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Betsabeth Monica Lugo

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**The Dissertation Committee for Betsabeth Monica Lugo Certifies that this is the  
approved version of the following dissertation:**

**God, Children and Country: An In-depth Study of the Condition of  
Immigrant Illegality Through the Experiences of Mexican Domestic  
Workers in Dallas, Texas**

**Committee:**

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Sharmila Rudrappa, Supervisor

---

Gregory Cuellar

---

Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez

---

Nestor P. Rodriguez

---

Michael P. Young

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**by**

**Betsabeth Monica Lugo, B.A.; M.A.**

**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to the Mexican immigrant women who trusted me to share their hearts and minds, and to my family for their unwavering love and support.

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And lastly, to my father whose life and values shaped mine. I know that wherever you are, you are proud of me.

# **God, Children and Country: An In-depth Study of the Condition of Immigrant Illegality Through the Experiences of Mexican Domestic Workers in Dallas Texas**

Betsabeth Monica Lugo, Ph.D.

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Supervisor: Sharmila Rudrappa

In this dissertation I examine the lived experiences of 43 undocumented Mexican women working in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, particularly, the ways that these women navigate and make sense of what I identify as *environments of vulnerability* -social contexts characterized by local configurations of migrant “illegality” (a paradigm-in-progress). In Article 1, I analyze three in-depth interviews with undocumented Mexican domestics to understand how they use religious stories and symbols to help them make sense of and cope with the uncertainties and vulnerabilities they face living in the United States. Findings from this article indicate that women 1) draw from religious discourses to actively interact with their social environments and 2) construct narratives that allow them to create an alternative version of the social world and a coherent sense of self. These findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of the ways that religion shapes undocumented immigrant women’s lives outside of religious institutions and religious contexts. In Article 2, I examine the strategies that 40 undocumented Mexican women use to mother in environments of vulnerability. Findings from this article reveal that these women use two key strategies to protect their children’s well-being: 1) moving out of neighborhoods with undesirable “others” (i.e., the poor, Blacks, and “less worthy”

Mexican immigrants) and 2) withholding information from their children regarding their legal status. These findings contribute to an increased understanding of the mothering practices of women who face multiple structural oppressions. Finally, in Article 3 I examine the factors that influence undocumented Mexican women's decisions to stay in the United States, even as they face the uncertainty associated with deportability – that is, even as they traverse environments of vulnerability. Two factors primarily underlie women's decision to stay in the U.S.: the availability of quality public education and educational opportunities for their children and the fear that they or their children will be the targets of violence in Mexico. These findings add to research on family and migration and extend previous research to reveal how Mexican women and their children navigate the shifting terrain of state power as they build their lives in the United States.



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## **Introduction**

Today, the more than 11.2 million undocumented immigrants in the United States (Passel and Cohn 2011), sixty percent of them Mexicans, experience in various ways the uncertainties and the often “anxiety-ridden realities” associated with the “condition of migrant illegality” (Willen 2007).

Beginning in the mid-1990s, a reconfiguration of the U.S. immigration system resulted in the convergence of civil immigration law with criminal law (Menjivar and Abrego 2012). Through this process of legal restructuring and coercive use of immigration enforcement (Rodriguez and Paredes 2013), which intensified after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks (Donato and Armenta 2011), “illegal” immigrants were increasingly construed as criminal immigrants. For instance, since the mid-1990s the number of Mexican undocumented and legal immigrants who are detained and deported has grown every year to reach a peak of 315,000 thousand for the fiscal year of 2013 (Simanski 2014). More than half of those removed from the United States that year (168,000) did not have a criminal record (Simanski 2014).

While deportation gained visibility after the enactment of the Patriot Act of 2001, its systematic implementation began to gather momentum a few years before, with the passage of IIRIRA (Illegal Immigration Reform and Individual Responsibility Act) in 1996 (Hagan et al. 2008). This law enhanced considerably the enforcement capabilities of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) by increasing the categories of noncitizens subject to detention and removal and by expanding the offenses for which undocumented immigrants could be deported (Hagan et al. 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> The USA Patriot Act signed into law six weeks after the September 11 2001 terrorist acts expanded the class of immigrants who are subject to removal on grounds of terrorism and authorized the Attorney General to place these immigrants in detention while their removal proceedings are pending.

But while detention and deportation are the most extreme techniques of law enforcement, they belong to an extensive repertoire of immigration control policies and practices (Walters 2002) in which the U.S. state is actively invested. The increased border control between Mexico and the U.S., workplace raids, the exclusion of undocumented immigrants from public services and basic legal rights, and the heightened scrutiny by employers, public officials, law enforcement and even private citizens are all tactics of a legal apparatus that produces the condition of immigrant “illegality.” Against the backdrop of a restrictive and punitive immigration regime, this dissertation examines how the uncertain and hostile environments, or what I term *environments of vulnerability* – a paradigm in progress - shape the lives of 43 undocumented Mexican domestic workers living in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. In doing so, this dissertation makes two major empirical and theoretical contributions to the literature on gender and immigration.

First, by zooming in on the perspectives of undocumented Mexican women, I make a contribution to the literature on undocumented immigration. The diversity in experiences of immigrant “illegality” and immigration control is consistently underemphasized in studies of labor migration. In fact, most of the scholarship on immigration control and “illegality” is about immigrant men or immigrant families, effectively excising women as immigrant workers. However, we know that gender is an important factor in shaping migration patterns and experiences (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, Boehm 2012, Gonzalez-Lopez 2005, Donato 1993, Parrado and Flippen 2005). Increased female migration to the United States is reflected in various studies that focus on immigrant women; however a great deal of this literature focus on their relationship with their families, the communities they create and the communities they leave behind (Menjivar 2012; McKenzie and Menjivar 2011; Parreñas 2001; Hochschild 2000, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). However, there is little scholarship of Mexican

women working as domestics and caregivers in the United States that focuses on their experiences of living in hostile and uncertain environments characterized by a ubiquitous threat of deportation.

Second, there are few immigration studies that explore what “illegality,” understood as an imposed condition of vulnerability and the threat of deportation (De Genova 2002) means for the everyday lives of Mexican women working in the United States (see Boehm 2009 for an exception). This is largely a consequence of the persistent view in scholarly circles that labor immigrants are rational economic actors that respond to “push” and “pull” factors associated with the market. From this vantage point, two questions have been traditionally examined: why people migrate in the first place and the consequences of migration at the individual and group level (Espenshade 1995, Valdez 2006). The first line of inquiry assumes that individuals decide to migrate in response to economic disparities and market considerations (Portes and Rumbaut 1990, Massey 1987, Massey et.al 1998). The second, focuses on whether Mexican immigrants may assimilate, or incorporate to the host society and whether society’s “opportunity structure” will enable Mexican immigrants to transition from “sojourner” to “settler” in their way to assimilation and/or incorporation (Cornelius 1992, Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, Brettell and Alstatt 2007, Portes and Bach 1985, Chavez 1988). While these frameworks have taught us much about the processes of immigration and settlement, there are questions about the immigration experience and how immigrants experience the condition of immigrant illegality in their everyday lives that beg answers.

## **DISSERTATION OUTLINE**

This dissertation is composed of three independent articles. Below I outline the topics, theoretical frameworks, and key findings and contributions of these articles.

## **Article 1: The Everyday Religion of Mexican Immigrant Women**

In this article I examine how undocumented labor migrant women use their religious beliefs and commitments to respond to the material, social, and emotional upheavals of their everyday lives. Using narrative analysis and a *lived religion* framework, I analyze three in-depth individual interviews with undocumented Mexican domestic workers to understand how they use religious stories and symbols to help them make sense of and cope with the uncertainties and vulnerabilities they face living in the United States – that is how they use religion to navigate *contexts of vulnerability*.

This study makes several important theoretical and empirical contributions. First, it makes an important contribution to the literature on religion and immigration by highlighting the significance of religion to Mexican immigrant women outside of the confines of religious institutions. While it is not surprising that Mexican immigrants turn to religion for solace in times of distress, this paper illustrates how Mexican immigrant women actively use religious beliefs and symbols to interact with the particularities and uncertainties of the environments in which they live. In addition, these women's particular social locations – as women, mothers, and undocumented Mexican immigrants – shape their everyday experiences and meanings of religion and religiosity. Second, this study shows how, through narrative, these women use religion to articulate alternative worlds and sense of selves that strive for coherence. In the first case, I examine how Maria defines God as a benevolent fatherly figure who protects her and her daughter



when they lost the protection of the male in the family. This is particularly relevant as Maria figured out life on her own as an undocumented immigrant. In the second case I examine how Dania builds a sense of community through religious beliefs and participation in her congregation, allowing her to achieve “religious citizenship,” in a context where national citizenship is unavailable to her. In the third case, I analyze the ways in which Nora’s internalized religious beliefs about family and motherhood interact with the challenges imposed on her by a troubled relationship with her husband and by her condition as an undocumented immigrant. These findings contribute to an enhanced understanding of the ways that undocumented migrant women draw on religious meanings and values in order to navigate the hostile and uncertain environment of immigrant illegality.

## **Article 2: Mothering at the Intersection of Immigrant Illegality: How Race, Class, Gender and Citizenship Status Shape the Work of Mothering**

In this article I examine the mothering strategies that undocumented Mexican women use in *contexts of vulnerability*. Drawing on interviews with 40 undocumented Mexican mothers in Dallas, I examine the factors that shape mothers’ definition of risk, their concerns for their children’s wellbeing, and the strategies they utilize to protect their children from harm. Further, I use an intersectionality framework to understand how race, class, gender, and citizenship status intersect to shape both mother’s fears about the risks their children face as well as the strategies they use to safeguard their children’s wellbeing.

In doing so, this study makes several important theoretical and empirical contributions. First, my research extends previous scholarly work that examines mothering practices of women who face multiple structural oppressions (Elliot and Aseltine 2012, Gonzalez-Lopez 2003, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). My research uniquely explores how environments of vulnerability – characterized by illegality and vehement anti-immigrant sentiment targeting Mexican mothers – shape the mothering practices of Mexican women living in the U.S. In particular, these women engage in two key mothering practices. First, they attempt to move away from neighborhoods that they perceive as occupied by undesirable others – the poor, Blacks, and “less worthy” Mexicans. In doing so, they attempt to protect their children from neighborhood violence and police detection but also attempt to define themselves and their children in opposition to damaging discourses that define illegal immigrants as unworthy at the same time that they reproduce racist and classist discourses. Second, they seek to protect their children’s emotional integrity by withholding information from them regarding their legal status.

A second key contribution of this article is that this research engages scholarship that examines the construction of illegality and “illegal” subjects (Chavez 2008, Coutin 2000, DeGenova 2002, Abrego and Menjivar 2011, Abrego 2011, Menjivar and Abrego 2012). Much of this scholarship has examined the experience of immigrants from Latin America, particularly Central Americans, and has focused on the historical and juridical processes of illegality construction. My paper extends this body of research by focusing on how the processes of production of illegality penetrate the intimacy of family life as they shape decisions that affect individuals and families. In addition, given the specificity

of the processes of illegalization for Mexican immigrants, this paper focuses exclusively on the experiences of Mexican immigrant women. This paper also demonstrates how everyday experience is a site where gender, race, class and state power, and individual agency coalesce.

### **Article 3: What Would it Mean to Return Home? Narratives of Hope and Uncertainty**

In this article I draw on 43 in-depth interviews to examine the factors that shape undocumented Mexican women's decisions to stay in the United States, rather than return to Mexico, even as they face environments of vulnerability characterized by the pervasive threat of deportation. Through narratives imbued with both hope and uncertainty, women articulate two main factors shaping their decisions to stay in the United States: the importance of access to educational opportunities for their children and the fear that they or their children would be the targets of violence in Mexico. These findings make several important contributions to the literatures on migration, gender, and family ties.

First, this research extends research on how family ties shape individuals' decisions to migrate. While previous research has found that children are one of the key reasons that individuals migrate to the United States, (Boehm 2008; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Salazar-Parrenas 2005), findings from this article confirm and extend this research by showing the unique mechanisms through which children motivate undocumented Mexican women's decisions to stay in the United States, rather than return to Mexico, even as they are deeply ambivalent about remaining in the U.S.

This research also contributes to the literature on gender and immigration by revealing how respondents' motivations for staying in the U.S. are shaped by their intersecting identities as women, mothers, and undocumented Mexican immigrants. For example, their motivations for staying in the U.S. are inflected with normative expectations that dictate that Mexican women deny themselves in favor of their children.

In summary, this dissertation examines how undocumented Mexican women living in the U.S. navigate what I term – *contexts of vulnerability*. In other words, how do they make sense of and forge meaning in environments characterized by the production of immigrant illegality and its attendant threat of deportation? I examine how they do so via three key domains: everyday lived experiences and meanings around religion, mothering strategies, and how children shape their decisions to remain in the U.S.

## **Article 1: The Everyday Religion of Mexican Immigrant Women**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the significance of religion to immigrants in the United States, and explores the ways that religion shapes immigrants' lives outside of religious institutions and religious contexts. Recognizing that women have become a greater proportion of the undocumented labor migrant population in the United States, this paper focuses on how Mexican immigrant women experience religion. Through a case study of the experiences of three undocumented Mexican women, I examine how they use their religious beliefs and commitments to respond to the material, social, and emotional upheavals of their everyday lives. Using narrative analysis and a *lived religion* framework, I analyze semi-structured, in-depth interviews with three undocumented Mexican domestic workers who live in the Dallas metropolitan area to understand how they use religious stories and symbols to help them make sense of and cope with the uncertainties and vulnerabilities they face living in the United States.

## INTRODUCTION

The convergence of civil immigration law and criminal law has become the key feature of the current immigration regime in the United States (Hagan, Eschbach and Rodriguez 2008; Menjivar and Abrego 2012). The series of laws enacted since the first half of the 1990s not only have increased the categories of noncitizens subject to detention and removal, but also have expanded the offenses for which noncitizens could be deported. Furthermore, with these laws punishment was made retroactive so that crimes committed before 1996 that were not defined then as aggravated felonies became grounds for removal, even if the immigrant had already served a prison sentence for that offense (Hagan, Eschbach and Rodriguez 2008). As the nation's approach to unauthorized migration shifted toward restriction, criminalization and deportation, undocumented immigrants in the U.S. have increasingly found themselves navigating social spaces marked by varying degrees of exclusion, isolation and subjugation (Quesada, Hart and Burgois 2011, Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002).

As Mexican women increasingly participate in the processes of migration, they live and work in spaces configured by a specific set of conditions that constrain them in profoundly gendered and racialized ways. These women are not only vulnerable to economic exploitation, ethnic subordination (Chavez 2008, Massey, Durand and Malone 2002) and legal action (Menjivar and Abrego 2012, Hagan, Eschbach and Rodriguez 2008), but because of their exclusion from public services and basic legal rights, they are especially vulnerable to ill health (Cohen 2009, Menjivar 2002), sexual and gender violence (Salcido and Adelman 2004, Villalon 2010), violence in the streets (Hirsch

2003), social isolation (Hurtado de Mendoza et al 2014, Gradstein and Schiff 2006), social non-existence (Coutin 2003) emotional stress from family separation (Dreby 2010) and familial conflict and instability (Rodriguez and Hagan 2004).

These structural vulnerabilities provide the conditions for the subjection of immigrant Mexican domestic workers in the United States. Under these conditions it is not entirely surprising that Mexican immigrants in general, and Mexican women in particular turn to religion and religious institutions (Menjivar 2006, Hagan and Ebaugh 2003, Warner 1998). Current sociological study of immigration and religion has focused on the diversity of immigrant congregations (Chen 2002, Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000), on the role of the church in the provision of social services (Ebaugh and Pipes 2001), on immigrant incorporation into mainstream American society (Eklund 2006) and on cultural and ethnic reproduction (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, Kurien 2001). Others have looked at how religion has moved beyond the private confines of the church to inspire and inform political protest against border policies (Hondagneu-Sotelo et al 2004) and more recently, religion as a resource for immigrants to endure the migration undertaking (Hagan 2008). This study contributes to this body of scholarly work by illustrating the significance of religion and religious beliefs and their interaction with migrant illegality in the process of subject formation for individual immigrant Mexican women.

In this paper I examine how Mexican immigrant women use religion and religious beliefs to navigate the boundaries of “existence” and “exercise” (Salazar Parrenas 2001) imposed by the processes of illegalization. I draw on the accounts and experiences of three Mexican undocumented women who work as housecleaners and child care

providers in the Dallas metropolitan area. Using narrative analysis and a *lived religion* framework I will highlight the creative ways through which Mexican immigrant women use religion meanings and beliefs to interact with the realities of their everyday lives and also the meaning-making process they engage in to make sense of themselves and their circumstances.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Lived Religion/Everyday Religion**

To examine how religion is interwoven with the lives of Mexican immigrant women, I rely upon Meredith McGuire's conceptualization of lived religion. McGuire (2008) argues that a lived religion framework allows for the distinction between the actual experience of persons who use religion and the prescribed religion of institutionally defined practice and beliefs (McGuire 2008:12). She states that individual religiosity is not a mere frame of mind but rather a subjective reality firmly embedded in the contingencies of everyday life. For McGuire, lived religion is a creative place for religious experience and expression in which individuals become actors fashioning and re-fashioning religious beliefs and practices in accordance with the ups and downs of their personal and social circumstances. In saying that individuals' religious experiences unfold in their social field of action, I argue, following Jackson (1996) that immigrant women's religious ideas and impulses cannot be understood outside of the contexts of their everyday living. Mexican American feminist theologian Jeanette Rodriguez advanced a similar conceptualization more than a decade earlier arguing that *religiosidad*



*popular* can be understood as how religion is truly lived and experienced by people (1994). Inspired by that framework, Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez (2007), in her study of religious meanings in the sexual lives of Mexican immigrant women, found that the women she interviewed, devised a “self-defined emancipatory sexual morality” (p. 168) that would help them integrate their religious values and beliefs and their sexual desires, in a way that responded to their realities as immigrants in the United States. A *lived religion* framework is important in studies that examine the religious experiences of women, particularly women of color, since all too often their voices and realities are excluded and the issues that directly relate to them are ignored. For Mexican women in particular, a lived-religion framework is a crucial analytical and theoretical tool, as it allows us to explore expressions of religion and culture that are central to the experience of Mexican women. As Maria del Pilar Aquino states, talking about religion for Latina women “is not a luxury, but a necessity and a right to be claimed” (Aquino, Machado and Rodriguez 2002: xiv). The rich theoretical tradition advocated by Latina feminist theologians (Rodriguez 1994, Machado 2002, Aquino 2002) who have examined the plural and creative ways in which Latinas in the United States experience God and live their faith within the context of their immigration experience undoubtedly informs this framework.

In sum, it is through a highly creative and dynamic process of interaction with their own social environments that individuals borrow, improvise, invent and negotiate religious meanings from the resources available to them (Gonzalez-Lopez 2007, Ammerman 1997, Griffith 1997, Orsi 1997). A *lived religion* framework is useful in that

it allows us to look into the realm of individuals' everyday religious experience and focus on the intersection between the world of everyday practice and the world of larger social structures (Ammerman 2007).

### **Religion Out of Place**

Ammerman (2007) notes that the religious resources (i.e., practices, symbols, beliefs, sounds) that transnational migrants bring with them do not remain unchanged. Transnational migration, internal migrations, and religious innovation have contributed to contemporary American religious plurality that we see today (Ammerman 2007; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Ebaugh 2003). Immigrants may both hold on to traditional religious symbols, rituals and narratives that affirm who they are and remind them of what they believed in before migrating (Greeley 1989; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Levitt, 2006), while the religious pluralism they encounter in the United States present them with a multiplicity of meanings and discourses — sacred and secular — that are available to be accessed at any moment (Ammerman 2007). In this way, religion is both a medium by which immigrants maintain cultural ties to their homeland (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000) as well as a means by which to incorporate new beliefs and traditions as they establish their place in the new land (Ammerman 2003; 2007). In order to understand Mexican immigrant women's religion-as-lived, I argue, following Smith (1992: 90), that we take as a point of departure the social realities in which religious beliefs, practices, and experiences emerge.

## **Everyday Religion as Situated Knowledge**

To the extent that undocumented Mexican immigrant women are embedded in multiple relational settings in their everyday lives and have access to various scripts and categories of understanding, not one pattern of action completely determines every situation they encounter (Ammerman 2003: 212). However, though each personal narrative charts the unique pathway that a woman has taken, the social and relational settings in which they find themselves provide scripts and categories of understanding that have already been constituted by existing rules (Smith 1992) and distributions of power (Ammerman 2003).

Acknowledging, with Neitz (2003) and other feminist theorists, that the everyday world is not as self-evident and natural as it appears, then the task becomes to discover how things fit together so that people believe, act, and narrate their stories in the ways that they do (DeVault 1996; Neitz, 2003; Smith 1992). In this paper I examine the cases of three Mexican women who are part of a larger sample consisting of 43 women who migrated from Mexico to Dallas after 1990. First I present Maria's case. Maria, a 43 year-old woman from Matamoros, faced the task of raising her only daughter on her own, after she and her husband divorced. She was raised catholic. Next, I present Dania's case, a 37 year-old married woman. Dania was 18 when she migrated from Monterrey with her husband and child. Now she has 3 children. While she grew up catholic, she gave up the religion to become a Jehovah Witness soon after she migrated to Dallas. And lastly I present Nora's case, a 40 year-old hardworking, entrepreneurial woman who in 1992 migrated to Dallas from a small town in Guanajuato. Despite a difficult relationship with

the father of her two children, she vows to keep her family intact for their sake. A catholic while she lived in Mexico, after migration she became a Christian.

Following Ammerman (2003) I ask, under what conditions do these women orient themselves toward religious meanings and definitions? What, if anything, guides and constrains these orientations? In what sense do these religious orientations “work”?

After their migration to the Dallas metropolitan area, Mexican women redefine the meaning of home. Because their migration coincided with changes in U.S. immigration laws that have led to the increased militarization of the border and the criminalization of undocumented migrants (Hagan, Eschbach and Rodriguez 2008), most of the women in my sample did not return to their hometowns, or any place in Mexico, to visit family and friends (see Durand and Massey 2004). Nevertheless, contrary to an experience of “placelessness,” (Anzaldua 1987, Appadurai 1989: iii) these Mexican women engage in a process of re-construction of place and home in order to re-ground their identities (Vertovec 2009: 12) and incorporate the local social relations and cultural practices of the new place. As they become exposed to new social practices, discourses, and institutions, whereby new logics and categories of understanding become available, a creative and fluid exchange of meanings and practices is set in motion (Louise Lamphere, and Rogers 2012).

To navigate the predicaments of undocumented life in the United States and still sustain a coherent sense of who they are, Mexican immigrant women must retool their long-accepted patterns of interaction and their well-established activities of survival. For

these women, the process of remaking themselves and their social worlds demands both endurance and ingenuity.

Mexican immigrant women's cultural repertoire in conjunction with their personal and social dislocations as they live and work in the United States -- divorce, social isolation, job insecurity, illegality -- constitute the "actuality" of their living and the starting point of their knowledge as embodied subjects (Smith 1987: 90). This situated body of knowledge encompasses the institutional rules, cultural expectations and moral imperatives that guide their interests, perspectives, fears, desires, and relevancies. And it is this embodied knowledge what shapes what they ultimately say and do (Yancey Martin, 2003). But while is not entirely surprising to see undocumented immigrant Mexican women turn to religion, no situation is ever fully determined. Their everyday religious experiences illustrate, not only the power of gender, class, race and legal status, as formidable axes of social life, but also the power of individuals to use meanings in creative ways and the human potential to resist the expectations and dictates of power.

## **METHODOLOGY**

An important goal of my work is to privilege people's experiences and accounts while using those narratives to understand the processes by which meaning is created. As I began listening and transcribing the interviews I realized that some of the themes and events I identified would not make much sense if taken out of the specific ordering in which the women chose to tell them. In addition, it also became evident that certain conditions were crucial in how these immigrant women lived their lives, yet they rarely

discussed them explicitly. For this reason, I turned to narrative analysis to better understand the complexities of their storytelling.

Narrative analysis is rooted in the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism. As with symbolic interactionism, this paper assumes that meaning is produced and reproduced through social interaction (Blumer 1969) and through the human act of storytelling (Plummer 1995). Human behavior, according to symbolic interactionism, is not an unthinking response to external stimuli, but rather a reflexive identity performance (Stryker 2008). Erving Goffman (1959) argued that human behavior could be thought of as a dramaturgical performance in which actors may alter the way they present themselves to others to elicit a particular response from the audience. Similarly, narrations are structured in order to allow the narrator to verbally construct an image of her life, and ultimately “to create a character for herself” (Patai 1988, p. 150).

This project also assumes the feminist tenet that each individual is situated within a matrix of intersecting axes of power and oppression – race, gender, class, legal status (Collins 1990, Smith 1992). Individuals’ location within this matrix is the starting point of their experience and knowledge. A focus on narratives allows me to place Mexican undocumented women’s experiences at the center of analysis and to accord to their voices the recognition and validity that is often denied to them.

Over the last several decades, scholars committed to feminist principles have turned to narrative analysis as a legitimate research method (Riessman 2007, Pierce 2003, Polleta 1998, Ewick and Silbey 1995, Somers 1994, Chase 1995) arguing that prevalent positivist approaches invariably distort the experience of women in general, and women

of color in particular. While feminism informs my project epistemologically, the principles of symbolic interactionism and narrative theory guide its methodological direction.

### **Constructing Selves and Social Worlds: The Power of Narratives**

To understand how Mexican women experience the effects of migrant illegality, their social and personal dislocations and the ways in which they activate religious meanings in order to respond to their particular circumstances, I examine their narratives. Chase (1995) proposes that narratives are sites where women make their experiences meaningful and intelligible for themselves and for others. She argues that to represent culturally intelligible solutions to everyday quandaries, women draw on available categories of understanding in a constant process of active sense-making (25). Narratives, Neitz (2004) argues, are not only representational; they are also constitutive of identity. But what are narratives? First, narratives consist of an ordered set of events that a narrator selects for narration (Somers 1994). These events are connected to a set of relationships and practices that locate the narrator as part of a plot (Ammerman 2003, Patai 1998). In this process, actors actively “evaluate the various possible scenarios available to them” (Ammerman 2003; 213) to best describe how life proceeds from one point to another (Ammerman 2007: 226). To the extent that storytellers choose which events are selected, how they are placed in temporal order and in a structure of relationships, narratives are inherently moral exercises “that give meaning at the same time as they create explanation and order” (Ewick and Silbey 1995 in Ammerman 2003; also see Patai 1988).

In her work documenting how ordinary Brazilian women become “invisible” in a society’s “givens,” Daphni Patai (1988) recognized that the women’s life stories were not merely a way of talking about the events of their lives, but were also discursive exercises that “shape what individuals can claim of their own lives” (105). On the other side of the social spectrum, Susan Chase (1995), interviewing women school superintendents in the United States about their experiences of power and subjection, argued that the way of telling about their work trajectories was in itself an exercise in self-fashioning.

In her research with Mexican immigrants and their sex lives, Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez (2005) used a narrative strategy to analyze the ways in which Mexican women and men articulate sexual pleasure and pain. Through narratives of sexuality, Gonzalez-Lopez found, Mexican immigrants communicate not only the power of social structure in shaping the most intimate aspects of their lives, but also the creative ways in which they may create their own “emancipatory sexual moralities” (2007:166).

I found that Mexican immigrant women’s accounts of their life experiences typically reflected common motifs such as moving across transnational space and enduring the profound effects of being constructed as “illegal aliens” (Peutz 2010), but that they also displayed a distinct ordering of events, that leads into the image of self they want to put forward in the present. As Patai (1988) observes “the events (a woman) relates are not isolated occurrences but are part of a pattern expressing the very idea of a self, a reference point that unifies recollections in the act of selecting and presenting them in narration” (162). In this way, the narratives they construct and communicate, are uniquely their *own*.



## Data Analysis

This paper examines the lived religion experiences of three Mexican domestic workers. These three interviews are part of a larger study of Mexican domestic workers who live in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and who migrated to the United States post 1990. While the entire sample consists of forty-three participants, this article is a case study that focuses on the experiences of three women for whom religion is highly salient. The women I interviewed for the larger study migrated from both rural and urban centers in Mexico. Most of my respondents migrated from traditional (e.g., Michoacan, San Luis Potosi, Zacatecas, etc.). All the women respondents had worked as or were employed as domestic workers at the time of the interview. Most of the women in this study migrated to the United States after 1990. All of them were undocumented at the time of the interviews. Twenty-eight women were married or in civil unions while 15 were divorced or separated. Of the 43 women participants, 35 were catholics or nominal catholics and 8 identified as Christian, Evangelical, Jehovah's Witness, or *believer* (See Appendix A). From May to December of 2013 I conducted in-depth interviews and participant observations. While I did not initially set out to study religion, the significance of religion in these women's lives soon became clear.

I draw primarily on tape-recorded, fully transcribed interviews and data from my observations in the field. I relied on "informal snowball sampling" (Esterberg 2002), in other words, all the women I interviewed were located with the help of other women who participated in my project. Due to the Real ID Act of 2005 that requires states to issue secure, tamper resistant driver's licences, anyone applying for or renewing a Texas's

driver's license must present approved U.S. identification documents. For that reason, none of my respondents, except for one, had a driver's license. While the nature of my research does not call for a random and representative sample of the population of Mexican domestic workers in Dallas, I made every effort to introduce geographic variation by seeking respondents from different areas of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metropolitan area.

The study also draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in women's private homes, occasionally in their employers' homes, in the Mexican Consulate in Dallas, and in social service agencies. Nearly all of the interviews and the fieldwork were conducted in Spanish. While the current national discussion on immigration reform inspired some optimism among some of the respondents, the uncertainty and precariousness of undocumented life in Dallas were more salient in setting the tone of the interviews.

The interviews lasted from one to three hours and a few extended over a couple of days either in person or over the phone. I began the interviews with simple questions: Where were you born? What is your age? Are your parents alive? Do you visit them? Are your children with you? Then I asked about their lives before migration, about the circumstances around which they made the decision to migrate, about their work trajectories, about the challenges and joys of raising a family in the United States, about how they engaged with their communities and about their hopes for future. In the course of the interview, a woman's particular interests, experiences and motivations would pull me toward some topics and away from others, by elaborating longer, sometimes unpredictable stories without my prompting. In this way, it was the women's own

themes, rather than mine, that guided the interviews. The interview transcripts often include tearful and painful segments in which the women react to either a sudden traumatic event(s), or to sustained and prolonged suffering. I, with James Scott (1990), agree that the long, open-ended interview, characteristic of qualitative research, is a powerful tool to elicit the “hidden transcripts,” that can potentially reveal a person’s deep vulnerabilities and strengths and that may only surface within a context of trust.

The University of Texas Institutional Review Board approved this study in August 2013, with a protocol number of 2013-05-0092. In accordance to the Institutional Review Board regulations regarding the confidentiality of research participants, I use pseudonyms for all the women participants to protect their identity.

### **On a Personal Note**

While in many ways religion was part of my experience growing up in Mexico, I never realized how fundamental an experience it was until I became an adult. To celebrate Christmas, to attend the *viacrucis* and to, sometimes reluctantly, go to the mandatory Sunday mass was for me what it meant to be Catholic. Yet, despite my growing criticism toward the politics, the moral inconsistencies, and the patriarchal ideals that structure the Catholic Church, there was something subtle, and personal about how I experienced religion that was hard to pinpoint. I somewhat knew what the Catholic Church taught about sexuality, about marriage, about divorce. What I did not realize was how powerful were the mechanisms the church used to make individuals feel guilty and inadequate when they “failed” to follow their teachings. As an immigrant in the United

States, far from my family and friends, I somehow felt that I had escaped the oppressive nature of the Catholic Church teachings and that the Catholic values and culture had become less irrelevant in how I lived my life. I realized I was wrong when I got married and had my children.

While these experiences did not lead me to choose religion as a dissertation topic, they sensitized me to listen carefully when the Mexican women I interviewed spoke about their every-day religious experiences. Listening to these women's stories led me to pursue the following questions: 1) How does the experience of immigration control and immigrant illegality shape the ways in which Mexican women experience religion? 2) In what ways does religion help them traverse the contexts of vulnerability that characterize their experience as illegal immigrants?

Listening, analyzing and writing about these women's experiences have undoubtedly turned into a process of personal learning that has transformed my views of religion as an exclusively oppressive force, allowing for a recognition of the complexity of people's religious experiences.

## **THE STORIES**

The accounts that follow are diverse and complex precisely because they arise from what Orsi (1997) refers to as the "densely textured level of (their) everyday practice and lived experience" (p. 10). Yet, despite the multiplicity of meanings, the fluidity of institutional boundaries and the fragility of their identities, Mexican women strive to project through their narratives a self that is coherent with the particular way their lives

unfold. Like the Brazilian women interviewed by Patai (1988), the women in this study construct and communicate stories that make sense in temporal and spatial terms, even when the circumstances of their real lives are uncertain and far from “logical”.

### **God as Father: Maria Rodriguez**

#### ***The Divorce***

Maria, a recent immigrant to Dallas, was a young wife and the mother of a three year-old girl in the year 2000, when she found out her husband was having an affair. Not willing to forgive his betrayal, Maria decided to terminate the marriage.

Prior to migrating to Dallas to marry her husband, Maria had worked for six years as an accountant in one of the many customs agencies in her hometown of Matamoros. During the three years of her marriage however, her life changed significantly. Not only did Maria leave her family back in Mexico — including twelve siblings and her parents — she also gave up paid employment to stay home to care for her daughter full time.

While Maria’s soft-spoken voice and calm demeanor downplayed the emotional storm brought upon by the separation, she spoke about the uncertainty that tormented her as she contemplated raising her daughter alone in the United States. Maria knew the challenges ahead were daunting but it was only as a divorced woman and single mother that she experienced more fully the constraining effects of immigrant illegality. With no family in Dallas to call on for help, limited proficiency in English, and only a low-paying job as a housecleaner the odds were decidedly against her. She frequently pondered whether to return to Mexico or stay in the United States and raise her daughter alone. One

of the questions that haunted her was just how was she going to be able to raise a daughter without a father.

Of the many ways that her non-legal immigrant status constrained her, Maria noted that “not having a legal permit to work and thus, not having access to well paying, stable jobs” was at the root of her uncertainties. For Maria, being “illegal” did not necessarily make her afraid of being “deportable” (DeGenova 2002), but it made the possibility of not being able to provide for her daughter’s basic needs very real. She knew she had to be proactive if she wanted to survive.

Fourteen years have passed since Maria’s divorce and Maria and her daughter Claudia have managed to overcome some of their trials. The dangers of growing up vulnerable to drugs and gangs that Maria had feared for her daughter, never materialized. Claudia grew up to be a great student: “punctual and organized with her schedule...loves getting involved in school projects...always in charge of her grades and responsible to keep her commitments at school.” At the time of the interview, Maria’s daughter was about to move to Nacogdoches, Texas to pursue a degree in science at a public state university. For Maria’s part, the home cleaning business that she started more than a decade ago has grown into a well-oiled, successful operation. In addition, using the money from the sale of a property she owned in Mexico and the income from her house cleaning business, Maria was able to pay off the house in which she has lived since the divorce, an achievement she talked about with satisfaction.

How did Maria respond to both the convulsive circumstances of her life and the internal turmoil that threatened the stability of her self-understanding? What resources

did she borrow, appropriate or improvise to remake her world and herself? What does her narrative strategy tell us about how she engages in the meaning-making process?

Religion is typically understood to be located apart from the intersections of ordinary life. However, for Maria, religion became the primary medium, to use Orsi's (1997) words, through which she acted on her particular material and emotional circumstances. In response to my question, "Do you go to school to learn English, or any other subject?" Maria instead discussed the spiritual training she received at the School of Formation, the educational arm of the Prayer and Life Workshop group<sup>2</sup>, an international evangelization organization with important presence in the United States, Mexico, Central and South America, Europe and Asia:

ML: Ok, do you go to school, any school to learn English, or anything else?

Maria: No, I haven't been going to classes, lately, no!, I have been only in, in the prayer group, the one Rosi goes to, that is what takes all the free time I have...)

ML: is that the Life and Prayer Workshop?

Maria: life and prayer workshop, hmm, it is, uh, I think that for this year I'm going to be very busy with that, because every three years we change the administrative board and I accepted the, I am serving as secretary, so

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<sup>2</sup> The Prayer and Life Workshops first appeared in 1984, with the mission of helping people initiate a personal relationship with God, and to have each Christian become a friend and a disciple of the Lord. Since then the Prayer and Life Workshops have expanded throughout several continents and now counts with more than 18,000 guides worldwide. After being given some signs of approval by the Vatican, the Prayer and Life Workshop was officially recognized in 1997 by the archbishop James Francis Stafford, head of the Pontifical Counsel of the Laity in the United States.

as much as I would like to do what I have to do, I don't have the time (laughs) but only for this year because I finish in June of next year, and next year I will make other plans...

By making this narrative move, Maria provided a hint about the significance of this religious experience for her life. As Maria described her current involvement in the Prayer and Life Workshop (PLW) by saying that it is “what takes all the free time I have,” she also established a link between this experience and her divorce:

ML: is this position as a secretary of the organization?

Maria: mm, and besides that, I lead the Prayer Workshop because it doesn't matter if we serve in any other way, what is important is that we lead the prayer workshop! Yes...that's it...

ML: Can you tell me a bit more about the experience of participating in the workshops?

Maria: About the Life and Prayer Workshop? Oh, I took the prayer workshop (pause)...because, when I separated my concern was that, I know that there are many children that grow up with many problems when there is a separation because they do not have their father, so when I was introduced to the workshop, in the very first session one gets to know God the Father, the One who takes care of you! The One who protects you!, but for me it was not so much to say that, that “ah I came to know God because I felt that He was already taking care of me since before, but it was more like “This is the Father that my daughter needs!,” if she feels



that God is taking care of her and that God is taking care of us, there will not be any problems! That is how I saw it and,...(pause) and thanks be to God...

It is precisely at this point in the story, when she talks about what she learns in the Life and Prayer Workshop that Maria begins to speak of the fears that overcame her as she contemplated the task of raising her child as a single mother. Maria's words, however, suggest that there are at least two dimensions to her fears. On the one hand, she is responding to the widespread culture of fear that she encountered as she migrated and settled in the United States (Glassner 1999, Gonzalez-Lopez 2005). In her research with Mexican immigrants and their sex lives, Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez (2005, 2004) discusses how the social fears and exaggerated perceptions of risk permeating the daily lives of White middle-class North Americans –fear of crime, drugs, sexual violence- permeate the lives of Mexican immigrants as well. Post-migration socioeconomic segregation, legal violence, racism, anti-immigrant sentiments and exposure to disproportionate coverage of negative news are among the factors that exacerbate the anxieties that Mexican women like Maria experience in the United States. On the other hand, Maria's fears speak to a more intimate, subjective dimension that is shaped by pre-migration ideologies, patriarchal mores, and gender meanings rooted in religion, culture and history (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005, Chodorow 1995, Loaeza 2005). While Maria talked about the concern she felt thinking her daughter might fall prey to drugs or gangs, Maria's biggest source of anxiety was that her daughter would not have a father, or rather, would not have a father's protection. Maria's concerns suggests the extent to which Mexican women

continue to be socialized in a role whose main mission is that of preserving the integrity of the family (Loaeza 2005). According to the code of patriarchal order advocated by the Catholic Church, Mexican women by internalizing Catholic values and symbols, can only claim moral authority if they are part of a family, like the Virgin Maria. For Maria, not having a man in the house would have meant to live like a single woman, without the protection and the respectability afforded by marriage. And that did not seem to be an option.

***What Am I Afraid Of? HE Will Be Taking Care of Us: How Gender Shapes Maria's Fears and Her Response to the Divorce***

Maria's fear and anxiety that her daughter would grow up without a father's protection and the dangers that might result from a father's absence reveal how patriarchal assumptions may have organized Maria's notion of the ideal family. While Maria's training as an accountant and her long experience working as a professional may have helped her overcome her feelings of helplessness had she returned to Mexico, she chose to stay in the United States as an undocumented immigrant. She migrated from the border city of Matamoros, Tamaulipas to Dallas, Texas to join her husband, a man originally from her hometown but who had already settled in the United States years before. Maria's husband, whom throughout the interview she never called by his name, was employed as a butcher in a grocery store and was the sole provider for the family. After marrying her husband and moving to the United States, Maria ended her six-year career in paid employment to become a full time housewife—prepare meals and be the

primary caregiver for their daughter. In addition to her financial dependence on her husband, she also relied on him almost entirely for her transportation needs. She said she did not drive far from where they lived, even at a time when the state of Texas still issued driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants without proof of legal residence. While Maria did not explain how she and her husband arrived at this type of asymmetrical gender dynamic at home, it can be said that powerful cultural, political and religious forces advocated by the Mexican state and the Catholic Church have constructed the home and the family as the legitimate realms for Mexican women to be (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005, Loaeza 2005). Several authors have critiqued the stereotypical view of the Mexican family as "familistic" and dominated by male authoritarianism (Baca Zinn and Eitzen 2002; Newman 1999) arguing that there is tremendous diversity in Mexican families (Baker 2004). However, while there is variation in how individual Mexican families are organized, there is no denying that Mexican women experience tremendous pressure to be "the center of family and the keepers of continuity and tradition" (Loaeza 2005, Lozano-Diaz 2002).

Despite the seemingly traditional way in which Maria's family life was organized after her migration to Dallas, her response to her husband's affair was far from "traditional." Refusing to live with marital disappointment, Maria did not adhere to a traditional gender expectation that would have prescribed commitment to wifely submission. She explained: "the father of my daughter had (female) friends here, and he and one of those friends that he had from before, started dating and so...for me it does not pass...no." Maria clearly drew the line between what she was willing to accept from

her husband and what she would not, and while she may have tolerated many things, her husband's flirtations were absolutely unacceptable. Noteworthy in Maria's story is that while she challenged the patriarchal rules of marriage by obtaining a divorce, the fear of not having a father for her daughter, a protector, remained a significant source of grief that was only attenuated when she engaged the religious discourse. For Maria, divorce and the disruption of the gender rules that had governed her marriage, created the conditions in which, through religion, she could define her circumstances and her sense of self in a new, more hopeful way.

### ***Surrendering as a Form of Empowerment***

While Maria "always went to church," it was only after her divorce, that she learned about the Life and Prayer Workshop: "A friend of mine told me 'a prayer group started' ... and since I didn't have anything else to do on Sunday after mass, I stayed for the workshop and that is how I [started]." For the next year and a half Maria immersed herself in reading, meditating and praying *la palabra de Dios* both during the workshop sessions and at home. Maria described how through this spiritual practice she gradually learned to surrender her fears and preoccupations to God's will until she "arrived at a state of mind in which [she] stopped worrying about many things." It is as if by virtue of her submission to and her reliance on the omnipotent God, Maria felt reassured that the protective, loving Father would always be there, faithful and forever watchful of their welfare. After all, God represented for Maria a safe, desexualized substitute for her unfaithful and unreliable husband.

When I asked Maria to talk about her experience attending the *Escuela de Formación*, she began her story by paraphrasing what: “God says in the Bible: Take care of My Things, that I will take care of yours.” At the center of her spiritual transformation is the shift of energy from her own personal preoccupations to the Things that are God’s. It is clear that Maria was deeply influenced by a passage from the Gospel of Matthew that speaks about surrendering to God’s Providence: “Seek first my Kingdom and my Righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Mathew 25:33-34). It is interesting to see however, how she reworded the text and personalized the message to reflect, not only the emphasis of the Workshop on forging a personal relationship with God, but also her longing for a protective Father.

Griffith (1997) writes that surrendering one’s will to an authority in exchange for protection is an important meaning of submission, but it is not its only meaning. Rather than being a unidimensional or static concept underlying traditional gender roles, she continues, surrendering encompasses a wide range of choices and flexible scripts around the notion of female submission (Griffith 1997). Each of these choices, Griffith adds, “holds very different implications for thinking about the resources one has at hand...and for thinking one’s own capabilities in the larger world” (1997: 178). To judge Maria’s religious experience as simply an expression of internalized patriarchal ideals would be to disregard Maria’s valiant effort to respond to her precarious circumstances.

In seeing herself as taking care of the Things that are God’s, Maria found in her retooled religious beliefs a new source of strength and courage. As she told me the story

of her experience in the School of Formation and going back to the time when she started attending, she said:

ML: How long does the training last?

Maria: For a year and a half

ML: Do you go daily?

Maria: No, only once a week, for two and a half hours, hmm yes, and that was also like, I was only driving here in Plano, and the School was in Irving, and so that helped me a lot to get out a little bit more, to get on, get on the freeway because I didn't drive there, and so that made me go!, and like I said "these are the Things that are God's, nothing will happen to me!" and with that trust I got out (laughs) and I went farther...

For Maria, the ordinary activities of everyday life, particularly those related to her survival became, to borrow Griffith's term "sacred work" (1997: 175). Paid domestic work, which is often frustrating and demeaning (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Rollins 1985), when perceived as part of a religious ministry can be transformed into an act of worship (Griffith 1997).

Maria: The moment one focuses on the Things that are God's, in, in meditating the Word and everything, is like everything else stops being important to you, and so one stops tormenting oneself for, for what am I going to eat...? what am I...?, And it is like one can live in peace, and so it is the same at work, because one goes to work in peace and that is how you get good results...

ML: Right, right

Maria: But, if on the contrary, one doesn't have peace inside, then one goes to work frustrated, and thus will have problems; I can only imagine that I would have lost clients, or I don't know, but I think that is how it works...

For Maria, submission and most importantly, the courage to do the things that are God's were at the core of her renewed relationship with God, which in important ways allowed her to transform the view of herself and of the difficulties of her everyday life.

### **Coming of Age: Nora**

"The first time I came to the United States I was single, it was not as difficult to come here, I was not very mature, it was like an adventure, one comes and goes, it was like a fun adventure, even if you got caught 3 or 4 times." Nora was 19 years old when she embarked in the journey north for the first time in 1992. She had never ventured out of her small town of Tierra Fria, Guanajuato, but one day her uncle who lived in the United States asked Nora to travel with the woman he had just married. "He did not want for my aunt to come alone, so he asked me to come with her. He told me that if I did not like it, I could just go back to Mexico". With her mother's blessings and her best Sunday dress she started the journey of her life. In her detailed account of the trip, Nora described their several attempts to cross the river into Texas through Reynosa, their weeklong trek through the unforgiving desert and their surviving on stagnant water. Despite her utter lack of preparedness for the journey, the experience was for Nora still a "fun adventure."

Once in Dallas, her excitement quickly vanished as she realized that her younger brother was working himself to death to send money back home and that her uncles, with whom Nora and her brother were staying, were inducing him to participate in their licentious behaviors:

“Once I saw that my uncles were drinking and that they were inducing him to drink, and he was too young, I felt bad and (p)...I just did not like that, because I, I was very close to my catholic religion and I knew that that was not right, but I was scared to say something because my uncles were older, and we could not speak our minds in front of...the elders, what they said and did was right, even if it was wrong, and that is how we lost our innocence, we learned the hard way...”

For Nora, this was the beginning of a series of experiences in which her deeply held religious beliefs and assumptions about what is moral and what is right became increasingly challenged. In particular, this experience illustrated the patriarchal gender rules that allowed the older men in her family the latitude to act as they pleased and denied Nora the right to question their authority and their behavior, even as her uncles clearly violated Catholic Church teachings on *moralidad y decencia*.

While Nora agreed to come to the United States with her aunt so that she did not make the trip alone, she never thought about staying here long term. However, seeing her younger brother work two jobs to alleviate their family’s economic need was so painful tha she decided that she would stay in the United States and work too:

Nora: I saw how much [my brother] worked, and I said “how is it possible that...?” well, we were very poor over there, my father is sick, he had a



stroke when I was about 1 year-old and he, mm, has lived with that illness all his life...

ML: So your father cannot work ...

Nora: Right, so, he could not work for, like, for 3 years, but after that he got up and went to work as best as he could, right?, and so, when I came I said “no, I think I am going to, I’d better stay here to work, to help my father support the family...”

ML: But that was not your intention from the beginning...

Nora: No! When I came and I saw how my brother was working, that he was working so hard, he left at..., he had 2 jobs, from 8:00 am in the morning until 1 or 2, past midnight that he returned, I felt so bad for him and I said “I’d better stay to help him” because he wanted to build my parents’ house, because we had a very small house...

While her uncles and her brother worked at the restaurant chain Chilis, her uncles refused to help her get a job there because in their view “those jobs were not for women.” Instead, they helped Nora find a job as a waitress at a small diner, where she worked for about 3 years, which, by the way, was the only occasion they allowed her to go out of the house. In silence Nora listened to her uncles constantly rant about “how women are useless, how women can’t do anything.” Fortunately, after 3 years of living with her mother’s brothers, Nora and her brother were finally able to move out of their house. Transferring to another Chilis location, her brother was able to help Nora get a job at the same restaurant as a dishwasher. She admitted that the job was “very hard,” but she was

eager to demonstrate she was up to the task. Not long after she was hired, she was promoted to the position of *busgirl* in a restaurant where, at that time, “all employees were men.” As she proudly said, she earned the promotion through diligence and endurance, and by going above and beyond her duties. Nora wanted both her managers and her uncles to see that she was as capable to do the job as any man! After 12 years of work in Chilis, Nora was earning 12 dollars per hour plus tips, an achievement she attributed to her determination. Nevertheless, despite being frequently recognized as a valued employee, her career at Chilis came to a halt as restrictions on the employment of undocumented immigrants were increasingly enforced. More important than her lack of a legal permit to work, however, as her manager pointed out when he fired her, was the fact that she had become an economic liability: “I could hire 3 or 4 people with what I am paying you.” Parting ways with Chilis was emotionally painful for Nora as she had come to see the restaurant as her home and felt she had invested so much of herself on that job. But she finally moved on and started cleaning houses as her new source of income.

From the time Nora arrived in Dallas, her experiences as a Mexican immigrant woman were marked by the power of gender. By gender I mean the ways in which “society organizes people into male and female categories and the ways in which meanings are produced around those categories” (Ginsburg and Lowenhaupt 1990). In this definition, gender is by no means fixed or “natural,” but is rather fluid and constructed through social interaction (Connell 1987, West and Zimmerman 1987). Gonzalez-Lopez (2003) argues that Mexican women grow up exposed to various types of socially constructed configurations of gender rooted in particular social and geographical

situations. In a male-dominated society such as Mexico, each one of these patriarchal configurations results in varying levels and multiple forms of gender inequality (p. 227). The particular gender oppression Nora experienced from her uncles emerged from cultural, religious and socioeconomic contexts prevalent in rural Mexico in which opportunities for education, paid work, and institutions that advocate for women's rights are limited (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005). It is in this context that intense expressions of machismo and gender inequality are more likely to appear and stand uncontested (Gonzalez-Lopez 2003). In the United States of the early 1990s, however, a relatively open labor market allowed Nora to get a job in a male-type occupation that not only offered her a pathway to financial independence, but also a way to contest the constraining gender views espoused by her uncles which defined women as sexual objects incapable of taking charge of their lives.

### ***Going back home***

As our conversation continued on the topic of work, Nora explained that because of the economic recession of 2008, she gradually lost all, except two, of the clients for whom she did housecleaning. After her experience at Chilis, Nora did not let this setback affect her, as she had cleverly found an additional source of income in direct sales. She added that she also worked for a year in the taco stand that her husband purchased in 2011. She said proudly that because of her hard work and her great people's skills, learned from her experience at Chilis, the taco business was thriving. While work at the taco stand was as demanding as the work she did for Chilis, for Nora working for the

family-owned business held a different meaning. No longer eager to discover and prove how capable she was as a woman, Nora saw in the taco business an opportunity to work with her husband for the family, “as a single force, *para sacar a los niños adelante*” (to help the children get ahead). She worked from 8:00 in the morning to 10:00 at night, leaving her children in the care of her mother-in-law, relatives or friends. She cooked and cleaned. She played uplifting Christian music. By then, Nora had left the Catholic Church to become Christian. The people who came to eat at their fast food business “just loved it,” Nora said. It was all going great until she discovered that her husband had a relationship with another woman. As Nora revealed this to me, she broke down. It was as if she had been carrying a physical burden that she could no longer hold. She said softly: “yes, we are together,...I, I do it for my children, eh, I want them to grow up in...in a family, like me.” I held her hand in silence and solidarity, until she was ready to continue.

As Nora began to collect herself, she talked about God and about her family: “I lived a life...more or less fine, but, without knowing God, without really knowing God!, but when I know God, mm,...I, I believe I am a decent woman because, even though I grew up in a poor family, my family had principles, they had principles, my parents were always together, despite the fact that my father has been ill all his life, he got us ahead (*nos saco adelante*), despite his illness and, I know that no one can substitute a father, no one can substitute a mother, no one can take their place!, but when I learned about God, when I gave myself to Him as a Christian...” Nora continued as if talking to herself “I learned that as a Catholic, I was wrong, ...I learned through the Bible that I was wrong, that I believed I was right, but I was wrong. Even my decisions were wrong!” At that

point, I was almost sure that Nora was going to make the connection between her new religious ideals of morality and her husband's betrayal, and yet I asked her to clarify: "a bad decision I made, mm, was that...mm...when I was like 25 years old, when I was 25 years-old, and we were all here [siblings], my mom was finally alone, my mom is unfaithful to my dad, mm...I do not...I do not blame her, I never did, because, I said, well, she lived all her life with my father, with my father's illness and...but we spoke to her and all, so then, I, so that she returned with my father, I told her, it was a bad decision on my part...mm...mm...how do I tell you this? mm...it was a bad decision, mm... I was a virgin at 25, and I told my mother "if you don't go back to my father I will give myself to the first man that...I will do it because of you!"

Her husband's transgression and what it threatened to destroy brought back this painful memory for Nora. Fifteen years ago, when her mother became romantically involved with another man while still married to her father, was felt as if she had broken a sacred, yet unstated promise that a woman will always be there for her husband and for her children. Nora's reaction to her mother's affair illustrates the power of *marianismo* (Travis and White 2000, Gil and Inoa Vazquez year), which is a cultural and religious imperative that is based on the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary (Gonzalez-Lopez 2007). Lozano-Diaz (2002) argues, that in Mexico, the Mexican incarnation of the Virgin Mary, the Virgen de Guadalupe embodies "sacred duty, self-sacrifice and chastity" (210). The Virgen de Guadalupe, Lozano-Diaz (2002) observes, has "permeated all of Mexican culture, in such a way that she is not only present, but she also plays an important role in the lives of Mexican women" (p. 207). In their book *The Maria Paradox*, Rosa M. Gil and

Carmen Inoa Vazquez describe how the values of *marianism* affect the daily lives of Mexican women in practical ways and provide *marianism*'s ten commandments that apply specifically to women:

1. Do not forget a woman's place
2. Do not abandon tradition
3. Do not be independent, single and self-sufficient
4. Never put your own needs first
5. Do not aspire to more in life than being a housewife
6. Do not forget that sex is *not* for pleasure
7. Do not criticize your man, or be unhappy if he is unfaithful, ill, indifferent, or abusive
8. Do not ask anyone for help
9. Do not talk about your problems with anyone outside the home
10. And most importantly, do not change those things that make you unhappy.

Mexicans, in Mexico and abroad, live *through* a culture in which Catholic tradition is key, regardless of whether the Mexican person is Catholic or not. And Nora's experience reflects this reality.

Even though Nora stated that she did not blame her mother for her moral transgression, expressing her understanding that her mother had lived all her life with a man who could not adequately fulfill his role as provider and a man she had to tend for, it is clear that Nora wholeheartedly blamed her. Nora's initial disappointment turned into anger as she described her desire to punish her mother, if she did not *voluntarily* return

with her father. By threatening her mother with “giving herself to the first man”, she was acting upon the cultural understanding that mothers are the stewards of the family’s honor (Gonzalez-Lopez 2003). In her research on the lessons about sexuality that Mexican mothers give their daughters within their migration experience, Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez (2003) explains that women’s virginity is at the foundation of an ethic of family respect that is safeguarded mainly by the mother figure. She argues that women raised in specific social contexts –i.e. *ranchos*, *pueblos* or cities- learn the specific value of virginity as a form of capital, *capital femenino* (222). While many Mexican women – particularly those with limited access to educational and job opportunities- may trade their virginity in exchange for financial stability and the opportunity to have a family through marriage, Nora used her virginity to coerce her mother into compliance, to make her mother return to her prescribed role as mother and wife.

In the end, the strategy turned out to be a “bad decision” because while her mother eventually returned to her father, she did not do so as a result of Nora’s actions. However, losing her virginity to a man other than her husband may have resulted in her husband losing respect for Nora (Gonzalez-Lopez 2003). Furthermore, reflecting on her past sexual behavior through the lens of her current religious beliefs and dispositions –e.g “I gave myself to Him/God”- causes her a great deal of shame. In a way Nora may see herself as impure and unworthy of the grace of God.

Her condition as an undocumented immigrant and the constraining effects of immigrant illegality compel Nora to stay with her husband, as humiliating as it may be

for her. She anticipates the scarcity and the hardship she and her children will face if she attempts to raise her children on her own, without her husband's support:

Nora: if he gives me everything, I can be with my children! And what could be better than to stay with my children! If I am giving all my time to my children, I teach them, I tell them, I do this for them, they are fine! And if I leave him, I would have to work in two jobs, then, my children are going to lose everything just like that!

Yet, for Nora the prospect of leaving her husband, or her husband leaving her is also frightening because the family she longs for would fall apart. She wants to see her children "with their father and their mother." And despite her husband's betrayal and the humiliation she endures, she still considers him her legitimate husband, because as she points out "we married by the two laws,...and the religious law cannot be annulled, ... because that is what the Bible says."

### **Good News – The End is Near: Dania Ramirez**

#### ***Life Growing Up***

Dania was off from work that Monday when she agreed to meet me at her home for an interview. Her sparsely decorated home, devoid of the sort of religious images and statues I had observed in the homes of many of my other interviewees, made it seem as if she had just moved there. Yet, the thirty-seven year-old mother of three had already lived in that apartment longer than she ever lived in Mexico. Soon after Dania turned sixteen years old she married her husband, and after they had their first child they embarked in



the journey north. She was only eighteen years old. At first, the trip felt like a vacation for her, but she never returned to Mexico, even when her border crosser card was still valid. She said that it was too much of a risk, because “one can go but even with a passport you never know if they are going to let you in the next time.” She feared that despite having a border crosser card “It could have been six months and you would not be able to cross or something like that because [immigration agents] would mark something on your passport.” For Dania, Mexico was not a place she longed to return, since after all her most significant life course transitions (e.g. becoming a wife, a mother, a Jehovah’s Witness) have taken place in the United States where she had already achieved a relatively stable family life.

Dania was born in a small town in the state of Tamaulipas but was raised in Monterrey, the state capital of Nuevo León. While Monterrey is known internationally for being the third largest city in Mexico, for being the second wealthiest Mexican city, for having the highest income per-capita in the nation and for being home to many of the most powerful national and international corporations, Dania seemed fairly oblivious to the city’s entrepreneurial pedigree. As she talked about her childhood in Mexico, she told me that she had only completed elementary school, even though she really wanted to continue her studies and enroll in the middle school. She seemed amused when she said that after much insistence on her part her father reluctantly agreed to enroll her in the sixth grade. Her father repeatedly told her that “women do not stay in school,” that school is only an excuse for girls “to be loose and to go here and there” without control. Dania’s account suggests that Dania’s relationship with her father was shaped by the social norms

of sexual morality he embraced. In her research on fathering Latina sexualities, Gonzalez-Lopez (2004) suggests that Mexican fathers' view of their daughters' sexuality is deeply influenced by the socioeconomic and political contexts in which men and women live. Being a girl and the oldest of seven siblings, Dania felt compelled to assume almost all of the responsibility for housework and childcare at home to support her working parents. As Dania's parents struggled to make a living in a poor, urban neighborhood in Monterrey, her family constructed their values and beliefs with respect to sexuality and sexual morality in a way "that reflected their concern for their daughters socioeconomic futures and life opportunities" (Gonzalez-Lopez 2004 p. 1119). For Dania's father, his reluctance to let her continue her studies, may be understood as an expression of fear of the sexual dangers she might have been exposed to at school. Becoming pregnant, losing her virginity or accepting casual sex would not only ruin Dania's reputation but most importantly her chances at getting married, which in turn, would ruin her economic future (Gonzalez-Lopez 2003). While staying in school may have meant in the long term an education and the possibility for better paid employment for Dania, she seemed willing to accept her father's reservations about girls going to school. In fact, in trying to instill in her own daughter what she had learned as a child, Dania seemed to reproduce her father's beliefs that the only choice women really have to improve their life chances is marriage and that once married, women are to be held accountable by their husbands for the performance of their duties: "*el día que te cases no quiero que me vayan a decir que no sabías hacer nada*" (when you get married, I don't want to be told you did not know how to do your work). In her research with Mexican

mothers, Gonzalez-Lopez (2003) found that Mexican women relate to their daughters in a way that reflects the distinct gender and sexual norms, the *regional patriarchies*, they were exposed to as young women. In this sense, motherhood becomes an opportunity to revisit and organize their gender and sexual beliefs (Gonzalez-Lopez 2004).

### ***Threats to the Social Order***

A major theme in Dania's account is the importance of both social order and safe spaces. Patai (1988) writes that it is precisely in the repetitiveness, in the "reworking again and again of themes and phrases" (p. 160) that a subject provides clues as to the meaning and significance of certain elements in her daily experience. The world as Dania experiences it, is essentially under threat. Consider the following excerpt where Dania briefly references her daughter's school:

ML: What about your daughter, is she in school?

Dania: Yes, she is in school

ML: In middle school? or already in high school?

Dania: In middle school, in the second year, yes, in the second

ML: Mm Aha, how is that?

Dania: Good, it is also very good, the school is calm/under control, the moment something happens, they respond quickly.

I asked this question expecting to elicit from Dania her assessment of how her daughter was doing in school in general, how she felt about her children getting an education, how she felt about interacting with her children's school as an institution of

the state. However her answer directed me toward an unstated concern about social order. Dania's assessment of the school focused on its ability to act swiftly to restore order if anything were to happen.

Another example that illustrates Dania's concern for social order is her description of the neighborhood in which she has lived since she migrated from Mexico almost 20 years ago. She explains:

ML: Have you lived in any other place since you came to the United States?

Dania: Only here in Carrollton, only in Carrollton we have lived

ML: You have only lived in Carrollton?

Dania: Ahá

ML: Wow

Dania: Yes, we have always liked it here

ML: Yes, it is in a good location right?

Dania: Yes

ML: You can go everywhere from here, right?

Dania: Eh, what happens also is that, yes there are a lot of Hispanics here but not so many like in certain other areas where there is a lot of crime, where there are a lot of *morenitos*

ML: Mm (ajá)

Dania: In other words, no...

ML: And that is better, right?

Dania: Yes, it is better here, I like it so much more here!

ML: Mm (aja)

Dania: More peaceful/calm

ML: Compared with Oak Cliff?

Dania: Oh, yes, I think it is so much better here!

ML: Mm

Dania: Yes

ML: Even for...

Dania: Because in Oak Cliff there are more *morenos*

ML: Mm

Dania: There is more vandalism and all of that, gangs, here there is a little more control

ML: Is it more peaceful here?

Dania: Yes, police is more vigilant of troublemakers forming groups, and management [property management]

ML: Aha

Dania: That there is no groups [creating trouble], and if they do find groups of troublemakers [they] make you vacate [the apartment]

ML: Oh really?

Dania: Yes, I mean, here they are more careful with that

ML: Do you mean, property management gets alerted quickly if...?

Dania: Yes, the moment that female neighbors start making groups, even women...

ML: Is that right?

Dania: They call them, and let them know..., they say “to please stop...”

ML: To the neighbors?

Dania: Stop the gossip

ML: Right

Dania: Yes, so, whether they are old or young

ML: Aha

Dania: Yes, here there is much more control

ML: Right, so that is good, isn't it?

Dania: Because they maintain order

ML: To keep it peaceful

Dania: Yes

ML: So, has there been any problem that has made them call the police?

Dania: Yes, and I have learned that, they [management] inform people that they have until certain date to vacate the apartment

ML: Really?)

Dania: Mm, they are very strict

ML: And that makes you feel better?

Dania: Yes, yes because to some extent one is more protected

ML: Mm

Dania: Yes, then one does not need to live with worry and all of that

ML: Right

Dania: Yes

In this excerpt Dania speaks of how the property management at the apartment complex where she has lived for almost twenty years, has dealt with those who threaten the social order, whether those individuals are young or old, male or female, brown or black. In her experience, external threats and insecurity are best managed through strict rules and swift enforcement. While at this point in the conversation Dania does not specify the nature of what she perceived to be a threat, knowing that the institutions with which she interacts on a daily basis will respond immediately to restore order, frees her from worry and to some degree makes her feel protected from harm: “to some extent one is more protected... then one does not need to live with worry and all of that.” Dania’s anxiety reflects what some sociologists have identified as *the culture of fear* (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005, Glassner 1999), which point to “the hidden dynamics responsible for the social fears permeating the daily lives” of Mexican immigrants (p. 95). Segregation, insecurity, poor-quality housing, xenophobia and sensationalist media work together to shape what Mexican immigrant women may perceive as dangerous (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005). In addition to the culture of fear, the growing concentration of Mexican immigrants and African Americans in many urban cities across the country has resulted in an increased physical proximity between them (Rodriguez and Mindiola 2011:155). For Mexican immigrants like Dania, this physical proximity, which does not necessarily lead to higher levels of interaction between Mexicans and Blacks (Rodriguez and

Mindiola 2011), might set in motion a larger dynamic of racial prejudice that starts in Mexico. The reality is that Mexico is a country of deep divisions and one of those divisions is expressed in the light skin/dark skin dichotomy.

A recent study of race in Mexico revealed that Mexicans tend to place higher social value on light skin color (Planas 2011). This study found that 60% of Mexicans had insulted others because of the color of their skin. The study also reported that 40% of Mexicans had treated people differently based on skin color (Planas 2011). De la Torre (2013) argues that how Mexicans perceive Blacks and behave toward Blacks, may be explained by the ways in which “Blackness is almost non-existent in the national discourses of belonging” (244). While Blacks played an important role in Mexico’s history and have entered and settled in Mexico for centuries, as the nation endeavored to create an image of itself there was no space for Blacks and blackness in Mexico’s racial paradigm, *Mestizaje* (De la Torre 2013). The Mexican or *mestizo*, a racial mixture of indigenous peoples and Spaniards became the proud symbol of the nation. Yet, the cult of the mestizo was predicated on the erasing of dark skin and Blackness (De la Torre 2013).

Inevitably, Mexican immigrants in the United States encounter African Americans and U.S. racial scripts (Molina 2013) about Blacks and blackness. It is clear, however, that the racial meanings they bring with them from Mexico also play a role in how they construct Blacks as racial categories.

But Dania’s story is not just about her concern for danger and social order. When Dania speaks about her religious beliefs and about her membership to a congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses, her story reveals a narrative of displacement and also a narrative of



belonging. Her story also hints at how her fears are connected to her social location as an undocumented immigrant in the United States (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005). It shows how her religious beliefs serve as a master narrative through which Dania tries to make sense of the conditions of her existence and to establish a place for herself in the world.

### ***Life as an Immigrant in Texas***

Around the time Dania and her husband migrated to Texas, sometime in 1994, California voters passed Proposition 187 by a margin of 59% to 41%. Section 1 of the proposition, also known as Save Our State (SOS) read:

The people of California declare that:

1. They have suffered and are suffering economic hardship caused by the presence of illegal immigrants in this state.
2. That they have suffered and are suffering personal injury and damage caused by the criminal conduct of illegal immigrants in this state.
3. That they have a right to the protection of their government from any person or persons entering this country unlawfully.

Among the proposition's major provisions were those that made it a felony to manufacture, distribute and use false immigration documents, and that excluded undocumented immigrants from public services including public education and publicly-funded health care. It also required public service providers to verify the immigration status of those seeking services and to report suspected undocumented immigrants to the State Director of Social Services, to the Attorney General of California, and to the

Immigration and Naturalization Service of the apparent illegal status of such individuals (Marchevsky and Theoharis 2000).

While Proposition 187 was later found to be unconstitutional, it served as a focus of a larger debate about the role of individual states in how they approached illegal immigration. It also provided the political momentum for the intense anti-immigrant agenda that resulted in efforts by some states, including Texas, to make life very difficult for undocumented immigrants. Arizona S.B.1070<sup>3</sup> and Alabama H.B. 56<sup>4</sup> are recent examples of such anti-illegal immigration bills crafted at the state level and modeled after California's Proposition 187 in 1994. Yet, before these two bills were signed into law in those states, Texas lawmakers also tried to assess the state's public appetite for Proposition 187-style restrictions on undocumented immigrants (Haney 1995). In the wake of California's Proposition 187, State Rep. William Hartnett of District 114 (Dallas) introduced legislation (H.B. 1945) that would deny driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants. In addition, according to polls conducted in 1995 by the Southwest Voter Research Institute, there was considerable support among Texans for denying the right to public school education to undocumented children (Haney 1995). While Arizona S.B. 1070, and Alabama H.B. 56 were challenged by the Supreme Court,

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<sup>3</sup> The 2010 Arizona Senate Bill (S.B. 1070) was the strictest anti-illegal immigration in a long time. The law required immigrants to carry a valid form of identification to prove immigration status. The law also makes it a crime to hire undocumented immigrants or be hired without legal authorization to work.

<sup>4</sup> The bill passed in June 2011 authorized, among other provisions, state and local police officers to ask about the immigration status of anyone they stop based on a reasonable suspicion that the person is in the country illegally. While this provision follows Arizona's S.B. 1070, Alabama's law is harsher than Arizona's, in that it bars undocumented immigrants from enrolling in any public college after high school. It also requires public schools to report the immigration status of all its students and to publish the costs associated with the education of undocumented immigrant children. The bill also makes it a crime to knowingly rent housing to undocumented immigrants (Preston 2011).

and Texas H. B. 1945 did not reach the next level in the legislature, these initiatives were clear expressions of nativist sentiments and represented a move toward institutionalized xenophobia (Haney 1995).

Even if H.B. 1945 did not become law in 1995, it served as precedent for the implementation of the Real ID Act of 2005, which established a federal mandate requiring states to verify social security numbers and legal immigrant status of applicants before issuing driver's licences. As a result of these requirements, undocumented immigrants in Texas have to live and work without a driver's license, which for most of my respondents have become a enormous source of uncertainty in their daily lives.

While saying that she is not concerned about her undocumented immigrant status, Dania still remembers the anti-immigrant atmosphere that was prevalent around the time she migrated to the United States:

Dania: Well, but I have never felt afraid...(pause). I've heard that people, yes, that they don't even want to go out, I knew that seventeen years ago people didn't go out, when I came to this country we were very few the Hispanics that lived here in Carrollton

ML: Just a few?

Dania: It was very rare to see Hispanics living here; more *Americanos* lived here

ML: Right

Dania: So, then I heard that people didn't go out at all

ML: Aha

Dania: Because, they said, immigration was always close by, just watching, looking for someone to pick up

ML: Aha

Dania: But those are rumors I heard, I believe that people have scared other people.

While California's Proposition 187 was instrumental in inspiring similar anti-immigrant laws in many states<sup>5</sup> and in creating a *culture of fear* among Mexican immigrants that spread to most Spanish speaking communities in the country (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005) there have been other well publicized reminders that Mexican immigrants are *illegal aliens* and do not belong within the space of the U.S. nation-state. The nationwide recruitment of volunteers for the Minuteman Project in 2004 is one example. The Minutemen, a militia group, stationed hundreds of men and women, some of them armed, along the U.S. Mexican border with the explicit purpose of tracking down and aiding the border patrol in the arrest of undocumented immigrants. At the local level, just south of Carrollton where Dania lives, the Farmers Branch's city council passed in 2006 a number of anti-immigration ordinances including punishing landlords for leasing to undocumented immigrants, allowing local authorities to screen individuals in police custody if they are suspected to be in the country illegally and making English the official language of the city. In a referendum held in May 2007 these anti-illegal immigration measures were approved by a margin of 68% to 32%. While the Supreme Court

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<sup>5</sup> Since 2010, most states in the United States have passed anywhere from 1 to 6 anti-immigration measures –from driver's licence eligibility to obligatory use of E-verify- while some states such as Utah, Arizona and Virginia have passed at least 11 anti-immigration measures. 36 states considered sweeping anti-immigration laws, but only 6 were successful (Gordon and Raja 2012).

ultimately declined to review the court ruling regarding these measures, the political debate and the legal battle surrounding this legislation was alive until the beginning of March 2014. For Dania, how the anti-immigrant debate unfolds in Farmers Branch is potentially relevant because Carrollton, where she has lived for almost twenty years, may adopt similar measures since the two cities share more than a city limit<sup>6</sup>.

By most accounts, Dania is a secondary migrant (Donato 1992). While the greater demand for low-wage female workers has initiated primary migration for women (Repak 1995) Dania migrated to the United States to reunify with family. However, Dania's role in the migration process was by no means secondary or unimportant, but rather an important part of a family strategy for survival (Toro-Morn 1995). Working as a housecleaner in the same company for the last thirteen years, Dania compares hers and her husband's ability to provide for their family in the United States to a life of limited choices had they stayed in Mexico:

Dania: To some extent one can live better [here] and can give better,  
better, hm, things to the children

ML: Aha...

Dania: There, you can either go to a restaurant or buy food

ML: Ah, aha...

Dania: You can't do both things

ML: What about here?

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, most of the schools in Carrollton are part of the Carrollton-Farmers Branch independent school district.

Dania: Here you can do both things

ML: You can, aha...

Dania: Even more!, yes

ML: Even more, right?...

Dania: Yes, here you live much better!

ML: Perhaps working as much, right?

Dania: Yes, but...

ML: Aha...

Dania: It is...it is very different, yes, because I imagine that there, it's like money here stretches a little bit more than Mexican money there

ML: Oh, yes...

Dania: There both [parents] work, but money is not the same, it doesn't last

To be sure, there are clear economic advantages for Dania's family as a result of migration. While Dania's earnings as a housecleaner are only 230 dollars per week, when added to her husband's income of 700 dollars per week, their combined income allows them to meet the basic needs of the family and "more." For Dania, however, the types of jobs available to her as an undocumented immigrant woman are limited by her lack of a legal permit to work, by her inability to speak English, and by her understandings of her obligations as a mother. While Dania had worked in various low-paying, low-status jobs prior to domestic work, Dania's wish to be home with her children when they came home from school to make sure that "there aren't any problems", made housecleaning the best

job option available to her. In her book *Maid in the U.S.A.* Mary Romero (2002) described how Mexican-American women actively tried to gain control over the structure of domestic work and the work schedules by gradually transitioning from wage work to an arrangement in which a job is exchanged for a specific amount of money. Romero (1988) argues that in this context, any efficiency realized by the worker that saves her time, could in turn be used by the worker with her own family. For Dania, the “comfortable” work schedule (*horarios comodos*) was among the reasons to take up housecleaning as it allowed her to do her mother work (“ponerle empeño a los niños”) and to be in control of what happened at home. While describing her decision to work as a housecleaner as a practical one, it suggests that ingrained notions of motherhood might also be at play here. Even when Dania’s mother worked outside the home and Dania herself worked from an early age, the cultural and religious imperatives pervasive in Mexican society that dictate that women’s place is in the home with her children (Loeza 2005) may also be powerful motivations for Dania to choose housecleaning over other childcare, or housekeeping at a hotel, for instance.

In her account, Dania does not directly connect the chronic uncertainties of her life to the context of living and working “without papers” in the United States. Perhaps, this owes to a social process Bordieu (1987) calls *misrecognition*. Bordieu explains that subjected individuals adopt and apply “categories of thought from the point of view of the powerful to the relations of domination thus making them appear as natural” (1998:35). Building on Bordieu’s conceptualization, Auyero and Burbano de Lara (year) argue that over time people “get used to” the conditions of their oppression. Not

surprisingly, undocumented immigrants like Dania come to see the injurious effects of the oppressive social structures they experience as legitimate and normal. To be sure, while Dania does not explicitly acknowledge them, there are several factors related to Dania's undocumented status that could drive her and her family to a state of crisis: illness and lack of health insurance, enforcement of legal employment through "employer sanctions" and E-verify, detention and/or deportation. And there are also the legislation campaigns, the law initiatives, successful or otherwise, the local referendums and the public debates around undocumented immigration aimed at producing and sustaining the "illegality" of Mexican immigrants. These are the conditions of existence that "become enduringly inscribed upon Mexican immigrants in their spatialized and racialized status of "illegal aliens"" (De Genova 2004, p. 178).

### ***Dania's Religion***

Gradually, as Dania speaks of her life experiences, one learns more details about what shapes her subjective insecurity and the content of her fears. For instance, Dania explicitly speaks of her fears of being an easy prey for criminals and those with bad intentions, of being attacked by an unknown rapist who is only waiting for the right opportunity, of being killed, of being robbed. Gonzalez-Lopez (2005) discusses the pervasive *culture of sexual fear* that shape the day-to-day life of Mexican immigrant women. Gonzalez-Lopez argues that in addition to the hidden processes that sustain this culture of sexual fear, media images that disproportionately focus on violent sexual crime (p.133) contribute to Mexican immigrants' heightened sense of risk. However, there are



other causes of uneasiness and anxiety that are only implicitly expressed: her children's and particularly her daughter's sexual behavior, her ability to secure a comfortable work schedule that will allow her to be with and protect her children, her social isolation, her loneliness, the danger of being separated from her children, the possibility of not being able to go back to her home and to what is familiar to her. She also talked about her preoccupation with being ready for the "end of times." During an unexpectedly long account of her religious beliefs and her experience as a Jehovah's Witness, Dania points to the ways in which her religion and her religious identity is relevant in her daily life.

In response to my question about her religious identity and whether she attended church, she declared that she and her immediate family were Jehovah's Witnesses. Vaguely remembering being a Catholic as a child, she said she became a Jehovah's Witness after marrying her husband, in the United States. In contrast to her experience as a Catholic, she said that as a Jehovah's Witness she actually gained a clear understanding of the Bible. Furthermore, because the congregation was kept small, she always had an opportunity to participate and voice her understanding of the study articles during the weekly meetings<sup>7</sup>, whereas in the Catholic Church "only the priest speaks."

Jehovah's Witnesses, a "new religion,"<sup>8</sup> believe that all scripture is inspired of God (Wah 2001). They believe the Bible teaches that Christ will soon return to "rapture"

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<sup>7</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses gather twice a week for two-hour sessions in which they focus on two or three study articles. These articles are published by the Watchtower society, which has been established as a "defender of Bible truth and doctrine" (Wah 2001, p. 165). These articles discuss current events in light of Bible prophecy and doctrine and are seen as instruments for "announcing Jehovah's established Kingdom and dispensing spiritual food at the proper time" (2001, p. 165).

<sup>8</sup> Christian Scientists, Latter-Day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses are three of America's homegrown "new religions" that grew out of Christianity according to Nancy Ammerman (2005). Their doctrinal innovations

true believers away from this world. After that happens, the earth will face a terrible “Tribulation” and the establishment of the reign of the Anti-Christ. In the end, God’s army will defeat Satan at the battle of Armageddon, and a new era will begin. According to their understanding of Bible prophecy, they believe that we are living in the “last days.” In this context, Jehovah’s Witnesses, generally concerned about salvation and the fulfillment of the prophecy, live their lives with a sense of urgency. Dania, just as every adult member of her religious group, is a “publisher.” Dania, her husband and their children are witnesses to the “news” primarily by talking to Spanish speaking people they encounter at gas stations during the weekends. In her answer to my question about how she and her family spend their free time, she describes her weekly routine:

ML: How do you spend your free time?

Dania: Eh, we get together for, Saturdays and Sundays in the mornings to go to predicate, we go talk to people about what we learn

ML: Aha

Dania: With the magazines, the Watchtower and Awake!

ML: Aha

Dania: So...

ML: Who do you talk to?

Dania: With people

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put these sectarian groups at odds with Mainline Protestant and other Christian denominations. However, Ammerman (2005) argues, their position at the margins should not be equated with non-importance for there are as many Kingdom Halls (Jehovah’s Witnesses) and (Mormon) “wards” as there are Roman Catholic Parishes. In addition, with over six million members in 235 countries, Witnesses rank among the fastest growing religious movements in the world (Stark and Iannaccone 1997).

ML: Like with people who don't...

Dania: We mainly look for people; we look for Hispanic people

ML: Aha

Dania: Not people that speak to us in English

ML: Aha

Dania: We look for Hispanic people, we read them a passage, we leave them with a magazine, depending on the theme that is being discussed

ML: Both you and your husband do this, right?

Dania: Yes, everyone, everyone, the children and us

ML: Oh, everyone in your family?

Dania: Everyone, all my family

ML: So for example you all go and knock on doors?

Dania: Yes and we talk to them

...

ML: So, how many visits do you do in the morning, for example on a Saturday? Saturday or Sunday?

Dania: In the, Saturdays, actually we use Saturdays and Sundays to go to gas stations in the mornings, at 6 in the morning we go to gas stations

ML: Do you get up at 6 in the morning, all of you?

Dania: Yes, because some of us get out at that time, we gather and decide where to go and they say 'you go to this gas station, you go to that one, you go to that other one, and there we wait for people to come that...

ML: People who are passing by?

Dania: People passing by, then, from 9:00 in the morning onwards we go on knocking on doors.

As a Testigo Dania feels responsible for announcing Jehovah's established Kingdom and for telling others that only those who believe will be rescued from sin by the blood of Christ. Only those who believe "may have the hope of inheriting heavenly life as joint heirs in the Messianic Kingdom with Jesus" (Wah 2001, p. 165). For Dania, not telling others what she has learned as a Jehovah's Witness as the Bible mandates, would amount to committing murder:

ML: Is this a requirement from your congregation?

Dania: Eh, in a way it is a Biblical requirement because the Bible says that, ah, what you learn, you must go and spread widely

ML: Is it like a ministry?

Dania: It's like, because it says that if you don't disseminate what you are learning you are spilling, spilling...

ML: Spilling, mh...

Dania: Blood, because you are depriving them from what you know, from what you are learning, to other fellow human beings

ML: Right

Dania: In other words, you could be telling someone 'look, if you learn this and do that you are going to be saved and if you learned, suppose...

and you are depriving that person from that Knowledge and you may not even know if that person is interested in knowing

ML: Aha

Dania: So then you are causing a murder, right?

ML: Oh, wow, right

Dania: Eh, and that is on you, and when the Day comes...

ML: You are going to be...

Dania: And you will be judged)

ML: ...Aha

Dania: They are going to say “your neighbor, eh...he wanted to learn and you knew the Word and you didn’t...

ML: Aha

Dania: You did not spread the Word

Dania does not quote literally from the Bible but her emphasis in this excerpt is on salvation, on Judgment Day and on proclaiming the News as mandated in the Bible. For Dania, following Biblical injunctions, as outlined by the Watchtower Society, means that, at the end of it all, she will be saved. For Jehovah’s Witnesses equally important as the Biblical emphasis on “the end of the world” and the imminent cleansing of the earth, are the principles of order, authority and obedience (Ammerman 1987). In fact, their doctrine presents disobedience as the root of sin, and sin is punished by death: “The wages of sin is death; but the Gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Not to obey what the Bible says is a sin. Jehovah’s Witnesses, through

their select reading of the Bible, explain that the theological origin of social disorder and sin is disobedience<sup>9</sup>. The promise that “a peaceful and secure new world that is about to replace the present wicked, lawless system of things” (Wah 2001, p. 165) depends upon doing what the Bible says. Here Dania implicitly makes the connection between her conviction that life’s difficulties and hardships shall pass and being a good Jehovah’s Witness:

Dania: The Bible says it clearly, it is the hope of resurrection for people.

People will be judged, if they did right or if they didn’t, eh, what you did,  
in other words, you only get one chance to do what the Bible says

Even if Dania expresses some uncertainty about the future by saying that “one may make plans for something, but it doesn’t work out” (“uno en veces puede planear algo pero no sale”), her confidence on God’s promise is evident in the intensity of her religious beliefs and in the dedication with which she engages in her religious practices.

In the process of talking about her life, Dania, I argue, transposes the episodes she selects for narration, into the religious meanings and stories that make up the public narrative of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. In this transposition, the uncertainties and the fears that shape her daily living find some sort of resolution. She feels confident that in the end, “those receiving favorable judgment will live on earth and will enjoy everlasting life

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<sup>9</sup> 15 Jehovah God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate it and to take care of it.  
16 Jehovah God also gave this command to the man: “From every tree of the garden you may eat to satisfaction. 17 But as for the tree of the knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat from it, for in the day you eat from it you will certainly die (Genesis 2: 15-17).

<sup>12</sup> That is why, just as through one man sin entered into the world and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because they had all sinned— . (Romans 5: 12)

in perfect conditions.”<sup>10</sup> And she will be one given the grace of salvation because after all, she is leading the life of a *good* Jehovah’s Witness, one who obeys the clear instructions God gave in his Word.

### ***I am a Jehovah’s Witness***

Jehovah’s Witnesses literally believe in the revelations and the prophecies that most Christians do not accept. They have their own translation of the Bible, which they read through the official interpretations provided by the semimonthly magazines from the Watchtower Society<sup>11</sup>. For religious reasons, they are unwilling to participate in mainstream cultural, political and medical practices. They engage in, and are required to do, door-to-door witnessing. Their distinctive beliefs and their high level of religious commitment have set Jehovah’s Witnesses apart from the rest of society (Ammerman 2005) and the same time, have brought them closer to their fellow Witnesses. Sturgis (2008) observes that the Witnesses are a very insulated group in that individual witnesses rarely have any meaningful contact with those outside the group and only superficial interaction with people in other spheres. Insularity often builds solidarity, which is especially important to those potential converts and members of the congregation who may be alienated from a primary group or from other realms of mainstream society.

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<sup>10</sup> Quote from a passage explaining Judgment Day from the Jehovah’s Witness’ official website, <http://www.jw.org/es/publicaciones/revistas/g201001/qué-es-el-día-del-juicio/>

<sup>11</sup> In addition to *Awake!* and *Watchtower*, the Bible-based journals that provide the weekly study articles, the Watchtower Society has recently published *The Secret to Family Happiness*, *Questions Young People Ask: Answers that Work*, and *Your Youth-Getting the Best Out of It*. According to their governing body, the Watchtower Society, the purpose of these publications is to clarify Bible principles and “to explain in the light of Divine Wisdom the true meaning of the great phenomena of the present day.” (Wah 2001, p. 165)

When describing the ways in which life in Mexico was different from life in the United States, strong friendships and support from social networks back home were for the most part absent in Dania's narrative. Perhaps working from an early age to help support her siblings left Dania with little time and opportunity to develop close friendships. Indeed, the only two people that appear in Dania's narrative when she talks about her life in Mexico are her father and to a lesser extent her husband. Migrating to the United States at a time when the anti-immigrant climate had reached levels not seen since the 1920's may have also played a role in Dania's wariness of social interaction. As Dania observes, "things may have changed, but the trauma continues for some people." In addition, her limited English proficiency, and her determination to be home with her children, may have limited her ability to forge the types of relationships that lead to trust. These are relationships that need time, frequent social interaction and shared experiences (Hurtado de Mendoza et al 2014). Being a Jehovah's Witness was Dania's most important source for social connection and social support. Consider Dania's description of fellow Witnesses as though they were her own family, even those she has not met yet:

Dania: Well, yes, we as an organization, uhm, even if we did not know each other, suppose that I went to Monterrey or another place, any other place and I asked "where can I find another Jehova's Witness church?"

ML: Aha

Dania: No, [and they say] 'there is one here' and I go there and say, oh and I find a friend, [and he asks] 'where do you come from?' 'I come from



Dallas, and I am a Jehovah's Witness,' so then, they hug you as though you were a person, a person from their family

ML: Part of them, part of their family...

Dania: Yes, so, we are a big family that, while we may not know each other, we are excited to greet one another and to see one another

ML: Yes, right, right

Dania: Yes, and then one starts spending time with them

ML: Right

Dania: Aha

ML: Right

Dania: So, there is more unity, right?

ML: It is like, like they make you feel part of something...

Dania: Yes

ML: Aha

Dania: Yes, these congregations are like that

ML: Mm, aha

Dania: Yes, that everyone even if we don't know one another, we are still thrilled to see each other.

In this part of the conversation Dania was eager to tell me how as a Jehovah's Witness, she feels so much a part of a large organization of fellow believers. It becomes clear that for Dania prior knowledge of these individuals and their congregations was not as important as common identity as Jehovah's Witnesses to consider them and herself as

part of one big family. Dania's joy in greeting fellow witnesses even if she is meeting them for the first time is a stark contrast to the reservation, suspicion and sometimes fear with which she approaches people in other realms of life. But what explains Dania's confidence and trust in accepting others that she barely knows? I suggest that recognizing each other as belonging to a common tradition depends on effectively keeping their identity as a group separate and distinct. The high cultural barriers erected by the Jehovah's Witnesses to a large extent allow them to guard against doubts that might weaken their faith or that might otherwise challenge the identity of the church (Ammerman 1987). For Dania, maintaining her identity as a Jehovah's Witness has also helped her at a more practical level. She uses the strictness of her religious beliefs as a gauge for other people's intentions. It allows her to distinguish between the "true and genuine" fellow believers and those who may approach her with malicious intent:

Dania: In reality you don't know, so when one starts talking, one starts realizing that 'no, he is correct,' he is telling it correctly, he is demonstrating that he is knowledgeable of this, that he knows that and, that he is managing [the situation] well

ML: Is it because there are certain things that only Jehovah's Witnesses know?

Dania: It's not that, it's that there are, mm, how could we say it?, you can see it, it is evident among people that really have a profound and basic knowledge

ML: Mm

Dania: So it is when you realize that it is true, because someone can come and fool you

ML: Oh, right

Dania: And [they start] prying, or [saying] ‘I am one of you, really, I am one of you,’ and this and that

ML: Mm, right

Dania: Aha

ML: And you feel afraid?

Dania: Aha, so then we feel more, more, that one can trust

Her fundamentalist religious beliefs serve her in two important ways. First her religious narrative provides Dania a way to identify people who may lie and threaten the stability of her everyday life. And second, her religious beliefs provide Dania the peace of mind that comes from the knowledge that she is among friends.

### ***Religious Citizenship***

Why do religion and religious membership matter for Dania the way they do? Are the moral decisions she makes based on the context-specific conditions and relationships that shape her everyday living? Listening to how she organizes her story, to how she emphasizes certain events in her narration and de-emphasizes others, it became apparent that for Dania, membership in her congregation is the main membership that establishes her as proper citizen of the community. It is through allegiance to her religious group that Dania pursues social inclusion, makes claims of belonging and engages with society.

By contrast, her status as an undocumented person in the United States is lived through a palpable sense of exclusion and marked by the possibility of being removed from the space of the nation-state (DeGenova 2004). Furthermore, as a member of an ethno-racial group, Dania is constructed in the United States as illegitimate, alien and unassimilable (Ngai 2007). Marginalized by race, gender and legal status, Dania is unambiguously situated outside the boundaries of formal citizenship and social legitimacy. While citizenship<sup>12</sup> and national membership remain elusive for Dania, there are other “cultural citizenships” that may emerge irrespective of formal status (Flores and Benmayor, 1997). Ammerman (2005) suggests that “denominational identity can be thought of as a particular kind of citizenship” (p. 210), one that is based on religious identification and active participation and not necessarily on notions of territoriality. In their conceptualization of *cultural citizenship*, Flores and Benmayor (1997) argue that to be and feel as a *full citizen*, legal or not, “one must be welcome and accepted as a full member in the society with all its rights” (p. 255). In the following excerpt Dania talks about how her congregation, by keeping a cap on the number of witnesses it takes in and branching off into new groups as membership becomes too large, facilitates and nurtures personal relationships among fellow denominational “citizens”:

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<sup>12</sup> Reflecting the emphasis on territoriality, border control and deportation of illegal aliens, the current conceptualization of citizenship is based on the right of citizens to be territorially present (Ngai 2007, p. 229). Ngai argues that the liberal valorization of citizenship that emerged during the post-war era only hardens the distinction between aliens and citizens as it constructs alienage as the opposite of citizens. In that sense Supreme Court chief justice Earl Warren wrote that: “citizenship *is* man’s basic right for it is nothing less than the right to have rights. Remove this priceless possession and there remains a stateless person, disgraced and degraded in the eyes of his countrymen” (quoted in Ngai 2007, p. 229).

Dania: We then have, it's better to have no more than one hundred so that we know each other better and participate more

ML: Right

Dania: So then we separate 100 people and move them to another place where a new group forms

ML: Right

Dania: But then it happens that there are people that move to nearby areas and start coming here

ML: Oh

Dania: So then you get to know more people

ML: Yes

Dania: And the same happens again and we have to separate people again, and more people arrive, and you get to know more and more people that way

ML: So, then the point is to keep the congregation small, right?

Dania: Small to know each other better and participate more

ML: And participate more...

Dania: As people leave, people come, and you are getting to know more people, more people that way

ML: Of course

Dania: Sometimes one can forget [who someone is] and say "I think I remember who that person is, but ...

ML: Right

Dania: And then the other person says “hey do you remember me? I used to go to...[and you say] ‘oh, yes!

ML: Mm

Dania: So, there are so many people, so many brothers and sisters, that you end up forgetting

ML: So the day you go to the church, you really like going right?

Dania: Yes, because there you receive encouragement and all of that, and they are happy to see you

ML: Aha

Dania: [They say] hey listen, I really missed you last week that you did not come, and things like that

ML: So it is very personal then

Dania: Yes, yes and they call you on the phone ‘hey listen, we missed you, I noticed that you did not come’

ML: And you enjoy that, right?

Dania: Yes, because you might become depressed or you may be sick and have no one to call you

ML: Aha

Dania: At least I can say “I matter to them”

ML: Aha

Dania: Mm, so that feels great.

In this excerpt Dania emphasizes the joy with which other members of the congregation greet her and how they demonstrate concern when she is absent from the religious meetings. Even more telling is the way she feels when other witnesses express their concern for her. To Dania the knowledge that “she at least matters to someone” is what communicates to her that she is a valued member of the group.

Developing a sense of belonging to a community of fellow believers is a key attribute of active citizenship (Flores and Benmayor 1997) and a prerequisite to participation in the work of the whole. Consider Dania’s response to my question of whether she volunteered for her church:

ML: Are there volunteer opportunities, or opportunities to work for or in the church?

Dania: No, no, no in the, in our organization there is no one you can say, no one gets paid like a priest, in our case we call them Elders, what in the church are called priests

ML: Aha

Dania: No, they live off of their income, in other words, they work, they have their families

ML: Oh, so they have their own jobs, besides the church

Dania: Yes, yes, they have their own jobs, the only ones, the contribution one makes is to distribute the magazines, the Bible, the hymns,...

ML: Right

Dania: I mean, things from the Church that one uses

ML: What about charity? Work for others?

Dania: Oh yeah, that also happens)

ML: It does?

Dania: Yes, because there has been lots of disasters, so we help, eh, when there is a person [in need], eh, people volunteer to like, help another person

ML: Mm, right

Dania: For example moving someone's house, installing this or that, and one offers to do it for free, in other words, one doesn't get paid

ML: No

Dania: One does it out of the goodness of one's heart

ML: Aha

It should be noted that in this excerpt Dania is speaking of helping other Jehovah's Witnesses, not people in the larger community. She promptly dispels the idea that she, or any other witness would work for the group for money, and instead sees her work for the congregation as an altruistic contribution for the benefit of the group she belongs to. Dania's account also gives us clues as to the ways in which through acts of solidarity, or *actos del corazón* as she calls them, a sense of community is built. According to Flores and Benmayor (1997) community building is a crucial aspect of *full citizenship* as it provides the means for otherwise rejected individuals to create spaces of inclusion. For Dania, the space of the church is the place where she builds and sustains



meaningful relationships but also the place where the fears and uncertainties of her present life find resolution in the promises of her faith.

Taking seriously the statement that religion and religious practice cannot be understood outside their contexts of use (Orsi, 1997) and that narratives are more than mere representations of events (Somers 1994) I argue that by situating herself as part of the congregation as a religious citizen, Dania is able to offset some of the liabilities of her immigrant illegality, particularly her social isolation, her overwhelming feelings of insecurity, and her sense of being a subject at the margins.

## **DISCUSSION**

The experiences of Maria, Dania and Nora illustrated the vitality of religion and religious frameworks in their everyday lives. These narratives revealed the presence of religion even in places I did not expect to find it, particularly in areas of life where the social demands and their vulnerabilities were too great to bear. The vitality of religion for these three undocumented Mexican women may lie in that it allowed them to imagine themselves in alternative social spaces where life potentially makes sense. When Orsi (1997; 2003) encourages us to rethink religion as a lived experience, he refers to it as a kind of cultural work through which people make and remake themselves and their worlds, often as they “stand on hostile and shifting grounds.” In this process of imagining and remaking in which Maria, Dania and Nora engage, religious symbols and idioms travel not only across cultural traditions and national borders (Levitt 2007; Ebaugh 2003) but also across multiple institutional spheres — e.g., gender, family, citizenship — to

enter the narratives that shape action in various domains of their everyday life (Munson 2007; Bartkowski 2007). Their narratives revealed that religion for them was not exclusively concerned with the sacred (Rodriguez 1995). Furthermore, their narratives illustrated that for them religious beliefs, meanings, imagery and practices were not abstract and fixed constructs that could be measured in binary terms but were rather contingent upon the constant uncertainty of their lives.

I realized from these three women's accounts, that religion could not be separated from other aspects of everyday life, for example parenting as a single mother, making ends meet on a domestic worker's earnings, or feeling a part of the community. Nor could their religious expression be understood apart from "the material (and social) circumstances in which specific instances of religious imagination and behavior arise and to which" these women respond (Orsi 1997 p.7).

Despite the modern conceptualization of religion as rooted in the absolute separation of the sacred and the profane (Durkheim [1912] 1995), the religious experiences of these three Mexican immigrant women in this study demonstrate that religion does not exist as a discrete category, apart from other spheres of activity. These three women's narratives reveal that religion is not simply injected into "other" domains or that it just provides a cognitive or affective overlay for other issues (Munson 2007, p. 126). It reveals how religious meanings and idioms cross institutional boundaries and become embedded in everyday notions of home, family and community. Lastly, and most importantly, these three narratives illustrate how, as Mexican women experience their unique cultural imperatives and the displacements and dislocations of undocumented

immigrant life, they may invoke religious patterns of action “in unpredictable ways and unlikely places” (Ammerman 2003, Rodriguez 1995, Aquino, Machado and Rodriguez 2002).

### **Limitations**

This research has some limitations. First, this paper follows a case study format. The findings from this research are based on the experiences of three women in the Dallas-Fort Worth area for whom religion emerged as a salient aspect of their lives. While the larger study was not about religion, religion and its intersection with immigrant illegality emerged as a salient theme in the interviews. Second, and perhaps as result of my sample size, there is much attention to individual resilience and agency and not enough focus on the negative effects and consequences of precariousness, and the power of the neoliberal state. By and large my argument is a positive one wherein religion is experienced as a stabilizing force and, therefore, more research on this topic is needed to balance it. Future research should investigate the ways in which religion is experienced as oppressive and exclusionary.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study makes several important theoretical and empirical contributions. First, it contributes to the literature on religion and immigration by illustrating the significance of religion to Mexican immigrant women outside of the confines of religious institutions. While it is not surprising that Mexican immigrants turn

to religion for solace in times of distress, this paper reveals how Mexican immigrant women actively use religious beliefs and symbols to interact with the particularities and uncertainties of the social contexts in which they live. In addition, these women's particular social locations – as women, mothers, and undocumented Mexican immigrants – shape their everyday life experiences and meanings of religion and religiosity. Second, this study shows how, through narrative, these women use religion to articulate alternative worlds and coherent sense of selves.

## **Article 2: Mothering at the Intersection of Immigrant Illegality: How Race, Class, Gender and Citizenship Shape the Work of Mothering**

### **ABSTRACT**

Drawing on the concept of maternal carework, in this paper I examine the strategies that undocumented Mexican mothers use to protect their children's wellbeing in the face of exclusionary immigration policies that create what I term *environments of vulnerability*. Drawing on interviews with 40 undocumented Mexican mothers, I examine the factors that shape mothers' definition of risk, their concerns for their children's wellbeing, and the strategies they utilize to protect their children from harm: moving out/moving up and managing information. Using an intersectionality framework, I demonstrate how race, class, gender and citizenship status intersect to shape mothers' fears of the risks their children face and the various strategies they use to safeguard their children's wellbeing. Findings reveal that undocumented Mexican mothers' maternal carework simultaneously protects their children and reproduces intersecting systems of inequality.

## INTRODUCTION

A primary motivation for migration is to improve the lives of children yet children often have to navigate the uncertainties and precariousness of immigrant illegality as much as their parents. Regardless of children's place of birth and residence, Mexican undocumented mothers living in the U.S. feel the pressure to protect their children from a variety of dangers and to ensure their wellbeing. As Ruddick (1980, 1994) writes, an essential component of maternal practice is the work of protecting/preserving children. In addition to the typical threats children are perceived to be vulnerable to – sexual victimization, high-risk behaviors, street violence, alcohol and drugs – undocumented Mexican mothers are also concerned with the perils of transnational crossing, lack of police protection, cultural degradation, and all the uncertainties of daily life imposed on them by the condition of migrant illegality.

The western focus on individual mothers as being at the core of children's wellbeing in conjunction with the cultural emphasis on children's vulnerability make concerns about children's safety and wellbeing the driving force of contemporary mothering (Villalobos 2014, Elliott and Aseltine 2012, Ambert 1994). However, while all mothers may worry about their children the content of the worries and the responses to these fears are not universal (Nelson 2010, Arendell 2000). Maternal carework, and particularly the work of protecting children, is not a private, singular activity between mothers and their children but takes place within specific cultural, economic and legal contexts that shape mothers' understandings, experiences and activities (Dill 1994, Glenn 1994, Collins 1991, 1994). For Mexican undocumented women living in the U.S. the

effort to protect their children is deeply influenced by larger social forces of race, class, gender and legal status. The maternal carework that Mexican immigrant women perform requires assessing potential threats to their children, selecting the strategies of protection and implementing these strategies even at high personal costs to them.

As Mexican women increasingly participate in the processes of labor migration and settlement (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003) their subordinated location in the social hierarchy anchored in illegality shapes the ways they mother their children. The legal and social construction of Mexican women as “illegal” immigrants (DeGenova 2005, Ngai 2007) results in a set of vulnerabilities that range from economic exploitation, personal insecurity, exclusion from rights and public services, labor market discrimination, (Gradstein and Schiff 2006) residential segregation, ethnic hostility and cultural depreciation (Quesada, Hart and Bourgois 2011, Massey and Bartley 2005). Indeed, the “everyday violence of imposed scarcity and insecurity” (Quesada, Hart and Bourgois 2011, p. 342) they experience as undocumented immigrants, contributes to the hostility of the social environments in which Mexican women raise their children. While the usefulness of the concept of *hostile environments* lies in that it captures the antagonistic social contexts in which individuals are marginalized by race, class, gender and sexuality (Elliott and Aseltine 2012), the concept must be expanded to include the oppressive, long term effects of being legally and socially constructed as “illegal”. Like gender and class, legal categories today create a new axis of stratification (Menjívar and Abrego 2012) that effectively shape Mexican immigrant women’s ability to mother their children (Abrego and Menjívar 2011). For example, the implementation of the 1996 Illegal Immigration

Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) which among other things, severely restricts undocumented immigrants' ability to travel, has influenced Mexican mothers' decisions regarding whether to be physically close to their children or "to mother their children across borders" (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997).

Concerns about deportation may also factor into Mexican women's mothering decisions as the fear of being removed from their children, and thus not being able to physically protect them, powerfully shapes their decision-making. For example, being in effect police targets may influence whether or not they seek police protection for themselves and their children.

To the extent that Mexican immigrant mothers characterize migration as a project to better the circumstances for their children, they engage in what Galvez (2011) identifies as a constant state of reassessment. Patricia Zavella (2011) argues that immigrants develop "a dual frame of reference, or *peripheral vision* by which they compare and contrast their situations in the host society with their previous experiences in their countries of origin" (p. 8). Furthermore, immigrants, particularly those in precarious legal status, develop a capacity to see the local and the far away simultaneously. The concept of peripheral vision is useful in understanding how Mexican mothers' awareness "is triggered by events that occur both in Mexico and in the United States and how as a result they gain a new perspective about possible options or meanings" (Zavella, 2011, p.8). For example, while some women express longing for Mexican life, fear of violence may factor in whether children are sent to, or kept from going to Mexico.



Maternal work is not just shaped by mothers' social locations but is also shaped by their perceptions of how others view them as a group. Historically constructed as the quintessential "illegal aliens" (Chavez 2008, Ngai 2007) Mexican immigrants have to contend with various representations of them portraying them as unable and unwilling to assimilate, as low in intelligence and high in "underclass behaviors" (Richwine 2009) – that is, as criminals and illegitimate members of society (Chavez 2008). In addition, since the early 1990s anti-immigrant rhetoric has shifted the emphasis from Mexican immigrant men as "job stealers" to Mexican women as out-of control breeders and, thus, a major threat to American public resources (Galvez 2011, Chavez 2008, Chang 1994). The negative societal attitudes propagated by the "*Latino threat narrative*" and particularly the alleged abuse of public services (Chavez 2008) are so intense that in many instances they are reproduced and internalized by immigrants themselves. For instance, Mexican undocumented mothers may respond to racialized discourses and expressions of cultural contempt by engaging in the discursive production of the *undeserving immigrant*, or by moving away from traditionally Hispanic neighborhoods in their quest for a more "wholesome," more "orderly" environment for them to raise their children.

## **THE CONTEXT**

### **Mexican Women and Mothering**

Motherhood is and has been a powerful cultural construct that lies at the core of womanhood in Mexico (Arredondo 2014). Regardless of measurable gains in education,

employment and health (Gonzalez- Lopez 2011, p. 41) in Mexican society the most desirable role for women remains that of mother-wife (Hryciuk 2010). While traditionally the Catholic Church had primacy over definitions of motherhood through the propagation of a family-centric model of society (Hryciuk 2010, Zavella 1997, Loaeza 2005), in secularized contemporary Mexico a neoliberal national discourse has elevated motherhood and the mother role to a privileged place whereby mothers are charged with the responsibility for the reproduction of the nation according to the requirements of the new modern national project (Gutierrez Chong 2004). There are public performances of respect for mothers including monuments and plaques that highlight their devotion and sacrifice for their families. And there is the celebration of Mother's Day, which since 1940s became an important national holiday everywhere in Mexico (Arredondo 2014). For instance, on May 10<sup>th</sup> 2005, president Vicente Fox underscored in a televised speech that motherhood was a "constitutive feature" of Mexican cultural identity. He emphasized mothers' contribution to national development and exhorted Mexican women to fulfill their "basic obligation" to perform their maternal work for the *good* of their family because the future of Mexico was in their hands (Hryciuk 2010).

### **Being an Immigrant Mother in the United States**

In addition to the financial and job opportunities migrants expect to find in the United States, they also migrate to fulfill parental obligations (Boehm 2008). For many Mexican women, cultural understandings of motherhood and its associated expectations are directly connected with their decision to migrate. Whether Mexican mothers describe

their motivations as “a better life for their children” or “to provide their kids with better educational opportunities,” they are situating their migration within the larger narrative of the *superacion* of their children (getting ahead). However, for Mexican mothers, mothering work is frequently imbued with ambivalent emotions and difficult decisions made within the context of migrant illegality.

Part of the immigration experience for Mexican mothers as they settle in the United States is entering “limited spheres of citizenship, where rights are reduced” and “belonging is more narrowly defined” (Galvez p. 150). As immigrant mothers seek out services and resources for their children they begin a long trajectory of experiences in which they and their children get constructed as unwanted subjects. In stark contrast to the exalted, albeit official, representations of mothers in Mexico, Mexican women in the United States have been made the objects of public anxiety about their supposed overconsumption of public benefits. Provisions implemented in immigration and welfare laws since 1986, reflect the public belief that immigrants, particularly women, impose a heavy welfare burden on American citizens. For instance, in 1986 lawmakers drafted legislation (Immigration Reform and Control Act- IRCA) that was meant to both discourage illegal immigration to the United States and to provide the opportunity for those who had been in the country illegally to legalize their status. However, the heated debate that ensued surrounding this legislation led to the inclusion of two provisions that governed those individuals perceived to be as potentially welfare dependent: the five-year ban from federal assistance and the public charge exclusion, which restrict immigrants’ access to social services and public benefits (Chang 1994).

Changes in the composition and nature of Mexican migration to the United States in the last three decades has contributed to even more public hysteria about non-citizen mothers. The changes, Cornelius explained, consisted of more whole families and more women, married and single, migrating and advocating toward permanent settlement in the United States (1988). The increase in female migration, and their settlement into permanent communities were framed as the underlying cause of “alarming” changes in the racial demography of the country (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994).

In response to these demographic changes and to pressures from a republican congress, in 1996 president Clinton signed into law a series of reforms that promised “to end welfare as we knew it” and transformed the character of welfare from a social safety net into a temporary program designed to address the “cultural deficiencies” of the poor (Marchevsky and Theoharis 2000). In addition to new work requirements and a five-year limit on cash benefits, welfare reform also represented a significant attack on undocumented immigrants (Marchevsky and Theoharis 2000). Under AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), undocumented immigrants were not eligible for public assistance, but their American citizen children were. The replacement of AFDC by TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) did not change the eligibility of children of U.S. born children but it “opened up new channels of surveillance and information sharing” as state agencies that receive federal funding “were required on request of the Immigration and Naturalization Service to furnish the INS with the name and address of, and any other identifying information about, any individual who (the agency) knows is unlawfully in the United States” (Marchevsky and Theoharis 2000, p.

253). They write that the reporting requirement in combination with the system of information sharing between the INS and social service agencies potentially transformed any public agency into an arm of the INS. If an undocumented mother were to ask for public assistance for her U.S. born children, she not only risks the threat of being identified and deported but also that of having to repay the U.S. government any funds that she “improperly” used (Marchevsky and Theoharis 2000). Furthermore, if that mother used false identification documents with the purpose of obtaining public benefits she would also be charged with a felony. The punitive nature of welfare reform reflected the same political momentum that inspired 1994 California’s Proposition 187. While proposition 187 did not become a law, it reflected a change in the anti-immigrant narrative that shifted the focus from immigrants as job competitors to immigrants as public charges. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1996) argued in her analysis of Proposition 187 that this shift represented a backlash to the permanent settlement of Mexican women and their children, noting that in a significant way both proposition 187 and the 1996 welfare reform provisions amounted to a clear rejection of Mexican immigrant women and their children as permanent members of the U.S. society.

In yet another twist in the anti-immigrant rhetoric, contemporary immigrants have now become equated with criminals who potentially pose a threat to national security. In the wake of the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, punitive laws that were passed in the mid 1990s were increasingly enforced. For instance, pre-1996 offenses that were not defined as aggravated felonies then, became grounds for removal as the immigration laws were increasingly enforced (Hagan, Eschbach and Rodriguez 2008). Moreover, with the

heightened enforcement of the 1996 Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA), the judicial review process that ensued after an order of deportation was issued almost disappeared, effectively eliminating relief from deportation for immigrants with family ties in the United States (Hagan, Eschbach and Rodriguez 2008). In addition, the reorganization of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) into the Immigration and Citizenship Enforcement (ICE) under the auspices of the newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS), gave way to a legal regime that through surveillance, enforcement and militarization of the border has criminalized an even wider range of immigrant behaviors (Menjivar and Abrego 2012). Thus, for contemporary undocumented immigrants who are variously constructed as “job takers,” “out-of control breeders,” “illegal,” “criminals” and “threats to national security,” the door is opened not only to harsh and exploitative treatment but to a shared narrative that frames the measures taken to remove immigrants from the country as justified (Massey 2007).

In this paper, I focus, not on the specifics of immigration laws, but on how within these legal and social spaces of insecurity, Mexican undocumented women protect their children while at the same time attempt to safeguard their future.

### **On a Personal Note**

As I came to find out, settling on a dissertation topic was perhaps one of the most difficult experiences I had as a graduate student. I entertained several ideas inspired by my readings on work and women’s issues, but none proved appealing enough to pursue until the end. I did not know then, but one of the most meaningful pieces of advice I

received happened during one of my early conversations with my advisor and dissertation chair, Sharmila Rudrappa, as I was writing my dissertation proposal. She asked me to think about the kinds of strenghts that only I could bring to the research process because of who I am. In retrospect, my advisor was inviting me to take a look inward for inspiration. As a single woman, with a degree in the Humanities, I left Mexico fifteen years ago to embark on journey of work and *superacion personal*. During all those years in the United States, I worked as a nanny and housekeeper, I earned a master's degree, which was my initial motivation to migrate, I married and had two beautiful children. As a Mexican immigrant in the United States, I have experienced some of the legal changes and the powerful effects of an immigration regime that subjects people to its punitive definitions. Listening to the stories of these 43 Mexican women, some of whom migrated for the same reasons I did, led me to pursue the following questions: 1) how does the experience of immigration control shape the way undocumented Mexican women mother their children? 2) In what ways class and gender intersect with immigrant illegality in shaping those experiences?

Without question, this research endeavor has turned into a process of personal recognition in which, by learning from them I am learning about myself.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This project started as an exploration of the ways in which the condition of migrant illegality might shape Mexican women's everyday life experiences. While my empirical focus was broad at the outset, the stories and words of some of the women

gradually led me to reflect on the effects that living at the margins, legally and socially, have had on their mothering experiences and mothering choices. As with other feminist works, the major aim of this project is to bring the women's accounts to the center of the analysis and to recognize the diversity of their experiences. Each of these Mexican immigrant women is variously situated within a matrix of power (Collins 1991) based on gender, race, class, and legal status and it is their position in that matrix what shapes how they make sense of the risks and challenges facing their children and how they respond to those challenges.

While feminism informs this project epistemologically, it also guides its methodological direction. To analyze the data I utilize a combination of grounded theory and narrative analysis as both methods take as their starting point that knowledge is situated and grounded in local contexts (Polletta et al 2011). Both these methods are fully compatible with feminist epistemology.

## **Sample**

The mothers in this study were drawn from a larger project investigating how Mexican domestic workers in the Dallas-Fort Worth area experience migrant illegality in their every day lives. Most (n=40) of the forty-three women I interviewed for the larger project were mothers. I examine data from the forty study participants who are mothers but focus on the experiences of nine women for whom the conditions of imposed illegality were most salient in the context of mothering their children. By focusing on their experiences, this paper builds on and adds to the body of literature on mothering and



the migration experience (Dreby 2006, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 2007, Parreñas 2005).

The women I interviewed migrated from both rural and urban centers in Mexico, as well as from traditional (e.g., Michoacan, San Luis Potosi) and non-traditional sending states (e.g., Baja California). Most of the women in this study migrated to the United States after 1990. All of them were undocumented at the time of the interviews. All of the women had worked as or were employed as domestic workers. They were diverse in terms of demographic characteristics (e.g., level of education, age, civil status, number of children), length of time in the United States. Twenty-seven of the mothers were married or in civil unions while thirteen mothers were divorced or separated. Thirty-four of the mothers had only U.S. born children while six mothers had U.S born and/or undocumented children living with them. Three out of the forty mothers in this study had children residing in the United States and in Mexico. The Mexican immigrant mothers in this study ranged from 29 to 48 years of age. Out of the 40 study participants that were mothers, 9 had a technical/ college degree, while most had some secondary education. Out of the entire sample of 43 Mexican undocumented women, only 3 of them did not have any formal schooling (See Appendix A).

## **Interviews**

I conducted in-depth interviews and participant observation for a period of eight months, from May to December 2013. I draw primarily on tape-recorded interviews and data from my observations in the field. The study also draws on ethnographic fieldwork

conducted in women's private homes, occasionally in their employers' homes, in the Mexican Consulate in Dallas, and in social service agencies.

I relied on "informal snowball sampling" (Esterberg 2002), to locate and recruit study participants. One of my key informants said to women who agreed to participate in my study "amiga, gracias por tu confianza" (friend, thank you for your trust). It is only because of participants' trust (tienen confianza) that I can do this study.

Nearly all of the interviews and the fieldwork were conducted in Spanish. The interviews lasted from one to three hours and in a few instances they extended over a couple of days either in person or over the phone. I began the interviews with demographic information about their marital status, and about whether they had children, brothers, sisters and parents. As the interview progressed we covered topics such as their migration experience, about their perception of the neighborhood where they lived, about their feelings and thoughts related to raising their children in the United States, and about their hopes for the future.

## **Analysis**

I personally transcribed the interview audio files in order to capture the dynamic process of storytelling<sup>13</sup>. I believe, like Riessman (2008) that the way we interpret interviews and transcribe them constitute the narrative texts we then analyze. Consistent with a narrative approach that views the interview as an "act of storytelling in dialogue" I include as much of the interactional context as possible. In other words, I include my

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<sup>13</sup> Riessman (2008) argues that transcription and interpretation should be seen as the same stage of a research project (p. 22).

initial questions, my reiterations of the respondent's words, my non-lexical expressions (Mmm, aha), the pauses (marked with ... ). Readers can readily see my encouraging signs of involvement in the conversation and my interruptions as I try to understand unstated assumptions or obligations. Readers can also see the moments when I failed to ask more about a particularly significant event or meaning. They can also see how respondents are active research participants when they rework my questions so as to be able to tell me about something they consider important or meaningful.

I also utilized a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006) to understand the "processes of interpretation from which these women derive and create meaning (DeVault 1990). For this analysis, I initially used line-by-line coding to identify instances where mothers talk about uncertainties and fears for their children, their perceptions of the environments of vulnerability in which they raise their children, and the strategies they use to manage their perceived threats. In my analysis of these women's narratives I pay particular attention to the events they select for narration, to the ordering of such events, to how events are linked to one another, and to the repetition of themes as it is through these discursive means that they create the significance of experience (Patai 1988).

## **FINDINGS**

### **Environments of Vulnerability**

I develop the term *environments of vulnerability*<sup>14</sup> to capture not only the objective constraints that impinge on Mexican women's capacity to mother but also their subjective and variable understandings of the *landscapes of risk* (Elliott and Aseltine, 2012). Environments of vulnerability are dynamic social contexts structured by the interlocking structures of race, class, gender and legal oppression. While vulnerability is often associated with poverty, it also arises when people are subject to isolation, insecurity and cultural degradation for a long period of time. In these spaces of vulnerability Mexican women and their children have a diminished but varying capacity to anticipate, cope with, and resist the effects of their marginality. The following sections illustrate how Mexican immigrant mothers mediate, anticipate and respond to the risks their children face while coping with the liabilities of migrant illegality. I focus particularly on those strategies that address the risks emerging from the conditions of their neighborhoods, and from access to damaging information.

### **Moving Out/Moving Up**

When Mexican mothers talked about the risks facing them and their children, their discussions were framed in terms of how they experienced the constraints of immigrant illegality and how in turn those experiences were shaped by race. Many of

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<sup>14</sup> I find Quesada et al.'s (2011) conceptualization of vulnerability useful as it extends beyond economic, material and political factors to include cultural and idiosyncratic ones as sources of physical, psychological and emotional distress.

these mothers linked the ethnic and racial composition of certain areas of the city to danger and conflict (see Quillian and Pager 2001). Dania, a 37 year-old, married mother of three, tellingly described her perceptions of Oak Cliff, a traditionally Hispanic, lower middle class neighborhood in the southern part of the Dallas metropolitan area. She said that while in Carrollton, where she currently lives, “there are a lot of Hispanics, there are not so many of them like in certain areas where there is a lot of crime because there are a lot of *morenos*”. Expressing preference for her northern neighborhood, she said that “it is better here, I like it here so much more” and added that, compared to Oak Cliff, the area where she lives is “more peaceful”. “In Oak Cliff,” according to Dania, there is “more vandalism and all of that, gangs, (whereas) here there is a little more control”. Laura, a 37 year-old married mother of two, also described the neighborhood where she used to live as “ugly”. She referred to the criminal activity she observed while she lived there – particularly shootings and drug dealings -- as widespread and unsettling. Like Dania, Laura attributed such disorderly conduct and criminal behavior to the presence of Hispanic and African-American residents:

Laura: yes, and so I think that also, somehow one felt afraid, for example, all the time that I lived in the apartments when I heard things or...

ML: tell me about it

Laura: Mm, for example, I had neighbors that were *morenitos*, well most of them were *morenitos* and they made a lot of noise, I was afraid!

While criminal activity and violence in their communities are no doubt a significant preoccupation for Mexican immigrant mothers (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005, 2004),

equally frightening for them is the presence of police in their neighborhoods when violent events take place. When I started interviewing Irina, a married mother of three children in her mid thirties, the conversation quickly veered to a description of the events that had occurred the previous weekend near her apartment in South Dallas. While she was sleeping, a young man was almost murdered by a group of men and a young child almost drowned in the nearby pool. She realized something terrible had happened when she stepped outside and saw “all that blood” and “police and ambulances everywhere and with their sirens turned on!”. Seeing such impressive display of law enforcement transported Irina back a few years to the time when she saw a former neighbor at her previous apartment complex being removed from her home to be deported back to El Salvador. She said:

Irina: “...her house was full of police!, from the FBI, from immigration, it was all full of them because they came to pick her up, she was taking a shower, and they waited for her to come out to take her away, (pause)...and they took her away”. Seeing that the detention and deportation of her neighbor proceeded despite the fact that she was a mother of young children was deeply disturbing for Irina:

ML: Did that happen in the other apartments?

Irina: Yes, in those apartments!, my neighbor there...what happened is that she had a warrant for her arrest, and she was from El Salvador, and was already deported once, and [had] all her children were little, oh!, my God!...)

To this day, every time she sees a police officer or other law enforcement in or near her neighborhood she can not help but think “*Ave Maria Purisima*, no! Who knows who they are picking up now?...no, when the police comes, I am afraid! ”

Laura, the 37 year-old mother of two who spoke of her neighborhood as “ugly” expressed a similar sentiment. Walking the streets of her neighborhood was usually stressful as Laura recalled it:

Laura: Always, always, always there were police officers; there were always two or three police cars because something had happened

ML: Aha

Laura: So, one would be scared to walk by

ML: Were you scared to pass by?

Laura: (Laughs) yes

ML: So what did you do? did you turn around?

Laura: I turned around until they had left

ML: Really? Did you wait until they left?

Laura: (Laughs) yes

ML: Did you go back to your house?

Laura: To my apartment

ML: Mm...

Laura: Until they had, definitively [left], even if I had not eaten, I waited,  
laughs

ML: You waited...

Laura: Yes, [laughs] yes, I think so, because yes, it was scary, because there were always one or two [police] around.

In the context of a punitive and restrictive immigration regime, it is not surprising that these Mexican immigrant mothers feel the way they do. They are not only undocumented but also criminalized which means that, at any given point, they are in effect police targets. Paradoxically, while these women feel responsible for the wellbeing of their children and would do anything to protect them, for them to seek police protection from violence in their neighborhoods means risking their present life and the future they have imagined for their children (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005).

Caught in this bind, some of the women in this study choose to move out of their neighborhoods and into others they perceive to be safer, even if that means incurring higher rents and expenses and a greater degree of anxiety as they scramble to make it:

Irina: Yes, right now I'm paying \$540, can you imagine? I mean, here it's like \$150 more, yeah it's more, but with the situation being like it is right now, look last Saturday a boy was drowning in the pool, right there, a two-year old boy, and then late that night, that same day, wasn't a young guy getting killed? Right now he is in the hospital because they shot him on his hand several times, most likely he will lose his hand, we are just not safe, we are just not safe there!, and I tell my husband that we have to start looking...)

...



ML: Have you always lived here [in these área] since you came from Mexico?

Irina: Yes, I lived here almost three years and then [I moved] there!

ML: To the neighboring apartments?

Irina: No, to the ones across the street! Not in these ones, in those other ones, over there, but here I was feeling fine, but then the problem with the bed bugs started, and then that man was killed, and I, I felt afraid because I was alone, my husband worked at night,...

ML: Do you feel afraid for your children as well? ¿or do you feel they are protected?

Irina: No, my daughter is afraid! Because she heard everything, she is afraid!...and more afraid because she walks by there, she walks by there to take the bus, she walks by the side of the apartment where that guy who was shot lives, and she is nervous...so we are nervous, yes, we are nervous!...

Describing her son's emotional vulnerability after the death of his father and how she dealt with the resulting challenges, Laura said:

Laura: And after that, in the beginning it was very hard, but because he was just a small child he understood what happened and not, but when he went to middle school there he became very depressed, in many respects, he started to hang out with this group of troublemakers

ML: Gangs?

Laura: Yes

ML: Ah

Laura: So, he hangs out with, like he said, “I’m not one of them...I am not in the group, but I like to hang out with them” and I said “but that is the same”

ML: Mm

Laura: I mean, you have not done anything bad, but if you continue to hang out with them, then it’s the same

ML: What did they do?

Laura: No, he never participated but he liked to hang out with precisely two boys who belonged to that group

ML: Mm

Laura: They gave him drugs, cigarettes, marihuana to try

ML: And?

Laura: When he told me, wow, it was like a great shock for me

ML: Aha

Laura: But he told me that he did not like it and that he had felt terrible

ML: Aha

Laura: And that now he felt like an obligation to those boys because he was hanging out with them

ML: He felt an obligation?

Laura: Yes, so that is when we moved to other apartments, because of that, we moved out of that area

ML: From where to where?

Laura: From Park Lane, from there we moved a little bit closer to here in Lovers lane, in the Village Green apartments

ML: Aha, Village Green

Laura: Yes, the Village Green, it was really expensive for our budget but for him we decided to move, and you would say, what difference does two miles make, but the difference was enormous.

Not all the women who decide to move to other neighborhoods for the sake of their children's wellbeing do so out of fear of violence and apprehension about the constant presence of police. Some of the women in my study make sense of their contexts of vulnerability in terms of race and class. For instance, consider Gisela's description of a "bad" neighborhood:

"...and in that área, it is very strange, but from Beltline to this side everything is just fine, but you cross Beltline to that other side,...crossing Beltline to that other side, toward the school, the alleys full of trash, horrible, the horrendous backyards, with stuff you would not believe...horrible!, so that is what I repudiate about mi *raza*, right?, they are dirty, messy, and like we say, if we want to be accepted here, then let's behave right! Don't you think? (42, single mother of two)

Similarly, Silvia married mother of two in her early thirties, expressed her sentiment about the possibility of having to live in Oak Cliff, a traditionally Hispanic, lower class neighborhood in the south of Dallas:

Silvia: I always said that I wasn't going to live in Oak Cliff, only *nacos* live there [laughs]

ML: You thought? ...ah...[laughs]

Silvia: That only *nacos* lived there

ML: Mm

Their characterization of the neighborhoods is permeated with “racialized and classed understandings of space” (Elliot and Aseltine, 2012, p. 726). Using terms such as *dirty* and *nacos* underscore the defining role of language in assigning social membership (Zentella 2007). A pejorative word in Mexican Spanish, *naco*, usually associated with lower socioeconomic classes is used to describe people considered culturally and intellectually inferior. It is an elitist expression used by those who consider themselves educated to describe the poor and the academically deficient. The term *naco* also connotes behavior and aesthetic choices seen as unrefined and in “bad taste” (Zentella 2007). These linguistic terms invoke and rely on racialized images and allow these Mexican women to speak about other Mexicans they consider inferior without making explicit reference to class, ethnicity or even race which, Elliot and Aseltine (2012) argue, is consistent with modern race talk.

These mothers rather than worry their children or themselves will be targets of violence or police attention they worry that their children will have to grow up in a “bad”

neighborhood. Consider Leti's (35, single mother of three) efforts to explain what she views as the biggest challenge of living in the United States:

Leti: ... not being able to rent in good places, I mean, that is why I say I was very lucky!! [laughs] because I got to go to, for example to those areas that are here nearby, where only Hispanics live...and I tell you God is great, God is good, because He knew that I wasn't going to be able to live there...[laughs] so that is it...in that aspect I think God helped me...

ML: Would it be difficult for you to live in a mostly Hispanic area?

Leti: Oh yes!!! Yes, a lot! A lot, I have had the chance to go there because I know people I work with or friends who live there, and you see people outside, drinking, listening to music, no, I don't want my children [to live] like that. I mean it would be very difficult...

As Gisela (42, single mother of two) answers my question about the place she used to live when she first came to Dallas, she is drawn into a description of the neighborhood and a justification of her mothering choices:

ML: So, you come here, and who do you stay with?

Gisela: With my parents, I lived with my parents...

ML: Where do your parents live?

Gisela: In Oak Cliff

ML: Is that where you first lived?

Gisela: Aha

ML: And how was that experience?

Gisela: Good,...it is just the reputation of Oak Cliff,...where my parents live is a quiet área, safe, nothing ever happened to us, nothing, nothing, nothing too bad, so...fine, fine,...but obviously I take my daughters to swimming lessons all the way to Royal Lane, I also used to bring them to the park to the Lovers Lane (emphasis), I mean, I did not stay there, no way

ML: We could say that you looked to get out of Oak Cliff?

Gisela: Yes,...while the área was safe, ah, it's just, the people, the dogs outside, all those things that, we didn't go out to the park there because you have to be careful of the dogs, and that is why I normally went north, to the swimming classes, to the park, to get a coffee with my mom...

For these Mexican mothers a great source of concern is raising their children among other Mexicans who in their view fit the negative stereotypes associated with the group. Demonstrating awareness of the culturally depreciated status of Mexicans in the United States and assuming responsibility for social acceptance, Gisela said: "If we want to be accepted, let's behave appropriately, right?". The search of a better life for these mothers and their children involves moving to more affluent areas as a way to distance themselves, physically and socially, from other poor Mexicans, *nacos* and Blacks (*morenos*). Taking their children to extracurricular activities, to parks, to restaurants, and to schools in more affluent neighborhoods, even as they struggle to pay the high rents, is how these mothers help their children earn status and respect (Zentella 2007).

During my conversation with Sandra, a forty-eight year-old, single mother of twelve-year old twins, she never spells out directly what made her decide to move from Fort Worth, where she had found a relatively good job as a factory supervisor and had the support of her sister, to Plano where she had no family and very limited job options. She said:

Sandra: The truth is that I never liked Fort Worth, so I came back to Plano.

ML: But you were there with your sister

Sandra: Yes, with my sister, yes. I came back to Plano because the children were going to begin school, they were going to start kindergarten, the truth is that I never liked Fort Worth, I like it to visit!, but not to live, so I told her, you know what? I am going to go back to Plano, the children are going to start school.

Instead of explaining why she decided to move from what seemed to be a more favorable environment for her in terms of work and social support, she engaged in a lengthy justification of why she had chosen to rent a spare room from an elderly couple, with whom it was “difficult to get along.” Returning to Plano after living in Fort Worth for a year also meant she was in close proximity again with her conflictive and threatening ex-husband. In addition, sharing one room with her growing pre-teen children was becoming increasingly challenging. While she did not state explicitly why she moved, Sandra’s account suggests that living in a nice home, located in an established middle class neighborhood of Plano was worth all the trade-offs. It is perhaps worth noticing that according to a recent estimate Plano was ranked the most affluent city in the

United States, with a median income for a household of \$84,492. In contrast, the median income for a household in Fort Worth was considerably lower at \$37,074. Also, only about 4.3% of Plano's residents live below the poverty line, while in Fort Worth nearly 16% of the population lived below the poverty line. In addition, as of the 2010 census the racial make-up of the city of Plano was 66.9% non-Hispanic white, 7.6% Black, 17% Asian, and 14.7% Latino, while for Fort Worth the racial make-up was about 41.7% non-Hispanic white, 19% Black, 3.7% Asian and 34.1% Latino. Sandra did not mention these statistics as playing a role in her choice of Plano over Fort Worth. However, listening to Sandra's full story, her aspirations for her children, her efforts to not speak about her illegality, her views about other poor Mexicans who take advantage of public social services, lead me to believe that for Sandra, moving to Plano to raise her children, was a decision she made in terms of her understandings of race, class and privilege.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century the U.S. society began to experience a major development related to the racial and ethnic *recomposition* of many U.S. cities, including Dallas (Rodriguez and Mindiola 2011:155). The immigration of Mexicans and the out-migration of non-Latino whites to the suburbs have resulted in a "simultaneously growing concentration of African Americans and Latinos" in many urban cities across the country (Rodriguez and Mindiola: 155). Yet their physical proximity has not always resulted in higher levels of interaction between these two groups, as evidenced by research in the Houston area (Rodriguez and Mindiola 2011:165). While relations between Mexican immigrants and African Americans in the United States may reflect issues related to economic and social competition over scarce



resources, and American racial scripts (Molina 2013), the testimonies of my respondents suggest that there is an additional dynamic at play.

A recent study of race in Mexico revealed that Mexicans tend to place higher social value on light skin color (Planas 2011). This study found that 60% of Mexicans had insulted others because of the color of their skin. The study also reported that 40% of Mexicans had treated people differently based on skin color (Planas 2011). In Mexico, the best, the highest paying and the most important jobs go to Mexicans, who, in addition to being well connected and having a good education, also have light skin color. Homeowners in wealthy neighborhoods also have a fair color of skin, while the people who serve them are dark. While this is a visible reality across the country, few Mexicans engage in discussions of race. The reason is not because there are no Black Mexicans or because Mexico does not have an African heritage. De la Torre (2013) argues that how Mexicans perceive Blacks and behave toward blacks may be explained by the ways in which “Blackness is almost non-existent in the national discourses of belonging” (244). While Blacks played an important role in Mexico’s history and have entered and settled in Mexico for centuries, as Mexico endeavored to create an image of itself there was no space for Blacks and blackness in Mexico’s racial paradigm, *Mestizaje* (De la Torre 2013). The Mexican or *mestizo*, a racial mixture of indigenous peoples and Spaniards became the proud symbol of the nation. Yet, the cult of the mestizo was predicated on the erasing of dark skin and Blackness (De la Torre 2013).

Inevitably, Mexican immigrants in the United States encounter African Americans and U.S. racial scripts (Molina 2013) about Blacks and blackness. It is clear,

however, that the racial meanings they bring with them from Mexico also play a role in how they construct Blacks and *others* as racial categories.

### **Managing Information**

Fears and concerns about children's safety and physical and emotional wellbeing are prominent issues for Mexican immigrant mothers in this study. In the previous section I explored how their concerns are shaped by the social and physical worlds Mexican mothers and their children inhabit, and how they respond to these concerns according to their understandings of race and class. In this section I discuss how Mexican immigrant mothers experience their legal vulnerability in relation to information their children receive and examine a strategy some of them adopt in their efforts to both protect their children's emotional life and avoid their children's plunge into the uncertainties of migrant illegality for as long as they can.

Living in the shadow of laws, policies, and practices designed to "close every door" and to make them feel vulnerable and unwelcome (Willen 2014), some Mexican immigrant mothers make every effort to spare their children from those grinding tensions. One way they do it is by withholding information from their children about their immigrant status, or similarly by de-emphasizing its relevance in their conversations with them. This strategy is particularly challenging given the widespread and highly mediatized nature of anti-immigrant discourses and the fact that for many undocumented immigrants the limitations they experience in their daily lives are prominent topics of conversation. Some Mexican mothers postpone talking to their children about immigrant

illegality and the dim prospects they face as they grow and enter adult spaces (Gonzales 2011, Abrego 2011).

For instance, Rosario, a forty-year old divorced mother of a twenty-two year old son, who spoke of “having a very close relationship” with her son, described the emotional downward spiral he fell into after he graduated from high school:

Rosario: Yes, then, my son has always been cautious

ML: Mm, he worries

Rosario: [Pause] He worries

ML: He does worry about that

Rosario: He does; look, he was the one who suffered

ML: Why? Tell me about it

Rosario: One time, he had graduated from high school

ML: Aha

Rosario: Yes, in the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>

ML: Right, 12<sup>th</sup> is the last year of high school

Rosario: He graduated from the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, then he started applying for...so then)

ML: Applying to where?

Rosario: Applying for scholarships,...or applying for college

ML: Mm, aha

Rosario: They were asking him for his papers and Joel said to me ‘mom, why can’t I do it? Why can’t I do it?,’ and I said to him ‘because you don’t

have a social security number son! And [he said] ‘but mom, what can I do?’ and I said ‘Look, Joel, at least you graduated from high school!’

ML: You said that to him?

Rosario: Yes

ML: Mm, aha

Rosario: I told him, ‘well, you have to find a job, any job’

ML: Mm, but he did not want to

Rosario: He said, I said ‘at a McDonalds, at a Wendy’s’, and he said ‘no, I won’t, I won’t work there, doing that’ so I told him ‘well then, if you don’t want to do that, you will have to do something, you may have to dig, or who knows what you will have to do’, I talked to him strongly!

ML: Mm

Rosario: Because he was like...yes, yes I will tell you that he got depressed

ML: Did he?

Rosario: Yes, he did

Rosario’s son confronts her about his legal status only after he graduated from high school and began applying for college and scholarships, “mami, ¿por qué no puedo?, ¿por qué no puedo?!” His desperate reaction suggests that it was at that moment that he realized what it meant to be undocumented. At that point Rosario tells him openly that he cannot get a scholarship to go to college because “he does not have a social security number” and that he will have to find a job, any job. Note that even then Rosario tells her

son that he cannot apply for a scholarship because he does not have a social security number and not because he is undocumented, in effect de-emphasizing to him his status of “illegal” immigrant. By withholding information from her son, Rosario may have been able to shield him from a childhood filled with fear and anxiety, but not necessarily from the depression triggered when he learned about the prospects of his limited future (Gonzales 2011, Abrego 2011).

When Miriam’s husband was pulled over by police and subsequently deported to Mexico, she also opted for withholding this information from her parents and her children, both in Mexico and in the U.S. In fact, after Miriam’s husband was released from a detention center two weeks after his capture, and sent to Mexico, he did not return home in Acamixtla Guerrero to see his older children, whom he had not seen in more than six years. Instead, he remained in the border town of Juarez for close to six months waiting for an opportunity to return to Miriam and his two younger children in Dallas:

Miriam: No, and in fact,...he did not, he did not want to visit his parents nor...he did not want to

ML: Don Julio did not want to go and visit the children?

Miriam: No

ML: Why, did he feel...?)

Miriam: Yes, and he said “how will I go there empty-handed?” And he said “where will I stay?” and more than anything it was like he did not have...

ML: How do you think he felt?

Miriam: Like frustrated, like a failure, to go...and to go with the hands empty, ...and in fact I told him “if you want I will go there” and “no!” he said “don’t come...do not come” he said, “I will go back there”

ML: He said that?

Miriam: Yes, mm, no and he actually had a lot of support from my family, like, from my mom, and so, in fact the children never learned that he had been deported, like...

ML: Ah, they were not told?

Miriam: No

ML: Mm...

Miriam: His mom knew, but like, it was the same for her

ML: You did not want them to know?

Miriam: The children?

ML: Aha

Miriam: No, I didn’t, nor my mom, I mean, no

ML: Nobody?

Miriam: Nobody

ML: Not even that he went to jail?

Miriam: No

ML: Would that have concerned the children?

Miriam: Yes

Silvia, a thirty-three, married mother of a fifteen year-old son who is undocumented was assertive in managing the information her son received from relatives she considered intrusive. Silvia viewed the questions from relatives about her son's immigrant status as a constant source of anxiety for him, and tried to quiet them down. In addition to confronting their views Silvia redirected the conversation to what she considered more appropriate issues for a teenage boy to be concerned about:

ML: So, what does your son say about...for example..., about not having papers, is it important for him or not, or does he even think about it?

Silvia: Mm, it is important for him, but he does not give it too much thought

ML: He is 15 years-old, right?

Silvia: Aha, ...he does think about it, but I, in a way...when he brings up the subject I try to make it such that it is not so important to him in that moment

ML: Aha

Silvia: Because,... since he was a little child..., if you told him, if he sees that we are having problems with money or he sees that we are having any kind of problems, he is the kind of person that [will say] 'oh, no! now what do we do, and this and that', I mean, he is thinking and thinking and thinking and I tell him 'son, you are too young to be worried about those things'

ML: Mm

Silvia: So, about the papers, everyone, my father, my mom, everyone, [when] he has a girlfriend, the first thing they do is ask him ‘does she have papers?!’

ML: Does everyone ask him that?

Silvia: Yes, so, ...and I tell them ‘so what if she has [papers] or not? but...in any case, I also, I have told his father, and I have told his grandmother that he is just fifteen years old and he is not getting married, I tell them that marriage is too far out for him, I have told him that he has to have many girlfriends!

ML: Mm

Silvia: Before marriage, mm...for me is more important that he studies than to be thinking about this or that.

This protective strategy emerges at the intersection of cultural notions that mothers are at the core of children’s development and wellbeing (Ambert 1994) and specific configurations of migrant illegality that push immigrants and their children into environments of vulnerability and risk.

Luci’s case is illustrative in that she implements two very different strategies of protection for situations in which she perceives her children to be vulnerable. Luci, a 44 year-old married mother of an 11 year-old girl and an 8 year-old boy, is deeply concerned about the possibility of her children becoming targets of sexual victimization. She says “yes, I feel nervous that someone will do something to her, that someone will give



something bad to her because she is still a little girl”. She has taught her children, and especially her daughter, to not trust strangers, friends and even teachers:

“She knows that she should not accept anything from strangers, that she should not go to the restroom with anybody, that if someone proposes to do something that she should not do it!, and I, since she was in elementary school I told her ‘if a teacher wants to do something to you, whether male or female, do not allow it mijita’...Yes, I tell them because... ‘scream if you have to’ and they said... they always said, as little as they were, ‘no, mom, you can not scream at school!’, and I said ‘if someone wants to do something to you, scream! I assume the responsibility of explaining why you screamed,’ ‘but we should not scream mom!’, ‘No, I am authorizing you to scream if you are in danger.’”

In the face of this perceived threat, Luci is not particularly interested in prolonging the innocence of her children, which she considers problematic as she tries to protect them. In fact, she recognizes that she must help her children mature sufficiently so that they can understand and resist the dangers that are part of the environments they inhabit. Consider the following conversation she had with her children about believing in Santa Claus:

Luci: My children have always believed that Santa Claus exists

ML: Really?

Luci: Yes, even two, three days ago my daughter was saying, oh, well...it had been days that the charger was not working and said, Angel said ‘mami, where did you buy the DS because the charger is not working anymore’ so I told him ‘no, son we will have to look for another one later’

and my daughter told him ‘no Angel, my mom cannot tell you where she bought it from because it was Santa Claus who brought it for you,’ and I told her ‘darling, you are already in the sixth grade, you must know that Santa Claus is for little children, and you are not,... you should not believe in Santa Claus because...!!!

ML: But you did not tell your daughter that in front of your son, right?

Luci: Mm..., yes, I told her in front of him

ML: Ahá

Luci: I told her in front of him, so that he also begins to understand that Santa Claus is for little kids, right?

ML: Aha

Luci: I told her ‘darling, you have to understand that Santa Claus is over,’ I told her, ‘you are older now, Santa Claus is just for little kids’

ML: Mm

Luci: She says ‘no mami, I still believe,’ and I said ‘no, my love don’t go around saying that Santa Claus’ I said ‘because if you don’t stop, if your friends hear you they are going to laugh at you, because they are going to say no, Santa Claus does not...you are not to believe in Santa Claus, Santa Claus does not exist!

ML: Aha

While Luci is unrelentingly frank in talking to her children about sexual danger and about being constantly vigilant of their surroundings, she manages and withholds information from her children in regards to their legal status:

ML: ... in the case of...well, the uncertainty of not having papers here, what is it that concerns you most about it, for example, driving, going out, or perhaps you don't feel any concern?

Luci: Well, it's a risk that one takes

ML: Mm

Luci: It is a risk that one takes that...that you go out and you don't know if you will be able to come back

ML: Mm

Luci: Because by no means we are...by no means we are sure that we are not going to have an accident, that we won't be detained by police, or...we just don't know if we will come back home

ML: Mm

Luci: You go out praying to God, and God permitting you can come back

ML: Mm

Luci: And it is the same with my husband, that everyday that he leaves, I say God help him, God bless him and God allow him to return safe

ML: Of course, and what do the children say about it?

Luci: They know, mm...broadly, we don't, we don't talk to them about it because my daughter is very apprehensive, and later she is like "and why

daddy?” My husband on one occasion told her that he had come to the U.S. walking and she...and she said...and many days she had it in her mind ‘and dad, but why did you not come in the bus? Daddy, why did you not come in the bus? and he told her the situation, and many days she had that in her mind and she asked, and she asked, so now, we don’t talk to them about it, only broadly

ML: Aha

Luci: We just tell them, we can’t honey, because we need...like in the case of her father’s job, she says “dad, why don’t you look for another job, where you don’t have to come back home so tired, so dirty?,” “I just, I can’t honey, I don’t have papers,” and that is it

ML: And that’s it

Luci: And that is it, without going into details on the topic, because she is too sensitive, she worries too much.

There is a difference, I argue, between protecting her children from concrete, physical dangers that threaten their physical integrity – sexual abuse and bullying – and protecting them from the insidiousness of legal violence (Menjivar and Abrego 2012) which threaten her children’s emotional integrity and their happiness. While for one situation her children’s innocence is problematic, for the other is a quality to protect. For Luci, there is a sense that she cannot act directly against the alienating conditions of their illegality, thus, she acts indirectly, “through the resources of thought and language,” by

withholding information, “to change her children’s experience of their relationship to the external forces that bear so heavily upon them” (Jackson p.182).

## **DISCUSSION**

This paper contributes to a body of work that examines how parents perceive migration as affecting their children (Dreby 2006, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 2007, Parreñas 2005). The multiple decisions parents face in the context of migrant illegality – to return to Mexico or stay in the United States, to send their children to Mexico or not, to have their children come from Mexico or not, to terminate relationships or to stay in them for the sake of the children -- become all the more pressing. An analysis of these interviews reveals how these intimate processes are connected to broader processes of migration, race, class, gender and legal status.

A key contribution of this research is that it reveals the particular mothering practices of mothers who live within *contexts of vulnerability*. This research adds to the scholarly literature that examines the mothering practices of women of color who face multiple structural oppressions (Elliott and Aseltine 2012, Gonzalez-Lopez 2003, Hondagneu and Avila 1997). While Elliott and Aseltine (2012) examine the mothering practices that poor Black women engage in in hostile environments, my research uniquely examines how environments of vulnerability – characterized by illegality and vehement anti-immigrant sentiment – shape the mothering practices of Mexican women living in the United States. Gonzalez-Lopez (2003) explores what Mexican women teach their daughters about sexuality as they grapple with the realities of their immigration

experiences. The Mexican mothers in my study engage in two key mothering practices. First, they attempt to move away from neighborhoods that they perceive as occupied by undesirable others – the poor, Blacks, and “less worthy” Mexicans. In doing so, they attempt to protect their children from the police and deportation but also attempt to define themselves and their children in opposition to damaging discourses that define illegal immigrants as unworthy at the same time that they reproduce racist and classist discourses. Second, they seek to protect their children by withholding information from them regarding their legal status.

This research also engages scholarship that examines the construction of illegality and “illegal” subjects (Chavez 2008, Coutin 2000, DeGenova 2002, Abrego and Menjivar 2011, Abrego 2011, Menjivar and Abrego 2012). While much of this scholarship has focused on the historical and juridical processes of illegality construction, my paper focuses on how these processes penetrate the intimacy of family life and the power they have in shaping decisions that affect individuals and families. This paper portrays everyday experience as the site where gender, race, class and state power, and individual agency coalesce.

This study also contributes to the literature on gender and migration. My study adds to sociological research that have examined how Mexican immigrants incorporate gender meanings in their parenting practices and how these in turn, shape their various immigration experiences (Gonzalez-Lopez 2004, Dreby 2006), particularly within the current context of the U.S. immigration regime. For instance, how the Mexican mothers in this study incorporate gender meanings in their decisions to withhold information from

their children parallels how Mexican fathers who choose to advocate for the premarital virginity of their daughters may do so both in response to regional constructions of patriarchy and to protect their daughters from a sexually dangerous society (Gonzalez-Lopez 2004).

Additionally, this study makes a contribution to an understanding of how meanings are constituted through the experience of being “illegal” and how those meanings contribute to the formation of a vulnerable subjectivity. In this sense, this study illustrates how mothering practices emerge as a result of a variety of oppressive forces in the environment rather than from the individual decisions of mothers.

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations of this research. First, I did not initially begin the project with the goal of examining mothering practices. Therefore, the narratives in this paper come from organic conversations driven by my respondents. However, had I began the project with this goal in mind and directly asked all of my respondents about their mothering practices, a more diverse array of mothering practices may have been revealed. Second, this paper examines the mothering practices of Mexican women living in the Dallas-Fort Worth area at this particular historical moment. This study is therefore not intended to be representative of the mothering practices of all Mexican women living in the U.S. Thus, future research should examine how geographical variation, among other demographic factors, shape Mexican women’s mothering practices in the U.S.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion this paper makes a contribution to an understanding of the mothering practices of women living in environments of vulnerability. In particular, this research reveals how intersecting structures of race, class, gender, and legal status profoundly shapes mothering practices. Future research should continue to examine both the particular mothering practices of Mexican immigrant women living in the U.S. as well as the mothering practices of women who are simultaneously disadvantaged by structures of race, class, ethnicity, and immigrant status. Doing so is important for developing a fuller understanding of how family life is profoundly shaped by structural forces.



### **Article 3: What Does it Mean to Return Home? Narratives of Hope and Uncertainty**

#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines what it means to return to Mexico for Mexican women living in the Dallas metropolitan area without papers. While the fear and distress caused by the possibility of being deported are common features of life among undocumented immigrants, not all undocumented immigrants experience the same kind of anxiety and apprehension about the possibility of returning home. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 43 undocumented Mexican women, I examine the factors that shape the women's subjective concerns about returning to Mexico and how they use narratives of hope and uncertainty to articulate two main concerns: providing educational opportunities to their children and protecting their children from violence. I pay particular attention to how Mexican women articulate their aspirational longings and how they are shaped by the condition of illegality.

## INTRODUCTION

Luci, a reserved yet articulate woman from a small mining town in Zacatecas, described how she felt four years ago, when her husband wanted to go to Mexico to see his mother before she died. Working on the tiny, colorful paper flags she had volunteered to make for the international festival at her son's school, she spoke of feeling great anxiety at that time. If her husband could not return to Dallas, how was she going to be able to pay the monthly rent of their mobile home, cover all of their expenses, and care for their two young children all on her own? Despite all that uncertainty, Luci was clear about one thing. She stated, "Yo pienso, yo pienso que ya no me...yo por mi voluntad yo ya no me regreso...(yo: ¿no se regresa?) Mm (ajá), le digo, yo por mi voluntad no me regreso!, yo sigo aquí mientras se pueda!" (I think, I think that I won't...of my own accord I will not return...(I: you will not return?) Mm (aha), I am telling you, I, of my own free will, I will not return! I will stay here as long as I possibly can!)

I use Luci's experience as a starting point to examine what it would mean for Mexican women to return home. Being deported or deciding to go back to Mexico when life has become intolerable in the United States (Serwer 2012), are perhaps the ultimate consequences of being undocumented in the United States (Abrego 2013). But how do Mexican immigrant women understand the consequences of leaving? In what ways would returning to Mexico affect their present lives and imagined futures? These are particularly salient questions within the context of both the economic restructuring of the Mexican state that have resulted in the massive defunding of public health care and

public education systems (Galvez 2011: 148) and the current state of violence as a result of the Mexican war against the drug cartels (Chabat 2012).

While some of the Mexican women in this study came to the U.S. because of personal ambition or economic need, many did not. A few of the women were sent to the U.S. by their parents when they were teenagers to care for the children of relatives. Others migrated just as young because they believed it would be an “interesting” adventure (Dreby 2010; Hirsch 2003). Several said they wanted to leave personal problems behind and to have some time just for themselves. A more traditional group came with or to reunite with their husbands or partners (Massey and Sanchez 2010). Interestingly not one of my respondents mentioned fear of violence as a reason to migrate. For most of the immigrant women in this study, however, their migration gradually turned into a larger project that could potentially enable them to improve their lives and those of their children. The research on undocumented immigrants has sufficiently established deportation as a source of fear, stress and suffering among immigrants without papers (Boehm 2009; Menjivar and Abrego 2012; Rodriguez and Hagan 2004), yet questions remain about the specific ways undocumented immigrant women, and in particular Mexican women, experience the possibility of returning to Mexico. The contemporary immigration discourse leads to the view that the approximately 11.2 million undocumented immigrants currently in the United States are a monolithic group of lawless and deportable individuals (Abrego 2013). However, as Luci’s story makes clear, undocumented immigrant women, are multifaceted individuals with multiple ties and responsibilities – as mothers, as wives, as school volunteers, as

homeowners, as workers. These commitments, their hopes for the future and the emotional investments these women make in both, shape how they assess the consequences of returning to Mexico.

For over a decade, research on illegalization and undocumented immigration has shifted the analysis from “illegal” immigrants as a category to the social and legal production of immigrant “illegality” (Coutin 1998, 2000; De Genova 2002; Ngai 2004). As noted by Willen (2007, 2014), the scholarly focus in the field has been, for the most part, on the juridical and sociopolitical aspects of “the condition of migrant illegality”. These studies continue to work with objectified notions of what undocumented immigrants are – exploitable and disposable laborers, targets of legal violence, deportable individuals, impossible subjects, racialized bodies (DeGenova 2002, 2004; DeGenova and Ramos-Zayas 2003; Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002; Menjivar and Abrego 2012; Ngai 2004) and remain relatively silent about the “impact of ‘illegality’ on migrants’ present experiences of “being-in-the world” (Willen 2007:10) and their plans for the future.

In this paper I explore the ways in which the experience of immigrant “illegality” intersects with immigrants’ aspirational longings to shape their subjective understandings of what it means to return home. Drawing on interviews with 43 Mexican undocumented women living and working in the Dallas metropolitan area, this article uses insights from feminist theory and from critical race theory to tease out the intersectional processes embedded in these women’s plans and hopes and projects as they remain in the United States. A feminist framework proves useful for this type of research because it is

grounded in women's lived experience, bringing to the center of the analysis women's "ways of knowing" (Reinharz 1992; Smith 1992). Critical race theory advances the analysis in that it reveals how society organizes itself along racial lines and ethnic hierarchies utilizing "neutral" principles of law (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Together, these analytic lenses stress the complexity and multiplicity in women's social locations and emphasize that race, class, gender and legal status do not simply intersect in people's lives, but work in complex ways to inform people's understandings of their options, and their consideration of future scenarios (Collins 2000).

## **THE CONTEXT**

### **Violence in Mexico**

While the unprecedented level of violence associated with the traffic of illicit drugs in Mexico began to attract international attention in the years 2005-2006 (Anaya Muñoz 2012), the problem had started long before that. For decades Mexico had kept its levels of violence low through the strategic use of coercion (Kenny and Serrano 2012). The period from the early 1970's until the early 1990s was characterized by "the affirmation of the state's monopoly over organized crime" (p. 35). At the end that period, however, as a result of a shift in the balance of political power, up-and-coming criminal leaders would make firmer territorial claims while organizing their operators in tight, brotherly organizations, giving rise to the drug cartels (Kenny and Serrano 2012: 39). The weakening of the hold of state regulation not only allowed the cartels to flourish but also to regulate themselves and to keep their operations largely out of public view (Kenny and

Serrano 2012, Wright 2011). That model of control collapsed however, when newly elected president Felipe Calderon attempting to reign in the growing power of the drug cartels declared “war” against them by deploying thousands of troops in Ciudad Juarez, and other border cities (Wright 2011). Since then, each year has proved to be more violent than the previous one (Wright 2011). As violence worsened, and the myth that “criminals were only killing each other” was dispelled, tens of thousands of affluent Mexicans fearing for their lives have joined their more humble compatriots in a quiet exodus to safer destinations in the United States (Sheridan 2011).

## **Deportation**

Ironically, while globalization has facilitated the circulation of goods, including drugs, the transnational circulation of persons has become increasingly restrictive (Bauman 1998). Restrictive and repressive immigration policies have resulted in the militarization of physical borders, the intensification of state surveillance and the massive production of “illegal” aliens (DeGenova 2002; Fassin 2011; Ngai 2004). However, the significance of borders and boundaries has changed considerably over time, specifically in relation to the U.S.-Mexico context (Fassin 2011). Over the long history of U.S.-Mexico migration, the first and largest systematic attempt to regulate the flow of Mexican immigration came about with the implementation of the Bracero program (1942- 1964), a labor agreement between the United States and Mexico involving the importation of about 4.6 million Mexican laborers (Ngai 2004). Initially designed to meet agricultural businesses’ demand for cheap labor, the Bracero program actually generated more illegal

migration as the recruitment of braceros and undocumented workers usually occurred simultaneously (Ngai 2004: 148). By 1954, before Operation Wetback<sup>15</sup> was implemented, more than a million workers had crossed the Rio Grande illegally. (Calavita 1992; Ngai 2004). While Operation Wetback began as an effort to end the hiring of undocumented Mexican workers by Texas' and California's growers, it evolved "as a though it was a military operation" aimed at stopping the "invasion of Mexicans" into the United States (Ngai 2004: 155). It is important to note, however, that since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and until the inception of the Bracero program, the flow of Mexican migrants into and out of the U.S. was largely unrestricted and unregulated (Ngai 2004). In general, male labor migration was seasonal and migrants consistently returned to Mexico to tend to their own crops after the agricultural season in the United States was over. Rouse (1991) characterized this migratory pattern as *transnational circuits* in which Mexican migrants maintained strong roots in Mexico while they labored in the United States in a constant flow of cross-border migration.

With the termination of the Bracero program in 1964 and the U.S. implementation of quantitative restrictions on immigration from the Western Hemisphere, seasonal migration decreased, and undocumented immigration began to steadily grow (Cerruti and Massey 2004). Arrests and deportations also grew in that period. For example, while in 1968 the number of deportations of undocumented Mexicans was 151,000, in 1976 the number had risen to 781,000 (Ngai 2004). "Returns" to Mexico, as Boehm (2008)

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<sup>15</sup> Operation Wetback was a massive enforcement effort to deport undocumented Mexicans, mainly targeting the border areas of Texas and California (Ngai 2004)

observes, have been both voluntary, by way of seasonal migration, and forced, for example through Operation Wetback starting in 1954 and through active deportation efforts (Calavita 1992; Ngai 2004). The increase in the flow of Mexican undocumented immigrants that occurred in the 1980s coincided both with a period of considerable economic distress, high unemployment and rising inequality marked by stagnating wages in the United States (Cerrutti and Massey 2004), and with the most severe economic crisis Mexico had experienced in fifty years (Hernandez-Leon 2008). In this context, and to assuage American public opinion, U.S. Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986, which, among other regulatory provisions, increased the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) budget for immigration enforcement, in order to curb undocumented migration from Mexico (Cerrutti and Massey 2004).

It was not until the mid-1990s, with the enactment of a series of immigration laws that the United States made it significantly easier to arrest, detain and ultimately deport noncitizens (Hagan, Eschbach, and Rodriguez 2008). The key significance of the implementation of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA), is that it marked the moment in which civil immigration law and criminal law begin to converge (Menjivar and Abrego 2012). This legislative innovation relied on a vast state technology that enabled both border and interior control (Hagan et al. 2008; Menjivar and Abrego 2012). Since the enactment of IIRIRA and AEDPA in 1996, the categories of noncitizens subject to detention and deportation have increased considerably (Hagan et al. 2008). In addition, under IIRIRA, 28 additional offenses constitute grounds for deportation. This is



particularly significant because Mexican nationals constitute the vast majority of undocumented immigrants in the United States and thus, the vast majority of deportable aliens (Boehm 2008)<sup>16</sup>. As Hagan et al. (2008) observe, before the implementation of IIRIRA and AEDPA, when an undocumented immigrant living in the United States was served an order of deportation, it could frequently be presented before a judge for judicial review. If, in that particular case, the judge found that deportation posed significant hardship for a family member –e.g. her U.S.-born children -- the judge had the discretionary authority to forgo deportation. By 2013 a record 363,000 (83%) of deportations were carried out as expedited removals without appearing before a judge (Gonzalez-Barrera and Krogstad 2014). Not only did IIRIRA and AEDPA make undocumented immigrants, particularly Mexicans, more vulnerable to deportation, they also increased the likelihood of deportation after apprehension (Gonzalez-Barrera and Krogstad 2014) and “eliminated relief for immigrants with family ties in the United States” (Hagan et al. 2008: 2).

### **Illegality, Deportability and Self-Deportation**

Efforts to deal with undocumented Mexican immigrants in recent years have relied on a variety of measures including an increasingly militarized border (Cornelius 2006; Fassin 2010), the expansion of bureaucratic apparatuses and technologies of surveillance of the borders and the territory (Coutin 1993; Menjivar and Abrego 2012), the widening of legal grounds for deporting individuals (Hagan et al. 2008; Ngai 2004)

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<sup>16</sup> In 2007, of the 960,756 “deportable aliens” identified by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security 854, 261 were Mexican nationals (Boehm 2008).

and the removal of legal barriers that protect undocumented and documented immigrants from deportation (Hagan et al. 2008; Ngai 2004; Preston 2007). In his analysis of migrant “illegality,” De Genova (2002) contends that in the current U.S. immigration regime, the most effective strategy used in the control of undocumented immigrants is *deportability*, and not actual deportation (also see Ngai 2004). De Genova makes the case that in the process of rendering Mexicans “illegal”, and thus deportable aliens, their illegality “has to be recreated more often than on the occasions of crossing the border” (2002: 437). For instance, immigrants’ inability to obtain various forms of state-issued documents, the policing of public spaces, including the places where they work, where they buy food, where they live, their ineligibility for housing loans, public assistance programs and health care, the requirement that they demonstrate their eligibility for employment, have had the effect of “transforming mundane activities into illicit acts” (Coutin 2000; De Genova 2002: 427). Furthermore, under the current legal configuration governing the undocumented immigrant population, there is practically no instance in which undocumented immigrants are not culpable of infringing the law in some way (De Genova 2004: 178).

Over the last few years, politicians and legal scholars<sup>17</sup> have outlined the legal-theoretical framework underpinning state immigration laws intended to “encourage”

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<sup>17</sup> Kris Kobach, Secretary of State of Kansas, and former law professor has masterminded a set of controversial anti-immigration laws such as Arizona’s SB 1070 and Alabama’s HB 56 as part of what is commonly referred to as the *attrition through enforcement* movement. This legal framework advances the notion that local and state officials have the “inherent authority” to enforce federal immigration laws. The movement’s driving principle states that attrition is effectively achieved through the raising the probability of enforcement. The appeal of this political and legal framework has been far reaching as former

undocumented immigrants to “make the decision” to return home – i.e., to self-deport. They argue that mass forced removal or expanded guest worker programs are not the only alternatives to shrink the existing “illegal” population in the United States (Vaughan 2006). Referred to as *attrition through enforcement* – or self-deportation -- the strategy is built upon the notion that local and state officials have the “inherent authority” to dramatically increase the probability of enforcement (Kobach 2007). The proposed policies of attrition include 1) eliminating access to jobs by mandating employer verification of social security numbers and immigration status; 2) ending the fraudulent use of social security and IRS identification numbers (ITIN), which are required to secure jobs, bank accounts, and drivers licenses; 3) doubling the detention and removal rate of aliens who have not been convicted of serious crimes; 4) increasing apprehensions and detention of undocumented immigrants through partnerships between state and local law enforcement agencies and federal immigration authorities; 5) increasing the number of Immigration and Customs enforcement (ICE) agents in the interior; and lastly, 6) passing state and local ordinances “to discourage the settlement of illegal aliens and to make it more difficult for illegal aliens to conceal their status” (Kobach 2007, Vaughan 2006). While some of these policies have been adopted in some states, in others they have been challenged as unconstitutional. However, legal scholar and staunch anti-immigration

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presidential candidate Mitt Romney drew his immigration talking points for his presidential campaign directly from Kobach’s work (Khim 2012)

activist Kris Kobach claims that if Congress were to make attrition through enforcement a nationwide strategy more “illegal” immigrants would return home each year.<sup>18</sup>

## **DATA AND METHODS**

This project began as an exploration of the ways in which the condition of migrant illegality may shape Mexican women’s everyday life experiences in the Dallas metropolitan area. As with other feminist projects, the two major aims of this work are to bring the women’s accounts to the center of the analysis and to recognize the diversity of their experiences. Using insights from critical race theory and intersectionality theory help me examine how contemporary legal configurations are central to the production of migrant illegality and how gender, race and class shape women’s experience of illegality. Combined, these theoretical insights are key for understanding how 1) the experience of immigrant “illegality” intersect with Mexican immigrant women’s aspirational longings and 2) these factors shape the women’s subjective concerns about returning to Mexico.

The data for this paper come from an in-depth, qualitative study with 43 undocumented Mexican women in the Dallas metropolitan area. Respondents were recruited with the help of key informants, and through snowball sampling. I examine data from the forty-three study participants but focus on the experiences of seven women for whom the conditions of imposed illegality were most salient in the context of their

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<sup>18</sup> The Pew Research Center estimated that from 2009 to 2012, the number of Mexicans in the population of unauthorized immigrants decreased by about half a million people (Passell, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2012). Passel et al. contend that this decline likely resulted from both a decrease in arrivals from Mexico and an increase in voluntary departures. Other studies have also identified increases in voluntary departures (The U.S.-Mexico cycle 2013).

aspirational longings and their desire to stay in the United States. By focusing on their experiences, this paper builds on and adds to the body of literature on the impact of “illegality” on migrants’ everyday, embodied experiences and their aspirational longings (Galvez 2011; Willen 2007).

The women I interviewed migrated from both rural and urban centers in Mexico, as well as from traditional (e.g., Michoacan, San Luis Potosi) and non-traditional sending states (e.g., Baja California). All of the women in this study migrated to the United States after 1990 and were undocumented at the time of the interviews. All of the women had worked as or were employed as domestic workers at the time of the interviews and were diverse in terms of demographic characteristics (e.g., level of education, age, civil status, number of children), occupational characteristics prior to migration, length of time in the United States, and English language skills. The Mexican immigrant women in this study ranged from 29 to 48 years of age. Out of the 43 study participants, 11 had a technical / college degree, while most only had some secondary education. Out of the entire sample of 43 Mexican undocumented women, only 3 of them did not have any formal schooling. (See Appendix A)

## **Interviews**

I conducted in-depth interviews and participant observation for a period of eight months, from May to December 2013. I draw primarily on tape-recorded interviews and data from my observations in the field. The study also draws on ethnographic fieldwork

conducted in women's private homes, occasionally in their employers' homes, in the Mexican Consulate in Dallas, and in social service agencies.

Nearly all of the interviews and the fieldwork were conducted in Spanish. The interviews lasted from one to three hours and in a few instances they extended over a couple of days either in person or over the phone. I began the interviews with demographic information about their marital status, and about whether they had children, brothers, sisters and parents. As the interview progressed we covered topics such as their migration experience, about their perception of the neighborhood where they lived, about their feelings and thoughts related to raising their children in the United States, and about their hopes for the future.

## **Analysis**

I transcribed the interview audio files personally in order to capture the dynamic process of storytelling. Consistent with a narrative approach that views the interview as an "act of storytelling in dialogue" I include as much of the interactional context as possible. In other words, I include my initial questions, my reiterations of the respondent's words, my non-lexical expressions (Mmm, aha), the pauses (marked with ... ). Readers can readily see my encouraging signs of involvement in the conversation. Readers can also see the moments when I failed to ask more about a particularly significant event or meaning. They can also see how respondents are active research participants when they rework my questions so as to be able to tell me about something they consider important or meaningful.

To analyze the data I utilize a combination of grounded theory and narrative analysis as both methods take as their starting point that knowledge is situated and grounded in local contexts (Polletta et al. 2011). Both these methods are fully compatible with feminist epistemology. Given the nature of this research project, I used inductive reasoning to help me detect patterns and regularities emerging from the data, rather than imposing preconceived notions on the data. I initially used line-by-line coding to identify instances where Mexican women talk about their fears of being deported, their aspirational longings, their hopes for and fears about the future and their desire to stay in the United States. In my analysis of these women's narratives I pay particular attention to the events they select for narration, to the ordering of such events, to how events are linked to one another, and to the repetition of themes as it is through these discursive means that they create the significance of experience (Patai 1988).

## **FINDINGS**

### **Deciding to Stay**

As Boehm (2008) writes “while return and involuntary removal are not new processes for Mexicans, since the mid-1990 return migration has taken on a shifting character from previous decades” (348). Owing to the current immigration legislation and state and local policies restricting access to the most basic necessities of life, namely housing, education, health care and employment, for undocumented immigrants the “condition of migrant illegality” is often linked to “anxiety-ridden and frightening

realities” (Willen 2007). To illustrate the powerful effects of the condition of illegality consider how Nora responded to my question of whether she had a Texas driver’s license: “No, they didn’t...[my driver’s license] it got expired and you know we couldn’t [renew it], it’s like, now, more and more they are blocking, em, every possibility, every way, and they don’t realize that the only thing they are achieving is, making it impossible for families in many respects.”

Briefly, yet tellingly, Nora reflects on how life conditions for her and her family have gradually worsened to the point where having a life in the United States has turned into a struggle to live. And yet, for many immigrant women like Nora and Luci, somehow the decision is not to return home. In this paper, I analyze Mexican immigrant women’s narratives of hope and uncertainty and situate them within the larger context of their aspirational frame and their reasons to stay in the United States. The Mexican women in this study articulate various reasons to stay in the United States. I focus, however, on two motivations: their children’s educational opportunities and protection from violence.

### **Children’s Educational Opportunities**

Studies of family and migration have identified that one of the most important motivations to migrate to the United States are children (Boehm 2008; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Salazar-Parrenas 2005). In my study, however, I found that for Mexican immigrant women their children are also a motivation to stay (see Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). These Mexican women articulate different perspectives on this theme –



some hope to stay in order to save money to buy a house for their children, either in Mexico or in the United States (*un patrimonio*), others to continue to provide their children beyond their most basic needs, and others to give their children a chance for a better life than they had themselves. For a subset of women in this study, their ability to provide their children with superior educational opportunities compared to their options in Mexico was a particularly strong reason to remain in the United States. Yet, as I listened to these women's narratives I realized that the decision to stay in the United States for their children's education was not a particularly easy one to make.

Gisela, a 42 year-old woman from Cd. Juarez, Chihuahua, described how difficult it was for her to finally make the decision to move to Dallas permanently. While her parents and most of her siblings had migrated to the U.S. starting in the 1980s, it was not until 2002 that she decided to join them. As a result of the 1986 immigration laws that allowed undocumented immigrants to regularize their immigration status, everyone in her family was either naturalized U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents, except Gisela. She explained that she refused to stay permanently in the U.S. because "I had half my life in Juarez, and if they had petitioned me, it would have meant that my trips to Juarez would have stopped, and I just couldn't do that." At the time Gisela was a young, single woman who was happy to be striking it on her own. She had her own apartment and owned a small business selling cell-phones. After the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, she recalled, "I began to struggle financially, I couldn't pay the rent." Seeing her struggling for money, her family intensified the pressure for her to migrate and she finally gave in. In many important respects life in Dallas was not as easy for her as her siblings had made

it up to be. Migrating to Dallas was certainly better for her financially, but it was a blow to her rich social life and her self-esteem. Going out on the weekends with her group of long-time friends was “part of my life! that is what I miss the most about living in Juarez, sitting with my friends over coffee to laugh, and converse.” For Gisela, equally challenging as not having a group of long-time friends was the fact that as an undocumented immigrant, her best option for work was domestic service. While she considered herself lucky for having found wealthy and generous employers who pay her well, she is aware that her social ranking has drastically gone down:

“In Mexico I was the boss! I only had two employees, right? but anyway, I was the one who made the decisions, I was the one who gave the orders, I was the owner!, and then you come to the U.S. and all you can do is domestic service, it doesn’t matter to me, I can adapt to whatever, as long as, as long as I have an income to meet my needs, then bring it on!, whatever, but it is difficult to go down in rank so much also...!”

A few years after Gisela settled in Dallas permanently, she started a relationship with a man and became the mother of two girls. At the time of the interview Gisela had separated and her daughters were 3 and 5. Listening to Gisela’s narrative one can recognize how her aspirational framework had gradually changed since she first arrived to Dallas. While working as a housekeeper has never been “her dream job” and the meanings she associates with the work have not changed, she now sees it as the medium through which to ensure that her daughters can go to college. When I asked Gisela if she would consider going back to Mexico to raise her daughters she said:

“...If I could... that all of us would go to Mexico I would do it!, but all of us!, that all us would go back there, and do everything the same but there, I would do it,... but also here the museums!, parks!, (emphasis) umm, so much to teach them! That's the difference, the world that can be taught to them here, which we don't have there, unless you live in Mexico City! And you have money, but in Chihuahua, well, what do we have?”

When I met Rosa for breakfast, our conversation began with a lengthy description of her job as a research lab technician and of the accident that made her quit. While at the time of the interview I did not realize the significance of this experience, as I listened to the interview and worked on the transcript, I began to realize how Rosa was weaving connections between certain events and experiences and her most pressing preoccupations. Rosa, a bacteriologist by training, migrated to Dallas at age 33. By the time of her migration she had spent 12 years working as a medical representative in Monterrey and had recently married. Because her husband had a job as an industrial designer at a German company and she had some savings from her previous job, Rosa did not have to work. Unfortunately all the “privilege” would end, because soon after they filed for adjustment of status from a work visa to legal permanent residency, the company her husband worked for refused to continue to sponsor him. Rosa, now a mother of two children, had to work to complement her husband's income. Before her job as a research lab technician, Rosa had worked as a nanny/housekeeper for several families, but as she came to realize the schedules did not allow her to be home with the children, to “help them with homework and take them to their activities.” While she initially hesitated, she

decided to use false identification documents to apply for a job at the lab, for which she was hired, “I was lucky”, she said. Her job at the research lab lasted for about 5 years, and it only ended because after her accident she had to provide authentic proof of identity to the Texas Workers Compensation and to health providers, which Rosa could not do. This job, however, allowed Rosa to be with her children in the afternoons, which in her opinion helped her children succeed academically. In the following excerpt Rosa describes her children’s academic success and explains it as a result of her “sacrifice:”

Rosa: My children, what can I say?, are wonderful! My Emma is in the seventh grade (7th), umm, Daniel is in third (3rd), Emma is the kind of girl that since the first grade, from kindergarten always excelled academically!, umm, when she finished fifth (5th)...

ML: Where does she go to school?

Rosa: Right now she is in an academy in the Grand Prairie school district, entered a program last year that was only, umm, 60 students in sixth grade, who were going into sixth (6th), umm, they took them and put them in only pre-AP, the advanced classes, umm, and with art classes, art, theatre, music, things like that, and umm, and Emma was very good!, then, but when Emma graduated fifth (5th), she had her recognition!, not, or she was on the Honor Roll, and he was given the Principal award and the vice principal award...

ML: Is your girl 9 or 12 years old?

Rosa: She is 12, and he is 8..., umm, she got the prizes, the awards of the Principal but because of her!, that is, because of her attitude, for obviously good grades, last year, well, seventh (7th) went very well!, she finished sixth (6th) and did very well!, and was invited to, a teacher did the application and she was accepted, without us knowing, in the National Junior Honor Society, National Junior Society?, (Emma) is good!, she's good!, and Daniel also, is on the Honor Roll, not so much as Emma (laugh) but he is on the Honor Roll, he's doing good!, he doesn't have the same attitude of (his sister) Daniel is more carefree, I mean, after all he's a boy, right? but umm, they're good, they have done me well, I mean, I think that my, my sacrifice of waking up at 4:30 in the morning to go to work, because I wanted to be done by 2 in the afternoon, in the end it was worth it!

Rosa had not felt her condition of illegality as intimately and as profoundly as she did when she injured herself at work. The visits to the doctors, the examinations, the official reports, the requests for identification documents made Rosa feel a great deal of anguish and uncertainty. The constant focus on her body, served as a concrete reminder to Rosa that she could be deported at any time. But what if she had to return to Mexico? What plans or aspirations would deportation disrupt? In a way Rosa answered my question: "I don't know if me returning, I can give them the education that I can give them here for free... I mean, I don't

know if me returning to Monterrey I could have them in a private school, or a private institute, with an education a bit superior to the public [school], if only I knew!!” (Emphasis)

For many Mexican women to migrate to or to remain in the United States have become a means to deal with the consequences of the economic restructuring of the Mexican state. As part of larger modernization projects, Mexico has adopted neoliberal policies that have resulted in the massive defunding of public health care and public education systems (Galvez 2011: 148). Hence, many Mexican women with children have come to see the private school as the only route to a quality education, which most women could not afford if they were to return to Mexico.

As Rosa talks about her dreams for her children, she also expresses her fears of not being able to help them realize them. In Rosa’s case her children educational future not only depends on her ability to pay for college, but also on her ability to stay in the United States to make sure her plans for her children become a reality. Knowing that in a society that values educational achievement, a college degree is her children’s best shot at legitimacy and their best opportunity for social inclusion, the possibility of her children not going to college is absolutely frightening for Rosa:

ML: ... if we talk about your children, what are your dreams for them?

Rosa: Oh!, that they will be, that they will be very studious because I do not think I can pay for their college!

ML: Does it scare you not to be able to pay for their college?

Rosa: Yes, yes, yes, and my daughter always tells me "do not worry, I'm going to... one day you will see me with a college t-shirt!!!," but yeah, I mean, I want them (to go to college), I know that if I'm with them, because I don't know what could happen, but I know that if I'm with them they'll get there!!!, I don't know how, but I know they'll get there, if I'm there!!, I tell them if something happens to me before, well I'm not sure!

For Karen, a thirty-three year-old single mother of a 12 year-old girl, the decision to stay in the U.S. is not one she has made alone. In 2006, Karen and her 6 year-old daughter migrated to Dallas where a few of her siblings already lived. As in Gisela's case, Karen also experienced the far-reaching economic consequences of the terrorist attacks of September 11th as the maquiladora where she had worked for as a human resource specialist went bankrupt. The closing of the maquiladora not only affected Karen, but the entire town of Villa de Arriaga in San Luis Potosi. In addition, since the divorce, her ex-husband had adamantly refused to have any communication with her and to provide any financial support for their daughter. Nevertheless, what Karen cites as the real reason for migrating to the U.S. was her father's excessive control over her. Karen went back to live with her parents in San Luis Potosi following her divorce for financial support and help in raising her daughter, but her father took a very strict stance toward her: "He limited me a lot, for example if I wanted to go out, it was simply not allowed for me to ever go out with a guy". For Karen, her migration was not so much a journey of superación, (to get ahead), or motivated by economic reasons so much as it was a quest for autonomy and independence. Yet, as Karen came to find out, in the United States, for

an immigrant mother without papers with a job as a nanny/housecleaner, independence and autonomy are nearly “impossible” to achieve.

Karen and her daughter went back to Mexico four years ago, when her father became gravely ill and had to be admitted to the hospital. After spending a few months in Mexico to support her mother during her father’s illness and recovery, Karen decided to go back to Dallas. Feeling confident that since both her visa and her I-94 form<sup>19</sup> were valid, their journey north would be uneventful. But once at the border Karen and her daughter were detained for over five hours of grueling interrogation, after which they were released and allowed into the U.S. Since that “horrible” experience, Karen said “ya no me quedaron ganas de regresar” (I just could not go back [to Mexico] anymore). Karen however, has grown deeply ambivalent about staying in the U.S. On the hand, she sees her prospects in the United States as bleak. Her job caring for other people’s children is so dreadful that Karen “prays to God that she doesn’t have to do this for the rest of her life.” But, with current legal restrictions on employment, domestic service is for her the only available and acceptable option. On the other, she sees her daughter’s future as “bright”:

Karen: ... Right now I don't know, I am between a rock and a hard place, because, I feel like leaving but, I, here in particular, I see a great future for my daughter, since she is very intelligent, school is going super well, things like that, but for me, outside of working on this, I don't see any

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<sup>19</sup> The I-94 is the Arrival/Departure record, which is issued by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. The form is issued to foreign citizens that are being admitted into the United States in a nonimmigrant visa status. The form is generally valid for a six month period, and is required to enter the country.



future, I don't see anything! ,... and now suddenly I get these feelings of leaving, but, aghh, now my daughter says that she won't leave for any reason!, now she won't!, and that she won't leave, and I'm like "what am I going to do?!!!... I mean, yes I am afraid, now at the same time, let's suppose that, well, what if I am?, I mean, what if I am limiting her?, I mean, because obviously the schools here, she is in the Longfellow, it is an academy, I mean, in Mexico I would have to pay for a private school!, because public schools are not good, it necessarily has to be a private school,...

This excerpt illustrates that there are many sources to Karen's great ambivalence. Similar to Rosa's concerns, Karen feels that Mexico's public school system is not equipped to meet her daughter's academic potential. But she is not sure she can afford a private school in Mexico that would be as good as the Longfellow Academy, which is part of the public independent school district of Dallas. In addition, her growing child is exerting increasing pressure to be an active participant in her mother's decisions, highlighting the interactive aspect of carework (Kurz 2002: 749). Most importantly, Karen's physical feeling of being tied (*estoy atada*) emerges from believing that if she decides to go home, she is harming her daughter's bright future and that as a mother she will be held accountable by her daughter.

Karen is pinning her hopes on the day her daughter can qualify for DACA,<sup>20</sup> president Obama's program for deferred action on deportation of undocumented minors. In the meantime, Karen is making sure that her daughter is making the most of every educational opportunity she has access to:

"I want to apply for next year to another school, it's called Irma Rangel, it's an all-girls school, it is also a magnet, it is difficult to get in there because they are very strict with grade averages, but I am pleased because, it is everything!, it's the district's but I like it being all girls, their uniform is pretty and above all that it is, practically, although it is not the only one, is one of the few schools that when they (graduate) they go directly to college, because for example my daughter is the Longfellow now, then for high school she has to apply to another school, and in this Irma Rangel they go directly to college, and when they are there I like it because they focus a lot and they see children who really want to succeed!, and have that motivation!, they put in a lot of effort, the school, apart from the other scholarships that they request, the school (Irma Rangel) gives them a scholarship to the (students) that, a friend of mine, her daughter got a full ride to college."

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<sup>20</sup> While The Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors act (DREAM Act) has been introduced and reintroduced in both the House and the Senate since 2001, it has failed to pass every time. As a result of the bill's failure and pressure from the Hispanic community, in 2012 president Obama issued an executive order that provides two-year work authorization and protection from deportation to undocumented immigrants who entered the country before they were 16<sup>th</sup>. It does not, however, provide a path to citizenship.

For Karen, her lack of job prospects, her fear that her daughter will blame her for limiting her academic potential, and the feelings of hopelessness that fuel her ambivalence about staying in the United States somehow dissipate when she thinks about what would await her in Mexico and its implications for her daughter's bright future. In that context, Karen decides to stay:

“Gosh, I ask God a lot to help me and to help my daughter so that she does not get distracted by anything, I mean, I will do whatever it takes!, for her to have a college degree, it is what (I desire), I mean, whatever career that she wants, ... God permitting, I will move heaven and Earth for her to study (vehemently) but yes, that she studies, whatever I have to do, I don't care, as long as she studies...”

While these women's narratives emphasize different aspects shaping their individual decision to stay in the United States, the larger story framing their experiences is how these women think about the educational opportunities their children have in the United States, and what they believe it means for their children's future. For this subset of Mexican immigrant women, providing for and ensuring the continuation of their children's educational training in the U.S. has become the most important force driving their migration project<sup>21</sup>, even as it requires great personal sacrifice on their part.

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<sup>21</sup> The focus on educational opportunities found in this group of Mexican immigrant women seems to contradict the research on parenting which have consistently found that mothering is generally associated with the care of children (Collins 1994; Nakano Glenn 1994; Rothman 2001) while fatherhood is most often associated with the provision of educational and economic opportunities for the children (Dreby 2006; Marsiglio et al. 2000).

## Protection from Violence

For a larger subset of women in my sample, protecting their children from violence associated with organized crime in Mexico emerged as one of the most important reasons driving their desire to remain in the U.S. During 2005 and 2006, violence linked to the traffic of illicit drugs was already reaching alarming levels (Anaya Muñoz 2012). By 2007, criminal violence had already engulfed Mexico (Kenny and Serrano 2012). Since 2006, approximately 60,000 Mexicans have been executed as a result of conflicts associated with the drug cartels (Kenny and Serrano, Council on Foreign Relations). As the violence escalated in Mexico, so did the pouring of violent images and violent stories in the news media, in the film industry, in music –e.g. narcocorridos- and in social media. Not surprisingly, among the participants, the most common response to my question of *what are the most important stories from Mexico in the news right now?*, was violence and *narcotráfico*. For most of the Mexican women in this study, the fear of violence was not a motivating force for migrating to the United States, yet, for close to a third of respondents, fear of violence was a powerful force shaping their intentions to stay and the main reason to stop sending their children to Mexico to visit family.

Almost all of the Mexican women in this sample had migrated to Dallas prior to 2007, before the violence associated with the drug traffic in Mexico had spun out of control. While most of the respondents reported being concerned about violence in Mexico, they themselves had not experienced a violent incident first-hand. For several women, however, after they migrated to the United States, violence had hit them close to

home as family members had been victims of violent crimes, including aggravated robbery, kidnapping and even murder.

Silvia, a 33 year-old mother from the border town of Matamoros described how her small town started to deteriorate after she left. Except for the neighborhood petty drug user or youngsters hanging out in the streets, “there was no violence” when she lived there, and “people were so nice that they even helped you carry your grocery bags when you got off the bus; now they will take you bags and run with them.” People in her town were poor, so when people with money came to live there it was very noticeable:

Silvia: All of a sudden a family arrived, ...mm...this man very quickly

ML: Mm

Silvia: In a street that was not even paved

ML: Mm

Silvia: the corners around everything was,...mud... I mean, there wasn't...the street that was paved was quite far from them, but he built an enormous house, with a pool, he set up a small store in the next street corner and his daughter, same age as me,...no, a year younger than me, was driving a brand new pick up truck.

In retrospect, Silvia believes that in her town, things started to go wrong when people from out of state began to move in to build big houses and to set up small shops (narcotienditas) in the town's poor neighborhoods. She remembered being told by friends that drugs were being sold in that little store, but since it was also the store where she bought milk and eggs, she did not to care much about that, besides she was too young.

However, as violent incidents began to flare up, it became increasingly difficult for her family not to care anymore, so they moved farther from the neighborhood, toward the outskirts of Matamoros, “in a place where there were no paved roads.” It was easier for her father to keep his sheep and his goats without worrying about someone stealing them. In her long and recurring reflection about crime and violence in her hometown, Silvia talked about its insidiousness. Over the years she learned that many of the people she knew, even friends with whom she had worked or gone to school in Mexico, began to get involved in illicit activities. The fact that many of these people had gone to college and earned a degree seemed irrelevant in the likelihood that they would work for the cartel, she said: “nowadays, right now, I mean, if you study, you will work for them, if you don’t, you still work for them...”

Still, Silvia decided to come to the United States, not because of the violence in Matamoros, but because shortly after marrying her first husband and having her first child, the relationship ended and she “wanted to put some distance.” She came to Dallas in 2001 for the first time “to see if she could survive on her own.” Silvia had left her son in the care of her parents, and after three months in Dallas she returned to Matamoros to see him, thinking that she would stay in Mexico permanently. Once in Mexico she found a job at a Burger King, but she quickly realized that the money she earned there would not stretch as far as to allow her “to be independent,” so she decided to return to Dallas. Her parents and her ex-husband continued to care for her son in Mexico. In Dallas she usually worked at two jobs at a time, (Sonic, Braum’s, dry cleaners, cleaning houses, etc.) occasionally using someone else’s social security number, but not always. Fortunately,

Silvia did not have to send money regularly to her parents because as she said, they were in a good financial position (*estan bien acomodados*), however she “splurged” whenever her son came to visit her in Dallas. By 2006 she started a relationship and by 2007, they had a daughter. After the birth of her daughter Silvia decided to take a job as a nanny so that she could minimize the driving distances involved in housecleaning and avoid the “unnecessary risks” of being on the move.

Silvia’s son had been in Mexico during all the time she had been in Dallas, and only visited her on his school breaks. The arrangement changed in 2008, when heavily armed men kidnapped Silvia’s father at his house and her son was there to witness what happened. After paying the ransom, Silvia’s father was eventually released. Silvia and her family decided it was too dangerous for her son to live in Matamoros any longer, so in 2008 he came to live with Silvia permanently. Since then, her son has developed an interest in enlisting in the U.S. Army and in preparation for that he has been participating in drill teams and summer camps as part of ROTC training at the community college. She fully supports her son’s decision. When her son’s father raised concerns about his son’s plans to enlist in the military, he asked Silvia to send him back to Mexico. To this she said:

oh, no, what is my son going to do there?” I told him ‘become a narco or do something bad?’ I told him “no, I prefer that my son dies being a hero than he dies being a petty drug addict or drug dealer.

Starting in the Fox administration, Mexico’s early strategy for fighting the drug cartels had the unintended consequences of disrupting the balance of these criminal

organizations and the start of a war between the Sinaloa cartel and the Gulf cartel, which lead to an increase in violence that disproportionately affected the cities in the border between Mexico and the United States: Nuevo Laredo, Matamoros, Reynosa and later Ciudad Juarez (Chabat 2012, p. 149, Wright 2011).

Leti, a divorced mother of three young children, talked about what it meant to her to be deported in relation to the situation of violence in Mexico. After experiencing a traumatic separation from her husband and losing her house, she said that she was only afraid to be deported for the children:

ML: Are you scared of being deported?

Leti: Not me!, right now no, actually, well, I said "well! if I get deported that's it! That's a sign that I'm leaving! [laughs], I mean, like making the decision, (of leaving), I was never too sure, yes, because they (the kids) did not want to leave, if it were for me I would already be there, but it's not just me anymore... And I am from Monterrey, and 2 years ago, I mean Monterrey had shootings, the killings and all! Can you imagine taking them with me, their dad had left, their whole life, everything that they had, everything would be over, the shock! Because they too have suffered a lot and then to take them to shootings!!!, because everything was there, right now it's calm but it wasn't 2 years ago, no!, there were dead people, decapitated heads, and I would say "my poor kids they're going to die!..." I'll stay here instead! That was another thing that kept me terrified!!!, and



I decided not to leave because of everything that I saw and it all happened in Monterrey! Everything was in Monterrey!

In addition to powerfully conveying Leti's present distress, her narrative also reveals another temporal dimension. For Leti, the decision to stay in the U.S. emerges from a concern about what is yet to come. That Monterrey's intense violence has waned somewhat recently, does not mean that it will not intensify once again, what are the assurances? Her narrative also illustrates how individuals' motivations are always contingent and how they may change overtime.

Nora, like Silvia, saw the development of violence in her town as something much larger and generalized than just the activities of evil individuals going around committing random criminal acts. For Nora, the fact that violence has already reached her small town in Guanajuato was indicative of larger, national processes ("la violencia ya esta nacionalizada"). Yet, what Nora kept seeing on the news in the Spanish TV channels or kept hearing from her mother over the phone, was not about political processes or about the failure of Mexico's security system, but rather about how violence is being used to destroy individuals, regardless of age and gender:

ML: Is there violence in your hometown?

Nora: Now there is! Yes, now there is! Since recently that all that drug trafficking started, that it started to nationalize, well it did nationalize because [it happened] even in my town,... my mom says that there are dead people, that they kill them in other places and they go and throw them in my town and my mom says,... everything, everything, everything

is horrible! That's why I don't want, I tell my husband "listen, I want to have my family united, no matter what! Wherever that may be, because people are, are just like vultures with children and young people!... my mom says that before, people used to die of diseases and it was rare when it was because of a fight, because it was always a clean and fair fight, now they commit suicide, many teenagers are committing suicide now, now many children are drug addicts, they're alcoholics, children, we're speaking of children of 9 and up, the girls same as the boys, drug addicts, drunks, umm, aggressive like some men, in my town, umm... and even just for a nasty stare they are already killing you!, they just killed a man who was a butcher, and they say he had many enemies, the worst way, they cut him into pieces, I mean the worst, those are horrible deaths!, those are no longer normal deaths of a bullet or something, and he died and that's it! No, no, no, now the more they suffer, the more they enjoy it, I don't know, my mom says, but every day it's the worse they kill them, it's the novelty.

Interspersed between these tragic anecdotes are Nora's gendered interpretations of death and violence. Despite Nora's initial observation that violence is the result of larger processes occurring at the national level, her account suggests that she attributes violence in her town to a breakdown in gender norms. In her view, men are no longer dying "normal" deaths, the result of clean and honorable fights. She suggests that what is happening is not (gender) normal because to kill and harm, criminals now have to hide.

She also extends her gendered assessment to children, girls in particular, who are victimized, in her view because their behavior is not gender appropriate. For Nora the only way to protect her family and especially her children from the threat of violence is to keep her family together, presumably in a place that is safe. For that reason, she no longer sends her children to Mexico, despite the assurances of her mother that her children will be safe:

Nora: “that’s why I don’t, it’s been how long?... my children won’t go (to Mexico), my mom (tells me) send them to me, send them to me, and I (tell her) “no, I’m sorry, no, I won’t!”

ML: When was the last time he went? How many years ago?

Nora: He was like... what was it? he was 8 years old...

ML: And now the boy is 12?

Nora: 12, well, he went when it all started (the violence)... my mom tells me “send him, look the neighbor came and so-and-so came and so on...” “no” I tell her “not me, not me!” (and she says) “it’s that you’re too afraid” no, I tell her, “I’m simply being cautious,” yes, if I know what is happening there, I know that whether it’s there or not (the violence) if it gets to my son, it will get to him, but I tell her, I don’t want to send him to the slaughterhouse, if something happens to him, well, then is God’s will, I tell her, but not because I sent him...

Luci’s account points to another dimension in Mexican immigrants’ fear of violence: the fear of not being protected from it. Criminal violence in Mexico is “a

manifestation of a failure in a highly significant sphere of the state,” the security system. The rising violence put Mexico’s judiciary and criminal justice system to the test only to reveal their weakness and dysfunction. Significantly, it also revealed that the Mexican security system could not protect the right of its citizens to security (Kenny and Serrano, 2012). Consider the following exchange:

ML: Do you know of cases in which... people close to you suffered an incident of violence?

Luci: My sister last year

ML: What happened to her?

Luci: On the Monterrey-Montemorelos Highway, they... a car intercepted them, they were in their car, they stopped them with shotguns, my sister was in there, my brother-in-law and my niece, my niece is 17, they were gun pointed, pointed at, they left them without a car, without a computer, without a telephone, without money, without anything, only the clothes they were wearing

ML: And they were standing there on the highway

Luci: And they took everything

ML: And what did they do?

Luci: Well the only thing that they asked for was help, that someone would pick them up, my sister says that she begged the attackers to not hurt them, right, also thinking about my niece and that they wouldn’t do anything to her

ML: Mhm

Luci: Umm... my sister says that she told them to take everything that they wanted but leave them alive

ML: Oh, what helplessness, no?

Luci: That's how it was

ML: And what did you feel when they told you, what went through your head?

Luci: Well a lot of fear for them, a lot of anger, umm, helplessness that there is nothing that can be done and that no one does anything!

The problem of impunity in Mexico is something that concerns Luci, and undoubtedly plays a role in her decision to stay in the United States. For example Kenny and Serrano (2012) write that, "of the 70,000 members of organized criminal groups arrested from 2007 into early 2010, ...98 percent were released for want of evidence to bring their cases to trial" (13). Furthermore, Kenny and Serrano add, the police, the courts and the prison system have shown to be utterly unprepared to cope "with the corrupting power of the drug lords" (13).

In this context, Lopez-Portillo (2012) argues, Mexican "police forces have every incentive to protect criminals or themselves become criminals." This is how Luci explains it:

ML: Mm (mhmm) authorities can't be trusted, right?

Luci: We cannot

ML: And would it be like that... if you had to return there?

Luci: That's the same, that's the same, to expose oneself, here one says "well, it's not my country", but we're more free than if it were our country

ML: Even though one is undocumented

Luci: Despite not having papers, we're more free here than if we were in our own country

ML: Here

Luci: And less scared

ML: Less scared

Luci: Exactly

ML: So the fear of being detained by law enforcement here is less?

Luci: It's that you don't,...you don't now if it is police or if it is a criminal, because everyone is, they are colluded, you don't know anymore who to be afraid of, if to be afraid of the authority of police officers, who are supposed to be protecting us, or to be afraid of the criminal

ML: Of course

Luci: Because there everything, they are colluded! And here you say "well, if I get arrested by immigration, what can you do?" But at least you know that...you have, that your integrity is guaranteed

ML: Here?

Luci: Yes here, in this country, I mean, it's not...and I'll tell you, it is not our country but at least we can feel safe

ML: They won't do anything to you here

Luci: Your integrity is guaranteed!

For some Mexican immigrant women, the strength of U.S. laws constitutes an incentive to stay. Beyond the irony of this, we must see these women's desire to remain in the U.S. as a basic struggle for self-preservation.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study contributes to an increased understanding of the factors that influence undocumented Mexican women's decisions to stay in the United States, even as they face the uncertainty of deportability – that is, even as they traverse *environments of vulnerability*. Two factors primarily implore women's decision to stay in the U.S.: the availability of public education for their children and the fear that they or their children will be targets of violence in Mexico. This resonates with previous research on family and migration that finds that children are one the most important motivations to migrate to the United States (Boehm 2008; Hondagneu- Sotelo and Avila 1997; Salazar-Parrenas 2005). This study extends this research, however, as it shows that children may play an important role in motivating women to stay in the United States even as they experience deep ambivalence. This study adds to the view that families are dynamic systems of people and relationships in which decisions are negotiated and relationships are constantly reconfigured (Boehm 2008).

This research also contributes to research on gender and immigration by centering on women's experiences. Indeed, respondents' motivations for staying in the United States are likely shaped by their intersecting identities as women, mothers, and

undocumented Mexican immigrants. In particular, their narratives are inflected with gendered norms around caregiving and sacrifice for their children. Future research should examine how, for example, undocumented men's motivations for staying in the U.S. may differ from what is presented here and how those motivations may reflect ideals of masculinity and manhood.

There are a few limitations of this research to note. First, while my respondents were diverse on a number of demographic characteristics, the sample is geographically homogeneous in that all respondents lived in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area. Future research should therefore examine how motivations to stay in the U.S. may differ by geographical location. Future research should also examine how the motivations to stay in the United States vary for women and men.

## **CONCLUSION**

Many of the women in this study continually assess the viability of their migration projects against the numerous barriers they face on a daily basis. While they often express ambivalence about whether to remain in the United States, “the locating of their migration within a larger aspirational frame” (Galvez 2011), which I argue changes overtime, influences not only their decision to stay but what they come to expect of their lives in the U.S.

In contrast to the assumption that undocumented immigrants, because of their “illegality” tend to adopt an “enforced orientation to the present” (Carter 1997; De Genova 2002), the data suggests the contrary is true. Maria Islas (2010) contends that,



“through practices of transnational dreaming, immigrants think about the future in ways that produce subjectivity in the present” (cited in Galvez 2011: 22). Mexican undocumented women consider the future in the form of plans, hopes, projects and even fears. This orientation toward the future constitutes a feature in these Mexican women’s narratives, which leads one to believe that in an important sense, for Mexican immigrant women, the future is now (Galvez 2011).

## Conclusion

### KEY CONTRIBUTIONS

This dissertation makes two important theoretical and empirical contributions. First, I develop the concept of *environments of vulnerability* to capture not only the objective constraints that impinge on Mexican undocumented women's capacity to go about their lives in the United States but also their subjective and variable understandings of these constraints. Environments of vulnerability are dynamic social contexts structured by the interlocking structures of race, class, gender and legal oppression. While vulnerability is often associated with poverty, it also arises when people are subject to isolation, insecurity and cultural degradation for a long period of time. In these spaces of vulnerability Mexican women have a diminished but varying capacity to anticipate, cope with, and resist the effects of their marginality. As this dissertation has shown, undocumented Mexican women living in the U.S. develop particular meanings to traverse these environs and those meanings are shaped by their social locations as women, as mothers, as Mexican, and as undocumented immigrants. Future research should continue to examine how undocumented immigrants cope with and make meaning in environments of vulnerability and how the strategies they use are shaped by intersecting identities of gender, race/ethnicity, social class, and age, among other factors.

Second, my dissertation makes an empirical contribution to the body of research that has examined the actual impact of the condition of illegality on their lived experiences, their moral and existential realities and their processes of subjectivity formation (Abrego and Menjivar 2011, Abrego 2011, Boehm 2008). While for several

years now research on illegalization and undocumented immigration has shifted the analysis from “illegal” immigrants as a category to the social and legal production of immigrant “illegality” (Coutin 1998, 2000; De Genova 2002; Heyman 2001; Ngai 2004) the scholarly focus has been, for the most part, on the juridical and sociopolitical aspects of “the condition of migrant illegality” (Willen 2007, 2014). My research attempts to explore the “impact of ‘illegality’ on migrants’ everyday, embodied experiences of being-in-the-world” (Willen 2007: 10).

This dissertation makes several key contributions to the literatures on gender, immigration, religion, immigration, and family ties. Below I specify the particular contributions that each article makes to these literatures.

### **Article 1: The Everyday Religion of Mexican Immigrant Women**

This article makes a contribution to the literature on immigration, religion and gender by examining undocumented Mexican immigrant women’s everyday religious experiences. Previous research has focused on the religious experiences of immigrants within specifically religious institutions and contexts. I therefore extend this literature in an important way by how undocumented women draw on religious beliefs and meanings to cope with daily uncertainties as they traverse environments of vulnerability (Gonzalez-Lopez 2003).

Another important finding is that the specific religious meanings that women draw on are shaped by their social locations as Mexican women and as undocumented workers. In particular undocumented God may be defined as a benevolent patriarchal

figure who protects a woman and her children in a hostile and uncertain world. Or religion may become a medium through which an undocumented Mexican woman may achieve “cultural citizenship,” in a context where legal citizenship is denied to her. Or religious values may become the glue that keeps the family together and a Mexican woman’s way to protect her children from the vulnerabilities of immigrant illegality.

## **Article 2: Mothering at the Intersection of Immigrant Illegality: How Race, Class, Gender and Citizenship Status Shape the Work of Mothering**

This article makes a contribution to the literature on motherhood and immigration. In particular, this research reveals the particular mothering practices that undocumented Mexican mothers engage in as they traverse environments of vulnerability. This research contributes to the body of literature that has examined the mothering practices of mothers who face intersecting structural inequalities (Elliott and Aseltine 2012, Gonzalez-Lopez 2003).

My analysis reveals two key mothering practices that undocumented Mexican women engage in. First, they seek to move away from neighborhoods that they perceive as containing undesirable “others” – namely, the poor, Blacks, and “less worthy” Mexican immigrants – in order to define themselves and their children in opposition to anti-immigrant discourses that define illegal immigrants as unworthy. At the same time, however, they also reproduce these discourses. Second, mothers attempt to psychologically protect their children by withholding information from them about their undocumented status.

### **Article 3: What Does It Mean to Return Home? Narratives of Hope and Uncertainty**

This article offers a revealing contribution to the literature on gender, migration, and family ties by illustrating how concern for their children motivates undocumented Mexican women to stay in the United States, despite the uncertainty and ambivalence they experience. In particular, my analyses reveal that concerns about their children's educational opportunities and the desire to protect them from violence motivate women to remain in the United States. Previous research has shown that children are a key motivation for people to migrate to the United States (Boehm 2008; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Salazar-Parrenas 2005), and my research adds to this literature by revealing how children are a key motivation for immigrants to *remain* in the United States. My analyses in this article also illustrate how these factors are shaped by women's intersecting identities as women, mothers, and undocumented immigrants. In particular, their narratives are imbued with norms about womanhood and motherly sacrifice.

#### **LIMITATIONS**

There are some limitations of this research to note. First, although representativeness regarding the place of origin was not my intention, it is worth noting that the sample is geographically homogeneous in that all respondents lived in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area. However, future research may consider examining how the strategies and meanings that undocumented Mexican immigrants use to navigate the uncertainty of deportability might vary by geographical location, particularly given the number of anti-immigrant laws vary from state-to-state. Another potential limitation of

this research is that the majority of the women in my sample were mothers and this undoubtedly shaped my findings. For example, for most women in my sample, concern for their children motivated them to stay in the United States but a different set of motivations likely compel childless women to stay in the United States and future research should examine what those are. Finally, I cannot make any claims about the representativeness of these findings among undocumented Mexican women living in the U.S. Future survey research, however, should attempt to answer these questions.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

The findings of this dissertation suggest several avenues for future research. One line of research that I am particularly interested in pursuing in the future is how undocumented Mexican men living in the U.S. make meanings and navigate environments of vulnerability. In particular, by comparing the experiences of men and women I will be able to examine how gender inequality as well as norms of masculinity and femininity shape the meanings and strategies that undocumented Mexican immigrants use as they traverse a hostile and uncertain environment.

Another area of future research that I intend to pursue is to examine how Mexican immigrants' lives change once they gain legal status. This will allow me to disentangle the effects of being a racial/ethnic minority and being undocumented in understanding how Mexican men and women navigate and make sense of their lives in the United States.

## Appendix A: Table of Study Participants

NAME	AGE	PLACE OF BIRTH	YEAR OF MIGRATION	MARITAL STATUS	CHILDREN	EDUCATION	RELIGION
<b>Miriam</b>	32	Acamixtla, Morelos	2005	Married	4	Secondary	Catholic
<b>Rosario</b>	40	Delicias, Chihuahua	1999	Divorced	1	Secondary	Catholic
<b>Alma</b>	45	Rancho Tetillas, Zacatecas	1995	Married	3	Primary	Catholic
<b>Laura</b>	37	San Luis Potosi	1998	Married	2	Secondary	Christian
<b>Yolanda</b>	36	Durango	1999	Divorced	2	Technical Degree	Catholic
<b>Mary Carmen</b>	38	Ocampo, Guanajuato	1992	Married	6	Primary	Catholic
<b>Maria</b>	43	Matamoros, Tamaulipas	1996	Divorced	1	College	Catholic
<b>Angeles</b>	23	Matamoros, Tamaulipas	2012	Single	0	College	Catholic
<b>Alicia</b>	36	Reynosa, Tamaulipas	1994	Civil Union	5	Secondary	Catholic
<b>Sandra</b>	48	Monterrey, Nuevo Leon	1999	Divorced	2	College	Catholic
<b>Silvia</b>	33	Matamoros, Tamaulipas	2001	Civil Union	2	Some College	Nominal Catholic
<b>Virginia</b>	44	Valle Hermoso, Tamaulipas	1985	Divorced	2	Secondary	Catholic
<b>Beatriz</b>	39	Miguel Auza, Zacatecas	1990	Divorced	3	Primary	Catholic
<b>Ana</b>	38	La Escondida, Municipio de Ocampo, Guanajuato	1998	Civil Union	1	Primary	Catholic
<b>Luisa</b>	31	La Escondida, Municipio de Ocampo, Guanajuato	2000	Married	3	Secondary	Catholic
<b>Elvia</b>	39	Municipio Villa Hidalgo, San Luis Potosi	1999	Separated	2	Secondary	Jehovah Witness
<b>Marisa</b>	47	Nueva Rosita, Coahuila	1990	Married	3	High School	Christian
<b>Leti</b>	35	Monterrey, Nuevo Leon	2000	Divorced	3	College	Catholic
<b>Elena</b>	47	La Rueda, Durango	1984	Married	1	Primary	Catholic
<b>Nora</b>	40	Tierra Fria, Cortazar, Guanajuato	1992	Divorced	2	Technical Degree	Christian
<b>Erika</b>	38	Durango, Durango	2001	Married	3	Secondary	Catholic
<b>Karina</b>	40	Mexico D.F.	2006	Married	7	High School	Catholic

<b>Karen</b>	33	Villa de Arriaga, SLP	2006	Divorced	1	High School	Catholic
<b>Rosa</b>	42	Monterrey, Nuevo Leon	2000	Married	2	College	Catholic
<b>Luz Maria</b>	34	Durango, Durango	1996	Married	2	Secondary	Catholic
<b>Patricia</b>	39	Vallecillo, Alamo, Nuevo Leon	1993	Divorced	2	Secondary	Believer
<b>Luci</b>	44	Chalchihuites, municipio de Galeana, Zacatecas	2001	Married	2	Technical Degree	Catholic
<b>Julia</b>	32	Villa de Arriaga, SLP	2004	Married	4	High School	Catholic
<b>Carolina</b>	41	Baja California	1993	Married	4	Some College	Christian
<b>Paulina</b>	29	Guerrero	2004	Separated	3	Some College	Nominal Catholic
<b>Gisela</b>	42	Cuauhtemoc, Chihuahua	2002	Separated	2	High School	Catholic
<b>Maribel</b>	38	Monterrey, Nuevo Leon	1996	Civil Union	0	Some College	Evangelical
<b>Araceli</b>	39	Atlacomulco, Estado de Mexico	2004	Civil Union	0	No Schooling	Catholic
<b>Dania</b>	37	Monterrey, Nuevo Leon	1994	Married	3	Primary	Jehovas Witness
<b>Rosita</b>	45	Tutuaca, Santa Barbara, Chihuahua	1994	Married	2	Primary	Nominal Catholic
<b>Margarita</b>	40	San Jose, Oaxaca	1992	Married	3	No Schooling	Catholic
<b>Paula</b>	40	El Palmar Chico, Toluca, Estado de Mexico	1994	Civil Union	2	Primary	Nominal Catholic
<b>Antonieta</b>	42	San Bernardo Miahuatlan, Oaxaca	1998	Married	2	No Schooling	Nominal Catholic
<b>Karla</b>	29	San Ciro de Acosta San Luis Potosi	2007	Married	2	Secondary	Nominal Catholic
<b>Irina</b>	37	Gomez Palacio, Durango	2006	Married	3	High School	Catholic
<b>Liliana</b>	45	Cortijo Nuevo, Michoacan	1995	Separated	1	Primary	Nominal Catholic
<b>Victoria</b>	29	Mezquite, Fresnillo, Zacatecas	2001	Married	3	Primary	Catholic



## **Appendix B: Interview Schedule**

### **Interview Guide (English version)**

#### **I. Background**

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. Where were you born and raised?
4. Are you married? If you are married, where is your husband from?
5. Did you marry in the U.S.? Is your husband here in the Dallas area also?
6. Do you have children? How many? What are their ages? Are your children with you?
7. How many years of schooling did you complete?
8. How many brothers and sisters do you have? Do they live here in the United States?
9. Where do your parents live? If they live in Mexico, how often do you visit them? How often do they come to visit you?

#### **II. Migration and settlement**

1. How long have you lived in the United States? How long have you lived in Dallas?
2. How would you describe your migration experience?
3. Do you still have friends and family in Mexico? Do you maintain contact with them?
4. If you are comfortable in sharing this information with me, do you send money to Mexico? To whom? How frequently? May I ask how much money do you send per month?
5. Do family or friends from back home live near you here in the United States?
6. Do you speak English?
7. What language do you most often use at home with your family?
8. What language do you use with friends?
9. How often do you speak English?
10. Do you currently go to school?
11. Do you think you will live in the United States permanently? Do you want to live in Dallas permanently?
12. In what ways do you think you have changed since moving to the United States?

#### **III. Housing and homemaking**

1. Do you mind describing where you live?

2. How many people live in your house?
3. How long have you lived in your current neighborhood? What about in your current house?
4. Do you feel safe in the neighborhood?
5. Do you pay rent? Does anyone help you pay the rent?
6. How do you pay the bills? Do you receive help in paying the bills?
7. How often do you buy groceries? If you don't mind telling me, how much do you spend on groceries per week? Does anyone help you in buying groceries? How do you travel to the grocery store?

#### IV. Entertainment

1. Do you go out to eat in restaurants? What kind of food do you prefer to eat?
2. Do you go to the movies?
3. What kind of music do you listen to? What radio station do you listen to?
4. Do you go dancing? If yes, how often?
5. How do you prefer to get the news? Do you read newspapers? Do you watch the news on TV? Do you get the local or national news? In English or Spanish? Are you familiar with the top news stories in Dallas? In the United States? In Mexico?
6. What TV channel do you prefer to watch? What shows do you prefer to watch?
7. Do you use Facebook? Whatsapp?

#### V. Family

1. Are your children in school? In what grades? How are they doing in school?
2. Are your children enrolled in activities outside school? What kind?
3. Who takes care of your children when you work?
4. Do they help you around the house? Do they work? Do they help to pay for household expenses?
5. Do your children have friends? Do they visit friends? Do friends visit them at home? Are they Mexican? Do they speak Spanish among themselves?
6. How do you feel about raising your children in the United States? If your children are in Mexico, how do you feel about being away from your children?
7. Do you feel close to your children? Are they close to you?
8. What do they want to become when they grow up?
9. Imagine you had stayed in Mexico, do you think you would raise your children in the same way as you do in the United States? Why?
10. How do you feel about your children's future?
11. How do you feel about your future?
12. Is there anything that concerns you about your future in the United States? About your children's future in the U.S?

#### VI. Present employment

1. How long have you been cleaning homes/offices? How long have you been providing child-care?
2. How did you get your current job?
3. If you are comfortable in telling me, how much do you earn weekly or monthly?
4. What job did you do before moving to the United States?
5. How do you feel about your job?
6. How secure do you feel about your job situation?
7. Do you work for Mexicans? Do you work with Mexicans?
8. Can you drive to your job or do you need someone to drive you?

#### VII. Community and civic involvement

1. Do you belong to any social or civic organization in Dallas? If so which ones? (Examples: Book clubs, parent-teacher associations, Casa Guanajuato, etc.)
2. Did you belong to any social or civic organization in Mexico?
3. Have you ever been in contact with a charitable organization or a government agency to ask for support in times of need? How was that experience?
4. How you ever been in contact with the police? If so, could you describe the encounter?
5. What would you say are the greatest needs of the Mexican community in the Dallas-Fort Worth area?
6. What would you say are the greatest needs of your family?
7. What are the most pressing problems you face personally?
8. As an immigrant, what rights do you think you have in this country?

#### VIII. Church involvement

1. What church do you attend? How frequently do you attend services? How long have you been attending that church?
2. How far is the church from your home?
3. Do you have friends from church?

#### IX. Last comments

1. Is there a question I asked that you found difficult or painful to talk about?
2. Is there something we did not discuss during our interview that in your opinion would be important for you to share with me?

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