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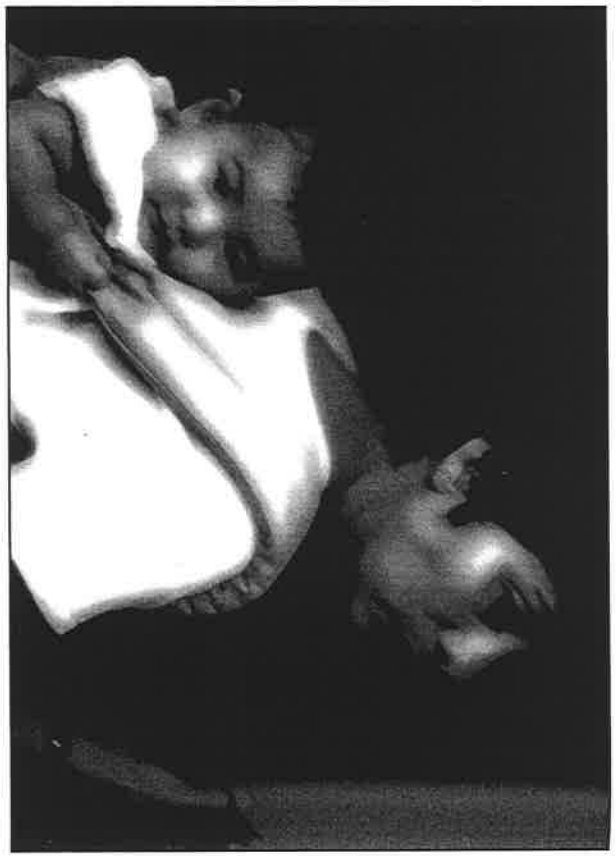

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Immigration Politics and Motherhood

Laura Pulido

Introduction

Although anti-immigrant sentiment is a constant across the U.S. political landscape, it ebbs and flows with larger political and economic shifts. The current wave began in the 1990s, was energized by 9-11, and has now reached epic proportions. While 9-11 was a major tragedy in its own right, it also spawned a whole series of secondary tragedies for racially-subordinated immigrant groups, including Muslims, Arabs, Asians and Latinas/os. The violation of both the human and civil rights of Muslims and Arabs is inexcusable. At the same time, the hardship that has befallen Latina/o, and especially, Mexican immigrants, is the less visible collateral damage of the post-9-11 fallout. Through both Immigration, Customs and Enforcement's (ICE) draconian policies and the larger criminalization of immigrants, Mexican-origin families are suffering some of the most inhumane forms of punishment possible—forced separation. This can be seen in the ICE raids, deportations, and in the women, who, in response, have taken-up sanctuary in churches across the U.S.

These events, which necessitate not only their own political analysis and response, also serve to illuminate several important shifts in the larger racial formation, and, in particular, in the relationship between immigrant and native-born people of color. Nativist racism has become so powerful that immigrants, especially Asian and Latina/o ones, incur far more dramatic forms of racism in general than their citizen counterparts. While these lines are often blurred through oppressive practices and for reasons of solidarity, elaborating these distinctions can also be useful, as they provide a different, and potentially more powerful basis for support. Focusing on the material differences in the racism that immigrant and native-born Latina mothers experi-

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ence, I argue for the need to replace identity politics with a politics of identity. Identity politics operates in at least two ways in the case of immigrant Latina mothers. First, among mainstream feminists, there has long been an effort to unite women based on a general politics of motherhood. This can be seen in struggles over reproductive health, welfare, childcare, and contemporary debates over the "mommy-track." While certainly not all women choose to or can become mothers, the ability to reproduce, and the subsequent caring of children is something that women around the world potentially have in common. Yet, to what extent does the politics of motherhood have the capacity to unite diverse women, and specifically, to enhance the well being of politically subordinated women? In the case of immigrant Latina mothers, we see the failure of the politics of motherhood to offer them any real support.

Examining briefly the case of undocumented Mexican mothers seeking sanctuary, I argue that the politics of motherhood are largely ineffectual for immigrant Latinas. Because they are so racially and socially-despised, their motherhood falls beyond the pale of mainstream feminist concern. Indeed, white anti-immigrant activists have assumed the motherhood mantle, as seen, for example, in the Phoenix-based "Mothers Against Illegal Aliens."[1] In this case we see that although the concept of motherhood has the potential to link diverse political subjects, it is overshadowed and thwarted by anti-Mexican racism.

The second way that identity politics limits the human rights of immigrant Latina mothers is through the well-intentioned racial positioning of native-born Latinas/os. In this case, Latina/o activists and scholars often assume a solidarity by erasing the lines of citizenship and legality which dissect the U.S. Latina/o population. Though this move stems from a deep political commitment, too often it is based on the hope that Latinas/os will support other Latinas/os, rather than a rigorous political analysis that might allow for broader bases of solidarity.

Anti-Immigrant Politics in a Post 9-11 Era

Why are Latina/o immigrants some of the primary victims of the U.S.'s response to 9-11?

Although few can point to any connections between Latinas/os and the events of 9-11 beyond Jose Padilla,[2] the lives of Latina/o immigrants have been greatly altered. A massive upsurge in anti-Latina/o (especially anti-Mexican) immigrant sentiment and mobilization occurred after 9-11.

Though there is a long history of anti-Mexican racism in the U.S.[3] which has shaped the lives of all ethnic-Mexicans for generations, recently, immigrants have overwhelmingly become the focus of this hostility. It is important to understand that nativist racism affects all ethnic-Mexicans. Not only are many families composed of a mix of native-born and immigrant persons (of various legal statuses), but the racism directed against immigrants systematically spills over onto the non-immigrant population. This is not an accident, but springs from the deep reservoir of anti-Mexican prejudice which has animated this country for centuries.[4]

As suggested earlier, political activists and ethnic studies scholars often blur the citizen/native dichotomy in an effort to promote solidarity.[5] Such a strategy is useful in terms of highlighting the racism that all Latinas/os and especially those of Mexican-origin continue to experience. However, it also glosses over a major shift in the racial formation, and in particular, the fact that citizenship is increasingly a proxy for race,[6] what is often called, "nativist racism." Nativist racism has led to policies intended to punish immigrants and evacuate them. The great human cost takes a toll in the lives of immigrant mothers and their children.

The current demonization of Latina/o immigrants has relied on the deployment of two key ideas that have been given new meaning and urgency since 9-11: "illegal" and "borders." The trope of "illegal" has grown powerfully with the expansion of the prison-industrial complex in the 1980s[7] and its cultivation by the media.[8] Immigrants are just the latest group to fall victim to its discursive and legislative powers. One of the necessary steps in enrolling the power of "illegal" is to link it to Latinas/os. This requires emphasizing the "illegal" nature of the unauthorized portion of the population, and then extrapolating it onto all Latinas/os. This move is facilitated by the fact that Mexicans, with a few exceptions, have historically been perceived as "outsiders", thus erasing the fact that many Latinas/os have deep roots in the U.S. "Illegal" is crucial because it is essential that prejudice, complaints, and hostility towards Latinas/os be framed as something other than anti-Latina/o racism. In a post civil-rights era of colorblind politics,[9] racism must be sufficiently masked in order to garner wide support—"illegal" provides just the necessary cover. Consider how this Phoenix-based anti-immigrant activist saw her neighborhood:

> She heard only Spanish in some neighborhoods. Day laborers swarmed near her house, and a rash of burglaries plagued her

> upper-middle-class neighborhood. She...concluded that Mexican immigrants were invading the country and weren't interested in assimilating. She formed Mothers Against Illegal Aliens... because she feared for the future of her two young children, who could be ignored in a United States dominated by Mexican-born people.[10]

Here is a case where an activist has effectively collapsed various segments of the Latina/o population; packaged them as "illegal" and mobilized under such a framework. Note the very first sentence: Since when is speaking Spanish (especially in Arizona) the equivalent of undocumented citizenship status? Ditto for day laborers.[11] This emphasis on legality is a powerful tool in rationalizing a host of human rights violations. For example, a spokeswoman for Save Our State, in referring to a deported mother, responded, "her and other families like hers wouldn't be in this situation if she had just done it the right way at first and not broken the law to begin with."[12] It is this ability to separate the law from reality (i.e. the fact that the vast majority of Mexicans cannot enter the U.S. legally under current policies even though they are a fundamental part of its working class) that allows one to ignore the actual relationships and suffering that are inherent in the practice of deporting parents.

The second major idea under which anti-immigrant activists have mobilized is protection of U.S. borders. Since 9-11, protecting our borders has become a major preoccupation. By protecting our borders, we can "control" who enters the U.S. and hopefully "keep out" those who might harm us. While this position may appear sound at first glance, it ignores some important facts. First, the perpetrators of 9-11 all entered the country legally. It was a classic case of overstaying one's visa. Thus, fortifying our borders does not address this problem. Second, there is no known connection between the U.S./Mexican border and any act of terrorism in recent U.S. history.[13] There has been at least one crossing of the U.S./Canadian border by a terrorist—but at the time of this writing the U.S. is building a 700-mile wall on its *southern* border. By deploying the power of the border, both as fact and metaphor, anti-immigrant activists have unleashed a wholesale onslaught against Latina/o immigrants in this country. Indeed, in their study of attitudes towards discrimination, Kuran and McCaffery found that discrimination against immigrants, especially those with limited formal education, was by far the most acceptable form of discrimination among survey respondents.[14]

This is a dramatic example of the "work" that political crises perform.[15] Though seemingly unrelated, Mexican immigration and post 9/11 hysteria have been stitched together to create the political space to attack Mexican immigrants in ways inconceivable a decade ago. "Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, pressure has been growing on the federal government to crack down on illegal immigrants, especially those who have committed crimes. And ICE...has been waging a public relations battle to show that it is addressing the problem."[16] This can be seen most acutely in sweeps, in which unauthorized immigrants are identified and apprehended by ICE. These sweeps have been occurring across the country and should be seen as a form of state-sponsored terrorism. At times, ICE agents show up at a workplace and take away hundreds of people. Other times, they arrive before dawn at immigrants' homes and haul them away. Indeed, in a two-week period in the fall of 2007 ICE officials arrested over 1300 persons in sweeps in Southern California alone.[17] Between 2002 and 2006 worksite sweeps have increased seven-fold.[18] Through such initiatives, Latinas/os now constitute one-third of all Federal inmates, despite comprising only 13 percent of the U.S. population.[19] Immigration sweeps in particular have engendered some concern. For example, one sweep resulted in a baby's dehydration because the nursing mother was apprehended, and in another case, older children were left to fend for themselves.[20] Because these strategies have resulted in forced separations, both short-term and extended, mothers and their children, and specifically, the politics of immigrant motherhood has attracted increasing attention.

Socially-Despised Mothers who Bear Brown Babies

The feminization of immigration has been underway for several decades.[21] As host communities have been forced to partially bear the cost of social reproduction there has been a growing anti-immigrant backlash.[22] Fujiwara has argued that it is hardly surprising that women are being targeted in this way. She points out that the feminization of immigration has shaped contemporary racialization against foreigners in profound ways. As a result, "women immigrants have become subjected to xenophobic movements designed to deny their motherhood and reproductive rights by cutting resources for social services for themselves and their children"[23]... and in the case of Mexican families, forced separations. Immigrant women are, what Fujiwara calls, the "hyper-excluded."

As suggested earlier, immigrant Mexican mothers are so vilified that any real support or identification with them as mothers

is almost nonexistent. For instance, after ICE modified some of its raid/deportation tactics, a spokeswoman from Mothers Against Illegal Aliens responded, "These women are using their children as pawns to come and stay here illegally. . . . They should all be detained, sent back and charged with child abuse for putting their children in this situation."[24] So much for the power of sisterhood. While such attitudes may be reprehensible, they help explain why some undocumented women have resorted to seeking sanctuary.

Of those seeking sanctuary, Elvira Arellano is one of the most well-known. Arellano is an undocumented Mexican immigrant who sought sanctuary in both Chicago and Los Angeles in order to stay with her child. As a mother, she has argued that she should not be deported and separated from her U.S.-born son. Such a position, drawing on the politics of motherhood, might potentially have been compelling to feminists and others concerned with both human and women's rights—yet she was ultimately deported.

The New Sanctuary Movement was launched in May 2007 with churches around the country offering protection to those immigrants wishing to avoid deportation. Elvira Arellano became a rallying point for Sanctuary activists, as she had sought refuge in a Chicago church (in 2006) and said "that if authorities wanted her, they would have to come and get her."[25] Despite her unauthorized entrance into the U.S., Arrellano refused her deportation order as it would have meant abandoning her son. After spending one year in the Chicago sanctuary, she stepped out of the building and risked arrest in order to speak at a rally. It was in Los Angeles, that the "criminal fugitive alien who spent a year seeking to elude federal capture,"[26] was arrested outside Our Lady Queen of Angels Church in downtown. Her crime? She entered the U.S. without authorization in 1997; a few days later she was caught and then re-entered (a felony), and then in 2002, she was convicted of using a false social security number to secure work cleaning airplanes at Chicago's O'Hare airport. According to ICE, "We see her not as an icon but as a priority and example of the type of person we want to ensure we're removing from the United States."[27] In contrast, Heriberto Garcia of Mexico's National Commission on Human Rights saw her as "the voice of the female undocumented immigrants who pursue the dream of working and forming a family."[28] Another reading of her actions might stress that she is part of the international working-class that is forced to break the law in order to support

herself and her family—conditions created by corporate capital and the state.

Although Arrellano has attracted major media attention, she is not alone. Liliana is another undocumented mother who has taken up sanctuary in a southern California church. She also entered the U.S. without authorization. Although she was granted a one-year work permit, she was ineligible for permanent residence. Since arriving in the U.S. Liliana has married and given birth to three sons. Liliana insists that she is "a mother, not a criminal."[29] It is precisely this juxtaposition of "mother" and "criminal" that is so powerful and strikes fear in the heart of Latina immigrants. However, it is also one fear that most native-born Latinas do not live with.

As a third-generation Chicana and mother of two, I can attest to the heightened racism that has targeted people of color and ethnic-Mexicans since 9/11. I am not blind to the fact that the laundry list of complaints directed against immigrants or "illegals" are also directed at me: speaking Spanish, having too many children, living in crowded conditions, etc. When I was pregnant I had a glimpse of what life must be like for immigrant mothers, as I was virtually indistinguishable from them. The usual accoutrements which may have signaled my class position as a university professor were gone. Instead, I was a small, brown, woman with a big belly wearing an odd assortment of clothes. I saw and felt the looks that white people gave me in response to bringing another brown baby into the world—it did not feel good.

I now have two small children and I still feel some of the hostility that results from being a Latina mother. It is especially acute when I speak to my children in Spanish in public. I confess there are times when I wonder to myself, "should I switch to English to avoid this disparagement?" [30]

However, it is also essential that I point out that I am in a fundamentally different position than immigrant women—I am a citizen, I am native-born. Yes, I may have to deal with racist students, administrators, and glass ceilings, but I do not live in fear of being separated from my children, which is, arguably, any parent's worst nightmare. Likewise, I have no concerns about being picked up in a workplace raid (in fact, I have the ultimate job security/tenure). Although we are all Latinas, I am far more privileged than my immigrant sisters, not just because I make far more money than the average Latina, but because of the security I enjoy as a citizen. These are real material differences that result

in Latina mothers experiencing extremely different forms of racism and exclusion.

I make this distinction not because more lines and divisions are needed, but to bring a greater degree of clarity to the situation. As a Mexican American woman, I am used to being in the less-powerful position, but this is one instance when I am actually quite privileged. Many Latinas/os are aware of this, and in fact, have become actively anti-immigrant themselves.[31] Indeed, some scholars talk about Latinas/os occupying an increasingly nebulous position as "honorary whites."[32] Researchers have found that for Latinas/os who identify as white, the whiteness is really a trope for belonging, or being part of the nation—predicated on the subordination of immigrants and darker-skinned people of color.[33]

It is precisely these fissures within the Latina/o population that need to be confronted and addressed. While scholarship has increasingly revealed profound fractures among Latinas/os, political activists and many ethnic studies scholars continue to refer to the undifferentiated racism that the Latina/o population faces. The logic underlying such claims is that, as Latinas/os, we all experience racism and thus we should all band together to resist such unacceptable policies. There is nothing inherently wrong with this strategy, except that it isn't working. The sad truth is that far too many of us are willing to embrace the cloak of citizenship and use our privileged status to further subordinate and marginalize our immigrant kin. We have reached the limits of identity politics in terms of Chicano/Mexicano solidarity. Instead of appealing to people on the basis of a shared racial/ethnic heritage (or gender, in the case of motherhood), we need a new strategy. Specifically, we need a much broader base of support among people predicated on what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls a politics of recognition.[34] A non-reified politics of recognition occurs when people unite not based on an essential similarity, but when they unite based on an understanding of how larger social forces operate, and in some cases, the understanding that they *could* be in a similar situation, if the state/capital is not constrained. It is important to realize that a politics of recognition is not discovered, but is produced through hard work.[35] This is our task if we are to challenge the demonization, deportation, and degradation of all immigrants.

Notes

1. Nicholas Riccardi, "Anti-Illegal Immigration Forces Share a Wide Tent," *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 2006, A1, A12.

2. Jose Padilla was a Puerto Rican Muslim from Chicago who attended a terrorist training.
3. Arnoldo De Leon, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Towards Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin: University of Texas, 1983); Michael John Rivera, *The Emergence of Mexican America* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); and Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: The Chicano Struggle Toward Liberation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).
4. Rivera.
5. Unfortunately, the larger mass of *Mexicanas/os* seem to have embraced these distinctions. See David Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995); Gilda Ochoa, *Becoming Neighbors in a Mexican American Community: Power, Conflict, and Solidarity* (Austin: University of Texas, 2004); and Lisa Garcia Bedolla, *Fluid Borders: Latino Power, Identity, and Politics in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), ch. 3.
6. Lynn Fujiwara, *Mothers Without Citizenship: Asian Immigrant Families and the Consequences of Welfare Reform* (University of Minnesota, 2008).
7. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California, 2007).
8. Paul Waldman, Elbert Ventura, Robert Savillo, Susan Lin, and Greg Lewis, "Fear and Loathing in Prime Time: Immigration Myths and Cable News" Washington: D.C.: MediaMatters Action Network, 2008.
9. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001).
10. Riccardi, A12.
11. Abel Valenzuela, "Working on the Margins: Immigrant Day Laborers and Prospects," San Diego: Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, 2000. Working paper #22.
12. Nightingale quoted in Gregory Griggs, "Woman Living in Church Hopes for Reprieve from Deportation," *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 2007, B3.
13. There was, of course, Pancho Villa's attack on Columbus, New Mexico in 1916.
14. Timur Kuran and Edward McCaffery, "Sex Differences in Attitudes Towards Discrimination," *Political Research Quarterly* 61 (2008): 228-238.
15. S. Hall, C. Critcher, T. Jefferson, J. Clarke, & B. Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and the Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978).
16. Anna Gorman and Andrew Blankstein, "Massive Sweep Deports Hundreds," *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 2007, A1, A18.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Teresa Watanabe, "Humanizing Immigration Crackdowns," *Los Angeles Times*, November 24, 2007, B1, B11.
19. Solomon Moore, "Study Shows Sharp Rise in Latino Federal Convicts," *New York Times*, February 18, 2009, A14. Forty-eight percent of all Federal Latina/o inmates are convicted on immigration charges.

20. Watanabe, B1, B11.
21. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
22. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, "Women and Children First: New Directions in Anti-immigrant Politics," *Socialist Review* 25 (1995): 169-190.
23. Fujiwara, xxi.
24. Dellacroce quoted in Watanabe, B11.
25. Louis Sahagun, "Giving Shelter From the Storm of Deportation," *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 2007, B2.
26. Watanabe, B1.
27. Hayes quoted in Teresa Watanabe, "Immigration Activist Deported from Mexico," *Los Angeles Times*, August 21, 2007a, B1, B7.
28. Richard Marosi, "Deported Immigration Activist is Toast of Tijuana," *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 2007, B9.
29. Quoted in Griggs, B3.
30. Interestingly, my four-year-old has already learned that Spanish is an "inferior" language and actively seeks to distance himself from it. Instead, he is keen to learn Japanese, which he has been exposed to from his father's family.
31. Carleen Basler, "White Dreams and Red Votes: Mexican Americans and the lure of Inclusion in the Republican Party," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31:1 (2008): 123-166; and Lisa Garcia Bedolla, *Fluid Borders: Latino Power, Identity, and Politics in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), chapter 3.
32. George Yancey, *Who is White? Latinos, Asians, and the New Black/Nonblack Divide* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003).
33. Sonia Tafoya, "Shades of Belonging: Latinos and Racial Identity," Washington, D.C.: Pew Hispanic Center Report, 2004; and Basler, 123-166.
34. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "You Have Dislodged a Boulder: Mothers and Prisoners in the Post-Keynesian California Landscape" *Transforming Anthropology* 8:1-2 (1999): 24.
35. *Ibid.*, 26.