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Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders by Leisy Abrego

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Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders by Leisy J. Abrego. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. 223 pp. ISBN978-0-8047-9051-2.

Family reunification has become a central focus of the current immigration debate in the United States. In the summer of 2014, this debate became more polarizing as Americans witnessed a massive wave of Central American children being detained by Border Patrol agents. Horrifying images of unaccompanied toddlers crying inside overcrowded detention centers circulated on major US news outlets. Leisy Abrego's book, *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders* was published in the midst of this humanitarian crisis. However, Abrego's research suggests that child migration is not a new phenomenon but rather the response of a broken immigration system. Abrego traveled extensively across multiple national borders to collect the agonizing narratives of Salvadorian family members who have been separated by unfair immigration policies. She draws from the lived experiences of Salvadorian parents residing in the US and of their children who remain back home. Abrego eloquently weaves these narratives together while connecting them to the broader political and social context that continues to shape immigration policies. Instead of reinforcing discourses regarding Central American immigrants, Abrego urges us to pay attention to the intersectionalities of immigration policies and gender norms and how these interplay to allow only a small group of migrants to improve their financial well-being.

Abrego begins by contextualizing the political processes that have made El Salvador an immigrant sending country. Historically, El Salvador had been ruled by an oligarchy that only protected the interest of foreign investors while relying on state violence to maintain absolute power. In 1979, a Civil War broke out as the situation became unbearable for the vast majority of Salvadorians. Several of the fathers that Abrego interviews, recount their horrifying stories as to how they escaped the death squads who were massacring their very own citizens. Since the U.S. was providing military aid to the Salvadorian government, the war was prolonged until peace accords were finally signed in 1992. By the time that the war ended, thousands of Salvadorian refugees had already fled the country.

Unlike other immigrant groups who have been granted refugee status such as the Cubans, Salvadorian emigrants have faced a long and complicated immigration process in the U.S. For example, many of those who were trying to escape the violence caused by the Civil War applied for political asylum once they arrived to the US. But, as Abrego points out, less than 3% of these cases were actually approved (p. 15). Unfortunately, it was not until 1990 that faith-based organizations were able to "successfully lobby on behalf [of the refugees], convincing Congress to grant Salvadorians Temporary Protected Status (TPS)..." (p. 15). Two years after the program was launched it was abruptly terminated, leaving Salvadorian migrants in limbo. Finally, in 2001, TPS was finally re-launched as a response to a series of earthquakes that devastated El Salvador. Instead of viewing TPS as a legal victory for the Salvadorian community, Abrego highlights that it does not provide a path to citizenship. Most importantly, Abrego argues that TPS places its beneficiaries in a space of "liminal legality" by making them eligible for benefits such as work permits and identification cards; yet, the beneficiaries are still ineligible for benefits such as voting and being able to travel internationally, which are benefits that are still exclusive to legal residents and US citizens (p. 91). Because Abrego also understands the importance of not homogenizing the lived experiences of migrants across the spectrum, she also draws from the experiences of those who entered the country with a tourist visa.

Unfortunately for immigrants, tourist visas are only granted to those who can prove that they have sufficient financial resources that will deter them from overstaying their permits. Clearly the financial capital that is necessary to obtain a visa in El Salvador is out of the reach of a vast majority of the population, who live in severe poverty. As a result, it is not surprising that only three out of the 43 parents interviewed for the study, had been granted visas before coming to the U.S. Abrego points out that the legal status of visa holders dramatically changes as they overstay their permits. For example, Amanda, a 47-year-old mother of two children, had originally entered the country with a visa and had secured a stable income as a domestic nanny immediately after her arrival. But when Amanda's visa expired, she became an unauthorized immigrant. Immediately after, Amanda no longer felt safe to travel within the U.S. because she became fearful of being deported back to El Salvador. Amanda lost her job and became more susceptible to fall into the hands of unscrupulous employees who would constantly threaten to fire her because they knew that she could not obtain another job legally (p. 68). Abrego concludes that under these circumstances, unauthorized immigrants have less financial resources in order to provide for their family members back home.

Prior to Abrego's research, the discourse surrounding transnational migrant families was greatly influenced by the stories of few families who had been able to achieve financial prosperity as a result of their migration. However, Abrego's findings suggest otherwise, specifically suggesting that legal status predetermines the likelihood that families will reach any form of financial stability for themselves and for their families back home. An overwhelming majority of the children interviewed expressed that they do not even have the necessary financial resources to consume three meals a day and to be able to attend school regularly. For instance, Ana, a 24-year-old high school student, also suffered from malnourishment given her limited financial resources. Although Ana's father had migrated to the U.S. in search of a better life for himself and his children, he was having financial difficulties of his own because of his limited employment opportunities given his unauthorized legal status (p. 136). Abrego's research also addresses families who have been able to achieve economic stability but for a very specific purpose- to highlight that it is these experiences that contribute to the misconceptions that all transnational families achieve economic stability. For example, María Elena, a confident 24-year-old, was excelling at a private college as a computer science major, and she recognized that her academic success had been made possible by the monthly remittances that her father sent her. Abrego highlights that María Elena's father was a TPS beneficiary who had a stable income that allowed him to send considerable sums of money back home (p. 145). Abrego concludes that while the children of TPS are more likely to receive remittances, "children of undocumented migrants were much more likely to be distraught about their living conditions and the family separation" (p. 83). Although Abrego argues that the varied legal statuses influence the overall economic well-being of the family members, she also urges us to pay attention as to the ways in which gender influences the ties that parents developed with their children despite the physical borders that separated them.

Abrego examines the relationship between gender expectations and familial ties by analyzing how motherhood and fatherhood have been socially constructed in Salvadoran society. While motherhood has a rigid set of gender expectations, fatherhood is seen as one of the multiple "acceptable forms of masculinity" for men (p. 10). Mothers are expected to be the ones responsible for child-rearing, providing the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development of their children, whereas fathers are not. This is why single mothers often find themselves in a bind as they are forced to negotiate between gender expectations, motherhood, and lack of financial resources. Even though mothers are forced to leave their children behind out of financial necessity,

Abrego points out that “migrant women [still] face greater stigma and more meaningful punishment [unlike] men for transgressing parental gender boundaries” (p. 11). Abrego highlights the fact that mothers view economic remittances as a way to reiterate and justify their departure. During the interviews, an overwhelming majority of the mothers expressed their need to constantly proving that they are “worthy mothers” (p. 112). For instance, Esperanza and Cristina both expressed how they provide themselves only with the “bare necessities” (p. 113) so that they can send the rest of their checks back home. While mothers recount the stories of how they would sacrifice their own livelihoods, an overwhelming majority of the fathers made it clear that sending remittances back home was not their priority. Generally speaking, fathers in the study were more relaxed about their remittances and some even “cited their wives improper behavior (or in some cases, the potential for improper behavior) to justify either a decision to stop remitting or a decision to move the children to the paternal grandparents’ home to avoid the possibility of supporting their ex-wife’s new partner” (p. 123). For instance, Edgar, a father of seven children, stopped sending remittances back home after moving in with a new partner in the U.S. Although Edgar was the one who first moved in with a new partner, he eventually used his wife’s new relationship as the excuse as to why he stop sending remittance to his children in El Salvador (123). Meanwhile, mothers went on to mention that they were even willing to stay in abusive relationships because their partners’ income allowed them to send more money back home (p. 117). Abrego concludes that the level of parental involvement amongst Salvadorian migrants is inevitably influence by societal expectations of motherhood and gender norms.

Abrego herself recognizes that one of the major shortcomings of her study is that she only focused on the experiences of heteronormative transnational families, thus completely excluded queer families. Her research disregards the additional social stigmatization and sexual harassment that this group faces as a result of their sexual orientation and/or gender identities. Because Abrego did not ask any questions regarding sexual orientation and gender identity of any of her participants, even if some of the parents were from the LGBT community, their unique struggles did not surface during the interviews. However, this research does challenge the discourses and criminalization that Central American immigrants face by contextualizing the multiple socio-economic processes that force people to flee El Salvador. Unlike other scholars who only focus on the financial factors that force migrants to their country, Abrego urges us to pay attention to the nuances and intersectionalities that allow only a small group of families to achieve financial stability. *Sacrificing Families* comes out in a time of uncertainty for the undocumented community due to the recent approval of both state and federal immigration policies. For example, President Obama recently used his executive power to approve the Deferred Action for Parental Accountability program, a program that will protect parents of U.S. citizens from deportation and allow them to obtain a temporary social security. But, as Abrego’s research suggests, until a comprehensive reform is approved, families will continue to be torn apart and comprehensive reform is approved, families will continue to be torn apart. Meanwhile, mothers will continue to have to negotiate between their economic necessities and their desire to be close to their children. This is why it is imperative that scholars continue to critically examine the impact that these temporary policies have on transnational families. Regardless of what side of the immigration debate readers are on, this book is a must-read for anyone seeking to better understand how the current immigration debate stems from the failures of the current immigration system.

References

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Reviewer

Martha Ortega is an undergraduate student at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She will obtain her B.A. in Latin American & Latino Studies with an Education Minor in Spring 2015. Her research interests are in the areas of migration, youth social movements, educational equity, and Mexican studies. Martha aspires to become a professor in Mexican politics in order to share her passion for Latin America. She hopes to one day return to her native Jalisco in order to see her grandparents, who she has not seen since she left Mexico as a child.