A complex set of economic, political and sociocultural factors associated with globalization are contributing to the growing displacement and scattering of families across space. Increased global integration of industrial and agricultural production systems organized around flexible strategies of capital accumulation disturbs established local work patterns. Workers – both men and women – are pressured to migrate across borders and into new labour markets in their search for a livelihood. Transnational business elites also navigate quite comfortably through the spaces of flows, profiting from their new found border-crossing mobility and multinational experiences of inclusion. In turn, narrowing eligibility criteria in the immigration policies of receiving countries delay or disable plans for family reunification. These transformations suggest that the spatially unilocal family may become an increasingly rare form of family life.

Time–space compressing technologies offer families with varying degrees of resources new possibilities for organizing family practices of reproduction and production around multi-local border-crossing arrangements. Research has documented the ways in which migrants negotiate and undertake significant aspects of their lives across borders and the cumulative consequences of these practices (Basch et al., 1994; Smith and Guarnizo, 1998; Portes et al., 1999; Levitt et al., 2003b). In particular, migrant families keep in touch and give care over long distances, send children to learn English abroad or back to the home country to be educated by grandparents. They manage multiple residences, and send or receive remittances. Immigrants also
engage in transnational collective action, forming grassroots institutions that facilitate their ongoing economic and political participation in places of origin and allow them to parlay home and host country social issues into a transnational platform of concerns. In turn, migrant transnationalism is associated with the construction of strategies by state and non-state national and international organizations and institutions (e.g. state ministries, transnational capital, religious institutions, etc.) that seek to engage with and control the activities of migrants and shape the agendas of their border-crossing institutions.

The existing literature offers suggestive albeit partial lines of enquiry and analysis for capturing the relationship between transnational migration and family practices. Pioneer studies of transnational migration recognized the distinct importance of the family for immigrants’ many border-crossing practices. The family was posed as the matrix from which a completely layered transnational social life is constructed and elaborated (Basch et al., 1994; Pe-Pua et al., 1996). Family networks have been conceived as a key micro-level building block on which other forms of transnational practices and institutions are built (Itzigsohn and Saucedo, 2001). In spite of this insight, little effort has been made to research or theorize the interface between transnational family practices and the public life of family members in entrepreneurship and political pursuits.

Research, explicitly focused on transnational family practices, has addressed the relationship between spatial ruptures and the negotiation of changes in the gender division of labour, gender relations and ideologies and intergenerational relations within the family. The literature captures the internal dynamics of transnational families through detailed case studies, but offers few overarching conceptual propositions. Indeed, as Levitt and Glick Schiller (2003) point out, there has been only limited consideration of the ways in which the broader institutional landscapes in which migrant families are embedded shape their propensity to experience spatial ruptures, the character of these long-distance relationships and family members’ ability and willingness to negotiate and manage their personal lives across borders.

Our article seeks to contribute to the conceptual spadework of bridging scholarship on transnational migration with studies of transnational family practices. Our comparative study draws on propositions and insights from the two fields to examine the multi-local transnational family practices of two dramatically different migrant populations. We explore the family practices of Salvadoran refugee-migrants in the US and of middle-class emigrants from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to Australia. We consider two overarching issues: first, how do contexts of exit and reception contour the transnational migration patterns and resulting spatial arrangements of immigrant family practices? Second, how do the actions of sending states impact the material and discursive dynamics of transnational family practices?
The article is organized into four sections. The first section reviews literature on the immigrant family, transnational family practices and transnational migration. It identifies key arguments and concepts that serve to organize the analysis of the case studies. The second section provides an overview of the contexts of exit and reception, and the state–migrant relations that characterize PRC migration to Australia and Salvadoran migration to the US. The third section presents a selection of family biographies in order to explore the types of transnational family practices found across the two cases. The final section is organized around the comparative analysis of the empirical findings and a discussion of the conceptual challenges posed by our effort to bridge regions and literatures.

**Bridging Literatures: Transnational Migration and Family Practices**

The family is a primary social institution that plays a central role in securing livelihood for individuals throughout the life-cycle, meeting individuals’ affective needs, and serving as a primary arena of socialization, identity formation and value transmission. The family is best conceptualized not only as a structural unit, but also as a series of relationships or a network of individuals bound by an ideology of shared kindred that engages in social production and reproduction, caregiving and feeding work (Orellana et al., 2001; Parrenas, 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003). The family interacts with and reflects the broader social order in which it is embedded. If the family is a set of social relationships, then it follows that both the family network and its individual members are implanted in a set of complex economic, social, cultural and political arrangements that contour the organization and character of the family (Li, 1998, 2001). The social orders race, class, gender and generational structures also determine the character of family relations and practices (Bottomley, 1983; Bottomley et al., 1991). In this light, the family emerges as a set of hierarchical social relationships that exhibit tensions, conflicts and disagreements about the definition of priorities, the management and allocation of resources, and the ideal strategies and division of labour for undertaking caregiving, feeding work and value transmission.

In the migration process, the family undergoes changes because it must continue to meet the same set of needs within a dramatically changed context. Migration does not dissolve, but redefines and challenges the established codes that organize and give meaning to the commitments and demands of the family. Displacement and physical relocation disrupt the material and discursive arrangements of the family as members find themselves spread out across different cities and countries, and consequently embedded within
different economic, social, political and cultural contexts. Migration produces changing options, modes of negotiation, sources of tension and sources of power and autonomy for its members. Gender and generational differences remain especially salient dividing lines, defining the particular interests and sources of power of individuals within the group. As new situations and conflicts arise, so too emerge novel instruments and strategies for resolving tensions (Boyd, 1996; Parrenas, 2001; Da, 2003b).

Our exploration into the spatially fragmented practices undertaken by migrant families establishes a dialogue and draws propositions from three overlapping sets of literatures including research on the immigrant family, transnational families and transnational migration. First, research on the immigrant family has focused on unilocal families, often conflating families and households. Spatial ruptures in family geographies have been treated as a temporary aberration and family reunification in the host society as a forthcoming and desirable end goal. New scholarship suggests that spatial ruptures need not signal family disintegration and may reflect a social reconfiguration that enables family members to maintain a sense of multiple and multi-localized belonging (Herrera-Lima, 2001). Without collapsing into economic imperatives as the driving logic of family spatial ruptures, it is undeniable that the migration of economically active members of the family unit remains an effective strategy for diversifying income sources by placing family members in different labour markets (Massey et al., 1998; Gonzalez de la Rocha, 2001; Lam et al., 2002). Indeed, these transnational and mobile livelihood arrangements may be emerging as the only viable, albeit precarious option for a growing number of working families inserted in the global economy (Sorensen and Olwig, 2002). While often tied to the necessities of livelihood, multi-local transnational family arrangements can also be part of a strategy for social mobility (Ong, 1999; Olwig, 2002). Spatial ruptures can even serve to assert wealth and status distinctions. In effect, multi-local transnational families cannot simply be branded as an irregularity destined to result in family collapse or as a temporary setback in the ideal family arrangement, and require further investigation.

Second, the literature on transnational family practices explores how spatially fragmented families negotiate changes in the gender division of labour, gender relations and ideologies, and intergenerational relations. Some of the central themes that have come out of this research include: analysis of how spatial ruptures between mothers and children lead to changing notions of motherhood (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Da, 2003a, 2003b); examinations of the stress imposed on heterosexual conjugal relations by physical separation and changes in the way male and female fidelity is defined and policed by the family and community (Binford and d’Aubeterre, 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003); and the ways in which the roles of elders, particularly grandmothers, are transformed (Plaza, 1999; Da, 2003a).
Findings challenge traditional theories of mother–child bonding, as well as popular gender ideologies that reify particular notions of womanhood (Orellana et al., 2001; Parrenas, 2001).

Significant theoretical and empirical gaps remain to be addressed in the study of transnational family practices (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2003; Pessar and Mahler, 2003). There is scant debate about the spatiality of family practices (Kivisto, 2003). In particular, there is limited discussion of the relationship between mobility and changing notions of home and away, or new understandings of presence and absence in family relationships. The ways in which physical distance and the ability of some members of the family to cross borders plays out as a source of power and autonomy for some individuals within the family network, and as a site of risk, threat and uncertainty for others has not been fully explored. Part of the difficulty is that most patterns and features associated with transnational family practices are drawn from case studies of particular immigrant groups in particular regions. In fact, the dearth of comparative analysis of the phenomenon has unwittingly resulted in a conceptual bifurcation between analysis of Asian and Latin American family practices. While the former is narrowly associated with the practices of elite – typically Hong Kong and Taiwanese – astronaut families with ‘computer widows’ and ‘parachute children’, the latter focuses on the ideology of marianismo (a stereotyped gender role where the ideal woman is self-sacrificing and serves her children and husband) to reify the fate of the working transnational mother. The trend is problematic because what is essentially an empirical divergence that revolves around class and resource differences threatens to collapse into a new set of essentializing conclusions about the cultural imperatives of Asian and Latin American families.

To break with this conceptual bifurcation and provide a more analytical explanation for differences and similarities across the two case studies, we draw on work by Pessar and Mahler (2003), and particularly, their notion of gendered geographies of power. The concept of gendered geographies of power is composed of three conceptual building blocks including: first, the term ‘geographic scales’, which asserts that gender ideologies and relations are configured simultaneously on multiple social spatial scales; second, the concept of ‘social location’, which captures the idea that people are positioned within interconnected power hierarchies that confer varying degrees of advantage and disadvantage; and, third, the concept of ‘power geometry’, which brings to the foreground the types and degrees of agency people exert given their social location (Pessar and Mahler, 2003). The idea of ‘power geometries’ highlights differences in people’s engagement with and experiences of time–space compression. Individuals may create, initiate or comfortably navigate the space of flows produced by late capitalism, while others may be more on its receiving end (Massey, 1994).

Third, the transnational perspective on migration confirms that a
growing proportion of the world’s migrants maintain enduring ties to their homelands even as they are incorporated in countries of resettlement. Migrants’ border-crossing relationships and activism have called into question conventional assumptions about the direction and impacts of international migration (Levitt et al., 2003a). A decade of research on transnational migration has generated rich discussion and debate. Recent efforts in the field focus on the articulation of a more coherent set of predictive arguments about the causes and consequences of transnational migration, the codification of transnational practices undertaken by different types of individual and institutional actors, and a consideration of the relationship between transnational practices and immigrant incorporation in the host society (Levitt, 2001; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2003; Portes, 2003).

Two propositions from this corpus guide our discussion of the border-crossing practices of transnational migrant families. First, it is argued that the character and scope of immigrant transnational activism are determined in part by the contexts of exit and reception that frame the migration process (Portes, 2003). The original concept of modes of incorporation poses that contextual factors in the host country such as the responses of the host government and civil society, labour market conditions and the human and social capital of the ethnic group determine differential settlement outcomes across immigrant groups (Portes and Böröcz, 1989; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). A transnational research lens stretches this argument in order to consider how conditions in places of origin also affect the character of migration flows and resettlement dynamics. Significant conditions include the character of the migration flow: whether it is a forced or voluntary migration, home country civil society responses to the emigrants, and societal norms and expectations about migration as a social process (Massey et al., 1987; Landolt et al., 1999; Popkin, 1999; Roberts et al., 1999).

Second, the literature suggests that differences in the propensity towards transnationalism are also conditioned by the border-crossing social, political and cultural landscape in which families and communities are embedded. This complex material and discursive border-crossing space is captured by the notion of transnational social fields defined as sets of interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices and resources are exchanged, organized and transformed (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2003). The institutional responses and opportunity structures available within the transnational social field contour the character and scope of transnational practices (Levitt, 2001). Home country state responses to emigrant populations are a particularly consequential part of this transnational institutional landscape. State action has multiple dimensions, including law, in particular changes in definitions of membership; state or elite rhetoric vis-a-vis the migrant population; and migrant-targeted public policy initiatives (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2003). The literature identifies
three types of migrant-sending states including transnational nation-states, which treat emigrants as long-term, long-distance members; selective states, which encourage some forms of long-distance participation and strategically restrict others; and, disinterested or denouncing states, which treat migrants as though they no longer belong to the homeland (Levitt and de la Dehesa, 2003; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2003; Popkin, 2003). State responses are never static and home country states will typically alter their relationship to migrant citizens over time.

Our article draws insights from the literature on the immigrant family, transnational family practices and transnational migration to make several empirical and conceptual contributions. First, we compare the long-distance family practices of two different migrant populations in an effort to gain a perspective on the viability, meanings and long-term consequences of long-distance family practices. Second, we explore the interface between the spatial arrangements of immigrant family practices and both contexts of departure and reception, and state actions, broadly defined. Third, we assume that gender organizes all social relations and that all social institutions embody, manifest and impose gendered realities and dynamics on individuals and groups. As a result, inspired by Pessar and Mahler (2003), we attempt to bring a gendered gaze to concepts – such as contexts of exit/reception and state actions – that are central to any discussion of transnational migration. Finally, we draw on the concept of gendered geographies of power to consider differences and similarities in gender dynamics across the two cases, and to contribute by an empirical study to the development of concepts that will allow us to engage in theoretically driven cross-national and comparative research.

The data for the article are drawn from our respective research projects. Data for the Chinese case are drawn from an Australia-based study conducted in 1998 by Wei Wei Da on the family practices of immigrants from the PRC. In the original research, qualitative data collection techniques were employed including in-depth interviews with 40 migrants who had emigrated from China to Australia after 1980. Interviews collected detailed data on a variety of family-related items, including issues related to marriage and attitudes towards sexuality, child-rearing practices, the division of labour within the family and kinship tie maintenance practices.

Data for the Salvadoran case are drawn from a study undertaken between 1996 and 2000 by Patricia Landolt as part of a larger project on the causes and consequences of the emergence of transnational communities among Latin American immigrants in the US under the direction of Alejandro Portes. The multi-sited study involved three phases of data collection over a four-year period including: (1) guided interviews with key informants in Washington, DC, Los Angeles and El Salvador; (2) semi-structured interviews with confirmed transnational actors and a general household survey of
Salvadoran residents of Washington, DC and Los Angeles; and (3) semi-structured interviews with confirmed transnational actors in rural and urban locations of El Salvador. The project sought to capture the scope of transnational connections between places of origin in El Salvador and Salvadoran settlements in the US, and to understand the cumulative consequences of this phenomenon for Salvadoran places of origin and of resettlement. Findings from the original project on family practices have been substantiated through additional and ongoing qualitative interviews by Landolt in El Salvador.

Contrasting Landscapes of Transnational Migration

We have organized the presentation of findings into two separate case studies, leaving the discussion of comparative trends for the final discussion. In this section, each case study includes a discussion of two processes: first, the contexts of departure and reception that frame migration and their cumulative impact on the character of migration flows; and second, the character of state–migrant relations.

PRC Immigration to Australia

Contemporary migration from the PRC to Australia echoes a series of socio-economic changes in both the sending and the receiving countries. The volume, nature and scope of the immigration flow are unprecedented, even when compared with patterns of 19th-century migration from China to the West. Emigration from the PRC to advanced western capitalist nations emerges out of and reflects the dramatic economic, political and cultural transformations that have swept across the country since the 1970s. In the late 1970s, with the end of the 10-year Cultural Revolution, China introduced a new ‘open door policy’ that initiated the country’s fast-track incorporation into the international capitalist system. In the 1980s, state efforts to restructure relations of production and reproduction were marked by groundbreaking economic reforms such as the creation of Special Economic Zones, designed to attract foreign trade and investment. In the early 1990s, the state became even more permissive of private enterprise, adopting the official slogan ‘Let some people get rich first’ (Gao and Liu, 1998).

Together, economic reforms and an ‘open door policy’ were tied to increased geographic mobility for individuals. Movement was no longer strictly controlled by the regime. The household registration system, adopted in 1955 in order to control rural to urban domestic migration, was gradually relaxed, which led to massive internal migration from rural inland areas to the urban regions of the coast. On the international front, new immigration policy measures contributed to a radical transformation in the character and scope of Chinese migration and in the PRC’s relationship with the overseas
Chinese diaspora. Restrictions on selective return migration to Hong Kong were lifted. Personal contacts with relatives from overseas, forcibly cut off during the Cultural Revolution, were reinstated. Leisure travel abroad, which for decades had been tightly controlled, became more permissive as overly bureaucratic procedures were simplified (Zhang, 1995; Fung and Chen, 1996; Gao and Liu, 1998; Tian, 1999). The government also piloted programmes to send scholars and students abroad for study, with the expectation that they would bring back knowledge and technology that might contribute to China’s ‘catch up’ project (Liu, 1997; Gao and Liu, 1998).

A rhetorical reformulation of migration and the migrant has shadowed the sea change in China’s political and economic relationship with advanced capitalist nations. In just two decades, emigration has gone from being a treacherous act, to something that was tolerated but ideologically suspect, to an activity that is openly and unreservedly encouraged and celebrated. Indeed, all migrations – regardless of whether the migrant is a man or a woman or whether the path taken is authorized and regulated, or undocumented and dangerous – are now judged by their results – ideally economic success abroad – and are recognized as a patriotic act. The elite narrative emphasizes that both new migrants and the historic diaspora are bound to China by ties of blood, and share with the PRC state the goals of modernizing the country. As Nyíri (2001) explains, the current discourse of Chinese national identity underplays and takes for granted historical memory and ancestral myths. Instead it focuses on playing up essentialized character traits and patterns of behaviour – such as the myths of Chinese industriousness – to which people can relate in their everyday lives. This official discourse is echoed by the media, as well as being internalized and consumed in only slightly modified forms throughout Chinese overseas settlements (Mitchell, 2001; Nyíri, 2001).

The Australian state also initiated a series of policy shifts in the 1970s that together with the new policies of the PRC paved the way for a wave of Chinese immigration. Australia’s immigration system was overhauled as race-based entry requirements were replaced with a focus on the human capital and financial liquidity of potential newcomers, and as a national multiculturalism programme was developed. Australia also established diplomatic relations with China (Hon and Coughlan, 1997; Massey et al., 1998). In the 1980s, Australian government programmes shifted to more targeted schemes for promoting and regulating Asian immigration. The government launched the lucrative education export programme, which provided English courses to overseas students, where Asians were understood to be the primary market. Since tuition fees for the ESL (English as a second language) courses, albeit high, were lower than fees for full degree programmes and given that entry requirements for the language programmes were fairly lax when compared to similar programmes in Canada and the US, the programme became a gateway
for Chinese migration to Australia. In 1983, there were less than 40 paying students in the programme, but the figure had jumped to 30,000 by 1992 (Fung and Chen, 1996; Gao and Liu, 1998). According to the 2001 census, there are now an estimated 142,780 Chinese-born people living in Australia, including 66,617 men and 76,163 women (Da, 2001).

Contemporary Chinese emigration has occurred in three stages, each involving distinct modes of exit and entry, as well as groups of migrants with distinct demographic and network profiles. A first wave of migrants exited China in the 1970s. The majority of emigrants in this first wave came from traditional rural source regions of Southern China’s Pearl River Delta. They had relatively low levels of formal schooling, and had relatives overseas who were able to help them finance their departure (Da, 2001). A second wave occurred in the 1980s. This population was distinctly urban, had higher rates of education and was employed in white-collar professions. Rather than draw on personal contacts to emigrate, the vast majority made use of international scholarships and educational opportunities abroad to leave China. An estimated 200,000 people left China as students during this period (Fung and Chen, 1996; Tian, 1999).

In the 1990s, a combination of factors led to a shift in PRC migration patterns. First, both the PRC and receiving states such as Canada, the US and Australia consolidated complementary policy programmes. The PRC state promoted study and investment abroad, just as receiving countries, such as Canada and Australia, instituted policies and programmes, such as the Canadian investor visa programme and Australia’s language programmes, that facilitate entry. Second, the penetration of immigration agencies into China and the increasing density of social networks and transnational exchanges between China and its diaspora meant that the current migrant was able to access more complete information about his or her migration options than previous emigrants. There was now increasing familiarity with immigration policies and selection criteria of different countries, labour market conditions and of the long-term chances of economic success (George et al., 2000; Wang and Lo, 2004). As a result, a three-tiered system of international migration has emerged: first, there are individuals and families that emigrate due to the sending and receiving state incentive policies; a second group of urban and educated individuals, who are able to mobilize information and financial support through their personal networks to take advantage of study abroad programmes or to apply as independent class immigrants; and, third, there is a growing pool of workers who are willing to risk their lives to exit China through undocumented and unauthorized means.

Salvadoran Refugee Migration to the US
The contexts of exit and reception that frame Salvadoran migration to the US stand in sharp contrast to those identified for PRC immigration to Australia.
El Salvador has a century-old tradition of largely unauthorized and unregulated regional labour migration tied to the seasonal demands of Central America’s agro-export economy (Vilas, 1995). In the decades before the civil war, labourers migrated cyclically to work and were reabsorbed into the household during economic down times. The viability of this flexible household arrangement rested on the expectation that migrants would save their wages while away from the house and make contributions to the family economy upon their return. The cyclical labour migration system also gave rise to a malleable kinship system, high rates of free unions and high numbers of children born out of wedlock both within the central conjugal couple and within other relationships established in secondary locations (Barón-Castro, 1978). By the 1970s, the country’s growing pool of land-poor rural wage workers were migrating by hundreds of thousands to work in Honduras, Guatemala, Panama and sometimes even as far as California.

In the late 1970s, the violence and economic disruptions of the civil war (1975–92) dismantled the regional labour migration system. Indiscriminate violence in the countryside and targeted persecution in urban areas prompted a massive refugee exodus of 30 percent of the country’s population, estimated at just over 5,000,000 in 1980. While an estimated 10 percent of the displaced sought refuge within Central America, the lion’s share of the refugees eventually abandoned the region and made their way to the US, and in smaller numbers to Europe, Australia and Canada (Hamilton et al., 1988; Zolberg et al., 1989).

The context of reception faced by Salvadorans in the US exhibits elements of hostility and of support. Much like the war itself, Salvadoran migration and resettlement in the US played out like a political battle between a hostile US government and a globally networked movement of progressive grassroots organizations. The federal government, which was politically and financially allied with the Salvadoran state, questioned the legitimacy of Salvadoran asylum claims and refused to recognize El Salvador as a refugee-producing country. Denied refugee status, Salvadorans lived in fear of deportation and only applied for asylum once apprehended by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). By the mid-1990s, an estimated 50 percent of the Salvadoran population remained undocumented or had only secured some form of temporary immigration status (López et al., 1996). Currently, in spite of the passage of favourable legislation such as the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA) that facilitates the regularization of undocumented Salvadorans, unauthorized entry into the country and undocumented labour market participation remain central pillars of the Salvadoran migrant experience in the US.

The labour market conditions faced by Salvadorans arriving in the 1970s and 1980s were equally troubling. A wave of deindustrialization and restructuring led to a collapse in unionized employment, a downward push on
wages, an informalization and a deskilling of the labour process, and an increased labour market segmentation (Sassen, 1991; Cross and Moore, 2002). Reflecting the global shift in the international division of labour, gender and age-based segmentation of labour market demand had a long-term impact on Salvadoran employment opportunities (Nash and Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Sassen-Koob, 1988). Young Salvadoran women found work as industrial and private caregivers and domestics, and in labour-intensive assembly work organized by sweat shops and homework arrangements (Repak, 1995; Bobo et al., 2000). Young men were hired for dangerous and backbreaking work – cleaning high-rise windows, removing asbestos, landscaping, etc. (Mahler, 1995; Landolt, 2000; Andrade-Eekhoff, 2003). Twenty-five years later, Salvadorans remain concentrated in industrial niches that are characterized by low wages, poor working conditions and uncertainty (Wilson, 2000).

On the other hand, the Salvadoran context of reception can be considered favourable in the sense that the refugee-migrants received support from a variety of international non-governmental organizations and transnational grassroots associations. Such organizations assisted the refugee camp populations in Central America, tracked the refugees' transit across borders and provided refugees with material and legal assistance in places of resettlement. In particular, transnational organizations loosely allied with the political project of the Salvadoran guerrilla movement, the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), mobilized to assist the refugees, monitor human rights abuses in El Salvador and lobbied for non-intervention and El Salvador's right to self-determination. This globally networked grassroots social movement enabled many Salvadorans to access a variety of resources in their process of incorporation. It also cloaked Salvadoran resettlement with a distinct discourse and imagery that emphasized the migrants' qualities as hard-working and politically educated individuals (Coutin, 2000; Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001).

Salvadoran refugees also drew on their own social networks of family and friends to assist them in the resettlement process. Newcomers found housing together, shared tips about job opportunities, formed church congregations, soccer teams and social clubs, and thus sought to reconstruct the torn social fabric of their lives. Continuing obligations to friends and family left behind in El Salvador also framed resettlement. When and where it was possible, the refugees sent money and care packages home with what quickly became a small army of suitcase traders known as encomenderos. Obligations to kin, heightened by the uncertainties of war, consequently served as a significant point of departure for the formation of transnational family relations. Over the years, border-spanning social networks have moved beyond the family, and now link together a broad spectrum of Salvadoran society. In the process, migrants, historically associated with
displacement and marginality, have unwittingly become critical agents of social change, shaping the dynamics of El Salvador's economic, political and cultural institutions at the local, regional and national level (Mahler, 1995; Landolt et al., 1999; Menjivar, 2000).

The transformation of El Salvador by the migration process has led to a dramatic rewriting of state–migrant relations. Over a period of 30 years, the Salvadoran state has changed from being what Levitt and Glick Schiller (2003) categorize as a hostile and denouncing state into a selective state that encourages some, but restricts other forms of transnational participation. After the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992 and as part of the state's project for reconciliation, the government began to reform consular services. Consulates developed broad-based outreach initiatives that included legal services for Salvadorans attempting to regularize their status in the US, public celebrations of religious festivals and national holidays and the organization of consultations and business meetings with Salvadoran entrepreneurs and community leaders. National and municipal government representatives began to visit migrant settlements. After a decade of impromptu postwar projects of reconciliation, the state's extra-territorial initiative culminated in 2000 with the creation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of a new office called the Dirección General de Atención a la Comunidad en el Exterior (General Secretariat of Attention to the Community Abroad, DGACE). The DGACE seeks to coordinate, facilitate, promote and support initiatives that incorporate migrants as long-distance development and business partners. Yet, the right to vote in national elections is not forthcoming (Landolt, 2003).

The postwar shift in state–migrant relations is shadowed by a rhetorical reformulation of the migration process and its key actors. Having portrayed the refugee-migrants as subversives and traitors throughout the war, the Salvadoran state and elite-owned national media have now recast the migrant as the hermano lejano or distant brother, the most industrious member of the national family, whose long-distance commitment to El Salvador is reflected first and foremost in the sending of remittances. In spite of the growing proportion of young women who now make the trip to the US, this national elite narrative is silent on the possible presence of a hermana lejana or distant sister. The hermano lejano narrative extends into a very problematic portrayal of El Salvador-based members of the migrant family. As the story goes, the migrant worker is often burdened by an irresponsible family that misspends his remittances and does not understand the importance of savings and productive investments. Echoing the North American neoliberal critiques of underclass welfare dependency and abuse, the receipt of remittances is associated with what are deemed socially inappropriate consumption patterns by peasant families and decay in the campesino family work ethic. Echoes of this multidimensional elite narrative are heard across a broad
spectrum of El Salvador’s population. Its most virulent versions are espoused by traditional village elites in pueblos with high rates of out-migration.

The ongoing structural dislocations of the Salvadoran economy and the maturity and complexity of the country’s migration networks guarantee that migration to the US will continue largely unabated well into the 21st century (Mahler, 2000). The initial modalities of exit from El Salvador and reception in the global cities of the US have cumulative consequences. Contemporary Salvadoran migration flows exhibit several basic features. Salvadoran migrants tend to sustain border-crossing social networks throughout their lives as sojourners and expatriates. Transnational social networks guide the early years of the immigrant experience, and become increasingly stable and complex over time. The promotion of a managed form of long-distance nationalism by the Salvadoran state facilitates migrants’ long-term engagement in El Salvador.

Finally, while US-bound migration now spans the social gamut, with a growing number of middle-class professionals also joining the flow, transnational migration remains largely the purview of working families who are forced to migrate to secure their livelihood. Three overlapping labour migration patterns are discerned as part of what appears to be an increasingly common strategy of assuring family livelihood through multi-local and transnational arrangements. Young men and women participate in short cycles of labour migration to regional production sites, such as export processing zones (EPZs) and modernized plantations, that are inserted in the global economy. After this first labour migration cycle, the young worker is poised for international migration to the next global work site – a poultry farm in Alabama, stoop agriculture work in California, or janitorial work in a Los Angeles corporate office. Finally, old age is no longer associated with return and a sedentary life, but may also involve ongoing movements between El Salvador and the US (Landolt, 2001; Popkin and Andrade-Eekhoff, 2002; Andrade-Eekhoff, 2003; Gammage and Schmitt, 2004).

To summarize, four features distinguish the contexts of exit and reception that frame the PRC Chinese and Salvadoran migration processes. First, whereas PRC Chinese migration is largely voluntary, Salvadoran migration is marked by violence and is clearly forced. The character of the emigration process has an effect on the degree of planning and resource consolidation a family can undertake prior to departure, on the migrants’ material and symbolic relationship to the home country, and on the institutional dynamics that frame their relationship to the sending state. Second, there is a marked difference in the kinds of social networks Salvadorans and PRC Chinese draw on to exit their respective homelands. Whereas Salvadorans depend largely on personal contacts of kinship and friendship to make the journey to the US, the PRC Chinese access information and other resources for emigration from a variety of sources: these are not restricted to personal
contacts, and also include institutional resources tied to educational and business investment opportunities.

Third, the sending and receiving state’s relationship to the migration process is markedly different. The PRC state has what amounts to an explicit policy of exporting educated urban professionals in order to advance China’s economic development. In turn, reflecting its own labour market demands and the interests of its multinational corporations, the Australian immigration system encourages the controlled entrance of PRC Chinese. This clear coincidence of interests creates a favourable institutional climate for authorized and planned migration from China to Australia. It also facilitates and in many cases encourages the construction of border-crossing relationships and institutions that complement or are directly aligned with state and capital interests. In contrast, Salvadoran migration brings together a tradition of unregulated labour migration with a refugee exodus, whose root causes and overwhelming dimensions are denied by both the sending and receiving state. This is followed in the postwar era by the consolidation of a migration system in which undocumented labour is exported to the US to meet the demand in the secondary labour market, and migrant remittances are imported to El Salvador to subsidize family livelihood and benefit Salvadoran finance capital. While denouncing the risks of undocumented movement and unauthorized entry, both the US and Salvadoran economies are structurally dependent on the continuation of this unregulated flow of precarious workers and are unlikely to address the root causes of continued migration.

Fourth, the character of transnational relations maintained between the two migrant populations and their respective homelands is also quite different. In the Salvadoran case, there is a great diversity of non-state transnational economic, social, cultural and political institutions that tie El Salvador to its migrant settlements. Over time, the relationship between these organizations and the state has shifted from antagonism to strategic cooperation. Alternatively, Chinese transnational practices are highly regulated and leave little room for independent undertakings by non-state actors. The PRC state and the state-friendly media have dedicated considerable resources to the penetration and incorporation of non-state transnational institutions into the government’s globalizing business agenda. Independent non-state transnational institutions are few and far between.

As a result of these differences, the families we have studied navigate through very different migration systems. In the case of the PRC, while dependent on the opportunities and resources the individual is able to garner in social networks, immigration is undoubtedly facilitated by the policies of the sending and receiving states. The migration process is therefore planned, documented, regulated and enveloped by a discourse of patriotism and national pride. Official rhetoric frames the maintenance of ties with people and institutions in the PRC – particularly once economic success has been
established abroad – as a patriotic duty that reflects well not only on the individual and his or her family, but also on the PRC. In the Salvadoran case, immigration is born of basic necessity – survival in a context of war and in the postwar era the need to supplement the family income to ensure livelihood. Movement across borders, the search for work and long-term settlement are unregulated, precarious and undocumented; fraught with risk for individuals and their families. Finally, while the Salvadoran state espouses a discourse of diasporic nationalism and takes strategic measures to regulate the situation of unauthorized Salvadorans living and working in the US, its initiatives are largely symbolic and do little to ensure migrant families’ citizenship rights either at home or abroad.

Spatial Ruptures and Transnational Family Practices

In this section, we examine the spatially fragmented family relationships that we found in different modalities across the two cases. In particular, we consider spatial ruptures in relations between married partners or the conjugal relationship, the relationship between children and their parents, particularly the mother; and the relationship between elders and both economically active adults and grandchildren. In each case study we present short family biographies that we consider emblematic and particularly revealing of multi-local, transnational family practices.

PRC Family Strategies of Social Mobility

The transnational family practices of the PRC migration to Australia reveal patterns that unravel our established understanding of Asian family transnationalism. The biographies also challenge assumptions about gender roles. The first three biographies exemplify situations in which families have been able to negotiate with relative ease the opportunities and obstacles posed both by sending and receiving state policy, and by global labour markets. In these three cases, flexible family arrangements have emerged that are characterized by a bridging and effective shrinking of geographic distances.

The first biography provides a noteworthy gender-bend on the well-known astronaut family phenomenon (Pe-Pua et al., 1996; Ong, 1999; Waters, 2002). In the 1990s, Li Xiao-gang immigrated to Australia with his son under his wife’s application as a business immigrant. As he explains, they chose to emigrate because, like many of their peers, they considered it trendy to go abroad; it not only symbolized their wealth, but also the promise of further success, particularly since Li Xiao-gang’s wife had plans to expand her existing business to Australia. Shortly after their arrival, however, his wife decided that the business expansion was too risky and returned to China to continue running her mid-size firm. Li Xiao-gang remained in Sydney. He
now recognizes that, although pre-arranged and mutually agreed upon, years of separation from his wife have harmed his marriage. Nonetheless, they both accept their long-distance marriage arrangement and continue to frame their emigration as a change of residence that has ensured economic success. Their lifestyle confirms this last interpretation of the family migration – both spouses shuttle back and forth for regular visits, Li Xiao-gang works in a Chinese business and has not felt the need to improve his English; he shops in Chinatown, and socializes within the Chinese community. His life and that of his family are deeply transnational and embedded in the opportunities granted by wealth and networking strategies of the contemporary Chinese diaspora.

Two additional family biographies highlight the importance of English-language ability and labour market possibilities to determining the spatially flexible patterns of family settlement outcomes. Zhao Jian-guo, his wife and their son emigrated together to Australia. Although the parents were professionals with good jobs in China, their English was quite poor. Unable to find work, Zhao Jian-guo’s wife returned to Hong Kong to continue her job in the finance sector, while he stayed in Sydney and opened a grocery store. The entire family is now able to get together occasionally. In a contrasting case, Wang Mei-ling and her husband emigrated to Australia precisely because of their excellent English skills. Wang Mei-ling’s husband soon found a well-paying job in an international company that wanted to expand into China. He was quickly offered a senior position in the company that required that he move to China. He now shuttles back and forth for work and in order to maintain his family. The case of Wang Mei-ling’s family also highlights that Chinese transnationalism is not simply a strategy of particular Chinese entrepreneurs, or even simply of the PRC state, but also one that is promoted and consolidated through the activities and business interests of foreign corporations seeking a bridge into the Chinese economy (Light et al., 2002).

The next two biographies provide examples of situations in which families have not been able to bridge distances as easily. More corrosive long-distance family practices have ensued. The case of Chen Da-jiang is fairly common. In 1990, Chen Da-jiang left his wife and child in China and migrated to Australia on a language programme with the plan of eventually sponsoring his family to join him overseas. A tardy immigration procedure delayed family reunification for seven years. In this time, Chen Da-jiang never visited China. He regularly sent remittances home, while his wife sent him clothing and care packages from China. In a further case, Lu Yang migrated to Australia in the late 1980s thanks to one of the country’s language programmes, leaving behind her two-year-old daughter and her husband. It took her six years to sponsor her husband. During this time, she travelled home twice and had her child visit her once. Even after the couple’s situation
had been regularized, they opted to have their child remain in China under the care of Lu Yang’s mother. Economic restrictions, the time pressures of full-time employment, her desire to practise her chosen profession and a belief that the PRC education system is superior made it easy for Lu Yang to justify her decision to leave her child with her parents.

The Precarious Livelihoods of Decentred Salvadoran Families

It is estimated that one in five households in El Salvador now has a significant family member living abroad and receives cash and other remittances on a regular basis (Mahler, 2000; Orozco, 2002). Research in El Salvador, particularly in San Salvador, in villages with high rates of out-migration and in two primary resettlement locations in the US, Los Angeles and Washington, DC, serves as the basis for identifying three patterns that characterize contemporary Salvadoran multi-local, transnational family arrangements. Furthermore, the multi-sited character of the original fieldwork facilitates discussion of these long-distance relationships from the perspective of different family members.

The first set of findings provide a glimpse of different patterns of spousal separation and long-distance conjugal arrangements that emerge when a country has become a primary exporter of labour power. The case of Maria Angelica Castro is fairly standard. She is an underemployed, 32-year-old mother of three children with a primary education. Her husband made the trip to Houston with the aid of coyotes or human smugglers in the mid-1990s and was then working undocumented somewhere in the US. When her husband first arrived in the US, he kept in touch and sent remittances quite regularly. But three years later, the couple has lost all contact. Maria Angelica Castro no longer receives remittances and does not have the resources to make the trip herself. Conversations with townsfolk during the course of our research about the impact of migration on their communities all too often end with discussions about the abandonment of women like Maria Angelica Castro by migrant husbands. Pueblo residents continually cite cases of women they know whose husbands send remittances infrequently or stop sending them. In these discussions, the irregularity of remittance receipts is not associated with husbands’ economic difficulties – layoffs, injury at work or increased costs of living – but rather with husband malevolence and infidelity.

The feminization of secondary labour market demand in the US alters the way conjugal couples negotiate migration. The growth in the flow of female labour migrants is reflected in the rise of niche market coyote services that specialize in smuggling women into Mexico and the US. The migration story of Irma and Ernesto Zelaya reflects this labour market shift. Ernesto Zelaya left his war-torn pueblo and made his way to Washington, DC, during the height of the civil war, leaving his wife, Irma, behind. He found relatively
stable work in construction and landscaping. Irma Zelaya, a primary school teacher in El Salvador, also made the trip undocumented and joined Ernesto Zelaya in Washington, DC, in the late 1980s. In Washington, DC, she sometimes got work as a domestic, but dedicated most of her time to running a home daycare service for other Salvadoran families who lived in their building. Eventually, they were both able to regularize their situation in the US, acquired their green cards and when the Peace Accords were signed, they returned to retire in El Salvador. In the first few years of their return, Ernesto Zelaya continued to migrate seasonally to the Washington, DC area to work in construction, but his trips never lasted more than a few months. Today, both in their late 60s, having built a good-size home, and purchased some land in the outskirts of town, they no longer have plans to go anywhere.

Long-distance and ruptured relations between migrant mothers and fathers and their children receive considerable attention and are a source of continual concern in El Salvador. Two family biographies provide different insights into this phenomenon. The case of Juan Antonio Perez is particularly tragic. Unemployed and with few prospects for providing for his newborn son, Juan Antonio Perez Sr migrated undocumented to the US in 1986, leaving behind his wife and child. Shortly thereafter, his wife was diagnosed with cancer and died in 1987, leaving her mother to raise her one-year-old child. Juan Antonio Perez Sr eventually found work as an electrician in San Francisco, remarried and started a new family. In spite of this, he continues to send monthly remittances to help cover some of his son’s living expenses, talks to his son on the phone and when he can sends him care packages with what in El Salvador are considered luxuries – brand name running shoes and jeans, video games, roller blades, etc. Although he still does not have his green card, Juan Antonio Perez Sr has on three occasions arrived in El Salvador claiming that his son must start preparing himself to leave El Salvador and that his move to the US is imminent. Each of these visits propels the boy’s grandmother into a depression, infuriates the other family members and encourage the boy’s fantasies about the wonders and riches that await him in his new life in the US. Juan Antonio Perez is now 17 years old, has briefly seen his father three times and still lives in San Salvador with his grandmother, who has raised him since birth.

A second case captures the dynamics of mother–child separation from the point of view of a non-migrant grandmother. Mrs Delfina Reyes lives in a large traditional house in the urban core of a pueblo in the central region of El Salvador. She has been taking care of her migrant daughter’s two children, aged four and seven, for the past three years since her daughter made the trip to the US undocumented. Delfina Reyes accepts her responsibility as the children’s primary caregiver and clearly assumes her duties with pride. Although there have only been occasional problems, she is worried about the timely arrival of the remittances her daughter sends for covering
the costs of raising the children. Delfina Reyes does not mention the children’s father. The children have not seen their mother since her departure, although they talk to her occasionally on the phone.

There is a growing population of children and youth being raised in El Salvador by adults other than their biological parents. Migrants are either leaving children in the care of grandparents and other members of the extended family, or sending US-born children back to El Salvador. While some people, such as Juan Antonio Perez, dream of giving their kids ‘a better future’ in the US, the majority of migrants make the move undocumented, work in precarious jobs and have limited possibilities for sponsoring their children to join them in the US. On the other hand, village residents associate the north-bound exodus of young workers and the separation of children from their mothers with a decay of family values, where teenage girls are portrayed as morally reproachable and young men as disengaged. The spectre of sexual promiscuity, drugs and gang activity hangs over these representations (Zilberg and Lungo, 1999). The contrast of this discourse with the narrative of the hermano lejano is noteworthy.

An overarching context of economic uncertainty and insecurity in El Salvador is giving way to a continual circulation of family members across locations. Undocumented labour migration begins when boys and girls reach adolescence and continues late into the individual’s life-cycle. Not only the economically active members of the family migrate as youths, but the elderly are shuffled back and forth between places of origin and immigrant settlements to complement adult work schedules. This suggests a need to examine the long-distance arrangements of Salvadoran families in a way that extends beyond a focus on spatial ruptures in dyadic relationships, i.e. mother–child or conjugal couple separations. The Jimenez family provides an excellent example of an urban middle class taking on these emergent family arrangements.

The Jimenezes are a large urban middle-class family that includes two elderly parents in poor health, five middle-aged offspring including three professional daughters who work in San Salvador, two working-class sons with stable employment in Los Angeles, and a large number of grandchildren in the US and El Salvador. The family’s migration process began during the civil war with the two young sons; later on, the father and one of the daughters fled the country for political reasons. Twenty years later, the family continues to engage in an endless juggling, in which members with varying resource contributions and demands are constantly shuttled across borders. Economic uncertainties and increased levels of violence and insecurity in San Salvador – the family has been carjacked several times – constantly prompt the Jimenez clan to discuss the possibility of a permanent and intact family move to Los Angeles. Yet they resist. In recent years, the family’s migration moves have concentrated on those who are considered more at risk; first,
taking into account the medical needs of their ageing parents the Los Angeles
based sons put the money together to sponsor their parents for the green
card; second, after high school graduation, the teenage granddaughter was
sent to study in Los Angeles. As a result, although she had originally resisted
living in Los Angeles, the Jimenez grandmother followed her teenage grand-
daughter to Los Angeles and now spends extended periods of time in the US,
raising her teenage granddaughter. In this case, the back and forth movements
of family members, first of the working-age members and the politically at
risk, and in the postwar years of the more vulnerable members, demonstrate
an effort to negotiate multiple locations to the advantage of the complete
extended family unit. There is a strong shared project of economic stability
and well-being.

The PRC and Salvadoran family biographies offer empirical evidence for
three types of family network patterns associated with transnational migra-
tion: spatial ruptures between mothers and children, long-distance conjugal
relationships and arrangements in which families circulate children, elders
and working-age members of the kin network across locations. The evidence
suggests interesting differences and similarities across the two cases that are
examined in the final discussion.

Discussion and Conclusion

The concluding discussion identifies themes that tie together the two case
studies, explores some of the conceptual insights that emerge from the
research, and indicates some of the methodological challenges posed by our
comparative approach.

Two themes clearly stand out as points of convergence across the case
studies. First, the case studies suggest that transnational family arrangements
are embedded in and have a transforming effect on established traditions that
frame both the materiality and normative order of expectations that define
family practices. In the Salvadoran case, for instance, flexible livelihood
arrangements that revolve around the migration and long-distance economic
contributions of working-age members of the family have a long history tied
to the tradition of labour migration and to the region’s agro-export harvests.
Migrant remittances are the contemporary pillar of this century-old
tradition. Currently, however, the migrants’ ability to return home regularly
is sharply curtailed. Thus, while the commitment to contribute earnings to
the family and ‘do right’ by one’s kin remains, the context in which such
arrangements are realized is fundamentally transformed and increasingly
uncertain. Likewise, in the case of the PRC, there are numerous traditions
that structure today’s long-distance family practices. Most notably the role
of grandparents, particularly grandmothers, as caregivers and educators of
their grandchildren is well established in the Chinese family tradition. Indeed, leaving young children in the care of grandparents when mothers migrate to urban areas for work is quite common. Such practices lay the normative groundwork for transnational mothers who opt to leave children in China in the care of kin.

Second, significant changes are taking place in the gender role performances and gender ideologies that organize women and men’s social location in the two migration systems. In dramatic contrast with 19th-century patterns of Chinese labour migration, which were dominated by men, and challenging established portrayals of Asian family migration strategies, Da’s research finds women initiating the immigration process and sponsoring their husbands, women as the heads of astronaut families and immigrant career women opting to practise their desired profession and leaving children in China with grandparents to continue their education. Woman-led family strategies for migration and mobility are facilitated by a number of factors including the gender equity policies promoted under Mao’s China, the current policy initiatives of the sending and receiving states and the discursive legitimacy granted by PRC state rhetoric.

In the Salvadoran case, the feminization of precarious work in the secondary labour markets of the US means that young women are joining men in the trek north. As they send remittances, women migrants also contribute significant resources to the family economy and, by extension, to the national economy. Unlike the PRC’s migration narratives, elite representations of the hermano lejano and popular discourses about the decay in family values that results from leaving children in the care of elders not only fail to acknowledge women’s resource contributions, they are likely to undermine women’s interpretations of their migration process. Although beyond the scope of the present discussion, the family biographies also suggest changes in age roles for elders and children that merit further consideration. The physical absence of working-age adults from the quotidian routines of home life has the potential to confer greater autonomy to remaining family members and may lead to the establishment of new types of relationships between the oldest and youngest generations of the family.

The multi-local transnational family practices of PRC and Salvadoran migrants provide a data-rich point of departure for strengthening the conceptual arsenal of the immigrant families literature and the transnational migration literature. First, together the two case studies bear ample evidence of the fact that the practices of immigrant families are being transformed by the process of globalization. Multi-local, transnational family practices are neither an anecdotal curiosity, a region-specific phenomenon, a temporary aberration on the road to family reunification in the host country, nor simply the refuge of the working poor. While Salvadoran working poor families disperse kin across different labour markets to reduce the costs of social
reproduction and guarantee livelihood, PRC families shuttle children, working-age adults and the elderly across locations as they make a bid for upward mobility.

Second, in a variety of ways, the case studies highlight the importance of considering the spatiality of family relations and family practices. To begin, the definition of the family as a network of individuals bound by an ideology of shared kindred breaks with the spatial determinism of the family as a geographically intact household. This definition has allowed us to trace the border-crossing dynamics of family practices. What we uncover is that transnational migration is promoting the formation of family networks that are dispersed and decentred. In turn, the constant circulation of family members within this transnational network prompts a redefinition of notions of home and away, as well as of presence and absence. In this context, phone calls, emails, letters, remittances, care packages and air travel enable families to maintain relationships and make decisions together across borders, allowing migrant members of the family to remain present. Increasingly, the idea of being ‘present’ is tied not to face-to-face interactions between loved ones, but rather to remittances and other kinds of resource contributions by migrants and non-migrant caregivers alike.

Geographic distance and mobility are clearly contentious sources of power and vulnerability within the transnational migrant family. Perennial concerns about the timely arrival of remittances to cover livelihood costs highlight the profound vulnerability of being a non-migrant member in a transnational family and the power conferred by, but also the tremendous responsibilities imposed on the mobile members of the family. The remittance uncertainty also sheds new light on the notion of precarious work. Traditionally reserved to refer to underpaid and structurally unstable wage work in secondary labour markets, in a multi-local transnational family caregiving and feeding work also become sites of precarious unpaid labour by wives, mothers and grandmothers that like precarious wage work are also tied to the vagaries of globalization. The dependence on remittances to ensure livelihood and to cover the costs of raising children also intimates a commodification of family practices.

The research reveals the many different ways migrant families attempt to navigate the space of flows produced by late capitalism. While some families are able to shrink and bridge distances, others experience dramatic ruptures in their family network. There is not only one type of transnational families, but rather a continuum of familial arrangements; families may shrink and successfully bridge long distances or their multi-local transnational practices may be ruptured, fragmented and even interrupted for substantial periods of time. Likewise, multi-local family arrangements may be associated with upward mobility and professional career goals, but can also be tied to livelihood requirements. Of course, what begins as a risky
journey imposed by structural dislocations may result in long-term improve-
ments in the family’s quality of life, particularly children’s access to health
and education.

A combination of factors determine a family’s ability to navigate global-
izing dynamics to their advantage including the family’s personal resources,
the resources they garner through different types of social networks; state
policies of sending and receiving states; and the elite and popular narratives
that provide tropes that family’s and individual family members draw on
both to make and justify their decisions. Evaluations of whether a family
network is simply being stretched or if a devastating rupture has occurred,
are socially constructed, in part through the multiple narratives of migration
in which family practices are embedded.

To conclude, the two case studies allow us to contribute to the research
agenda of transnational migration. First, our findings confirm the importance
of contexts of exit and reception in contouring the practices of migrant
families. More significantly, the research advocates that studies of trans-
national migration should pay more systematic attention to the narratives
and representations that shadow institutional processes. It also highlights the
importance of a gendered understanding of key institutions and policies that
are the bedrock of transnational migration systems. Second, the research
raises questions about the appropriate unit of analysis for studying trans-
national migration and about the kinds of data we need to collect in order to
capture the complexities of transnationalism. If the family plays such a
critical role in undertaking transnational endeavours such as entrepreneur-
ship and bids for political power and status, how are we to capture the inter-
face between these public ventures and their family underpinnings without
understanding what takes place within the family unit? To provide a more
concrete example, survey questions about transnational migrants who own a
second home in their place of origin or send remittances to family and friends
in their homeland provide only limited information about the resource circu-
lation that takes place within the family network. Such questions fail to
capture the tensions and power games that go into forging the transnational
family networks in which other activities are embedded and on which they
depend. Our research confirms the need both to bridge the study of immi-
grant families with broader discussions about transnationalism, and to recon-
sider the research agenda of transnational migration so that we can capture
the relationship between the networked practices of primary social insti-
tutions such as the family and the collective endeavours of transnational
migrants.
Notes

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1 At: www.ree.gob.sv/
2 The names of the interviewees have been changed.

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