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Book Reviews

Ester E. Hernández
California State University-Los Angeles

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Salvadoran Imaginaries: Mediated Identities and Cultures of Consumption

BY CECILIA RIVAS. NEW BRUNSWICK: RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2014. 216 PP. ISBN 978-0813564616

Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders

BY LEISY ABREGO. STANFORD, CA: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2014. 272 PP. ISBN 978-0804790512

The crisis of Central-American unaccompanied minors crossing the U.S.-Mexico border has dominated recent discussions of migration and refugee flows in the hemisphere. Two recent groundbreaking studies on the impact of migration on Salvadoran identities and familial structures offer critical background on the roots of the problem. The authors were both born in El Salvador and this connection informs their deep, highly intuitive observations and analyses of text, narratives, and institutions from their respective disciplines of communications and sociology.

Cecilia Rivas conducted ethnographic fieldwork during the period of 2005-2006, anchoring her focus and perspective from within El Salvador. Through archival and ethnographic methods, *Salvadoran Imaginaries: Mediated Identities and Cultures of Consumption* traces an outward journey through Mexico, taking us to complex and original sites of analysis such as Salvadoran malls, news media, and call centers serving U.S. companies in the capital, San Salvador. She argues that media coverage of migrant aspirations, consumption in shopping malls, and training in call centers highlight cultures of increasing consumerism, emigration, and dependence on remittances. For Rivas, these are the spaces where people learn to self-regulate and become subjects of a “Salvadoran imaginary” (5). She charts changes in Salvadoran quotidian practices and boundaries between Salvadorans at home and abroad.

In the first chapter, she examines how newspapers such as *La Prensa Gráfica* construct a transnational community through their stories in the supplement and digital section, *Departamento 15*, an imagined 15th department (the national territory is comprised of 14 *departamentos*). The section highlights emigrants’ encounters with tragedy in the form of assault, death, mutilation, and rape aboard the freight train or “la bestia” as they cross through Mexico to the United States. Later, she inter-

rogates the success/failure narratives in *Departamento 15* against the acute aversion of all things Salvadoran in the novel *El asco: Thomas Bernhard en San Salvador*. Written by exile Horacio Castellanos-Moya, this novel caustically interrogates what it means to be Salvadoran. Whereas the supplement strikes an affinity for Salvadoran products/food and longing to return “home,” Vega, the protagonist, mocks all things Salvadoran. Exalting the intellectualism of the outside (i.e. Canada, where he resides), his observations of “Salvadorans” are emetic; from within a dive bar he expresses disdain/distaste for the country and its people. In other words, the scathing critique of identity/kinship in the novel throws the 15th department into question.

Through observations at the mall and interviews with call center workers and Salvadoran journalists, Rivas examines what it means for individuals to be comfortable or socially versed with the crossings of a “global” economy. From the position of people living in El Salvador, Rivas points to the constructed nature of identities, particularly when call center workers deploy English language proficiency to connect themselves to a global terrain that makes them rethink their affiliations and social positions. Highly educated call center workers share space with deportees, and the government designs a sort of a study abroad program or paid internship experience at these centers (113-114) for children of emigrants. Rivas carefully argues that it is through these sites/places where interactions reframe narratives of connection and distance—sometimes inverting the relationship of interior/exterior in unexpected and productive ways.

How do the poor figure in or engage into spaces such as the mall? Rivas alludes to their exclusion, briefly focusing on market vendors without permits who carve out an uneasy permanence/presence in San Salvador’s streets. It would have been important to include some of their views on the malls, the informal economy in the streets,

and their discussions of newspaper stories. Do ordinary Salvadorans relate to discourses of borderlessness? Will these sites engage more than the emigrant/consumer?

Dealing with the economic fissures that lead to emigration and sustain it, Leisy Abrego's *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders* delivers a sobering analysis of migration as survival and mobility strategy in a bordered world. Abrego meticulously dissects how emigration forms transnational families where mothers and fathers migrate separately from their children resulting in economic, social, and emotional consequences for the children. Transnational families endure tremendous sacrifices that position the children in vulnerable situations depending on the legal status of the emigrant and whether it is the mother or father who is away. Through interviews conducted between 2004 and 2006 with 83 relatives of migrants in El Salvador, and 47 mothers and fathers in the United States, Abrego explores the emotional toll that the absence of the mother has on the children and how that absence is mitigated by the mother's ability to support and to improve children's lives. Abrego finds that many of the children evaluate separation from the parent (9.4 years average in her sample, 21) in a favorable light if their material situation (access to food, health, and education) has improved as a result of migration.

Highlighting the gendered aspects of interviewees' experience, Abrego found that although Salvadoran women in the U.S. earned very little, they consistently remitted money to their children, whereas some of the men in her sample could not recall the last time they had sent money for their children. In Chapter 5, she analyzes how despite having cumulative disadvantages in the labor markets, remitting behavior is driven by gendered expectations that fall unevenly on mothers. Among her interview sample, only a handful of people, often documented, had the ability to realize mobility in their areas of employment and thus had the full potential to be seen as "successful" parents to their children if they remitted money to them.

Her analysis of the different familial situations makes clear that family separation is multifaceted. Children reported more emotional suffering when their mothers were absent. She attributes this to familial expectations of motherhood, again emphasizing the role of gender in experiences. Children in very poor families confront more challenges. For example, she interviews a young man who can barely afford to eat, is working to help

support the family, and wonders what is the point of his father's absence if things are not better and in fact are worse because of his absence? Many children experienced resentment at the inability to connect with each other as family (153). Families struggling to make it, what she calls "barely subsisting" with limited food, schooling, and health resources contradict migration as a strategy for survival and mobility. Their stories of hardship in El Salvador and in the U.S. will hopefully enter policy discussions and development agendas.

These books shed light on the deep inequalities, contradictions, and aspirations of transnational families at both severance points. Transnational families are deeply rooted in an economic order that funnels bodies, and strips them bare for display atop bestial machines such as the freight trains carrying so called "unaccompanied minors." These are not people on a journey but running away from the worst of times. They embody institutional policies and choices within a neoliberal model of immigration enforcement, previous campaigns of militarization in the region, and current security initiatives. Both books are excellent as main texts on (im)migration, families, and transnational identities, and for topics on Latin America and borderlands. Readers can appraise a neoliberal order that encourages us to see the world and migration through arcades and consequently away from social justice. Alternatively, as Abrego argues, poverty is a low-intensity form of violence afflicting transnational families.

Ester E. Hernández

California State University-Los Angeles