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ABSTRACT

By tightening its borders and reducing opportunities for unauthorized immigrants to adjust their status, the United States has created a population of long-term unauthorized immigrants who are now transitioning into older ages. As the undocumented population ages, issues of death and dying are increasingly relevant to them and to their families. Though we know much about how families maintain social and emotional closeness despite geographic distance, death and dying remain undertheorized in transnational family scholarship. This is important because the death of a family member can significantly impact family structure and functions. Based on ethnographic and interview data collected between 2017–2022 with unauthorized Mexican immigrants and their families, this study examines how older undocumented immigrants grapple with the fear of transnational death before it impacts them, how individuals mourn from afar when people they love and rely on in their communities of origin die, and how transnational families are impacted by the death of one of their members, especially when that person played a vital role in maintaining transnational bonds. In addition to contributing to the literature on transnational families, this research advances immigration scholarship by highlighting underappreciated social and emotional penalties imposed by current immigration laws. This study also contributes to our understanding of the importance of death and bereavement by examining the consequences of being prevented from gathering to grieve.

Key words:

undocumented immigrants, immigration, aging, death, transnationalism, mixed-status families

Grieving in the “Golden Cage”: How Unauthorized Immigrants Mourn from Afar

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The foundation of mourning is the impression of a loss which the group feels when it loses one of its members. But this very impression results in bringing individuals together...

The group feels its strength gradually returning to it; it begins to hope and to live again. Presently one stops mourning, and he does so owing to the mourning itself.
—Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, p. 465–466

Mourning the dead is a nearly universal human experience. Though the tenor of rituals may vary — some cultural traditions are more celebratory, reflecting beliefs about life after death; others focus on the loss of life and are accordingly somber — groups tend to gather to mark the deaths of their members. Funerary rituals allow groups to renew their bonds and provide a space for individuals to confront death and express negative emotions (Durkheim 1912). Yet not everyone is able to gather and grieve. Individuals may be cut off from attending funerals for a variety of reasons, including incarceration or restrictions on in-person gatherings, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ In the past three decades, as countries have tightened their borders, many people have been prevented from mourning their dead in person due to immigration policies.

Rising immigration restrictions and increased enforcement have made entering the United States without authorization more dangerous (De León 2015) and prevented unauthorized immigrants² from adjusting their immigration status (Menjívar 2014). This blocks unauthorized

¹ Ávila (2021) notes that transnational death and death due to COVID-19 can be overlapping experiences, given the overrepresentation of immigrants in “essential jobs” that place workers at higher risk.

² Foreign-born non-citizens who live in the United States but lack “legal resident” status. In this paper, I use “unauthorized” and “undocumented” interchangeably.

immigrants from practicing circular migration, resulting in years or decades of separation from loved ones in their countries of origin (see, e.g., Abrego 2014; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007). As a result, when unauthorized immigrants in the United States lose loved ones in their communities of origin, they are very rarely able to attend funerals.

Scholars have called attention to disrupted circular migration patterns (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2015) and increasingly punitive immigration enforcement measures that lead to abrupt family separation (Golash-Boza 2015). This study adds to transnational families and migration scholarship by calling attention to additional, widespread hardships: the pervasive fear that friends and relatives will die before migrants can return to their communities of origin and the inability to attend mourning rituals when they do.

Transnational grieving (Bravo 2017) refers to the experience of mourning a loss that occurred in a different country — a transnational death. For the purposes of this study, transnational grieving refers to the experience of mourning the death of a close family member or friend and being unable to attend mourning rituals due to immigration status.³ I focus on unauthorized Mexican immigrants mourning deaths that occurred in their communities of origin.⁴ Drawing on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the United States and Mexico between 2017 and 2022, I ask three questions to understand how unauthorized immigrants contend with transnational loss: (1) how does the fear of transnational death shape the lives of unauthorized immigrants, even before it impacts them directly?, (2) how does unauthorized immigration status create and complicate transnational grieving?, and (3) what strategies do people use to mourn from afar while undocumented?

³ In Communications, the terms “transnational grieving” and “transnational mourning” have been used to refer to public vigils mourning deaths that occurred across national boundaries as a form of protest (see, e.g., Chéry 2017).

⁴ Future research should study how transnational death impacts families when immigrants die in the United States. That experience is acknowledged in this paper but is not the primary focus.

The findings are divided into three sections. In the first empirical section, I argue that as unauthorized immigrants age, the possibility of transnational death becomes a specter that looms overhead and shapes emotional wellbeing. This specter is twofold: immigrants in this position worry about not being able to say goodbye and mourn their loved ones in person; they also worry that their loved ones in Mexico may experience the pain of transnational grief if they themselves die in the United States. The second empirical section focuses on how undocumented status creates and complicates transnational grieving. I find that, in addition to experiencing feelings of grief commonly associated with loss, undocumented transnational mourners report having added feelings of powerlessness and guilt, directly and explicitly attributable to their inability to cross the border. The death of a support person can also cause a domino effect of additional losses — ranging from losing a caretaker for children who remain in Mexico to losing administrative support for remittances and savings. The third empirical section discusses the strategies that unauthorized immigrants use to grieve. Strategies — which may be used alone or in tandem — include sending a documented family member to the funeral in their stead, providing financial support for funeral arrangements, and/or participating in end-of-life moments and funerals using technology. Importantly, access to these strategies varies, as does the comfort that each provides. Taken together, the evidence underscores challenges of aging without documentation and the importance of integrating death and dying into the study of migration. It also highlights the value of mourning as a collective social ritual — the absence of which has specific and lasting costs for transnational families.

DISRUPTED MIGRATION PATTERNS

Beginning with the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), the U.S. government

has increasingly penalized unauthorized migration and militarized the Mexico-U.S. border, disrupting longstanding patterns of circular migration for unauthorized immigrants. As the risks to migrate have risen, many would-be temporary Mexican migrants without authorization have stayed in the United States instead of going back and forth as people did in previous decades (Massey et al. 2015; Reyes 2004). During the same period, the United States has restricted opportunities for immigrants who are undocumented to become legal residents, ramped up detention and deportation, and increased recruitment of migrant workers on short-term temporary visas with limited earning potential and workplace rights (Durand and Massey 2019).

These legal changes have led to an increased undocumented immigrant population. The current undocumented population is estimated to be triple what it was in 1990 — and nearly half of all undocumented immigrants hail from Mexico (Lopez, Passel, and Cohn 2021). This period has also led to much longer migration stays for unauthorized immigrants, 66 percent of whom have lived in the United States for more than ten years (Lopez et al. 2021). Among Mexican immigrants without authorization, this figure rises to nearly 85 percent (Lopez et al. 2021).

Some studies describe longer migration stays as settlement (Chavez 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1995; Lopez et al. 2021; Massey, Durand, and Pren 2016). They note that since the late 20th century, Mexican immigrants have established long-term residences across the United States, with a large proportion marrying and having children in the country or bringing family members from Mexico to join them. Even when unable to adjust their legal status, undocumented immigrants participate in their communities as parents, workers, volunteers, and consumers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1995). This can create a sense of belonging and a feeling of “substantive citizenship” despite lacking recognition by the state (Chavez 1994; Isin 2008).

Other studies emphasize structural constraints that problematize the notion of

“settlement” among unauthorized immigrants, pointing to the constraints that lead them to live in the United States long-term with no change in status. Scholars describe this as a “caging effect” or “*jaula de oro*,”⁵ noting that undocumented immigrants feel trapped within the borders of the United States because there are economic incentives to migrate, but it is so risky to attempt circular migration (Minian 2018; Reyes 2004; Rosenblum 2012). Research that compares documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants finds that documented immigrants circulate back and forth across the border freely, while their undocumented counterparts are “caged in as long-term settlers” (Massey et al. 2015). This has created a system of “slow violence” that “routinely leaves noncitizens waiting, marooned, left out, and helpless in their efforts to remain or reunite with their family members” (Lee 2019; Nixon 2011).

PERSEVERING TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

Despite years-long physical separation, many immigrants remain socially and economically connected to their communities of origin and the people who live there (Van Hook and Glick 2020). Migrants adopt a “transnational family strategy” (Abrego 2014) when economic opportunities lead some members to migrate while others remain in origin communities because they are unable to migrate safely together (Boehm 2012; Dreby 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007; Parreñas 2015). This common pattern leads to the geographic separation of many families who must now relate to each other across borders (Carling, Menjívar, and Schmalzbauer 2012; Menjívar and Abrego 2009; Schmalzbauer 2005).

Transnational families use increasingly affordable technologies to communicate more

⁵ The term *jaula de oro* comes from a song by the band Los Tigres del Norte, who sing, “Aunque la jaula sea de oro, no deja de ser prisión” (“Even if the cage is made of gold, it’s still a prison”) alluding to the economic opportunities available in the United States for undocumented immigrants who must essentially sacrifice their freedom of mobility in order to attain them (Minian 2018).

frequently and in new ways to maintain strong relationships (Bacigalupe and Cámara 2012; Baldassar 2008; Madianou and Miller 2012). Transnational parents use digital communication tools to build stronger relationships with children (Francisco 2015) and to perform care work from afar (Parreñas 2015).

Technology is insufficient for managing all aspects of transnational family life. The usefulness of technology varies by circumstance. Previous research finds that technology is unsatisfactory during periods of illness and dying (Baldassar 2014). Technology is also insufficient for managing many crucial responsibilities. Migrants typically rely on a strong relationship with someone in the origin community to handle financial affairs, share news, answer calls, and carry out family responsibilities that must be done in person, such as caring for children or older family members (Dreby 2010; Parreñas 2005; Thai 2014). Losing such a person can pose significant challenges for migrants and their families.

Though we know much about how families maintain social and emotional closeness despite geographic distance, death and dying remain undertheorized in transnational family scholarship. This is significant because the death of a family member can significantly impact family structure and functions. Given that immigrants rely on a small number of people to help them stay connected to their communities of origin, the death of one such person has the potential to significantly transform or even sever transnational family ties. Accordingly, I examine the practical challenges that stem from transnational death and how transnational families work to solve ensuing logistical problems.

Transnational family scholarship has largely focused on relationships between migrant parents and their young children, but data show that immigrant populations are aging, and their transnational bonds persist. A quarter of unauthorized immigrants are estimated to be 45 years or

older, and 62 percent have been in the United States for a decade or longer (Migration Policy Institute 2019). The few studies that have examined transnational family relationships between adult migrants and their own parents find that immigrant adult children use remittances and technology to care for their aging parents, despite high emotional and financial costs (Miyawaki and Hooyman 2021). Distance and lack of mobility complicate adults' abilities to provide care for their parents (Baldassar 2007) and to receive familial support (Bruhn and Oliveira 2021).

As the undocumented population ages, issues of death and dying are increasingly relevant to transnational families. This study adds to this literature by examining how older undocumented immigrants grapple with the fear of transnational death before it impacts them, how individuals mourn from afar when people they love and rely on in their communities of origin die, and how transnational families are impacted by the death of one of their members, especially when that person played a vital role in maintaining transnational bonds.

NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF MOURNING FROM AFAR

Mourning rituals prompt social networks to gather. They serve as ceremonies through which groups reinvigorate bonds — and redefine their boundaries. Funeral rituals confront death in order to reassure mourners and allow life to continue (Bailey and Walter 2016; Davies 2017; Long and Buehring 2014). Durkheim (1912) argues that by coming together, a group asserts that the death of one member has not “killed” the group and that it will survive. Through mourning rituals, groups assert who their legitimate members are and what statuses people hold within group hierarchies (Walter 2008; Woodthorpe 2017). For example, in the United States, families make decisions like which people will carry the casket, who will be listed as a “survivor” in the obituary, and who will give the eulogy.

Mourning rituals provide spaces for expressing emotions about death as well as giving and receiving comfort. Within funerals, individuals may express sorrow in ways that are not socially sanctioned in other spaces, such as crying loudly (Fulton 1995; O'Rourke, Spitzberg, and Hannawa 2011). Interacting with others allows mourners to confirm one another's emotions and feel that they are less alone because other people feel the same way, and they express negative feelings together (Collins 2014; O'Rourke et al. 2011). Funerals permit mourners to share stories and reminisce about the deceased (Bailey and Walter 2016). Comparing virtual and in-person funerals, palliative care researchers argue that physical touch mitigates grief and is an essential component of mourning rituals (Petry, Hughes, and Galanos 2021). Psychological research points to the benefits of funerals in helping individuals accept and come to terms with death (Doka 2008). Recent sociological research points to the power of funerary rituals not only to reaffirm existing social bonds but also to create new bonds (Prickett and Timmermans 2022). It follows that being prevented from gathering to mourn is a significant penalty for unauthorized immigrants and their families.

Other fields have begun to examine transnational grief as a penalty. Recent death studies and psychology research has examined how undocumented status impacts immigrants as they mourn deaths from afar. Not being able to return for a loved one's funeral carries negative emotional costs. Immigrants in this position struggle to accept the death (Le Gall and Rachédi 2019). Among unauthorized Mexican immigrants, experiencing transnational death is a predictor of clinically significant distress (Garcini et al. 2020). In Mexico, relatives of undocumented immigrants who died in the United States report that they struggle to find closure while families of immigrants who were able to practice circular migration seem to experience less trauma (Ortiz Ruíz, Aguilar Magaña, and Rivera Heredia 2020).

In this study, I argue that much can be learned by advancing “transnational grieving” as a sociological phenomenon. The study of mourning for those who cannot participate in funerals in person helps reveal the social function and emotional importance of community rituals around death and dying. A sociological perspective also reveals strategies that people undertake in response. How do individuals in this position grieve? How do transnational families readjust after the death of one of their members?

Moreover, sociology allows us to consider transnational grief as a widespread hardship that affects immigrants and families directly impacted by transnational death, as well as a broader population that knows they are likely to experience such a tragedy in the future. Given the limited opportunities for undocumented immigrants to adjust their status and disrupted circular migration patterns, transnational grieving is a common experience for millions of people. Unauthorized immigrants contend with the possibility of experiencing transnational death, even if it has not yet impacted them. It is thus necessary to understand whether and how the fear of transnational death shapes immigrants’ lives before they experience it. Understanding the impact of transnational grief advances immigration scholarship by highlighting underappreciated costs of current policies: being forced to mourn from afar if friends and relatives die in immigrants’ communities of origin and anticipatory fear about having to endure this experience.

SALIENCE OF UNDOCUMENTED STATUS

Research has shown that undocumented status is not equally salient in all contexts or at all times (Gleeson and Gonzales 2012; Patler and Gonzalez 2021). For example, undocumented immigration status can be irrelevant for students in U.S. K–12 public schools because children’s right to education is protected under federal law, but immigration status is hugely significant in

higher education and workplace settings (Gleeson and Gonzales 2012). Geographical location also affects how vulnerable unauthorized immigrants are. Federal, state, local, and institutional policies can either ameliorate or exacerbate vulnerability (Armenta 2017; Enriquez et al. 2019; Enriquez and Millán 2021; Mollenkopf and Pastor 2016; Walker and Leitner 2011).

Transnational grieving is most shaped by the inability to leave and re-enter the United States. Thus, unlike other issues that impact unauthorized immigrants, it is not affected by an immigrant's state or city of residence, and the negative impacts are not attenuated by institutional contexts. The fact that transnational grief is common and practically unavoidable for unauthorized immigrants, whether they live in a sanctuary city or a hostile town, adds to the urgency of understanding the challenges posed by transnational death and the strategies transnational mourners use to confront them. Furthermore, the period of time following a loved one's death — as well as the period preceding it, if the deceased was known to be dying — likely heightens the salience of immigration status for people who are undocumented. If, as previous research suggests, immigrants without authorization feel that the United States is a golden cage, transnational grief may make the cage feel more constricting.

METHODS AND DATA

This research emerged from a binational ethnography examining Mexico–U.S. transnational family dynamics, focusing on how people maintain relationships in the context of prolonged separation. I did in-person fieldwork in central Mexico and New York City over three consecutive summers: 2017, 2018, and 2019. I resumed in-person fieldwork in New York City in 2021 through 2022. Since 2020, I have conducted digital fieldwork, which has included attending events on Zoom, such as community conversations about enduring the COVID

pandemic. During my first summer of fieldwork, the topic of transnational grief often emerged. As this became my focus, I returned to interview participants who had not brought it up independently and began asking all participants about their experiences with transnational death.

For this article, I used flexible coding methodology (Deterding and Waters 2021) to analyze field notes from in-person and digital fieldwork, as well as transcripts from 24 in-depth interviews conducted in person or by phone with 17 participants who experienced transnational death. I used Nvivo software in my analysis. Seven participants were interviewed twice, either because they had not experienced a transnational death when first interviewed or because transnational death was not a main focus in the first interview. The interviews that were not focused on transnational death helped me gain insight into the important relationships for the interviewee and how they maintained transnational bonds. In two cases, I also met the deceased before their death and learned about their perspective on transnational family life.

All interviews and participant–observation were done in Spanish. Most participants were unauthorized immigrants at the time of the study or had been undocumented in the past. Interviews were transcribed by a transcription service. I translated quotes into English. Sample questions include “How did you learn that your loved one had passed away?,” “Were you able to talk to them or see them near the time of their death?,” and “Were you able to participate in any formal rituals to honor their life (e.g. attending the funeral via video call)?”

By focusing on how unauthorized immigrants grieve without access to traditional mourning rituals, this article heeds warnings from scholars who call for research that investigates how migrants exercise agency, instead of portraying them as passive victims due to their immigration status (Agustín 2003; Jensen 2021; Schenk 2020).

TRANSNATIONAL DEATH AS SPECTER: HOW FEARS OF TRANSNATIONAL DEATH IMPACT UNAUTHORIZED IMMIGRANTS

Research suggests that penalties affecting unauthorized immigrants have spillover effects that impact mixed-status families and wider immigrant populations (Asad and Clair 2018; Dreby 2012). Similarly, I find that immigrants who are unauthorized contend with transnational death even before it impacts them directly. As immigrants who are unauthorized age, transnational death becomes worrisome in two ways: (1) they may fear losing someone they love in their community of origin, and (2) they may fear their own possible death at their destination site.

Fear of losing a loved one from afar

When I met Verónica, she worked full-time as a nanny and at a factory on her days off. Gregarious and extroverted, she also maintained a full social calendar. I usually saw her rushing to parties or talking to friends in Mexico on social media. She often joked about not sleeping and said that her dream vacation was a hotel on a desert island where she could sleep, uninterrupted, for days. Once, walking home from the laundromat, I asked her if that was really where she would go. Verónica's smile shrank. Her voice dropped as she shook her head, "I need to see my mom."⁶ Due to her immigration status, she had not seen her mother since migrating to New York in the 1990s. As her mother got older, Verónica felt that she was running out of time to see her again. The preceding conversation happened two years before Verónica's mother became ill and passed away in 2020. Her story illustrates how long-standing the fear of transnational loss can be, and how little can be done to prevent it, given the limited opportunities unauthorized

⁶ "Necesito ver a mi mamá."

immigrants have to change their immigration status in order to cross the border.

Participants who were able to adjust their immigration status described reuniting with family members as a primary motivation for doing so. Galilea moved to the United States in 1999 without authorization, but she was able to adjust her status in 2013 thanks to her son. Having experienced two transnational deaths, she recalled praying that her “papers”⁷ would be granted before the death of her father. Ultimately, he died just two months before she was granted legal permanent residency. “That was really terrible for me, because I thought, how is it possible that I didn’t make it in time to see him?”⁸ Galilea’s story points to the fact that current immigration policies do not account for the urgency of family reunification. Though she knew her father was ill, there was nothing she could do to expedite her documents. In our interview, she told me that she believed transnational death to be so painful that the government should provide humanitarian visas for immigrants with sick or recently-deceased family members, even if those immigrants are otherwise ineligible to adjust their statuses.

Fear of dying without having returned

I met Elena a few years after her husband died suddenly in New York. She described worrying about never going back to Mexico, a worry that was shared by her children who lived there: “My daughter told me the other day that she’s getting used to the idea that she’s never going to see me again. She said, ‘It’s going to be like it was with my dad. I’m preparing myself because I don’t think we’re ever going to see you again.’”⁹ Elena’s voice broke. She explained that she wanted to

⁷ “Pápeles,” slang for a valid visa, legal permanent residency, or citizenship status.

⁸ “Eso fue bien tremendo para mí, porque yo dije, no puede ser posible que no lo haya alcanzado. Fue como, mi papá falleció este mes y como a los dos meses me llegaron mis papeles.”

⁹ “Mi hija el otro día me dijo que ella se estaba haciendo a la idea de que ya no me va a volver a ver. Dice ella, ‘Va a pasar lo que con mi papá. Me estoy preparando porque yo creo que nosotros ya no te vamos a volver a ver.’”

promise her daughter that they would see each other again but knew she could not.

In New York, I frequently witnessed people pitching in to help send the body of someone who had passed away to be buried in Mexico. For example, in 2018, I spent an afternoon with Rosana and Azucena while they figured out how to donate money to a family whose daughter had been run over in a laundromat parking lot. Her parents wanted to send her body to be buried in Mexico so that her grandparents would get to “meet” her.¹⁰

In Puebla, I met return migrants who listed avoiding a transnational death as a silver lining to having returned to Mexico. Ernesto described it as his primary reason for returning. He recalled that when he lived in New York in the ‘80s and ‘90s, fellow Mexican immigrants would knock on his door when someone died. He and his roommates would pitch in to help send the body back, even if they did not know the deceased. Having endured a difficult migration journey crammed in the back of a tractor-trailer, Ernesto knew he might never return to the United States after leaving, but the thought of returning to Mexico in a casket frightened him more.¹¹

HOW UNDOCUMENTED STATUS COMPLICATES TRANSNATIONAL MOURNING

Undocumented status significantly constrains how people can grieve. This heightens the salience of undocumented status for mourners, who report feelings of powerlessness and guilt along with experiences of stigmatization. Unable to attend funerals, they lack the opportunity to give and receive physical contact and have little reprieve from daily life. For unauthorized immigrants, transnational death often also has practical implications — ranging from losing a caretaker for

¹⁰ Repatriating the deceased is a common practice rooted in the belief that if families cannot be together in life, they should at least have the chance to say goodbye to their loved ones and that migrants who hoped to return to Mexico should have the right to be buried there.

¹¹ Several factors facilitated Ernesto’s return. First, he was single and had no dependents, either in Mexico or in the United States. Second, though not wealthy, his family did not have significant financial struggles. Third, he came from a region in Puebla known for tourism. When I met him, he ran a corner store owned by his sister in an area with a lot of foot traffic. Most of the people I met during fieldwork did not have such advantages.

children who remain in Mexico to losing administrative support for remittances and savings.

Feelings of powerlessness

Transnational grief can heighten the salience of immigration status and provoke feelings of powerlessness. Since migrating, Heriberta has endured two deaths and met other transnational mourners through a mutual aid group at her church. She explained, “It’s sad because when something like that happens, you’d like to go, see [your family], support them, spend those difficult moments together. And we can’t. . . . It’s sad; it’s difficult, but it’s our reality.”¹²

Migrants who knew that someone they loved was dying described anguish at their inability to help. Knowing her mother needed a soft foods diet in her final months, Florencia found it difficult to eat. She ran a small restaurant, and anytime she had to make food that her mom could have eaten, she started to cry. Her thoughts would fixate on the fact that she was feeding dozens of people every day, but she couldn’t feed her own mother. She said, “It was something that was impossible to fix. Your only option is to accept that you can’t do anything.”¹³

Florencia described it as the “price” that immigrants who are undocumented are forced to pay: they may live and work in the United States, but they may not see their families.¹⁴ This is something that came up in almost every interview, with participants lamenting that if they had their “papers,” they would not be in this position.

For unauthorized immigrants in mixed-status families, documented family members are contrasts to their lives, examples of the rights they would gain and what they could do if they had

¹² “Es triste es triste porque cuando pasan esos casos uno quisiera ir, verlos, apoyarlos, pasar momentos difíciles con ellos. Y no podemos hacerlo. Lamentablemente. Es triste; es fuerte, pero es la realidad.”

¹³ “Era algo que no había de qué manera poderlo arreglar. No queda de otra más que aceptar que no puedes hacer nada.”

¹⁴ “Ese es el precio. Ese es el precio de estar aquí.”

a different immigration status. Florencia has a brother and a sister who migrated to New York before she did and were able to become legal permanent residents. After her mother's health declined, leaving her unable to communicate via telephone, Florencia relied on her siblings who would travel to Mexico and report back. In effect, Florencia lost the ability to communicate with her mother directly in the last year of her life, while her siblings did not.

Galilea remembered the frustration and loneliness of watching her brother, who also lives in Texas but has had his papers for decades, leave to attend family funerals in their hometown while she remained North of the border, wishing she could go. In the two decades since she migrated, Galilea's oldest brother, mother, and father have all died in Mexico. Before she had papers, Galilea imagined that getting her papers would enable her to go home for important occasions, like funerals and celebrations. Though she has not experienced another death in her family since becoming a permanent resident, she traveled as soon as she could in 2013 to visit her father's grave. She has gone back many times since. In 2018, Galilea celebrated her fiftieth birthday with a big party in her hometown, complete with mariachis and all of her extended family. This suggests that her immigration status the only thing holding her back. Despite not having returned for nearly fifteen years, when her status changed, Galilea began visiting Mexico for important moments in her life, just like her documented brother had before her.

Saúl is an immigrant in his seventies. When he migrated, his wife stayed in Mexico with their children. Saúl's wife passed away in 2019. Describing his experience of transnational grieving, Saúl used metaphors that evoke incarceration: "She died, but I couldn't go. I stayed here, locked up. ... I couldn't get out." Then, he clarified, "Well, I *can* get out, but I can't get back in."¹⁵ Echoing these themes, Verónica lamented, "I could easily get on a plane [to Mexico].

¹⁵ "Ella se murió pero no pude ir. Me quedé aquí encerrado. ... Y yo sin poder salir. Bueno, puedo salir pero no puedo entrar."

The problem is how to get back.”¹⁶ She began to sob. In contrast, Galilea described getting papers like this: “Now we can go [to Mexico]. We are free now,”¹⁷ underscoring the idea that not having papers was tantamount to being held captive.

Being unable to give or receive physical affection seems to heighten feelings of powerlessness due to undocumented status. I called Diana after learning of her father’s death in the fall of 2020. She described wanting to comfort her mother, whom she saw crying on video calls: “Being here, I can’t do anything, not even give her a hug.”¹⁸ Verónica described feeling an acute need to hold her mom’s hand while she saw her on video calls near the time of her death. This speaks to the physical gestures people use to express sympathy and solidarity. Through their screens, mourners see loved ones whom they would like to console but cannot touch.

Guilt and stigma

Participants reported believing that their absence caused their loved one to suffer more at the time of their death and felt like they had behaved selfishly by not returning. These feelings coexisted with the recognition that structural obstacles prevent unauthorized immigrants from returning.

Verónica’s mother died from a prolonged illness. Verónica said she felt overwhelming guilt about not having returned to see her mother while she was ill and worried that she did the wrong thing.¹⁹ In a phone call with me, Verónica explained, “She told me a week before she died that she wanted to see me. She asked me to come.”²⁰ Similarly, Florencia is haunted by the

¹⁶ “Yo fácil me puedo ir en un avión. El problema es cómo regresarme.”

¹⁷ “Ahorita, ya podemos ir, ya ahorita estamos libres.”

¹⁸ “Estando aquí no puedo hacer nada, ni siquiera ir a abrazar.”

¹⁹ “No hice lo correcto.”

²⁰ “Una semana antes de morir, me dijo que quería verme y me pidió que regresara.”

knowledge that her mom died missing her: “It hurts to know that she died searching for me, thinking about how she never saw me again.”²¹

Diana described her “decision” not to go back for her dad’s funeral in November 2020 as “choosing money over family.”²² I have known Diana and her family since 2017, so I responded by reminding her that the reason she migrated was to send money back to support her parents and her young son after becoming a single mother. Diana told me I was right, but she still felt guilty for not having returned when she learned that her parents had contracted COVID. She worried that she could have saved her father’s life by taking him to the hospital sooner.

During my first interview with Diana in 2017, I asked her when she migrated. She began shaking and struggled to speak. This signaled that she may have experienced trauma while migrating. Though all migrants are at heightened risk if they attempt to cross the border into the United States without authorization (see, e.g. Infante et al. 2012), women are particularly vulnerable (Simmons, Menjívar, and Téllez 2015; Soria-Escalante et al. 2022). However, being aware of the risks and understanding why she had not attempted circular migration did not fully alleviate Diana’s guilt. This was also evident in other participants’ accounts. Though Mariano explained that he cannot go back to Mexico due to his status, he described the fact that he did not return for his father’s funeral as proof that he lacked courage.²³

While doing fieldwork in Puebla in 2017, Ernesto told me about a friend of his whose brother had returned to Mexico for their mother’s funeral. He planned to return to the United States after the funeral and asked a nephew if he wanted to go with him. The nephew had been thinking about migrating, so he said yes, and they traveled together. They crossed the border into

²¹ “Me duele saber que ella se murió buscándome, pensando que ya nunca más me vio.”

²² “Escogí el dinero sobre la familia.”

²³ “No tuve el valor.”

Arizona in the winter, when temperatures frequently drop below freezing. One night they huddled for warmth next to a tree. In the morning, the nephew woke to find that his uncle was unresponsive. He allowed himself to be found by Customs and Border Patrol officers with the hope that his uncle would receive medical care and recover, but his uncle had already died. The cause of death was determined to be hypothermia. His uncle's body was repatriated to Mexico. The nephew also returned to their community of origin, where their recently bereaved family gathered to mourn another death.²⁴ This is the only instance I heard of someone returning to mourn, which highlights how difficult circular migration is under current border conditions.

Despite these difficulties, unauthorized immigrants may doubt that their social networks in Mexico understand how constrained they are by immigration laws. This provokes feelings of stigmatization, either because family members ask migrants to come home directly and judge them for not returning *or* because migrants feel that their families do not really understand why they do not return, even if they do not express it outwardly.

In Verónica's case, she felt judged by her siblings and by her mother's doctor. As the health of Verónica's mother declined, Verónica paid for her mother's medical care and was in frequent communication with the doctor in charge of her care. In the weeks before her mother died, Verónica asked what more could be done to help her. She expected to hear about more expensive drugs or treatments, but the doctor said, "What would help your mom is for you to come see her."²⁵ Verónica recalls tearfully explaining that it was the one thing she could not do. She felt compelled to tell him that she could not leave the United States due to her immigration status and that the only way she was able to afford her mother's healthcare was by working here.

²⁴ Ernesto brought the nephew from this story to the house where I was staying so I could interview him, but the nephew decided he was not ready to discuss the events with me. I learned these details from Ernesto.

²⁵ "Lo que le ayudaría a su mamá es que usted viniera a acompañarla."

The doctor may not have intended to shame Verónica, but his comments added to the guilt Verónica felt and the sense she had that her relatives in Mexico judged her for not returning.

Little reprieve from daily life

Unauthorized immigrants who have experienced a transnational death do not have much of a reprieve from daily life. This is partly because they tend to be concentrated in low-wage jobs with no paid time off and partly because, even if they are willing to take unpaid time off, it is expensive to do so. Finally, knowing that they cannot physically attend the formal rituals honoring their loved one's life, they may feel that they have "nowhere to go."

Some participants reported being unable to take any time off from work. "On Monday, I buried my mother. On Tuesday, I went to work,"²⁶ Verónica explained. Others were able to miss work, with no paid time off. Efraín told me, "I took two or three days off from work to recover because my spirits were so low. ... Thank God they let me miss a couple of days."²⁷ Notably, Efraín felt lucky — rather than entitled — to miss work.

Finally, lacking the opportunity to attend a funeral, some participants did not even consider missing work. Margara worked at a restaurant owned by a Mexican immigrant in New York who was sympathetic when he learned that Margara's mom had died. He told Margara to take time off from work, but she refused. As she saw it, her only two options were going to work or going back her room in a shared apartment. Margara told him, "Please don't make me leave. Because I won't feel OK if I go back to my room. Inside those four walls, I won't feel OK."²⁸

²⁶ "Sepulté a mi mamá el lunes, y tuve que presentarme a trabajar el martes."

²⁷ "Bueno pues en esos días, me tomé como dos o tres días sin trabajar, para recuperarme un poco de los ánimos, porque tenía los ánimos muy bajos. ... No tenía ganas de hacer nada, solo quería estar en casa. ... Pero también tuve que cambiar el chip rápido porque los gastos acá y el trabajo. Entonces, eso te hace volver otra vez a la normalidad. Entonces en el trabajo, gracias a Dios me dieron permiso de faltar esos días para recuperarme."

²⁸ "No me corra,' le digo, porque yo no me voy a sentir bien de llegar a mi cuarto,' le digo, 'y en esas cuatro paredes no me voy a sentir bien.'"

Similarly, Santiago felt similarly: “I thought that if I kept working, I could keep my mind busy. Instead of dwelling on the regret of ‘I should have gone to see him.’”²⁹

Loss of Significant Support for Transnational Families

For immigrants with close transnational bonds, the death of a loved one can have a domino effect of causing additional losses that affect their connections to their communities of origin.

Participants experienced additional losses as a result of their loved one’s death ranging from losing a caretaker for their children to losing administrative support for their financial affairs in Mexico to losing their primary connection to their community of origin.

Saúl relied on his wife to manage the remittances he sent back, oversee the construction of a house, and take care of the small plot of land his family uses to grow plums. When we talked about his wife’s death, Saúl told me he was afraid of what would happen to those investments. I asked him if, in one sense, he and his wife were also business partners. “Yes, exactly,” Saúl replied, “because now there’s nobody to tell me, ‘Here’s how things are going. Here’s what we need to do.’”³⁰ This weighed on Saúl. He worried he would be sent back or have to go back to Mexico after aging out of his construction job and that he would have no way to support himself.

Aside from relying on someone to manage financial matters, immigrants whose children remain in Mexico rely on other family members to be their primary, in-person caregivers. The death of such a caregiver has reverberating impacts for transnational parents who must now find new ways to ensure their children are cared for. Diana has a ten-year-old named Edwin, who had been living with Diana’s parents since she migrated in 2017, when he was in kindergarten. When

²⁹ “En ese momento pensé que si me mantenía trabajando podría mantener mi mente ocupada. Y no mantener como el remordimiento de ‘me hubiera yo ido a visitarlo.’”

³⁰ “Sí, exactamente, porque ya no hay nadie que me diga “así están las cosas, hay que hacer esto.”

Diana's father died, she worried about who would take care of Edwin and her mother, since only her father knew how to drive, and he was the person in charge of their family business selling tortas³¹ at town fairs in the region surrounding their small town.

For Margara, the death of her mother meant that she had to find a new place for her children to live because Margara's siblings decided they could not continue living in their grandmother's house. One of Margara's daughters was legally an adult at the time of the death, so Margara counted on her to become the primary caregiver on paper, but Margara felt more responsible for ensuring their children's wellbeing than she had when her mother was alive. She worried about how they would recover from this loss. In Margara's view, her children had already endured a painful separation from her — their mother — and now had to lose the grandmother who raised them in her absence and their very home.³²

Other immigrants felt that they themselves had lost their home after experiencing transnational death. I met Florencia in the summer of 2017 at the small restaurant she owned. The TV was always on in her restaurant, and sometimes we would watch the news together, in the time between the lunch and dinner rushes. Once, when a news anchor on Univisión was reporting on Trump's promise to deport every undocumented immigrant, she said matter-of-factly, "I cannot go back to Mexico because my mom is gone."³³ The loss of her mother loomed over her and came up often in conversation, with Florencia lamenting that her immigration status had prevented her from going back to take care of her mom. After her death, she told me, there was nothing for her in Mexico. Returning would only emphasize her loss. Verónica explained it similarly: "When I go back to Mexico, I'm going to have to stay in a hotel."³⁴ This, to her,

³¹ In Mexico, "torta" refers to a type of sandwich.

³² "Siempre se criaron ahí; desde que yo me vine los dejé ahí; siempre estuvieron ahí."

³³ "Yo no me puedo regresar a México porque ya no está mi mamá."

³⁴ "Cuando regrese a México voy a tener que llegar a un hotel."

symbolized being a stranger with no home to return to. Saúl felt similarly. Imagining returning to his community of origin, he said, “Now what will I do? There’s nobody who misses me there.”³⁵

STRATEGIES USED TO MOURN FROM AFAR WHILE UNDOCUMENTED

Because they could not participate in funeral traditions in person, the transnational mourners I met found themselves mourning without a social script to follow. Untethered from the demands and support of traditional funerals, they were left to improvise mourning strategies. In this subsection, I use data from interviews and field notes to explain how transnational mourners reported coping with the loss of a close family member using strategies ranging from sending proxies to mourn in their stead, providing financial support at the time of bereavement, and using technology to participate in funeral rituals virtually.

Mourning by proxy

Undocumented transnational mourners in mixed-status families may choose to send a close family member or friend who is documented to attend the funeral in their place. For example, when Florencia’s mom died, one of her teenage daughters had a valid passport, and Florencia decided to send her to the funeral. Florencia’s daughter was able to do what Florencia herself wished she could have done at the funeral: say her last goodbyes and take flowers to her graveside.³⁶ Though losing her mom was painful, Florencia told me that she felt good about having sent her daughter.³⁷ It allowed her to meet what she saw as her familial responsibilities.

This strategy is not available to transnational mourners whose loved ones are

³⁵ “Era la madre de mis hijos y era la que me esperaba. ¿Y ahora qué voy a hacer? No hay nadie que me espere.”

³⁶ “Le dije, hija, le dices a mi mamá que me perdona. Porque, cuando tú tienes a una persona de frente, estás con ella, pues es diferente, le puedes hablar, pero yo ya no. Entonces, le dije a mi hija que le dijera eso a mi mamá y que le pusiera unas flores y ya.”

³⁷ “Por eso me siento bien.”

undocumented or in a liminal migration status. Such was the case for Verónica. Verónica has a daughter in her early thirties who offered to go to Verónica's mother's funeral in her place. Verónica wanted to say yes but worried that this might risk her daughter's future. Verónica's daughter has Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) so, technically, she could have applied for permission to leave and return to the United States. However, because DACA is a tenuous status, Verónica worried that if her daughter went, she might not be able to return.

Providing financial support

Transnational mourners may seek to cope by sending money to pay for end-of-life care or funeral expenses, which may assuage the guilt of being unable to return to be with the people they love in a difficult time. However, this strategy requires savings or the ability to earn or borrow more money during this time.

Participants who were able to send remittances to pay for funerals evinced a sense of pride. Margara sat up straighter and smiled as she told me that she's always "been there one-hundred percent for [her] parents."³⁸ She described the end of her mom's life as a time of high expenses: "She didn't have health insurance [and she stayed in] expensive hospitals, two or three days at a time; they'd call me and say, 'It's \$40,000 [pesos]; it's \$30,000 pesos. Go get money; go get money.'"³⁹ This was hard for Margara whose restaurant kitchen job did not pay much. She had to borrow money from people she knew and ask for extra shifts in order to increase her earnings, but paying for her mother's high-quality medical care helped her feel better about being far away. Verónica comforted herself by remembering that if she had gone back to Mexico

³⁸ "Yo siempre he estado al cien con mis papás, siempre."

³⁹ "Cuando se enfermó mi mamá, que no tenía seguros, que de hospitales caros, se iba de dos días a tres días que me marcaban que son 40.000, que son 30.000, a sacar dinero, a sacar dinero."

to be with her mother in her final months or weeks, she wouldn't have been able to afford for her medical treatment, and her mother would have suffered more. Florencia described this as the benefit of remittances, explaining that sometimes sending money is the closest you can get.

This strategy is not available to immigrants in difficult economic circumstances. For example, when his mother died in 2020, Efraín had been out of work for six months, due to the economic downturn. He described feeling shame because he did not send money for funeral expenses: "I wanted to help, but I couldn't. And that feels awful."⁴⁰ Accustomed to sending remittances, immigrants who do not may feel that they are failing their families.

Using Technology to Mourn

Participants who are unable to return for a loved one's funeral may rely on interpersonal communication technologies to connect with fellow mourners and participate in mourning rituals virtually. However, I find that, while this is true for some immigrants, not all have access to technology during periods of dying and bereavement. Those who do use technology for mourning report varied experiences. Some find it useful for mourning; others describe added emotional trauma owing to differences between participating virtually rather than in person.

Participants described not being able to use communication technologies due to health or access issues. Diego, an immigrant in his thirties who lives in New York, wanted to use phone calls to say goodbye to his mom who was dying of cancer, but she lost the ability to talk in the weeks leading up to her death.⁴¹ Smartphone use was not widespread at the time, so there was no one who could help him video call with his mom or attend her funeral from afar.

⁴⁰ "Me dio pena con mi familia porque pues nomás no mandé dinero. Y pues eso me duele un poco, porque pues yo queriendo mandar o ayudar, no tuve la posibilidad de hacerlo. Y pues eso se siente feo. En lo personal, yo me siento mal por eso."

⁴¹ "Cuando mi mamá murió ya no podía hablar, por su enfermedad, así que yo no podía hablar con ella."

Florencia's mother was resistant to technology use, refusing even to install a landline in her house. When her mother was in good health, Florencia could call her by calling neighbors who lived somewhat nearby in their rural town. However, as she grew frailer, the long walks to the neighbors' became difficult for her, so Florencia talked to her less frequently. Finally, her mother lost her hearing, so phone calls became impossible. Though Florencia's mother died in 2015, because her mother lived in a rural area with limited internet and cellular access, there was no way for Florencia to video call her mother or see her funeral.

Other participants were able to use technology to mourn and found it helpful. Margara was able to see her mom's funeral on a video call. She vividly remembered seeing the casket as it was taken out of her childhood home and how her children held the phone above the open casket so that she could pay her last respects on the screen. As is tradition, Margara's family had mourned the body at home for days before taking the casket to be buried. She explained how her family called her as they were beginning the funeral procession.

On the day of her burial, the day that she left my father's house, they videocalled me ... [T]hey showed me the casket, and they showed her to me in there. My children showed me. I saw how she was taken from the house. What hurts most is hearing the mariachis arrive playing the song 'Amor Eterno.' It cuts you to the core — and today you hear it and it's the same, it hits you because you remember.⁴²

Though she longed to be there in person, Margara reported feeling grateful to have been able to participate in the funeral in this limited capacity, and her syntax suggests that she did, for a moment, feel that she was actually at the funeral because she switched from first-person "I" to the general "you," meaning what people in general experience at funerals. It is common to hear

⁴² "Yo trabajé el día -- incluso, mira el día que la iban a enterrar, el día que salió de la casa de mi papá me hicieron la videollamada; me hicieron la videollamada, me la pasaron, o sea, me pasaron la caja, me pasaron ahí ya ella, mi mamá en la caja, me la pasaron mis hijos, la vi cómo salió de la casa, más que nada te duele mucho los mariachis llegando con la canción, la de 'Amor Eterno,' te llega hasta -- y hoy la escuchas y lo mismo, te llega porque te acuerdas."

mariachis playing “Amor Eterno” at a funeral, but most people experience this in person rather than through a smartphone screen. Yet, for Margara, the feeling was immediate enough that she generalizes her experience and views herself as a typical Mexican mourner.

Efraín was raised by his grandmother, whom he thought of as his mother. He was devastated by her death in late 2020. Knowing that they were very close, his family members sought to involve him in the funeral virtually. Efraín was able to see his grandmother in the casket. His cousin offered to livestream her funeral Mass for him, but Efraín worried that the priest would find it disrespectful for someone to have their phone out.⁴³ He was also unable to see her one last time to say goodbye on the screen before her body was cremated due to a scheduling change. I told him I imagined that must have been difficult, since he was expecting to have that opportunity. Efraín said it was, but that he was grateful for the video calls not just because they allowed him to say goodbye to his grandmother like he would at a funeral; they were also a way for him to see his family come together:

I liked seeing that my family was a little more united. It actually really brought us together. Some of my cousins that we hadn't seen in so long went [to the funeral]. They all got together. ... Seeing them all together gave me some comfort.⁴⁴

His family passed the phone around so he could talk to his cousins. Efraín's story suggests that technology can be used to get one of the most important benefits from attending a funeral: the opportunity to connect with others and renew bonds (Bailey and Walter 2016).

In contrast, other participants found that using communication technologies added to their

⁴³ “Como dices tú, precisamente en una videollamada, me la pasaron y la vi ahí tirada, la vi en el ataúd. En la misa no quise estar presente porque, como que se me hacía un poco de falta de respeto estar con el teléfono y estar ahí haciendo el padre la misa y rezando y uno con él teléfono ahí mirando. Como que no me gustó mucho la idea.”

⁴⁴ “Me gustó que la familia estuvo un poco unida, sí se unió la verdad. Fueron gente de mis primos que no veíamos en tanto tiempo. Se juntaron todos y pues fue algo unido, verlos juntos a ellos me reconfortó un poco.”

pain. For example, Ashley, who was in high school in New York, got a video call from her cousin when her great-grandmother was dying, but Ashley immediately hung up because she did not want to remember her great-grandmother like that.⁴⁵ Saúl described a similar experience. He recalled receiving a text message from one of his daughters while he was walking down the street by himself. The text contained a photo of his wife lying in her casket. Saúl had not been expecting to see that photo, and the shock made him feel sadder and more isolated.

Verónica has been in New York for about twenty years, and in that time she has lost both her father and her mother. Reflecting on her mother's death, she said it was hard because she was able to witness so much of her mom's suffering and the funeral proceedings. Video calls with her mother in a hospital bed left her feeling helpless. "I could see she was in pain, and there was nothing I could do to help her,"⁴⁶ she explained. In contrast, she added, "When I lost my dad, I didn't have to see everything."⁴⁷ Months after the funeral, she struggled to know what to do with the photos and videos on her phone from those days. She could not bear to watch them, but she also could not bring herself to delete the last images she has of her mother.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study sought to understand how unauthorized immigrants anticipate, experience, and respond to transnational deaths that they must grieve from a distance. I find that transnational mourners who are undocumented report feeling guilt and stigma about not returning to grieve their loved ones. In addition to feelings associated with grief, they feel guilt and regret about having migrated (Le Gall and Rachédi 2019). My research shows that people also worry their

⁴⁵ "Yo le colgué porque no quería yo ver a mi abuelita así."

⁴⁶ "Yo veía que estaba sufriendo, y no había nada que podía hacer para ayudarla"

⁴⁷ "Cuando falleció mi papá, no tuve que ver todo."

absence caused the deceased to suffer more near the time of their death and feel guilt about that.

Transnational grief is associated with feelings of powerlessness against the border and immigration laws, suggesting that this experience heightens the salience of undocumented status and exacerbates the sense of being “trapped” in the United States (Minian 2018; Reyes 2004; Rosenblum 2012). Mourners also describe feeling powerless to give or receive physical comfort, like holding their loved one’s hand during the last moments of their life or hugging loved ones at a funeral. They have little reprieve from their daily lives in the United States, in part because they may feel like they do not deserve time off since they cannot go to the funeral. The pain of transnational loss is further exacerbated by the loss of support structures necessary to maintain strong transnational bonds (e.g. a transnational mother must negotiate care for her son in her community of origin after the death of her father, who served as her son’s primary caregiver).

Despite the fact that unauthorized immigrants cannot mourn in traditional ways, transnational mourners still experience a need to process their grief and feel connected to people who are grieving the same loss. In order to do so, they pursue various strategies, alone or in combination. They may choose to mourn by proxy (sending a documented family member to the funeral in their stead, such as a U.S.-citizen child), pay for health care costs and funeral arrangements, and/or participate in end-of-life moments and funerals using technology.

However, access to these strategies varies, as does the comfort that each strategy provides. Mourning by proxy is a strategy unavailable to unauthorized immigrants who lack close relationships with people who are “documented” and can thus cross the border. Previous scholarship suggests that remittances are often considered “signs of love” by those who receive them (Mckenzie and Menjivar 2011), but immigrants who are unauthorized tend to be concentrated in precarious low-wage jobs, so it can be difficult for them to send additional

remittances near the time of their loved one's death.

Regarding technology use, previous research suggests that social media may provide an alternative mourning space (Gutiérrez Nájera and Alonso Ortiz 2019) and that participating in funerals using communication technologies is the “second best thing available, besides being physically present” (Bravo 2017: 42). In contrast, my data suggest that, while some people find comfort from using technology to participate in end-of-life rituals, mourning virtually differs significantly from mourning in person and carries added risks for additional trauma.

First, by allowing mourners to see their loved ones suffering on the screen, communications technology can make the feeling of powerlessness more acute. Second, in person, people experience difficult moments once, but if those moments are recorded — as transnational funerals often are — mourners can relive them over and over, which may add to their pain. Third, when people experience painful moments surrounding death and mourning, they are often in groups, which can make it easier than witnessing painful moments alone, but the transnational mourners I interviewed described many instances of being alone, either at home or in public, at the time that they received these calls and images. Fourth, people usually experience these moments in specific contexts intended to allow the expression of negative emotions in order to grieve and strengthen bonds with fellow mourners. But as discussed above, the mourners in this study often had little to no reprieve from their daily lives, so they were likely to receive these videos and photos at unexpected times or when such images contrasted sharply with their surroundings, such as when stealing a glance at their phone during work.

In sum, though technology may at first appear to facilitate this dimension of transnational family life — offering a way to be there without being physically present — mourning virtually is qualitatively different from mourning in person and poses additional, unique challenges. My

findings call attention to the importance of attending to the risks of virtual funeral participation, rather than focusing only on the possible benefits.

Implications

Though this study focuses on the experiences of undocumented immigrants from Mexico, transnational grieving affects all unauthorized immigrants, regardless of country of origin, a population estimated to number 10.5 million (Budiman 2020). Current immigration policies effectively preclude immigrants who lack authorization from participating in end-of-life rites that serve important social and emotional functions. Understanding the experiences of transnational grieving while undocumented thus sheds light on the social costs of current laws and allows us to consider possible benefits of immigration reform measures that facilitate international mobility.

Transnational grief exemplifies the social and emotional costs of hardened borders that impede immigrants from practicing circular migration and lead transnational families to endure long-term separation. Understanding transnational grieving and its impacts is fundamentally necessary for uncovering the “slow violence” of immigration laws (Lee 2019). Under the current system, unauthorized immigrants are denied freedom of mobility, as they hope and wait for laws to change. They long to be allowed to travel between their countries of origin and the United States (Boehm 2012). For immigrants in this position, transnational death is the worst-case scenario. Death transforms separations that immigrants hoped would be temporary into permanent losses, and immigration laws further prevent immigrants from gathering to grieve and bury their dead. In effect, restrictive immigration laws deny unauthorized immigrants and their loved ones the opportunity for reunification. Transnational death is therefore the culmination of slow violence.

This study highlights that the undocumented immigration crisis is a crisis of mobility that cannot be fixed by allowing people to remain in the United States legally *without* the freedom to leave and re-enter the country. Most immigrants have strong connections to their communities of origin and the destination sites where they now live, and they long to be able to move freely between both places, especially during important moments like death and bereavement.

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