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'Here and There': Children and Youth's Perspectives of Borders in Mexico–United States Migration

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This article explores children's perspectives regarding migration and family separation on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border. 'Transnational care constellations'[1] that connect separated siblings allow children to imagine the other side of the border and to explore their thoughts and perspectives through the lenses of inequality, as well as through a sense of belonging and family. This article presents ethnographic data of families that capture the dynamism of families that are both 'here and there' as children assemble their ideas and narratives of how transnational lives exist. © *2019 John Wiley & Sons Ltd and National Children's Bureau*

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Introduction

This article explores child and youth's perspectives regarding migration and family separation on both sides of the Mexico-USA by analysing a cohort of data collected between 2010 and 2014 with 68 children and their mothers. This article takes the approach of transnational care constellations to parse out children's dual narratives to build a thesis around the centrality of children's narrative in transnational processes, which I argue are important to better conceptualise dual-nationality or transnational lived experiences and how this in turn creates larger gaps in perceptions of inequality and sense of belonging among children and their families. Children in Mexico are grappling with ideas about how their families are living in the United States. At the same time, children in the USA are constantly exposed to their parents' preoccupation with the siblings who stayed behind in Mexico. However, when borders physically separate siblings, they participate in an arrangement where they are able to experience their family transnationally. Even though siblings are not *close* in the physical sense, they narrate versions of the continuum of a connected transnational family. Children compose elaborate narratives about the different sides of the border, and in this article, I show two dimensions of children's sense-making of transnational family living. I explore children's narratives and perspectives of ideas of inequality, as well as their ideas of sense of belonging in their families. To do that, I centred their experiences within an arrangement I call *transnational care constellations*.

Mexican immigrant women, like other migrants across the globe, often form new families when they move. Women who stay married to the same partner may have more children once they settle in the new country, yielding siblings and half-siblings split across borders. This set-up creates transnational relationships. These constellations include mothers in New York City (NYC), their children in NYC and Mexico, and their children's caregivers in Mexico. Dreby (2010) first developed the approach of looking for constellations of migrant parents in order to more accurately describe changes in family dynamics. Keeping in mind that

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Dreby's work focused on the parent–child–caregiver constellation, I further developed the concept by putting the mother at the centre, since she was making decisions related to care 'here' and 'there', focusing on how care crosses transnational terrains and how it influences the different groups of children in Mexico and in New York City.

Within transnational migration research, separated siblings' relationships have been understudied in part due to the complexity involved in the collection of data, but also because children seem to be continuously learning about where the 'rest' of their families are. I argue that it is precisely through children's worldviews that we come to understand how migration and separation affect their lives. Children in Mexico clung tightly to the notion of family and struggled with their physical exclusion from representations of the family in the United States. In a legal environment that promotes and necessitates prolonged periods of separation, the emotional aspects of separation are extremely difficult for family members. The women interviewed largely showed great resolve to affirm their maternal ties with their children in Mexico, but the children themselves sometimes felt excluded. Through their photographs, drawings, poems, journal entries, Facebook messages, text messages and other representations, children made sense of maternal migration and transnational families. Children articulated the ways in which this exclusion was real to them by expressing concerns for their siblings on the other side, by thinking through artefacts such as material things and by imagining their roles inside the family they had come to understand.

The first narrative concerns the existent inequality on 'the other side', which is informed by children's interactions not only with family members who are physically close to them, but also by interactions across the entire transnational care constellation. These narratives, or 'traveling discourses' as Said (1983) would call, have children contrast their experiences to their sibling's experiences. Second, children weave in a sense of belonging in the family to their narratives. Children hold latent desires to be part of a *family*, and transnational separation heightens the craving for an imagined family in close proximity. Attention to these themes illustrates children's use of learned cultural values to create realities that inhabit spaces far away from them.

Classic and emerging theories on transnationalism

The questions that have traditionally shaped studies of migration in anthropology have focused less on migration flows and more on how individuals respond to these global processes. Culture, which includes the study of the interaction between beliefs and behaviour and social relationships, has resulted in an emphasis on adaptation, culture change, identity and ethnicity (Brettel and Hollifield, 2000, 2008). Theories of migration have spanned decades and even centuries. In the 1940s, modernisation theory included a bipolar framework of analysis that separated and opposed sending and receiving societies, which brought attention to the well-known push and pull factors of migration. Push and pull factors are economic, political, cultural and environmental forces that can either induce people to move to a new location or encourage them to leave their place of residence. According to Kearney (1986), this concern with push and pull factors and modernisation is rooted in the 'folk–urban continuum' formulated by Robert Redfield in 1941. Redfield's model contrasted 'traditional' folkways and 'modern' urban life. The idea was that modernisation theory marked the movement from country to city as people searched for more opportunities (or pull factors). Macro-theories of migration in the 1950s/60s grew out of trade theory and labour surplus resulting in models like the push and pull. This paradigm dominated much of the discussion regarding migration, linking people's movement (urbanisation) to hopes for economic development. World Systems Theory (Wallerstein, 1974) in the 1970s takes into account the profound consequences of cultural capitalism in people's mobility in the world. Finally, in the early

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1990s, anthropologists introduced transnationalism as a framework to understand what happens when people move. Children and youth, as shown in this paper, articulate these continuums as they are linked through transnational ties.

In anthropology, as in other disciplines, scholars have long argued that the social and economic lives of migrants are not always bounded by national boundaries or physical borders. Anderson (1983) affirmed in his seminal work 'Imagined Communities' that a national community is defined as 'imagined' since its members do not personally know each other but yet they bear in their mind the thought of mutual connection. In this article, the concepts of transnationalism and transnational childhoods are central to the understanding of how children across borders stay connected and imagine the other side. Separated siblings' membership to their families is constantly being negotiated. Even though children frame their experiences as *divided,* they are also borderless as they traverse frontiers in their narratives. Thus, transnationalism becomes an important conceptual framework to understand how children make sense of their families. Anderson's longing for the imagined borderlessness of nations is reflected on the contemporary approach taken up by Kearney's (1995) transnationalism which represents a departure of the folk–urban continuum proposed by Redfield (1941). Children in this research disrupt the continuum and show a nuanced understanding of physical borders.

Scholars agree that transnationalism is a notion that captures a process that goes beyond geographical borders in the form of political organisations or family relationships. Basch, Glick-Schiller and Szanton-Blanc defined transnationalism as,

> The processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call this process transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural and political borders. (1994: 7)

However, many separated siblings in Mexico and in New York had not *been* to, what authors call, 'society of origins'. Transnational families and the narratives of those who had 'been' on one side or another become the source with which children forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link them across borders. The perspectives and sense-making of children on both sides of the border are not restricted to their parents' views; children also imagine how their siblings live and reflect on what kind of lives they have on the other side based on what they see, hear and communicate with their own siblings. The content of children's social fields built across borders reflected common, and normative, themes discussed my immigrant parents such as their motivations to migrate: lack of employment in the *pueblo*, the need to work, the possibility of stable income elsewhere, upward mobility and better living conditions.

Realities across borders may seem distant, but children are constantly 'crossing the border' with their imaginaries. Gardner (2012) asked, 'what is it like to have a "home" where close relatives live, but which one has never visited?' (p. 1) and 'how is transnational migration experienced by children?' (p. 1). In order to answer these questions, the author explains:

> Clearly, imaginations and imaginings are central to the future shape of transnational social fields. In some instances, this may lead to certain places becoming sites for heritage tourism, very much 'over there' and conceptually different from 'home', but in others it may lead to the distinctions between places becoming increasingly blurred, especially if the children themselves do not make such distinctions, however much state boundaries or (adult) discourses of ethnic belonging insist on them. (Gardner, 2012, p. 12)

This article builds on the discussion presented by Gardner but includes the micro-contexts and the specific accounts children and youth give of their transnational experience. In the introduction to *Minor Transnationalisms*, Lionnet and Shih (2005) explain:

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> The transnational . . . can be conceived as a space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center.
>
> (p. 5)

The transnational body is a physical space of exchange and participation. Importantly children and youth actively construct this transnational body by doing both: first what Lionnet and Shih (2005) describe as without mediation from the centre, as in their parents, but also by what Gardner (2012) described as the imaginings of the future and sites of heritage, in the case for children where their siblings are parents. In this paper, children experience the narratives of transnational macro-forces that impact people's mobilities in their everyday contexts. I argue that children are very much at the centre of understandings of transnational family living and that they are actively trying to assemble images of where their siblings and mothers live. Conversations that take place over dinner reflect a lot of daily concern and curiosity transnational children have of their families.

Cultural theories on transnational childhoods

Shifting global economic and political conditions, with increased movement of labour and capital around the world (Sassen, 1998), may make the future of some immigrant families more contingent and uncertain than in the past. This does not mean that families move easily through transnational circuits; on the contrary, the borders of nation states are real, and they exert social, emotional and financial costs on those who cross them (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997). Still, most research on children and immigration avoid the complexities of children's ideas of borders and transnational living, instead of focusing on linear trajectories of assimilation (Orellana and others, 2001). Children, more often than not, are positioned as recipients of migration. Scholars (Dreby, 2010; Gallo and Dabkowski, 2018) have shown, however, the agentive and dynamic ways in which children articulate, negotiate and imagine transnational childhoods.

As Coe and others (2011) write, the idea of childhood is culturally specific, and it shifts over time in response to political and social changes. Children and youth construct their own stories about what constitutes 'home' and 'away' (Zeitlyn and Mand, 2012), about their siblings, and about opportunities, which in turn shape their ideas about family life and belonging. Coe and others (2011) bring attention to children and youth, who, as they put it, are at the nexus of family separation. To focus on children's experiences is to reveal how migration shapes their perspectives of family, inequality and in the case of the present article, of Mexico and the USA.

As Orellana (2009) has argued, children continue to be mostly invisible outside of families and schools. They are often addressed as baggage 'brought along', 'sent for' or 'left behind' by sojourning parents (Orellana, 2009, p. 15). Explorations of children's actions, contributions, social relationships and cultures are paramount to understanding the implications of maternal migration. In addition to understanding how children use their power within families (Dreby, 2007), it is also important to look at how children express resentment or appreciation for parents and faraway siblings, and ultimately how migration shapes and influences their worldviews. Children of immigrants 'here' and 'there' change as a result of family movements across cultural and geopolitical borders and their interface with institutions like schools and neighbourhoods. Orellana (2009) accurately describes this phenomenon: 'children and youth experience juxtapositions of discrepant beliefs and practices made visible by the movement of people' (p. 25). These juxtapositions, beliefs and practices are made visible through the lens of social belonging and inequality across borders. In this article, I present

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ethnographic data that not only show the complexities of children's thinking about *where* their siblings, parents and grandparents live, but I also show their sophisticated description of *how* they imagine their sibling's transnational childhoods to exist. I propose we learn from children and with children as we grow the literature of migration and childhood.

Methods

Data for this article come from a multi-sited ethnographic study that sought to 'follow the people' and their stories (Marcus, 1995, p. 106). This ethnography took place in Mexico and New York between 2011 and 2014 to capture the dynamism of transnational caregiving and communities that are both 'here and there'. Transnational Care Constellations emerged as a way of understanding how relationships are created within the transnational terrain. Some scholars of citizenship similarly use the concept of constellation. Rainer Baubock (2010) proposes that the study of citizenship move to a more systematic comparative approach. He suggests the term 'citizenship constellation' to denote a structure in which 'individuals are simultaneously linked to several such political entities, so that their legal rights and duties are determined not only by one political authority, but by several' (p. 848). In the same vein, I propose that these individuals are linked and that the relationships they develop are determined not only by interactions between them and the people they live with, but also by people who are away from them, whom they imagine to be a certain way. While recognising the traditional meaning that family holds in the Mexican context through concepts of *familianismo,* the gender roles that attributed to women and men within their immediate families through the lenses of *marianismo* and the stoic man who usually is the migrant and provider, I employ a transnational care constellation to show how there are different relationships that exist beyond the perceived the roles attributed to member of a family unit. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) describe the inseparability of methods and findings, thus transnational care constellations worked as both a framework — of how people care and stay connected with one another — and findings — because of where narratives were situated.

Research sites included Puebla, Hidalgo, VeraCruz, Mexico State, Morelos and Tlaxcala in Mexico and the NYC neighbourhoods of East Harlem (Manhattan), Sunset Park (Brooklyn), Jackson Heights (Queens) and the South Bronx. I am no stranger to the idea of living transnationally. Originally from Brazil I arrived in the United States ten years ago. As a Latin American immigrant on a student visa, I was positioned differently from someone born and raised in the United States: I also lived far away from my family and terribly missed them. However, I was able to go back and forth between Brazil and the USA and I had the ability to travel to Mexico which helped me build relationships with families. I recruited Mexican immigrant women in New York City who had school-age children both in Mexico and in the USA through different strategies. I did volunteer work at a centre for family life in Brooklyn, I befriended the owner of a small grocery store and restaurant who helped me spread the word in the South Bronx and I met women through neighbours and friends in New York City. Then, the participants themselves introduced me to several more Mexican immigrant women in each of these neighbourhoods.

Through these many interactions I collected structured, semi-structured and group interviews conducted in Spanish and or English with 68 children; in-depth interviews with 31 caregivers (30 grandmothers and one aunt) and 55 mothers; and informal interviews with 36 family members, 21 teachers, and nine fathers; participant observation documented through field notes with 12 transnational constellations. Ethnographic observation took place in their homes, schools, places of work, church, parks, friends' homes, restaurants, street fairs and playgrounds. I documented monthly remittances in the form of cash transfers and gifts through interviews and observations. To protect their privacy, I changed the names of my interviewees.

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I use drawings as tools for children to narrate their experiences of separation and migration and to understand when and where their siblings, parents showed up in these pictorial representations and other imaginary geographies they may have. Children were asked with minimal instruction to first draw a picture of his or her family, then a picture of how the child imagined Mexico or the USA and last to draw his or her house. I followed the tradition of well-established scholars such as Punch (2002) who highlights ways in which research with children is different from working with adults and brings to the fore power relations between adults and children and the different 'competencies' of children. In her article, she describes an approach to interviewing with a 'tool kit', strategies to ensure that children are engaged in the interview process. Following these suggestions, I used an arts-based strategy to elicit narratives from children and youth. A sizeable literature exists questioning whether working with children demands particular methods, and covering the ethics of working with children and power relations (James, 2001; Punch, 2002). One of the ways to address these demands is to pursue long-term engagement with children so that there is a shared understanding between the researcher and the child about what is part of children's everyday world.

Since I was engaging in long-term relationships with children and parents, these drawing sessions happened only if children wanted to engage with it. Otherwise, we would play and talk. Some children enjoyed drawing with different colours and paint, and others were quickly bored and wanted to move forward with play. While, from a methodological point of view, I gave minimal instruction to children to draw, these images of the family, the home and Mexico or the USA were part of their everyday lives.

In order to organise and document the time spent with participants, I established three levels of engagement. At the first level were eight transnational care constellations; I spent time with these families in Mexico and in New York for a total of 26 non-consecutive months, tracking half of them for over three years. At the second level of engagement, I interviewed and observed 12 additional families in NYC, but visited the members of these particular constellations fewer times in Mexico. Altogether, *within these transnational care constellations*, I interviewed and observed 30 children in Mexico (15 female and 15 male, aged seven to eighteen years) and 37 children in NYC (20 female and 17 male, aged four months to eighteen years). At the third level of engagement, there were 40 mothers in NYC, as well as fathers, caregivers and over 60 children and youth in Mexico who were not part of the constellations. They were interviewed and observed over the three years of research.

I chose to centre on children's narratives when discussing their perceptions of separation. This approach was informed by the field of Childhood Studies which presents childhood as a social construction and a structural category of society; it places an emphasis on children's 'here and now' status, on children as beings as well as 'becomings', and conceptualises children as agentic with the capabilities to shape their childhoods. It argues for children's competence to share their experiences and emphasises children's rights to the nature and extent of their participation in research (Corsaro, 1997; James and Prout, 1990; Jenks, 1996; Qvortrup and others, 1994; Uprichard, 2008). Children are considered as active participants in the research process, as subjects of research rather than objects (Hunleth, 2011).

In this ethnographic analysis, I followed the model of Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995), iteratively drawing patterns from the hundreds of field notes, transcribed interviews, pictorial representations and narratives. Subset of categories that came from deductive and inductive approaches around children's experiences of living transnationally were 'siblings', 'houses', 'material goods', 'belonging', 'separation', 'love' and 'care'. Drawing on the aggregated data sources (interviews, participant observations, drawings), I am able to show how separated siblings discuss their ideas about where members of their families are illuminating the ways in which immigration impacts the family organisation.

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Findings

Children, on both sides, experience transnational lives on an everyday basis. They are not removed from the context of mobility experienced by their mothers and siblings. Children inhabit these spaces of everyday and make sense of their transnational ties constantly. Mothers and children in the USA are in constant conversation with children who are in Mexico. Mothers are active participants in building transnational motherhood practices that keep their children in Mexico *close* to them (Oliveira, 2017, 2018). These practices include daily communication about mundane, everyday activities such as curfew, homework and eating habits. In Mexico, children are acutely aware of the fact that their mothers have *new* children who were born in the United States. The *messiness* of transnationalism is reflected in these micro-contexts both in Mexico and in the United States. As grandmothers in Mexico reassure children in Mexico of their place in the family, they also wonder about the grandchildren they do not know in the USA. Thus, it is not by accident that children on both sides of the border are actively participating in transnational living and building their own ideas of care and family look like.

As I show the experiences children describe, it represents the conversations all constellations had among themselves at different points in time. But this is an anthropological qualitative study about the lives of people in this particular group. Children's experiences are complex and nuanced, and the two sections below explore two different dimensions of how children make sense of sibling separation. They do not, by any means, exhaust the multitude of ways children make sense of the consequences of family migration. The first dimension is about children making sense of the other side with the lenses of inequality; the second dimension dives in the socioemotional aspects of separation and sense of belonging.

Images of the other side: making sense of inequality

Children on both sides of the border evaluated their siblings' lives who lived far away. Children described siblings as having 'more' or 'less' *things* than them. This inequality, perceived or real, created space for children to imagine the other side. On both sides, they made sense of distance and assessed what it means to be in the USA or in Mexico by thinking about work, class and material things. Mothers in the United States framed a large part of their immigrant experience as sending *money home*. Children in both sides grappled with the idea and meanings of remittances, and thus, their analysis based on inequalities matched their realities. Children in this research showed a degree of specificity that went beyond existing stereotypes of modern and traditional societies. In the situation below, children in NYC discussed their ideas about Mexico.

On one winter day in Violeta's apartment in the South Bronx, Ramiro asked me if we were going to play: "Are we playing today? It's cold out". I answered I thought it was cold too, but that I had a lot of crayons and paint we could use. Violeta, who was watching television as she pounded a chicken flat for dinner, started telling all of us how when growing up in Mexico she would kill a fresh chicken for her family's dinner. The three other children propped up. Violeta continued, "yes, it's how we do it *there,* and I was your age!" (emphasis added).

The last time I was at their home I had told Ramiro, Leah, Noemi and Kimberly (all siblings) that we could do some drawing in my next visit, so Noemi without missing a beat asked, "are we drawing today?". I replied, yes if they wanted to. The four children sat in a circle and helped me arrange all the crayons, paint and paper available. I asked them what they wanted to draw that day and Leah responded, "the animals! Like mamá's chickens". I followed up with, "should we draw Mexico then? Or what we think Mexico looks like?". "I

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know! I can do it" yelled Ramiro. Children spread around on the floor with paper, glitter, crayons, markers and paint. After a few minutes Ramiro (10) was very excited to be done. He wanted to explain the drawing to me and make sure I understood every detail:

Ramiro: Here are the people in Mexico ... They are at farms with lots of animals, a donkey, a cow chickens, and maybe a dragon ... just kidding [about the dragon]! The people in Mexico work a lot, they wake up at 4 or 5am every day and just work [...].

Researcher: Why do you think they have to work a lot?

Ramiro: Well, because they are poor.

Researcher: How do you know?

Ramiro: [pause] Because my mom says it all the time, how there is kidnapping in Mexico and she is not letting me go there because I could die... People will take your money no matter what ... they want your Nikes, they want your watch ... because they can't have it. Here there are so many stores that sell all that, in Mexico there aren't, so they take it from you.

Leah (8): {researcher}, my mom can show you the videos of people without their heads ... their heads get cut [off]. Women too ... they take things from you. I don't want to go.

Violeta interrupted, "*Niños, stop*. It's not true! Just stories!".

G: Your brother Andrés lives there, right? Do you think he is also afraid?

Leah: No he is not afraid... because he is really old, he is like 28 years old.

Ramiro: He is not 28!

Leah: How do you know?

Ramiro: Because we play video games together and I asked him.

There are several ironies in this juxtaposition. These children live in the South Bronx and their father Silas reported that he had been mugged and beaten twice for being 'Mexican' in the United States and the children themselves had described not feeling safe playing in the park because of 'gangs'. Yet, safety did not come up as an issue for them in the USA, only in Mexico. Further, the children held a perception that Americans are wealthier because of the amount of available consumer goods. Ramiro and Leah explained that there is a need to work more in Mexico, because people do not have enough. Meanwhile, Violeta works five days a week in New York City and earns only $100 dollars per week. In Mexico, Violeta's mother Tatiana sells animals and food and receives remittances from her daughters and son who live in the United States. Tatiana lives in a two-bedroom house that has more room than Violeta's apartment in the South Bronx.

Ramiro has a Facebook account which he uses to communicate with his brother Andrés and with other family members in Mexico. Ramiro knew Andrés was fourteen years old because they played video games together. Andrés did not have an Xbox or Playstation in his home in Mexico, but he went to a computer/game store a few blocks from his house and played with his brother. Andrés told me, 'I wish I also had an Xbox at home like my brother has in his house in *El Norte*. I have been asking my *mamá* Violeta but they don't send me, I think they have more there'. Ramiro's perception of Mexico was informed by a combination

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of his parents' narratives about Mexico as well as his interactions with sibling Andrés. Violeta and Silas were incisive when asked about their desires to return to Mexico, 'I will never go back there' (Violeta) followed by 'the government doesn't help you one bit' (Silas). Violeta watched the news on television and also online. Curiously watching reporting on crime, violent deaths and cartel activity were a common fixture of this particular household. Although all the other families spoke about the sad violence that had been occurring in Mexico, Violeta and Silas talked about it extensively, going through the gruelling details of drug cartel violence in Mexico. Children listened to the stories attentively and followed up with questions. This family had not experienced or witnessed that violence themselves, but the poignant narrative inside the house shaped the ways in which children reported on their ideas of Mexico. Children and youth in the United States had similar narratives to the ones expressed Ramiro.

Leah, age eight, showed me yet another representation of what she thought of Mexico. After she was done drawing, she picked up her three-year-old sister Kimberly, put her on her lap and started rocking her from side to side. She made noises that sounded like she was trying to put Kimberly to sleep, patting gently on her back and singing her a song. She looked at me and with her sister in her arms told me:

> I was trying to draw mothers and children in Mexico to explain that raising children in Mexico is really hard. Buying a house, even worse! You have to work really hard for your children to put food on the table, to be a good mother. Here in New York there is help and jobs ... but you must know that is a hard life over there in Mexico.

It took me a few seconds to absorb her short explanation. She had borrowed some words from her mother at that particular moment. Leah did not get along with Violeta, and she wrote extensively in her journal about feeling unloved by her mother. During observations, Leah often disagreed openly with her mother. But when we were talking about what she thought Mexico was like, Leah channeled her mother's narrative to explain the feeling of inequality that exists between Mexico and the USA. In many instances when the children would complain about not being able to go to the movies or not being able to buy something, Violeta would get extremely frustrated. In one of those moments, Violeta said:

> Do you think life is easy? I want you to go to Mexico to see how it is there... how people have to batallar (fight), to be someone... here you kids have it all! You have no idea what it takes to bring up a family and feed you all. I was pregnant riding a bike from side to side to deliver chickens for your grandmother. Do you think I ever complained? No! The answer is no. So shut up, now.

In this case, as with the other twenty families I observed, children adopted mothers' narratives about how *difficult life* was in Mexico. Whether these narratives were truthful or not it did not matter. What mattered was that young children were able to construct narratives of an imagined transnational geographical location that included their siblings. Children and youth in this research who had younger siblings often told them *tales* of what Mexico was like. They were never specific about names of towns or states in Mexico, but focused on the perceived dangers and hardships that the country imposed upon their families.

The USA-born six-year-old Carlito, whose mother, Aruna, had been living in NYC for seven years, had two brothers in New York who were the USA-born and two half-sisters in Mexico who he had never met in person. He had constant communication with them via phone and videos. When I asked Carlito to draw what thought Mexico looked like, he explained to me: 'There are cows and chickens, and people work in really hot weather... they work many hours a day and don't get paid much, then they can't go to the mall and buy

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toys'. He followed up with another explanation, 'but they have a lot of space there to play, my mamá said... my sister Nina told me that the parties always have *teclado* (keyboard), so it's good to dance'. Carlito followed a similar narrative when compared to Ramiro, a 'rural' Mexico where *working hard* was the norm.

Carlito then told me a story of his dream of *two Carlitos*: one who lived in Mexico and did not have a school or even a home, and the other who lived in the USA and got to go to McDonald's. As he finished the story, his four-year-old brother teased, 'You cry, you cry'. I asked Carlito if he had woken up crying from the dream and he told me, 'I don't remember' and since he had talked about his sisters before, he made yet another connection, 'do you think that's how my sisters live?' The week Carlito had this dream was a difficult one for his mother. Aruna had a complex relationship with her own mother in Mexico. This relationship made her communication as well as her the USA-born children's communication with their siblings in Mexico challenging. Throughout the week, Carlito heard Aruna describing her worries about what her daughters would eat if her own mother kept on deciding what to do with the remittance money she sent every month. Carlito showed me a small pot in his bedroom with lots of coins and he told me, 'This is for my sisters; they need the money because in Mexico they don't use cars and the schools are outside, not like in buildings'. Carlito had an elaborate view of how his sisters lived in Mexico and the level of inequality that separated them as siblings.

These views were also fundamentally empathetic. The worry that parents had on one side of the border translated into children as young as six years old, worrying about their siblings across transnational terrains. Children and youth in the USA worried about their siblings in Mexico as much as parents did. Of the 33 children interviewed in NYC (excluding the three babies), 23 expressed concerns for the safety of their siblings and their living conditions when asked how they thought their siblings' lives were. In addition, seventeen households watched the news reported from Mexico that covered violence and drug cartel arrests. Families engaged with the news in different ways, but the narrative of danger was misdirected to Mexico and talked about in the small apartments in NYC with children around.

Many of the children I interviewed in Mexico assumed that their families in the USA had a better life, replete with consumer goods. Children made the distinction between Mexico and the USA based on material things that directly differentiated socioeconomic status. Ana (18), one of three sisters who lived in Mexico away from her mother Camila and her three the USA-based siblings, described what she imagined the lives of her siblings to be like, 'All I know if that my mom has her own grocery store, and that my siblings wear nice clothes, and they always have what they want. In our case I have to ask her to give me things, I know they have more there'. Other children in Mexico, Brian (7) and Pilar (13), also described the 'better life' they assumed their siblings had in the USA. They used the sentence '*viven mejor*' (they live better) to explain how their siblings lived. After doing participant observation and interviews with the 30 children who belonged to the 20 transnational constellations, I observed a pattern in their responses as to how they imagined the USA. The pattern is exemplified by this conversation with Yuri (11) in Mexico:

Researcher: How do you imagine New York or the United States?

Y: I think it's really big ... with big, big buildings and a lot of stores where people buy gifts.

Researcher: What about where your siblings live?

Y: They live in these big buildings I think, but I think my house is bigger ...and they shop at these stores and send us nice gifts [she showed me a t-shirt she

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was wearing]; everyone has money there and they buy the newest bicycles and new shoes and they can eat at McDonalds all the time, right?

Y: [After a moment of hesitation] they could send us more if they wanted to ... [very low voice and looking down to the floor]

Researcher: What do you mean?

Y: *Maestra* (teacher), you and them have so much more than we have and then all we get are a few things every month ... why can't they share more?

Twenty children and youth started their answers with broad descriptions of what the U.S. or NYC looked like, as illustrated in the drawings in the appendix. But they quickly transitioned to a narrative where they described a sense of inequality based on material goods and money. When Yuri asked the question "why can't they share more," Rita, his grandmother, gave him a look that suggested to me and to Yuri that she was upset. She said, "How can you say that? After all the effort your mother puts into working and sending you things." Yuri replied, "You always get upset." Of the 30 children and youth I interviewed in Mexico who were part of the 20 constellations, 27 complained about inequality in the distribution of money and material goods between siblings. These findings shed light on the debate that has long existed in migration studies on the benefits of remittances. In terms of development in an economic sense, remittances are known to benefit families who have been behind economically (Asis, 2006). However, what happens with the money and how it is spent leaves doubt about the real efficacy of remittances. Cortés (2015) discussed how remittances can create dependence on the receiver side and even contribute to children's disinterest in school. Kandel and Kao (2001) found that children of migrant parents, particularly boys, may have a greater propensity to drop out of school than children of non-migrants. Dreby (2007) found that more than 40 per cent of children interviewed in Mexico who had immigrant parents dropped out of school in the middle of their studies.

Children and youth feel the socioeconomic divide between families 'here' and 'there'. The way they perceive upward socioeconomic mobility is linked to consuming material goods. My analysis reveals that within this transnational context, children create their own versions of the story using inequality as a base for comparison. Thus, they are assessing the economic and political inequalities on the other side of the border. Suárez-Orozco (2002) has argued that the poorest immigrants suffer tremendous adversity as a result of immigration, but in spite of these difficulties, they often improve their economic and social circumstances. Many of the children of maternal immigrants in Mexico and in the USA did share that opinion and, as a result, came to expect certain benefits from migration. While U.S. children and youth do not think about their parents' migration as much as those in Mexico do, the ideas shared were described as: by living in the USA they are 'better off'.

Symbols of development are present in the description of what the USA looks like — urban setting, consumer goods, money — yet these same symbols illustrate the deficit narrative towards Mexico. A parallel can be made with the work by Kearney (2004a, 2004b, 2004a, 2004b) who argued that basic conceptualisations of the anthropological subject began to change rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s, to deal with the expressions of identity and class in this complex world. Kearney (2004a, 2004b, 2004a, 2004b) and Rouse (2011) used modernisation theory to explain the folk–urban continuum. Thus, children were characterising the spectrum of the so-called modern and traditional through the explanation of inequality. Children and youth's imaginaries remain very much attached to ideas of what is modern and what is traditional in the form of material goods.

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The 'rest' of the family: sense of belonging

Studies regarding the effects of migration on children suggest that children show some resentment towards migrant mothers and less so to fathers. In her work with children of immigrants in Ghana, Cati Coe argued that children express more pain about the migration of parents than the parents express about their own migration. She points out that in her work, children complained about two aspects of migration: the dispersion of the nuclear family and the care they received from caregivers (Coe and others, 2011, p. 102). I documented children and youth in Mexico complain about the scattering of the family, but more about not belonging in what many of them called the 'new family'. Even though children rationalised the reasons behind the migration of their mothers, narratives of feeling sad and missing their parents emerged regularly. The children in Mexico struggled to reconcile their feelings of anger and abandonment with the discourse of caregivers and other members of the family that emphasised they should be grateful for their mothers' sacrifices on their behalf. This relationship, however, was nuanced. The politically charged environment of transnational family relationships allowed for much imagination of the other side, as illustrated by Fernanda, 14, who lived in Mexico and had a sibling living in the USA: 'If you ask me if I am sad because I don't see my mamá. . .yes, of course, yes. But I don't know how it would be if she lived here. . .you know? Would we get along? Would I like her here?' Fernanda illustrates the many iterations of perceptions that happen in children's lives.

Esperanza

This situation was very much a part of the relationship between Emilia and Esperanza. In our first interaction, 17-year-old Esperanza lived in a house in a *rancho* called San Felipe four hours outside Jalapa, the capital of the state of VeraCruz. She had two siblings who lived with her in Mexico and two half-siblings who lived with her mother, Emilia, in the Bronx, New York. The first time I met Esperanza, she was waiting for me at the plaza of San Andrés, a larger town close to San Felipe. Emilia told me that arriving to San Felipe was difficult and I would need someone from there to guide me along. Esperanza gave me a warm welcome and was excited to show me around and introduce me to her favourite spots in San Andrés. It was a big holiday in Mexico, Mother's Day, so there were many festivals happening in the streets, and people were cooking their favourite foods to celebrate their *madres*. Esperanza was with her grandmother Enriqueta. Enriqueta could not contain herself and asked me ten questions at a time about her daughter Emilia. She touched my arm and asked, 'You hugged my daughter, right?'

As we started to walk, Esperanza's phone rang; it was Emilia. They chatted for a few seconds, and Esperanza passed me the phone. Emilia wanted to check if I had arrived safely and if they were going to cook me a big meal. I told Emilia 'Happy Mother's Day'; she thanked me, and I passed the phone back to Esperanza. Esperanza and Emilia began to chat on the phone, and in the car to San Felipe, they were still talking and Esperanza put Emilia on speaker. Esperanza quickly transitioned from an excitingmood to a more assertive and impatient mood. In calmer moments, Esperanza justified her mother's decision to leave Mexico. She said, 'Look around where we live. There is nothing here but the family. She had to go and make something of herself, work, send us money, and support herself. Life may be easy for many people, but not for poor people. It was not a choice, she had to do it'. However, at that moment, on the phone with her mother, Esperanza's logic fell apart, and frustration took over:

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Esperanza: The teacher at my school told me that I can start teaching kindergarten next year because I'm really good with kids, I'm patient with them . . . I help them a lot.

Emilia: That's good, but don't forget that you have to finish your studies first, that is what the money is for . . . [baby crying on Emilia's side].

Esperanza: *Mamá! Calla la niña* (Mama, shut her up)! *Hazme caso mamá* (Pay attention to me, Mama)! That's why I hate talking to you on the phone, all you care about is your new family, the family you have there in the United States . . . I hate your new family!

Emilia: Calm down Espe- . . . the baby is hungry, you know how babies get when they are hungry, *hija*.

Esperanza: It's always the same talking to you, you only want to talk fast and ask me about school, then you have to go with your kids from your new family. *Nadie me quiere* (no one loves me).

Emilia continued her attempts to calm Esperanza down with no success. Near the rancho got, the reception weakened, until we could only hear every other syllable from Emilia. Enriqueta in the back of the car told me: 'It's always like this. Esperanza thinks that Emilia and her children live in this beautiful house in New York and that her mother doesn't care about her and about her siblings . . . but that's not true. My daughter is a fighter'.

After I showed Esperanza and her siblings Yago (13) and Juan Pablo (12) pictures of her mother and half-siblings in NYC's South Bronx, Yago, who had been diagnosed with Down Syndrome since birth, yanked Emilia's picture from my hand and ran to his bedroom. I followed him and asked if everything was all right. He sat on the bed and started kissing and hugging the picture and repeating, 'This is my *mamá*, my family'. Esperanza also followed us into the room and took the picture back from him. She stood up as he sat down and holding the picture she told him, 'We are NOT part of this family [pointing at the picture]. We don't belong with them Yago, they don't even know who we are. Did you know that? They don't care about us.... Look at them, they don't even look like you and me'. She looked at the picture for a few seconds. Then, Yago got up again and yanked the picture from Esperanza's hands, 'It's my *mamá*, my family'. Esperanza, upset, responded:

> Maybe yours Yago, but not mine . . .. They know nothing about me. Do you know what a family is [Researcher's Name]? A family stays together . . . they talk to each other, they know what is going on. What do they know? They are so busy living their life . . . together . . . under the same roof, like a family.

I noticed Juan Pablo standing at the door watching the interaction between his siblings. I asked him if he had any thoughts about what Esperanza and Yago were discussing, and Juan Pablo told me, 'I feel like my *mamá* is my *mamá*. She is. I don't know her husband there or her kids, so the rest of the family... I guess... I don't know them. I don't know if they would like me, but blood is blood, right?'

In many regards, children in Mexico respected and appreciated their mothers, but moments of frustration brought up feelings of resentment. Children left behind sometimes resented siblings they did not know but were supposed to love, who got to live with their mothers. There is no denial that the opposing symbols of beneficiary and bearer of the consequence of distance — was a constant thought and struggle in the minds of children in Mexico. As with other children I interviewed, Esperanza could easily explain and justify the

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reasons for migration. However, they resented the 'other family', and the impossibility of reunification fed their resentment. It had been years since the three siblings had seen their mother. They struggled with the idea that they were the beneficiaries of their mother's sacrifice.

Conclusion

Children's narrative on both sides of the border is nuanced and complex. Macro, structural and global inequalities that are part of the reasons people move are shouldered by young children as their narratives suggest. Thus, while it may be that these constructed imagined childhoods of the other side are fatalistic, what children show is that they listen and incorporate their parents' worries about the other side, but they also actively construct their sibling's imagined transnational childhoods.

I have argued that thoughts of inequality related to material goods and emotional support create imaginaries for children and youth on both sides. The idea of family never disappears even with distance and prolonged periods of separation. Children and youth take real and perceived inequalities to heart, and this complicates how they come to resent, idolise, love and miss family members. Their thoughts and impressions about migration, separated families and siblings on the other side influence their ideas about inequality within the family and their sense of belonging. Physical resemblance was important when they discussed about their siblings, grandmothers and mothers. In addition to these emotions, those on both sides imagined their siblings in different time and spaces. They started with an economic perspective of how the 'rest' of the family lived and used those ideas to build characters of who they are. Children often used inequality as a lens to reflect on how siblings live across the border. Siblings in NYC worried about the well-being of their siblings in Mexico and had ideas of the country as a complicated place to live. Simultaneously, children in NYC used the situation of their siblings in Mexico as a way to inquire their mothers about material goods.

Children and youth in Mexico sometimes resented siblings in NYC, who they largely did not know but were supposed to love, and who shared the same residence as their mothers. For children and youth in Mexico, being the beneficiary as well as the bearer of the consequence — distance — built frustration and added to the confusion of how they were 'supposed' to treat their siblings. Kinship crossed borders and made separation and distance hurt that much more. Imagining family bonds, trying to find resemblance of kin and engaging with love and care across borders were only a few of the practices children developed from the other side. Transnational childhoods and children of immigration deserve more attention from scholars of migration studies, and we can all learn from their narratives.

Note

1 This passage's language was in English, as chosen by children.

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