

ANTHROPOLOGY

Love for the Land: Remittances and Care in a Nicaraguan Transnational Community

Caitlin E. Fouratt

California State University, Long Beach, US
caitlin.fouratt@csulb.edu

Despite renewed interest in Central American migration, little attention has been devoted to understanding the diversity of migration pathways within the region. This article explores the tensions in the complicated connections between migration, land, consumption, and love in the case of migration between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Based on interviews and ethnographic observations with members of transnational families in Achuapa, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, I examine how migrants and nonmigrants talk about remittances to make arguments about both abandonment and connection—that is, love for the land and people. Houses and land mediate local understandings of both the absence and presence of migrants in Achuapa. However, those who send and receive remittances, women and men, and young people and old all understand the relationships between migration and care or abandonment differently. At the community level, discourses around remittances tie in to nation-building projects through the resurgence of revolutionary discourses of solidarity under the Sandinistas. In this context, migration has become a new way for poor Nicaraguans to participate in the global economy and care for loved ones, even as it threatens nationalist longings for solidarity.

A pesar de una renovación de interés en la migración centroamericana, se ha dedicado poca atención a la diversidad de flujos migratorios dentro de la región. Este artículo examina las tensiones entre la migración, la tierra, el consumo y el amor en el caso de la migración entre Nicaragua y Costa Rica. Basado en entrevistas y observaciones etnográficas en Achuapa, Nicaragua y Costa Rica, se examina como los y las migrantes y personas no-migrantes hablan sobre las remesas en discusiones sobre el abandono y la conexión—es decir, el amor por la tierra y las personas. Las casas y la tierra median el entendimiento de la ausencia y presencia de los y las migrantes en Achuapa. Sin embargo, los que envían y los que reciben remesas, las mujeres y los hombres, las personas jóvenes y las viejas entienden la relación entre la migración, el amor y el abandono de manera diferente. Al nivel de la comunidad, los discursos sobre las remesas se vinculan con proyectos sandinistas y nacionalistas a través del idioma de la solidaridad. En este contexto, la migración se ha vuelto al mismo tiempo una nueva manera para que los nicaragüenses pobres participen en la economía global y cuiden a sus seres queridos, y una amenaza a los deseos nacionalistas de solidaridad.

The 2014 media frenzy over Central American women and children at the US-Mexico border has generated both popular and academic interest in Central American migration to the United States. However, much less attention has been given to the diversity of migration pathways within Central America and the importance of intraregional migration. Indeed, while attention has focused on the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica have been largely absent from these discussions. Yet Nicaragua has the second highest emigration rate in Central America, behind El Salvador. Forty percent of Nicaraguan households receive remittances (Monge-González, Céspedes-Torres, and Vargas-Aguilar 2011; Orozco 2008). But in contrast to migrants from the Northern Triangle, migrants from Nicaragua are more likely to move within the region to Costa Rica than to the United States (Baumeister 2006). Around 250,000 Nicaraguans live in the United States while more than 300,000 live in Costa Rica (Baumeister, Fernández, and Acuña 2008). Costa Rica, in turn, is home to two-thirds of

all regional migrants, of which Nicaraguans are the largest group (PNUD 2003). This mass movement of Central Americans who are fleeing not just violence but also economic crisis contributes to the reshaping of families, communities, and nation-states throughout the region.

Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica has deep historical roots in nineteenth-century regional economic developments, including the rise of the Costa Rican coffee industry, the construction of its railroad, and the establishment of the multinational banana industry. Contemporary migration is linked specifically to political and economic instability during the latter part of the twentieth century, including the Contra War, economic restructuring, and natural disasters (Mahler 2000; Fouratt 2014). Migration to Costa Rica has been facilitated by reliable transportation, lax border and immigration enforcement, and economic opportunities in the country. Nicaraguans represent around 7 percent of the Costa Rican population and fill low-paying jobs that form the basis of the country's agricultural and service sectors (Castro Valverde 2007; INEC 2011). Over the last thirty years, this migration has also seen a shift from the temporary movement of male laborers to increased migration of women and more permanent settlement that includes the establishment of transnational family ties (Mahler 2000; Chen Mok et al. 2001).

Achuapa, a rural town in the northern Pacific region of Nicaragua with an unusually high level of out-migration, offers an example of the ways in which family migration strategies are reshaping social relationships through remittance sending and house building. Achuapa demonstrates a growing national tendency of rural out-migration as young people face high levels of unemployment and the subdivision of family plots (Baumeister, Fernández, and Acuña 2008). From Achuapa, migrants travel to Costa Rica both for temporary, seasonal work and for more long-term, permanent migrations. While some Achuapans have lost touch, many continue to maintain transnational connections with family members back home, particularly through remittances invested in constructing houses and improving agricultural land.

Within the community and sending households, discourses about both transnational connection and disconnection revolve around these two forms of property. Both houses and land are the focus of physical and affective labor on the part of migrants and those who stay behind to care for families and tend the land. Such transnational caring may generate new forms of instability through family separation but may also create other forms of stability in a context of uncertainty and debt. Thus, homes anchor migrants not only to their own families but to particular communities and the nation. At the same time, homes and the material goods bought with remittances point to new forms of consumption and transformed livelihoods in rural Nicaragua.

At the community level, discourses around remittances echo nation-building projects articulated through revolutionary discourses of solidarity under the Sandinista party. In Nicaragua especially, the land is deeply tied to national discourses of campesino identities and livelihoods that have been threatened by economic crisis and neoliberal restructuring. Today, remittances represent the largest source of national income (Martínez Franzoni and Voorend 2011) and account for almost 13 percent of GDP and 38 percent of exports (Programa Estado de la Nación 2008). Unlike other Latin American countries such as El Salvador, where the state promotes remittance sending (Coutin 2007; DeLugan 2012), the Nicaraguan state has done little to harness the financial power of remittances or the political power of emigrants.

In this article, I look at how the uncertainties and contingencies of life in rural Nicaragua shape the different pathways migrants take as well as the ways people talk about migration. I examine how Achuapans use talk about houses, land, and material objects to make claims about migration and abandonment or connection within families, the broader community, and the nation. In examining how people talk about property with relation to migration, I seek to understand how generational, gender, and other distinctions inform the meanings people attribute to migration. That is, those who send and receive remittances, women and men, and young people and old all understand the relationships between migration and care or abandonment differently. Yet all employ ideas about property to make their claims. While much scholarship has examined the role of affective labor within transnational families (Boehm 2012; Pribilsky 2007; Dreby 2010; McKay 2007; Parreñas 2005), I am concerned here with the role of affective labor in sustaining local communities, and ultimately the nation, across transnational ties.

While some in Achuapa see emigration as absence, irresponsibility, and a lack of care on the part of migrants, migrants themselves assert that migration and the remittances it affords represent forms of caring for both people and property. Despite discourses of family and social disintegration in Achuapa, migrant men and women consistently argue that migration, while requiring absence and separation in the short run, ultimately forms part of a strategy for maintaining "a home," allowing families to grow and thrive in Nicaragua. Their arguments about leaving "for their children" or to "build a home" imply families and a nation that were never stable or "intact" to begin with. At the same time, practices of family-making through

migration underwrite the state's neglect of the working poor. Indeed, migration and remittance-sending highlight the ways in which Nicaraguan nation-building projects have relied on unpaid care work within families to enact social solidarity.

Although Achuapans, and Nicaraguans more generally, follow various migration pathways, I focus on migration from Nicaragua to Costa Rica because this route comprises half of all migration from Nicaragua. This migration route is characterized by the two countries' geographic proximity and a long history of circular migrations. In this context, remittances between Costa Rica and Nicaragua form only part of a dynamic circulation of care and support among transnational communities. Nicaraguans in Costa Rica are more likely than their compatriots in the United States or Europe to return to Nicaragua for short-term visits or as a long-term future plan. Further, given cultural similarities and the long history of this migration flow, Nicaraguans in Costa Rica are more likely to settle down and establish roots in Costa Rica than they are in Panama, El Salvador, or other countries within Central America. In other words, Nicaraguans in Costa Rica are more likely to be both more integrated in their host country and more connected back home, to be both more settled and more mobile than are Nicaraguan migrants elsewhere.

This article is informed by more than twenty-four months of fieldwork in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, including seventeen continuous months during 2011 and 2012. In Costa Rica, I interviewed twelve family members (eight women and four men) of those interviewed in Achuapa. In 2009, 2010, and 2011–2012, I conducted additional interviews with Nicaraguan migrants in Costa Rica and their relatives in Nicaragua. I also conducted participant observation with organizations linked to migrant advocacy, specifically the Asociación de Trabajadoras Domesticas (ASTRADOMES), a domestic workers association and member of the National Civil Society Network for Migration in Costa Rica. This article focuses primarily on interviews from 2009 and includes the data from interviews with thirty-six Achuapans, mostly relatives of migrants and returned migrants in Achuapa, and twelve Achuapan migrants living in Costa Rica. Interviewees in Achuapa included two leaders of a local agricultural cooperative, a local facilitator of the Nicaraguan Civil Society Network for Migrations (Red Nicaragüense de la Sociedad Civil para las Migraciones), and a schoolteacher who provided insight into the implications of emigration within the community.

The Contradictions of Transnational Life

Transnational families, that is, those with core members living in two or more countries, are fraught with tensions over separation, cultural expectations about family and parenting, and economic strains related to remittances. As labor migrants in the United States and other countries find it harder and harder to secure livelihoods in either their home or host country, "families somewhat unwittingly create transnational households within transnational communities" (Pribilsky 2007, 10). This, argues Deborah Boehm (2008), is the fundamental contradiction of transnational families: that people migrate "for their children" even as migrating makes family relations and children's lives vulnerable.

This contradiction, and its gendered implications, have often been framed in terms of care. Women's migration has been linked to issues of transnational family life in ways that, given specific cultural contexts, are not ascribed to men's migration (Kofman 2014). For example, a number of scholars have noted that migrant mothers' absences are especially hard on children left behind (Parreñas 2005; Abrego 2009). The literature on global care chains (Hochschild 2000) has interrogated the inequalities in care provision across borders, as "women from the South end up working as nannies and domestics in overseas localities" while they pay other women to care for their own children back home (Chant 2003, 246). Such care chains, in turn, create "care drains" resulting in the extraction of care from developing countries to the developed world (Hochschild 2000, 2002). However, the care chain paradigm has focused heavily on flows between households and on women's domestic labor, paid or unpaid, largely ignoring other institutions, sites, and agents who participate in care activities (Kofman and Raghuram 2009, 2012; Yeates 2004, 2009).

Taking a cue from the polyvalent meaning of care in Spanish, care can also encompass a wide range of work that includes men's labor and that may be directed toward a range of family and community ties (Carsten 2000, 2004; Kilkey 2010). Terms in Spanish for care can mean both an affective orientation of love and respect, *cariño*, and the activities of taking care of one another that include nurturing, supervising, and looking out for, *el cuidado* (from the verb *cuidar*). In Achuapa, people also use *cuidar* to talk about cultivating land and livestock. Thus there are expectations for men's care work that extend beyond the family and the traditional breadwinner role to the land itself.

Expanding notions of care also highlight the tensions of transnational family life. Characterized both by desires for caring from afar and feelings and experiences of loss and disconnection, transnational families represent “a contested emotional field” (Mckay 2007, 190). Indeed, migrants’ and nonmigrants’ interpretations of migration “are multifaceted, ambivalent and change over time to reflect a complex set of factors in the communities” where they live (McKenzie and Menjívar 2011, 64). Understandings of migration, forms of transnational communication, and absence or separation are contested and change depending on geography, generation, gender, and mobility. Such separations have been seen as “interrupting a sense of solidarity and community of shared events in a particular locality” (Kofman 2014, 84).

Migrants employ a variety of techniques to maintain family and community ties, including phone calls, text messages, and other forms of communication, travel, imagined forms of co-presence, and material objects (Baldassar 2008). Remittances form one of the key mediators of transnational relationships, providing income to family members “back home,” creating obligations, and indexing migrants’ longings for return. They provide an important lens for understanding what is at stake in transnational family projects and the negotiations, struggles, and tensions among various household and family members, including parents, grandparents, children, siblings, and others. Remittances also represent a kind of emotional labor and are part of “the work of connecting, sharing, telling stories, listening, responding” that produces long-distance intimacy (Mckay 2007, 179). Indeed, scholars have emphasized how migrants understand remittance sending as part of their parenting responsibilities and as signs of love and care (Boehm 2012; Dreby 2010; Abrego 2009). Yet ambivalence around remittances stems from the imbrication of economic transactions within the private space of the home.

In particular, the assumption of strict separation of caring and intimate activities in the private space of the home from income-generating, productive activities outside generates tension, even as, as Zelizer (2005, 2) notes, “plenty of economic activity goes into creating, defining, and sustaining social ties.” Indeed, cultural assumptions about gender and economic roles mean that remittance sending is often interpreted differently by men and women, by senders and those who receive them. For women, conceptions of transnational motherhood have expanded to include income-earning and remittance-sending activities into definitions of motherhood (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997), but mothers are often still more vulnerable to criticisms of abandonment or lack of care when they leave children behind (Parreñas 2005; Abrego 2009, 2014). Men, on the other hand, may find that sending remittances allows them to assert key elements of masculine and paternal identity as breadwinners. Fulfilling his role as breadwinner from afar may give a man the authority to maintain an emotional connection to children left behind (Dreby 2010).

Menjívar and Abrego (2009) suggest that children back home associate their parents’ continued remittance-sending with love, while those who do not receive remittances express feelings of abandonment and resentment. At the same time, “parents and children resist defining their relationship as purely economic in nature” because “money risks replacing love and care” (Dreby 2010, 67). Though the material may not replace face-to-face interactions, remittances and the things they buy shape transnational intimacy, sustaining family ties, even as they point to transformations in those ties. They represent at once love and abandonment, both absence and presence. Houses, as sites for family and care, are a particularly significant focus for such transnational investments.

Remittances tie migrants not only to families but to communities and nations. As Levitt and Jaworsky (2007) have noted, thirty-six countries are so dependent on remittances that their economies face potential collapse without them. Increasingly, sending-country governments are recognizing the importance to national economies of continued transnational ties and the remittances they secure. Such governments have attempted to capture both migrant loyalty and financial transfers. The Philippines, for example, has organized the export of workers abroad through government agencies as a way to encourage temporary migration, stem unemployment, and secure foreign exchange (Sassen 2000). El Salvador and Peru have both capitalized on their citizens abroad, encouraging return migration of successful and entrepreneurial migrants and promoting remittance-sending (Coutin 2007; DeLugan 2012; Gammage 2006; Berg 2010). In the case of Peru, this endorsement of migration reflects changing relationships between the state and migrants, who in the 1980s were condemned for betraying the nation by leaving (Berg 2010). In Mexico, the government has encouraged local transnational connections by encouraging and supporting hometown associations (HTAs) (Orozco 2004). In all these cases, remittances—even when destined for individual households—represent links between migrants and sending nations and communities. Nicaragua, despite its high level of emigration and the significance of remittances as a percent of GDP, has done little formally to capture migrants’ loyalty or remittances. Nevertheless, moral discourses around national solidarity are employed at the national and local levels to leverage migrants’ sense of responsibility toward their communities of origin.

Remittances may also underwrite the transformation of economic and social policies and the state's neglect of the working poor in sending countries. Monthly per capita remittances to Nicaragua represent nearly double annual per capita social spending (Martínez Franzoni and Voorend 2011). At the same time, sending communities have become linked to the global economy through economic restructuring and capitalist expansion as well as migration, which "has also inadvertently redefined local definitions of wealth and status" (Pribilsky 2007, 11). House construction itself may represent an individual and status-building endeavor (Melly 2010; Pellow 2003; Thomas 1998). Thus, at the community and national levels, remittances are the subject of debates over solidarity, national development, and belonging. While some see such investments as encouraging conspicuous consumption or indexing middle-class aspirations, migrants often emphasize the social relations imbricated in such material investments.

My interviewees' disillusionment with current politics articulated Nicaraguans' desires for a "community of care," a concept Ellen Moodie (2011, 152) describes in postwar El Salvador as "a desire for an inclusive, caring democratic state" that encompasses both protection by the state and feelings of mutual support. This disillusionment reflects dissatisfaction with the dominant neoliberal development framework as well as with the renewal of revolutionary rhetoric under Sandinista president Daniel Ortega. Ortega's presidency relies heavily on revolutionary discourses and images of solidarity, popular participation, and equality, but his administration has assiduously courted big business and implemented vertical, authoritarian power structures (Kampwirth 2008). This transformed revolutionary spirit has done little to change many people's day-to-day lives, which are marked by poverty. Indeed, some scholars have seen emigration from Central America as a symptom of breakdown in the context of postwar disillusionment (Silber 2011). However, while these attempts may be unsuccessful at creating a community of care, Nicaraguans employ migration as an attempt to create and maintain a sense of belonging and connection.

Legacies of Instability: Nicaraguan Migration to Costa Rica

Little media, political, or scholarly attention has been directed at the diversity of migration pathways and the importance of this migration within Central America. Achuapa, in particular, is a municipality that has experienced high rates of emigration due to economic, political, and environmental factors. Achuapa is predominately rural and composed of small producers; the Nicaraguan Emergency Social Investment Fund (Fondo de Inversión Social de Emergencia, or FISE) has classified it as one of the poorest municipalities in the country (Larson 2002). The region suffers from degraded soils, affecting agricultural production (Larson 2002). And although many Nicaraguans benefited from land reform under the Sandinistas, beneficiaries often did not receive formal titles to their land (Cupples, Glynn, and Larios 2007). In Northern Leon, where Achuapa is located, only around 38 percent of farmers hold title to their land (cited in Cupples, Glynn, and Larios 2007). Small producers have seen their lands further diminished as land has been subdivided by subsequent generations, and in many cases family plots are no longer large enough to sustain household members (Baumeister, Fernández, and Acuña 2008). Like other rural areas of Nicaragua, Achuapa has experienced increasing levels of emigration.

Such emigration is linked not only to continued economic crisis but also to a history of national crises that reveal the difficulties of making neat distinctions between political, economic, and other motivations for migration. For example, the devastation caused by the 1972 Managua earthquake was deepened by the Somoza regime's mismanagement of international relief funds, sparking mass migration both internally and internationally (Dosal 2009). Later, as Nicaraguans fled the Contra War in the 1980s, they sought to escape both violence and the economic crisis it prompted. Achuapa, which was a Sandinista stronghold, experienced heavy fighting. A number of local men were disappeared and killed by the Contras, and many farmers were unable to maintain production during the conflict. After the war, Violeta de Chamorro's government implemented structural adjustment programs, pursuing a neoliberal policy of reducing government expenditures for social services, salaries, and employment (Mojica Mendieta 2003; Babb 1998). As a result, Nicaragua's informal sector grew to employ about half the economically active population (PNUD 2003). It was during this period that large-scale migration to Costa Rica accelerated.

In November 1998, the crisis was exacerbated when Hurricane Mitch swept through the region, causing millions of dollars of damage to Nicaraguan agricultural crops, telecommunications, and road infrastructure and leaving nearly 800,000 homeless (NCDC 2004). In a matter of days, the little economic stabilization that Nicaragua had gained was destroyed. Achuapa was hit particularly hard. Juanita, my host in Achuapa, described eight days of rain, like a biblical flood story, a river with cows, dogs, pigs, and chickens bobbing along; people pulling out yams, yucca, and potatoes—anything that hadn't been swept away. Juanita claimed that if it had rained one more day, the town, which is situated between two rivers,

would have been lost. By the time the rains subsided, the waters reached less than two hundred meters from the central plaza. Achuapans dried whatever was left on the roofs of houses that were still intact. Nearly everyone lost their harvest, food stores, and livestock and suffered damage to their houses.

The devastation left by Mitch was both ecological—soils washed away, harvests lost—and economic; the income from those lost harvests was needed to feed children, invest in farms, and ensure family survival. Those who had borrowed in order to plant were left unable to repay debts. Many of my interviewees' relatives left Achuapa for the first time between 1999 and 2001 because of debts linked to Mitch. And many Achuapans who continue to leave temporarily or have been gone for years are working off debt cycles that date back to that hurricane. As in other Latin American countries, debt has been a powerful driver of migration (Stoll 2012; Miles 2010; Mahler 1995). Hurricane Mitch represents a tipping point in these decades of crisis that accelerated migration as a strategy for Achuapans in their efforts to build homes and communities.

According to local officials, about 30 percent of Achuapa's population lives abroad. Indeed, a survey by the Spanish International Cooperation Agency (Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo, AECID) of the municipality revealed that 60 percent of Achuapans have family members who have emigrated internally or internationally (Dallo Moros 2005, 48). This migration is comprised predominately of young people who have been unable to find work (Baumeister, Fernández, and Acuña 2008). Achuapa's emigration rate, which is higher than the national average, probably underestimates the actual number of Achuapans who participate in international migration. Many families depend on the temporary migration of men, who are gone only a few months at a time and may slip through calculations of more permanent emigrants.

Achuapans, like other Nicaraguans, use migration to various destinations and remittance sending within overall household or family strategies that attempt to build more stable lives, participate in the global economy as consumers, and maintain their land. Most families employed some combination of internal and international migration, sending multiple members to different destinations. In my observations, migration to Europe was the most permanent and was undertaken primarily by women, who had married foreign aid workers or members of solidarity delegations or work brigades who had visited or lived near Achuapa during the Revolution. Others followed these networks to find jobs as domestic workers and caregivers for the elderly. Most migrants to Europe returned home to visit only every five to ten years, and settled permanently and raised their children abroad. At the other end of the spectrum, migration to El Salvador was the most temporary, undertaken primarily by men for three-month stints as agricultural laborers. The income generated by such temporary migration was used to resolve acute financial problems such as debts tied to farming, investment in new agricultural equipment, repairs to houses, or for special occasions like a wedding.

In contrast, migration to Costa Rica entails both short- and long-term separations, enduring transnational connections, and more reliable remittance streams than migration to Europe or El Salvador. It is also the most common destination for Achuapans. In Costa Rica, men work primarily in agriculture or construction and women as domestic workers for periods ranging from a few months to several years. While there is a significant Achuapan population settled permanently around San José, Costa Rica, many Achuapans also migrated seasonally for coffee harvest and other jobs in the agricultural sector (Baumeister, Fernández, and Acuña 2008). Remittances from Costa Rica represent one quarter of all remittances received in Nicaragua, despite the fact that Nicaraguans in Costa Rica make much less money compared to those in the United States or Europe (Orozco 2008).

Remembering and Forgetting: Remittances, Consumption, and Care

Achuapans use remittances and the material goods they procure through migration to make claims about both love and abandonment as part of a strategy to maintain social ties. Remittances and house construction are key components in linked and tension-filled discourses of remembering and forgetting that Achuapans use to express this affective labor. Homes are particularly important because they are both material and symbolic sites for the forging and reproduction of family ties. They are at once sites of stability and security as well as of family and social change (Carsten 2004). Houses are often the focus of migrants' financial and emotional investments.

For example, I met Mayra sitting outside her house on a dirt lane a few blocks from Achuapa's central plaza. From the outside, the brick façade of Mayra's house looks like most others on the street. But inside, it is clear that the house is only half built, with the cinder-block outline of the future kitchen visible through a back doorway. The front room has a cement floor and zinc roof, but the bedroom next to it has a dirt floor.

When our conversation turns to the advantages of her husband's migration to Costa Rica, she sweeps her arm to indicate the interior. "The advantage is this." They have built the house with their own hands, slowly, cinder block by cinder block. The unfinished construction is the result of their both working for four years in Costa Rica. Now returned to Achuapa to care for the growing house and for their young daughter, Mayra worries about the rest of the construction still needed, the money to buy farmland in the hills, and about when—and whether—her husband will return.

Like Mayra's house in progress, homes financed by remittances are not built overnight. Rather, families construct these houses themselves piece by piece, room by room. Migrants' houses in Achuapa are constantly changing, growing in fits and starts. At the same time, they represent a site of stability and continuity for family in a context of dislocation, movement, and instability. For migrants in Costa Rica these same houses constitute forms of participation in family life and a focus for their longings for return. They know every detail of their houses, even if they have only seen them a few times: the color of tiles and paint, plans for roofing or furniture, the pieces left to buy and build. The most successful migrants' houses have zinc roofs as well as tiled stoops and even glass windows. Zinc roofs are considered more modern and require minimal upkeep, an important consideration in households where male labor may only be available when migrant men return home periodically. These houses also anticipate a different level of development and consumption, including spaces for indoor bathrooms, despite the fact there is only sometimes running water in Achuapa. Families in Achuapa proudly point out improvements "made"—that is, paid for—by relatives abroad. In this way, houses very visibly represent transnational connections as well as dreams and hopes for the future (Melly 2010; Pellow 2003).

The ways migrant men and women describe these homes under construction differ. Men tend to focus on the materiality of the house—what was left to build and how long it would take, meaning how much longer they would need to work abroad. For example, Jimmy, a migrant living outside San José, bought a lot and still owes half the price but says, "If I can finish paying it, I'll leave in December and stay [in Achuapa]. But right now, it's very difficult to come up with the money, now everything is more expensive than before." So he is unsure if he can return permanently. In contrast, women talk more about the affective qualities of home building and discuss dreams of family life in the houses—playing with their children and sharing time and living spaces with other family members. Marlen, a domestic worker who shares a cramped apartment with five other women in San Jose, had plans to return to Achuapa: "I'm building next to my mom, on the same lot. [The house] has a living room, a bedroom, and it shares the kitchen with my mom, so we can cook all together, live all together." These partly finished houses indicate dreams in progress, multiple trips abroad, and continued separation from loved ones.

However, the unfinished houses and the ambivalence of Achuapans like Mayra toward loved ones' absences point to larger ambivalences around remittances and transnational family-life. In Achuapa, and among Achuapans in Costa Rica, these tensions are represented in idioms of remembering and forgetting. Nicaraguans use remembering/forgetting to describe not simply transnational relationships but the act of sending money or other goods. As one Achuapan woman in San Jose notes, her separation from her children has not affected them "so much economically because we never forget them," noting that she regularly sends remittances for her children's education and food (cf. Schmalzbauer 2004). It is not just the actual money or packages sent but the act of sending itself, as a kind of emotional labor, that reinforces a mother's connection to her children, framed as part of her sacrifice. As another migrant woman in San Jose notes, "The expression of a mother's love is waiting in line for hours [at the bank] to be able to take out the money or cash a check; waiting again to send that little bit of money. To endure the sun, the rain, the lines." Through the process of providing food and other materials for subsistence, migrant parents stake claims to belonging in their households of origin. (See Carsten 2004 on feeding and kinship.) Migrants themselves point to the goods they send as strengthening ties back home, mitigating their absences from the lives of children, and materially demonstrating that they remember and care.

For those back home, remittances also bear the traces of migrants' emotional labor, signifying love and sacrifice and reasserting notions of family from afar. A popular refrain when talking about receiving remittances was "they remember us." Alfonso, a local landowner and father of seven with two adult daughters abroad, said that his daughters "don't forget about us. They send us Euros." A young woman whose father had been in Costa Rica for over five years explained, "Look how much my father loves me, he never forgets to send money for school and other things I need." In some cases, the combination of a lack of connection and the absence of remittances categorically signals both forgetting and the severing of ties. Although the Achuapans I interviewed were from families that had maintained transnational ties, since then I have interviewed members of families from other sending communities who have lost touch.

They describe such cutting of ties as both abandonment and forgetting. And while forgetting also implies that migrant relatives stop calling, visiting, and maintaining emotional connections, many say that the first step toward disconnection is when they “forget” to send home remittances. That migrants often talked not just about remembering but about “not forgetting” points to the tensions in these linked discourses of remembering/forgetting. Thus, even when remittances are sent, the possibility of forgetting continues to haunt their remembering.

In Achuapa, the specter of abandonment haunts transnational relationships, even if most families maintain contact despite distance and separation. Although I encountered much talk about abandonment in conversations with Nicaraguans in Costa Rica and in sending communities like Achuapa, I encountered very few cases where families had completely lost touch because of migration. Men’s abandonment, in particular, worried both nonmigrants in Achuapa and migrants in Costa Rica because of a widespread perception that “women come here to work; men come here to start new families.” As Mayra explains, “Sometimes, we’re left alone. A woman waits for the men to come, but they make a home there, they marry. [My husband] says that he’s only going to stay this year, that he’s coming back to Nicaragua this year. I hope so, but I hear about women abandoned by partners who have made their homes there, in Costa Rica.” Concerns over abandonment by both mothers and fathers extends beyond infidelity to a concern with the effects of parents’ absence from households.

For many migrants the tensions of transnational relationships center not on the dichotomy of remembering/forgetting, but on the expectations associated with remembering. Discourses of remembering and forgetting place the responsibility of both economic support and emotional investment on those who migrate. That is, migrants are expected to remember, or at least not forget, loved ones back home, supporting them materially and maintaining affective ties. However, almost no one in Achuapa speaks about the responsibilities of those left behind to maintain relationships with relatives abroad. Migrants complain that those back home rarely understand the challenges of being an undocumented immigrant in Costa Rica (Fouratt 2016), the difficulties of sending remittances, or the challenges of transnational communication.

Some Achuapans in San Jose note that while they regularly sent money and gifts home, they rarely receive packages in return. In part, this is not for lack of effort on the part of family members in Achuapa. Older women there spoke about sending local baked goods and cheeses to relatives in Costa Rica, though such packages rarely reach their destination because of customs inspections and spoiling. Thus material demonstrations of love and care flow back over the border to Achuapa but rarely go the other way to reach migrants in Costa Rica.

Children’s expectations mean that migrants often feel they cannot return to Achuapa without gifts for family and friends. Marlen, a domestic worker in San Jose, Costa Rica, says she only returns to Achuapa once a year, despite having two vacations, because of “how awful it is to arrive with your hands empty.” Further, Achuapans in Costa Rica remark on the growing difficulty of demonstrating their care for family through small sums of money and packages of basic grains, much less through building homes in Nicaragua. Care packages (alternately called *necesidades*, basic needs, or *regalitos*, small gifts) that include rice, beans, and school uniforms have become more critical to family survival, given the rising cost of living in both countries, migrants’ low salaries, and the recent economic slowdown. This has forced some migrants to return to half-finished houses or to remain abroad for longer than they planned, like Mayra, who hopes that her husband’s remittances will be enough to complete construction and ensure his eventual return.

Thus homes, as projects for building futures and asserting transnational connections, anchor migrants to Achuapa and to families. Yet these homes, and the remittances that contribute to their construction and renovation, also represent the tensions in transnational family life. Their piecemeal construction indexes the growing challenges migrants face in Costa Rica—including precarious employment, rising costs of living, and prolonged separations.

Losing Love, Leaving Land: Emigration, Remittances, and Community

Homes anchor migrants to the wider community and nation as well as to their own families, even as they index changing ideas about development, lifestyles, and belonging. Concerns with family abandonment are linked not only to family breakdown but ultimately to social breakdown. At the community level, tensions over migration emerge in discourses about homes and more broadly around land and consumption. In Achuapa, a discourse of losing love for the land echoes the tensions over love and abandonment found within families while drawing on national discourses of solidarity and campesino identity. A survey by AECID found that, while two-thirds of Achuapans characterized emigration as “not beneficial,” 78.5 percent

of the population was “willing to migrate” (Dallo Moros 2005, 53). This ambivalence in the face of high emigration rates and uncertainties of return has captured the concern of local leaders, who link emigration to family abandonment and social breakdown.

Local leaders do not criticize migration or absence per se. Indeed, in some sense, migration represents part of the local agricultural cycle in Achuapa. Juan, a young man who worked for a year in a horse stable in Costa Rica’s Central Valley, explained that in his rural district “the majority emigrate to Costa Rica in the winter. They plant, they harvest, and then they go work and earn something there.” They return to use their earnings to plant for the following year. Remittances from even temporary migration allow Achuapans to weather economic problems without having to sell their land.

Leaders in their fifties and sixties contrast this temporary migration with the more problematic migration of young people today. This emigration, they argue, is leading to new expectations of consumption and an abandonment of campesino livelihoods. Nelson, a fifty-four-year-old man who has traveled to Costa Rica six times since 2001 and who defines himself as an *hombre de campo*, argued that his migrations have strengthened his ties to the community because they allowed him to pay his loan and maintain his land. Further, by paying off his loan from the cooperative in a timely manner, despite a poor harvest, his migration allowed him to maintain his status as a cooperative member in good standing. In contrast, Nelson notes, “the young person of today,” including his own son, “isn’t like us. He doesn’t want to work the land.” Indeed, local leaders are so concerned with the lure of migration for Achuapa’s young people that one leader called migration Achuapa’s “greatest development problem. All the young people have gone or they don’t want to work the land. Only the old people, the adults, are left. They’re not going to move forward much.” Physical absence is compounded by young people’s lack of interest in traditional agricultural livelihoods.

Alfonso, a cooperative leader and local landowner, argues that those who return from abroad lose their “love for the land.” According to him: “Young people think they have to leave in order to work. In terms of the cooperative, it’s a major problem, especially for the small landowners in Achuapa. Their sons have lost their love for the land. They go to Costa Rica to harvest coffee and [sugar] cane, they earn a little, and then they don’t want to work on their own family farms in Nicaragua.” This losing love for the land includes not only physical absence but also new patterns of labor and consumption and an affective component of abandonment. For Alfonso, landownership is not just about feeding his family or maintaining a certain social status but about a way of life that situates Achuapa within a national discourse of heroic campesinos and national solidarity that was especially salient in 2009 during the thirtieth anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution.

Local leaders, like Alfonso, employ this discourse of loving the land both to discourage migration in the first place and to assert a moral claim over migrants’ return. In this sense, losing love for the land echoes discourses of nationalism and solidarity that “glorified campesinos-worker revolutionary commitment as foundational to the emerging national community” (Montoya 2007, 74). In his speech commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution, Daniel Ortega explicitly linked *el pueblo*, the people, with campesinos, arguing that they “are the ones that most love and defend the land, because they live off the land!” (Ortega 2009). He urged the pueblo to enact solidarity as a revolutionary principle through which they would contribute to Nicaragua: “We will never give up! We will never sell out, never! Rather, in the middle of poverty and difficulties, we continue building dreams, multiplying hope, we continue enriching optimism, creativity, to discover new paths that will make this people fully happy” (Ortega 2009).

This emotional discourse calls for a solidarity that implies not only emotional attachment but also the labor of Nicaraguans who work the land. Indeed, loving the land recalls a responsibility toward farmland as the epitome of the nation. The cultivation and care of land represents a patriotic labor that is both the work of the revolution and its legacy. In contrast, leaving the land—both rural farms and the country itself—implies a rejection of this legacy and the principles of the revolution. At the local level, emigration is a drain on the land, depriving Achuapa of labor and its future leaders and landowners (in the case of those who remain abroad semipermanently), thereby putting the nation at risk.

In particular, leaders criticize men who leave to work other people’s land—always “as peons, never as owners.” This critique of a system in which men abandon their land to care for someone else’s property represents a twist on the care chain discourse. Men’s responsibilities toward family and farms position their absence as akin to abandonment, similar to the way that the care chain literature characterizes women’s migration in which they leave their own children to care for other people’s families (Hochschild 2000). While the latter implies an abandonment of people, the former criticizes the abandonment of property

and places “left behind.” In both cases, this loss of love or care entails the absence of both physical and emotional labor tied to family and larger social responsibilities. But for men, the gendered expectation to both maintain families and cultivate the land provides grounds for criticizing those who go to take care of other people’s lands while leaving their own farms behind. In contrast, local leaders rarely criticize women who emigrate and leave their own children to work as nannies and housekeepers in Costa Rica. Instead, cooperative leaders believe that women primarily emigrate because they have already been abandoned by their husbands. In this sense, local leaders talk about women’s migration as one more consequence of men’s absence, even if women migrate for other reasons.

Achuapan migrants in Costa Rica argued that loving the land sometimes required leaving it. For Danilo, a fifty-something father of five and landowner, cycles of debt push him to migrate temporarily almost every year. In 2008, he left for Costa Rica to try to pay back a sesame harvest that he lost due to bad weather. He stayed fourteen months, trying to repay the loan that had allowed him to plant in the first place. Despite the generous loan terms the local cooperative provided, Danilo says he is still “always drowning” because of the climate, sesame prices, and his children’s expenses. Being present on the land does not matter much if you cannot sell the livestock you raise or crops you harvest, or if you lose those crops. Temporary stints on a Costa Rican pineapple plantation have allowed him to bring back money for the family’s daily consumption and eventually to pay back part of the loan. Further, many Achuapans rent land for farming or occupy land to which they never received the legal title (Cupples, Glynn, and Larios 2007). Even as local leaders criticize their leaving, migrants recognize that the land they left was never really theirs in the first place.

This idea of loving by leaving contrasts with the claims of local leaders like Alfonso, who believes that the most immediate effect of emigration is family disintegration. Yet Alfonso and his family have achieved a level of economic security that is unusual compared to other families in Achuapa precisely because two of his daughters live abroad. Their remittances have allowed all of his younger children to go to university, paid for medical treatment for Alfonso’s ongoing health problems, and helped him avoid selling his farmland in tough times. “My children,” he says, “are my great capital.” His other, of course, is that farmland, preserved and improved through his daughters’ remittances.

A number of local leaders also argue that encouraging migrants to return is not sufficient to guarantee their continued commitment to the land and the community. Local leaders argue that when young Achuapans return they never fully return to the land. Local leaders consistently criticize migrants who, accustomed to Costa Rican lifestyles and spending habits, return to Achuapa dissatisfied, and those “who are getting by here but choose to sell their land or their cattle to go to the US or Costa Rica.” As Alfonso notes, young men “come back and as soon as the clothes they brought from Costa Rica are old and ugly, they leave again.” Further, their remittances and gifts increase expectations of consumption among those “left behind.”

The distinction between those who are “getting by” and those who are truly struggling remains unclear. What counts as inappropriate consumption? When is migration a necessary step and when is it simply a preferred choice? These are ongoing debates within transnational households and in the community at large. As an Achuapan man who works in a furniture workshop in Costa Rica comments, “One wants to stay [in Achuapa]. You arrive with a little bit of money, but then when you have none left, you leave again. Money doesn’t last there—you arrive with \$1,500, \$2,000, but how long can it last? The things there are so expensive.... My money—I eat it all there.” Many others characterize Costa Rica as a place to make money, and Nicaragua as where they spend their earnings.

Discourses criticizing those who leave index families’, communities’, and the Nicaraguan economy’s fraught dependence on emigration in a context where many Nicaraguans see few alternatives. As one migrant woman points out, in Nicaragua “I wish we weren’t just a symbol of remittances. They think about us for our remittances but they don’t remember to make any policies which would make life easier for us.” Discourses celebrating campesino livelihoods that call on images of a nostalgic and mythic sense of solidarity, and a state capable of meeting its citizens’ needs, shift the blame from the economic and social policies that make emigration appealing or necessary onto those who “choose” to leave. In Achuapa, where the municipal government and cooperative are all under administration by the Sandinista Party, such discourses of solidarity and nationalism were particularly strong. Further, some men note that in the current political climate—with the Sandinistas also in control of the local cooperative—being on the wrong side of the political divide can mean no access to cooperative credits or markets, despite a national rhetoric of solidarity and reconciliation. Thus local understandings of remittances, and their affective meanings are, in part, a reflection of state discourses around nationalism and solidarity.

The transformations of the meanings of solidarity under the renewed Sandinista Party are not lost on working-class Nicaraguans. Achuapans and other Nicaraguans argue that the misplaced priorities of politicians show how little they care about the Nicaraguan people, *el pueblo*. Others point to the opulent displays of Christmas lights in rotundas and along highways in Managua, where wealthy Managuans pass by in cars. But participation in this modern, neoliberal nation is unattainable for most of the families I met in Leon, Estelí, and even the popular barrios of Managua. And Achuapa, with its dirt roads, intermittent water service, and lack of basic services, seems a world away from the capital and its growing number of exclusive shopping malls, where the wealthy can shop for imported electronics and eat at Burger King. Instead, Achuapans are unable to procure the material goods that would signal their participation in the modern nation, and find it difficult to enact the kind of social solidarity that underlies the renewal of revolutionary longings within families and communities. Here, migration becomes a new, if not entirely successful, way for campesino families to enact a community of care and participate in this transformed national project.

Conclusion

These tensions among property, love, and community reveal the particular ways in which Nicaraguan migrants in Costa Rica and their families in Achuapa negotiate relationships in the context of migration. Some Achuapans highlight migration's negative impacts in terms of physical absence and the disintegration of affective ties to family, communities, and homeland. In particular, concerns around physical absence from the locale, new patterns and expectations of labor and consumption, and an affective component of abandonment emerge in discourses of losing love for the land and forgetting those at home.

At the same time that migration produces uncertainty for Achuapans, it is one of the legacies of the instabilities that have plagued Nicaragua. As my interlocutors often remind me, mobility can bring both progress and precariousness. Those who migrate often take out loans to pay for paperwork or coyotes to smuggle them across borders. If they cannot make enough during their time in Costa Rica, the United States, or Europe to pay back those loans, or if they are caught at the border or deported, these failed migration attempts can throw a family deeper into poverty or cut off their chances of ever emerging from vicious cycles of debt.

Discourses about abandonment and losing love for the land, which focus on absence, irresponsibility, and migrants' lack of care for families and communities back home, disguise the ecological, social, and economic insecurities that inform everyday life in Nicaragua. Although I have focused here on Achuapa, crisis was a recurring theme in my fieldwork with Nicaraguan transnational families. Histories of crisis—from the Sandinista Revolution and Contra War to economic crisis and natural disaster—have shaped patterns of migration and migrants themselves, as well as the structures and experiences of communities. These legacies of crisis continue to inform Nicaraguan migration and the ways in which Nicaraguan migrants participate in families and communities back home. The costs of remittances for Nicaraguan families can only be understood in the calculus of political instability, ecological disaster, and economic crisis. Further, these tensions highlight questions about socially appropriate and inappropriate consumption in places like Achuapa. Achuapans themselves struggle to differentiate between whether migration is necessary or simply a choice for improving lifestyles and levels of conspicuous consumption.

While absence and abandonment highlight institutions—like family or society—that break down as victims of crisis and time, migrants' efforts to claim connection through material objects suggest a rethinking of the intimate connections between migrants and families back home. Reinterpreting the act of leaving and continued absence as a form of care, Achuapan migrants attempted to solidify tenuous family relations through material and affective links to home. Such attempts to care for loved ones are focused on and can be read through investment in land and homes—literally houses and their material components.

In Achuapa, migrants' efforts to build homes and care for land in Nicaragua reveal both the work required to maintain transnational ties and the intimate ways in which migrants participate in communities back home, namely through the mundane, everyday emotional labor of feeding, housing, and caring for loved ones and land. Discourses of abandonment and evaluations of the costs of migration in this transnational community highlight the tensions in the circulation of love and care through remittances. "Leaving as love" challenges discourses of national solidarity that seek to enroll Nicaraguan citizens as active participants in postrevolutionary nation-building projects. Solidarity represents one of the enduring legacies of the Sandinista Revolution as well as the language that binds family and society into a unified nation. But the

kinds of practices through which solidarity is enacted within transnational families destabilize visions of the solidary society. At the intersection of desires for solidarity and disillusionment with national development projects, migration becomes a new way for poor Nicaraguans to enact a community of care even as it threatens their place in the solidary society and nation.

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Author Information

Caitlin E. Fouratt is an assistant professor of international studies at California State University, Long Beach. She completed her PhD in anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. Her work has been published in *International Migration Review*, *Anuario de estudios centroamericanos*, and *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*. Her research centers on migration within Central America. She is particularly interested in transnational kinship, immigration law and policy, and migrants' and refugees' encounters with state bureaucracy.

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