



Living together across borders: Communicative care in transnational Salvadoran families

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Migration transforms societies in both sending and receiving countries, and this is especially evident in El Salvador. At least 25 percent of the Salvadoran population lives abroad, the vast majority in the United States. Transnational relations and flows are a defining aspect of Salvadoran society, politics, culture, and economy. A history marked by various forms of violence and adverse economic conditions has made emigration—and the resulting family separation—the only viable strategy for collective survival. How do transnational families remain connected and sustain relationships across borders despite long-term separation? In her book *Living Together across Borders: Communicative Care in Transnational Salvadoran Families*, Lynette Arnold delves into the communication practices of transnational families to make an argument about the vital role of language to maintain cross-border care and familial relations despite distance. While apparently ephemeral and minimal, everyday conversations are a driving force that forges *convivencia* — living together — and enables transnational families to both navigate and challenge the conditions of global capitalism. Yet, communicative care is entangled with and further reproduces socio-economic inequalities as well as gendered and generational hierarchies.

Arnold's two decades of engagement with transnational families in El Salvador serves as a background to this study. Employing linguistic anthropological methods, the author conducted ethnographic research tracing the linguistic practices of two transnational multigenerational families — the Mejías and the Portillos — during five years. After living with the families in the Salvadoran rural villa of Cantón del Río, Arnold traced the ties of these families to relatives in the United States and spent time with them in subsequent visits. In addition to conducting interviews, she also gathered recording of transnational calls. The latter are the primary form of commu-

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nication for transnational families, because they are not only technologically accessible but also strike a balance between allowing some intimacy while serving as a collective form of communication. Accounts of the historical and structural context shaping migration, detailed descriptions of family composition and structuring dynamics, combined with careful examination of communicative patterns from interviews and call recordings produced a profound and nuanced portrait of the powerful role and multidimensional impact of communication in cross-border care.

Weaving together insights from linguistic and medical anthropology, Arnold advances a communicative approach to care that “seeks to revindicate language as a vital care practice” (p. 16). Concretely, language facilitates, enacts, and signifies care. In the case of transnational families, communication is indispensable for coordinating the provision of practical and material care. Beyond this facilitating role, communication enacts care; language fosters emotional connection fundamental to sustaining familial ties across individual life courses and intergenerational spans despite distance. The work of communication as care is both material and affective. Further, communication defines what actions are identified as care and under which circumstances. The enactment of care and the production of the meanings of care, Arnold highlights, are co-constitutive.

A central aspect of Arnold’s approach is the acknowledgment of the political and contradictory character of care. While necessary to sustain life and while having the potential for resistance, care is also violent. It is shaped by and shapes socioeconomic inequalities of political economic regimes as well as hierarchies along the lines of gender, race, class, generation, and migration status. Care is transformative work that is both inequitable and labor-intensive. Likewise, care has been co-opted by capitalism and mobilized to perpetuate patriarchy.

The author addresses this co-optation of care through an analysis of migration discourses endorsed by the Salvadoran state. Migration and remittances are a crucial aspect of neoliberalism in El Salvador, and the discourses about them are a form of political struggle and signification. State rhetoric frames kin care as evidence of moral personhood and national belonging. It shifts responsibility for national well-being from the state onto migrants while promoting a simplistic, heteronormative vision of care as unidirectional economic provision from (male) migrants to dependents back home. This erases care’s multidirectional nature and non-material dimensions. Yet these dominant narratives create opportunities for resistance: migrants have strategically leveraged them to advocate for political participation rights, while cross-border communication simultaneously reflects and challenges state-endorsed imaginaries.

In contrast to state-endorsed rhetoric, Arnolds shows that transnational care involves reciprocal engagements in multiple forms of care, with language playing a crucial role. Rather than one-sided effort, care is defined by “collaborative *convivencia*” (p. 84). The analysis shows how conversations in transnational families involve not only the coordination of care provision but also reciprocal emotional and relational labor. Care in multigenerational extended households operates following the principle of asymmetrical reciprocity—structured by gender and age hierarchies, economic disparities, and moral imaginaries. This asymmetry manifests in communicative care: migrants primarily demonstrate care through financial provision, with communication serving a subsidiary role, while non-migrants enact “gracious per-



sonhood” mainly through communication (p. 73). Reflecting care’s inherently contradictory nature, these exchanges simultaneously reinforce existing hierarchies and create subtle opportunities for challenging familial power dynamics and fostering incremental change.

Arnold further explores the multifunctionality, temporalities, and contradictions of communicative care by examining three specific practices: greetings, remittance negotiations, and collective reminiscing. Through these everyday interactions, transnational families sustain the relationships that make cross-border *convivencia* possible. Such conversations enact transformative work that simultaneously preserves relational continuity and facilitates incremental change, primarily at the interpersonal level. At the same time, communicative care reproduces global inequalities by assigning asymmetrical expectations of care to migrants and non-migrant relatives, thereby inscribing broader socio-economic disparities between the Global North and Global South within kinship relations. These asymmetries are further shaped by intersections with gender and age hierarchies. Ultimately, cross-border *convivencia* and kin care within transnational families are embedded in, and often in tension with, larger sociopolitical structures and global processes.

The contributions of *Living Together across Borders* go beyond the field of linguistic anthropology and extend into the interdisciplinary domains of family and migration studies. Arnold skillfully connects global and national structural conditions to the everyday interactions of transnational families, illuminating the entanglements of language, care, and political economy. Against a global political context etched by the increasing dehumanization of migrants, the book offers an insightful testimony of the struggles that transnational families face and of their agency and resilience to navigate such challenging environments. As a migrant and member of a transnational family myself, I find Arnold’s analysis and her call for solidarity particularly resonant, offering an innovative framework through which to understand and engage with the lived realities of care, migration, and kinship across borders.

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