

# The Interrupted Circle: Truncated Transnationalism and the Salvadoran Experience

Ines M. Miyares\*, Richard Wright\*\*, Alison Mountz\*\*\*, Adrian J. Bailey\*\*\*\*, and Jennifer Jonak\*\*\*\*\*

\*Department of Geography, Hunter College - CUNY

\*\* Department of Geography, Dartmouth College

\*\*\*Department of Geography, Syracuse University

\*\*\*\*School of Geography, University of Leeds

\*\*\*\*\*Department of Anthropology, Hunter College - CUNY

This paper examines the transnational experience of the Salvadoran community in New Jersey and El Salvador. We argue that this experience is “truncated”, stunted as much by the tenuous residency status of many Salvadorans as by distance or poverty. We use unstructured and survey-based interviews to illustrate how the Salvadoran transmigrants have responded to separation from their families in El Salvador by struggling to maintain place ties by substituting vicarious return for actual return. We propose that migrant circulation can occur vicariously through gifts, remittances, and telecommunications when a migrant’s legal status, in this case Temporary Protected Status, constrains corporeal circulation. We also explore the downsides to this vicarious return, with our particular interest in the children left behind and the longer term viability of remittance-based economies.

## Introduction

El Salvador’s economy has become reliant on remittances from its population abroad, most of whom have attempted to settle in the United States after fleeing the Salvadoran civil war waged between 1978 and 1990. Over the two decades during which significant numbers of Salvadorans have been in the U.S., a large, quasi-documented community has developed. The individuals and families that make up this community are trapped in the “permanent temporariness” of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) – the interim residency condition begrudgingly provided by the State Department (Bailey, *et al.* 2002). The Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (BCIS) acknowledges that many of these migrants cannot be effectively repatriated due to El Salvador’s continued eco-

nomie crisis, but still has created a multi-year backlog for review and adjudication of TPS cases. The constraints on migrant circulation imposed by TPS status stymie migration patterns exhibited by most transnational communities (Mountz, *et al.*, 2002).

Transnational migration has been defined by Glick-Schiller, *et al.* (1995, 48) as “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement.” The term, though, has become overused and infused with multiple meanings. In response to the growing number of migration studies differentially applying the concept of transnationalism, Portes, *et al.* (1999) proposed limiting the concept of transnationalism to occupations and activities requiring regular and sustained social contacts over time and across na-

tional borders. In situations where states exercise their sovereign rights to curtail flows of undocumented migrants or to strictly regulate trade (Sassen 1996), regular migrant circulation and transborder economic activity, however, may be curtailed. This is the case of Salvadoran asylum seekers in the United States who have been granted TPS. Families have developed a form of interaction with the home community that we describe as truncated transnationalism. That is, the home and host communities are connected through an imagined transnational social field largely void of circulating transmigrants. This constructed transnational social space holds a very strong attachment for some, but which, for many, is impossible to physically circulate in. Restrictions imposed by the state prevent migration, and the hope and anticipation for the freedom to enter the heretofore inaccessible migrant field place truncated transmigrants in a state of structural and behavioral limbo (Bailey, *et al.* 2002; Mountz, *et al.*, 2002). This transnational social field represents an imagined community different in form from that conceived by Benedict Anderson (1991), but nonetheless compelling as a subject of investigation. The research reported in this paper explores some of the particularities of the imagined transnational community of Salvadorans that make up the social field spanning El Salvador and northern New Jersey.

Transnational migrants' lives are ordered by the connections they have forged in different places. In the case of Salvadorans, the trauma of the prolonged civil war and its social and economic aftermath frames their perception of the point of origin. Many left family, including children, behind, and most hold a deep sense of commitment to people in El Salvador. Structural constraints imposed by BCIS regulations both obligate and prohibit settlement and place-making in the US. In order for these individuals to achieve residency, they must prove they have developed place ties in the US and that it

would be life-threatening for them to return to their home country. In the midst of these incongruencies, Salvadorans have thus created a transnational space in which place ties are established and maintained in the contradictory reality in which they live – they cannot formally settle and yet they must prove that they have; they cannot physically return and yet commitments to family and homeland obligate them to do so.

We propose that this transnational social field can be entered vicariously through gifts, telecommunications, and particularly remittances, even when legal constraints prevent actual migrant circulation. Most research on remittances has focused on the implicit contract migrants have with family members in the home community (i.e., Stark and Lucas, 1988; Stark, 1991; Lianos, 1997; Leinbach and Watkins, 1998; Menjivar, *et al.*, 1998) or on income redistribution and community development (i.e., Barhan and Boucher, 1998; Conway and Cohen, 1998; Jones, 1998; Rodriguez, 1998). We argue that, for Salvadorans, remittances serve as a form of return migration in the transnational circulation process. While vicarious return allows for limited maintenance of place ties and family ties, we also will discuss the social costs of remittance-based transnational households.

This paper examines the historical, legal, and social context of the Salvadoran transmigrant community and the multidimensional importance of place ties to this community. Second, we give voice to individual respondents in New Jersey and El Salvador who have adapted their lives in light of their need to develop and maintain place ties. Third, we explore various meanings of money beyond remittances and raise the question of the sustainability of such an imagined community embedded in a remittance-based economy.

### **The Interrupted Circle**

Refugees and asylees are rarely studied as circular migrants. The trauma of exodus becomes the focus of their expe-

rience, and their expected migration patterns are either resettlement (e.g., Miyares, 1996, 1998) or repatriation (UNHCR 1996). This limited view of their experience has now been brought into question. By adopting a life course perspective to refugee migration, Bailey and Hane (1995) found that some Salvadorans who left during the civil war seeking asylum in the United States or Mexico had developed circular migration patterns comparable to those of economic migrants. US asylum law prohibits migrant circulation until permanent residency is awarded, assuming that return migration is evidence of the possibility of voluntary repatriation. Salvadorans with asylum cases still pending risk deportation if they return to El Salvador to visit family left behind, yet many are committed to retaining ties to their home communities. Thus the "circle of migration" (after McHugh and Mings, 1996) has been interrupted by structural constraints imposed by the state (Mountz, *et al.*, 2002).

McHugh and Mings (1996) proposed three factors involved in the circle of migration: separation, experience, and return. Separation is the process of leaving home and the migration journey. Experience refers to the journey and placemaking in the new location. Return completes the circle of migration in that it "is the resolution and tension between home and journey" (McHugh and Mings 1996, 542). "The home-journey dialectic embodies a paradox. Journey increases awareness of home, yet absence engenders irrevocable change and loss of home" (McHugh and Mings 1996, 543). In the process, place ties to "home" can change, evolve, or become severed between locations as time passes.

Place ties are essential components of life. Relph (1976, 1) argues that "[t]o be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know *your* place." Place attachment results in an identification with and involvement in the social, cultural, and political features of a location (Mesch and Manor 1998, 504). One can have ties to a place that has actually been

experienced, what Relph (1976) has called existential space, or space that is experienced vicariously through the experience of others or by means other than one's actual presence. Attachment to a place considered "home" cannot be separated from the human relationships and social meanings that have defined a place as such (Sopher 1979, 137). Tuan (1975, 30; 1996) argues that attachment to place finds its most powerful expression in exile: "home becomes vividly real only when juxtaposed against the contraries – foreign country and journey." For Salvadorans we interviewed who had TPS are unable to enter El Salvador existentially without sacrificing their requests for asylum. Salvadorans live with an attachment to El Salvador yet the inability to return, and the legal need to develop place attachments in New Jersey in order to potentially bring the season of separation to a close. This has resulted in the development of creative, and often vicarious, strategies for maintaining ties to "home".

### The Study Sites and Methodology

This paper is part of a larger study that took place in New Jersey and El Salvador during the 15-month period between June 1997 and September 1998. We worked closely with Salvadoran community-based organizations in New Jersey that lobby for legislative change and assist in providing legal counsel to asylum seekers with the intent of better understanding the Salvadoran experience. Using a snowball method to select respondents, we conducted a structured ethnosurvey, interviewing 56 New Jersey Salvadoran households at length. This survey asked questions concerning household dynamics, migration history, employment history, healthcare, remittance behavior, community involvement and connections to El Salvador. Additionally, we held lengthy unstructured taped interviews of thirteen of these households.

In New Jersey, we attended community events; the second author volunteered as a teacher of English-as-a-Second-

Language, participated in community organizations and conducted interviews. During an annual picnic sponsored by one of the community-based organizations, we conducted an intercept survey with 183 Salvadoran respondents. We also spoke with approximately 25 transnational households across El Salvador over a 5-week period in the summer of 1998 and lived with one of those households in the San Salvador area for two weeks, experiencing first-hand the character of this truncated transnational community.

Our New Jersey-based interviews and time in El Salvador opened a window into the transnational structure of Salvadoran families. For those with TPS, there was little actual “to-ing and fro-ing” (Mountz and Wright 1996) so as not to risk jeopardizing their asylum cases. Additionally, the trauma of the war and an inability to experience first hand the changes in El Salvador resulting from several years of peace and relative stability, had created a transnational “landscape of fear” (Tuan 1979) the imagination of which prevented many Salvadorans from even entertaining the possibility of a return home.

Nearly everyone we surveyed and interviewed left family behind in El Salvador. Half of our respondents had left children behind in the care of others. As we visited families in El Salvador and became acquainted with children and the relatives who were fulfilling the role of parent, conversations about remittances did not solely focus on the financial benefits, although the evidence of those benefits was everywhere on the landscape. In many households, remittances have substituted for return. As one mother in San Salvador told us,

What helps people here are the people that have left, who are over there who send things to their parents to survive everything. That's how people get by. Because if you were to see the things that the humble people bring to exchange, bringing what their children have sent them

through sacrifice so that they would be able to leave their children, because they fled and when they are sent back here they have to steal, right, more poverty. Personally, for me, it's not recommendable that my children come back. I can't guarantee them anything if they come back.

To understand the role of place ties and vicarious return in this Salvadoran community, it is vital to enter the lives of those in this truncated transnational social field. Some Salvadorans in the US have been able to actually return, while most others do so vicariously through remittances, gifts, and various forms of telecommunications and electronic media.

### The Salvadoran Experience

Decades of poverty, corrupt governments, and political repression in El Salvador led to a 12-year civil war fought on several fronts. The civil war between the US-backed Salvadoran government and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) rebels involved extreme brutality that often obscured the goals and structures of support on each side. Military duty and political ideology could pit family members against each other. Both sides would conscript civilians into service, whether or not the “soldier” was an adult or supported the side for which he or she was fighting. Death squads fought a covert or “dirty war,” assassinating or causing the disappearances of key leaders such as San Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980, college students taking part in political activities, and other civilians suspected or accused, whether rightfully or not, of anti-government activities or sentiments.

Another front was the psychosocial war that paralyzed the Salvadoran populace and created a culture seeking to survive until the next day (Bencastro, 1996, 1997, 1998; Martín-Baro 1990). This produced a traumatized population (Carter, *et al.* 1989; Galdamez, 1990;

Martin-Baro, 1990; Rodriguez Diaz, 1997). Families gave shelter, scarce food, water, and other supplies to both sides; children and suspected household members were hidden to protect them from arrest or conscription, and conversations with all strangers and even loved ones were considered risks. Those most at risk of arrest, conscription, disappearance, or murder took their chances elsewhere – moving to different villages or cities, crossing the border to Honduras or Mexican refugee camps, or seeking asylum in the United States or Canada.

Tens of thousands of Salvadorans entered the US as undocumented migrants, typically crossing three to four borders overland with the assistance of coyotes, and many requested asylum at some point after arrival. These individuals and families anticipated receiving refugee status as had Nicaraguans and Cubans, but since the US had backed the Salvadoran government, people fleeing the slaughter in El Salvador (and neighboring Guatemala, where the US again supported out-of-control government forces) were received very reluctantly. The US immigration services made the case that Salvadorans entering the country without papers were illegal economic migrants rather than displaced refugees. During the 1980s, 98 percent of Salvadorans and Guatemalans who applied were denied political asylum (Mahler 1995, 159), compared to a 50 percent denial rate for Nicaraguans. In the mid-1980s, a group of Central American advocates and churches filed a lawsuit against the US government for practicing unjust standards in adjudicating asylum applications. This case, *the American Baptist Churches vs. Thornburgh* (760 F. Supp. 796, N.D. Cal. 1991), was settled out of court. According to the agreement, the US would give second hearings to those who had been denied asylum. It also gave people who had not yet applied for asylum the opportunity to do so. Meanwhile, those who either reapplied for asylum or applied for the first time gained the right to apply for the temporary program created in response, *ABC* (the acronym of the

principal church involved in the lawsuit). Through *ABC*, Salvadorans were granted temporary permission to work while they negotiated the long process of applying for asylum. The quantity of applications overwhelmed Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) asylum officers, the wait grew longer, and eventually anyone who applied for asylum under *ABC* received temporary permission to work.

In the same year that *ABC* was settled, the new Immigration Act of 1990 became law. This act granted Salvadorans Temporary Protected Status (TPS), that is, protection from deportation for 18 months. TPS gave asylum applicants a social security number and enabled them to apply each year for a work permit. The INS encouraged people with TPS cases to apply for *ABC*, each of which was extended beyond multiple deadlines. Subsequently, two acts redefined Salvadoran legal status, the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the 1997 Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA) (for more details, see Coutin 1998). These two laws only postponed resolution of the Salvadoran situation since both merely outlined how members of this community could prevent deportation orders. Even as late as 1997, there were over 190,000 cases pending. Only 3.5 percent of pending cases had been granted asylum, and only an additional 2.9 percent of the applications had been reviewed by an immigration judge (USDOJ 1999). This does not include the approximately 150,000 additional applications for temporary protected status that followed the devastation from the earthquake in El Salvador in 2001.

*ABC* or TPS restricted geographic mobility. For instance, people with this status must inform INS of any residential changes they make, and few Salvadorans move outside of the administrative region of the INS office where they have initiated the asylum process. A return to El Salvador, no matter how

fleeing, would infer to authorities in the United States that an individual no longer had a well-founded fear of persecution and would almost certainly cost that person any hope of continued eligibility for asylum. The effects of the Salvadoran struggle for residency reverberates transnationally. Most Salvadorans in the US left family members in their country of birth. We interviewed people in El Salvador who do not understand why their adult children in the US send gifts and remittances but have not visited in a decade. We also spoke to children who are being raised by grandparents and who only know their parents through gifts, remittances, and telephone calls. Salvadorans must choose between the possibility of political asylum status and returning to attend weddings, funerals, their children's birthdays, and other major family events in their home communities. Most choose to stay in the US and take their chances with the courts for longer-term possibilities of transnational circulation. Salvadorans in temporary status programs have been immobilized in a limbo of spatial, temporal, economic, social, political, and psychological dimensions. This prolonged experience of limbo has exacerbated the tension between "home" and "return." They can neither travel back to El Salvador to visit family, nor can they reunite their families in the US.

### **A View from "Home"<sup>1</sup>**

Our US respondents in New Jersey had to develop a certain degree of settledness to successfully plead their asylum cases, and they also did their best to maintain place ties with families left behind. They commonly achieved these transnational connections through village-based organizations within the US that worked to support community development beyond remittances sent to individual households in El Salvador. Below are selected stories from one Salvadoran village that exemplify ways in which this process has produced a truncated transnational social life for all in-

volved. We chose this village based on its degree of connectedness with New Jersey-based community members.

La Lomita is a small town in El Salvador's easternmost *departamento* of La Union. It lies several kilometers south of the departmental capital of La Union. La Union is a port city on the Golfo de Fonseca near the Honduran border. This easternmost state was minimally affected by ground combat during the war, but FMLN forces intermittently bombed the port to disrupt oil shipments coming into the country. Shipping-related businesses began to close, and the port ultimately closed in the mid-1980s, severely impacting the local economy. As of 1998, La Union had yet to recover. What few businesses remained were not major employers and involved low level, local, service provision.

In contrast, La Lomita was enigmatic. It appeared to be a thriving little town with a minimal internal economy (see Landolt, et al. 1999 for a similar discussion of the city of San Miguel). Prior to the civil war, La Lomita's economy was closely integrated with that of the city of La Union, with many of the men employed in shipping-related businesses. Locals reported that men began migrating to the US to work in 1970, but when the war shut down the port, the labor-force generation saw little choice but to head north. Moving to other cities such as San Salvador or San Miguel meant entering combat zones without necessarily securing jobs. People calculated that it was better to risk going to the US than to stay in El Salvador.

While a large proportion of the Salvadorans in the US appear to be comprised of economic migrants, both our research and earlier work (e.g., Chavez, 1994) found that it is difficult to separate economic motives from political reasons. For those from La Lomita, the line between being economic migrants and political asylees was similarly very fine. Although perhaps not directly at risk of death, the war's impact on the economy drove locals to emigrate. Many fleeing the war had applied for *ABC* status,

but, given that they were for the most part only indirectly affected by the hostilities the viability of their *ABC* cases was very tenuous. In the meantime, *La Lomitanos* in the US were making the most of their window of opportunity and were highly organized in their remittance commitments.

We arrived in time for a momentous occasion – the weekend-long celebration of the second paved street in town. The town consisted of two streets, *Calle Principal* and *Calle Escolar*. The latter, the street to the high school, was the focus of the celebration. We timed our visit with this celebration because of the pride with which one of our *La Lomitano* informants in New Jersey had spoken of his hometown. This was the only village in the area with a high school. Remittance-based projects had included a medical clinic, although they had yet to recruit a doctor. The next project was to be a playground for the village's children.

We assisted with the preparations for the celebration, and in doing so became acquainted with a number of the village's children. The evidence of remittances was everywhere. Children were wearing designer clothes and Birkenstocks while riding expensive mountain bikes. Several children were named after popular American primetime television characters. There were children everywhere, but we met few, if any parents.

La Lomita is a classic example of what Rouse (1991, 12) has characterized as a “nursery and nursing home for wage-laborers in the United States.” As with the community in Mexico about which he writes, “almost every family had members who were or had been abroad; the local economy depended heavily on the influx of dollars and many of the area's small farming operations continued only because they were sustained by migrant remittances” (Rouse 1991, 12; also see Jokisch 1997). Unlike Mahler's findings in other villages in La Union (Mahler 1999), even the majority of the mothers were absent here. Other than the visiting politicians and soccer players in town for the celebration, we saw three

distinct cohorts – grandparents, grandchildren, and several dozen young men. There was to be a dance that night and we had the impression that these young men had returned home to select wives. They were too young to be part of *ABC*, so were likely traveling without formal documentation.

Among our *La Lomitano* informants, we met Teresa. Teresa was a teenager who had almost completed high school. Her mother left for the US when she was only a year old, and she had not seen her mother since. Her grandmother, who was now quite old and frail, had served as the substitute parent. It became readily apparent who was caring for whom at that point. Beneath Teresa's warm smile and gentle disposition was a young woman with an uncertain future. For all of the activities and remittance-based projects organized by US-based *La Lomitanos*, little attention had been given to the future. Projects had improved the town's infrastructure, but had not created a local economy. Because of her responsibility to her grandmother, Teresa could not leave. Her options were limited to continuing to rely on remittances from her mother, who lived in the Salvadoran community in Nassau County, New York or to marry a transmigrant who would be an absentee spouse.

We also visited the children of one of our New Jersey informants, Eduardo. Eduardo originally left for the US alone and had significant personal problems. His wife chose to join him, leaving their two daughters with Eduardo's parents. Eduardo's father was a deeply religious man – part of the Catholic base community that developed in La Lomita during the war (see Galdamez 1990 for a discussion of Catholic base communities). His faith had been key in holding this family together. We brought gifts and messages of love for these girls. Over the years the girls had sent occasional videotapes to their parents in New Jersey, but they were wary of speaking to us. Whereas we had documented their parents' daily lives – their jobs, homes, and daily struggles, to these children, their parents

were a memory, an occasional phone call, and remittances.

Another child, Tomasito, age nine, spent extensive amounts of time with us over the course of the weekend. It was about 80° F, but Tomasito was in designer baggy jeans and a designer long-sleeved heavy knit shirt. He danced, sang, and carried himself like a child raised on MTV. He too lived with his grandmother. His mother had moved to New York City when he was four. We took his photograph and offered to find his mother on our return to the US. We asked him for his mother's address or phone number. He did not have it, but told us his grandmother, who had to go down to La Union for a few days, would have it. We returned to La Lomita a few weeks later and visited Tomasito and his grandmother. She did not have her daughter's address or phone number. Tomasito's relationship with his mother was one of gifts, remittances, and occasional calls to the town's one telephone, but they had no way of contacting her. Lupita, another nine-year-old who befriended us during our visit, told us her mother and older siblings lived in the Upper Midwest. Like Tomasito, she clung to a promise that her mother would send for her when she was older.

### **Transnational and Other Ties**

*La Lomitanos* in the US had become a well-organized, well-networked local community. It was also part of a well-organized, well-networked transnational community. Economic prosperity, however, hinged on regular and significant remittances from relatives in the United States. The tenuous legal standing of these US-based transmigrants, however, meant that the continued development of the local economy depended on two things: a sufficient number of transmigrants received residency in the US and investment in generative economic enterprises rather than consumptive activities. Vicarious return in the form of remittances translated into precarious longer-term local economic

development. Stymied efforts by Salvadorans in the US to visit "home" meant continued social dislocation across this transnational field.

For most of our respondents, initial separation from their homes in El Salvador had its roots directly or indirectly in the civil war and the continued separation in its economic aftermath. The US government's prolonged failure to resolve the "temporary" status of Salvadorans has only served to exacerbate the experience and impacts of separation. A woman in Newark revealed how she had children in the United States who were citizens and children in El Salvador that she had not seen in nearly a decade. She believed her children in the US would have more opportunity to prosper. A woman residing in San Salvador spoke of how her mother left for the US when she was eleven years old. She anticipated that her mother would remain in the US and she would remain in El Salvador. A woman interviewed in El Salvador had her husband and two sons in the United States. Like many others, her sons had not returned to her country due to legal constraints. She planned on remaining in El Salvador; however, her daughter who worked doing "simple" things such as selling perfume, wanted to join friends and family in the US. The daughter lacked any means of gaining sufficient monies to leave El Salvador.

Salvadorans with TPS in the US face a terrible dilemma. They must create place ties in the US to convince state authorities that it is life-threatening to physically return to El Salvador in order to be granted the legal right to visit "home". Legal residents are able to buy homes without the fear and risk of deportation. One couple decided to buy a house collectively with an extended family member who was a legal resident. For this family, a form of stability developed while awaiting the outcome of their asylum hearing. For other Salvadorans, fear can be both a determinant and a consequence of place ties, preventing some households from even considering physical entry into the transnational

space. For example, one couple did not want to risk losing what they had built in their community in Newark. Because they were not legal residents, a trip to El Salvador could cause them to lose everything. After ten years of investing and building ties in Newark, fear prohibited them from taking such a risk.

Maintaining or lacking a feeling of being rooted in either El Salvador or New Jersey can be a result of various ties built or severed throughout the transnational network. A woman in El Salvador told us that she never intended to migrate, although her mother had been in the US for fourteen years. "Yes, I will stay in El Salvador...stay with my people, my friends, people I love". Her roots were clearly in El Salvador, and they were strong enough for her to want to remain there for life.

Alternatively, a woman in Newark felt that she had roots both in New Jersey and in El Salvador. "I do feel like I have roots here...my heart is in El Salvador, however I am scared to confront El Salvador...if the situation would improve, I would live in El Salvador...I have one foot here, one foot there, I am incomplete!" She was asked about her ability to return to El Salvador even for a short time and of her sense of ties to both communities. She responded, "Being able to go to El Salvador is like a vitamin...going back would give you more strength to work harder."

Whereas successful adjudication of an *ABC* (asylum) case demands settledness and place ties in the US, the permanent temporariness of *ABC* and *TPS* inhibits the development of such ties (Bailey, et al. 2002). Accordingly, links to "home" or "community" are maintained through social networks. A majority of those interviewed belonged to at least one Salvadoran community group in New Jersey, whether social, political or religious. A large number were members of more than two groups, and some more than four. One woman described the community feeling in her town in New Jersey. "I do feel a part of a Salvadoran community...yes, because we give our time to each other, to spend

time with the other Salvadorans that are here." Another woman in New Jersey belonged to a church that was about 95 percent Salvadoran. This type of network can help migrants maintain and perpetuate ties to their home countries and overcome the interrupted circle, though vicariously.

The necessity of forming these connections as an alternative to returning to El Salvador is a result of familial attachments, particularly to children. Numerous individuals surveyed had children in both New Jersey and El Salvador. Several had left all of their children behind with relatives in El Salvador. For these households, it was essential that their imagined transnational space remain intact to validate ties and support family members abroad. It was hoped that the exchange of money and phone calls would help deter the negative affects of distance and separation. One mother stated:

Young children they just don't understand...now children are at the mall spending what mothers send...young people don't appreciate or understand the importance of this money and how it can change their circumstances in El Salvador...free deliveries have damaged the youth...grandparents have no authority over grandchildren.

The most prominent form of return was the money exchange between the two locations. A majority of the respondents sent money to El Salvador. Several respondents sent about \$1000 per year, some more than \$2500 and one respondent more than \$5000. This was done for various reasons. Some family members needed money for medicine, some send a little money when they could for immediate needs back home, and one was sending money to have a house built, assuming he would return one day.

Gifts and remittances signaled an effort by parents in New Jersey to maintain a sense of connectedness with their children in El Salvador and thus substituted

for actual return, at least for the time being. However, the parents felt they had to remain in the US to earn money for the family. Despite the social costs, parents believed they had little choice but to remain in the US. One respondent described this tension as follows:

They are still there so that their children can do better, their family is there, although they would like to have them by their side with them there.... And years and years pass, and they cannot have contact with the family, so after a while, maybe the parents have gone, and they have left behind their small children, and this love, well it gets lost. You know? So when, after a long time, they finally are able to come, well they don't come back to the same relationship that they could have had with a more constant relationship. Only by letter, by phone...

This account magnifies the importance that the forms of vicarious return have for Salvadorans. Although parents could not actually visit the children, telephone communication and transfers of money served as ways of maintaining ties.

### **Meanings of Money Beyond Remittances**

Money can hold multiple representations beyond remittances, including freedom, stability and success, division and separation. For example, to obtain a visa to enter the US even as a tourist, a Salvadoran has to have savings in a bank account, be a homeowner, or own and operate a business. A lack of money represents the inability to move, relocate or migrate, or obtain material items that others have the ability to buy. In the Salvadoran transnational community, money divides families who are assisted via remittances and those who are not. Money also represents division between families and loved ones for years at a

time. When a family made the decision to migrate to the US to enhance their income, money becomes a symbol of separation.

One respondent in El Salvador discussed how anger among community members could manifest itself toward families in El Salvador who had ties in the US and received remittances, thus hindering ties within the local community. Some families were poorer than others, and the ones who had money tended to resist helping the poorer ones, resulting in a sense of mistrust among neighbors.

Flexible relations between countries result in more opportunities ...more money, ...especially [in the] post war period ... very beneficial ... However, there is discrimination in El Salvador as a result of this transnational lifestyle. There is a difference in ways of living with those that receive money from abroad and those that don't. Assistance is very important, almost impossible to survive in some cases without it. There are negative aspects to this assistance however. People tend to be copycats and want what other people can obtain from this assistance they receive. As a result crime often manifests and people obtain money from any means possible.

### **Conclusions**

We have argued that the Salvadoran community has developed a transnational social field, though truncated, shaped by delays in resolving their "temporary" status. Migrants physically removed from their home communities, either because of the war or because of economic need, retain significant ties to their home places. In most cases, though, they have not been able to actually return physically. They do so vicariously through various forms of remittances.

What has emerged in the Salvadoran community is an economy of vicarious return that reconnects family members despite their inability to physically see one another. Within the Salvadoran ethnic economy in the US, a labor market has emerged designed to service remittances and to vicariously represent family members. A *vijero* or traveler carries gifts, monies, and messages between family members in the US and those back home. TACA, the Salvadoran national airline, offers special rates for couriers and the treasures they transport. Storefront money transfer services and long distance telephone centers are prevalent on the Salvadoran-American landscape and are present in cities and towns across El Salvador.

The question that remains is whether this is sustainable and what the future will hold for El Salvador and its people. We found, as did Landolt, *et al.* (1999), local remittance-based economies that produced nothing but future migrants. This imagined yet truncated transnational space has become more than just a way to describe the connections and circulation between the US and El Salvador. For a significant portion of Salvadorans in the US and for their families back home, life seems permanently interrupted.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The name of this village near La Union and of the children we interviewed have been changed to protect our

respondents both in El Salvador and in the United States.

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