

**Cuentos Para Dormir: Bedtime Stories by Deported Parents**

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**ABSTRACT.** This article examines the issues of deportation and family separation and how a book series published by deported parents living in Tijuana, Mexico examined these topics. Deportation is an everyday threat for the millions of children in the U.S. who live with at least one undocumented parent. *Cuentos para Dormir* are a unique set of books that speak to heartfelt issues of family pain and separation written by parents whose families have been directly affected by deportation. In addition to being important social and cultural artifacts, the books also serve as important empowerment tools for parents hoping their stories of deportation will sensitize audiences who may not have been directly affected by this phenomenon.

*Key Words:* Picture books, deportation, immigration, family separation, Tijuana, children's literature

During the spring, summer, and fall of 2015, a group of deported parents living in Tijuana, Mexico worked on writing books for their children who were still living in the United States. The project was facilitated by a former high school teacher from San Diego, herself an immigrant, originally from Russia. These books were to tell the parents' stories of their own deportations to Mexico and to express the sentiments they had been feeling since being separated from their children. It was an unorthodox project for parents who originally came together as a group to support, and advocate on behalf of, deported mothers living in Tijuana.

Seven titles were independently published in December 2015 and soon after their publication, media interest grew and the picture books have been featured in numerous news stories (both in the U.S. and in Mexico) and the parents have presented them in various forums (Carcoma, 2015; Sánchez, 2016; Zaragoza, 2015). These books represent the everyday uncertainties, fears, and frustrations of many immigrant parents, and their children, as well as the realities of many children who have at least one undocumented family member. The following article looks at this project as the production of social artifacts during an era of record-breaking deportations and family separation in the U.S. It examines the multiple roles these picture books hold for discussing the topic of deportation with populations in schools that may be detached or unaffected by that reality as well as being vehicles of expression from individuals most affected by this phenomenon—deportees and their children.

### **The children of the undocumented**

In 2014<sup>1</sup>, there were an estimated 866,000 undocumented individuals under the age of 16 living in the U.S., and there were just over 5,000,000 children under the age of 18 living with at least one unauthorized immigrant parent between 2009 and 2013 (Capps, et al., 2015; Sánchez, 2016). In 2014, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deported 22,088 unauthorized immigrants who claimed to have at least one U.S.-born child. (Sánchez, 2016). After deportation, the fate of many of these children is uncertain and sometimes separation from their parents can even become indefinite (O'Neill, 2012; Wessler, 2011). In the strong undocumented immigrant removal climate of the 2010's, *all* children of undocumented parents are vulnerable to having a parent detained and/or deported (Capps, Castañeda, Chaudry, & Santos, 2015). Deportation has become an even greater reality in 2017 with Donald Trump's election as President of the United States in November of 2016. Trump has gone further than Obama ever did in casting a wide net over undocumented immigrants, making virtually all undocumented individuals deportable regardless of "priority" or convicted offense (Alvarez, 2017).

Since the early 2000's there has been increased attention on the "mixed status" family phenomena and the effects that growing up with undocumented immigrant parents may have on children. A mixed status family is one in which members hold different "authorizations" to live in the U.S. For example, the adults in the family may be citizens, permanent residents, or undocumented immigrants, while the children can be either native-born citizens or immigrants (documented and undocumented) like their parents. Children of undocumented immigrants, "are more exposed to a

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Migrant Policy Institute. "Profile of the unauthorized population: United States" <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/unauthorized-immigrant-population/state/US>

number of risk factors than children of immigrants in general and all U.S. children, including” (1) lower preschool enrollment; (2) linguistic isolation; (3) limited English proficiency; (4) poverty; and (5) reduced socioeconomic progress (Capps, Fix, & Zong, 2016).

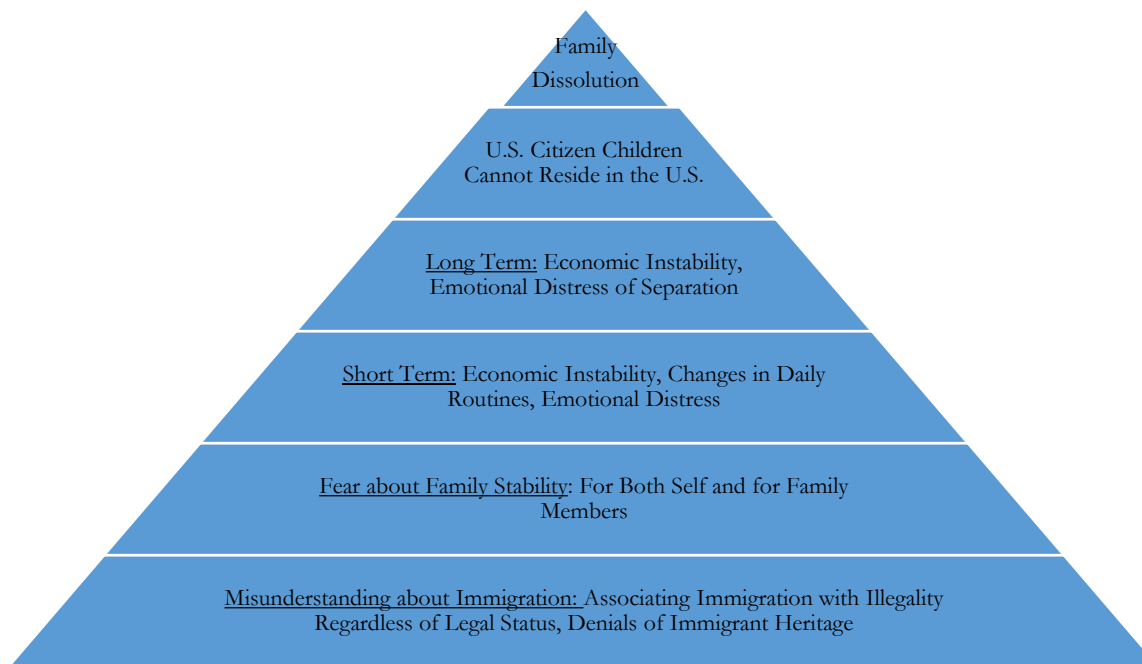
For the children of deported parents, the risks are unsurprisingly more severe and long-term (Capps, et al., 2007; Richards, 2017; Rojas-Flores, Clements, Hwang, & London, 2016). When large scale immigration raids were the preferred method for capturing and deporting undocumented immigrants (i.e., Greeley, CO; Postville, IA; New Bedford, MA; Portland, OR, etc.), critics quickly began to document the harmful effects this practice had on young children (Capps, et al., 2007). Immediate impacts included missing school, children being left alone at home without adult supervision, and, of course, economic instability. Long term effects also included economic and psychological stress (Capps, et al., 2007) in the forms of “psychological trauma, material hardship, residential instability, family dissolution, increased use of public benefits and, among boys, aggression” (Migrant Policy Institute, 2015).

As worksite enforcement subsided, and internal enforcement and increased border security filled the gap, deportation and the fear of deportation remained (and remains) an everyday reality in families that have at least one undocumented parent or guardian (Dreby, 2010; Richards, 2017). It is estimated that between 1997 and 2007, more than 100,000 children were affected by a parent being deported, with at least 88,000 of these children being U.S. citizens (Immigration Policy Center, 2010).

Deportation as a phenomenon that affects individuals beyond the deportee has been receiving increased attention in academic research, the popular media, and in policy papers in the last decade (Capps et al., 2015; Dreby, 2010, 2012, 2015; O’Neill, 2012; Rodríguez, 2013). Dreby (2012), for example, conceptualizes the “burden of enforcement policies on children” using a *deportation pyramid* (italics in original) (p. 830). Drawing from a public health model known as the “injury pyramid,” that describes “the burden of injury on the population,” Dreby’s model (which has six levels) argues that virtually all Latinx (particularly Mexican-heritage children) are negatively affected by a general social “misunderstanding about immigration” (p. 831). In the model, represented in Figure 1, Level 1 (starting at the bottom) suggests that the largest number of children of Mexican decent are affected by the general public’s conflation of Latinxs with immigration, and immigration with illegality. Mexicans, in particular, have long been considered the iconic “illegal aliens” (Hernández, 2010; Ngai, 2004). Thus, many Mexican children, out of shame or in response to social hostility, may deny their immigrant heritage and/or culture (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

The second level affects a smaller number of Mexican children but the effects increase in severity. These children fear for their family’s stability, particularly their own welfare and that of their parents. The pyramid rises four more levels passing through the short-term effects of enforcement policies (economic instability, changes in daily routine, and emotional distress) and in Level 4 long-term effects such as economic instability to emotional distress.

**Figure 1: A Deportation Pyramid to Assess the Burden of Deportation Policies on Children**



Source: (Dreby, 2012)

The last two levels, while affecting a smaller number of Mexican-origin children, are the severest cases of distress. Level 5 includes U.S.-born children having to reside outside of the United States due to a parent being deported. It is estimated that nearly half a million U.S. citizen children are enrolled in Mexican schools. Many of these children struggle in these schools due to not being able to write or speak Spanish fluently to not being enrolled in school at all for lack of documents (Cave, 2012; Lakhani, 2015; Linthicum, 2016; Robbins, 2016). The final level on the *deportation pyramid* affects the smallest number of Latinx children yet is the most severe case of distress—the dissolution of the family.

Dreby's (2012) model is useful in that it argues that all Latinx children are in some way or another affected by deportation and/or general "mainstream" misconceptions about immigration and Latinx cultures. These misconceptions are rooted in a long history of racism and myths about immigration that cannot easily be erased without explicit educational opportunities to learn about the complex racial history of immigration and its relationship to labor exploitation (Chomsky, 2007).

If anything, the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States demonstrates an intensification of anti-immigrant and anti-Latinx sentiment unseen or unwitnessed by many Latinx youth in recent history, particularly in the nation's K–12 schools (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). Trump's election also accelerates the need for more education on the experiences and realities of immigrant Latinx children in the U.S.

### **Latinxs, immigration, and deportation in children's literature**

Providing children in schools with reading material that represent diverse populations and experiences has received increased attention in recent decades (Myers, C. 2014; Myers, W.D. 2014).

Since Nancy Larrick's now classic 1965 essay titled *The All-White World of Children's Books*, multicultural literature advocates have pushed publishers (with mixed-results) to publish more books by and about people of color (POC) (Horning, 2014). Nonetheless, children from non-white families continue to be woefully underrepresented in children's literature, and rarely do children from diverse family backgrounds find characters in books that reflect them (physically) or their experiences (Rich, 2012).

In 1985, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison began keeping track of children's books (that they received) "written and/or illustrated by African-Americans." They found that in 1985, of the approximately 2,500 trade books published (picture books, novels, non-fiction, etc.), "only 18 were created by African Americans" (CCBC, 2016). In 1994, they expanded to keep "track of the numbers by Asian/Pacific and Asian Pacific American, First/Native Nation and [Latinx] book creators as well" (CCBC, 2016). Since 2002, the CCBC has been keeping annual statistics on the representation of POC as authors and illustrators of children's book as well children's books about POC. Of the 3,400 books received by the CCBC as of October 11, 2016 (published in 2015), only 3.1% were written by African Americans (7.9% were about African Americans), less than 1% (.06%) were written by Native Americans (1.2% were about Native Americans), 5.2% were written by Asians/Pacific Islanders (3.3 were about Asians/Pacific Islanders), and only 1.7% were written by Latinxs (and 2.4% were about Latinxs)<sup>2</sup>.

Latinx children, while "nearly a quarter of the nation's public school enrollment . . . seldom see themselves in books written for young readers" (Rich, 2012). And, for Latinx children, the issue of deportation of a loved one cannot be overlooked when documenting this group's experiences in the U.S. The topic of immigration is not new in children's literature, however. As far back as 1960 *My Dog is Lost*, by beloved children's book author Ezra Jack Keats, was published. It told the story of Juanito who on his second day in New York City had lost his dog. Having recently arrived from Puerto Rico, Juanito did not speak the language or understand the customs of his new home. Immigrants struggling to adjust to their host societies is a common theme found in children's literature and there are a handful of very good books that address this issue (such as *Home at Last* by Susan Middleton Elya, for example). Yet, the topics of immigration and deportation present a unique challenge, as some critics may find these topics to only be suitable for, or relevant to, Latinx children, the children of immigrants, or for children who have experienced immigration first hand. (Hommel, 2010, p. 342).

*Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale* by Duncan Tonatiuh (2013), *My Shoes and I* by René Colato Lainez (2010), and *Two White Rabbits* by Jairo Buitrago (2015) are three excellent picture books that speak to the issue of immigration and the treacherous journey many Latinx migrants encounter on their trips north to the United States. And while it is true that the topic of immigration may be unfamiliar to children who do not have an immediate connection to the experience, these books provide useful information in the paratext (peritext)<sup>3</sup> for teachers to help children engage the issue of immigration more deeply and to begin to examine the reason families (out of necessity) may choose to leave their countries of origin. In *Two White Rabbits*, for example, the author tells the story

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<sup>2</sup> Source: CCBC <http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pestats.asp>

<sup>3</sup> Paratext (peritext) are book "features such as dust jackets, casings, and endpapers." Due to page restrictions in picturebooks (picturebooks are typically 32 pages long), "authors, illustrators, and book designers make use of available spaces to foreshadow elements of plot, introduce traits of a character, or provide background information that illuminates a story" (Lukens, Smith, & Coffel, 2013, p. 65).

of a young Central American child traveling north with her father. As they travel northward on top of the *La Bestia*, the freight train used by many undocumented Central American immigrants to cross Mexico's expansive territory, the young girl remains optimistic (though unsure about the journey) in the company of her father, who grows gradually more tired as the story progresses. In this book, children see in Rafael Yockteng's illustrations migrants crossing rivers and sleeping on tracks, and the shiftiness and unworthiness of coyotes (human smugglers) and the intimidation of Mexican authorities (police and soldiers) against migrants. The book leaves the reader wondering what happened to the little girl (who is also the narrator) as the book ends as the characters arrive at a wall separating the U.S. and Mexico.

The books mentioned above speak about the immigration journey, an experience many children may not have experienced, particularly if they are U.S.-born children of undocumented immigrant parents. There are two additional picture books worth mentioning because they address deportation and family separation and are more closely aligned with the *Cuentos para Dormir* series. They are *From North to South: Del Norte al Sur* by René Colato Laínez (2010) and *Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation* by Edwidge Danticat (2015). Danticat's story is about a Haitian woman being held in a detention center (ironically called "Sunshine Correctional"). This story is told from the point of view of the woman's daughter who does not understand why her mother has been detained for not having "papers." The girl experiences loneliness, confusion, and even frustration, to the point that the guards at the detention center ask her father not to bring her anymore if she cannot behave (she cries inconsolably when she has to leave her mother behind). The story does not get into specific details as to the legal reasons, but eventually the mother is released and can go home "while she is waiting for her papers." An adult reader may ask if the mother is being placed on parole (with the possibility of still being deported) or is she being granted some form of case dismissal or humanitarian visa that will allow her to remain in the U.S.? The author also provides some background information on deportation and the number of parents of U.S.-born children affected by deportation in the paratext (peritext) of the book in an "author's note."

Colato Laínez's book *From North to South* is the children's book that perhaps most aligns with the themes found in the *Cuentos para Dormir* series. It is set in San Diego, California and Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. The story is based on Colato Laínez's experiences as a teacher in California. He writes in the introduction that one day one of his "students was crying because her father had been deported to Tijuana, Mexico"—an experience shared by many of his students who had also "had cousins, uncles, or neighbors who had been deported, too." The book tells the story of José who, like the little girl in *Mama's Nightingale*, is going to visit his mother. Yet José's mother has been deported and is living in a shelter in Tijuana (El Centro Madre Assunta is a real shelter in the Colonia Postal neighborhood, next to La Casa del Migrante—a shelter for men). The reader finds out as the story progresses that José's father is a permanent resident and that a lawyer is working on the mother's case. The story concludes with José dreaming of his mother having the "right papers" and the family crossing back over the border into San Diego together.

The books mentioned above make notable contributions to the topics of immigration, detention, and deportation in children's literature. Combined with books about refugees and immigrant adjustment in the U.S., teachers can form a useful and necessary learning unit that looks at

the different aspects of immigration in general, and undocumented immigration in particular. Mainstream book critics, unfamiliar with the hardships of migration, however, often fail to capture the humanistic lenses these books are attempting to provide young readers and instead focus their attention on whether the protagonist is “an illegal immigrant” or why people would embark on such dangerous journeys in the first place—details that may or may not be obvious to Latinx youth who have suffered family separation due to immigration (Perkins, 2010).

It is problematic how easily mainstream book reviewers throw around the word “illegal” to describe the characters in these books. Not once do the authors of these books use the word “illegal” to describe their characters’ situation (preferring to refer to “papers”) yet reviewers seem to be preoccupied with the legal status of the characters. In her review of *My Shoes and I*, for example, Maggie Homel (2010) in the Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books writes,

Though the melodic language may appeal to young listeners, the story fails to contextualize Mario's journey (since it's never stated that his entry is illegal, it's not clear why it has to be so dangerous) in any way that would make his experience understandable to those unfamiliar with such journeys; the text's sunny simplicity, however, makes it an unlikely choice for more knowledgeable older audiences. (p. 342)

Apparently, Mario’s entry into the U.S. must be explained in the book from a “legal” perspective than from a humanistic one for young audiences to appreciate his struggle. For Holman, it seems to be more important to judge the main character’s actions rather than the sociopolitical and economic reasons El Salvador became such a dangerous place after the late 1970’s and during the 1980’s. U.S. intervention and a bloody civil war may not be appropriate topics for young readers yet it is questionable that the “more knowledgeable older audiences” Holman refers to would understand the magnitude U.S. policies have had on shaping Central American nations going back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Furthermore, the question of why the journey “has to be so dangerous” is a complex convergence of U.S. foreign and domestic policies, racial violence and immigration enforcement along the U.S./Mexico border, drug cartel financial interests, and low-level corruption found in Mexico’s police and military.

The Horn Book Guide’s review of Colato Laínez’s book also poses questions that privilege mainstream immigration stories but fails to comprehend the realities tens of thousands Central American immigrants have faced for nearly 30 years (Novogrodsky, 2010). The reviewer once again asks questions that place importance on an immigrant’s legal status than on the reasons these individuals and families may have undertaken such a dangerous journey. The review writes, “Colato Laínez’s text has some gaps (why is Mario’s mother alone in America? Is Mario an illegal immigrant?)” (p. 294). These are adult reader concerns in some sense. Children may wonder why the family is separated but it is doubtful that legal status would be a noticeable gap for young readers.

Equally problematic is Perkin’s (2010) review of the *My Shoes and I*. This reviewer is concerned that the book may be objectionable to audiences more concerned about “illegal immigration” than the welfare of children or immigrants attempting a life-threatening journey: “Mario's plight is not explained, and much of his survival story is compressed, so children will have questions. Some may object because this seems to be an uncritical story of illegal immigration” (p. 46).

Thus, it is apparent that immigration, particularly undocumented immigration from Latin American countries, continues to baffle the mind of many in U.S. society. Yet, for young Latinx children, deportation and family separation are something that they have come to live with. It is important that these children and their families tell their stories, particularly to those audiences who privilege “melting pot” or “nation of immigrants” narratives over real life stories of racial and economic injustice and hardship.

## **Families and deportation**

Immigration is a life-changing experience. It is a “major life decision [that] has important psychological and social implications for the individual and the family group” (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Many political, economic, and social factors influence an individual’s decision to leave their country or region of origin (Chomsky, 2007; Segal, 2002). There also exists within the individual a certain degree of agency and motivation that ultimately provides them with the courage to uproot themselves (and sometimes their family) to an uncertain future and outcome. Weighing the benefits to the risks, these individuals find the costs of immigrating to be more attractive than the consequences of remaining in their native countries.

Deportation from the U.S. has long been a possible outcome for being in the country without the proper documentation or authorization. Family separation is a common accompanying phenomenon to immigration; paradoxically family reunification is a common impetus for immigrating in the first place (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). In a study from the early 2000’s, researchers estimated that only 20% of children immigrated to the U.S. as a family unit, “most of the children were separated from one or both parents for a few months to a few years” (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001, pp. 66–67). In the case of deportation, family separation is also a common occurrence. There are “networks of family members affected by removal and the many other forms of return that accompany deportation” (Boehm, 2016, p. 8). Indeed, “deportation alters many lives, even those of individuals who have never” migrated (Boehm, 2016, p. 8). The same can be said of the individuals found in this study as they narrated in their picture books the fate of their family members (often children) after their deportations.

## **Purpose and Rationale**

While *Cuentos Para Dormir* has evolved over time to serve multiple purposes and address varied audiences, it first began as a modest project with the singular hope that writing autobiographical “bedtime stories” could offer deported parents a potentially therapeutic means of expression as well as a meaningful way to connect with the loved ones they had to leave behind.

When considering the significant trauma and damage resulting from deportation and family separation, one could assume any number of possible actions: staging and participating in protests, calling or writing to one’s congressperson, giving money to organizations supporting immigrant rights, informing undocumented immigrants of their rights, etc. While the importance of such actions cannot be overstated, this project did not function at these macro- or meso- levels; rather, it sought to use



artistic means to engage directly with a small group of people intimately living the experience of deportation and family separation. As such, *Cuentos para Dormir* was conceptualized as an artistic project, though also inevitably a political/activist project as well as an educational/pedagogical one.

Art and creative writing have been shown to have therapeutic effects, particularly for populations who have suffered trauma (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Lepore & Smyth 2002). Prior to catalyzing this project, Sophia had employed artistic methods (both writing and participatory photography) in her work with several vulnerable groups, including young people who had experienced multiple forms of oppression and women who had survived sex trafficking. She heard directly from her students that this outlet offered them comfort, catharsis and strength as they worked to translate and depict their experiences and emotions artistically. Several women from the group of trafficking survivors commented that they found the photography projects to be “more therapeutic” than the formal talk therapy sessions they attended.

While Sophia was cautious to assume that any creative project would glean such effects, she was nevertheless inspired by the possibilities of participatory artistic practice (Helguera, 2011). The idea of working with deportees was driven by the idea that creative storytelling, in its engagement with imagination and emotion, could potentially offer these parents therapeutic benefits, while also providing them an artistic language through which to communicate something difficult and emotionally complex to their children and grandchildren. Thus, *Cuentos para Dormir* functioned in the realm of the emotional and imaginative. While writing allegorical stories would not change the real-life situations of the deported parents, it did offer them a means through which to communicate that which is sometimes difficult to express didactically: their hopes, worries, sorrows, fears, faith, commitment, and love.

### **Positionality (and beginning of process)**

Embarking on this project, Sophia strived to be critically aware of her positionality as a white, middle-class woman and, in many ways, an “outsider” to the population she sought to engage. Though she is herself an immigrant, having immigrated to San Diego from Russia at the age of five, she was privileged to have been offered legal means of immigrating, and eventually, U.S. citizenship. Furthermore, Sophia was accepted into whiteness, and thus “American” identity, in a way that is not offered to racialized immigrants, including the Latinx/Chicanx parents she would be working with (Chomsky, 2007). To complicate the notion of “outsider/insider,” Sophia had lived in San Diego most of her life and had been keenly aware of tensions and ideologies around immigration, specifically at the U.S.-Mexico border. She spent several years learning Spanish to achieve fluency, and worked for a decade with Latinx populations in Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area, both as a mentorship director and a high school English teacher. Still, Sophia was aware that her project carried with it her own assumptions—for example, that the deportees had a tradition of reading “bedtime stories,” or that these artifacts carried any cultural meaning or significance for them. For these reasons, she first approached DREAMers Moms, the self-organized group of deported parents-turned-activists living in Tijuana with many questions to learn as much as possible about their experiences and to gauge their interest in the project.

From the beginning, DREAMers Moms' co-directors Yolanda Varona and Robert Vivar showed great enthusiasm for the idea of writing children's books. Yolanda, suffering from chronic insomnia, had been filling notebooks with rich descriptions of her nightly visions and dreams: images of anthropomorphized stars, fireflies, border walls, and crashing waves. Furthermore, another member of the group (Emma Sánchez Paulsen) had been writing fiction for her youngest son for years, handwriting the pages and attaching them to re-worked covers from discarded children's books (Carcamo, 2015; Sánchez, 2016). While not all members of DREAMers Moms had established familial traditions of reading bedtime stories, and indeed there were varying levels of text-based literacies (in both Spanish and English) among the group members, there was sufficient interest to initiate the project. All participation on the part of the deportees was voluntary.

### **Process for creating *Cuentos para Dormir***

Sophia met weekly with the participants across six months to complete the writing of the stories. The meetings were run in the format of a "writing workshop," with each session focusing on one part of the writing process: brainstorming, purpose and audience, metaphor and symbolism, imagery, story arc (setting, conflict, climax, resolution, etc.), character, etc. The group began by reading together dozens of children's books that Sophia had brought from the San Diego public libraries. Unable to find any books that focused on deportation (the librarian offered "divorce" and "moving"), she instead chose books for their rich symbolism, engaging storytelling, and emotional impact. Among these were *Me llamo Yoon/ My Name is Yoon* by Helen Recorvits (2003) and *Vamos a Ver a Papá / Let's Go See Papá* by Lawrence Schimel (2011). Every week the participants analyzed these books, identifying and discussing the particular element they were working on that week (e.g. metaphor, character) as well as brainstorming their own stories. In this way, Hector Barajas chose the frigid setting of "ICEland" for his story; Monserrat Godoy envisioned a mother lion trapped by hyenas; Yolanda Varona imagined herself as a mother firefly rising toward the stars in a pink bubble.

At the start of the project, the parent-authors identified their audiences and their reasons for writing. Some chose to write for their adult children, others for their young children or else their grandchildren. They identified multiple reasons for wanting to write: to explain the deportation process; to share feelings of fear, sorrow, resilience, solidarity; to offer motivation and support to their loved ones; to communicate their loyalty and enduring love. Emma Sánchez de Paulsen, for example, chose to write for her youngest son, who was just a baby when she was given a ten year "sentence" to stay out of the U.S. He had grown up thinking the situation was somehow normal, and she wanted to share with him the whole story. Though not professional writers, the participants worked intentionally, striving to keep their audience and authorial purpose in mind throughout the writing process. As such, the books are highly diverse: some are written in a simple style with minimal text, while others are more elaborate in their wording. Two are written in English, and the rest in Spanish, as participants were encouraged to write in whichever languages they preferred.

**Picture 1: Cuentos Para Dormir Series**



Though participants produced individual books, the writing process was highly collaborative, with the parents discussing their work, sharing drafts, and offering one another feedback and motivational support throughout the six months. DREAMers Moms was already a close-knit group: many of the members had seen each other weekly or even daily for years; they pray together, laugh together, cry together, and, in some cases, live together. In the words of some of the members, they are each other's family. This community support proved to be invaluable in the writing process. As some participants struggled to get started or overcome writing blocks or emotional obstacles, others offered encouragement, moral support, and brainstorming help. As participants read their drafts aloud to the group, it was not uncommon for the readers and their audience to cry together as they processed the emotions that were being shared.

**Picture 2: Parent/Authors Working on Story Drafts in Tijuana**



Once the initial drafts of the stories were completed, participants engaged in a revision process, though this varied by the amount of time and effort the authors could invest in the project. Some of the stories underwent significant revision, while others remained in the first or second draft form.

Upon seeing their completed drafts, the participants became excited about the possibility of producing hard copies. They were promised by Sophia that if they wrote a complete draft, they would receive two copies of their printed story in the form of a book.

Given that each book was highly specialized and there was no individual illustrator involved in the project, the book illustrations involved many people, ranging from the authors themselves, to children of the authors, other local children, and even the facilitator's family members. One of the authors, Hector Barajas, completed the illustrations of his own book, *Princess Lili and the King of ICEland* and for Yolanda's book, *La Ciudad Más Triste del Mundo*. Emma Sánchez de Pualsen worked together with her three sons to create dozens of illustrations for *El Pequeño Elfo*. Maria Francisca enlisted the daughter of a friend to create drawings for her book, *El Aldeano y La Princesa*. The remainder of the books engaged a more extensive community to assist with illustration: Border Angels, a San Diego-based immigrants' rights organization, connected Sophia with a summer camp serving Latinx children, many of whom were immigrants or the children of immigrants. These children, ranging in age from 6-16, listened to Monserrat's *Mamá Leona Contra el Muro* and Felix Peralta's *Pia, Una Patita Bien Traviesa* and created illustrations in response. The rest of the books, including *My Dream*, were illustrated by Sophia's family members. Sophia then compiled, scanned, and digitally colored all the images. Finally, she created simple layouts, integrating text and image on Photoshop and the self-publishing platform, Blurb.

As the project's facilitator, Sophia undertook the responsibility to raise money for the book production (all work to this point had been volunteer and self-funded). Through the crowdsourced funding platform Indiegogo, the group raised over \$2000, which proved sufficient to provide every participant with two copies of their story: one book for the author, and one for her/his family.

The resulting books are idiosyncratic artifacts, highly specialized and minimally edited to retain the original intent of the author. Each story shares the specific experience of one family, and yet suggests more universal themes that recur throughout the collection: fear, danger, detention, domestic violence, illness, loneliness, faith, friendship, resilience, love.

### **Themes found in *Cuentos para Dormir***

*Fear, Violence, Illness, Loneliness*

Inevitably, the seven books narrate experiences of extreme hardship and pain throughout the deportation process: before, during, and after. In *La Ciudad Más Triste del Mundo*, the family lives in fear of a large, black stain that moves from house to house swallowing people. This visual metaphor representing Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE), or the U.S. government at large, recurs through other books, taking the form of the evil King Rothbart, who rules ICEland in *Princess Lili and the King of ICEland* or a pack of vicious hyenas in *Mamá Leona Contra el Muro*. Similarly, in *El Pequeño Elfo*, an evil wizard calls the mother fairy to his kingdom, tricking her and casting a ten year-long spell.

Danger and fear take many forms throughout the books. In *El Aldeano y La Princesa* and in *El Pequeño Elfo*, the families make arduous journeys across deserts, experiencing heat, exhaustion, dehydration, and potential violence. In *Mamá Leona Contra el Muro* fear is both interpersonal and

institutional: the lioness flees her husband out of fear that he will harm her and her children, only to land in the hands of hyenas, who lock her up in a cage for an indefinite period.

**Picture 3: *Mamá Leona Contra el Muro* from the *Cuentos Para Dormir* Series**



As these parents are separated from their loved ones, physical and mental hardship is experienced on both sides: Yolanda's daughter "la estrella Paulina" fades from the night sky as she retreats into depression while Emma's husband "el gran Elfo" suffers a heart attack as he raises three boys alone. To be sure, great loneliness is felt in Tijuana, too: a mother firefly cries an ocean of tears in *La Ciudad Más Triste del Mundo*, a man runs a desperate race alone but gets nowhere in *My Dream*, and a mother lion is left in an unknown jungle all alone in *Mamá Leona Contra el Muro*.

#### *Friendship and Solidarity*

Friendship and solidarity prove to be thematic antidotes to the isolation, shame, and sorrow the storybook characters experience. In Yolanda, Emma, and Monserrat's books, the fireflies, fairies, and lions form communities that provide surrogate love and support to the wounded parents. Emma and Monserrat both included Yolanda, director and co-founder of DREAMers Moms Tijuana, in their books to honor their mutual love and friendship for her. In *Princess Lili and the King of ICEland*, the captured Soldier King (representative of Hector, who is himself a military veteran) forms a loving community with fellow deported soldiers; it is their loving group embrace that melts ICEland and enables them to return to "Amerikka."

#### *Faith, Resilience, and Love*

Perhaps most salient across the books are the thematic currents of faith, resilience and enduring familial love. Just as the protagonist in *My Dream* refuses to stop running until he reaches his "treasure," Mamá Leona vows to continue fighting until she reclaims her cubs. While many of the "cuentos" conclude with happy endings, in others the future remains unresolved, the authors offering only their undying hope for family reunification. In the meantime, the characters on both sides of the border remain resilient despite all odds: Emma's three little elves, for example, create a "triangle of strength" to help each other face any obstacles that may arise. It is this love between brothers, between a husband and wife, between a father and daughter, between a mother and her two children, and even between a veteran and his fellow soldiers, that triumphs in the end. In the words of Hector Barajas,

writing in *Princess Lili and the King of ICEland*, “Through the love of a father and daughter, there was no more need for borders—there was only one kingdom, one family, one love.”

### Filling a gap

While *Cuentos Para Dormir* has remained relatively small in scale, having involved the families of seven deported participants, it has expanded in its audience and reach. Upon receiving the printed books, the authors were eager to utilize to share their stories with audiences beyond their immediate families. The group came to see the set of seven individual, specialized storybooks as a collection of artifacts that offer an imaginative and emotional language to the experience of deportation, which has become highly politicized in the U.S. in the last decades. As noted earlier, the racialization and politicization of immigration, specifically of Latinx/Chicanx people and especially along the U.S./Mexico border, has fomented a xenophobic and dehumanizing rhetoric that contributed to the rise of white nationalism and the election of Donald Trump. These seven stories, then, constitute a kind of counter-narrative that humanizes and amplifies the voices of those suffering the effects of deportation and family separation.

**Picture 4: Sophia and Yolanda Varona Presenting at the University of Oregon**



Indeed, while some may argue it is impossible to change the “hearts and minds” of unsympathetic people (and one need to look no further than the comments section of the LA Times articles on *Cuentos para Dormir* to confirm this) (Carcamo 2015), the group has nevertheless seen a very powerful response from audiences, some of whom did not know the extent to which families were affected by recent deportation policies. The group has presented at conferences and universities on both sides of the border, in Mexico City, Tijuana, San Diego, and Eugene, Oregon. Hearing the parents read directly from their books and appreciating their willingness to share the beauty they have created from the grave injustice they are living, audiences are moved at an emotional level that is difficult to access through news articles or statistics. It is here that the power of artistic expression is most palpable.

Equally as powerful are the testimonials of the parents that participated in the project. Emma, for example, who is going on her tenth year of being separated from her husband and three sons, recounted that the project brought her closer to her youngest son, who had spent most of his life apart from his mother. Together they crafted the story and spent hours creating elaborate illustrations; she felt that they had bonded in a way that had been impossible to that point. Other parents commented that the project provided them with the drive to continue fighting, and to share their stories with others in the hopes of drawing attention to family separation due to deportation. Of course, the goal for the group has always been (and continues to be) family reunification, an end to deportations, and a pathway to citizenship for all immigrants. The parents-come-activists (and now published writers) continue to fight for this dream every day.

## **Conclusion**

Family is a universal theme and clearly the issue of family separation is one that can resonate with many individuals. For immigrant Latinx parents, their stories are important and none can be more important than that of the sacrifices they have made for their children. While some critics would put the question of legality in the forefront of a story about immigration and deportation, these parents centered their family and their love for their families in their books. These books and these stories are social and cultural artifacts, more than just books. They speak to a particular era of U.S. society that vilifies immigrants and targets Latinx children and communities. The features of books such as these, which speak about hard truths but are centered in universal feelings of love, hope, and family present powerful narratives for Latinx children who may feel alone in schools, in a society unwilling to humanize their experiences or their fears. They can also be useful tools for teachers and populations not directly affected by immigration for they present authentic stories of parents struggling to reconnect with families taken from them by deportation.

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