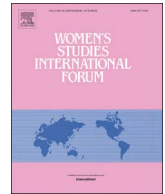




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# Illegality, motherhood, and place: Undocumented Latinas making meaning and negotiating daily life

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## ABSTRACT

Federal immigration policies powerfully shape immigrants' and their families' lives, but the consequences are uneven across place. Taking seriously the notion of place as socially constructed, this article draws from two qualitative studies, one in the new rural immigrant destination of Southwest, Montana, and the other in the traditional urban destination of Los Angeles, California, to examine how undocumented immigrants navigate daily life in the US. In the face of legal violence and place-specific forms of exploitation, mothers exert strained forms of agency through access to or creative redefinitions of local work, social services, and networks. They make meaning of place as best as they can through the lens of motherhood, regardless of how they achieve financial or emotional stability for their children. The analysis reveals that illegality intersects with dynamic characteristics of place to produce varying experiences of exploitation and constrained agency centered often on motherhood.

## Introduction

*Gaby is an undocumented single mother who lives in Montana with her youngest son Raul, a US citizen. Her two older sons were deported to Mexico in 2010. Gaby works two jobs as a dishwasher while Raul attends school and after-care. The logistics of daily life work relatively well as long as school is in session and Raul is healthy. But when school is closed or Raul is sick, life becomes unduly complicated. The network Gaby can tap for support is both small and dispersed; she lives several miles outside of town and has no close neighbors. Most of the time, she has to manage on her own. Gaby drives without a license, and her anxiety about a police stop is high. On the open roads of Montana, she is conspicuously marked by her deep brown skin and anywhere in public by her Spanish-speaking tongue. Despite these challenges, Gaby mothers Raul as best she can. She earns enough to keep them afloat, and places a high value on Southwest Montana's clean air, low crime and good schools.*

*Alicia is an undocumented mother of five in Orange County, California. Her oldest child is a recipient of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA); the other children are U.S. citizens by birth. Alicia's husband—also undocumented—works more than full time, yet his wages are insufficient to provide for the family. Alicia works from home to care for their special needs child, making and selling food to help pay their monthly expenses. She lives in a densely populated Latino neighborhood where she gets around by foot or bus. Latino second-generation school staff encouraged Alicia to run for a*

*position in the school council and she has been organizing school fundraisers for more than ten years. Although her family struggles financially to cover all their needs in an expensive city, Alicia has been able to tap into co-ethnic spaces that allow her to find economic and educational resources to mother as she intends.*

The distinctions evident in these two stories provide a base from which to explore how place shapes experiences of illegality and agency—even when it is constrained—among undocumented mothers. Montana, one of the whitest and most rural states in the U.S. with among the fewest foreign-born residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), produces a different context for immigrants than does the global city of Los Angeles, home to a large population of Latinos and the largest unauthorized immigrant population of any US county (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, & Albert, 2011; Fortuny, Capps, & Passel, 2007). And yet, Alicia and Gaby share important experiences. As undocumented immigrants, they mother in the context of legal violence (Abrego & Menjivar, 2011); when immigration laws “serve as legitimating sources for the harmful treatment of immigrants” (Abrego, 2015: 265). This context produces fear and anxiety while increasing their vulnerability to exploitation. Gaby and Alicia's experiences are also informed by social constructions of Latina motherhood that center sacrifice and direct care (Bejarano, 2002; Schmalzbauer, 2014). Our particular interest in the relationship between place and motherhood is inspired by motherhood's centrality to family survival (Abrego & Menjivar, 2011) and the ways in which

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geography shapes what Ayala and Murga (2016) describe as multidimensional agency—a form of agency that, while meaningful, is still constrained by pervasive structures of inequality.

In this article, we examine how undocumented mothers navigate and make meaning of the place-specific consequences of legal violence. Drawing on two separate studies, we compare the daily care practices and multidimensional agency of immigrant mothers across two distinct receiving areas, one that is “traditional” and urban, and another that is “new” and rural. This analytic strategy reveals that illegality intersects with dynamic characteristics of place to produce varying experiences of exploitation and multidimensional agency centered often on motherhood. We argue that even in the face of different and vast structural limitations, undocumented women with children make place meaningful by taking advantage of those characteristics of their environment that allow them to fulfill their socially constructed roles as mothers.

### Illegality and place

Today's context of immigration is characterized by historically specific conditions that powerfully mark immigrants. Legal status, as conferred by federal immigration law, is a central determinant of an immigrant's life chances (Massey & Bartley, 2005), as it determines complex rewards and penalties that stratify immigrants' experiences. In this system, undocumented immigrants are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, criminalization, and dehumanization (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). The social, political, and legal production of “illegality” — the condition of undocumented immigrants' legal status and deportability (De Genova, 2002; Menjívar & Kanstroom, 2013)—restrains immigrants from securing rights and resources. In the last few decades, illegality has gained broad significance as immigration laws have converged with criminal laws in punitive ways that vary across states and cities (Stumpf, 2006; Varsanyi, 2010). Enforcement tactics that combine federal law with local law enforcement agencies have led to record numbers of detentions and deportations (Golash-Boza, 2015), with a steep increase in deportation of people apprehended through interior enforcement after the attacks of 9/11 in 2001 (Abrego, Coleman, Martínez, Menjívar, & Slack, 2017). Local context therefore matters greatly for how immigrants experience illegality.

Place is dynamic and textured in ways that also matter for immigrants' lives. Each place of settlement is comprised of economies that determine job opportunities; demographics that are characterized by spatial segregation, population size, and history of co-ethnic communities; and state and local policies that facilitate or block access to services (Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008; Nelson & Nelson, 2011; Price, 2012; Silvey & Lawson, 1999; Singer, 2013)—all of which contribute to how immigrants fare socially and economically (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Each place, moreover, produces a local notion of what is “normal” or “mainstream” in which immigrants embody, through skin color and language, particular experiences of illegality (García & Schmalzbauer, 2017; Licona & Maldonado, 2014). Built environments and natural landscapes further impact immigrants' physical and socioeconomic mobility by delimiting access to education and employment (Dreby & Schmalzbauer, 2013).

Street-level bureaucrats, those people who interact with clients in local schools, service agencies, and medical settings, play important roles in the lives of immigrants, especially in prohibitive legal contexts. Depending on how street-level bureaucrats are situated in relation to both local immigration politics and the reigning professional expectations of their fields, these workers have tremendous influence over how immigration policies are interpreted and carried out (Marrow, 2011; Deeb-Sossa & Mendez, 2008; Schmalzbauer, 2014). For example, while Marrow (2011) found service workers in North Carolina likely to bend rules to support immigrants, Winders (2008) found the opposite to be the case in Tennessee, where workers defied legal orders and refused to file citizenship papers for babies born in a regional hospital. Whether street-level bureaucrats in immigrant destinations speak Spanish and

understand the reality of immigration, or present themselves as ignorant, hostile or ambivalent to the issue, also influences service access and undocumented immigrants' vulnerability to legal violence (Deeb-Sossa & Mendez, 2008; Menjívar, Abrego, & Schmalzbauer, 2016).

### Motherhood, legal violence, and multidimensional agency

Across contexts immigrant women are charged with mothering—a “historically and culturally variable relationship” in which someone provides care and sustenance for another (Glenn, Chang, & Forcey, 1994: 3). Gendered expectations generally prescribe that Latina mothers prioritize their children's needs over their own while sustaining kids physically and emotionally through daily care work (Abrego, 2014; Bejarano, 2002). The meanings and practices of motherhood, however, vary greatly, as they are shaped by material consequences of class, race, and immigration status (Abrego, 2017; Dill, 1998; Glenn, 1983; Schmalzbauer, 2004, 2014; Segura, 1994; Zavella, 2011), as well as by structural contexts that promote patriarchy (Ayala & Murga, 2016). Poor mothers, and especially mothers of color, for example, have often been blocked from opportunities to provide financial stability, making them especially vulnerable to exploitation (Dill, 1998; Glenn, 1983). Still, poor women find deep meaning in motherhood and children become central to their identities despite the challenging contexts of their lives (Collins, 1998; Edin & Kefalas, 2011).

Some experiences are unique to undocumented and Latina women who bear the additional burden of mothering in a context of legal violence. Contemporary legal conditions and enforcement practices require them to mother while also managing the fear of forced separation from their children (Abrego & Menjívar, 2011; Dreby, 2015; Golash-Boza, 2015). And although men are more likely to be deported than women (Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013), in heterosexual families it is women who must hold things together when the men are expelled (Dreby, 2015). Mass deportations, therefore, serve as constant reminders of the possibility of forced family separation (Dreby, 2015). In response to ramped up enforcement, undocumented mothers have been known to keep children away from schools after immigration raids or to more generally avoid health professionals and other service providers out of fear that they may contact immigration authorities or that their record of service-use may be cited to deny them legalization in the future (Menjívar et al., 2016).

The structural consequences of legal violence are also likely to make mothers reliant on social networks—but these are already determined by demographics, spatial segregation, built environment, landscapes, and local economies (Dreby & Schmalzbauer, 2013; Flores-Yeffal, 2013; Hagan, 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Menjívar, 2000; Schmalzbauer, 2014). In effect, place powerfully blocks or facilitates women's network formation (Deeb-Sossa & Mendez, 2008; Dreby & Schmalzbauer, 2013; Menjívar, 2000). In some cases, social networks and community supports may help undocumented women better manage the challenges of daily life (Flores-Yeffal, 2013; Hagan, 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Menjívar, 2000). For example, in urban areas, immigrant women utilize social networks to find work, and access social services, resources and information essential to their families' well-being (Cerutti & Massey, 2001; Cranford, 1998; Hagan, 1994; Menjívar, 2000). On the other hand, the marginalization that characterizes rural settlements typically limits network formation (Deeb-Sossa & Mendez, 2008; Dreby & Schmalzbauer, 2013). Indeed, Latino migrants to new destinations have fewer familial and kin contacts than do migrants who settle in traditional destinations (Donato, Stainback, & Bankston III, 2005).

Finally, we also want to highlight undocumented mothers' agency, however constrained, as they navigate patriarchal expectations and legal violence in different places. We utilize the lens of multidimensional agency to make visible the ways that “women, embedded within a patriarchal structure, adapt, negotiate, resist, and/or transform the meaning of the schemas or normative orientations” of patriarchy (Ayala & Murga, 2016: 1) in their labor as mothers. Through our

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