Mexico marked with Red Cross locations and points of assistance, indicating what services each point provided (shelter, meals, free phone calls, medical assistance, etc.). The back included a list of tips and information to help along the journey (e.g., don't tie clothes around your waist while riding the train as they can get caught and cause an accident) and a list of migrant rights (e.g., if detained, migrant families have the right to stay together). Experienced migrants were savvy on the migrant trail, and objects like this map connected migrants to resources along the long journey between Mexico's southern and northern borders. However, such knowledge and tools were also signs of the extended and prolonged nature of migrations through Mexico.

Tizoc, a middle-aged Mexican man, ran the modest *casa migrante* (migrant shelter) where I did my fieldwork in the small city in Central Mexico. A migrant turned day laborer turned labor organizer in California, he had returned to Mexico to care for his mother when she became ill. After she passed away, he and two other return-migrants started the shelter. His own experiences and the people who helped him along the way had inspired his advocacy for migrants. He often told these stories to the other migrants, many of them younger than him, to provide them with some guidance.

Tizoc ran the small shelter alone, and it was common for migrants who stayed for extended periods of time to take on some duties to help keep the *casa* operating. Most migrants at the shelter stayed for a night or a few and then continued on their way. There, they could shower, get a change of clothes, sleep in a bed, and eat a hot breakfast. Occasionally, someone would stay longer, find work locally, and save up some money before continuing. Since Gabriel was there for nearly a month, he helped Tizoc with tasks at the shelter.

One morning, Tizoc had stepped out and was not around at the shelter when I arrived for the day. The front door was open, so I went in and upstairs to Tizoc's office. Gabriel was conducting an intake of another Honduran man who had arrived that morning, which involved writing his name, the date, place of origin, and destination on a spiral-bound notebook. Gabriel explained how things worked at the shelter to the new arrival, going over the schedule and house rules. "I know you're tired," Gabriel said, "but you aren't supposed to sleep in the beds during the day when Tizoc isn't here." Gabriel showed him where the bathrooms were and said he could have a shower and pick out a set of clothes from the donation pile, and the man nodded. In these moments, Gabriel's comfort with the routines of the shelter made it easy to forget he was a migrant preparing his next move. He had worked many different jobs, in Honduras, Mexico, and the United States, and took pride in being handy, resourceful, and adaptable, and he was clearly a big help to Tizoc. Once he started talking, and Gabriel often shared stories of his life, it was clear that being a *migrante* was an ongoing condition, a reality that shaped his life.

"There is a Lot to Survive": Memories of Violence

The ongoing impact of violence was one of the most salient ways that migration stayed with people as they continued to move from one place to another and even once they settled in

one place. All the migrants I spoke to in Mexico had witnessed extreme acts of violence during their migrant journeys. All of them seemed to carry the memories of violence with them and, being in the middle of the journey, were bracing themselves for more. Some, like Gabriel, talked at length about the violence. He and others told me they found talking about it cathartic, that they needed to release the pain and shame of what they had witnessed. Others preferred not to speak, opting to go outside for a cigarette when certain topics of conversation arose or busying themselves with tasks at the shelter. A few of them told me they got headaches when people started talking about the violence. Many had nightmares. Some were physically injured—they showed me their scars—and a few were disabled. Almost all were emotionally injured, though they expressed it in different ways.

Gabriel shared accounts about his run-ins with *mareros* (gang members) and *mafias*, as he called them. “There is a lot to survive,” Gabriel explained, “a lot migrants have to endure.” Gabriel told me that in the previous couple of years, the increased private train security had made riding atop the freight trains more challenging. As a result of the violence associated with migrants, companies like Ferromex, the private rail consortium that transports goods, have established security stops to scare or force people riding atop freight trains to get off. Gabriel attributed the security to the gangs associated with the trains that he said assaulted the migrants. I asked if the gang assaults were new; Gabriel said they were not, but that before, they would occur less frequently and in more remote places. Now, he told me, they happen near towns and weekly or even daily.

Gabriel’s claims about gangs along the train route were consistent with what I had been hearing from other migrants, advocates, and scholars: migrants attract criminal gangs because of the widespread commodification of migrants in Mexico. He lamented how migrants were

scapegoated for criminal activity, explaining that the train companies blame them for robberies and violence in the towns along the route, but he said that it is the criminal gangs who actually carry out these crimes. Gabriel had been forced off a train himself in Sonora, a state along the US border, and Michoacan, in Central Mexico. For Gabriel and others, the migrant condition was about more than simply being on the move—it involved all the ways migrants were constructed in the countries of transit, the ways they were perceived and scapegoated, and the violence they were subject to, not only because they were in violent places but for the very fact of being migrants.

Tizoc came into the kitchen as Gabriel and I talked and started chiming in about the trains as well. He agreed that the use of force by private train security, something mostly associated with the border regions where migrant policing was particularly brutal, also happened in the Central Mexican town we were in. Although they used rubber bullets, he explained, “the fear is the same,” a fear that encompassed migrations. According to Tizoc, security did not used to shoot migrants with these rubber bullets, but in the previous two years, the train companies began hiring ex-military members, initially in the south near the border with Guatemala, and subsequently they extended the security stops toward Central Mexico.

According to Gabriel and others at the *casa migrante*, gangs have their own check systems as well. The *polleros* (another word for coyotes) have to pay a fee to the *maras* (gangs) in southern Mexico and then are given a code word. Gabriel felt the southern border (with Guatemala) was more dangerous than the northern one (with the United States). Some migrants corroborated, and others contested this claim; the “worst” parts of migration were often debated at the shelter. In southern Mexico, Gabriel said, everything is about money. No one lets you use the bathroom for free or gives you a hand; everyone is trying to make money off you. This

sentiment, that every aspect of migration has a cost, was consistent across cases. It was reflected in my observations in small ways, like when migrants would ask how much it would cost them to take something from the pile of donated used clothes that were meant to be free to those staying at the shelter.

As he rode the trains, Gabriel saw the gangs conduct checks. If the guides had not paid for their codes, they could face serious injury or death, as could the people they were bringing with them. Once, in 2012, after one of the times Gabriel was deported from the US, he was making his way back north through the Mexican state of Veracruz, when the train he was riding atop came to a halt. The Zetas, a criminal gang, figured out how to stop the trains in motion, Gabriel told me, his voice getting low almost to a whisper whenever he mentioned gangs by name. Men climbed on the train, some from the back, others from the front, closing in on the migrants. Gabriel was huddled up with a small group of Hondurans he met on the journey. The Zetas, realizing they were Hondurans, said, “Our problem isn’t with you” and walked on. They made it to the Guatemalan *polleros*, who tried, unsuccessfully, to pass themselves off as regular migrants (rather than paid guides). Someone else nearby, under pressure, had already given them up. The Guatemalan *polleros* did not have the code word. Gabriel’s speech accelerated as he told me what he saw happen next. He made his hand into the shape of a gun and told me the Zetas shot the two Guatemalans and then took the women and children who were with them, dragged the women by the hair, and raped them. Some migrants jumped off the train and fled for the hills, but most stayed on the train. For what he estimated was two hours, he sat on the train in silence, watching everything. Then the train started moving, and the migrants continued their journey.

Gabriel frequently told me he felt the need to “release” these painful memories and had relayed several similar experiences of witnessing sexual assault during migration, as well as the

shame that stuck with him. “I’ve seen twenty to thirty men rape a woman while she screams for help,” he told me, “but you can’t do anything.” Gabriel had witnessed someone try to stand up to a man who was raping a woman, and he was shot and killed. I only met two women migrants at the shelter, but several men told me similar stories. They described being helpless and hopeless when they witnessed the abuse.

Migrants at the shelter expressed solidarity and support over their experiences of violence and trauma. Once, a group of migrants was standing around outside the shelter before an event that Tizoc had invited them to. The subject came up, and they each began sharing stories of the sexual assault they had witnessed. One told me about a group of seven men who raped a woman in front of him. “You are helpless in those moments,” he explained. “You want to intervene, but they are armed, and anything you do will only put you in danger... You just have to look out for your own life.” The rest nodded in agreement. When they spoke about it, there was palpable shame. They bowed their heads, and some looked away. A few told me how the pain stayed in their bodies and the memories were imprinted in their minds. Some expressed guilt and impotence. These conversations with one another, however, sometimes served as a reassurance. The migrants had a shared understanding that bystanders were often helpless to stop sexual assault and that, therefore, being a witness did not make one culpable, despite the ongoing shame. If ever they saw someone intervene, that person was likely to be killed, and the assault would continue. Some of them concluded that migrating meant survival, and survival required looking out only for oneself. I heard this repeated by many migrants in many situations, that they could only look out for themselves and they could not trust anyone else. Yet they shared these stories with one another and provided each other with reassurance and understanding, expressing compassion regarding the atrocities they had witnessed and been unable to prevent.

This was one of the many ways I observed migrants helping each other, emotionally and materially. They had a shared understanding that bonded them, even if that bond was brief, particularly around how, even when they were no longer moving from one place to another, their memories and resultant trauma would not end with the journey. Tizoc and Gabriel, Gabriel and Cristian, and other migrants at the shelter shared experiences with each other. Though Angie and Leonardo would never meet Gabriel (or likely one another), their stories also intersected, not only in their hardships but also in the support they received from others. Angie, for example, during her journey had passed through a nearby city in Central Mexico and stayed at a *casa migrante*, part of a network of shelters Tizoc belonged to. *Las Patronas*, the women volunteers who toss food onto the moving trains for migrants, visited Tizoc's *casa migrante*.

Gabriel's migrant condition was defined by his many migrations and a circuitous, ongoing, decade-long state of migration. For him and others at the shelter, migrations had various stages but did not necessarily follow a linear order; their migrations were multidirectional and unpredictable. Through these many migrations, the migrants had much to survive—discrimination, violence, and trauma—as they pushed themselves north.

CONCLUSION

The stories of Leonardo, Angie, and Gabriel highlight the temporal and spatial complexities of migration. In this chapter, I showed how migration trajectories are complex and extended. Leonardo, who set off toward an imagined “*Norte*,” found his North harsh and unforgiving. Angie's migration, extended, circuitous, and unpredictable, also continued into her life in the US. Gabriel embodied an ongoing state of migration. While border crossings were significant in all cases, so were the many points along the way that did not come near the border. Security stops, police checkpoints, gang checkpoints, migrant shelters, train routes, and bus

stations each provided threats and opportunities, as did the many actors along the way. Each reached a place far away from his or her country of origin, worked hard to recreate his or her life, build families, find work, establish routine, and move beyond migration. Nonetheless, they all remain unsettled, and their migration stories, in some ways, are still unfolding. They still have hurdles to overcome in their own “settlement,” are implicated in family migrations, and are connected to people back home and in transit. Each of them have memories of migration that would not leave them once they were geographically separated from the violence back home or the pain of migration. Yet each continued *Norte*, a direction pointing toward an idea as much as a place—the hope of a better life—and each of them succeeded in his or her own way.

By the time I met Leonardo, his life had changed significantly from the time he first arrived in the United States. He had a job and was living in a two-bedroom apartment in Oakland with his family, including his young child. Nonetheless, these experiences stayed with him, and the trauma of his migration extended his, and his family’s, migrant condition. He told me he struggled to control his temper and used to have explosive fights with his wife. When we spoke, he said they had worked through many of their challenges and learned to communicate more effectively with one another, but he struggled with the pain he carried. Once in the US, he was implicated in subsequent family migrations, like that of his brother, who migrated six months after Leonardo arrived in the US. He considered bringing other family members as well, though he worried about what he perceived as increased security at the border. His father, who had originally planned to migrate to the US, was sick and would likely pass away in the next year or so, and Leonardo was coping with the pain of not having a chance to say goodbye unless he returned and risked never seeing his wife and child again. Additionally, the racialized status he

had in Mexico continued up north, and he was hyper aware and hypervigilant about the possibility of deportation.

Angie, who made her migration choices under extremely constrained conditions, described these decisions with optimism and dignity. Angie had grown up in an extremely poor family, even relative to the other families in her rural community, and lived through life-threatening hardship. Yet she had seen people's lives transform. Her alcoholic and abusive father back home in Honduras turned to Alcoholics Anonymous and became, in her words, "a new man." She, too, was determined to become a new person. She left her husband, even though he was the one who had brought her to the US and, in many ways, was one of her strongest connections to home and even though she was financially intertwined with him in her first few years in the US. Many of her drug-dealing friends turned to the church and rebuilt their lives, and with their support, she did too. When we met, Angie was living with a new partner and working making clothes again—a job she enjoyed. However, she still has borders left to cross. She was undocumented for many years, having avoided her asylum hearing at the advice of her family, but eventually obtained a U visa. Her oldest child was still in Honduras, and she was trying to think creatively about how to bring him to the United States.

In Tizoc's *casa migrante*, most of the migrants eventually continue on their way north, but on rare occasions, someone decides to try to settle in town. When I left Mexico, Gabriel was still at the shelter but not sure where he was going next. He had been successfully picking up short-term jobs here and there, in construction, brickwork, and occasional domestic work. When I talked with Tizoc over WhatsApp messages about a month after I left, he told me Gabriel had decided to try his luck in town and that he had helped him find a small place to live with modest rent. Though Mexico is a country of reception as well as a transit for Central Americans,

particularly in this town, they were still labeled as migrants. Though I cannot say whether this is true for Gabriel, it can be difficult for Central Americans who settle in this city to fully become part of the host society.

As the country fixates on the border region, politicians, reporters, and the public ask if there is a “crisis” at the border, and if so, what is that crisis? Is it, as some would have it, an “invasion” of Central American nationals? Is it a human rights crisis suffered by the migrants who attempt to cross? There is a great deal of misunderstanding of migration underlying these questions and their representation in the general public. News reports often refer to migrants at the border as if they materialize there, discussing only in passing the long journeys they must endure to even make an initial attempt to cross over into the United States. Recently, Central American migrant caravans have begun to draw attention to the whole length of the migrant journey, but as the stories in this chapter highlight, Central American migration through Mexico to the US is not a new phenomenon, though they do face increasingly hostile conditions. Even in reference to the caravans, migrants are sometimes referred to as “undocumented” or “illegal,” predetermining their legal status before they enter the US and treating their legal status as inherent to, rather than constructed by, the US government, a status that is also a tool of control that prolongs their migrant condition.

As in the previous two chapters, the stories in this chapter reveal how the challenges of migration and immigration are not concentrated at the border alone. Central American immigrant families face new challenges in sanctuary cities, considered places of relative safety, as federal immigration politics become increasingly vitriolic and restrictive. Family separations, enacted by state agents at the border as families attempt to enter the country, are also occurring elsewhere in

the country and across many borders in slow, ongoing ways. In these ways, migration itself extends far and away from borders and the act of crossing.

Chapter 5: Conclusion: The Root of the Pain, The Spirit of Resistance

INTRODUCTION

The root of the pain

During an interview, the pastor of a Mam church — who asked that I refer to him simply as *el Pastor* — told me the guerillas arrived at his town in Guatemala when he was about 8 or 9 years old. According to him, the guerillas provided popular education to the indigenous people of his town. He relayed their education to me: the indigenous, now poor, used to hold all of Guatemala. When the Spanish came, they killed the natives. Anyone the Spanish could not kill was driven up the mountain, where the land was cold, and the colonizers kept the fertile land to themselves.

The guerillas, *el Pastor* said, came to tell the indigenous people it was their turn to reclaim the land that was rightfully theirs. The people of his town banded with the guerillas. This brought the military to their corner of the country; soldiers came, and the violence began: “the guerillas were organizing the people...the soldiers burned down homes.” According to *el Pastor*, after the change in government, the new leader wanted peace, so the soldiers left his town. At this point, the Civil Defense Patrols were formed to control the guerillas. The same guerillas began outing one another; they were torn apart. Now, he told me, in times of peace, “the root of that pain has remained.” That pain, he said, remains in Guatemala, but also in the people of Guatemala, even when they leave their countries:

What used to be there, before, that still affects the person. It is what I, as a pastor, understand. The situation that had affected many people before, and that pain, it has not ended, people still remember that past.

El Pastor, who turned to religious faith, service, and community as a source of healing, held deep insights into the role of past trauma in the lives of his congregants. He understood, and explained to me, that the challenges facing indigenous, mostly undocumented, Guatemalan immigrants were ever evolving, but not new.

In this dissertation, I have examined violence and trauma in the lives of Central American communities in Bay Area sanctuary cities from a sociological lens. The chapters build conceptually, though in a non-chronological fashion, with each offering a different dimension of how the past connects to the present. By analytically connecting different modes of violence to social systems and family histories to political histories, I am interested in expanding existing understandings of intergenerational and structural violence and trauma. Through my empirical examination, I hope to have captured this *root of the pain* and its impacts, something my participants understood so well and articulated so expertly and even poetically.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

In Chapter 2, I described how Central American immigrant families in Bay Area sanctuary cities were contending with a changing political climate around immigration. The Bay Area has a significant history of immigrant movements and immigrant rights advocacy, and it is considered a place of relative safety for immigrants when compared to conservative jurisdictions near the border. In the wake of the election of Donald Trump, however, federal policy and rhetoric featuring more restrictive approaches to immigration, and local practices and rhetoric defending sanctuary city status, have created an uncertain and contradictory landscape for immigrant families to navigate.

In light of these changes, I identified three key themes regarding how participants perceived and managed new and ongoing threats in day-to-day life. First, in this new climate,

participants described a great deal of uncertainty on the meaning of sanctuary. This uncertainty and growing distrust extended out from the protections of sanctuary to other legal and social protections. As participants saw certain statuses come under threat (e.g. DACA, TPS), they worried about what could be next. Participants were left to hope for the best but plan for the worst, resulting in a collective and pervasive sense of fear.

Second, participants' fears became routinized and embedded in daily practices. Chores were reorganized, family roles rearranged, and new routines were formed to reduce the possibility of exposure to immigration agents and face possible detention, deportation, and family separation. Meanwhile, local leaders—like the mayors of San Francisco and Oakland—were making strong declarations that they would protect the immigrant communities in their jurisdictions.

Finally, the memories that participants carried with them, from home countries and migration, shaped their perceptions of current events. Participants' fears of deportation in the United States were exacerbated by their previous traumatic experiences—in a trauma-induced expansion of fear—and the legal violence imposed on immigrant families exacerbated the pain of past trauma—in a fear-induced expansion of trauma—creating a feedback loop of trauma and fear. Analyzing their perceptions and responses in the broader context of their individual and family histories provided methodological insights into the study of trauma and re-trauma of immigration policy.

In Chapter 3, I describe the complex conditions of family separation among Central American immigrant and transnational families. There are often multiple family separations within a single generation and many across generations. Central American immigrant family separations are the result of multiple forms of structural violence that converge in synergistic

ways to inflict multiple layers of trauma and re-trauma. This structural violence, often produced by the state, instigated the flight in the first place, then reverberates as family separation inflicts collective trauma and intergenerational trauma. The trauma of separation is therefore not driven by a single, acute separation.

Detailed narrative of a family history of separations, primarily from the perspective of María, a Guatemalan asylum-seeker living in the Bay Area illustrated the chronicity and cyclical nature of family separation. Maria experienced early separations in her life, such as her migrant worker parents leaving her and her siblings behind when they went to Mexico, which shaped how María thought of the decisions she would later make as a parent. In her adult life, Maria experienced her next dose of serial separations and family disruption, including when her husband first migrated to the US, and then her constrained decision to flee violence at home and leave her daughter behind. Throughout these separations, María went to great lengths to ameliorate the negative impacts of separations she experienced as a child on her own daughter.

Next, I described María's efforts to bring her daughter to the US and reunite her family. Maria experienced the paradox of the asylum application process, which—in requiring María to relive painful experiences—was retraumatizing, yet it was also her greatest hope for reunification. Throughout this process and on a daily basis the ongoing fear of deportation produces an enduring threat of yet another separation for many Central American im/migrants., The challenges María and her family faced in the event of reunification and the simultaneous separation María's daughter may experience from the parental figures she had back home are yet another source of potential anxiety and trauma.

Through this case study, interspersed with other cases, I showed that family separation was a core, critical element of how experiences of trauma become intergenerational in the lives

of Central American families. Family separations are pervasive and cyclical, with dynamics that repeat across generations and whose destructive impacts are chronic. Analyzing María and others' experiences through the lens of structural violence implicated the state in ongoing family separations, not only in the forcible separations at the border but also the quiet, chronic, pervasive separations that are happening all the time.

In Chapter 4, I examined the continual and cyclical nature of the migrant condition. For many Central Americans in the United States and Mexico, the boundary between a *migrant* (a person on the move) and an *immigrant* (a person settled in a new country) is blurred. Participants left violent conditions, migrated through harsh terrain (politically, socially, interpersonally, and geographically), and settled in societies that were structurally and legally violent—constantly subjecting them to displacement. For many immigrants “settled” in the United States, migration is rarely “completed” or off the table.

Two sets of data—in conversation with one another—emphasize the continuities of migration: narratives of immigrants in the Bay Area, recounting migration experiences from years before, and narratives and observations of in-transit migrants in Central Mexico, from a mid-point on the journey. Each mirrors the other's pasts and potential futures. Three cases of migration—Leonardo and Angie, both living in the Bay Area, and Gabriel, on the move in Mexico—exemplify the realities of migrants' journeys while they were actively migrating in relation to the migrant condition in the broader context of participants' lives. Their migration trajectories were complex and extended, with many significant events during migration occurring away from the border. Each participant relied tremendously on guidance they had received before leaving from seasoned migrants, the support they found from strangers along the way, and their own persistence and grit. The pains participants experienced would not easily leave them

once they were in the United States—or Mexico, in Gabriel’s case. Memories of migration and the resulting trauma were some of the most salient factors that extended the migrant condition into the stage of “settling” in the country of reception.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOCIOLOGY

This dissertation builds from interdisciplinary understandings of violence and trauma, drawing upon sociological theory to explain the intergenerational transmission of trauma and its consequences, traditionally the purview of psychological analysis. This project sits at the nexus of three critical social phenomena: violence, trauma, and immigration. By bridging them, I bring new perspectives and understanding to the role of structure in the study of trauma. My primary intervention is bringing a sociological lens to the study of individual, collective, and intergenerational trauma and applying a sociological study of trauma to the sociology of violence and of immigration.

The majority of scholarship on trauma has focused on psychological or biological measures. This research is critical to understanding the lasting impacts of painful events on physical and emotional health. However, most of this scholarship has adopted an individuated approach to trauma—defined as an individual emotional or psychological response to a distressing event—and the way an initial injury creates lasting impacts on that person’s life. That work has been extended to include the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next. However, for many im/migrants I interviewed, traumatic experiences were not acute or experienced individually. There has not been a substantive body of work focused on the sociological study of intergenerational trauma transmission or the collective structured trauma of the im/migrant condition.

This dissertation contributes to the evolving literature on the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Intergenerational trauma refers to the process of transmitting trauma from a generation of trauma survivors to second and further generations. The study of trauma across generations has validated the historic nature of pain and the lasting harms of severe traumatic events. Yet the emphasis on psychological and biological measures of trauma, and the quantification of trauma on the individual, can miss the social and political dimensions of trauma over generations.

My research provides a structural analysis of intergenerational trauma transmission, treating trauma both as a pain that can be passed from person-to-person within a family and also as an ongoing form of structural violence. Further, my research highlights the intergenerational dynamics of trauma among Central American immigrant families, neglected in the literature on trauma across generations. Unlike the study of intergenerational trauma among descendants of Holocaust survivors, the trauma Central American families are subject to cannot be situated in the past. For many Central Americans, past traumas intersect with ongoing structural realities. A sociological structural study of intergenerational trauma adds new dimensions to the intersections of trauma and structural violence.

My dissertation also contributes to the study of violence impacting immigrant families. Although the violence research literature treats different types of violence (such as intimate partner violence, gang violence, etc.) as distinct problems and experiences affecting distinct populations (women, youth, etc.), my dissertation examines different forms of violence together with different levels of violence (interpersonal, community, political, legal/structural). The conditions Central American immigrants face place them in the nexus of multiple forms of violence. However, much of the general research on multiple forms of violence—their risks,

protective factors, and their consequences—does not consider the pre-immigration experiences of immigrant and transnational families. By asking participants to highlight significant moments in their personal and family histories, my dissertation examines violence beyond the physical encounter, traces its effects across generations, and contextualizes family experiences within a broader structural frame. These findings contribute to an innovative understanding of how different forms of violence intersect in Central American immigrants' lives.

Finally, in my work, I engage the question of violence as one that is closely intertwined with historical and continued forms of subjugation. By centering the immigrant family as a crucial site for examining experiences, ideas, and constructions of violence across place, space, and generations, this dissertation provides a uniquely sociological approach by connecting structural violence to trauma.

IMPLICATIONS

When I began this project, despite the long history of Central American migration to the United States, popular discourse largely conflated immigrants and Latinxs with Mexicans. Today, Central Americans are at the forefront of a national conversation on immigration. Academic work—particularly qualitative, community research based on relationships—takes time. But the world of politics moves fast, and we are in a new era of how people define human rights, like asylum, and who deserves a chance at a better life. Beyond sociology and academia, it is more imperative than ever to have empirically and theoretically grounded narratives of Central American immigration—which is why hearing and retelling detailed stories is fundamental to how I collect my data and relay it.

The families in this study experienced considerable difficulties in their day-to-day lives, difficulties that appear to be expanding in scope in the current political climate. This study helps

to elucidate some of the community- and family-level mental health impacts of immigration policies. Sanctuary jurisdictions remain critical, both practically and symbolically. Many immigrants receive the much-needed services and social acceptance that may be more difficult to access in conservative regions. The sanctuary discourse is a rallying call for people to support immigrant rights of safety and wellbeing. However, sanctuary cities have also become a battleground between liberal local governments and the anti-immigrant federal government (along with its supporters). As outlined in Chapter 2, this discord creates a great deal of uncertainty and precarity for the immigrant families who bear the burden of this proxy war. As local leaders and advocates continue to advocate for sanctuary (I believe they should), they must also consider how the lives of immigrant families are complicated by these confrontations.

Furthermore, this study provides a picture of the multiple ways that trauma, fear, and anxiety structure and are structured into Central American immigrants' lives. Although this dissertation is a snapshot into the lives of a few dozen families in the Bay Area, it raises questions that have implications for community institutions working with immigrant families—such as social services, legal services, and advocacy organizations, health care providers, and school districts. Researchers and people working within these institutions alike are increasingly attentive to how immigrant communities are internalizing messages about the precarity of their statuses, both legal and social. Immigrants contend with both a realistic fear of deportation and the trauma-induced expansion of that fear because of their experiences with authorities historically. This work also emphasizes the importance of considering the impact of the current political and discursive conditions on the emotional wellbeing of immigrant families in light of pre-immigration experiences. The emotional and psychological impact of the trauma, precarity,

and danger that families have had to negotiate for decades both in and out of the United States is relevant to the way they manage daily life under the new political realities today.

Several emerging approaches to health care, education, and service provision consider how trauma shapes various areas of people's lives. The findings in this study add to the body of literature in support of these efforts, including trauma-informed care (Bath 2008), trauma-informed systems (Ko et al. 2008), and structural competency (Metzl and Hansen 2014).

However, there is no trauma-informed care if there is no care. People who are too scared to leave their homes or answer their doors do not access care. People being held in detention at the border do not receive care. Therefore, ambitious structural demands must accompany these approaches: safe options for entering the country that keep families together, trauma-informed legal avenues to asylum, and a real path to full social and political citizenship.

LIMITATIONS

Like all qualitative project with small, targeted samples, the generalizability of these findings is limited. Additional empirical gaps to the data should be noted. First, nearly two-thirds of the interview participants were women (17). This result is partly because participants were initially recruited through a family program primarily attended by mothers. The author (the only interviewer) being a woman may also have been a barrier to engaging some Central American men, though 10 did agree to participate.

Second, all interviews were conducted in Spanish, excluding some Central Americans who did not speak fluent Spanish. Some interviews were conducted with indigenous Mayan Guatemalans who spoke Spanish as a second language, but only in instances when their language fluency level was great enough for participants to comfortably discuss complex emotional subjects. Central American immigrants who do not speak Spanish may experience additional

barriers to accessing resources (such as legal and mental health services), accurate and up-to-date information about immigration policies, and social support. Therefore, it is possible that the negative impact of the new political conditions on local immigrant communities may be underestimated. Studies conducted with interviewers who speak the indigenous languages of the Central American communities in the San Francisco Bay Area could investigate this question further.

This project was designed before Trump took office, and data collection began post-Trump. This timing created significant new avenues and expanded possibilities for the project, but it also produced some limitations. The analysis in this dissertation (particularly in Chapter 2) makes claims regarding changes to immigration politics post-Trump. These claims are firmly grounded in participants' perceptions of changes, but less so on the author's first hand observation of these changes. Comparative pre-Trump data would allow for an analysis that goes beyond documenting what participants say about how conditions have changed by comparing how participants navigated various realities (e.g. fear of deportation) differently or similarly in the pre- and post-Trump era. I plan to seek out future collaborations with researchers who may have such data.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

When I initially envisioned conducting a qualitative research project on intergenerational trauma, I imagined a study in which I would interview and observe several members within a family, representing multiple generations, both in one on one interviews and together. As I mentioned previously (in Chapter 3), the transnational dimensions of immigrant families created logistical and geographical barriers for doing so. Additionally, although I interviewed a few couples individually and observed many families together, there were several instances in which

the family members of an interviewee did not want to speak with me. I made myself available, but given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed and that my goal was to gain trust and ensure the comfort of all participants, I was careful to respect boundaries and took “no” for an answer. I believe that in some cases, building the necessary foundation of trust may take years, beyond the time spent on this dissertation.

Ideally, a study could be designed that would follow fewer families more closely and over a longer period of time. I would be fascinated and honored to attempt to accompany families through the trajectories of significant family events and, ideally, to extend the work geographically to where various family members live. When I had the opportunity in this study to ask participants to reflect on encounters after I observed them, rather than recalling past memories alone, I gained a richer understanding of what was occurring and how they experienced it. The primary data source I used for my analysis was in-depth interviews of life histories; in the next stage of this project, I hope to build on the more iterative interview-observational approach.

Another research direction I am interested in includes in-transit migration. I initially went to Mexico for a summer to gain a background understanding for my work in California. The Bay Area participants’ migrations were significant to their life stories, and I wanted to study the political and legal conditions Central Americans were subject to in Mexico. My ethnographic fieldwork at the migrant shelter produced additional questions I hope to return to. I was constantly surprised at what I found there: the migrants who seemed in a perpetual state of migration; the temporary, yet deeply intimate relationships that formed along the way; and the chasm I observed between the residents in town (“there are no migrants here,” “you came to the wrong place,” and “you should go to Chiapas”) and the many migrants I met, passing through by

bus, train, and foot. My preliminary fieldwork there and the relationships I built with local leaders and scholars will hopefully serve as a launching point for further research in the future.

With in-depth interviews of nearly 30 participants and a year of fieldnotes, I was not able to include all the data analysis within this dissertation. I have several ideas for additional manuscripts using the existing data from this project. Some of the major themes that remained unexplored or underexplored include the following: the role of faith and religion in managing fear and healing from trauma; the role of communication technologies among transnational families; family reunification; gendered dynamics of violence and abuse; and indigeneity and service provision and advocacy to Latin American immigrant communities. Additionally, as I described in my introduction, I plan to write a methods article about the challenges and consequences of conducting immigration research in the current political climate, in collaboration with my colleague who has collected data on immigrant health across two clinics in a conservative and liberal jurisdiction, respectively, pre- and post-Trump.

Finally, in the classic sociological “structure vs. agency” debate, I have inadvertently landed on the side of structure (structural violence, structural oppression, and structural trauma) in this dissertation. However, many examples of resistance and personal transformation permeate my fieldnotes and transcripts. It is my sincere desire to illustrate a complete image of these participants in all their strength and complexity. Their resistance and resilience are one of the next major analytical areas I plan to explore.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: RESISTANCE

In this dissertation I ask the following: What does a family’s pain look like? What does a community’s pain look like? I have documented the ways that collective pain can be leveraged

and the result of social control. I have also observed the way collective pain can be a source of solidarity, collective healing, and resistance.

In the spirit of that resistance, I end with the story of Lilian, a 40-year-old Salvadoran TPS holder, who was deeply proud of her daughter in *la lucha* (the struggle for justice). Her girl, Sol—about 13-years-old—was a US-born, native English-speaking, charismatic middle-schooler. “Before, she didn’t really like Spanish, but with everything that is happening now, with her [American] father she only speaks English, but at home it’s only Spanish.” Sol, outraged by Trump’s policies and rhetoric, has reconnected with her Salvadoran roots. She recommitted to speaking Spanish and asked her mother about their family history. Sol questioned everything, and organized students around injustices she saw in her life:

She always says, ‘I hate Donald Trump’ [laughs], all the time...She fights for the rights of all the kids at her school. If someone tells her ‘no’, she finds a ‘yes’ for everything.

She’s a fighter. I tell her, ‘*Hija*, you got some of that Salvadoran *guerrillero* in you,’ I tell her and she asks, ‘Why *guerrillero*, mami?’

‘Because they always fought for the good of the people’...

‘Like my *papi abuelo* [grandfather]?’ I tell her, ‘Like your *nani* [grandmother]’

Families and communities do not only inherit historic and generational trauma. Many, like Sol, also inherit a fighting spirit of resistance. The rise of anti-immigrant sentiment—constraining as it is—is also met with a countering force, a new generation of defiance. After Trump announced he would eliminate TPS for Salvadorans, Sol organized a walkout at her school and was joined by 30 of her peers, mostly other Latinx students who said they were protesting on behalf of their parents. Lilian initially worried about her daughter skipping school and the attention she was drawing to herself around these issues, but when Sol said “I’m doing this for you, I want you to

know you are not alone,” Lilian’s feelings turned to pride. Lilian and Sol both have grand plans for Sol’s future: “I can tell she’s going to be a great lawyer. She says she wants to be a medical examiner, or an immigration lawyer to help all Latino people.” I hope she will.

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