Open to Disruption

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The city looks different. I cannot tell how much my own perspective has changed and how much the city itself has. I am particularly conscious of my own movement; when I first made the trek across Route 80, to a new home in northeast Ohio in 2007, seeing so many blond-haired children in my son Temo’s kindergarten class surprised me. The return trips to New Jersey, starting just a few months later and continuing over the next three years, shook me just as much. As we drove by so many people walking on the sidewalks—an uncommon sight where we lived in Ohio—Temo asked from the back of the car, “Mom, why are there so many brown people here?”

We have come a long way since. After living in Ohio for three and a half years (2007–2010), we moved back to New Jersey for six months (January to July 2011) before relocating up Route 87 to Albany, New York, in the summer of 2011. Now when we visit, it is my younger son, Dylan, who asks about the “brown people.” Temo, at age ten, is a bit more sophisticated. As we cross the city to our friend’s house, we pass the hub of Latino businesses: all the signs are in Spanish, and ranchera music sounds from the store with an iconic towel of the Virgen de Guadalupe displayed on the open glass door. Temo breathes in deeply and says, “I love the smell of it here.” I smile. I smell a mixture of corn oil and purple Fabuloso floor cleaner. A few minutes later, Temo asks a bit more seriously, “Why have so many Mexicans come to live in this place?”

I should have a ready-made answer. I teach about immigration. I have interviewed hundreds of members of Mexican families in this particular

Every return to this place is a self-reflective exercise—in contemplating how I have changed as a mother and a woman, how my relationships have changed, and how my children have grown across these movements through time and place. Returns are highly personal. They involve influential characters in my formative years; the memories tug at my insides for reasons I cannot explain. They are difficult to write. So I’ve put this off, waiting for just the right moment to make the intellectual return and to explain how profoundly returns have shaped my perspective as a scholar seeking to understand how migration alters family relationships, especially in the experiences of women and children—women and children like myself and my boys, who have also moved around, but under entirely different circumstances.

To write on these scholarly returns is to focus on one particular period: the first six months of 2011, when I moved back to New Jersey for fieldwork and interviews in the Mexican community. Temo was a third grader, and Dylan, at four, attended preschool. Not teaching that semester, I set myself a difficult task: to interview the children and parents in forty families, and to do school observations and home visits with six children. (I had completed the same amount of fieldwork in Ohio over a span of two years.) I did the logical thing and reconnected with as many people as I could. I met new families—recommendations from friends or friends of friends. I interviewed a few of those closest to me—people whose houses I had stayed at and who had visited me during my tenure in Ohio—who agreed to help. I took such care not to step on toes or ask too much that my discomfort shrouded these interviews. And, I reconnected with those I knew more marginally from times past, including a family I had interviewed in my first study, a friend from back when I was married whose baby shower I had attended, a woman whose husband I had visited when he was in jail, and a former ESL student whose son had gone to preschool with Temo.

The six months in New Jersey, although hard for me emotionally, imparted methodological, theoretical, and empirical insights. They allowed me to compare my work in this familiar (or not so familiar) site in central
New Jersey to another time (when I lived there from 1999 to 2007) and to another place (my time in Ohio from 2007 to 2010). I learned that perhaps the best role in terms of access is that of the reconnected family friend, like the people from the past whom you find on Facebook. I confirmed some of my prior findings on the consequences of family separation for children, and achieved greater insight into how separation affects relationships over time. And, I learned that illegality, once a terrible inconvenience, had become a more divisive issue now threatening to fracture families and communities—the elephant in the room that can no longer be ignored.

**On Access: The Reconnected Family Friend**

Andrea squints. She appears to be holding in tears. I had just asked the ten-year-old if she knows what an immigrant is. “Yeah, it is when someone is illegal in this country and police-ICE comes to look for them to send them back to their country.” She then tells me her parents are immigrants, which seems to have provoked the emotion. I try for a positive spin, asking if she isn’t proud that her parents are immigrants. She says no. “Do you ever feel scared that they are immigrants?” I continue. “Yeah,” she says, chin quivering. “What scares you?” I ask. “When the police-ICE comes, they will take them.”

Andrea is exceptionally shy, her mother, Leticia, tells me. I had noticed this myself when I attended a *quinceñera* party Andrea was at with her cousins, whom I also knew and interviewed. Andrea smiled sweetly, and often, but only spoke when whispering into her cousin’s ear with a hand over her mouth. Leticia tells me Andrea hates to go to dances because she worries that gang members may be present: “Es muy miedosa” (She is very fearful). She is the type of child whom I would expect to be difficult to interview—the type I have interviewed before without any sort of emotional confessions. Why did Andrea talk so candidly to me?

When I present my work on interviews with children—which I have done in Mexico, Ohio, and New Jersey—to professional colleagues, I am often asked, “How do you get children to talk to you?” Two things are essential, I think. First, when I feel comfortable talking to children, they seem fairly comfortable talking to me. This means formulating questions that are easy to ask and to answer, which is not so intuitive for adults and worse for those of us accustomed to academic-speak. I also jump from topic to topic so that interviews don’t build into too serious a direction; I want the stakes
to remain low and for children not to feel any pressure. So a child and I may end up talking about his favorite video games or TV shows, and I’ll get play-by-plays that I can barely follow—“I hit the last goomba with a koopa shell and then Bowser comes out of nowhere! He throws a fiery breath at me, but I jump out of the way.” Then I’ll ask something a bit more serious, like how often he talks to his father on the phone—that is, the father he doesn’t live with: the one who was deported to Mexico.

Second, children seem to talk to me more easily when they know that I know their parents, and that I am a part of their parents’ world. I typically interview the parents first, so that the children see me at their house before I ever try to sit down and talk to them. This is because university human subjects review boards require researchers to gain the parents’ formal consent to interview children, in addition to minor children’s assent. In my experience, young children have no interest in and little understanding of this paperwork or the formal procedures. What they want to know, and quite crucially see, is that their parent or guardian sanctions my presence and likes and trusts me. The more they see me around, the better. Then, they talk.

My returns to New Jersey proved that a third strategy may be the best of all: children seemed to like talking to me when they view me as family friend who has been away and is reconnecting. Andrea does not remember me; she tells me as much when I meet her at the door to the second-floor, three-room apartment where she waits for me. As I walk up the icy sidewalks to the house, I immediately recognize her—a grown-up version of the four-year-old I last remembered seeing. I greet Andrea warmly, and she smiles shyly. As she leads me up the stairs to the overheated, sparsely furnished apartment to her mother, Leticia, she says that she doesn’t know me but that her mom told her about me. In fact, I had been at the baby shower for Andrea—or rather, for Leticia—and still have the photograph of me measuring Leticia’s round belly with sheets of toilet paper. Leticia and I spent a lot of time together back when I was married and Leticia was still with Andrea’s father, when we were both young mothers. After the year I spent in Mexico, I became absorbed with dissertation writing; although we were still friendly, we stopped seeking each other out. Then I moved to Ohio, and completely lost touch.

I spend the next hour catching up with and interviewing Leticia. Andrea sits in, listening, perched on the edge of a twin bed covered by a matted, once fuzzy black blanket etched with a bright green lion face, while I sit on the other full-sized bed in the room. Leticia holds her newborn son, feeding
him and rocking him in a chair. I ask if Andrea ever speaks to her biological father, whom I knew before he and Leticia split up and he went back to Mexico. Leticia directs the question to Andrea: “When did your dad last talk to you? When did your aunt call him?” Andrea doesn’t answer, so Leticia directs her comments back to me: “Her aunt calls him. But he hardly calls. Very little.” And then back to Andrea: “Joanna knows your grandmother.”

Andrea smiles. “Yes, I met your grandmother,” I add. “My mother and my grandmother,” says Leticia. We go on to recall the visit I made to Leticia’s hometown, a place that Andrea has never visited but had often heard stories about, like this one.

By the time I interview Andrea, Leticia has given me three white tank tops, a green and black striped T-shirt, and a thick brown hoodie, all drawn from a large clear plastic bag she brings out from her closet—clothes she had been given at the last factory she worked at. “I have so many,” she says. “Take them, they are new. They are nice.” I accept the gifts. Leticia warns that Andrea is shy, and then leaves to warm up food in the kitchen. Andrea proceeds to tell me, with no shyness intervening, about the kids in her school, her best friends, what she thinks Mexico is like, and—most importantly—the confession at the end of her fears about her mother’s immigration status.

Andrea is not the only one. I interviewed eleven-year-old Edward, whose younger brother was in my son Temo’s preschool class. Years earlier, I had taught English to his father, Mauro, when Mauro was just eighteen and I was not much older at twenty-one. At the time, Mauro had been in New Jersey for two years: he had left his school on the coast of Oaxaca at sixteen to come work here. Young and bright, Mauro had placed into the highest-level class. He dreamed of college. Now, having spent half his life in New Jersey, Mauro held onto aspirations only for his children. “I wanted to be someone in life: to be a professional. I could not do it. So I would like my children to be someone.”

Edward, like Andrea, opened up to me about the sensitive topic of immigration, unlike many of the children I had interviewed in Ohio, who had mentioned their fears, but usually uncomfortably, in passing, without elaboration. Edward said he preferred that the other kids at school not know that his parents were immigrants from Mexico, “’Cause then everybody gets everything spread around the whole school. Then they start making rumors.” For Edward, the fact that his parents are Mexican immigrants was a private affair. “’Cause I don’t really like to tell what happened—like, what has
happened in—like, in our life.” I asked Edward if he knew what an immigrant was and what it was like to be an immigrant. “Weird,” he told me.

“In what way is it weird?” I asked.

“That, um, people think . . . like, the people that are not from here . . . that, um, they’re not supposed to be here.”

Then there was twelve-year-old Osvelia, whose mother I had known for years. In the past, we had frequented picnics and parties together; once we went on a camping trip overnight. Osvelia was three years older than my son Temo. Back when I was interviewing transnational mothers, her mother, who had never been separated from Osvelia, told me stories of others from her small rural town in Oaxaca who had moved to Mexico City without their children to work as domestics. Her own mother was the town midwife; stories of the strong black coffee and herbs her mother used during deliveries entranced me. However, like with Leticia, I had lost touch.

During my visit, Osvelia made tacos for us for dinner while I sat at the kitchen table interviewing her mother. When Osvelia finished serving us all, and we had eaten, she sat down and told me about her aspirations to be a cook and what it was like to change to a new middle school, where most of the other kids were White and not-Latino, after having attended a nearly all-Hispanic elementary school. Like Andrea and Edward, Osvelia felt comfortable enough to talk about these difficult things. When I asked if she wanted people to know about her parents’ undocumented status, she wavered some: “I really don’t—like, um, I want some people to know.”

I pushed a little, probing. “So which people would you feel okay knowing?”

“My friends that I feel like keep secrets well.”

I interviewed a few children in New Jersey, and some in Ohio, who spoke openly about immigration issues and whose parents I had not known before. Yet my returns to New Jersey proved that the best sort of access, especially with children, is achieved somewhat serendipitously.

In the two years I worked in Ohio, I planned repeated contact with families, and cultivated relationships with women and children, as part of data collection. Of course, this has benefits. Because I was able to observe children over time, I learned more about their daily routines and the changes in these routines each year, as they grew. But the return to New Jersey yielded much more candid interviews with children whose parents I had known for a long time. Significantly, these are not the interviews I did with the closest people in my network; they are not my best friends. I interviewed a couple
of my closest friends quite uncomfortably; their children trusted me, but knew me a bit too well. My maternal role—as the mother of their friends and someone who had occasionally watched them—trumped our interactions. The best interviews occurred with the children whose parents had once been my friends, or my students, or fellow parents of young children. One can plan out long-term commitments in a research site with longitudinal designs, but I achieved the best type of access through embedded personal relationships that had not been developed solely for the purposes of research. These were with people who share a history with me, but with whom I am not so close that my role as researcher causes confusion. Returns to New Jersey taught me that perhaps the best interviews result from the role of the reconnected family friend who happens to be a social science researcher.

On Theoretical Returns: Outcomes over Time

I cry during my short conversation with Candida. I listen to the transcript now, trying to remember what sets me off. Candida, who is nineteen—but who looks and acts older than her years—sits at the glass dining-room table in the first-floor apartment with her mother, Antonia, whom I have been interviewing. Before Candida joins us, I have already learned from Antonia that Candida spent two years living in Mexico City with Antonia’s mother when Antonia, her husband, and their younger daughter first migrated. Candida was eleven at the time, and thirteen when she joined her parents and her sister in New Jersey. That Candida remained in Mexico for two years without her parents was, in part, due to economics: Antonia and her husband could not borrow enough to afford the crossing of both girls. But other motivations prompted the decision. Antonia explains that “it seemed to us to be very difficult to arrive here with two daughters. One at age eleven, almost twelve; it seemed too complicated to bring her here, without [us] having work. And we didn’t know what complications we would find on the way—they tell many stories, of bad things that happen [to young girls crossing the border]. We were always thinking about our oldest daughter.”

Candida arrives from the bus, having just come from her classes at the community college. Her simple pair of jeans and grey and black striped T-shirt downplay the full, curvaceous figure so different from that of her tall and lanky eleven-year-old sister. While I talk with Antonia, the sister has been watching TV and ignoring my son Dylan, who tries to watch with her. Candida, in contrast, immediately joins us at the table and, when she
finishes her conversation with us, pulls out a Candyland game from the closet to play with Dylan. Her thoughtfulness reminds me of sixteen-year-old Cindy, whom I interviewed in 2005 in Mexico while her mother lived in the United States; Cindy always played so cheerfully with my son Temo while plaintively complaining about her mother’s absence (Dreby 2010, chapter 10).

“It was really hard, at the beginning,” Candida explains in telling me about that time of her life. “I didn’t have the same kind of confianza [trust] with my grandmother as I did with my mother.” Later she specifies, “To a parent you can say, *in a childish voice* ‘No, I don’t want to eat this.’ And with your grandmother it’s, ‘No, you have to eat this.’”

Antonia tears up while Candida talks about the time in Mexico without her:

> I remember that my grandmother and all my aunts and uncles worked. So I remember that I had to go to school all by myself. I was maybe ten . . . no, eleven years old at that time. So at that age I had to take public transportation alone and go all over the place. So I remember I had to go one and a half hours before school started. But the school where I went wasn’t far from the house where I used to live with my mother, it was just like ten minutes walking. I remember I would go over there, before school started, and I would just sit outside there, the house where we used to live with my other grandmother [with whom they lived with before Antonia migrated]. I would just sit there, thinking. Remembering.

Candida’s voice breaks. My eyes water. There is something about the image of a young girl sitting alone and remembering her parents that is so reminiscent of the stories of the more than sixty children I interviewed in Mexico living without their U.S. migrant parents. How often have I heard this refrain: a grandmother is not the same as a mother (Dreby 2007, 2010).

Antonia too is upset. “It’s what I told you about earlier,” she explains. “All that we went through and how we had no money [when they first arrived in New Jersey]. When [Candida] got here, everything was settled.” She offers this justification for the heartache. Antonia suffered as a new migrant, and had protected Candida from this hardship. She reasoned that the temporary separation was best for all. It avoided the dangerous crossing for a preteen girl. It allowed Antonia and her husband to stabilize their economic situation
before bringing Candida into the world of undocumented immigrant life in New Jersey. But Antonia had not been able to protect her daughter from the hardship she experienced in Mexico resulting from her mother’s absence.

Antonia and Candida’s account returns me to the many stories—from both parents and children—I listened to that were wrought with pent-up sadness: the sadness of parents who did not want to leave their children but saw no other way, and the sadness of children seeking ways to express their feelings of powerlessness in their families’ migratory process. It is only now, in hearing Candida cry, that the sterility that so often shrouded the renditions of heartache in those earlier stories stands out. In my earlier study, I purposively interviewed families currently experiencing separations—that is, mothers and fathers living without their children in New Jersey, and children living in Mexico without their parents. I intended to study separations while they occurred. My interviews focused on how parents, children, and caregivers coped with separation while apart.

Listening to Antonia and Candida cry openly, together, reminded me of how dry the interviews in Mexico with children had been: they had recounted their resentment at feeling left behind with bitter detachment. Like Candida, they had told me about feeling sad without their parents and how they wanted their parents to come back. But only two out of the sixty had grown emotional during our interviews. They had talked about being upset during their parents’ absences, but they rarely expressed this emotion. In retrospect, the emotional detachment seems to have been a defense mechanism.

My visit with Candida and her mother affirmed prior research findings, reiterating many of my key findings about the impact of parent-child separations on family members. But it was at once different; it could be different because Candida had now lived with her parents for six years in the United States. The pain lingered, but Candida—and Antonia—could now talk about it, feel the emotion, and express the emotion, because the period of physical separation was over. As I left, Antonia confessed, “We have never spoken about that time like this before.”

My new work does not specifically focus on parent-child separations, although I included in my sample in a handful of transnational families. Yet I stumbled across stories like this one, about previous periods of separation, embedded in the others that I sought about the impact of legal status on growing up and on childrearing. In doing so, I found answers to some of the nagging questions my book Divided by Borders had introduced; namely, what
happens over time to children who have experienced family separations? I followed a small number of families in the earlier research and learned that the separations typically turned out to be, as for Candida, relatively short-lived. No one intended them to be permanent arrangements, although they often dragged on much longer than expected. But I had limited data about how children had fared after reunifications with parents. Reunions, I suspected, rarely panned out as everyone hoped; the heartache seemed to continue and expectations remained unmet, at least for the time immediately following reunification. Ultimately, though, I could say little about the long-term consequences of separation. The question has been asked of me again and again: does family separation, as a migration strategy, work out over the long run, for both parents and their children? Are separations ultimately worthwhile?

In Divided by Borders I left this question unanswered, letting readers decide for themselves based on the stories I presented. I am still inclined to do so. Families differ, as does each child. No true experiment can compare the experiences of a child who remains in Mexico while a parent goes north with the experiences of another version of the same child who migrates with a parent and those of a third version of the child who stays in Mexico with a parent. The sacrifice may be worthwhile for some children, and in some family situations, but not in others. Yet returns to New Jersey, and conversations like the one with Candida and Antonia, convince me that patterns exist.

Children separated from their parents for short periods of time while they are young seem to recover from the period of separation fairly seamlessly. Jasmine is a case in point. I interviewed Jasmine’s parents as part of my first study (they were members of the only family I interviewed for both projects). At the age of one and a half, Jasmine had stayed in Mexico with her maternal grandmother when her mother, Jacinta, joined her father in New Jersey. Jacinta knew she would not be able to carry the toddler across the border but had grown severely depressed without her husband and wanted to reunite the family in the United States. Three years later, after the birth of their second child in New Jersey, Jacinta sent for Jasmine. I first met Jasmine when she was four, soon after her arrival. For the first few months, she hid in her parents’ room anytime I visited, clinging to her father; her parents explained that he looked like an uncle Jasmine knew back in Mexico. Jasmine also did not speak. She was born with developmental problems and used hand signals to communicate. The move initially traumatized the little girl. The immediate aftermath proved difficult.
I talked to Jasmine—now age fourteen—upon my return to New Jersey. Her younger sister, Ana, is eleven; she also now has another U.S.-born sibling who is five years old. Jasmine speaks clearly enough to be tape-recorded, although with some noticeable speech difficulties. For this reason, I interviewed Jasmine together with Ana. Jasmine is in a regular eighth-grade classroom, but she also continues to receive therapy in school, although not as often as her mother would like. According to Jacinta, “she doesn’t remember Mexico, because I don’t talk with her about it.” But Jasmine and Ana are aware of the legal status differences between them. When I ask the girls about what it’s like to have parents who are immigrants, Ana explains, “I’m scared that our parents are going to get separated.”

“How about you? Do you feel scared?” I ask Jasmine.

“Yes,” she answers.

“How come?”

“I feel scared we might be apart. I’ve seen on TV that happened.”

Ana adds, “I think the people from America, me and my [younger] brother, will go to another family. And Jasmine and my parents will go back to Mexico.”

But Jacinta and her husband have not made any plans to return to Mexico. Later that year, in the spring, they throw Jasmine an elaborate quinceañera party, her father explaining that even though it was expensive, he wanted to give this one thing to her, her dream, because of all that she has been through. Jacinta explains that she would go back to Mexico for herself, but there is no future for her children there—no special services in the schools to meet Jasmine’s special needs. Of course, it is impossible to know how Jasmine would have fared in Mexico had she not migrated, but it is easy to imagine that she would not have received the same attention to her speech difficulties. In this case, the sacrifice Jacinta made to be separated from Jasmine seems to have paid off: the trauma of reunification subsided before Jasmine entered school, and she has now adjusted well to life in New Jersey. It seems likely that the services Jasmine has received in New Jersey have enabled her to learn to speak and provided access to an education alongside other children her age.

Children separated from their parents at older ages, and for longer periods of time, may fare worse over time because of periods of separation. The experiences of Carlos and Milagros’ family exemplify this. Carlos met Milagros, a mother to two young children (ages one and four), in Mexico. They moved in together, and then after a few years Carlos came to New
Jersey to work. Within a year, Carlos saved enough money to send for Milagros. For four years, their two children (Rebecca and Silvio, ages five and eight when their mother left) lived with an aunt and uncle in Mexico and their four cousins.

In New Jersey, Carlos and Milagros had a son, and then, when he was three, in 2006, they sent for the two older children. “At first they didn’t want to come,” Milagros tells me, “but then they decided to because the older one began to complain that I wasn’t there.” They also wanted to meet their little brother. But the reunion was not easy. “We didn’t recognize each other,” Rebecca explains in describing her arrival to New Jersey. “I remember just standing there and looking at them because I remembered that when my mom left them she was all skinny and then she got a little fat here. It took about a month to get used to living with them again.”

Up until this point, the story sounded familiar, like those of children I have met before. But the father, Carlos, tells me more: how difficult it was for Silvio—at age twelve—to adapt to life in New Jersey. “For two or three months he cried almost every night, uncontrollably.” Silvio was resentful, feeling like he had been left behind in Mexico by his mother, who had gone on to have another child without him. “We didn’t know what to do,” Carlos says. “He even had suicidal thoughts. He said he was going to get a knife and cut himself and hurt himself and his siblings.”

In school, Silvio’s performance fluctuated. Milagros said, “Sometimes he would do badly. When he was mad at me, he would say, ‘I am going to get all Fs.’ And, he would get all Fs. Then he would say, ‘Don’t worry, mommy, I am going to get good grades now.’ And he would get good grades, all As and Bs. They gave him a special recognition, because he is very intelligent.” The account suggests that emotional issues directly affected Silvio’s schooling.

When I interview the family five years after their reunion, Carlos says that things had gotten much better, but Silvio’s life had taken a different path than his mother, who had been a schoolteacher in Mexico, had originally hoped. When Silvio was sixteen, his younger girlfriend got pregnant. She moved in with Carlos and Milagros, who supported the teenage parents so they could finish high school. But neither did. Silvio opted out, leaving school to work full time. According to Milagros, “Now that he is working he says, ‘If I had the opportunity to get my papers, it would be easier to find a better job.’ In one place he was working, they wanted to keep him, but they asked for his papers.”
Silvio’s prospects, in fact, do not look all that much different from those of his parents, who have worked without papers for so many years in the United States to provide a better future for their children. In spite of his aptitude, it seems that Milagros and Carlos’ intention of providing Silvio with a better future, through the sacrifice of unauthorized migration and the separation it entailed, did not pay off. For Silvio, the four years apart from his parents came at such a critical moment in his lifespan that the emotional aftermath of the separation deeply affected his schooling. The temporary family separation had not borne out well for Silvio, at least in the sense that Milagros and Carlos’s sacrifice did not yield the intended results.

As difficult as it is to make predictions, my returns suggest that for some children, like Jasmine, whose two years in Mexico without her parents is a time she can no longer remember, the sacrifice can be worthwhile, while for other children the emotional wake of a separation has more long-standing effects, provoking, as the case of Silvio suggests, a spiral downward when the separation falls during a critical period of a child’s life. The differences are in the age of the child at the time of separation and reunification, with younger children experiencing the least trauma, and the length of time parents and children live apart, with the shorter periods of separation having lesser long-term impacts.

For still others, like Candida, the end result is less clear. The emotional wake of the separation—which was short, but fell at a critical time in Candida’s life—appears to have had some long-standing effects (such as Candida’s memories of the period still provoking tears), although it has not derailed her from a desirable path. Although she is still unauthorized, Candida graduated from high school and is studying at the community college, hoping to become a nurse. The Dream Act was not passed as Candida had hoped, but since my meeting with her, the Deferred Action program for unauthorized youth has gone into effect and she will surely qualify for employment authorization. Silvio, however, will not, because he had already dropped out of school as of June 2012; the long-lasting burden of separation will continue to mark his life chances.

On Contexts: Changes Wrought by Illegality

“I don’t think he will come. If one could cross [the border], then yes, I would want to go and then come back again [with him]. But the way it is now, I am too afraid.” This is Yessenia talking about her twelve-year-old son, who
lives with her mother in Mexico. Based on my conclusions above, one might deduce that leaving children while young is the best strategy. But Yessenia had left her son ten years earlier. Circumstances have prevented their reunification, and she has not seen him since.

In *Divided by Borders*, I wrote: “In leaving their children, migrant parents are both thoughtful and proactive. They take advantage of their available resources to move to a place where they can earn more for their labor. They weigh the costs and benefits of migration and decide that leaving their children temporarily is sensible, even if heart-wrenching. They consider this difficult decision a sacrifice. They hope to make the most of their sacrifices by working hard in the United States” (Dreby 2010, 203).

Yessenia’s story confirms my earlier assertion. When Yessenia finished sixth grade, at the age of fourteen, she moved in with her boyfriend and they married. At age fifteen, Yessenia had her first baby. At the time, Yessenia’s own father already worked in New Jersey. He offered to help Yessenia’s young husband migrate so he could work and support Yessenia and the baby. After a year in New Jersey, Yessenia’s husband stopped sending money and left Yessenia to be a single mother. “The truth is I did not want to come [to the United States],” she explains. “My mom told me to come so that I could buy things for my baby. So I could give him a better life.” Yessenia left her son at the age of two and a half with her mother, in Mexico. The decision to leave still troubles Yessenia ten years later; her voice falters in telling me the story. But at the time she left, a temporary separation seemed like the only viable choice for the teenage mother.

In *Divided by Borders*, I also wrote about how the costs and benefits equation changes during periods of separation. Parents’ lives evolve during the time they live in the United States. They have new children, and, at times, new partners. They become invested in a lifestyle of hard work and low-wage labor, attempting to achieve a sense of stability that will enable them to reunite their families. Meanwhile, children in Mexico also change. They become emotionally close to their caregivers; their resentment at their parents for leaving them builds. Children may resist parents’ efforts at reunification. Separations become increasingly difficult the longer parents and children live apart.

Again, Yessenia’s experiences confirm this. In New Jersey, Yessenia works as a temporary worker at a local factory that hires many Mexican women, including her sister. Periodically, she gets laid off and collects unemployment, and then is later rehired by the same company. This way they avoid
taking her on as permanent worker with benefits. For Yessenia, securing stable, steady employment has proved difficult. Her family circumstances have also changed during her time in the United States. Originally single, Yessenia met a man whom she moved in with, and the new couple had two children, ages six and four, when I met her. Yessenia's economic problems persist as she struggles to support herself and her children.

Yessenia has wanted to send for her son for the past seven years. Money has been an issue, but not a prohibitive one. In fact, she recently found a way to send $2,000 for braces to fix his teeth since children at school were making fun of him. A few years back, Yessenia tried to bring him. “My dad came and so I tried to bring him over here. But he didn’t want to come. He refused.”

“Did he say why?” I ask. “Did he give you an explanation?”

“He said that he doesn’t like it. That here it is very ugly, he knows because he sees it on TV. That over there it is much prettier, that they are free, that they can go to the river. They go to school, they jump and play. Here they [kids] are all stuck inside.”

Yessenia’s son has changed during the time they lived apart, just as Yessenia had. Like so many of the children in Mexico I interviewed, he resisted reunification, which prolonged the separation of mother and son.

“I feel bad about my son in Mexico. Sometimes sadness overcomes me, and I feel like crying. I have my two children here, but it isn’t the same.” Yessenia goes on to explain:

He never throws it in my face, thank God. He understands. I tell him, “Do you remember when I was there and you wanted something, I couldn’t buy it for you? My mom gave me something, but it wasn’t enough. I had to work to buy you things. . . . He [her son] has never told these things to me [over the phone]. But at school he writes poems. My aunt said she found them. My mom said she found the papers from May 10th [Mother’s Day], from the Day of the Child, [and he writes] that he feels sad, and alone. That sometimes he wants to tell his mom that he feels alone, that he loves her very much. But when I talk to him, he doesn’t tell me this.

I did not interview Yessenia’s son, but if I had—based on the interviews I did do with children in Mexico—I expect that he would have expressed some dry resentment at having been left by his mother, and that it was fueling his
resistance to a reunion. I also might expect that at some point this resentment will start to fade, and that Yessenia’s son will look to her to bring him to the United States to work, just as Yessenia’s own father had done for her when things did not work out for her in Mexico. So I pressed Yessenia on the point.

Joanna: How long have you been trying to get him to come?
Yessenia: Since he was five years old.
Joanna: And what would happen if today or tomorrow he started to say that he wants to?
Yessenia: Sometimes I talk to him about it. But he says no.
Joanna: You know, that could change. Many kids, when they get to be fourteen or fifteen, all their friends begin to come north . . .
Yessenia: But now the crossing is difficult. Not anymore.
Joanna: People aren’t coming anymore?
Yessenia: They say no. Haven’t you seen the wall they put up over there [on the border]? Then they kill people. It isn’t like it was before. One used to leave home and be here after a week.
Joanna: If he asked now, would you send for him?
Yessenia: I’d be too afraid. . . . There are so many bad people. They kill them.

Yessenia’s story affirms patterns I wrote about before regarding the change in family dynamics during separation—specifically that of children’s increasing influence on the parents’ decision-making processes, resulting from the guilt parents experience. But Yessenia’s story also introduces a new calculus, one I did not fully account for before: the political context of illegality. Since the time I did my first interviews with parents living without their children, three main changes to the legal context in which the unauthorized live have occurred, altering the legal landscape under which separations occur.

First, the border has become ever more dangerous. This is in part due to the U.S. militarization of the border—the wall that Yessenia references—and greater levels of funding for border control (Cornelius 2001; Eschbach et al. 1999). This is also due to the drug cartels taking over much of the smuggling operations, putting individual migrants at greater risk (Slack and Whiteford 2011). One woman I interviewed, for example, said that the
coyote from her town who used to take people across the border has gone out of business because he is too afraid to work with the drug cartels to bring people across the border.

Second, there has been no form of immigration reform that will allow the unauthorized to regularize their status. When I interviewed families for Divided by Borders, many parents planned to return to Mexico after saving enough money to support their children in Mexico. Rather than return to Mexico, many—like Yessenia—feel they must hunker down, waiting until some sort of relief is passed; after all, they have their U.S.-citizen children to think about. As of 2010, with no reform having been passed, the result has been a dramatic number of people, estimated at nine million, living in mixed-status families—that is, families in which at least one parent is unauthorized and one child is a U.S.-born citizen (Taylor et al. 2011). Parents now have even deeper ties to the United States, like Yessenia does via her citizen children, without any options for legalization.

Third, the number of deportations has risen drastically, from close to 190,000 deportations in 2001 to close to 400,000 each year between 2009 and 2012 (Preston 2012; U.S. Department of Homeland Security Office of Immigration Statistics, 2011). The threat of these enforcement policies has had deep impacts at the local level. Parents worry about deportation and know that if it happens, they will not be able to get back across the border. Moreover, if they are deported, they will be unable to regularize their status if comprehensive immigration reform is in fact ever passed. Children, as the accounts in this chapter resoundingly express, fear separation from their parents and from their siblings. They fear the police. (For more on children’s fears, see Dreby 2012 and Dreby 2013.)

Consequently, legal conditions have altered the cost/benefit calculus of separation for mothers like Yessenia. Once she gained a foothold in New Jersey, although ever so tenuous, she wanted to bring her son, but he was unwilling to come. Now if he decides he wants to migrate—like so many children I interviewed did when he comes of age—he will be unable to because Yessenia deems the border crossing now to be much too dangerous, and her return to Mexico ever less likely. In this case, the changing legal context seems to be leading to a permanent separation. The decisions to separate that I wrote about in Divided by Borders also resulted from immigration policy that did not allow parents to migrate legally with their children, and required them, because of their ongoing unauthorized status, to take
low-wage jobs. But the changing legal landscape now means that the temporary separations parents expected to endure are ever more likely to become permanent.

**Final Thoughts: On the Legacy of Illegality**

My returns to New Jersey gave me methodological and theoretical insight. But, by far, the shifting legal context dominates all the stories I have told in this chapter. Legal status was on everyone’s mind when I returned to New Jersey. Andrea trusted me—as a long-lost family friend—enough to relate her fears about her mother’s legal status, as did Osvelia and Edward, who confided in me because they knew my connections to their parents. Candida, Jasmine, and Silvio’s prospects are tied—in part—to their continuing lack of a legal status. Candida, attending community college, likely still waits anxiously for the Dream Act to pass so she can finish a degree in nursing and work in the field permanently. Jasmine fears that she and her parents will have to return to Mexico while her sister and her brother, U.S. citizens, remain here. At the age of eighteen, Silvio now faces the same economic fate of his parents—a life of low-paid, undocumented labor. And Yessenia predicts that she will be permanently separated from her son in Mexico because of the changing legal context, which has made the unauthorized crossing of the border more dangerous and expensive than she ever originally imagined.

When I first lived and worked in New Jersey, legal status created significant barriers, for sure. It prevented those I knew from getting driver’s licenses. People worked in low-wage jobs when they were qualified for better positions because they lacked the necessary paperwork for better-paying positions with benefits. Mexican immigrant families I knew faced barriers to mental health services, and health care more broadly, because they lacked a social security number. These obstacles kept them from reuniting with their children in Mexico, but just for a time. Legal barriers significantly shaped families’ lives, but with some creativity and hard work, they were somewhat negotiable. At that time, it was still a number—a missing paper.

My returns to New Jersey have shown me just how significant the changing legal context has become over a relatively short period. The meaning of illegality has changed dramatically across a five-year span. The children I interviewed upon my returns, and their parents, described palpable fears about legal status. For example, I asked a six-year-old—one whose family
I had not known before—if she ever feels scared that her parents are immigrants. She said yes, “because if I am here and my mom goes to Mexico I am going to be sad because I would miss her.” And a twelve-year-old boy told me he is scared his parents are immigrants because “we might be apart.” These increased fears result from changes in enforcement practices over the past few years, and they trickle down into the daily lived experiences of children and their families, affecting the relationships between spouses, parents, children, and siblings. My returns have taught me that in the absence of comprehensive immigration reform, illegality becomes a status imbued with social meaning. My returns have shown me just how important this elephant in the room, illegality, has become.

New Jersey continues to feel different for me every time I go back. At times, I so long for my connections to people back there. When the loneliness at being the new girl on the block (now in Albany, but also when I lived in Ohio) gnaws at my insides, I cling to memories of my friendships when I was younger—those people who in my twenties replaced my own parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and sibling as my most significant others. My longings for home also hit me in my role as a researcher. Interviewing families in Ohio, for example, I quickly learned to be uniquely aware of my status as a community outsider and as a woman—a single woman, at that. Originally I thought I would interview mothers and fathers for the new project; I dropped this as soon as it became clear that as a single mother and a White woman, formally interviewing men in Ohio crossed over some line previously invisible to me; it was too risqué. I desperately missed my town in New Jersey where, whether it was because I had worked as a volunteer teaching ESL or because many people knew my ex-husband, a Mexican, I had little trouble interviewing men. Back in New Jersey in 2011, I spoke with many men about my study, and interviewed quite a few along with their wives—and even a few separately. And then there were my observations of children in 2011 at a school where, in 2000, I had spent time working, attending meetings, and participating in community events. The smells of the hallways and the brightly colored murals comforted me. My return liberated me from of the burden of being the stranger.

Yet at other times in New Jersey, shifting tides alienate me, turning me into a stranger once again. Eventually, friendships need new life and new memories; with some, the connections continue to grow, but with others, experiences cause us to drift apart. The built landscape that looks at once so familiar also feels strangely foreign. New businesses have opened, a new
parking garage and a shopping center erected where there previously was none, and the roadways in and out of the city have been revamped. Change sticks to every place I used to habituate, challenging my assumptions from the past. When I accompany one woman I interviewed to the ER, for example, it takes all afternoon for me to realize I am out of place. I anticipate having to translate, as I had done many times in the past at that same emergency room. Now, however, the receptionist brushes me aside, not needing the help to communicate. The doctor looks straight into the patient’s eye, ignoring me completely, speaking in an abrupt and awkward, yet functional, Spanish. No longer needed as a resource, I save my interviewee the taxi fare and give her something to do while waiting. Times have changed.

As I too have changed, and continue to change with every return. In New Jersey, I was always a student, relatively poor. Medicaid insured my children; I used WIC during both pregnancies. I shared every room in my house to make ends meet—to get through grad school as a young mother. In New York, and Ohio previously, I am a professional, making a decent salary. I am a homeowner driving (cringe) a Prius. Now I am the mother of older children who do not tag along quite so easily on interviews, which I cannot work in and around the winter hockey schedule. My Spanish falters, and my children are no longer bilingual. My perspective, like the physical space, has evolved considerably.

To me, New Jersey will always be a special place—a place with more heart than anywhere I have known. But it is also a place that is not really city or country, where one municipality bleeds into another; the older historical sites have town centers, but it is mostly shopping centers and strip malls that define the start of one place and end of the next. New Jersey, now, seems to me to be traffic, and congestion, and endless commerce. There we cherish the smallest plots of earth and trees because there are no others. I used to scoff at the ignorance of the “which exit in New Jersey” jokes, which miss everything: when I moved away from New Jersey, I missed the diversity of the state, the ability to find great food from all parts of the world without the grit of New York City, and the people who knew me, with whom I felt at home. But now, living a few hours upstate, the openness relieves me. I still live in a small city, not too different from the one I know in New Jersey. But here a nearby small farm delivers fresh milk in old-style glass bottles with blue tops every Tuesday to my door, along with fresh eggs. I can drive in fifteen minutes in any direction to see snow glistening in trees,
or picture-card-perfect farms stocked with red barns and, yes, bales of hay. Driving just a bit further, I can see graceful hills transform into stunning landscapes: to the north, the wild, high peaks of the Adirondacks; to the east, the Petersburgh Pass into the rock fences of the Berkshires; and to the south, the heights and grooves of the Catskills and the Hudson Valley.

I now have my own New Jersey joke. When I am driving us south, the boys always ask, “Are we in New Jersey yet? Are we almost there?”

“Look outside,” I say. “Is it still beautiful?”

“Yes,” they nod.

“Then we are still in New York.”

Returns mark so much change. They have taught me about changes in the structures that shape our daily lives, be they the legal structures that mark the lives of the children I have interviewed or the class structures that shape my life and the lives of my children. The returns have brought with them methodological benefits, theoretical insight, and greater self-awareness of my own evolution. They have brought with them new perspectives and new appreciations of what I have already learned about transnational family life, and about what I love, and hate, about the places I think of as home.

Notes

1. See Dreby 2010 for details on the study and methodology.
2. See Dreby 2012 and Dreby and Schmalzbauer 2013 for more details on the study and methodology.

References


