



CONTESTED AMERICANS

**MIXED-STATUS FAMILIES
IN ANTI-IMMIGRANT TIMES**

CASSAUNDA RODRIGUEZ

Introduction

Mixed-Status Families

Sometimes when Natalia speaks with her hands, I think about the fluttering of birds and her talent for telling stories about her life in a mixed-status family.¹ Twenty-something Natalia was born in the United States and therefore has US citizenship, but this is not the case for everyone in her family. Her parents, undocumented at the time of her birth, remain so. Still, the United States is their home. Natalia sits back in her chair to assert, “My parents have been here so long, so it’s not sensible to think that you should go back to your country when you’ve made a home for yourself in another.” It is in the United States—Los Angeles specifically—where Natalia’s Mexican immigrant parents have set roots and raised their children.

Natalia is a college graduate, speaks fluent English, has a professional career, and tells me she is doing all that she can to access upward mobility for her family. She also worries about the well-being of her undocumented family members and the possibility of a loved one’s deportation. “We don’t want to imagine the worst,” Natalia explains as she describes the ways her family copes with deportation fears. This, too, is hard when proposed policy changes and news reports rattle her family’s sense of security. The country is reckoning with particularly anti-immigrant times. She elaborates, “There is a sense or idea that all the undocumented and their offspring are out to get us in America. That has an impact on everybody who is an immigrant or a child from immigrant parents. You can’t escape it. . . . Oh, man! There are a lot of bigots in this country!”

Natalia complicates the assumption that citizenship equates belonging, saying, “I think it has to do with how society accepts you. If society doesn’t accept you, then you feel like you are not American because they think you are not American.” She recognizes that citizenship is more than just legal rights. For one to experience full citizenship, membership

must be acknowledged by other society members. Natalia has a legal claim to belong in the country, but her social experience of this membership is conditional, negotiated, and challenged. Her undocumented family members' ties to American membership are even more tenuous despite their extended time living in the country.

Natalia's thoughts get to the crux of a current dilemma in American politics: the place of undocumented immigrants and their (citizen) children in American society. For some elected officials, bureaucrats, and political pundits, the rightful place of Americans born to undocumented parents is anywhere but the United States. There has been a sustained attempt among conservative elected officials to amend or eliminate birthright citizenship to make the children of undocumented immigrant parents ineligible. In these debates, Mexican undocumented mothers are castigated for having children or "anchor babies" for the purpose of helping them access legal residency. Several hate groups and elected officials have gone as far as to suggest that mixed-status families reproduce like rats and rabbits.² Donald Trump joined the conservative chorus to argue that the American children of undocumented parents are legal loopholes and otherwise illegitimate American citizens.³ The citizenship of these Americans is, therefore, contested. This rhetoric often goes hand in hand with the denigration of Mexican undocumented immigrants—a group Trump publicly referred to as criminals, rapists, and thieves.⁴

The Obama-era program known as Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Legal Residents (DAPA) would have provided an estimated 4.4 million eligible undocumented parents temporary protection from deportation. However, DAPA was never implemented. Along with this blocked program, undocumented youth have faced a constant battle to access the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which provides protection from deportation and other tangible benefits.⁵ Researchers have well captured undocumented young adults' challenges and resilience in activism, school, work, and family and dating contexts.⁶ Yet, researchers know little about the lives of their citizen counterparts who have undocumented family members. It remains a question if and how members of mixed-status families experience belonging in the United States, and how adult citizen children may manage part of the undocumented experience in their own lives.

If we are to believe conservative rhetoric about mixed-status families, Natalia should be able to legalize her parents without any problem, thereby serving her role as an anchor baby. Because she is an adult and no longer legally dependent on her family, we could also imagine that Natalia can escape her connection to the undocumented experience. Instead, Natalia's age, citizenship, or efforts to become upwardly mobile do not prevent the possibility of her parents' deportation, mitigate the family responsibilities she holds as a citizen, or erase her racialized experiences as a Latina or Mexican American woman. For an American like Natalia, her own and her undocumented family members' membership in the United States is a socially contested issue and question. *Contested Americans* tackles this dilemma.

How, then, do adult-age citizen children in mixed-status families experience and articulate US belonging? How do both US citizens and undocumented immigrants in Mexican mixed-status families make sense of their US membership? Importantly, how do families like Natalia's manage differences in legal status and map out plans and responsibilities? This book answers precisely these difficult, but critically important questions about these contested Americans.

I find that citizenship is a negotiated ideal for Mexicans and Mexican Americans who are intimately connected to undocumented status. Undocumented status or illegality is created by governments, but it is also continuously reproduced and shaped sociopolitically.⁷ What I call "family illegality" describes how family members negotiate illegality in their lives. They must contend with family illegality because immigration status is meaningful, and because the nation-state perpetrates what sociologists Cecilia Menjivar and Leisy Abrego call "legal violence" against immigrant communities.⁸ Policies and programs that separate families, cause fear of separation, and otherwise prevent immigrant families from living secure, healthy lives are all state-sanctioned forms of violence. As we will see for the adult-age children of undocumented parents, their relationship to family illegality can change over time as they become adults and face new freedoms, as well as new responsibilities.

Each person in a mixed-status family tries to mitigate family illegality by making choices or claims to help their loved ones. For undocumented parents, negotiating family illegality is an effort to eliminate the spillover of illegality to their children. In practice, this often means if parents are

deported, they are willing to endure the emotional struggle of physical separation to keep children in the United States. Parents do this to protect what they see as their children's citizenship right to remain in the United States in order to continue their US-based academic and professional futures. These are difficult decisions born out of love and a sense of how sacrifices may yield the best results for children down the road.

For adult-age, primarily educated citizen children in mixed-status families (eighteen to twenty-eight years old), citizenship is experienced as a responsibility to help their families manage the challenges of illegality. In their lives, sometimes family illegality is made less salient because of their age and independence, while simultaneously these same two factors entail new pressures and family obligations. Members of mixed-status families also discursively challenge popular anti-immigrant sentiments about immigrants and immigrant families. At a symbolic level, family illegality is also managed when undocumented immigrants claim their belonging by emphasizing their economic contributions and their clean criminal records. Citizen youth also deconstruct the derogatory term "anchor baby" and dispute harmful narratives about their families. Although US citizenship is the goal for many undocumented immigrants, this book also points to the limits of legal citizenship as citizen participants experience various forms of racialized nonbelonging when they spatially navigate segregated Los Angeles.

Research(er) Background

I conducted this project as a feminist scholar and as both an insider and an outsider in the communities I researched.⁹ I was an insider in terms of my Mexican/Latino identity and immigrant family and working-class upbringing. My outsider status depended on who I was interviewing or what kind of data I was collecting. Sometimes I shared the immigration status and age range of the participants, and other times I did not. With young adults, our shared age range and similar family and educational backgrounds were often points of connection. With older undocumented adults, we had a shared ethnicity and the Spanish language in common, but our immigration statuses were certainly different, and often so were our educational backgrounds. I suspect, however, that undocumented parents' willingness to participate in the

study had something to do with supporting a young, aspiring Latina professional—a professional status they hoped their own children would eventually achieve.

Like the participants, I also have roots in Los Angeles. I was a young child living in a heavily Mexican and immigrant community in the San Fernando Valley when California was undergoing a state budget crisis in the early 1990s. Immigrant women and their children were increasingly blamed for these budget woes and were depicted as part of a larger problem of waves, tsunamis, and hordes of immigrants coming from the southern border.¹⁰ At the time, Governor Pete Wilson ran a reelection campaign that centered on saving the state from what was framed as the perils of undocumented immigration. His 1994 campaign ads included grainy black-and-white security footage of anonymous (assumed brown) bodies running past a US-Mexico border checkpoint and across Golden State freeways. The ad depicts undocumented immigration as an invasion, until Wilson comes on the screen promising to fight against undocumented immigration and deny state services to “illegal immigrants.” In doing this, he promises to protect law-abiding, taxpaying Americans. “Enough is enough,” Wilson concludes at the end of his ad. As young as I was at the time, I was privy to how such rhetoric implicated my Mexican immigrant family, even if I could not articulate my discomfort. But my nuclear family was also *legally* protected. Like many of my particular ethnic background and age/immigrant generation, I personally understood the meaningful benefits that the last broad amnesty program in 1986 offered not just to immigrants but also to their families.

Later, I would make sense of these matters more thoroughly in college, where I learned the importance of critical scholarship and broad activist movements. When I left Southern California to attend graduate school in Massachusetts in the summer of 2011, I left behind a vibrant student and local community invested in fighting for student, immigrant, and workers’ rights, as well as racial and feminist justice. At the time, these important social issues felt all the more salient given the economic uncertainty and devastation that was occurring following the Great Recession. In graduate school, I became more intensely aware of the record-breaking deportation rates of immigrants under the Obama administration. Increasingly, I noticed documentaries and other media

on the strife of immigrant and mixed-status families. As sympathetic as some of these narratives were, there were still many anti-immigrant discourses about immigrant lawbreakers and immigrant mothers irresponsibly bearing “illegal” or anchor baby US citizen children. Children, however, do eventually grow up, and in Los Angeles, these so-called anchor babies included many of my peers—adult-age children whose parents migrated in the 1980s and 1990s and were part of my community. I could not look away from the cruelties of immigration policy. I left New England to make the cross-country move back to Los Angeles.

There is an urgency in this work. Perhaps I approached this research as a story that I could facilitate for people whose lives are often told in a constraining dichotomy: immigrants and their families are undesirable threats (lawbreakers, job stealers, economic drains) or else they are family-oriented victims working hard at backbreaking jobs. Real life, however, is more complicated. Yet, at the same time, it was and is certainly true that mixed-status families face a range of challenges tied to illegality—from the mundane to the terror of family separation. In thinking about my motivation for this research, I found some relevance in Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros’s explanation for why people of color write: “We do this because the world we live in is a house on fire and the people we love are burning.”¹¹ I could not look away from the flames. In these politically incendiary times, I seek to present a nuanced account of how members of mixed-status families make sense of their family ties and membership in the United States.

Making an Undocumented and Mixed-Status Population

The fact that mixed-status families call the United States home is by no means accidental. Instead, the presence of these families has largely been facilitated by US policies that have incentivized immigrants’ permanent settlement. Part of this background is explained by policies that militarized the border and, in turn, effectively cut off much of the seasonal or circular migration that immigrants would undertake between the United States and Mexico. These enforcement policies were a political move on behalf of opportunistic elected officials and political pundits who helped construct undocumented immigration as a moral panic. The militarization of the border and the decrease in circular migration

began with the Immigration and Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, followed by the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) in 1996. IRCA represented a three-pronged approach to curbing undocumented migration by granting amnesty to an eligible 2.3 million undocumented immigrants while also increasing border enforcement and providing employer sanctions for employing unauthorized workers.¹² Funding for border enforcement programs was funneled into Operation Gatekeeper in California and Operation Hold the Line in Texas. As a result of pressures to address what was considered the racialized problem of “illegal” immigration, the budget for Operation Gatekeeper doubled, resulting in a significant increase in the number of border patrol agents and the incorporation of new technologies of surveillance.¹³ While IRCA and subsequent border policing programs made the border more durable, they did not curb unauthorized migration as intended. Instead, they made border crossing more dangerous and permanent settlement more likely.¹⁴ These policies, coupled with border-enforcing programs following September 11, 2001, made clandestine border crossing more dangerous. As the border became less porous, this transformed a pattern of circular migration to a population of undocumented immigrants deciding to remain in the country and make the United States their permanent home.

Although immigration statuses are not fixed, the absence of immigration reform has also solidified—for many—an undocumented status that has been unchanged for decades. Now well over thirty-five years since the last broad legalization offered under IRCA in 1986, more than half of the undocumented population has been in the United States for at least ten years.¹⁵ The demand for feminized service work also meant that since the 1980s, women began migrating much more than in previous periods.¹⁶ Moreover, immigration status differences among parents and children are made possible by birthright citizenship that grants citizenship to children born on US soil. Not surprisingly, the majority of undocumented parents in the country have citizen children. About 85 percent of undocumented immigrants have US citizen family members, and 62 percent of undocumented immigrants have at least one US citizen child.¹⁷ American children in mixed-status families are also no small population; about 5.8 million American-born children live with an unauthorized family member in their household.¹⁸

Not only do undocumented immigrants remain stuck as undocumented and their families as mixed-status, but undocumented status has also become increasingly criminalized. This has been possible through a coordinated governmental apparatus that oversees immigration enforcement. Following the events of September 11, 2001, the newly established Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Immigration Control and Enforcement (ICE) began to oversee immigration enforcement programs and processes. Thanks to both IIRIRA and the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, undocumented immigrants are subject to an increased risk for deportation for a wide variety of offenses, and they face fewer options to successfully contest an order of deportation. Immigrants are under greater surveillance when federal programs, such as those established under 287(g) agreements, partner immigration authorities with local law enforcement to identify and detain undocumented immigrants. Other programs, such as the widely scrutinized Secure Communities (S-Comm) program worked to notify ICE when immigrants are arrested and fingerprinted as part of their processing in local jails. The result of these policies and programs is the increase in the detention and deportation rates of immigrants. Further, in many cases, individuals have been caught in the immigration enforcement dragnet because of minor infractions, such as traffic violations.¹⁹ The detention and removal of immigrants who have committed minor violations suggests enforcement programs are not about removing violent criminals but about criminalizing noncitizens under the state.²⁰

The state's surveilling of undocumented immigrants serves as a mechanism to control families with the threat of deportation. This threat feels all the more real when among the major outcomes of increased policing are considerably higher rates of immigrants detained and deported. In the years leading up to this study, the United States deported a record-breaking number of people in 2012 and 2013 (approximately 419,000 and 438,000, respectively), while hundreds of thousands also voluntarily left the country from 2011 to 2013.²¹ In 2014, the removals had dropped somewhat but still were over 400,000.²² These numbers leave behind impacted families that must manage difficult decisions. When children leave with deported parents, they also experience a form of deportation and can face poverty, reduced educational opportunities, and violence in their ancestral homeland—life circumstances that their parents hoped

to leave behind by migrating to the United States in the first place. Children who leave with deported parents become “exiles,” and children who remain in the United States may become “orphans” without the presence of their parents.²³ Family members who remain in the United States may also have to deal with dramatically altered caregiving and financial supports when parents and primary breadwinners are suddenly detained and deported.²⁴ As a result of immigration policies, in effect, mixed-status families contend with complex realities.

Record-breaking deportation rates did not go unnoticed and were met with anti-deportation resistance. By November 2014, President Obama suspended the controversial S-Comm program. Citing harsh criticism, cities being unwilling to participate, and a general misunderstanding of the program, DHS replaced S-Comm with the Priority Enforcement Program (PEP) in 2015.²⁵ The newer program worked similarly to S-Comm because immigrants who are arrested still have their information and fingerprints transferred to ICE databases, which can then flag ICE about an immigrant being in police custody. The difference is that PEP was meant to prioritize criminals or those considered threats to public safety. Once an immigrant is flagged in the system, ICE can request a hold on the detainee to pick them up. According to advisory materials developed by the Immigrant Legal Resource Center, “SComm = PEP. S-Comm was dismantled in name, but in fact it continued in practice as ‘PEP.’”²⁶ I also observed that activists at various community events were quick to point out the similarities between PEP and S-Comm. The new program did not necessarily represent a victory for immigrants, and of course, it did nothing to help families already impacted by deportation. For them, the damage was done. This was the federal immigration policy context when I collected data, although the following years would bring forth more restrictive immigration proposals and policies from the Trump administration, including discontinuing PEP and reviving the S-Comm program in 2017.

The Question of Belonging

Eschewing sociological questions of assimilation, *Contested Americans* centers on members of mixed-status families’ meaning-making concerning citizenship and belonging.²⁷ While there is substantial literature

on immigrant families and the undocumented immigrant experience, there is comparatively very little research on how citizenship is experienced within mixed-status families. This gap is especially glaring considering how citizen children are sometimes used for conflicting political purposes. Some antideportation activists have centered their campaigns on the family by claiming parents of US citizens deserve to remain in the United States, while at the same time citizen children in mixed-status families are constructed as a problem in anti-immigrant debates.²⁸ Centering on citizenship provides a meaningful investigation into how everyday belonging is articulated and experienced when much of the policy and discursive context constructs citizens and noncitizens in these families as undesirable and even harmful to the United States.

In this book, we see how members of mixed-status families engage with family illegality, which underscores both the real limitations and the possibilities of citizenship for those who possess legal status, and for those who do not. Scholars have theorized citizenship as “a form of membership in a political and geographical community . . . [that includes] legal status, rights, political and other forms of participation in society, and a sense of belonging.”²⁹ Traditional sociological approaches to citizenship have included sociologist T. H. Marshall’s formulation of citizenship as entailing legal status, rights, participation, and belonging.³⁰ The legal status that citizenship provides is prized in mixed-status families because it does allow some access to areas of social life that are deeply consequential—such as a right to remain in the United States without the fear of deportation and legal access to wage labor. Yet, for undocumented family members and those who love them, they know that legal status—even with its limitations—is not something to take for granted.

However, many of the legal status advantages that exist for citizen children in mixed-status families may be accessible into adulthood or when there is less dependency on parents. Theories of citizenship have paid less attention to the role of families. In the lives of my participants, though, family matters a great deal when it comes to their relationships with immigration status and citizenship. When scholars examine how citizens’ rights are challenged in mixed-status families, they do so by examining how Americans may feel betrayed by their country as they experience the challenges of immigration laws and enforcement along-

side their undocumented romantic partners.³¹ In families with young children, researchers study how children are collateral damage in immigration enforcement actions.³² Somewhat relatedly, scholars also study how minor children are prevented from accessing resources they are entitled to, such as educational, social, and medical programs.³³ In this way, the state's very treatment of immigrants prevents US citizen children from realizing the full promise of their legal status. In effect, children are penalized because of the intimate and dependent relationship they have with undocumented immigrant parents. However, the existing scholarship has not fully accounted for how family relationships may alter both access and the promises of US citizenship when children of undocumented parents are adults.

Adult children and their family members have a somewhat different relationship to the political and administrative realities of immigration status. The rewards of citizenship are in some ways better realized for *adult* children compared with their dependent years as minors. In other ways, these privileges result in new family responsibilities and concerns. Concurrently, some of the punishments of immigration policies continue to harm the undocumented and citizen members in families. Even as members of mixed-status families attempt to access the broad privileges attached to legal status, there remains the larger question of how family members access belonging—a key component to citizenship.

Aside from differences in legal status, members of Mexican mixed-status families contend with racialized experiences that further complicate their sense of belonging. Since members of Mexican or Latino mixed-status families may be racialized as non-White, even the citizens among them may find themselves feeling like they occupy a second-class status in the United States. Scholars have pointed out how Marshall's theoretical foundations of citizenship are arguably less relevant to individuals marginalized by class, gender, and/or race.³⁴ Shaped by these social locations, marginalized Americans may have formal citizenship but cannot fully exercise substantive citizenship or experience belonging in their country.

A focus on belonging can capture discrepancies between legal recognition of membership and how groups are accepted in practice. For instance, if we consider the case of Black Americans, they were granted recognition of US citizenship in 1868 by the Fourteenth Amendment.

Still, Jim Crow policies and contemporary mass incarceration and discrimination have long excluded members of this group from the promises of citizenship.³⁵ Certainly, then, legal status matters, but the intersection with race and other social locations can impact how one is excluded from full citizenship. Legal status is not the only prerequisite for feeling a sense of membership either. Immigrants without legal claims to a country might experience inclusion in the national polity when they have access to education, labor protections, and other privileges.³⁶ Noncitizens may also feel a sense of territorial belonging after living in a country for an extended number of years.³⁷ Looking at belonging allows a deeper examination of the lives of both citizens and immigrants in mixed-status families. It can reveal what formal citizenship *offers* and *still denies* racialized members of the United States.

One indicator of this nonbelonging for American-born Latinos has been their reluctance to identify as American. In this study, citizens do not usually identify themselves as American in their everyday lives.³⁸ These Americans reject this label because of their marginalization and their inability to be marked as White or English monolingual and because of how they see their immigrant families are treated in US society.³⁹ In other research, Mexican American and Asian American youth view citizenship as racialized White and may not identify as Americans because of how they are often treated as racialized outsiders.⁴⁰ In other words, these young adults could claim American identity if they felt that they were truly accepted as part of the nation and that their claim to this identity would not be challenged. However, for members of Mexican mixed-status families, both their racialized experiences and their immigrant status or ties may shape their sense of inclusion in the United States. In everyday language, these racialized connotations of citizenship are sometimes reinforced by citizen and undocumented members of mixed-status families when they, for example, would use the term *los americanos*, or Americans, as a synonym for Whites.

Sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn has argued that citizenship is first and foremost a category that denotes membership, and one that is enforced by the state *and* laypersons.⁴¹ In this book, I share and build on this argument espoused by Glenn in that citizenship implicates questions of belonging by community members. As she has noted:

Citizenship is not just a matter of formal legal status; it is a matter of belonging, including recognition by other members of the community. Formal law and legal rulings create a structure that legitimates the granting or denial of recognition. However, the maintenance of boundaries relies on “enforcement” not only by designated officials but also by so-called members of the public.⁴²

For citizens and non-citizens in mixed-status families, any legal claim to belong can be contested. Popular support among state and non-state actors to amend birthright citizenship for the children born of undocumented immigrants exemplifies how even citizen members in mixed-status families are deemed unworthy of inclusion. Citizenship, then, is based on an experience of belonging that is also shaped by whether other members of a community acknowledge your membership.

Looking at citizenship through the lens of belonging is particularly pertinent given the politics surrounding birthright citizenship and mixed-status families. If citizenship is imagined as a consensual admittance between members, immigration restrictionists loudly and adamantly reject the children of undocumented immigrants who gain access to citizenship via birthright.⁴³ Restrictionists see these American children as nothing more than legal loopholes. It is in this way that immigration restrictionists do not consent to or accept the children of undocumented immigrants as part of the American “imagined community.”⁴⁴ While the fervor against citizen children born to undocumented immigrants may be imagined as stemming from a small extremist segment of the population, national polls suggest otherwise. According to a recent poll, as many as 49 percent of respondents oppose granting birthright citizenship to children born to undocumented immigrants.⁴⁵ These challenges to citizenship, therefore, necessitate an understanding of how members of mixed-status families, deemed nonconsensually admitted to the polity, experience and articulate their own sense of belonging.

Questions concerning citizenship and belonging have interested researchers in and across fields. In this book, I look closely at how members of mixed-status families articulate their own sense of belonging in the United States, and how they make efforts to fight for the right to

physically belong in the country. I find that members of mixed-status families explain how the United States *is* their home despite their immigration status, their connection to illegality, or their racialized identity. In addition, scholars have examined how undocumented immigrants and their loved ones may assert their right to belong in the country by analyzing political mobilization and/or participation in cultural or ethnoreligious festivals.⁴⁶ Here, I find value in exploring how people advocate for themselves and their families in less public ways.

Racialization and Mexican Mixed-Status Families

Given the share of Mexican immigrants in the overall undocumented population, it is perhaps unsurprising that many mixed-status families are of Mexican origin. As a result, current immigration laws that impact mixed-status and undocumented families also significantly affect Mexican and Mexican American communities. Partly because of this demographic reality and the ongoing social, legal, political, and cultural association of illegality with Mexicans,⁴⁷ family illegality is not just a legal or familial negotiation but also one shaped by the racialization of immigration.

Mexican-origin groups occupy a unique space in the American racial landscape. As any sociologist will tell you, Mexicans are not a race but an ethnic group. While race is a social construction based on meanings typically assigned to physical characteristics, ethnicity is based on a broad array of religious, cultural, and ancestral origins. As a result, race—even while a social construction—is theorized as more fixed, whereas ethnicity can be optional or symbolic.⁴⁸ However, I find that Mexicans and Mexican Americans did not talk about their ethnicity as optional in the way many descendants of European immigrants do. Instead, Mexican Americans are often treated and made to identify themselves as a distinct racial group.⁴⁹

Based on the experiences of participants, and the way they engage in family illegality—especially at the discursive level—I argue that Mexicans and Mexican Americans are a racialized group, similar to how scholars have described them as a “racialized ethnic group” or a “racialized ethnicity.”⁵⁰ Groups can become racialized, since race itself has always been a category of shifting meanings and contestation.⁵¹ Further,

Mexicans are not simply racialized as non-White; instead, they are often explicitly racialized as foreigners and “illegals.”⁵² Immigrant replenishment or the long-standing presence of Mexican immigrants in the United States means Mexican Americans are sometimes mistaken for foreigners based on their skin color, physical features, and/or surname.⁵³

The racialization of Mexican Americans has never been straightforward. Groups can be considered bureaucratically White but treated and racialized as non-White in practice. This discrepancy is certainly true for Mexican Americans. Following the Mexican-American War, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 granted Mexicans on newly annexed US land the option to become American citizens. At the time, only Whites were eligible for US citizenship. Therefore, this expansion of citizenship essentially marked Mexican Americans as legally White. However, they were ostensibly treated as non-White in their everyday life.⁵⁴ Despite Mexican Americans being legally White, nineteenth-century public officials considered them a distinct and *racially inferior racial* group.⁵⁵ Later, Mexican Americans would at one point have their own racial category in the 1930 US Census.

Despite the obvious racial implications of studying immigration, immigration research as a whole can be improved by better accounting for how immigrants are racialized. Immigration enforcement programs are also not race-neutral in practice or in outcome. Current punitive immigration enforcement policies violate the human rights of immigrants and the civil rights of citizens of color.⁵⁶ For example, immigrant policing programs have led to the racial profiling of Latino people.⁵⁷ Latinos of all legal statuses can experience racial profiling when raids and immigration sweeps occur in their Latino mixed-status communities. In these circumstances, law enforcement or immigration agents use apparent markers of Mexican identity to racially profile people as undocumented immigrants.⁵⁸ Consequently, Mexican and Mexican American families can be subject to the immigration enforcement regime regardless of their legal status.

The racial underpinnings of immigration enforcement are hard to deny when the majority of detained and deported migrants are from Mexico.⁵⁹ Yet, while many Mexican immigrants are deported or deportable, there remain limited opportunities for undocumented immigrants to change their status. This predicament is why one immigration scholar

refers to deportation as “racial expulsion.”⁶⁰ Deportation has long been a racialized project, particularly for the Mexican American community. In the 1930s the US government initiated “Mexican repatriation” that deported both Mexican immigrants and Americans of Mexican origin. As agents relied on race/ethnicity to target potential deportees, they made little distinction among those with and without legal status. As a result, during the 1930s, an estimated 60 percent of deportees were actual US citizens.⁶¹ The racialized foundation of punitive immigration enforcement is clear.

More recently, these racialized patterns of removal have continued. The representation of Latino men in deportation rates and the sites of workplace raids where Latino migrant men are overrepresented mark these men as the targets of punitive immigration enforcement.⁶² This was particularly the case during the 2008 economic recession when Latino migrant labor became disposable.⁶³ These raced and gendered logics of disposability make Latino immigrant men deportable while ongoing depictions of Mexican bodies as criminal may have more easily advanced the immigration policy shifts toward “crimmigration.”⁶⁴ The discourse on national security was effective in criminalizing Latino immigrants precisely because this group has been constructed as archetypal criminals.⁶⁵ Indeed, national discourses have long criminalized Mexican Americans and Mexican migrants as *bandidos* (bandits) or criminals and gang members who are prone to violence and lawlessness.⁶⁶ Certainly, the latest incarnation of this depiction was re-introduced in Donald Trump’s final 2016 presidential debate when he referred to undocumented immigrants as “bad *hombres*,” or bad men.⁶⁷ The criminalization of Mexican migrants has consequences that severely impact immigrant and mixed-status families.

While I draw from sociological perspectives on citizenship and racialization, this discussion has parallels to critical race theory (CRT) perspectives. Pulling from the tradition of CRT, and specifically Latino/a critical theory (LatCrit), the fact that Mexican immigrants and Mexican-origin US citizens are racialized as “other” is not coincidental. Such othering processes can be reflective of what LatCrit scholars refer to as “racist nativism.”⁶⁸ Acknowledging how racism and nativism often go hand in hand in the Latino experience, Pérez Huber and colleagues conceptualize racist nativism as

the assigning of values to real or imagined differences, in order to justify the superiority of the native, who is perceived to be white, over that of the non-native, who is perceived to be People and Immigrants of Color, and thereby defend the right of whites, or the natives, to dominance.⁶⁹

In other words, how Latinos and immigrants are subjugated works to protect White supremacy. In this case, Mexicans and Mexican Americans in mixed-status families have to shoulder double burdens, one of which is that they must often manage *family illegality* in their lives. To be clear, it wouldn't have to be this way if it were not for immigration policies making undocumented status so consequential. In addition, Mexicans, regardless of their legal status, also have to manage their discursive marking as non-American others—a burden not usually experienced by Whites, who are presumed to be prototypical Americans.⁷⁰

Researching Mixed-Status Families

Studying members of mixed-status families is important not only because they form part of a large population of sixteen million but also because debates about immigration would be sorely ill-informed without acknowledging these families and their experiences. As Heide Castañeda notes, mixed-status families are a “primary and enduring feature of the immigrant experience in the United States today.”⁷¹ Researching mixed-status families also represents an opportunity to better understand the impacts of illegality, as legal status differences within the family may reveal power and penalty in managing this social and legal status. Some immigration scholars are increasingly noting how current immigration laws cement undocumented status as a *social identity* that may be similar to some of the social consequences of race and gender.⁷² Thus, immigration policies can make the lives of mixed-status families difficult, while the citizenship of some family members may mitigate some of the challenges of illegality. When it comes to being an adult child in a mixed-status family, adult citizens do not face the same challenges as minor citizen children, nor do many of these citizens have the privilege of eschewing responsibilities that would not be expected of adults with legal status parents. Citizens can also face distinct responsibilities that are not necessarily expected of their undocumented peers.⁷³

Focusing on the lives of adult citizen children also provides an opportunity to look at the lives we may have ignored. Too often it is easy to forget that Americans are part of immigrant families, or, when we do think of them, we are perhaps reminded of the popular image of *young children* struggling to make sense of family separation. Yet, without widespread amnesty, the United States' inevitable future includes citizen children in mixed-status families who will age into adulthood. This is especially true in California, where US citizen children are estimated to have the highest number of undocumented parents—approximately two million US citizen children live with an undocumented family member.⁷⁴ Learning about the experiences of young adults can be helpful in understanding challenges current and new young citizens in mixed-status families will face in the years to come. Understanding these challenges provides essential information for these young adults, individuals who serve this population, and academics who have long been interested in understanding the immigrant second generation.

This book draws on in-depth interviews conducted during the years 2015 and 2016 with sixty-seven individuals who are part of mixed-status families. Most of the families were living in working-class neighborhoods in Los Angeles County. Interviewees were part of Mexican mixed-status families, but they also reflect the diversity of Los Angeles and bi-ethnic/biracial identities and partnerships that are found there. For example, while participants shared ethnic, familial, or intimate ties with Mexicans, six participants also identified with Salvadoran, Guatemalan, or Armenian origins.⁷⁵ Interviewees were part of families that included at least one US citizen and one undocumented immigrant family member. Interviews were conducted with 41 adult-age children, 20 parents, and 6 individuals connected to mixed-status families through partner or grandparental ties. In terms of immigration status, I interviewed 42 US citizens, 7 DACA recipients/DACAmented immigrants, and 18 undocumented immigrants who were part of mixed-status families. The terms “undocumented” and “unauthorized” are used to describe immigrants without government authorization to reside in the United States. This includes individuals who entered without authorization, as well as those who initially had authorization but then overstayed their visas. DACAmented immigrants include young adults who gained access to the DACA program.

Participants in this study were largely part of families headed by undocumented parents with citizen children or a combination of undocumented, citizen, or DACAmented children. However, aware of the critiques on how antideportation mobilizing, immigration law, and immigration research often have privileged heteronormative families, I chose not to explicitly define family for participants when making recruitment efforts.⁷⁶ While no queer families participated, leaving this family definition open meant that I didn't disqualify participants whose household and family extended beyond the traditional nuclear family. Doing this is particularly important for working-class families of color, many of which have historically relied on or lived with extended family and "fictive kin."⁷⁷

Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish depending on the preference of the interviewee. Sometimes participants also responded in a combination of English and Spanish words. The interviews took place in locations chosen by the participant, typically in homes, cafés, and restaurants and on college campuses. Interview themes centered on questions pertaining to experiences of citizenship, belonging, discrimination, familial responsibilities, and details of their familial relationships. Additionally, I asked respondents about media representations of mixed-status families and immigration policies, and I asked parents about parenting, migration, and plans for their children. Aside from these questions, participants often volunteered rich, detailed information about themselves and their lives. Interviews ranged from about 1 hour to 3.5 hours in length, averaging about 1.5 hours for an interview.

I was able to access participants through several means, including tapping into established personal networks that I had developed during some of my college years between 2008 and 2011. Participants were also directly sampled from Latina/o student or community groups. When possible, I also accessed participants from family members I had already interviewed; this snowball sampling strategy was most effective in accessing siblings or partners. After realizing I could not access enough parents through youth/young adult networks, I also sought to recruit parents while serving as a volunteer English as a second language (ESL) instructor at a local nonprofit. After several months, I invited my students and students from other ESL classes to participate in the research study by making classroom announcements and distributing flyers. Ul-

timately, this strategy was not effective. Some of my students, I assume, already had legal status, while others may not have been interested in investing additional time away from work or family when the class was already a significant time commitment. Yet my participation as a volunteer teacher gave me insights into the broader Latino immigrant experience and provided me with a sense of camaraderie and joy during this time. Thankfully, my volunteer partnership with the nonprofit eventually allowed me to recruit potential participants from another department where I was able to approach mothers waiting for their children who were taking part in after-school services.

In trying to recruit young adults, I made direct contact with potential participants by making announcements during student group or community-based general body meetings, posting on their social media pages, and meeting with members at their group events. Through these channels, college students in the social sciences and humanities also learned about my study from university staff who shared the study flyer or a recruitment email with them. Recruiting adult children from educational institutions means the young adult sample comprises mostly educated young people. Doing this was intentional, although I tapped into personal networks and community organizations to help diversify the sample. Yet, we can learn a lot by looking at a privileged group that may meet all the proverbial checklist measures for how social scientists think about integration for immigrants and their children—English language fluency, educational attainment, and professional occupational status, to name a few. Yet, despite efforts for upward mobility and US integration, these young adults may be marked as American outsiders. Knowing the challenges of educated young adults in mixed-status families also allows educators in particular to learn of their experiences and perhaps, with this awareness, to develop strategies of support. Understanding the limitations of my sample, the goal here is not generalizability. Instead, I seek to provide an in-depth account of actual lives that we may know so little about—and voices the public may so often ignore or refuse to include.

Alongside the interviews, over the course of a year from 2015 to 2016, I was a participant observer in private homes and immigrant-friendly spaces. In doing this research, I often found myself in immigrant- and Latino-centered spaces, including know-your-rights workshops, public demonstrations, and group meetings and events hosted by organizations

that were invested in immigrant rights and/or Latino/a empowerment. I was able to interact with immigrants in a number of community programs and with broad groups of people that included immigrants, the children of immigrants, community service providers, and allies. Most of all, I observed families during their mundane routines at home, as well as during celebratory moments, such as birthday parties and baptisms. I observed and spent the most time with the Garcia-Mendez mixed-status family in the evenings when family members enjoyed each other's company following school and work obligations.⁷⁸ I draw from little of the participant observation data explicitly, although these observations did inform this study.

Understandably, undocumented immigrants and their family members were sometimes reluctant to participate in this research, particularly in the “magnified moment” in which I conducted interviews. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild describes magnified moments as “episodes of heightened importance, either epiphanies, moments of intense glee or unusual insight, or moments in which things go intensely but meaningfully wrong.”⁷⁹ As I conducted interviews and fieldwork, I saw firsthand how mixed-status families experienced both the 2016 presidential race and the possibility of DAPA and their heightened feelings of relief, confusion, and/or disappointment. Importantly, I also saw the discrepancies in hope and optimism—for some families, DAPA was never a possibility.⁸⁰

Los Angeles County Context

Los Angeles County—homeland to the indigenous communities of the Chumash, Tataviam, and Tongva—represents eighty-eight cities, several regions, and a sprawl of neighborhoods with distinct cultural and political histories. As a county, Los Angeles is the most populated in the United States, comprising approximately ten million people, with 33.7 percent of the population being foreign born.⁸¹ Los Angeles remains today a racially diverse metropolis and immigrant gateway. Participants were mainly from or living in Central Los Angeles, East and Southeast Los Angeles, and the San Fernando Valley. These regions include communities that have long-established Mexican neighborhoods as well as those that have experienced an increased Mexican and Latino population since the 1980s.

Doing this research in Los Angeles was ideal for locating mixed-status families, as well as older immigrant families that would include adult-age children. The county is also home to a large settled undocumented population, meaning that about 68 percent of the undocumented Angeleno population has resided in the United States for over ten years.⁸² California is home to the largest concentration of Latinos in the United States, at 39 percent of the population; in Los Angeles County, this population is nearly 50 percent.⁸³ Out of the Latino population in California, 84 percent are of Mexican origin.⁸⁴ A sizable number of those Mexican-origin Californians call Los Angeles home. As Roberto Gonzales notes, Los Angeles is “distinctly Mexican . . . [and] Angelenos of Mexican descent make up the municipality’s single largest ethnic group.”⁸⁵ With over 6.5 million Mexicans and Mexican Americans living in Los Angeles, the location is ideal for studying questions that relate to Mexican American incorporation.⁸⁶ Additionally, since one out of every five Los Angeles County residents is undocumented or shares a household with an undocumented immigrant, this demographic reality makes the case for why studying mixed-status families in Los Angeles County is imperative.⁸⁷

Although this book joins a long list of immigration studies out of California and Los Angeles, the City of Angels continues to be a puzzle for the curious mind interested in questions of belonging. The integration experiences of immigrants and their children are shaped by the “context of reception,” which includes a host society’s laws and racial/ethnic makeup.⁸⁸ Immigrant residents of Los Angeles have access to accommodating immigrant policies, large immigrant and co-ethnic communities, and a robust infrastructure of immigrant-serving community and civic organizations. Los Angeles is also approximately 135 miles north of the US-Mexico border. Therefore, undocumented immigrants and their loved ones can avoid the constant surveilling and presence of border patrol agents that characterize life in border towns.⁸⁹ For these reasons, we can consider my findings are shaped by the context of Los Angeles as a relatively hospitable place for undocumented immigrants and their families. On the other hand, we should not be too quick to laud Los Angeles as a Mexican/Latino, immigrant, or multiracial utopia. As racially and ethnically diverse as Los Angeles is, the area is an epicenter of residential hypersegregation and is one of the most segregated US cities

for Latinos.⁹⁰ Further, while having co-ethnic networks can be helpful for new immigrants, the saturation of Latino immigrants in Los Angeles also means immigrants face more competition for work and housing. Historically in the not-too-distant past, California was also the site of virulent anti-immigrant policies and discourse. Further, while California and Los Angeles can represent the vanguard in pro-immigrant policies, not all undocumented immigrants may be eligible for or choose to access such protections.⁹¹ Nor does living in Los Angeles mean undocumented immigrants and their families are immune from federal policies or national rhetoric.⁹² One cannot underestimate the role of immigration policies that are national in scope, or the fact that on the ground, hate crimes and unauthorized policing tactics can make immigrants vulnerable even in accommodating immigration contexts.

Nevertheless, undocumented immigrants in Los Angeles live in a context of reception that is more immigrant-friendly than not, and these data were collected before the years of the Trump administration. This distinction is important as readers make sense of my findings. Understandably, the experiences described here may differ from those in mixed-status families that live in more hostile immigrant contexts where the fear of deportation may be more pronounced and subsequently may impact undocumented immigrant spatial mobility, presentation of self, and other routines and family responsibilities.⁹³ In Los Angeles, Special Order 40 has mandated that police officers refrain from interacting with a member of the public for the sole purpose of determining their immigration status.⁹⁴ Furthermore, former California governor Jerry Brown signed the Trust Act in 2013, which prevents California counties from putting a hold on a jailed detainee so that ICE can take them into immigration custody, although there are some exceptions. Later, in May 2015, the County Board of Supervisors ended the 287(g) agreement between the federal government and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.⁹⁵ These policies established the local context for the immigrant families in this book.

Organization of the Book

In chapter 1, I outline how undocumented parents conceptualize the citizenship status of their American children. Although their own status

is insecure, undocumented parents value the US educational opportunities available to their children and perceive it as their children's right to continue accessing this resource. As a result, most parents are willing to fragment their families if they or their partners are deported. Parents use the phrasing *no quiero cortarles las alas* (I do not want to cut their wings) to emphasize their roles in protecting their children's educational opportunities. Parents' plans regarding their possible deportation involve protecting their citizen children's rights, while for their undocumented children, parents rely on moral logics and extended time in the United States to encourage their children's continued residence in the United States. Although parents do experience some ambivalence about their plans, this language highlights the importance of education in undocumented parents' hopes and dreams for their children.

In chapter 2, I track how young adults manage family illegality. Citizen children who have undocumented parents manage family illegality in new ways when they become adults. Adult-age children come to learn that their legal status affords them newfound mobility as well as partial relief regarding parental deportability. The transition to adulthood also represents a new relationship to illegality as young adults are able to develop new ways to cope with and understand parental deportability. Young adults also shift their relationship to illegality when they transition to college, negotiate sponsoring their parents for residency, and participate in family breadwinning. First, my analysis reveals that the pathway to college is made more difficult for citizen college-goers when financial aid processes ask for parents' Social Security numbers and other US authorization information. I also find that the responsibility to sponsor parents for legalization is not a family-friendly option for families who do not want to separate and wait out an extended bar outside the United States. These harsh realities stand in stark contrast to any public discourse about so-called anchor babies and the opportunistic use of citizen children's privileges. Moreover, my findings complicate how we understand gendered family breadwinning, since citizen daughters are expected to financially help their families even if they have adult undocumented brothers.

Chapter 3 chronicles how young Americans "talk back" to public rhetoric about anchor babies and birthright citizenship. Mexican Americans share counterstories that challenge the mainstream anchor baby

myth by using several claims that speak to their lived experience and knowledge. Young Americans position anchor baby discourse as illogical, hypocritical, and racist. They argue for the dignity they seek for their families and themselves as a way to counter how elected officials warn of the so-called dangers of birthright citizenship for children born in mixed-status families. While I focus on young adult narratives, I also outline how this rhetoric impacts the lives of mothers and young children. Ultimately, members of mixed-status families resist how they are depicted in public debates and consider this another example of how their membership in the United States is unfairly tenuous.

Chapter 4 examines how undocumented immigrants express their belonging in the United States. Undocumented immigrants construct their worthiness of being in the United States by articulating how their labor provides economic contributions to the country. From these narratives we also get a glimpse of immigrants' visions for immigration reform and their longing for formal recognition from the state. In these narratives, however, not all undocumented immigrants are constructed as worthy. In their attempts to mitigate their own stigma, undocumented immigrants also create moral hierarchies of worth based on clean criminal records and labor history. They do so partly because they place blame on the actions of a few immigrants for creating or maintaining stereotypes of undocumented immigrants as rapists, murderers, and drug dealers. These narratives and hierarchies surrounding criminal activity also reveal how belonging can be stratified for undocumented immigrants.

Chapter 5 focuses on how citizens in mixed-status families experience belonging at the local level. In multiethnic segregated Los Angeles, participants generally feel belonging in their local hometown neighborhoods but experience racism and racial microaggressions in predominantly White communities. It is in White communities where Mexican Americans are told to go back to Mexico, are racially profiled, and experience a range of indignities that mark them as "illegals," undesirable, and/or inferior. These racialized experiences also shape how Mexican Americans exercise agency in responding to or preparing for microaggressions. These Americans primarily use language, self-presentation, and family strategies to mitigate racism.

In the conclusion, I summarize the main findings and unpack some of the contradictions in this work. Despite the challenges youth may face

in the event of a parental deportation or in navigating higher education, parents have an optimistic view of their children's futures. Parents feel a responsibility to protect what they see as their children's citizenship or moral right to get an education—but this perception is also based on a dual frame of reference, where parents value and better appreciate US education opportunities over those they believe are available in their home countries. For this reason, if a parent is deported, forced separation is deemed preferable. On the other hand, going through a legalization process in which a parent voluntarily exits the country and waits through a several-year ban is not considered an appropriate plan when families want to stay together. In the conclusion, I also raise pertinent questions about what living in a Trump era of politics meant for mixed-status families and what the future can hold for families if immigration reform and other immigration policies are accomplished. Finally, I provide policy recommendations and challenge readers to consider what change would look like beyond the confines of respectability politics. Ultimately, belonging for members of mixed-status families is a complicated and negotiated ideal. This book centers on the unique subjectivities of these contested Americans who grapple with the realities of illegality and their own racialized belonging.