

Legality, Survival, and Action:
Immigrant and Refugee Organizing in the Pacific Northwest

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For my son Gabe

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Glossary

DHS	Department of Homeland Security
FMLN	Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front
ICE	Immigration Customs Enforcement
ILLEGAL	Racialized misnomer intended to describe undocumented immigrants
IAHRC	Inter-American Commission Human Rights
LNPSO	Norte Puget Sound Organización
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NCJ	Northern City Jail
SM	Sanctuary Movement

Preface

Men With Hats¹

Grandchildren, the bustling customers
in a lone grocery store
The last turnip

Speak to us we are not politics
Men with hats take us to
your disgrace, removal, isolation
public prodding
violation
your bodies endure caves of pain
there lay a seashell and i
a grandchild, pick it up
press it against my ear
like dream against pillow
an echo or ocean's heartbreak

Through the twenties, on to the sixties
oh generations
these painful lies continue
Your memories repeat
fumigated with DDT
your humiliation

Grandchildren discontent
emancipate hate from ourselves
recover our loss
center love on the dirt we come from
this salt, our ancestors, the residue
memories fold and layer

Colonial cathexis never end coercion
Nations define men
body artifice ignore your worth, men
Citizens calculate a life into dollars and piecework
The laws package dangerous ideas
Master ignores you, philosophizing your profit
This is their figment

But you are men with hats
Grandchildren say it
commerce, government, consuls, growers, labor

¹ Star Berry (2010) originally published as "Men with Hats" in *Tahoma West*.

ignore your life, thoughts, family, papers
Sometimes unions beat you to death
The courts, bosses, Citizens—with their protections; ignore you
Men with hats, your wages ignore you
Their transportation, yours, ignore you
the food rotten in your mouth
the pick isn't for your belonging

Men, through your great grandchildren, tell your life stories
bring the a bursting orchard that scatters
planting the love for our kin, the cause, a billowy community

It is not easy writing this letter. It began as a poem, a long poem I tried to turn it into an essay but the result was wooden, cold. I have not yet unlearned the esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing that school brainwashed into my writing. – Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1981)

My great grandfather was a proud *minero* who worked in the coalmines of Greeley, Colorado. My grandmother was born in 1931 in Canyon Del Agua Spring in Las Animas, Colorado. Sometime after her birth my grandmother, her sister and parents were repatriated back to Mexico. I am a third generation descendant of migrants; my great grandparents journeyed to the U.S. to work. This fragmented family history has inspired my curiosity and emerging academic interests since my first year of graduate school. Sprung from empirical questions about race, I became curious about my own identity, particularly my racial-ethnic background, immigration history, difference and the politics of belonging. Compelled by my limited knowledge of my own family history in the Americas and the United States, I strove to learn about race and immigration in my academic life. Thus, belonging and difference have become paramount themes in my academic work, including this thesis.

Raised in a predominately white, small suburb of Puyallup, in the Pacific Northwest during the 1980s, my upbringing was Americanized. Our family did not talk about being brown or about our cultural differences and instead attempted to fit in with the dominant Anglo community. We had an uneven approach to maintaining a connection with our roots: we retained many traditional cultural practices, mainly because of the effort of strong matriarchs in our family, who also maintained an inherited Mexican-Catholic guilt. However, details about our

family's struggle to survive after migrating from Mexico were often withheld. On the one hand, as a child, I was cognizant of Mexican cultural expressions like dance, food, and *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a way to ethnically associating myself as being Mexican. On the other hand, there is something about not knowing my family's experience of the border that I badly wanted to recover to explain my racial difference, exclusion, and trouble fitting in with white counterparts. My family's unity in the face of this exclusion demonstrated our desire to validate our *Mexicano* community.

As a U.S. citizen, born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, my access to a migration story is generationally, physically, and experientially removed. Due to colonialism, racism, and patriarchy, and ideological² processes, my history has been erased and beautiful cultural traditions marred.

My geographical location, having grown up in the Pacific Northwest and its distance from the southwest region of the U.S. and the Mexican border, has greatly informed my research interest in marginalization and immigrant rights. My research project is unique because of the sparse demographic concentration of other Chicanos in this area.³ My family's indigenous roots are still further removed due to colonial conquest in Mexico and the forced removal of traditional cultures and languages as they were dispossessed of their homelands. My family's displacement began to occur long before crossing the border.

² Note: Joseph Nevins (2010), in *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on "Illegals" and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*. New York, NY: Routledge, p. 121. One of the central points of this book argues that through the current immigration policies, the U.S. history of political and economic coercive practices, a *build up* of policies have also lead to American societal fears of an invading "other," the illegal immigrant. The term "illegal" is word that is associated with the "outsider" view, that undocumented immigrants are taking jobs from Americans (arguably white), and they threaten national integrity and territorial space. This fear of the immigrant maintains public support for restrictionist policies, notably the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1875.

³ For an overview of demographics in Washington State see: <http://www.pewhispanic.org/states/state/WA/>. Of the reported 11% of Hispanics of the total population, 82% come from Mexican origin and the median age of U.S. born and foreign born is 23 years of age.

Ignacio (2005) in her reflection of Filipino community and identity, conveys the following: “the process of collecting data and analyzing empirical material [...] has reinforced my feelings that I can neither look from the outside in nor the inside out (Preface, p. xx).” Captured in Ignacio’s words, my own struggle to fully engage in the following narrative of immigrants and refugees is my responsibility to remain true to my own subject positions. My personal experience of immigration is absent, and yet I have a deep affiliation and respect for the recent sojourns of Mexican immigrants as a member of the resettled diaspora of a displaced population. Traditions run deep in my family history and spill over into my political efforts. Moreover, while nothing can replace the physicality of crossing the border, today in its present context, the personal experiences of my family’s migration and colonization has provided me with a communal historical memory that lends itself to critically engage with the transnational demand for labor in the U.S., and its how exploitative labor conditions impacts immigrant families in Washington State. I have found that immigrants’ and refugees’ experiences of community continue to carry forward their migration history, manifesting itself in new territories through collective struggle and community organizing approaches.

Reminded of my own marginalization within the dominant Anglo community, and because of my multiple identities, I have consciously and actively challenged injustices through my political work. This political work is part of my daily endeavor to challenge white dominance and patriarchy. I am aware, however, by merely acknowledging that I am Brown, Chicana, and a mother, who has more than enough experiences with being shut down within a dominant white-privileged society, that I am not an expert on all marginalized people and experiences. Still gender, race, and a personal history of domination prompt me to examine and critique the institutions and

structures that oppress the undocumented immigrant and refugee communities. My poem *Men With Hats* (above) reminds myself and other grandchildren to *speak* about our histories because *we are not politics* in the way political pundits, business, and the government wants us to think we are under a capitalist society. My intention with this poem was to call upon a wider community to keep talking about what is relevant in their lives. I am captivated with the idea of what our world might look like and how we could live better together if we allowed our minds to percolate on our immigration stories through sharing and listening. We might uncover truths while respecting our differences. Hopefully, through this knowledge we will become better equipped to mobilize, strategize, and transform our communities.

Introduction

Overview

The national security enforcement strategy of the United States' immigration policy has shaped the dominant national discourse on immigration. An overview of the U.S. "practice of territoriality" is necessary in order to understand why life experiences contribute to a fuller understanding of immigrant rights and immigration policy. Joseph Nevins (2010) drawing from Michael Mann (1984) describes the U.S. "nation building project" as a process of expanding territoriality through its despotic and infrastructural control of the geographical space and the people within its boundaries (p. 24). Nevins argues that these historical processes included: pacification through violence and brute force, Americanization, and the displacement and conquest of Natives peoples and of Mexican land (p. 24). Today, immigration policies and procedures systematically cultivate a security culture - based on anti-immigrant sentiment - through the targeting and displacement of migrants and refugees; thus they seek to recycle the border enforcement approach.⁴ The U.S. history of the displacement of indigenous peoples, traditions and culture reminds those interested in immigration that there is a pre-history to the artificial national boundaries that harm so many who are displaced by economic structural policies in their home countries.

Immigrant and refugee communities are impacted differently by border enforcement practices of apprehending and detaining individuals in order to secure the boundary. Non-

⁴In 2013, the work of 287(g) of the Immigration Nationality Act that had "allow[ed] a state and local law enforcement entity to enter into a partnership with ICE, [...] [where] state or local entity receives delegated authority for immigration enforcement within their jurisdictions" was replaced by a federal mandate that trumped state and local jurisdiction in favor of more federal funding to Secure Communities, an existing program that expands on the practice of collecting personal biometric data on non-citizens and naturalized citizens for purposes of detaining anyone on potential immigration issues. Note: from <http://www.ice.gov/287g/>

citizens' status, race, and social class all play a role that shapes the lived experiences of immigrant and refugee communities who must navigate immigration policy and judicial process.

The Role of the Media in Shaping and Enforcing Immigration Policies

The mass media generates a binary perspective of immigration through the classification and categorization of those deemed unworthy of citizenship, and thus functions as a rhetorical device that dehumanizes immigrants. Based on an insider and outsider narrative (legal versus illegal, for example), the media often ground their stories on immigration in relation to the U.S. economy, domestic jobs, and to traditional American values such as individualism, meritocracy and private property.

Furthermore, the mass media's news content perpetuates a hegemonic narrative, whereby the phenomenon of immigration is morally rectified through the application of punitive law. Therefore, the messages U.S. audiences receive are based on the artificial perception that immigrants are a security threat to the nation-state, and therefore drastic measures must be taken to solve the problem. The media's insistence that immigration is a problem that should be "solved" through enforcement often leaves out the lived experiences of immigrants in Washington State, which is 13.1 percent of the total population.⁵ If addressed in the news, immigrants are often criminalized, described as "illegal" people⁶ trespassing on U.S. soil. It is through this

⁵ See the Immigration Policy Center report (2010) for further statistical details about immigrants in Washington State. Retrieved from <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/new-americans-washington>

⁶ Bacon (2008) in *Illegal People* describes the crafting of the U.S. Constitution as an intentional practice of granting citizenship to, initially only to free white men, and then subsequent groups that fit the white criteria. For example, when the civil war ended, immigration law became a legal tool used to reinforced racial privilege and hierarchy. The the U.S. used exclusion from citizenship, which also meant exclusion from rights on the job and the coercion of a vulnerable immigrant labor force that built the railroads and maintained agricultural crops.

process of dehumanization, disseminated in the media that legal categorizations⁷ which divide the population are upheld to further justify more stringent laws. This institutionalization of difference through the media renders U.S. citizens incapable of recognizing and understanding why “illegal” immigrants are a result of social and economic policy, and in the end immigrants’ lives are rendered invisible, and their voices muted.

Corporate mass media has the tendency to shape public opinion in support of more punitive policies and practices, usually for economic gain of private corporate interests. Without an avenue to understand the dehumanizing processes of apprehension and detention, many people will continue to be negatively impacted, including citizens, undocumented communities and all non-citizens who have adjusted their status. In the following passage, Bacon (2009), in an interview I conducted with Dr. Charles Williams, described his role as a journalist:

The challenge for doing the kind of journalism I do is to listen really carefully to what people say, and to help them tell the stories of what has happened to them and what they have done about it. I think that people are not just passive victims. They also have very creative ideas about how to act in a way that fights for rights and social justice.⁸

Unlike the dominant discourse, Bacon reports on the details of peoples’ lives, and this provides his readers with content that humanizes and more fully represents communities. Often, the presence and contributions of immigrants and refugees is otherwise difficult to realize when the access to knowledge on immigration is fixated on legal status.

In early 2011, Washington State remained one of two states that did not require legal

⁷ Ngai (2004) in *Impossible Subjects*, provides a historical and legal analysis of how process of exclusion reinforces binary between legal and non-legal creating problems for the modern state that cannot be solved under that cyclical practice, p. 4.

⁸ Berry, S & Williams, C. (2009) "Illegals' of the World Unite? An Interview with David Bacon," *Against the Current*, 141 (July/August).

documentation of presence (e.g. a social security number or work permit), in order to obtain a driver's license. But in the wake of Washington's new requirements, Jose Antonio Vargas' (a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist) driver's license was revoked by the Department of Licensing, after they failed to establish that he was a Washington State resident when he applied for his drivers license.⁹ Why did his license get revoked? Vargas announced publicly in the national media that he was undocumented. As a result, local licensing authorities investigated his driver's license application and State residency. Unfortunately, this news report about Vargas' legality crafted his story as a problem of legal identity, not of driving legitimately. Likewise, the news report portrays Vargas as an "illegal." This categorization leaves little room for readers to ponder real problems - that Washington State drivers, who are unable to produce a document that validates their immigration status, will now be forced to drive without a permit, and subsequently, without a driver's insurance. The article also relies on the theme of public security, which correlates and frames driving practices with national security and identity. Lamentably, the author of this news report prioritizes policy that is based on punishment and racialized exclusion. Thus, we know little about Vargas except that he is a well-known, award-winning journalist who doesn't fit into the stereotype of an illegal undocumented immigrant. To the journalist's credit, in this news report, readers are barely given the chance to contemplate that, at twelve years old, Vargas came to the U.S. as an undocumented child. Moreover, we still know nothing about the structural forces that contributed to his migration.

⁹ Turnball (2011) reports with the title "State DOL Cancels Driver's License of Reporter in Country Illegally," published the Seattle Times, about Vargas. Focusing on, perpetuating, and without question she links Vargas' alleged out of state residency with the role of immigration law, thus conflating the two separate issues with identity. The logic of legality she applied, linking drivers' licenses, is a moot point since at the time drivers were still able to obtain a license without producing documents that prove legal presence. This has provided dangerous effects for the safety of all drivers regardless of legal status. Retrieved from http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2015684571_vargas22m.html

The Enforcement of National Boundaries: Impact on Identity and Policy

News reports like this shape public support for immigration policies, not only controlling undocumented immigrant's movement, but they also send a clear message about national identity, membership, and legality.¹⁰ Citizens should worry about the potential ramifications and social control reinforced by these punitive measures and through the exclusion of immigrants. In other words, when Washington State's new driver's license policies conflate identity and national security, citizens become tacit supporters of a security culture that also upholds the security approach to immigration policy. Additionally, local jurisdictions and all individuals regardless of legal status are simultaneously forced to apply immigration enforcement, in partnership with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE). In other words, there most likely will be pre-textual knowledge entrenched in local enforcement institutions and further reinforced through the media that pits all Washington State residents against each other at the micro-level when immigration enforcement is applied to driving movements within localities.

On April 3, 2012, local law enforcement had been forced to “[use] fingerprint analysis to identify *illegal immigrants*” in compliance with the federal program, Secure Communities.¹¹

Secure Communities is a database that shares identification of individuals who have been booked

¹⁰Gusfield (1984) looks at how social institutions shape public problems in two primary ways; the private roles embedded in the social responsibility that identify who is responsible for a problem by applying generalization to mass amount of people, and by a creating solution that seeks to control private actions through policy-making. Social institutions' shaping of public problems and policies shape cultural perspectives and meanings through public political actions (Introduction). In my study the securitization industry/news media are create a discourse that constructs *illegals* as the “public problem” so that it is also creating “the solution” (i.e., securitization).

¹¹ “ICE’s Secure Communities Activated in Washington and Montana”
http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/localnews/2017908365_apwasecurecommunities1stdwritethru.html

in jail and with the Department of Homeland Security. “ICE’s Secure Communities Activated in Washington and Montana,” calling undocumented immigrants “illegal,” represents immigration as a matter of national security. Once again the mass media represents - not just announces - this new federal regulation, calling undocumented people “illegal,” and thus associates any non-citizen with danger. Media representations that apply the word “illegal” create a situation where the readers of the correlating article only have the choice to overlook the contributions and familial unity that are erased by name-calling/distinction from “legal” in favor of regulating U.S. employment and citizens’ social mobility. This dominant discourse shuts out discussions that alternatively, could provide an explanation migration due to transnational economic re-structuring (e.g. the North American Free Trade Agreement and war) and issues of institutionalized police surveillance.

News reports like these necessitate providing immigrant and refugee perspectives to highlight the struggles they have experienced in relation to the social, political, and economic fabric of a globalized world and disseminating their words across a wider audience. In other words, non-citizens, through their migratory journeys to the U.S. – whether in crossing national boundaries or by resisting racial profiling and detention - should not be left to simultaneously cope with being made invisible in the media.

Demographics and Labor

A Pew Hispanic Center report states that 11.1 million undocumented immigrants reside in the United States (Passel & Cohn, 2010). In Washington State, undocumented workers constitute 4.1% of the total labor force, about 140,000 people (Passel & Cohn, 2010). Labor historian Mae

Ngai (2004) argues that immigrant labor from Mexico has been used as imported colonialism—a “de facto socio-legal” relationship based on racialized bodies in contractual labor (p. 129).¹² Moreover, while there have been no formal colonial ties between the United States and Mexico, the American conquest of Mexican land has had residual effects of racialized policies, relegating legalized immigrants, refugees, Mexicans, undocumented immigrants, and agricultural workers to low wage jobs, while creating an abundance of readily willing agricultural workers in the Southwest and other regions (Ngai, 2004, p. 129). Immigrants and refugees are often perceived as a source of cheap labor, docile and suited to serve corporate interests. Immigrants and refugees must live within the confines of these coercive conditions.

Dignity and Human Rights

Dignity and human rights protections for immigrants and refugees have been diminished over time through world poverty, structurally coerced migration (i.e., economic displacement), and exclusion from U.S. citizenship. In the U.S., immigrants’ and refugees’ dignity and human rights protections are threatened because they have to dodge deportation, thus remaining in the shadows or working without proper documentation, e.g. without a social security number or work visa. By extension, through social, economic, and political subordination, without U.S. citizenship, immigrants and refugees cannot gain full substantive rights under national law (Glenn, 2002, p. 19).

¹² See the Bracero Program, 1942-1964, a binational agreement between the U.S. and Mexico for an example of coercive and racialization in agriculture. This migrant labor program justified the need for contracted agricultural workers from Mexico (who were men), based on the perceived knowledge of the time; that is, there was a labor shortage in the fields due to industrial expansion and wartime “evacuation of Japanese” who also worked the fields (Galarza, 1964: 42). Thus, Mexican nationals replaced Japanese American agricultural workers.

Today, immigrants and refugees work in factory, agriculture, and service sectors, which include 8.3 million undocumented workers (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Alas, many undocumented workers have been the victims of labor coercion and forced out of their home countries due to global economic restructuring (Bacon, 2008, p. 60). Global economic restructuring is an aspect of global corporate expansion and the reconstitution of local economies¹³ (Bacon, 2008, p. 60). Global economic restructuring, for example, affects specific ethnic enclaves, which are solicited for low wage jobs in advanced economies, such as the recruitment of Filipinas recruited to work as domestic workers in the United States and Italy (Parreñas, 2001, p. 25). For many undocumented immigrants and refugees, the process of economic restructuring within their home countries also shapes the immigration outflow patterns and the types of work made available by corporations in the United States (Massey, 1990, p. 65).

Social network literature has quantified areas of immigrant and refugee lives such as labor coercion. The strength of immigrant communities are demonstrated by immigrants' and refugees' social networks that include cultural influences in local neighborhoods, e.g. stores, community centers, non-English marketing. Factors of colonialism, trade, political, and economic conditions influence the strength of social networks (Massey, 1990, p. 63). Social network literature allows policymakers to track how and if migrants are able to reduce the potential risks of immigrating alone (Massey, 1990, p. 69). Immigrants' and refugees' socio-economic positions in society, and the global economies' push and pull of immigrants for labor are other forms of data which are often deduced out of this research. But a complex and often inadequate system of legal categorization within communities is often left up to speculation, or is simply not discussed.

¹³ For example see, the North American Free Trade Agreement 1994.

While social network literature emphasizes the importance of immigrant groups, ethnography and case studies further describe the difficulties immigrants experience as they cross the border without proper documentation in the United States (Chavez, 1998).

Historians also have analyzed specific organizing struggles, using lived experience methods to recall union struggles of, for example, cannery and agricultural immigrants and refugees workers in the United States (Ruiz, 1987 & Fink, 2003). This historical research on labor struggles by immigrants illustrates the conditions of peoples' lives and a further critique of legal status may be deduced; that immigrant workers have often had to fight for survival and better working conditions. Moreover, a comprehensive understanding of immigration and immigrant rights should account for how individuals manage larger economic influences over their lives, along with the legally defined processes and procedures that restrict their (immigrant and refugees) migration, thus affecting their ability to survive.

Literature Review

Rhacel Salazar-Parreñas' (2001) analysis on immigration of Filipina guest workers examines the dislocations these workers experience within a macro structural economy and through intermediary influences, to explain and understand the micro processes that they either follow or resist.

Parreñas' (2001) analysis on Filipina domestic workers' dislocations is concerned with the ways Filipina domestic workers mitigate or resist institutional processes of migration by looking at levels (e.g. macro, intermediate, and micro processes) of influence over the subject's life (p. 2). This analysis acknowledges the colonial influences of Los Angeles and Rome on the

Philippines (p. 35). Moreover, Parreñas' focus on two geographical locations and their colonial influences over the Philippines, explains how residual effects of colonialism shapes transnational households through family separation via migration; thereby highlighting the contradictions of social mobility in the U.S., despite Filipinas education, and their experiences of non-belonging within and outside of the migrant community. Drawing from Benedict Anderson (1989), Parreñas articulates that the global demand for workers in different locations creates an "imagined community" based on the institutional processes of dislocation (p. 12). Thus, Filipina domestic workers experience with inequality helps them derive meaning in their lives, from where they are situated economically and socially (p. 13).

Another framework for immigration analyses comes from social network literature. Social network literature incorporates quantitative and qualitative research on immigration to further describe population growth or contraction, based on the particular relational ties or networks that form within an immigration population. Specifically, the qualitative interpretations of immigrant rights in this area of research pays attention to historical, social, political, and ethnic enclaves, and patterns of migration (Massey, 1990). These analyses look at the potential for strong social networks and resources within particular immigrant groups. Because informal networks are considered part of the undocumented status (e.g. informal labor, coercion, limited access to state resources), accordingly, the literature of social networks also analyzes familial ties and whether transnational communication reinforces and expands on these networks.

Social network literature advanced the foundations of quantitative immigration research by focusing on population and patterns of immigrants. It discusses ethnic groups, patterns, and the pooling of resources. Additionally, it substantiates that through communication within

particular communities and strong family ties, the decision to migrate may be shaped by what sorts of resources may lessen or heighten the risks. Finally, this body of knowledge focuses on the non-material or material pooling of resources. Analysis of immigrant and refugee communities, the discourse focuses on the impact of population growth or contraction in both sending and receiving countries. Moreover, it looks at the continuance of patterns of immigration, despite national policies and restrictive regulations (Haug, 2008; Massey, 1990).

Work on social networks and immigration has emerged in response to the idea that migration is primarily an individual choice for self-betterment or as a means to access higher wages and better jobs (Massey, 1990). In many ways, it suggests that researchers should look to ways of either reinforcing these ideas or challenging them. Social networks and immigration literature varies by acknowledging different ethnic groups, countries of origin, the receiving country, groups of immigrants' in and outflows, and the potential for social capital that come from strengthening ties within the group (A. Portes, 1998). Social network literature uses *social capital* as a mode for understanding the institutional effects of restrictive immigration laws or patterns of exclusion from jobs, social services, education, and social resources.

In social network literature, social capital, within immigrant and refugee communities, are the immaterial associations, e.g. because immigrants cannot access a job that provides a standard of living without a Social Security card or work visa, they often pool resources, within a specific ethnic community and share knowledge of an informalized job market (Portes, 1998, p. 2). Immigrants benefit from social capital by their potential to build power within groups through alternative means, despite living in an informal economy (Portes, 1998, p. 2). Social networks research evaluates immigrants' exclusion from formal economic channels, such as stable jobs,

education, and housing, and it considers the way that the generation of immaterial value within undocumented immigrant and refugee communities shape the community at large. Arguably, through help from families and friends, new immigrants have informally benefited from the ways they migrate to the United States and other advanced countries. Thus, the strengthening of social networks, over time, and the type of resources available within immigrant groups are some themes that have been discussed within social networks and immigration literature (Massey, 1990).

In addition, social networks and immigration literature, at times, also describe the negative impact of restrictive immigration policies on immigrants and their ability to build social capital (Portes, 1998; Collyer, 2005). Because corporations often seek a docile labor force (e.g. an abundance of passive and compliant workers who will forgo most harsh conditions, potentially loss of pay, and loss of benefits), employers depend on excluding undocumented workers from access to decent jobs and some social services. An analysis of the negative impact of social capital examines how and what crimes are reproduced in informal economies influenced by the pooling of resources, such as gang affiliation (Portes, 1998; Collyer, 2005).

Finally, social networks literature focuses on ethnic niches in the sending and receiving countries, evaluates group formation, or population changes (Collyer, 2005). The social and political context and geographical location shape the immigrant and refugee community; thus qualitative research has accounted for the way new technology and the global economy influence social capital and how groups are constituted differently depending on their circumstances. All in all, social networks literature focuses on themes of the strengthening of social networks and considers how social capital lowers the risk of undocumented immigration for new immigrants

(Haug, 2008).

Following Parreñas, I consider the macro and intermediary structures as frameworks to acknowledge that my subjects are situated within institutions that often shape their perspectives and political actions while they are socially and economically constrained, pushed, and pulled by the enforcement of national borders. Either they crossed through U.S. sponsorship, overstayed a tourist visa, or crossed clandestinely in order to survive. Each subject processes their settlement into Puget Sound region differently and makes efforts to advance, advocate, and fight back in response to systemic and institutional oppression by sharing their experiences of repression, oppression, and war and displacement in their home countries. Extending from social networks literature, my findings indicate that structural dominance in the global economy and within institutions leads these individuals to seek immaterial associations that are politically motivated. So in addition to my personal critique of the legality of persons, my contribution in this study utilizes these frameworks to consider how my subjects' expression of legality shape organizing approaches. I found that their perspectives indicate that legal status is a problematic category, illustrated by and through their work for immigrant rights.

Chapter I: Exploring Immigrants and Refugees in the Pacific Northwest

Immigrants and refugees have long shaped the history of the Pacific Northwest¹⁴ by their contributions to shaping Washington State economy. Meanwhile, much of the literature on these communities is focused on the Southwest, Midwest, and the Northeast. Because of this, I chose to focus on the individual immigration narratives from this geographical location, and the community organizing experiences of key leaders in the North Puget Sound Region of Washington State. Although immigrant rights are the core issue to be addressed, I explored life narratives of refugees, legal permanent residents, and undocumented immigrants. I ultimately found that within the Puget Sound region it is imperative to grasp the personal histories to more fully substantiate the potential of the immigrant rights movement, and through their stories, illustrate the contradictions and inequality embedded in legality as a mode for organizing.

I chose life narratives of immigrants and refugees, as this method allows me to understand the experiences and perspectives on legality and the actions people take when they are directly impacted by the harmful policies of a security culture and by border enforcement. Often, immigrant and refugee perspectives are not considered within immigration and immigrant policy discourse. In looking at immigrant and refugee perspectives on legality and organizing, these voices express the dehumanizing effects of border enforcement policy that prioritize national security above the sanctity of family unity.

¹⁴ For further reading see Ernesto Gamboa (2000) *Mexican Labor & World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942- 1947* for an integral historical analysis on the labor and militancy of braceros in Washington State.

Method

Frustrated with the focus of data on the flows, patterns of flows, and the classifications of immigrants, I would often leave seminars torn, like a wastebasket full of crumpled notebook paper. I simply wanted to know how family unity was reflected in the data of population flows. Quantitative studies, while compelling, leave me feeling like migrants are relegated to numbers and I sought humanizing stories. Generalizations about the flows of immigrants only conjured abstract images of *the* immigrant. Research primarily centered on numerical data, in some respects, appeared dehumanizing when in-depth life stories of immigrants and refugees were not also accounted. Ethnography and participant observation, in contrast, helps to provide a glimpse of individuals engaged in immigrant rights. These frustrations increasingly led me to focus on immigrant narratives.

Thus, I chose ethnography – particularly participant observation and narrative analysis - as a way of studying immigrants and refugees in the United States. This collection of stories gives attention to hardship and survival, as well as, courage and collective action. These particular methods piqued my interest, due to the knowledge that can be obtained by observing people, and by giving attention to what individuals and groups convey (Atkinson & M. Hammersley, 1994).

Over the past year, my participant observation involved attending meetings with a coalition of community organizations that organized annual May Day marches in Washington State. Notably, since 2006 the May Day March in the United States has shown to be a massive protest for dignity and existence. In Washington State, thousands of workers have taken to the streets each year on May Day to express solidarity against all wars and for worker-human-immigrant rights and dignity (Turnbull, 2008).

First exposed to volunteerism in 2008, I participated in local community events, meetings, and political rallies that addressed immigrant rights in the North Puget Sound region of Washington State. By attending community organizing meetings with immigrant and refugee organizers, who had been collectively engaged in changing the landscape of political consciousness for all immigrants, I also participated in this organizing. These community-organizing meetings led to political demonstrations throughout the year.

It wasn't until late 2010, through involvement in public community meetings across the Puget Sound, that I justified research on immigrant and refugees lives. The immigrant and refugee organizers expressed their experiences and knowledge of their home country into dedication to the community, politically grounded in immigrant rights. I saw these individuals at the forefront of community organizing for human interests. These narratives, hopefully, challenge dominant immigration reform discourse in favor of acknowledging that the nation-state has been artificially constructed through conquest of indigenous land; that is, immigrants and refugees illustrate complex lives that involve knowledge of layers of oppression, based on their lived experiences and struggle for liberation, that is carried into community organizing.

I chose six individual immigrants and refugees to interview through snowball sampling. I conducted the interviews in English in late 2010 through spring of 2011. I provided my contact information to potential subjects. Upon confirming meetings with these subjects in person, all identifiable data was removed in such as way to ensure complete anonymity. All interviews were audio-recorded, and following the interviews, I immediately transcribed them. I met with each subject individually up to two times, for two-hour sessions. I carefully changed all individual

identifiers to pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity of my subjects. This system of pseudonyms continued before interviewing, during, and in the transcribing phase.

I interviewed immigrants and refugees from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, age groups, genders, sexual orientations, and from different countries of origin. The respondents' countries of origin are Cambodia, Laos, Mexico, and El Salvador. One man identified himself as indigenous from the P'urhépecha tribe in Mexico. In addition, the respondents belong to one or sometimes several of these legal categories: political refugees, undocumented immigrants, and legal permanent resident, and naturalized citizen. I interviewed three men and three women. All respondents are over the age of 18, though their ages when they migrated vary from child to young adult. It was imperative, for the purposes of this ethnography, to allow these stories to speak about the struggles and collective power these indigenous, immigrants and refugees faced. Throughout I have tried to keep the narratives intact, only adding a brief description to strengthen the flow of their story. I have marked my emphasis of their voice with italics.

Questions that Guide this Study

1. What is the role of particular legal statuses, as they vary, and does this impact refugee and immigrant rights organizing?
2. How does the subject define one's community, and does self-defining relate to the social categories that compel immigrants and refugees to struggle for immigrant rights while organizing in their communities?
3. Does education or knowledge of immigration law shape how refugee and immigrant community strategically organize?
4. What, if any, issues and obstacles do the interviewees address within their

communities politically, socially, and economically? If there are issues and obstacles, what is realized as successful organizing?

My subjects' willingness to share pieces of their lives with me is not taken lightly. Considering this, all names and locations have been changed to protect my subjects' anonymity.

Methodology: Life Narratives and Conversational Text

After considering previous quantitative and qualitative studies, news reports, and social networks literature on immigrants and immigration, I analyzed my empirical material using conversational analysis.¹⁵ The conversational analysis of these immigrants' and refugees' personal narratives allowed me to explore how my respondents draw meaning, specifically about legality, survival, and how they organize around these experiences. Through their stories, I found that larger global economic and legal institutions influence their lives. For these particular people, this does not seem to limit their political action, but it appears to be a source of strength to build stronger communities. Moreover, conversations elaborate on the external factors, such as the economy, that shape and constrain their lives. Their lives illustrate the detail of what otherwise would remain unknown about the struggles and contributions of immigrant workers (Chavez, 1998; Fink, 2003; Ruiz, 1987). Thus, immigrants and refugees are community leaders who articulate their work in the North Puget Sound region, providing personal levels of knowledge situated in a global economy and national sphere.

These stories are situated within three frames. Following Rhacel Salazar-Parreñas (2001) levels of analysis of globalized workers and through social networks research, these frames provided a terrain to highlight their lived complex worlds. Considering these narratives are centered upon different identities, legal status, and collective knowledge, I have found that the substantive differences in these narratives of immigrants and refugees, in contrast to legal status, a problematic category, allows for collective challenge to the hegemonic framework of citizenship, which excludes and oppresses immigrant and refugee communities.

¹⁵ See Clandinin and Connelly (1994) for a description of narrative analysis.

Chapter Summaries

Clandinin & Connelly (1994) explain that the personal stories of experience “[have] a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history” (p. 415). My subjects’ perspectives on legal status build collective on the knowledge of the immigrant and refugee experiences that are important for understanding how larger macro structural and institutional domination takes shape in the lives of communities (Parreñas, 2001). While I have not provided a detailed history of U.S. citizenship and exclusion, I would like to emphasize that my subjects’ perceptions of legality are based on the lived realities that stem from exclusion from citizenship – the right to survive, the right to due process, and family unity and to provide basic needs for their families. Their motives for organizing within immigrant and refugee communities reflect their critique of tacit consent and obligation to the nation-state, exclusion and membership – values that shape and dominate American political discourse.

In Chapter II, Marco focuses on his P'urhépecha traditions and experiences in Michoacan, Mexico that forced him to migrate to the U.S. Marco channels his elders’ wisdom into his organizing in factories and around driver’s license education. Chapter III focuses on Ramona, who flew to from a major city in Mexico to Washington State, overstayed her visa, and settled in Washington State to begin community organizing. Ramona began volunteering and organizing with non-profits, and she developed a political voice within Latino media. Similarly, in chapter IV, Guillermo, like Marco and Ramona, crossed the U.S. - Mexico border, only he, like Marco, crossed clandestinely. Unlike Marco and Ramona, Guillermo crossed the border as a child and as a political refugee from El Salvador. He settled in a Northern Washington State agricultural town and became a naturalized citizen. Guillermo began his organizing work around education

reform in the public schools, based on the absence of critical Chicano and La Raza history and curricula. In chapter V, we see that Amara journeyed to the U.S. in her childhood, as political refugee from Laos. Her experience, as legal permanent resident illustrates the trauma many children experience when migrating to the U.S. Similarly, Raksmei the focus of chapter VI, also traveled to the U.S. as a young Khmer political refugee. Both Amara and Raksmei share their childhood experiences of attempting to “fit in,” and the social-economic factors, which led them to face the immigration detention system. Finally, in Chapter VII, Zoila crossed the U.S. Mexico border clandestinely, after fleeing El Salvador and settling in Mexico, only to be forced to the U.S. because of the Mexican economy and discrimination.

These immigrants and refugees provide us with a description of rich experiences that are useful across disciplines. Humbled by the breadth of knowledge I gained from these individual narratives, I can only hope this research will complement current ethnographic research on immigrants and refugees perspectives and will be used alongside the quantitative and qualitative studies such that may develop a more emancipatory political agenda on immigrant rights.

Background on Mexico

Beginning with Marco, a P'urhépecha man from Mexico, we learn that his experiences of economic displacement as a migrant worker was due to the process of colonization of his town. In general, economic displacement through colonization correlates with a shift in the type of labor one produces from one's home country. The type of labor that shifted was Marco and his tribe's ability to work for themselves by working off the land into wage laborers (thus working for a corporation/ employer). This economic displacement also correlates with the over fertilization and pollution of the land his tribe used to survive in his town. These factors necessitated the need to flee his home state in search of wage labor within different territories in Mexico that had been industrialized and, eventually, in an advanced country. The P'urhépechas, who had subsisted off working their own land to provide themselves with the basic needs were no longer able to do so due to colonial expansion.

The conquest of his town in Mexico culminated in the dispossession of his labor and land for the means of turning a profit. Marco describes this conquest and the “new ideas” associated in this transformation as Christianity and technology from advanced countries. Fred Krissman's (2002) migratory networks research emphasizes that “labor demand” (i.e. employer recruitment) culminates in a supply of unfree labor that uses ethnicity as an aide to replace the immigrant labor force, contending:

... class and legal status have the potential to unite at least portions of the two ethnic groups (e.g., harvesters, if not supervisory personnel). But ethnicity can relegate all *mestizos* and all indigenous Mexicans into distinct camps, unwilling to cooperate even in mutual self-interest. Therefore, ethnic differences are a unique weapon in the arsenal of

management. When all three variables are combined, worker solidarity is much more difficult to attain. (p. 2)

Marco's difficult choice to migrate from his town to the U.S. and then ultimately end up in Washington State illustrates the process of ethnic labor replacement that reaches further beyond colonization in Mexico, his town, and his experiences. In other words, Marco's migration to El Norte and then beyond the border further north is part of established patterns of labor migration and geo-politically coercive labor practices that have been used by employers to recruit workers, through their established social networks and through the ethnic unity and division present on the jobsite. But, for Marco, ethnic unity is an organizing mantra. Drawing on ethnic unity, Marco seeks to counter this division and misinformation within the ethnically similar Latino community he works alongside for the purposes of immigrant rights.

Chapter II: Marco P'urhépecha, Mexico, 42

I met Marco in May 2010 in a south Puget Sound city. During that month, students, community-based organizations, and city council members worked together to pass a city ordinance that condemned Arizona's SB 1070, a racist and anti-immigrant piece of legislation.¹⁶ I was struck by Marco's organizing efforts, which brought forth an immigrant community that collaborated on writing letters of support for this anti-racist city resolution. To allow local police to partner with federal authorities, through the administering of immigration enforcement meant exacerbating institutionalized racism, and we intended to proactively take a stand against the rationale based on fear of an "other." Potentially, all non-white community members, not only undocumented immigrants, would face more racial profiling if copycat ordinances were to pass in the city.

The community faced some challenging questions: Would racialized ordinances impact the community? How has racial profiling by the police affected the city? For non-whites who were targets of racial profiling in stores and on the streets, many of these questions were not rhetorical and not just a matter of political debate. It took critical dialoguing within the community of whites and non-whites, citizens and non-citizens, on systemic racism. Marco helped bridge and transform a community, comprised of politically conservative and business oriented public officials, who appeared to have no vested interest in taking an anti-racist position on SB 1070.

¹⁶ See Fact Sheet for the Arizona law S.B 1070. Notably S.B 1070 requires that local law enforcement and governmental agencies determine immigration status based on "reasonable suspicion [...] that the person is an alien who is unlawfully present in the U.S. Additionally "Allows a law enforcement officer, without a warrant, to arrest a person if the officer has probable cause to believe that the person has committed any public offense that makes the person removable from the U.S." These are pre-textual enforcement measures that allows for racial profiling and presumes "illegal" individuals may be identifiable based on their phenotype and other appearances. Quotes were retrieved from <http://www.azleg.gov/legtext/49leg/2r/summary/s.1070pshs.doc.htm>

The toughest issue for the South Puget Sound city of organizers of this anti-racist resolution was convincing mainly white people to call out SB 1070 as institutionally racist and “our” city’s problem, despite the geographical difference between the Pacific Northwest and Arizona. Many folks who spoke out against the ordinance took a color-blind approach, even arguing against our anti-racist stance by explaining that what happened in Arizona would never happen in our city because race was not an issue. However, the community overwhelmed the city officials by collectively arguing that the immigrant community, including all people who may “appear” to be without papers, would be impacted by racial profiling by authorities if a copy-cat policy or procedure were codified in the city.

Marco and the immigrant community, along with many other folks of color, and white allies successfully influenced the city council that institutional racism has been and will continue to be our city’s problem, and that a potential for copycat policy in the wake of SB 1070 is enough to affirm a statement that we stood against institutional racism.

Marco would never, personally, take credit for having passed this ordinance. Coming from an indigenous rights perspective, he believes it takes a community to bring about change. His selfless work gave me a way of understanding how legality is an artificial social framework that is tied to an individualized obligation to the nation-state. With his indigenous worldviews, his community work and his awareness of artificial borders was a direct response to immigration policy that attempts to destroy family unity. His knowledge about anti-immigrant legislation and his ability to bridge a divided city into a unified community compelled me to learn more about how his life experiences connect to the needs of the non-English speaking community and address, also, the needs of undocumented and low-wage workers within a broader locale.

Marco spoke profusely about his indigenous identity, which informs his perspective of the forced migration of indigenous people and, ultimately, his efforts at organizing the immigrant community. Indigenous people in his community historically migrated through “Las Americas” for basic needs, because of religious persecution, and, most recently, because of the United States’ and Christian colonial economic development projects that have transformed his indigenous community into wage laborers who were forced to move abroad in order to survive.

Marco’s indigenous identity provides a way for him to discuss, not only his non-legal immigrant status, but also his non-legal existence¹⁷ as an indigenous father of U.S. citizens. Along with his cultural identity and traditions which de-emphasize the nation-state, he also views the nation as a terrain that contributes to the racialization of labor onto brown bodies, which corporations use via exploitative labor practices.¹⁸ Part of the indigenous experience gives Marco the ability to embrace historical knowledge that acknowledges colonialism, artificially constructed national boundaries, and the corresponding restrictive labor processes.

On “Status”: An Indigenous Perspective

Marco’s indigenous perspective consistently refers to the decolonial movement of the P'urhépecha tribe in Mexico. Prior to the existence of national boundaries and legal categories, indigenous people have migrated for basic needs, utilizing only what was necessary to survive. Furthermore, the P'urhépecha migrated, also, as an outcome of Christian and economic colonialism. He also recalls the external factors that changed the way his town had traditionally worked on the land. This indigenous history, customs, and traditions, allow Marco to describe

¹⁷ Ngai (2004) in *Impossible Subjects* provides discourse about the “social reality” of non-citizens and how the restrictive immigration policies create unsolvable problems for the nation-state; the restriction and control of human bodies (and their movement) and an open doors approach (e.g. structural adjustment policies) that deregulate the movement of goods and services.

¹⁸ Exploitative labor practices I refer to here include (but are not limited to) non-payment for labor, racialized mistreatment and verbal abuse, poor and harmful working conditions, and the loss or non-existence of health benefits.

the instability and deconstruct the embedded ideas of legal status, which complicates our understandings of so-called Mexican “immigration”:

[Ideas of legal status] are very important, because [...] Immigrants, or new Immigrants - we talk about them like - we start analyzing that probably, we go back about twenty years – forty years, you know? But, we do not analyze, from the perspective as indigenous. I am not considered as immigrant in any part of Las Americas from the north to the south.

But, now with the [status] - to understand that, you have to understand *Tu Anapu* is [the time] before the Europeans came. *Iondri Anapu*, is before the Europeans came and Christianity. And *Yasi Anapu* - its the people, the people of, the contemporary people, moving different directions. Basically, looking for the basic human needs, to survive. And this is, historically, when we did that type of mobilization, in the time of *Tu Anapu*. It was a little bit different then, than *Iondri Anapu* and *Yasi Anapu*. Basically, in *Tu Anapu*, it's about people mobilizing from one place to the other, you know *esta*, looking for food. It was a basic time for people to understand, and live with in harmony, the elements, all the natural stuff, the mountains, the animals, and all that.

[I]n my specific case, as a P'urhépecha— we do not [or] try to keep a lot of things, or richness, or in the meaning of money. It was more about looking for good places, or lands, with the basic needs like water, or like a piece of land to do the harvesting or to plant the corn and things like that, but not in the meaning of owning a piece of land as a profit, or anything like that.

The Impact of Christianity on Migration

In the times of *Iondri Anapu*, new things came, and the new religion came. And my people were so confused and they are still confused. The [colonizers] talked about a god of love, but other hand they were acting totally different. They were raping our women, and were killing us, because we do not (a lot of indigenous people), we do not accept [their new Christian ideas]. And even today, we are still in a resistance; we do not want to accept this new religion. There are still P'urhépecha people, even today, who trying to keep alive our spirituality, our manner to see the... not only to live in harmony with the elements.

At the time when some people who moved out, not exactly out of the P'urhépecha territory, they moved up to the mountains, you know? To survive [from] the persecution; specifically, from the church – This new movement [was] coming in the name of God, trying to convert them [to] Christian people.

So they hide up in the mountains. And, this is the first time when I-when we hear of people abandoning town, abandoning their homes, to just to try survive.

You know, and *Tu Anapu* and *Iondri Anapu* there are very interesting stories, but it takes time to understand, you know? And it takes a lot of studies, to and unfortunately, most of the people who wants to understand this; they are looking for this books, write it down for the Christian people, like the Catholic-Roman priests, and all that, but few people asked the elders, the indigenous elders, and ask them about the perception. How they keep some of these stories, you know? And, as I said, they follow, very much, the existing books. But those books are not made; they are not specifically for the indigenous people. Most are made [for] Evangelicals.

On the indigenous perspective, the imposition of modernity, and status

You can imagine at this time, they are not the indigenous people, and they try to interpret and understand the indigenous people at that time. We found a lot of mistakes. We use them to try to analyze our stories, but we do not use them as a base. We use the elders as our base. We still have elders with the knowledge, the information about being indigenous, to understand the style of life.

My perspective is *Yasi Anuapu*: contemporary people. When I was nine years old—ah, little bit younger, probably seven - I don't remember that much about that specific time - but I do remember the first school in my town. Public education came with classrooms in my town. [The educators] start, basically, giving us information, as kids, as a young people to be prepared and learn how to write and read. Of course, it was not in our language, it was in Spanish.

At that time they start changing our manners to view the life. For me, in my seven-years of age there was only one world, with no deficiency, with no borders, with no classifications. Some people were supposed to be rich in my town, but now I know some people in my town are not rich, they just have a little bit more horses than the others, or probably a little more piece of land than the others. But they are not rich.

They start telling us about another war, you know, a “global war.” They start talking to us about being prepared. Unfortunately, we get so confused because they tell us things like, “Do you want to die like your grandfather? Do you want to die like your dad? Like poor?” They start telling us that we were poor people. In my seven

years [of age], as indigenous, in that time we do not understand what being poor people [meant]. My grandmother always told us to live in the moment. They [elders] say, “The future is important, but what is [more] important is stay alive today and have enough to eat for today and we’ll see tomorrow.”

You know it was very shame[ful] for the people who lived in the town to look for another life in the cities or even far away. And at that time we did not have perception about El Norte. We just have the perception, these people are going nowhere, and that was probably two-three hours from my town. [The traditional indigenous inhabitants of the town were] just like, “Oh! Do not do like these people [who left to seek work outside the town], they are going nowhere.”

It was shameful for someone to leave the town. And at that time, if they have to do it, basically hide; they have to use the bridge they have to do it at night. They said, we need you guys; we need you guys in here, because they said you have to keep the traditions, still alive our manners to live and things like that.

We start hearing about people [talking about] Tijuana, and that was far away. You know, you can work in factories.

Economic Colonialism, Mexican Nationalism and Its Impact on Indigenous Communities

Marco’s explanation of the traditional circular movement of P’urhépecha people that existed prior to national boundaries between the U.S. and Mexico was heavily influenced by Marco’s consultation with his elders. The elders’ perspectives of survival allowed his age group of young indigenous people to build from these perspectives. Spain and the U.S., through empire building, were external factors that influenced modern migration in his town, based on

colonization.¹⁹ His own experiences recount economic colonization, through over-fertilization and pollution of his town's crops. The elder community, from which he and his younger counterparts relied heavily upon, began to look favorably on men moving out to "El Norte" because there were no jobs where he lived, and the influences of colonialism had transformed labor and agriculture.

The dangers of colonization also threatened his town's indigenous traditions. Elders from other surrounding towns reminded the younger generation of the Bracero Program (1947-1964) and the economic dangers of El Norte. In the following excerpts, Marco provides details about how colonization continued to transform his community in favor of adjusting to the capitalist mode of production.

[It] was around '86/ '87 and the beginning of the '90s, when I started noticing a big movement of people, trying to survive. I also noticed some people, outsiders, coming, with supposedly new ideas about how to survive. Because in the fifties and sixties, they arrive in our towns, and they basically took the wood, the forest from us. They [taught] us how to [turn a] profit with wood. And [there] was a lot of resistance, you know. From the elders, but it was the young people who [were] saying, if the wood is good to make the profit, then let's do it. And [there] was a big confrontation in different communities, some people we were divided. Some people saying let's do it and others saying no it is not right to do it. Basically, it was cutting the wood to make a profit. The person getting the benefit from this was not the local people. The

¹⁹ Galeano (1997) in *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, provides a history of empire building, colonization, and geo-political economic coercion of Latin America that outlines much of Marco's discussion of conquest and transformation of his indigenous community.

people from the big towns they used the wood. They paid a very, very low price for the wood.²⁰

Basically, they teach our community: make money, and start making profit on it. They start driving big trucks. They used big commercial machines to cut the wood. [There were] at least seven or ten families doing that. So, at that time there was some prosperity, because the wood was giving us money, and the corn, all the things from the forest and the mountain, there was prosperity at that time.

Later, when I was talking about the people from Tijuana, they were speaking Spanish. Spanish is my second language. They started saying words, most of the time they started telling bad words, and they started telling us of big cities and being good. Unfortunately, they did not give us the right information, because they were surviving in these big cities by living under bridges, or living in these small houses made by cut wood, or even plastic. If you can call them houses, they are outside of the cities, with not basic stuff, like lights.

So, basically, there was no reason for my people to move out. Since school came, I was seven or six years old. They told us about being prepared and learning Spanish. They told us [that] being a teacher, a doctor, and a lawyer is a good thing. And it was a lot of discrimination at that time, for those people who moved to the cities. The people came back and [were] saying, the Hispanics don't like us, the mestizos are calling us Indian and ignorant and things like that.

One of my elders was saying this has happened from a long time ago. So, the elders said, let's do this, let's follow up, this new movement about being educated

²⁰ Lazaro Cardenas Mexican president 1934-1940 allowed U.S. Anthropologists to study a couple of "Tarasco" communities including Beals.

and the meaning of school. Let's write and read and speak Spanish. So we got to send you to the cities, defend yourselves, but come back and help us out. Basically defending our traditions: use Spanish as a new tool of organization.

The young people, about my age, we do not understand that part. We moved to the cities, learned Spanish, became teachers, doctors, but did not follow up that direction. We almost abandon [our indigenous community]. With our new skills, ok say, as a doctor, a teacher, we do not feel connected to that community anymore. And, [some were] trying to act not as indigenous anymore, and trying best to act as a mestizo. The elders they [were] sad, they think that was a big mistake. They say we are being lazy, at the forest anymore, not harvesting crops, and all that, and it's not right. They think we did a big mistake when they sent us to the cities.

Leaving Indigenous Identity: Education, Professionalism, and Fertilization

With this new movement, there came new ideas to our town. Supposedly, the people who [were] educated at universities, engineers and all that, they started dispersing, or disseminating some information to our towns. Like to use the fertilizer for example. At that time, when I was little, there [were] no chemicals around my town. It was just like compost, and things like that. You know, very natural stuff, organic stuff, and things like that. This new movement; they started bringing fertilizer to our towns.

And this is another long story. And we have the name of the companies that test fertilizer. They test it and use it later, you know, for *them*. And, basically, there are *companies from the States that use our land to test their fertilizer*. So, supposedly,

these new people from universities, educated, P'urhépecha, as myself, they disseminating this right to use the fertilizer.

Why I am talking about this? In the '80s: '85, '86, '90s, and the beginning of the '90s, when they start using a lot of fertilizers, and they almost kill our lands, that means, a little bit of corn. We cut down the forest. To recover a tree, it takes long, long, long time. It takes years and years to get them adult, so you can cut them. So you know, they are not usable for commercial purposes. You know, with the land being poisoned. We basically poisoned our lands; we are not getting that much corn. The government of Mexico, in about '86/'86 they tried to run a program to give resources to the *campesinos*, or the people who work with the land. They came up with the new ideas about using new technologies, like using tractors. Also they came up with using the fertilizers, like I said before.

It was very common for us to work with the land, with the common sense, without any new technologies, or anything like that. It was basically using a half part of our land for this year, and using the other, a cycle of agriculture, and using this natural fertilizer, from the animals, and compost to keep our lands healthy. As I said, when they came, supposedly to help us, the tractors, they get, I don't want to say, "old." They get. Let's say you have a gas, oil leak. Our people do not understand how to fix the problems. They use these tractors, with all their problems; they basically start putting oil, gas, and things like that, in[to] our lands. And that is another manner; how they poison our lands.

For some reason, in the '90s or 2000, the government does not give us resources, to keep up the modernization of the *campesinos* and *campesinas* of Mexico.

Forced Migration to "El Norte" and its Impacts on the Indigenous Community

So you can imagine the land, being poisoned, just getting a little bit of corn. The corn [got] reduced [to] probably 60%. The size of the corn was reduced about 60% also. The people start looking around, kind of like, wow, now what? We don't have forest, you know the corn, for some reason, every single year is asking for more fertilizer, and this year I did not get any corn.

So it started: moving out of the town to cities, to work as a laborer. Like coming in, working for a certain period, and going back to the family. That is the time we started hearing about El Norte. Probably '88, '89 and we start hearing a lot about El Norte, about working, you know, and working on the other side of the border. And there are some of the elders, who came from the United States from the Bracero Program. There are stories P'urhépechas coming. Not exactly from my town, there are only 20-30 people in my town. But very few people coming and working with the Bracero Program. They tell us, yeah, it's true: *there is another country named El Norte*, but it is very dangerous. If you want to try it, do it. In that moment it was acceptable for people to move out, it was not a shame. They said, so if you want to survive, do it. Whenever you want to, do it, because we don't have any resources here to survive. So, people start moving out, the students, this new movement of teachers,

doctors, lawyers, they start moving out and most of them, they are in the United States.

It was mostly the males, they started moving out and going back in the season. In the summer time, part of the spring, and going back in the winter. Or staying out two years, no more than three years and going back to our towns. For women, it was not acceptable for them to move out. Even the kids, the elders always taught us to keep our kids in town, and do not force our women to move out. They basically use the women to bring the [men] back. You know, to tell the [men], if you got to move the whole family, you better never come back to our town. So it was just the males, going back, going back. Very recently, in about probably, we are talking about 2005, 2006; there was a new movement of women coming in here, entire families coming in here. Since this enforcement at the border, and the war, it is not evil for people to going back and going back in anymore.

So they have to stay for a longer period to save money, and to be able to go back to our towns. At that time, they decide to bring their wives and the kids, to the United States. There was a lot of opposition from our elders, when we start doing that, and they say that, basically we gotta disappear. But you know, without being able to go back, we decided to probably stay here for about five years or so. [he cries] But, it never happened, because our kids start growing up in here, and they born here. They do not feel like they belong to our community anymore. So it seems like we did a big mistake.

It's been very difficult for them to understand, we have go back. And I don't think we gonna go back. I think most of our people; we gotta stay in here because in

our towns, or in our country, things are not good. There is not any support, especially for the *campesinos*. I am not just talking about the indigenous; I am talking about the mestizos, or the people [who] work with the land. There's not a support anymore. Most of the people, using corn [are] coming outside. Specifically, it's the United States. We are not putting any resources on our lands, to keep up with the production with our own corn. And it's not just the corn. We are getting a lot of things from outside, you know, even from country from China, United States, or Canada. So we are being dependable from outside products. You know, when we have pieces of land, you know, very usable or healthy enough to keep up our own production. So that is how things are getting changed and being finally, our parents or elders are not asking us to go back anymore. They are telling us stay there and save money, if you have extra money send it to us, but do not come back in here, things are not good in here. And the only people who are in there, they are the people who are professionals, who have some type of school, of education in the meaning of doctors and lawyers. But, a few of them, they live in my town, they live in the big cities working. Because you can imagine, small town, with probably 6,000 people, 5,000 people, they are not able to do the work locally, so they have to move in the big cities or another states to apply their profession, because in my town it is not realistic for them to stay there.

Marco's Migration Story: Linking Indigenous History to Economic Policy Changes

My oldest daughter came with my wife. I came just by myself. My original idea was to work and stay in Tijuana and bring my wife with me. But, I got a phone call from my mom. This was a time when I said, they were accepting this, and giving [me] advice.

So my mom called me and [told] me, “There are some of your cousins, they are going to El Norte, they are going to cross the border. I think you better ask them if they can take you, you know, if you want to go all the way to El Norte.” I tell my mom, “No, I want to stay in Tijuana.” Well, I called my cousins and they tell me “yeah, why don’t you come with us?”

I grow up in a big city, so we moved. Well my personal story, we moved out from my town when I was nine years old. In ’86, the ending of ’85, I moved out from my town. I grow up basically, with the mestizos, the people who speak Spanish. So I learned Spanish. I feel like I am very fluent in Spanish, for that reason. I do not have a university level of education in the meaning of school, but I have a certain skills. Everywhere I work, I have the opportunity to be a supervisor. I was working good in there.

Personal Reflection: Economic Colonialism, Identity, and Organizing

Marco’s labor organizing began in Michoacan, Mexico. He began to develop organizing strategies and, in the end, workers were compensated according to Mexican labor law. Marco already had experiences with corporate expansion and privatization in his town. These development policies had changed his indigenous tribe’s way of life. Marco became knowledgeable of Mexican labor law. He recognized that Mexican workers needed to use the tools embedded in the legal system to influence change at his worksite.

Marco was motivated to organize fellow workers when the company removed employee benefits. He drew from the protections that Mexican national labor law had established. He also drew from his experiences, as a displaced indigenous person, which provided him with a perspective on the injustices of all workers within a global capitalist system. His indigenous

perspective on corporate expansion and exploitation, as Marco expressed earlier, transformed the traditions of his tribe and the labor they produced. In many ways, his labor organizing in Mexico conveys, that although he relied upon national labor law to organize, his interests in organizing were not necessarily tied to the level of the nation. Instead, his indigenous values sought him to call upon and take action against the injustice of colonization that he already experienced.

In '99 I started noticing something in that city. I worked for one of the largest corporations in Mexico, and they started doing certain things. First of all, they fired all the people. I am talking the security people, people who are able to access areas, janitorial, what we call “*confianza*.” People working for 10-20 years. They fired them, and hired security people, a private agency, and janitor[s]. They hired a private janitor.

[Before then there were] resource[s] and benefit[s] for [the workers]. They were giving us, like transportation from the factory, kind of like a bus from the factory, and not charging us any money to use it. Then [management] sen[t] us a notice, you know to all the workers, saying, “it will not be for free anymore, we need to charge you some money” because it is being privatized. They start[ed] to privatize it from the outsider company.

They start[ed] to reduce a lot of benefits. In Mexico, 2% of the profit belongs to the workers.²¹ Every May they have to do a financial review. So any profit they make 2% is for the workers. That is legally...under the constitution in Mexico, the labor rights.

Workers Organize Around Corporate Expansion

²¹ See Article 123(A)(IX) of the Political Constitution of the United States of Mexico.

A lot of corporations, they do not respect that part [of the labor law that designates 2% of the profit to its workers]. Anyway, I worked for them for almost two years. So, the first year I heard about the workers, complaining about, because they did not get any of that profit. They tell me, like, supposedly the factory was telling them they were not making any profit: "We are in a negative balance, so we don't have any money to share with you." The second year, when I was, they [the workers] asked me to represent them in these meeting. In that meeting, they [the corporation] tell me the same thing, we don't have any profits, you know, we came negative this year and there is no money at all. It was the third year for them doing that and people get angry enough, and they [the workers] said, "No, this is not right."

I started organizing the labor - a labor movement inside the factory. Telling them okay, if we get organized, we can probably get the compensation. The factory [grew] and hired another 200 workers, and they bought this new big trucks to move their stuff, and equipment from Europe to make tissue paper, it's basically napkins and this notebooks. They start doing the extension on that. They publicized, nationally, in specifically that factory. It was being like the highest fabric, in the meaning of production and quality. They send us letters saying, "Congratulations." I told the workers, if we organize we can get...some type of compensation. Based on, supposedly [that] we are the first factory in the entire corporation to get 100% quality and very good production.

I organized the workers in there. It was very tough to deal with them, because it was people coming from Mexico City coming with very new ideas. Like, "If you

don't like it you can go out, we can hire a new people." They fired a lot of people and they start doing this privatization, like in security and all that.

In the end, we spent about a month in meetings and meetings. So we get, not just myself, there was about sixteen people representing the laborers, the *obreros*. There was three of us, the other two decided not to keep it up. In the end we get the compensation for the workers.

Employer Retaliation for Organizing

One of my friends, who organized the workers, put a very expensive tool in his backpack. They accused him of robbery. The other guy, they basically, put him in a discipline, they gave him three days without pay, and he got angry enough and he [left]; he basically did not come back to the factory. In my case, the [took] my people off, I was a supervisor of eighteen people. They moved all my coworkers to another section, because I was having a little difficulty. They told me they got to take my people for just three days, and then they would bring them back. [A week passed], and I start noticing something [was] wrong. I asked my supervisor for the truth. He told me, "Why don't you ask the supervisor of the department." He told me, "it's not personal." He told me they don't like me anymore. I told him to give me a voluntary departure and I signed a paper. I decided not to work for them anymore and followed up with an official process. And that is why I am here.

The last day in the factory, I told the workers, "They really want to fire me. I got to resign. This is my last day. So, from now it depends on you. I think we had a

great organization. It is on you, you are strong enough, because basically they want to fire me. I don't feel comfortable in here.”

That is when I decided to go to come to Tijuana, to start looking for work in there. In the end, I decided to cross the border. But I did not understand what is the implication [was] in crossing the border. I never understand that when you cross the border, you are doing a violation of the law. Or, what this [is what the U. S.] administration thinks. I just crossed like anybody. My family knew I have skills. They told me not to stay in Tijuana and told me to cross the border. Some of my cousins were living in higher and middle class told me they do not have any school and do not write even in their own company. If you cross, you can help them since you have skills, you can help them with their administration. I said, “Ok, let's do it then.”

On Rights: Survival, Family, and Indigenous Culture

Marco now turns to his social position in the U.S. While he does not directly address legal status, Marco emphasizes the socio-economic barriers that exist for undocumented immigrant workers who come from Mexico. He also distinguishes between constitutional rights, which he defines as obligations to citizens of the United States and basic rights, such as access to jobs which require documentation to work in the U.S. Marco also emphasizes indigenous-cultural rights, which he describes as his right to keep his “mother tongue.”

Marco describes his survival strategies,

When I crossed the border, at home I worked very tough jobs - as a *campesino* and as a laborer. But this time, it was the toughest work in my life in the United States. I worked roofing. It was very tough work. So, my wife...Normally, for my

style of life, I work in offices. It was very surprising for me; when my wife called me and asked me how I am doing, I said, “Don’t even ask me, it is very tough work. I want to send you some money. But, I am okay.”

When my cousins told me about, probably, about getting a good job in here - it was true, but [there] was another barrier. It was another wall to jump in, which is the language. I know I have skills, but I have to speak English to use the skills the right way. That’s why I didn’t work in the office in here. I started at the bottom. So, later I was planning to stay here three to five years. I told my wife, I have to save money. I was studying to be a lawyer. I said, “Ok, I was studying, was trying to save money.” Good enough to start a small business, then I would start at the university.

My wife agreed with that, but later it was difficult to save money. I have to pay rent, bills and a little bit of money to support my wife. In the end she said she wanted to come in here. I told her it was very dangerous to come here and how we put our life in a risky situation to be here. Even with that she told me she wanted to come here. We decided she would come here. It was not just my wife, more and more wives wanted to come here with the kids and all that. Even now, personally, I really like, even with all the things. In Mexico—I still like Mexico. In Mexico you do not live not with that pressure like in here [U.S.]. In Mexico it is different, if you have a piece of land and small house, even if it is not a fancy house, good enough to protect you from the rain and to keep you dry you can survive with the basic stuff. Now I have two kids, they are born in here [U.S.] and one more is coming.

Basically, and they — I think they reserve the rights to stay in here. Like anyone else, they are citizens of this country. I said, probably I got to stay in here

until something happens to me. But, I am prepared for any circumstances or anything.

And my kids, they have the rights. *I* worked so hard for these thirteen or fourteen years. I already did a lot of contribution to the country, not just in the meaning of work. I am organizing communities for them to understand their basic rights, not just rights and obligations to be in this country. I am defender of the mother tongue, my native. I am defender of Spanish, even though it is not my first tongue. I am also a defender of promoting for people to speak English if they [have the] ability, if they have the time. A lot of our people do not speak English, not that they don't want to do it. It is because they work so hard, or they work even sometimes two [jobs], you know. Or, simply they get tired enough with ten [or] eight hours working and they want to take a rest.

With that in mind, that is a little of my personal story. I think it is very similar with a lot of people. Because, I notice if we go back a little bit, probably 2000s – '80s, or even 2004 or so, we are talking about *campesinos* or *campesinas*, people coming from little towns. Where now, I am noticing people coming from the cities, you know. People who have the education, in the meaning of school, like lawyers, like doctors; they are coming in here to do the work, as the laborers. I find out, “Hey, how come you came in here?” They say, “Because Mexico is not doing good.” Well, there are some people who are with already with technical studies actually. They are working here as laborers. Hopefully, things change and they can get the right documentation and they can probably—they said, a lot of them tell me they can get some school in here, plus the schooling in Mexico already. Hopefully they can probably get a balance [economic stability] in here. Probably they can work as a

doctor, as a lawyer, with these technical skills. But even if they get—I don't know what you call this, in Spanish it is called *validación*. You have school in Mexico, they tell me that. The problem is they don't have the right validation to work in that position as a doctor, as a lawyer, that is why they prefer to work as a laborer.

Tools to Survive and Organize

Marco's community work continued in the U.S. when he went to apply for a driver's license. He found that many people within his community who attempted to apply for a driver's license were non-English speakers and found it extremely difficult and almost impossible to take the written test. Once again, Marco uses language, a tool of U.S. culture, to demonstrate his ability to get the license. Then, he applies this new language to help the non-English speakers overcome the barriers to success in the United States. He views learning the English language as a way to understand how immigrants are talked about in the U.S. Success, from Marco's perspective, meant attaining the tools necessary to provide basic needs for his family and thus survive, as opposed to individual prosperity.

Lessons from Elders: Language is a Tool for Surviving and Organizing

I think we can never stop [organizing]. I mean it's on different levels. I remember the first time being in here, you know, I noticed members of my community talking about how it is very difficult to get the license, to drive a car in the state of Washington. Since I have feelings, I start asking them, why they feel that way. They said, "Oh, because the people who does have the license, they said the test is so difficult and it's in English. You have to do the driving test." Things like that. So

I ask one of the members of my community - at that time there were probably three people with the license, [one] was a friend who doesn't have schooling. I don't want to [imply] that someone who doesn't have an education, that they are not able to understand. But I found out that if he has a license then there is a way to do it. So I start to do my own investigation, and I got my license. I said "Ok, I can prove it to them." Like it's not that difficult; there are options, its not impossible.

It was impressive for them, when I told them it is not that difficult, "You can do it." I can read and write. I can read the books for you, and you can do it in Spanish. It is false if someone is saying that you can't do it, that it has to be in English. A lot of members of my community get a license to drive.

Later, I am talking about the first three months, I heard about elementary schools, and I hear about programs for parents, who want to speak English as a second language.

A week before when I came in here, I started with lessons in a town near the North Puget Sound region. I basically heard people within my community, basically laughing at me. They said, "it's ridiculous, you just came in here. You want to speak English." I said, "Well, you know, I want to understand how the system works in this country. I want to know the language of this country, so I know how they are talking to us." You know, things like that.

I learned basic English, at that time. I also proved to them that it is not impossible. I noticed a lot of people became interested in learning English.

Focusing on Justice: Past Knowledge Informs the Present

By learning English, Marco not only obtained his driver's license in Washington State, he also helped the community understand Washington State policies on driving and also helped others pass the test. Marco's indigenous past, forced migration, the destruction of his traditional cultures, the racialization of undocumented communities and non-native speakers, shaped his awareness of a larger capacity to organize. If the tools of the colonizers were learned, known, and understood within his community, they would be better equipped to stand up against the injustices.

Marco's priority was survival, family unity, and acquiring the basic needs. He was not seeking to get ahead in his profession, even though he usually ended up with promotions. Ultimately, he was not interested in pleasing management. Bringing his indigenous traditional sense of community and having to navigate a new culture with new ideas in the host countries, Marco developed close social ties to Latinos in the United States and demonstrated his radical organizing practices:

It is almost impossible when you have these feelings of social justice, of understanding the system. No matter where, no matter in what conditions, you can always do it, and recognize within the community. And I did a lot of [small] things. At that time, in the first year period, I organized some people. It is like a warehouse, they work with the vegetables. But, and it was a supervisor in there, really bad. Unfortunately, [he was] Latino, like the rest of our community, [but] he was doing a lot of bad stuff around our people.

The year in here, I was not able to understand the system and understand our labor rights. I just feel this is not right. [The boss] was calling us "stupid" and "animals." You know, things like that, bad things. Treating them [co-workers] as

slaves and things like that. I asked the people, you know especially, some people, let's say, "citizens" of this country being confronted with this situation. And I said, "Wow, how come you are not protesting." This is not good. You know, he was totally abusing, especially the women. I had a meeting with them at the lunchtime and told them we are going to let the owner of the factory or this warehouse [to] know [about] the situation; that this is not right.

They were afraid to organize. They said, "No, because they can lay off us." In this [Washington] state it is very easy to layoff people. They know we don't have rights. And I was a bit shocked. Ok, I am coming from Mexico, where labor rights are not good and supposedly in the United States you can supposedly, [have] the rights, or the meaning of the labor rights, [they] are supposedly better. Hearing about the labor rights, hearing this from my family and they [were] doing this back and forth. They were good benefits and they pay good.

We organized a meeting with this foreman, this supervisor. And we told him our disagreement with his actions, but he didn't change. So we organized a strike. We didn't work for one day and a half. We stopped at the lunchtime and we went to the gardens, in the landscaping area outside of the building. And we said we are not going back until he changes his attitude.

On the second day we decided to not work. You know, some of us felt afraid and they did work. They called me on the telephone, they said, "What's going on? You are organizing all of this." I said, "You know, people are not happy, this person is abusing them. It's been very obvious, especially the women. You have to take care of this situation."

They talked with him and things changed. You know, his attitude was better, in the meaning of, at that time he understood people got organized. But, I was not feeling comfortable there so I decided to start looking for a new job.

And I worked for a golf course for probably five or six years. I learned a lot of things, and I learn also, like, its not all the people, in the meaning of supervisors, not all people are bad people. There are also people who want to help, who have the passions with people who do not speak English. So I worked for them. And it went good. We did things here and there in the meaning of labor. The supervisor, or the general supervisor, he was a very good person. We had a few complaints but anyone who had complaints they attended to right away.

Later the golf course they changed, in the meaning, you know, we did the construction part. Later some of the workers, we stayed with the maintenance groups, to keep up the maintenance part of the golf course. A new company came in with different ideas. I remember that time when a lot of members of our community were like couriers. How to operate mowers, you know, they were giant lawnmowers. And this company was not giving them the opportunity to learn how to use these technologies.

I didn't work for a year, I went to do something else. Later I came back, you know, with this golf course. And that time I came back with some things in my mind. I worked there for five or six years and they are not giving us— or, the maintenance crew: this new company was not giving us opportunities. Outside it was so bad, in the meaning of new work its difficult. I decided to go back and organize the workers. At

that time I gave them—I ask [management] for a chance for a year to give [the workers] a demonstration of how we can do the work. When the people are happy, when they are getting good salary, [management] are giving [the workers an] opportunity to escalate their position at work.

And they said, “Well, most of them do not speak English. It will be difficult for us to have direct communication with them. That is why we were just using them [the maintenance crew] as laborers. And I tell them, “No, I don’t think that is true. Just give them the opportunity for at least a month. We will see if in one month we can prove it to you.” We can change your mind.

To keep it short, we demonstrated to [management that] our people are able to do the technical work. Our people was able to do other labor, or even supervising. You know, they were very happy. That specific year they gave me an award for doing that. The general manager sent me a letter saying, “Thank you, this is the best golf course in Washington State and Northwest.” Washington, Idaho, Montana. That’s when I said we do not have to strike; it does not have to be fighting each other. You can make change, even if it is a small thing wherever you are, at school, at work, at church. Any area where you are around people; living in an apartment complex, or if you are the homeowner, you always have the opportunity to organize with your community.

There are a lot of people who do not have the right information, they do have information, but a lot of times this information is to oppress people. I call this liberation, when the people have the right information, and they know how to organize, we let them use their skills, and things change. They really change.

Economic Exploitation in the United States

In the following excerpt, Marco recognized that labor force of undocumented and Spanish speaking workers was racialized. Furthermore, he noted that the Latino community is not homogeneous, even in organizing. Marco explains how he sought out organizations that modeled the life he wanted to live and how he shunned personal advancement in the professional world. He also discusses how he found a community organization that was advancing the power of a community that did not know it existed:

Personal Opportunities vs. Obligations to the Community

I had opportunities [to move up in rank] even at the golf course. In there I worked as a foreman. It doesn't make any sense, when they are giving you a lot of opportunities and they don't want to pay you the right wage. In the golf course, I ask them [for a raise]. They don't give it to me. So I said, "Okay, bye-bye."

At that time I start my own business, landscaping. It went very good for about five years. Five years ago I noticed a lot of activity in the construction area. I learned how to install irrigation systems and systems related to landscaping and waterfalls. It was a very good market at that time. The construction was very good. In the meaning of money I [made] very good money at that time. I didn't save it. But, we tried to buy a house.

We changed our lives a little bit. And, in about that time, about five six years ago, I noticed having more time free. Because I was doing my work, my own boss, not anyone putting me in an hourly rate like, "You have to be there at this time and

that time.” I had been able to hire people and give them some obligations. At that time, I was like, “Okay, I have to start doing something.”

At that time I was able to pay for Internet. I did research in the state of Washington. I started looking in the newspaper and I started looking for organizations in the state of Washington. And I said, “You know I better call them and see how I can help.” I noticed that a lot of this information about our rights, about our labor right, any type of people telling me, we don’t have rights. Most of our community—or some of our community [said], “You know they don’t have documentation and it is very difficult to organize them.” I said, “You know what I don’t think it’s that true.” I better start looking around and see what I can find. So I noticed California at that time. You know a lot of organizations in California, a lot of movement in California, but in Washington there was at least four or five Latino organizations. You know, but not that noise in this area. I hear about the May Day rallies in this area. I hear a 300, 500, 1200 people getting together in this area. And, I said, “Ah!”

At that time, I heard about (a well known organizer from California) coming to the state of Washington. I heard and I said, personally, I read things about him and thought, “This guy is interesting, I better attend this meeting.” So, I attended the meeting with him. He gave very good information.

At the same meeting I met [another well know organizer from the North Puget Sound area in Washington State, from a community organization that works...to spread knowledge about immigrant rights within the immigrant community]. It was very interesting how we met [the organizer from the La Norte Puget Sound Organización] was in opposition about our ideas. California has his own ideas and

Puget Sound has his own ideas, very much similar, but some people around there; I felt a little bit confrontation between activists in the South Puget Sound area and North Puget Sound. So, I [thought] I better do something because this meeting is going nowhere. It was more about personal attacks. I told the North Puget Sound organizer to keep his own personal ideas and to let us do this meeting. I am talking about this because it is interesting how I met him. He came directly to me and said, "Ok." He didn't talk anymore and left the meeting. And at that time I felt a connection with him, I felt he looked very interesting. Before I left the meeting I started looking around asking who [he] was and what organization was he leading.

I heard about La Norte Puget Sound Organización [LNPSO]. Some people told me "they are not a good organization." Basically, some people told me, if someone wants to be there they are not very open. They want to just leading the movement, but they don't want others to lead the movement, and things like that.

But I heard this in Mexico: when you are organizing a movement, it is always the people from the other side who probably have a misunderstanding. Or, probably, they don't know about the movement. They have an idea but they are not there in the beginning, when you are having these meetings, because they do not understand.

They want to get involved when things are done.

The first time when I met the members of LNPSO, [sic] I don't want to say they are wrong, I feel they are good. Churches are good in the meaning of their philosophy or what they are for. They are good, they can help with spirituality activities, or if you have a pain or you need something, but they are not organizers. They cannot be neutral, because they have strong beliefs of the Bible and God. It is

good though, in their manner to organize. To be an organizer you need to be neutral, you have to be very neutral, otherwise you could get lost. So, [with] LNPSO, I feel that way, mostly about being directly.

I saw something personal. When we started this conversation I talked about my mom. I told my mom, I started my own business, things are very good, in the meaning of a better wage; we have more money. But, I feel very empty. I asked her what do you think about this, “I don’t feel very good. There are a lot of abuses. People are talking about immigration reform. I feel like I have to be there.” She told me don’t feel like, if you have a lot of money, or the business you are doing the wrong thing.” She told me,

Keep in mind; your father [sic] did a lot of work, like what you are doing without getting any money, or without getting paid. This type of work is very painful. You did this type of work in Mexico. You know how the situation [in Mexico] is. Be careful, because in there you don’t know how your basic rights are—in there.

I said, “Yeah, but I can feel people are being abused. I feel that, but I also feel like people feel they have no power.” I explained to her about the [driver’s] license, about when they were feeling like *it’s impossible* and things like that. It seems like in this area people are misinformed.

When I said, personal, let’s say I have landscaping, and it’s a good product in the meaning of business, in the meaning of profit. At the same time, I get a phone call from any city around this area, that police are abusing our people in here, or they are being discriminated of our community, in apartment complexes or probably anywhere. So, in the right side there’s this project and you can get a good profit. You

can get great personal things. On the other hand, it's people asking you to organize them.

I feel profit can be good money, but for me, the people in need are more important than any profit. Any money in this, but it's not good, also. It's not good to stop a project, especially when it's under contract. If you stop a contract in this country it can be a huge problem. If it's verbally, it's the same thing, you know. Personally, I said, "Ok, I better stop doing these big projects and I keep it up in the small business, landscaping." That way I can be able to be open or flexible when the people have a need. I can stop by and help them organize. I always tell them, I can probably—I did it once, I get a phone call. So, I left all my tools in one place, and I told them, "I have to go."

He asked me, "What happened?" I told him, "Oh we have to get organized in—southeast Puget Sound city, Washington. Things are not good." But, it really affected me in my business, but gave me good feelings, personal. At that time I probably lost a lot of money, but I did something good [by] organizing the community. You know, this is not a direct answer. It is basically, something about me, something [about how] some people live, [how] they think.

Living Indigenous is about the Mother Land, not Profit

The first time when we [organizers] had this dialogue, they asked me, "What books did you read?" Or they tell me, "How did you get prepared to be at that level?" And I always tell them, I didn't read any books, you know. It is coming, you know – I use a lot of memories from my elders, indigenous people, and when people said, "Oh,

no. It's impossible, we cannot survive without this or that ...” And always, my memories, coming, when I was little, well, basically being able to provide your own food, in your daily life without really thinking about profit or anything like that. Just using the land, the motherland, to provide yourself food. Not asking her for more for no reason. You are just asking for profit. If you really have a need, the motherland can give it to you. You know, but don't ask her for [excess], I feel like, well.

It is probably a different manner to organize. I feel attached to my elders. I feel my mouth is only a tool. When I tried to speak with the people, publicly, I always ask for their needs and from the elders, even if they are not in front of me. Once in a while, I say it in my mind, I tell [the elders], “I am really sorry if I am going to say something wrong, because I know I am just your instrument. Give me knowledge to give the right information to these people. If I don't know something, our elders tell us, “If you don't know something, just keep quiet. Don't say things, like, invent things.” If someone asks you something and you don't know, it is better to keep silent and be honest with your people. Tell them, “You know what? I don't know, that is something specific, and we can investigate that together.”

The People Behind the Leaders Lead

The other thing [about being] indigenous and being in the movement, it is not like Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa, or Martin Luther King you know. It is like, *our leadership: it is a community*. When we tell a story, when we read the story, whoever did these books, they did a lot of attention for Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa, Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King and people like that, but they don't talk about the people

behind them, the people who really did the work. Historically, when you talk about just one person, you are, let's say, it is not good for the movement, it is not good for the community, you know. Because, Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, probably they were the public people, leading the movement. Without the community there would be no leader leading the movement. And you have to ask your community. You have to follow their direction. This is leadership and I really liked it, when LNPSO followed up with our community, and [the community] gives us direction. They give us the points on what to do. In these community meetings we analyze any proposals for immigration reform, any situation. In the community we have the opportunity to talk about it, to say things, and if we don't have a unanimous decision on how we vote, then we decide not to do it. We decide on how to help in every meeting. We heard about "stop deportations" and they are still there asking, "Stop deportation. Stop separating families!" And, me, I ask, "How can we do that?" I know we cannot meet with Barack Obama. Even if I get an opportunity, I don't think he is going to listen to me. I don't think he is going to sign anything to stop deportations. But, we can do things locally, like the legislation in north Puget Sound County, and the ordinance in the south Puget Sound city. We can do things like that, locally.

The local ordinance at the east Puget Sound city, where they clarified that they cannot do this [police racial profiling] anymore, they can only do this, only if the federal government asks them to do it, or if it is a criminal investigation related to drugs and things like that. [Another example] is adult gambling facility when we organized them. We helped these neighbors in this mobile parking lot.

Local Level and Resource Limitations on Grassroots Community Organizing

We can do small things in that level, with our resources. Realistically, we don't have the capacity to be at the national level. You know, lobby with these politics and things like that, but we can, at some level, we can. These organizations, at the national level, we can start working with them. We can start asking them certain questions. We can start approaching them, in our side in the need of the people and the community. And, I am doing that, at every single meeting in Washington D.C., Chicago—everywhere. I am the one who probably disagree with how they are leading the movement. A lot of organizations in the United States they already know about me. They say, "Oh [there he is]; he is not going to agree with us."

Approaches to Organizing within the Immigrant Rights Movement

I remember once, someone from Texas. I sit with him at a table because he was an elder, for me he was an elder. I said, "I got to talk to him and see what he thinks about the movement." He told me something very interesting, he said, "How come you are telling these organizations, 'you are not doing things the right way?'" I told him, "See, first of all, they start talking about immigration reform, based on the family. That's good. Then, later they said unification and being together. Not just Latinos, but African Americans, all the immigrants, and all the community working together to preach immigration reform." In the end the last speaker said, "Oh, we better to analyze our realistic situation. We better start looking whether it is *realidad* to ask for full immigration reform. We better accept this in small pieces." I told the gentleman, "See, in the beginning, they said being united, working in the same

direction, pushing for something for the whole community.” In the end, they are telling us like, “It’s not possible.” What do you call: same organization, saying two different things. That is why I told them, in front of two to three hundred people, they are not being good leaders and it is not good. They have to talk about it before these types of meetings. The first speaker was very good and I connected with him. The last speaker, she was throwing the rest of the good organizers. Probably, they [the audience] is going to start thinking, “Oh yeah, it’s true, it’s not realistic.” They will accept it as is, you know. They [asked] me, “Marco, they are a nation-wide organization, with a lot of money. How do you think you can tell them to change their minds?” I am not telling them to change their minds, not telling them to do. I am just telling them my point of view, or my analysis. If they don’t want to accept my analysis, that’s ok. But, I don’t want to remain silent when I am noticing something that is not good.

On Identity, Experience, and Leadership

About probably four years ago, someone asked me for an interview. It happened once, publicly. It was one of our elders in Mexico. I have that recording. He said, “Well, this has been a long, long time talking, Marco. I just want to say, sorry if someone gets tired, but I want to explain why.” He said, “Indigenous people: we do not speak directly.” I notice like Latinos or the Hispanic people, they are a little poetic, but they are also direct and short. If you are, “Oh, tell me yes or no.” They are probably going to tell me, “Yes or No.” But, in English it is very specific. You have to say yes or no. You agree or disagree. “That’s it, I agree or disagree: I don’t want to

hear anything else, just tell me yes or no.” Indigenous people, we talk in *espiral*. I don’t know if you noticed these Mayan glyphs, or this Nayarit glyphs [Marco gestures to a painting on his wall]. *Entonces* [Marco takes a piece of paper and draws a swirl]. We speak that way. He said, “When I [am] talking about these things that we are trying to do, *I am thinking in P’urhépecha*.”

I am trying to do that. You know, while I am speaking in English. Not Spanish to English, or directly in English. And it’s interesting, I said, “Yeah, that’s true.” Our *tatas*, our *abuelas y abuelos*, when we ask them for advice, they got to ask you if you have time, at least two hours or three, because they have to speak. Once in a while they have to use stories related to, real stories, related to the real people. They tell you, don’t let this destroy you, like it already destroyed someone. They tell you a long-long-long story. In the end there is no way to—normally in here [U.S.] they ask you “Any questions?” With the elders, there is no way to ask any questions, because they already give you every single detail of the story—they want to convince you. In the end you just want to, “Oh! That’s why!” So, they use a lot of common sense, you know. More than reading books, or scientific-based, it is the common sense and the experience of life.

Who is going to Speak for Us? Experience informs the IR Movement

That is why I feel, not good, honestly, when someone who didn’t cross the border, who didn’t have these difficulties, at least three or four days without food, without water, and later, they are going to lead the movement? It is almost impossible. How are they going to feel our feelings? How are they going to

understand our needs? You know, with a lot of respect? But, they are citizens of this country, and they don't know. Some members of our communities said we better ask, whoever is in the TV, who is the most popular, in the news or any people in the media, we better ask them to support us, to lead the movement. I thought, "Hmm, do you think they understand our feelings?"

One of the media guys in *Univision*, the most popular, he is making four million per year as a commentator in the news. That is four million per year. I asked them, "Do you think he is going to leave the four million to come down to the base and organize us? I don't think so, but we can ask him." Probably, he came with a visa, as a student in the United States. I say, "Do you think he really understands, in the moment, when you came to the United States, when you are in the desert without food?" I say, "No, I don't think so." That's the problem, when we have to ask these people to be our leaders, when we are suffering and we are the leaders. We have the power to close this division, *if we want it. If we want it, we really have the power, because we are the people who paid.*

But, there are people who do not understand that. Even if they have the money, we have the power, if we want to change the media, or this misinformation from the media. When I am having these meetings in the community they tell me—I ask them, "Tell me a little about the Dream Act. Tell me the basic points of the Dream Act." People, they tell me, "Oh, the young people, they can qualify for this and that. Once in a while they are right, but most of the time they say things like, "We didn't hear about it." I ask them, "Did you read the bill, or your son. Did he show you the bill, what's the Dream Act?" They say, " Oh, I just listened to the media, and

Univision or *Telemundo*.” I say that is the problem because people are not getting the right information. In Univision, they talk about the Dream Act for thirty seconds or one minute. I think one minute is a lot, because this media costs a lot of money. They [the media] are just publicizing this, not because they want to inform people, they want an audience, they want to talk about polemic things, not with this professionalization, like, “Ok, let’s talk about it and analyze the points.” They say, “Oh, this is good,” or “our leader—” whoever, they come up with a name, “Our leader is saying this and that.” I say, “And who [said] he is a leader?” They say, “Oh, he is a lot of times on the TV. I say, yeah, so the TV tells you he is the leader and not the community. [laughs]

Summary

Legal status and nationality are central themes of immigration policy proposals. However, Marco’s indigenous worldview allows him to look beyond the homogenizing effects of immigration policy to make connections with Mexican and *mestizo* workers who have been displaced, marginalized, and exploited along with his indigenous counterparts. In other words, he thinks and, thus, lives as indigenous to convey a strong affiliation with a broader community of workers. Marco’s discussion of basic needs, his children’s new U.S. culture and their inherited indigenous traditions, can help us identify how to decolonize “nationality” in order to expand our ideas of rights. For Marco, a political social movement is based on his indigenous right to move about freely like his people did before national borders existed. Thus, immigrant rights are not only about radicalizing beyond a nationalistic social movement; this community work also acknowledges a pre-border existence.

Marco, thus, intends to critically engage with the topic of immigration, to consider the rights of indigenous and all people to move about freely, between borders, but most importantly, for the basic needs. The “basic needs” he talks about is the ability to survive, and do not correlate with survival for personal profit. Marco is invoking a cultural and political understanding of the right of all people to move freely and the right to remain in the United States without fear from the militarized border and the dispossession of autonomy.

From Marco’s indigenous worldview, this suggests that there is the potential for a broader community to organize around a cultural-political and, potentially, Brown affiliation. This affiliation is based on the mutually shared experiences of a racialized community who have worked the land in agricultural jobs as part of the capitalist system. Through corporate expansion, indigenous people were forced to sell their labor for corporate profit in Mexico. Furthermore, he recognizes that collective power may not be fully realized in the North Puget Sound Region by non-English speaking residents even though they have power and are capable of making their political voices heard. He understands that some non-English speakers are still misinformed about their indigenous history and of the labor struggles they live through as factory workers, landscapers and service sector workers - all jobs that he had once held.

An indigenous perspective importantly informs Marco’s strategy to focus on people’s basic needs for survival rather than on legal status. This perspective challenges the category of immigrant status and national boundaries. Viewing migration from his indigenous history and identity, he challenges the institutions that uphold legality based on the privilege of U.S. citizenship. He challenges legal status through his indigenous identity, as it is exclusionary and a rigid categorization, associated with maintaining a social knowledge that subordinates non-citizens into a group of exploited laborers. Yet, he also realizes that understanding the

nationalistic system can be reinterpreted through his traditions and affiliation with his community. Instead of coming from a colonial mentality, which bases rights on privatization and the individual²², he advocates for an alternate understanding of legality that is based on power of the people and the right to maintain cultural traditions, basic needs, and family unity.

By starting out with a pre-history of national boundaries, Marco's claims that indigenous people have traveled from the north to the south freely and without national regulation. This worldview implies that the superimposed structures of capitalism (e.g. colonialism, empire building, and nation-making), have subordinated and tried to erase indigenous culture for purposes of profit. This national project has transformed his indigenous community into wage laborers on either side of the Mexico-U.S. border.

Marco also explains European and Christian influences over his town and on the indigenous people. The effects of colonial dominance introduced new ideas of inadequacy, boundaries, and "classifications." Marco's decolonial vision resists legacies of colonialism through his locating of talking points for coalition building and solidarity with others who experience similar struggles. Marco points out, that despite the colonial efforts to transform the P'urhépecha tribe, they have found ways to resist.

His understanding of movement through "Las Americas" also allows him to point out the instability of legal status and the categorization of immigrant that provides legitimacy to the legal and non-legal dichotomy that shapes the hegemonic understanding of immigration policy reform. Marco is able to deconstruct and challenge the socialized category of the outsider as immigrant, by explaining colonial influence and legacies of capitalism on national boundaries between

²² Thomas Hobbes (1651) in *Leviathan* and John Locke (1667) in *The Second Treatise of Government* establish social contracts. Concepts from these texts, recognizable in U.S. Constitution today are the right to life, liberty, and property. The influence of these two political texts relate to the social meaning and political discourse of individual rights, which have justified among other things, consent and government. See Glenn (2002) for a critique on citizenship its inequality between the citizen and non-citizen. Rightly, Glenn asserts that citizens were white men who had rights at the expense of the labor of non-whites, women and children (p. 20).

Mexico and the U.S. The superimposed capitalist structure that privileges some and excludes an immigrant workforce maintains idea of *the* immigrant as a category (Nevins, 2010; Ngai, 2004).

These lived experiences of Marco, an indigenous organizer, inform talking points on a collective struggle against U.S. colonial expansion, which must be taken into account when considering U.S. immigration policy. The state imposed dominance, by changing the structure of labor on the indigenous communities, and coercion to migrate from Mexico to the United States, thus seeks to maintain dominance, by extension the maintenance of marginalized communities.

Marco's story paints a picture of a different type of immigration policy that must account for economic displacement of all workers. Without understanding Marco's worldview, policy citizens and non-citizens are at a grave disadvantage for truly shaping immigration policy, let alone advancing immigrant rights. Scholars have discussed the coercive structures and systems of exploitative labor practices.²³ Political pundits have discussed these larger structural forces less. Marco's personal experience speaks in the interest of immigrants, refugees, and indigenous people. From Marco's perspective, a critique of legal status puts us closer to understanding his right to maintain traditions and culture and the right to survive for the basic needs.²⁴ In opposition to capitalist aims, Marco wants his audiences to recognize indigenous communities' philosophy and principles of organizing in the Puget Sound Region.

²³See Nevins (2010), Ngai (2004), Parrenas (2001) for further reading on global workers and colonial effects on racialized labor.

²⁴ See cosmopolitan writers such as Seyla Benhabib.

Chapter III: Ramona, Mexico, 41

I met Ramona in 2008 in a southeast city in Puget Sound. At the time, she worked for a non-profit in the north Puget Sound region. As a paid community organizer, Ramona mobilized individuals to speak out against a city ordinance that required all contracted city workers to pass an e-verify screening at the time of employment.²⁵ When Ramona contacted me to speak out against E-verify at the city council meeting, she had hoped to also mobilize Latino-friendly business leaders and immigrant rights advocates to speak against the proposal. Unfortunately, the immigrant-rights-friendly community was not well mobilized the day of the city council's public hearing. The ordinance passed due to the strong presence of anti-immigrant militiamen in an open public meeting and due to one city councilmember, who sponsored the ordinance that persuaded other council members to take an immigration enforcement approach in local government. Thus, the city began a relationship between local and federal government to enforce immigration law.

Since that day, Ramona organized in similar political settings (within which I participated) and May 1st marches in north Puget Sound. I even ran into her in Washington D.C. at a national conference that included an immigration policy session on Secure Communities and E-verify. In 2011, I interviewed Ramona. I was struck by her confidence as leader in the grassroots political community and her dedication to blending her work between lobbying and grassroots organizing for immigrant rights. I heard that Ramona was involved with Latino media

²⁵ E-verify is a database that checks Social Security numbers or other forms of personal identifiers, such as a work visas, to verify proof of legal presence. Personal identifiers, used to document legal status, are collected in the database and is overseen by the FBI in partnership with Immigration Customs Enforcement and local government. The database is a platform that builds on collaborations between private and public employers in local and federal government in order to locally enforce immigration laws via apprehension, detainment, and possibly deportation. Since the e-verify database is administered at the local level, it has come under scrutiny by immigrant rights advocates, due to database inaccuracies and that the data collected includes anyone who has adjusted legal status. Employers use this database platform to coerce undocumented immigrant workers into substandard working conditions, such as work with no pay, poor and strenuous working conditions, or by threatening to call ICE.

and that the Latino community relied on and trusted the information centered on Latinos-specific political news and news on behalf of undocumented immigrants that she disseminated.

Because of the dominance of the legality discourse in mass media news reports and because of the framing of immigration as a problem that must be contained, it is rare to access undocumented persons' perspectives on immigrant rights organizing. Often the media portrays undocumented individuals as living "in the shadows." Before I met to interview Ramona for the first time, I was unaware that she was undocumented. For purposes of their own protection, immigrant rights allies and undocumented immigrants often do not speak of their legal status in daily interactions. Through this absence and silence, there is less of a chance that the issues undocumented communities face will be articulated. This is why Ramona's life story further illustrates how the legal/non-legal binary is insufficient in addressing and assessing the lived reality of immigrants in national discourse on immigrants and current immigration policy. It is through her anti-oppression outreach in the media and her long-term training on the forms of policy and procedures that repress her communities that she is able to problematize legality.

Much like Marco, Ramona discussed how her personal experiences as an immigrant motivates the work she does in her community. As she spoke about injustice, Ramona discussed the role of Latino media and that the representations in the media do not automatically represent immigrant interests. By using Latino media as a tool in her organizing practices, she organized in the interest of keeping families unified. Ramona diligently keeps herself informed about immigration law and her rights. Her narrative reiterates a call for family unity and a fleshing out of internalized oppressions, which necessarily, complicates undocumented people, Latino, and LGBT lived experiences. She explains how a mass movement of people is presently organizing

in such a way that implodes the simplistic categories of legal and non-legal status. Below is Ramona's personal narrative:²⁶

On Legal Status

Unlike Marco, Ramona did not cross the U.S. – Mexico border clandestinely. Ramona never intended to settle in the Pacific Northwest, but she was married and decided to overstay her tourist visa to be with her then husband. Ramona found the culture difficult to adjust to and thus, she began to involve herself in volunteerism to gain connections within the Latino community. Like Marco, Ramona felt that the Latino and immigrant community were misinformed. The internet gave both of them access to the culture and community through access that would have otherwise been lacking and unknown without this information tool at their fingertips. After her daughter was born, Ramona began to take a more political role toward anti-oppression work, utilizing the media and the internet:

In 1992, I was married to a person who had lived here [in the U.S.] before. He wanted to live here again. I was really reluctant, but the economy had gotten really bad in my home country [Mexico], so I decided to join him here [in the Pacific Northwest].

With respect to immigration law, I have no status. I came to the U.S. with a tourist visa. I went back and forth several times with my visa. I hadn't decided. I was pretty much a tourist, but I would spend a lot of time here. After a couple of years, I decided to stay. I overstayed my visa, you know a tourist visa is impossible to renew. So now, I have no status. The last time was back in '96. For about four years, I was a tourist from '92-'96. I went back and forth because I was not happy here in the U.S. I had culture shock.

²⁶ Personal narrative March 16, 2011 conducted in English.

I always had an impression of the U.S. that it is a very imperialistic country. So I had really mixed emotions of being here, while I was thinking that this country [the U.S.] was provoking a lot of misery in my own country [Mexico].

I became politically involved in my country. A lot of activity started happening where a lot of people who were involved in politics started to get killed. So, I got really scared. I figured if really big named politicians were not risking their lives I felt like, “Well, why should I?” So, I decided to join my partner at the time again here. That is when I decided to overstay my visa.

Pacific Northwest Culture and Isolation

I came directly to Pacific Northwest city because my ex-husband lived here for years prior. Obviously, my entrance was in different cities because there is not direct flight. It took me years to move here because there weren't many Latinos. Or, if there were, I couldn't find them. You know being a new immigrant; you rely on other immigrant experiences.

Community Needs and Oppression

Sadly, the immigrant experiences I was surrounded by were really negative and misinformed. Most of the information that I got was really wrong information. That was one of the reasons later that I became involved [in organizing]. These people that I met, now I understand, they had this tremendous level of oppression, and they were replicating this. Obviously they didn't want others to – I think what happened with these specific communities [was] they felt other had to. So, it was really misinformed.

On Media, Latino Culture, and Addressing (Mis)information

I started finding out about Latino media. This was a really small community. The quality of it [Latino media] was terrible. I didn't want to read their newspapers or hear their radio because there was no news. It didn't give me anything to learn about my community here. The national newscast still sucks. It is really bad. I wanted to watch the news, but there was no news at that time. It was only like from 4 a.m. to 4 p.m. This was a newscast from Miami. The only way I could get the Mexican newspaper was to go to the city open market one week later. This was 1992-94. Thank goodness for the Internet. By 1996, I had the Internet and was really happy.

Still Latina Despite Citizenship

What made me decide to get really involved [in immigrant rights] was that I had my daughter in 1997. When my daughter was born I realized I had to do something. Although she is a U.S. citizen, I realized she would not be seen as one. She has a Latino name, and she is a daughter of immigrants. Right after her birth, I started to look for chances to become involved.

I spent so much time on the computer. I thought, maybe I can teach computer [skills]. Also, I had a programming background from Mexico. They [the center I volunteered at] asked, "*En Español?*" I said, "Sure." From then on it began. I started getting to know the community in that area – the Latino community.

I got involved in understanding how non-profits work. I joined the board in this community center. From then, I met other people involved in other non-profits – events

and all those sorts of things. It really just started from getting involved at this community center, and I asked to volunteer.

Gender Roles and Sexism in the Latino Community and Organizing

Like Marco, Ramona also struggled to work with different approaches to organizing. In Chapter I, Marco struggled with Latino employers who were replicating abusive working conditions, and some of the Latino workers expected these conditions. He also dealt with dynamics of differing political ideology within the immigrant rights movement. Ramona also was aware of these organizing dynamics. Unlike Marco, for Ramona, gender dynamics within organizing was what she sought to address. As Ramona began to volunteer and became more engaged with the Latinos of Washington State, she began to realize that the complexity of multiple oppressions within her community was reproducing misinformation for Latinos. She sought to dismantle this misinformation by educating potential Latino leaders on the history of oppression and dynamics of identity.

I started working on those opportunities as well. I found a couple of groups here and there. I went through a transition: I learned their politics, how to get funding, turf wars among them. Talking about the Latino community, I learned about their power struggle, sexism – big baggage there. A lot of these groups expect the women that join will take notes, are going to bring food for the events, are going to clean up, but are not expected that these women are the main speakers. They expect the women to bring children and contribute to diversity. They do not expect the women to question the leadership. I think that was a big issue for me.

Internalized Sexism, Paternalism, and Heteronormativity in Organizing

I joined a group of women. I struggled there because there was not a lot of conversation around this – it was more about – it became a social club. It was a social group because you are isolated. Most of them don't know how to drive – or things like that. There was the social piece but not the social change that I was looking for. It was really hard for me to address other issues – progressive issues such as abortion or LGBT community. It is still taboo in our [Latino] community. So I didn't find support for women who were looking for that kind of support to be part of the leadership of the movement. I didn't find it until years later. I found mentors in women who had gone through this – they had reached a level of leadership.

We are not a group. I call them mentors because I keep calling them every time and asking them for their advice. They have accepted that role. I never found – I haven't seen anyone doing that support for female organizers.

M1, Labor Struggle, Immigrant Struggle

The immigrant rights struggle meant different things to people and collectivities. Since 2006, May Day has been a point of discussion for many labor unions that sought to incorporate these transnational workers into a traditionally nationalistic organizing campaign. Because May Day 2006 involved many groups: labor, immigrants, service based providers, and the faith-based communities, many have focused their discourse on a labor upsurge and what to do about utilizing immigrants within an organizing model. Ramona describes who and what May Day meant to people interested in the immigrant communities to which they belonged.

[May 1, 2006] wasn't really a workers' issue – I mean *it was*, but I don't like the idea that labor claims it because it wasn't done by labor unions [sic]. It was meant to stop the Sensenbrenner Bill [HR4437].²⁷

Now the reality here in Washington State is, the Latino mainstream media refused, totally refused, to talk about immigration. I personally went on different radios asking them to give us some space to talk about immigration raids that had been happening since 2003, about abuses that the police and ICE were doing around our community. They totally refused. Why? Because – this is how they put it – they said: “We don't want this to scare the community. Our sponsors want them to go and shop. We need them to go to community events, going dancing, and if we talk about these issues, they are going to be scared, and they are not going to go out.”

Now why all of a sudden did media finally open the door and turn out so many people—at least in the Latino community? It was because of the Catholic Church.²⁸ They [clergy and parishioners] would have been really affected by this bill because the bill was terrible. It would have made non-profits, including churches that were helping undocumented individuals liable. So they were the ones who were organizing in calling on all Latino media to do turnout. So the push of the Catholic Church to media and obviously their own parishioners was really the formula that brought out those thousands and thousands of people out across the nation. This is something a lot of people don't know because all of a sudden we just heard in a church or a radio station – “Hey you have to go out and do this [march].” Obviously, labor had their share but those thousands

²⁷ In 2006 H.R. 4437 was an anti-immigrant piece of legislation that would have criminalized undocumented immigrants and anyone in a service profession that provided support to these communities, such as clergy and social workers.

²⁸ See Ruth Milkman, “Critical Mass: Latino Politics in California” - *NACLA Report*, which discusses the role of the Catholic Church in the mass mobilizations of May 1, 2006.

of people who came out probably didn't even know they were part of a union. So although they brought members, they were not the main numbers that we saw in 2006.

Leading the Fight, Latino Media as a tool to engage the community

I think the main objective here is to have the community lead the fight. They have their voice, but if they don't lead, if they are not the main group deciding what to do or how to do it, you are just asking for opinions. But at the end, someone else makes the decisions. To me, it has been really critical to have, not only their voice, but to have their leadership and that means skills. In order to have our community lead, they need to have specific skills that would allow them to take on the fight. That is why I utilize Latino media in my organizing all the time because I think it is a tremendous tool.

I see it working already. For years and years, I would go on the radio and talk about – not only immigration reform on a national level, but [also] what has happened at the state level or even in a specific city. Now people expect to have that kind of information. At the same time, we have kind of surpassed a little of the fear which has been really well engrained in our community. Now we are kind of going to the next step, which is taking action. Now it is much more easier to go on radio or TV or Facebook or whatever social media that is out there and people start taking action. Also, I have been able, throughout the years, found specific people in the community that I have helped develop their leadership skills, so that they can take on more of the strategy area and more of the decision making, also how to navigate the power structure.

A Broken System

I am [an] example of how broken the system is – even people like me [with] absolutely no criminal record - on the contrary my activism represents community service. I am a single mom. I have been involved with my daughter’s school. Beyond that, I have been able to raise an awesome kid who is really conscious and socially minded. I think I also donated to non-profit organizations. So, in general, if we talk about good moral character, as immigration law puts it, I [have] surpassed that.

So, how come I don’t get it? I never used public services and [I] paid taxes. I have paid more than my share. I am happy to pay taxes in general. It does worry me because I have no life in my country. It has not only been too many years, it has also been my personal life, it is not there anymore; it doesn’t exist. At the same time, it worries me that when I moved here I knew there was an undocumented community, among ourselves we would say, “Oh, we have no papers.” That is the way we would describe ourselves. But then years passed, and even now, they describe themselves as “illegals.” So the fact that a lot of the community adopted this term worries me because we have given into to this rhetoric of hate against undocumented immigrants.

It worried me a lot in the past that I would be deported. But now that I have been so involved and I understand immigration—I am not a lawyer but I understand it—I am not worried as much because I know the system I know what to do. That gives me a lot of power. That is another reason why I do what I do because I want to understand the system. When you understand the system, when you understand it, you feel a little more empowered. You have more tools to navigate it and to fight for a just reason.

For all those people that should be allowed to stay, they should fight to stay. Now that I have more information, I don't feel as afraid as before. But yeah, the fear is always there.

Extending to Regions and Bridging Space

Ramona shared how she addressed different types of needs for long-term solutions, part of organizing within the undocumented community. It was apparent that she sees the community should have a space to share information and grow, building the power they share as Latinos. Like Marco, Ramona wanted the community of Latinos to be informed. Since there were misinformation and immigrant rights-based information was lacking, through the existing Latino media of the time, she decided to develop workshops to build collective knowledge around immigration and immigrant rights:

The problem is it very hard for our community, geographically speaking, to get together. First of all, we are all dispersed across the Puget Sound – to mention one area. The other is that there has not been a hub for the Latinos or Mexican community to come together. I think people always say we need a place or we need “one single leader to come together.” I don't really agree with that, but at the same time I see the need for – or beginning of something like that. There are a few groups here and there, but the fact that the undocumented community is mostly fearful – it allows for this to be even harder. They will not leave their closest areas. Even if there was a center or organization or building, I think it would be very hard for people to get there.

Working with the undocumented and broader community

I work with the undocumented community, but because it is undocumented, I don't want to ask, and I don't want to assume. So I work with everybody. Does that make sense? A lot of people identify themselves right away. I actually tell them not to do that anymore. Actually, what I do (and it has been successful) is that I know the movement and the non-profit world, so I work with organizations, too. Now, I also learned how the political system works, so I work with elected officials at some level if that makes sense. So, I end up doing coalitions with different groups, but really my main work is with the undocumented community.

Local and National Influences on Work

In 2009, when the Gutierrez introduced his immigration reform proposal, we read it and gave a summary to people and asked them what they think. So every time we have an immigration proposal at the national level, we are ready with a workshop to understand what they are giving us and what they are proposing.

Anything that comes about that influences the undocumented community, also influences my work. I mean when the Dream Act came about in 2010, we wanted people to read the proposal, and then let them decide whether they think this is a proposal they should support.

This year in 2011, at the state level, we had our fair share of anti-immigrant bills. The state budget has a huge impact for communities of color, and more than anything with immigrant communities, more than that with the undocumented population. So, definitely, any policy that comes at that level - and I if feel I have the understanding and support to organize - we will take it on.

Trainings for the Undocumented Community

One is an immigration workshop that covers constitutional rights. We also talk about: “What do you do if police or ICE stops you?” Trainings also cover detention immigration system and how it works and what happens when you get out of detention centers. Others cover how to hire a lawyer, so people will be informed. There are a lot of abuses from immigration lawyers out there. I always go beyond that, for example, I have done trainings for legal observers. For example, if there is an immigration raid, I developed a rapid response team on immigration raids years and years ago.

I also developed family packets. This is really for emergencies but it is also for families. So, what do you do if someone else has to go pick up your kids at school? This was years ago too, and I still give these packets away.

Collective Dialogue for Activists

The long-term piece is organizing in communities of color: [trainings on] how political systems work, how non-profits work, power analysis. Then, I go beyond that, and we develop a training to understand immigration policy and give people the chance to give their opinion on what they think of the policy. Also, I do general trainings for leaders or emerging leaders on gender issues, racism, and oppression. So this is kind of the reaction training that everyone does, and then, we also try to, in order to mobilize, we have to understand the system along with our own privilege and oppression. I also write for Latino papers and I am on the Latino radio every day, informing people always with a call to action.

Summary

Ramona's perspective, as a Latina and mother, influenced her need to develop ways of sharing information about needs of the Latino and undocumented communities around her. Due to Ramona's experiences in organizing and the threat of violence in Mexico, she came to the U.S. not intending to overstay her visa. After her child was born, Ramona realized that her U.S.-born child would face racial discrimination due to the child's Mexican ethnicity, despite the fact that Ramona's daughter is a citizen. Like Marco, Ramona was aware of oppression and the misinformation disseminated within her communities; she works for immigrant communities by empowering potential leaders through education, policy work, and action. She believes that female focused leadership challenges Latino cultural norms and traditions, specifically those that reinforce patriarchy, sexism and hetero-normativity. Allowing for the possibility of engaging even that, which is considered taboo by tradition, interests of LGBT communities are also analyzed.

Ramona first experiences, as a volunteer at a local community center, utilized the computer skills she learned in Mexico, as a college graduate and from her professional experience. She found that the Latino community could not access news from Mexico on the issues that were of interest and affecting Latinos. The information that Latinos were sharing at the time were either misinformed or not utilized to empower the community to make political influence. Additionally, she realized that Latinos and undocumented communities in the north Puget Sound region, having experienced systemic oppression, and reproduced dominance within their immigrant and Latino communities. That is partially why Ramona uses Latino media, as a tool to organize for immigrant rights. She continues to provide leadership and skills training for potential leaders within the grassroots movement, since she understands that a gender, race, and

class analysis develops skills that create awareness of oppressions and intersections in order to strengthen her community, and she has provided trainings to groups interested in working within this community.

Unlike Marco, Ramona does not explicitly name this dominance as part and parcel to the nation-state or colonization directly. However, she does convey similar themes as Marco her organizing. Ramona emphasized internalized layers of marginalization that affect the Latino community of Washington State. She pointed to the LGBT communities as having been still thought of as taboo. She also realized that through knowledge of internalized oppression and immigration law, her ability to work for immigrant rights and in defense of herself strengthened. In the next narrative, Guillermo's perspective on *La Raza* invokes the ideas that both Marco and Ramona have introduced – that is, the organizing must come from the communities, who have experienced marginalization and repression.

Part II: Background on El Salvador

In both Guillermo's and in Zoila's (final chapter) narratives, the history of political repression shapes their awareness of legal status, which shapes their organizing practices. In the 1800s, Salvadorans underwent structural repression through agrarian reform. In El Salvador, agrarian reform meant many different things, including indiscriminate government-sponsored and U.S. funded, mass murder, rape, and torture.²⁹ The government of El Salvador abolished communal land holdings, thus dispossessing the peasantry from owning the means of production (land) through state violence and brute force. Perhaps the most recognizable example of agrarian reform was the 1932 mass uprising. Coined *La Mantanza* (the massacre), General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez ordered the military to kill 30,000 peasants. In addition, the government also accused Augustin Faramundo Martí of being a communist leader that led to the peasant uprising.

Later, in the 1970s, class-privileged Salvadorans associated the term "land reform" with communism. Dating back to *La Mantanza*, class-privileged Salvadorans equated communism with political mass murders, pacifying many through instilling fear from the Salvadoran army. Also during the 1970s, a mass movement was building to address the then current state-repression and government-sponsored political murders in El Salvador. This again led to another set of proposed agrarian reforms. This mass movement and uprising was comprised of landless workers, college students, and unionized workers, many of whom were left out of the policy and phases of this agrarian reform (p. 31). In 1978, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights published a

²⁹ See Also William Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy* (1996) for context of US intervention and development projects in Central America.

report on the government-sponsored killings of Salvadoran citizens. Many Salvadorans suffered from this state sponsored violence, with U.S. supporting El Salvador in these efforts of repression, through training and funding the government's reign of terror on countless innocent citizens, including many children (Report on Human Rights in El Salvador, 1982).

Chapter IV: Guillermo from El Salvador, 30

I met Guillermo after an emergency community meeting had convened in a North Puget Sound City. This meeting included individuals, labor, and faith-based organizations that wanted to support one hundred and thirty workers who were quietly fired. The janitorial company fired these workers, claiming that Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) were to audit the contractor to verify the legal presence of all the workers. I was struck by Guillermo's dedication to this action and other immigrant rights actions. Guillermo often put himself on the line. In direct actions, he was very vocal and articulate, especially when it came to addressing racism and associated injustices. I wanted to interview him because of the confidence he conveyed as a spokesperson at marches and at public and at hearings on proposals at the state level. Not realizing until after my interview how vivid Guillermo's memory of crossing the border was, it was amazing to learn that his early years had informed his activism.

Guillermo explains his journey to the United States, fitting in as an undocumented student, and later, his struggle to change curricula that provided Brown history to students. He discusses his experiences as a refugee from El Salvador, as an undocumented child, his family's mixed legal status, and later, his naturalization – all of which provided ways to consciously approach organizing as a collective political struggle of Brown community members.

At four years old, Guillermo left El Salvador on September 11, 1986. He crossed the border between Guatemala and Mexico and then between Mexico to the U.S. Separated from his parents, he attributes mistrust for his parents with his experience of being uprooted by war. Later, once he was reunited with his parents in the United States, it was very difficult for him to trust the U.S. government as well. Guillermo discussed the traumatic memories of crossing borders:³⁰

³⁰ Personal interview February 11, 2011, conducted in English.

At the border of Guatemala, I remember my grandmother telling me this was going to be my last day with her [...] When I woke up, there was just me and my sister; she was seven years old. We were with a bunch of people I didn't know in a van. I remember meeting my parents in Texas and not trusting them. I just came from a war zone, where the government had a very sophisticated spy mechanism. I already knew not to trust the government.

Legal Status

Guillermo's parents adjusted their legal status to legal permanent residents, but he and his sibling were still undocumented. Mixed statuses may be typical within refugees and even undocumented families, yet, as Guillermo explained, it was not atypical to hear about undocumented children who have naturalized U.S citizen parents. Guillermo faced discrimination as an undocumented child in school. This discrimination, and the lack of what he calls a "Brown historical curricula"³¹ in grade school, has had lasting effects on him: he became motivated to work in solidarity with migrant farm workers. In many ways, the Brown curricula he longed for explained his history of having been displaced from his home country. Guillermo also conveyed that, despite his own legal status, his brother could not become naturalized, and suffered devastating socio-economic effects. His brother's confidence, ability to finish a college education, and acquire a decent standard of living had suffered. In the following excerpts we learn how Guillermo constructed his identity and his understanding of the "brown" experience in relation to other anti-racist struggles, how he navigated legality, and how all of this affected the struggles he chose to organize around.

³¹ The lack of a history regarding Mexican, Central American, and Latino/a history in grade school.

Undocumented and Unable to Fully Participate

My status—I am currently a United States citizen. Basically, [...] I am from El Salvador. I was born in El Salvador in 1982. At that time, there was a civil war going on. It had been going on for over two years when I was born. In terms of my status, my parents, both of them were granted legal status [in the United States]. Yet, all of us [children] were undocumented. It's funny because usually it is the other way around: the parents are illegal and the children are not.

I was undocumented for ten years. Growing up, I remember being a little kid, and my school would take trips to Canada. I would have to explain to my teacher that I couldn't go because I wouldn't be allowed to enter the country again. I remember they [classmates] would do stuff, they would bring me like souvenirs and stuff, because I couldn't go and fully participate.

Whose American History? Mobilizing for Curriculum Change

I didn't like my...Euro-centric education. When I was in high school, I wanted to learn about brown people and our history, and that wasn't there. I went to a school with a very high drop out rate among the brown kids, the Chicano, the *Raza* students. I personally don't like the term Latino or Hispanic. Being in the *Raza* community, being excluded from education—I remember being excluded from things. I had teachers tell me I wasn't going to achieve anything. I remember one teacher, Mr. X, in middle school, told me [that he] didn't want to see his tax money go to welfare, because that was the only thing I was going to achieve in life.

Here as a conscious adult, I can't wash my hands clean of what was going on. Ignorance is bliss, but people get murdered because of that. I felt like I had to take a stance on something. [...] I identify my community as the *Raza* community in North Washington City. I saw that a lot of the things that I went through, a lot of students were going through [...] I did a lot of activism around education and around creating a curriculum change, diversifying curriculum, diversifying America history, and the way it's viewed. American history has never been an Anglo history, you know, it's been a history of various different people, but all those histories are excluded. But we water down our history and make it this boring and over Anglicized; we only do rah-rah American history. We don't do what American history really is.³²

I remember being in fear of being deported. I just remember when we read about black history and how this country had people they viewed as second-class citizens. I had a really hard time differentiating what they went through from what I went through, except for the fact that it was a different struggle. But, in its nature, I felt like it was the same. I always felt like that since I was a kid. I remember admiring Martin Luther King and wanted us to do a same movement for undocumented immigrants. It was part of my dream my whole life to see a strong movement where we were able to achieve our rights. I just remember seeing that my rights were completely taken away from me, based on illegal status.

Citizenship, but Family Ties Cannot be Broken

I became a United States citizen. Actually, historic dates [laughs], November 30, 1999, the day the WTO [protests] started, I was in Northern Washington getting sworn in, as a United States citizen. That was because my father had become a U.S. citizen, and I

³² See Eric Wolf (1982) *Europe and the People without History*.

decided to apply before I turned eighteen. It is a lot more difficult, when you are an adult, to get U.S. citizen status.

My brother was very smart. My brother graduated high school in three years with honors. He took advanced science classes and wanted a future in studying biology. He made it through the community college system on his own, no tax money going in there, paying out of state tuition. By the time he got to his four-year college, he just couldn't afford the tuition. He was working with fake documents and trying to go to school. He actually was very brilliant, and eventually, he got burnt out. I can see how much devastation it had in him. He is very fearful, and *I feel it destroyed his confidence in himself*. His life turned around. *It's sad to see that this legal status could do that to him.*

Community Building

Guillermo explained *Raza* means “the people” meant taking a political stand in defense of a collective struggle. In the Pacific Northwest town, Guillermo identified himself as *Raza*, while others thought of him as culturally Mexican American. Mexican American culture influenced his collective identity and unity with other brown folk. Even though his country of origin is El Salvador, Guillermo uses an awareness of this collective brown identity in the US to strengthen and harness the student movement and farm worker solidarity in his town. For Guillermo, being brown is not only associated with personal identity. As we will see, he critiques organizing around simple, cultural identity groupings. Instead, he defines the *Raza* as a political and cultural struggle, and highlights their obligation to his community in his organizing practices.

Similar to Marco's discussion of using a political organizing approach that does not revolve around citizenship, Guillermo instead politically organized for the brown struggle, which included representation in the curricula and workers' rights in his town. The struggle for education is as important as workers' rights because it empowers a community through the meaningfulness of a shared history of socio-economic struggle and contribution to society.

Redefining Identity is Part of Community Building

When I worked in the [the Pacific Northwest town], it was primarily with *Raza* in the community, just people that we see as us. That looks just like me, came from the same background, from the same town [in the United States], went to the same high school, come from a similar culture. Culturally, it is funny because my friends, a lot of them, tell me I am culturally Mexican American, not culturally Salvadoran [laughs]. I am culturally Chicano [laughs].

It's a smaller community. You can reach people easier. It is a very organized community. I think the work had been done for a very long time. But Pacific Northern Hill Community College MEChA and the Agriculture Community Group—I would give us the credit. We have worked to cultivate a culture of organizing, a culture of resistance, [and] a culture of protesting. So when other organizations [go]...there and feel like they are creating a movement, they are really just piggy-backing on the labor that was already done in creating a culture that already stands up for itself. I feel that Northern Pacific Northwest town is often overlooked when it comes to politics. It has a very connected Latino base, *Raza* base, and progressive base.

Even a [news]paper over there said, "Why don't Latinos get involved in politics?" We do. We just do it differently. We march and we protest. We don't mobilize votes for

candidates, who at the end of the day have consistently turned their backs on us. We are involved, just not the same way.

Identity is a Political Movement at the Local Level

I honestly believe, without the [students at the] community college, that political movement that we have seen would not have taken place. It has been absolutely instrumental. [...] The student group has been pushing community work. And that is what I have seen at the student group that I have not seen at other chapters in the country. [That is] a lot of these students have been about themselves or just Chicano identity and helping themselves out through college. The mentality and philosophy that *we* had through college was *we* are privileged, *we* are the ones who made it here, *we* don't need support to get through college. We need to go into the community and take our privilege and go back to the community and working with and for the community.

I think a lot of the student groups/ Chicano student groups are “self-help” groups for students who are struggling. That was one thing I noticed about our group. We went out into the community and talked to folks. We wanted to know what was going on.

It took us years because a lot of us came out as drop outs, as the unwanted members of society. We had to take years of building relationships within the community and be like, “You are not thugs or drug dealers. You are here for us and we are in this together.” I think that work that we did—even though the other college students who aren't like us, who are the kind of people others looked up to, when it came down to it they turned their back on the community. For us, we were never the kids who were told, “You're fine, you're fine.” It is everybody else that is the problem.

So we worked hard to make sure we worked together, that we were fine with each other, and the community respected us for always being there. The community has a lot of respect for the students who came out of those three years at the community college. The work that we did was community-based; it was us getting out there and mobilizing the community. That is the kind of work that I want to be doing.

On Immigration and Labor

From migration to settlement in Washington State, Guillermo has conveyed a sense of mistrust for the U.S. government, which has not lessened. Like Marco and Ramona, Guillermo's community work involves awareness making and information sharing about migration history. Like Marco, Guillermo's perspective of political work looks deeper, past the dominance of electoral politics and policies, to direct action that must be taken within the community of undocumented people. For Guillermo, immigration reform is national security dilemma that seeks to maintain the dominant narrative of the problem of immigration. There has been personal trauma he experienced as a political refugee, his affiliation within racial identity and marginalization. Combined with being recognized as culturally Mexican, these different identities allowed him to relate to the struggles of migrant agricultural workers, who also faced human rights abuses by the U.S. government and commercial interests. Thus, when Guillermo emphasized May Day as a groundswell that had the potential of creating change within the lives of workers, he was also speaking on behalf of his own experiences of human rights abuses:

Immigration Reform, Equality, and the Immigrant Rights March

I don't believe that anything that's been proposed is a real immigration reform. I wouldn't support any immigration reform for the next few years. No one in the political realm is producing anything that is about human rights, that is about equality, that isn't just perpetuating a notion that is "It's the immigrant's fault." It is our Federal government's laws fault. Immigration is a natural process of human history. Throughout history human beings have migrated. Where people are coming from—these migration routes existed before Columbus even arrived in these parts of the shores. Before there was a United States, people from South and Central America were coming up north and vice versa.

What's important about May 1st? It is very important. If the rest of the United States were able to mobilize and recognize May 1st, which is an American holiday, was started in the United States - and many people attributed it to the eight hour workday - I think the average American would be doing better, if they were mobilizing and trying to create a strong movement.

Summary

Guillermo's perspective on legal status is not an individual conception of private rights (e.g. the right to vote), but rather solidarity based primarily on his identification with people from the "brown community" who organize politically. Guillermo's varied experiences with legal statuses and affiliation with *La Raza* philosophy and principles gave him space to work for his community. His desire for equality was based on his critique of Anglo-centric Americanized education, which excludes the history of people who experienced human rights abuses like him. Because he was critical of the exclusionary ideals that maintain the dominant curricula,

Guillermo deconstructed this anglicized hegemonic knowledge. He argues these same ideals maintain and uphold the larger macro-economic system that results in human rights abuses and coercion within his particular ethnic niche of workers.

Guillermo's community building and political work challenged the existing privileges associated with naturalization. His experiences with multiple legal statuses provided him the ability to recognize that in grade school, the hegemonic curricula of Anglo education left out much of United States history. Instead, he sought a history that consciously acknowledged U.S. involvement in the murder and destruction of Salvadorans. He drew parallels between the Civil Rights struggle and the Immigrant Rights movement. The parallels of struggle allowed for Guillermo to build an understanding of collective identity, outside of the oppressive ideas of white privilege, so that brown and *Raza* ideology fostered a philosophy of giving back to his community.

Guillermo's own description of his community's "culture of organizing," credits the student movement in the local community college he attended. He emphasized the student groups' ability to work beyond the issues of individual identity, to build a strong sense of political organizing as a community. Moved to organize and disseminate *La Raza* education, he advocates that brown identity should address the substantive socio-economic conditions of brown people: the right to flee from political persecution, the ability to maintain family unity (not to be torn apart by war), and to attain the knowledge that represents brown folk's lived experiences so that the community may address the injustices and discrimination they face.

Despite the advantages that Guillermo personally enjoys, due to his new citizenship, some of his own family members simultaneously lack the basic social-economic rights to have a decent standard of living because they are still undocumented. Unfortunately, Guillermo's

brother was not able to become a U. S. citizen. This leaves his brother disadvantaged, due to the lack of funding for higher education and creates barriers for access to decent wages and benefits that many citizens take for granted. These experiences suggest that one contradiction of citizenship – it cuts into family unity.

It was obvious that Guillermo still endures emotional duress due to migration and that legal status still persists on dividing his family after they have been reunited in the United States. In many ways, Guillermo’s personal frustration and awareness of the lack of representation of marginalized histories in grade school curricula and access to legal status, created an awareness that blurs lines between legal and undocumented statuses. This awareness drives him to organize, the fact that his family continues to face the repercussions of an unjust war. His experiences demonstrate the paradoxical nature of institutionalized barriers to citizenship.

Similar to Marco’s story of the indigenous people, Guillermo also described immigration reform in terms of it being a “natural process of human history,” existing before national borders were constructed.³³ He organizes for immigrant rights on an American holiday that established the workers’ rights many of us enjoy today. This is because he believes that all workers have a vested interest to organize despite their legal status.

³³ See Nevin (2010) argument on national boundaries and the enforcement build up strategy that was discussed in the introduction of this thesis.

Chapter V: Amara from Laos, 40

I first noticed Amara at a local march in early 2011, where she spoke out against Secure Communities and mass deportations by sharing her own personal experiences with trauma and displacement as a refugee and former detainee. At this immigrant rights speak out, Amara explained that she had recently been held in detention by Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE). While her detention was a central incident in her life, she pointed to her experience as a refugee. She also pointed out that economic refugees (migrant workers) are part of a collective struggle for immigrant rights.

This wondrous woman is Laotian American and a single mother. Because Amara is a single mother, her insight into legality, identity, and immigrant rights work could draw upon similarities about the challenges mothers face when they migrate to the U.S. In Ramona's and later in Zoila's vignettes, their narratives convey how they not only had to struggle as immigrants and refugees, but their young children relied on them for care and guidance.

In the following narrative, Amara described her memory of the refugee camp and her life as a child in the U.S. Her upbringing was influenced by her experience of the war, both structurally and institutionally. Amara explained the trauma of escaping the Vietnam War on her life. War created the material conditions that made it imperative for her family to flee Laos in 1979. As a refugee in the U.S., she was given the status of legal permanent residency, and she associated this almost legal status with prosperity, opportunity, and protection under the law. Thus, she strove to accommodate her Laotian and refugee identities within the dominant values of American life that stems from U.S. citizenship. In other words, Amara lives "in between" - she is American, Laotian and a refugee.³⁴

³⁴ Personal interview on May 20, 2011, conducted in English.

Legal Status

My status, right now, I am in an immigration proceeding with the immigration court. In October 2009, two ICE agents came and arrested me at my work [a private elementary school for homeless children who have experienced trauma in their lives]. I was going to lunch, and they caught me coming down the stairs.

They took away my rights as an American. I have been here 32 years of my life. I came here in 1979, escaping the Vietnam War. It wasn't my choice of my own to come to America. Because of the war that had happened and the aftermath, the sweep that they had done on our side, the Laotian side, was very horrific and it was very inhumane. They killed everybody along the border of Laos and Vietnam. A lot of the Vietnamese, they crossed over into the Laotian side to escape the war from their own country. They were killed alongside civilians in Laos.

In Between Cultures: Laos and U.S.

As a child, Amara like many other refugee and immigrant children, translated for her father once the family was in the U.S. In part due to language barriers, and unaware of the potential consequences of how immigration law could later meld with criminal law,³⁵ Amara's father did not initiate the legal process of naturalizing his children:

Our family, we are a family of four, me, my brother, my step mom, dad, later my dad's nephew joined us to take the immigration test. The Americans came in and asked us, "Whoever can pass this-" They called it a written test, but it wasn't; it was more of an artistic test. We had to draw a house that we grew up in and if it matched, we were

³⁵ See Juliet Stumpf's (2006) theorizing on the "convergence of criminal and immigration law," and why it poses problems, even for those with legal status, through the increasing of restriction of a nation's members. Ultimately, these problems are part of the modern nation-state.

allowed to go with each other, and if it didn't match, we were left behind. So, I remember taking that test because I was fumbling with the pencil, and I was trying to figure out what they wanted me to do, and I needed more clarification because I didn't speak English. It was being translated to me by recruitment - a translator from the refugee camp itself. I understood her more than the facilitator of the whole process.

Eventually, we waited another year and a half before we were allowed papers to come to the United States. I remember that day there was a lot of commotion there were people crying, tears of joy, of abandonment, of just the loss of family members in the war. In their voices, the screams and cries, it feels like there is a lot of stress a lot of anguish.

My dad had to go and apply for benefits through DSHS (Department of Social and Health Services). About six months after, we received our benefits, my dad, with his skills, tried to find a steady income for the family. That was a struggle because of the cultural and language barrier. He has a very heavy accent. A lot of people don't understand his accent. I could translate most of it for him. That was a very daunting task for him. Once I learned English, I had to translate everything, from school papers, to doctors' notes, letters, [and] insurance papers.

I was determined to learn the language and culture. It was really hard because my dad and step-mom were [a] very old-fashioned Laotian family. They wanted nothing more than to keep their culture alive because they know that once their children grow up their own values would be different. They were trying to keep the family ties close. The fact of the matter is, they were pushing me outside of the family because I was learning [a] new culture and I was excited.

Trauma and Community Work

While recalling her experiences at the refugee camp, Amara described her experiences with trauma and homelessness. Combined, these experiences inform her work with homeless children today, applying her refugee experiences with young clients on how to cope with trauma and the process of healing. Her retrospection allows for the sharing of how she found ways to cope in her professional life. Her gender and Laotian culture illustrate the intersections of a traumatic childhood and U.S. homelessness.

There is a lot of hurt. I don't know how people heal from that. For myself, I do a lot of things with my hands, being proactive in my life it helps a lot. Also, being a teacher and being in an environment of children who are going through traumatic problems, just this moment in their life, I can be surrounded by them and surround them with understanding that I don't know what they are going through. I have gone through a traumatic situation, and this is how I cope. I teach them my life skills on how to move forward and cope without being depressed and without isolating myself from the world. It has been an eye opening experience, just walking— my journey through life.

I was like, "Oh cool." I could learn a lot being in America more than I could, growing up in Laos. I thought my family would be happy for me, but that was not the case. Growing up in America was like being in prison. I was kept in the house a lot. Women are looked down upon in my culture. Men are put on pedestal; they get away with a lot of things. A lot of the females - even if they argue in court - they get the book thrown at them.

It is just a culture thing. So growing up with that, being hindered and not being able to participate in things other kids are able to participate in, and every day the other kids asked, “Amara, are you going to practice?” And I can’t because I have to be home before 4:30 p.m. and the sun starts going down and your family starts calling you names, just making fun of you. It is not a way to live, to be hearing negative stuff from your own family.

Fitting in, trouble at home

After I graduated high school, I left because of the situation with my step-mom. She was a very abusive lady. I would have to be living with her, and she was constantly abusive. My dad was a truck driver when we lived in Eastern Washington. He did long haul. He went to different states and stayed overnight. Every time Father’s Day came around and [I saw] everyone celebrating and my dad was nowhere to be found. I have always had to look after myself and pull myself up by my own bootstraps³⁶, just keep going with whatever life threw at me and keep trying. That is the only courage I had.

I promised myself throughout high school and my little career of school, when I have my own children I would be there for them and support them as much as I can. Also, I wasn’t going to allow people to step on me emotionally, physically, or psychologically.

Advocacy

Amara’s social justice work stems from her ability to realize that her family’s survival is imperative first, if she is going to help others. She articulates her interpersonal awareness of

³⁶ Although Amara appears to subscribe to the notion of pulling up oneself by one’s own bootstraps, evidence of accommodation to U.S. meritocracy, it also appears that she is couching this idea in trauma and her resiliency persona journey with dealing with a new culture where she does not fit in. She also does not fit in with her school mates.

oppression by contextualizing it within the global and transnational economic sphere, through the coercive influences of war and the U.S. role on displacing her from her home country.

In a country that took my land away, I still advocate for the community at large, all over Washington. Of course, my number one advocate is my children and myself. As long as I am alive, I will be an advocate for anyone who does not have a voice of their own, be it a child, be it an immigrant that doesn't speak English, be it a homeless family that has a voice of their own but doesn't know how to articulate it or doesn't have the courage to speak up. Be it a senior citizen who has health care that is going to be cut. Even our neighboring state that needs us to say, "Yes, we do support our neighboring states in this country."

My advocacy started in 2005 when I entered the transitional advocacy center for the homeless population [in the north Puget Sound city] where I work at today. I went and applied to get my daughter into school. This started in 2003, of course, because I was couch surfing. Even then, because I have one child, it was hard to enter into the system. I didn't know how to do anything. It was kind of like a shock that didn't set in. Everyday until 2005, I had to just keep one foot in front of the other. I didn't know where I was going. I didn't have a concrete plan. I left it up to God to lead me, spiritually and emotionally. I was walking in a blind man's shoes, basically.

In 2005, me and my daughter enrolled at the school. I became the co-chair of the parent advisory council. That was my first organizational group in the community of homeless. They help the population of homeless families, mostly single parents. After that, I became the president of the parent advisory council. I extended my work with a group focused on ending homelessness in the community in ten years. I became the

advocacy voice for the community at large of homeless families. Then, I was on the preventative work group to create systems in my city. I was on the disproportionate workgroup for a year.

After that I became a representative on the Legacies of War, a non-profit agency that educates, give hope and heal people from a war torn situation. It is not just limited to the Vietnam War; it extends out to the war in Afghanistan and all the wars in American history. It is just to educate people that it [war] is just devastating. It just kills everything from spiritual, to people, plants, animals, the environment – not just the people where the war is taking place, the country or state, it affects the whole world. That is the education piece that we bring to the table, just to give people a new way of seeing how war affects us as human beings. Also, after that, I became, at the same time that I was being recruited - I wanted to be on an advisory council that reviews all the big non-profit agencies in the city. Then, I became a member of the state lobby group.

Influence of Detention on Identity and Action

Part of Amara's remarkable life, acting as a moderator and advocate for her family, explains why she identifies with a mix between the dominant "American" identity and her liberatory tendencies to critique and question them. As an advocate for the homeless, regrettably her resiliency could not legally protect her from deportation. Amara speaks of detention and how it opened a new opportunity to advocate for fellow detainees. She redefines what American identity means through the inferences she utilized to cope while in detention:

Non-American Living in America

Once they arrested me and put me into the federal holding branch of immigration, they said, “You are in trouble, you missed an immigration hearing. You have no ties to America. You lost your rights as an American.” I remember when they took me in, I remember Obama. One statement he mentioned stayed with me while I was in detention. I worked off of that. The statement he made when he was inaugurated, as President of the United States was, “The American Constitution covers American citizens and non-American citizens.” I took that statement and I worked off of it.

When I was in the detention center, I helped many women in the detention center advocate and have a voice for themselves. I have taught and helped numerous women who don't speak English that well and doesn't understand their rights as non-Americans living in America.

I helped them articulate letters to the court for them. One woman from Korea, I helped write a letter to her husband in English, because he does not know how to read Korean. I believe she was a mail-order bride.³⁷ He had done some kind of domestic violence, and she called the cops. He pointed his finger at her and told them she was an immigrant whose visa had expired, so they arrested her instead of him. She was processed and the court system – even the jail system did not inform her that they were going to move her. She was being transferred to an immigration detention center. She thought she was going home. So a lot of the procedures and process that they are doing are illegal. It is very illegal. They strip you of your human rights and dignity. Human rights is being human, it doesn't matter who you are. Human rights are what the nation and the whole world really stand behind. The detention center violated every single human right.

³⁷ See Philippine Women Center B.C (2000). “Canada: The New Frontier for Filipino Mail-Order Brides.”

Between Survival and Deportable Offense?

Many detainees experience minimal to no legal aid due to U.S. immigration law's failure to provide free legal representation to all detainees regardless of legal status. Amara believed her past criminal convictions may be the reason she was in deportation proceedings. However, this is not certain, and the accuracy of criminal reports is questionable. Amara explained that her socio-economic situation, her homelessness and being a single mother, influenced her past choices to begin stealing in order to survive, and now this could potentially lead to her deportation. Amara explains,

One day, I double wrote a payroll check and accidentally put it in a pile with the bills that they were supposed to sign off on. I gave them a pile of checks and they split it into two. By the time it went through I was like, "Oh, great." I cashed it. The audit caught it, and they pulled me in. They were like, "Okay, this is stealing from the company." I go - "I understand. I went and asked you for a raise. I even showed you my full budget, and it wouldn't even cover that. I go to school full time and am a mom full time. I need that support." They didn't want to hear it and they pressed charges. I was caught in that system.

When I got out, I couldn't find a job. So I started stealing. I stole diapers for my daughter when she was around a year and a half. I got caught and taken to jail. It started over and over. Finally, in 2002, I left the area because of the situation that I was in. I was bouncing from couch to couch.

I don't know if my criminal history has to do with the immigration hearing. They just told me that I had an immigration hearing that I missed. I didn't get the letter that

summoned me. When I went to the immigration court in the detention center the judge told me that I was incarcerated in 2008. I was hired on at the school in October 2007 and I worked until 2009. How was I incarcerated in 2008? So there was a discrepancy somewhere in the administrative paperwork. I don't know the whole detail and cannot get a hold of anyone that will answer these questions.

American Immigrant Identity and Legal Status

Pending the immigration court hearings and possible deportation, Amara's identity with trauma implies the impact of interpersonal struggles at home, as a young refugee, a young translator for her dad, and her struggle to survive with her child as a homeless mother. This sense of solidarity with all immigrants, despite her particular personal legal deportation case and former experience as a legal permanent resident, shows her work is not solely for individual aims, but to call on her own experiences:

Even if I become an American citizen, I was still born a Laotian. Immigrants have had a lot of their hands in building America throughout history from the Irish, Japanese, to the Chinese to enforced slavery and also cheap labor from different countries, Tanzania, Malaysia, South America, Central America, Mexico, Canada, I could on and on and on. I am an immigrant. I will always be an immigrant.

Summary

Amara has lived in the Pacific Northwest for 32 years and is integrated in United States culture with two children, both of whom are United States citizens. However, through a closer analysis of her social justice work, one may deduce that her American identity complicates a

dominant understanding of constitutional rights (e.g. U.S. obligation to its citizens and non-citizens). Her approach to social justice work with homeless youth and immigrants who need support suggests she recognizes that American identity is not about individuality, but that collectively displaced migrants and refugees also have earned their place as legitimate members within the nation-state.

Amara's strong perception of cultural difference in the U. S., due to her formative years as a child refugee, creates a space where she must navigate between Laotian traditions and a new external U.S. culture based on individuality. Thus, she balances a refugee and "American" identity that are fluid and also in opposition.³⁸ Even though she embraces the opportunities embedded in her own understanding of American identity, she does not ignore the residual effects of war, and how poverty in the U.S. impacts her personal immigration circumstances now. She recognizes that the U.S. has used immigrant labor and slavery to advance infrastructure. Therefore, she would like to be recognized, along with other immigrants and refugees who have contributed into making the U.S. prosperous.

Amara's formative years suggest that she does not fit within a homogenous American identity of privilege and whiteness. Displaced from Laos, her home country, because of war, and now a U.S. legal permanent resident, not recognized as a citizen, she socially attempted to strive to embrace American culture and this led her to believe that economic success was possible. Alas, Amara struggled to also satisfy family values at home, and under pressure she ran away, became homeless, and resorted to desperate means in order to survive. The trauma of attempting to belong and not quite making it must be addressed in immigration law. I believe that her

³⁸ See Chela Sandoval (2000) *Methodology of the Oppressed* for reading on oppositional consciousness and strategic essentialism.

refugee experience is why Amara became an organizer. She expected to be acknowledged by the justice system due to the U.S. national influence over Laos.

Like Guillermo, Amara's experiences as a young refugee in the U.S. gave her an awareness about the injustices of U.S. involvement and funding in her home country. Because of extra-legal U.S. military exercises in Laos, Amara and her family was forced to emigrate or risk pre-mature death. Therefore, immigration law should have acknowledged not only her status as a refugee, even though the U.S. was not at war with Laos, but should have provided her with socio-economic resources to help her family transition in their settlement in the U.S. Additionally, the U.S. government federally and locally should have encouraged the continuance of her cultural traditions alongside U.S.-American culture.

In the absence of such socio-economic and cultural resources, Amara's limited socio-economic choices left her to resort to criminal activity. This is similar to Raksmei's (next chapter) experiences and choices. Both Raksmei and Amara's childhoods were shaped and influenced by their capability to understand and moderate the English language for their fathers and families. Often child refugees are expected to carry on the burden, of not only acting as English language learners, but also as the conduit for immigration procedures through translating. She has found ways to advocate and organize through her role as a translator later when she began to advocate for the refugee and immigrant struggle for rights.

Chapter VI: Raksmei from Cambodia, 32

In 2008, Raksmei was involved with a community group of individuals, attorneys, and faith-based organizations that sat together at a community non-profit organization. The members gathered to brainstorm about the inhumane conditions of a privately owned detention center in South Puget Sound. Raksmei impressed the community group with his knowledge of the immigration detention system by contributing quirky strategies to bring awareness into the struggle for immigrant detainee justice. I remember his jovial nature, and his brilliant tee-shirt idea. At the time, I had no idea that Raksmei was waiting to be deported back to Cambodia. In 2010, Raksmei shared his life story and perspective on legal status.

The Khmer community was at a disadvantage for not having knowledge or socio-economic access to language classes. Raksmei's perspective on legal status came from his family's experience fleeing the killing fields of Cambodia. Later, his mother was left with limited choices and relied on public housing in the North City in the Puget Sound. Like Guillermo and Amara, a life in poverty and trouble fitting in at school as a refugee left Raksmei with similar childhood experiences of alienation. He also experienced extreme trauma by having been uprooted due to war, his family ripped apart, and then through exclusion in a new U.S. culture that did not prepare him for individual success. Instead of being integrated into U.S. dominant culture, Raksmei searched for a subaltern community. Unfortunately, he found a community in street gangs.

His family needed ESL classes and tutorials to learn how to adjust to U.S. life. The kind of U.S. support that Khmer families lacked was how to retain their culture but also learn how the system worked in the U.S. Instead, refugee families like Raksmei's faced poverty and an environment that dehumanized refugee youth. Like Guillermo, Raksmei noticed how emigration

ripped his family apart. Raksmei emphasized the social aspects associated with legality. Furthermore, socializing Khmer people into “host” culture in the dominant U.S. culture may have spared Raksmei’s gang affiliation. Because there was not a formal way of building these associations with state resources (e.g. through ESL classes, community centers, youth groups, cultural competency), this left his community unprepared for the new value system associated with individualized success and prosperity.

Raksmei was convicted of an aggravated felony and served jail time due to charges related to his actions with his gang. Afterwards, immigration court found Raksmei deportable, due to a criminal conviction of an aggravated felony. Part of this story is about Raksmei’s struggle with refugee and Khmer identity, and indefinite detention. Through the hardship he faced, he individually became empowered in immigration detention as a jailhouse lawyer, and then found that community power had been built due to collective effort necessary to end indefinite detention.³⁹

Legal Status

I was found deportable. I am a parolee. So, I am actually just an alien on parole. The government gave me permission to stay in the U.S. until my country decides to accept me back.

Refugee camp

We left Cambodia around November 19, 1979 and we were stuck in the jungle for almost a year before we got to the refugee camps. My first memory is basically in the refugee camps around 1981, ’82, ’83. I actually don’t have any memory of Cambodia. I was too small. I would have been three and [malnourished] and everything.

³⁹ Personal interviews on January 4, 2011 and May 24, 2011 , conducted in English.

My father and my family were separated [from us] in 1979 when the Vietnamese army invaded. During the invasion, my father wanted to go back home to see if our house, before the Khmer Rouge was still there. And so while he was gone, the army invaded. We were held hostage by the Khmer Rouge in the jungle for the next -almost a year.

In the refugee camps my mother found out that my dad was still alive. Again, my mom thought my father died. My father thought my mom, well the whole family, died because of the invasion and having to be held hostage in the jungle. Having [thought that we were] making the journey and [he was] trying to make that journey from Cambodia to the Thai border, he thought that we didn't make it. He thought that we died.

My mother made contact with him through letters, probably in '82 [or] '83 in America. I haven't spoken to my [dad]. [I have] this relationship where I was brought up by my mother, only. I have nothing to do with my father. I have this... it's really stupid, but I refuse to talk to him. I send him money occasionally, but sometimes he would call me on my phone. I don't pick up. He doesn't leave a message or anything but I know it's from Cambodia. I know it's from him. I do know what he looks like though.

Conditions in the Refugee Camp

It varies from camp to camp. Usually the food would be distributed to your community, or to your family weekly. I don't know maybe you get two kilo of fish or four kilo of rice and probably some money. I don't know how much, but we have to survive somehow. So it's actually like a food bank where they give weekly food.

In the Khao-I-Dang Refugee Camp, we stayed in a hut made of bamboo sticks. At night, we would usually hear the fighting because it's so close to the border. You can hear shootings and probably grenades. There's no privacy. Me, my two older brothers, and my mom; we slept in one place. It wasn't separated by anything. It was normal to us. That's how I was brought up; there's no privacy. So I wouldn't know what privacy was at the time.

In the Philippine refugee camp, it's kind of like getting you ready to be in America. They let you watch movies and they have books. It's like a survival guide, how to shop, banks, use checks or what not. That's what my parent, my mother, had to go through and my oldest brother. It was a preparedness camp.

Settling into American Culture and Poverty

It was totally different for us - for me as a kid. It was the first time being in America. I squatted on the toilet, because I didn't know what the toilet [was]. How do you use it? I never sat down on a toilet, and I couldn't bear the toilet seat touching my leg. I'm like, "Uh, that's gross." I end up squatting like I don't know for how long. The bed, it was crazy. Like the first time I got to sleep on the bed. I think we jumped on the bed for like hours and hours. This was the first time we had our own bed.

A church group sponsored us to get to the United States. We lived in Richmond, Virginia. That was our first place. It's actually a public low-income housing. It was already furnished through a church organization. It was [furnished] from the thrift store or gifted; the couch and bed. It was something, I think we were really fortunate to go to a place, and it was already furnished with a couch and 1970s TV.

Adjusting to Difference at School

I don't remember the elementary school now. I don't even remember what grade I was in. It was in probably kindergarten, or second, or third grade. I was put into the special group of kids, where you can't speak English. You get put into this class. It's hard.

I think my mom told me, "You gotta brush your teeth every time after you eat." I took my toothbrush to school. I tried to brush my teeth after lunch. But no body does that. So I hid it.

This one time there was a three-day holiday and we thought, "Okay, in America there's a three day weekend. So the next Monday, you don't go to school." We didn't go to school. The next day we went to school, Tuesday. And [the school was] like, "Where were you?" I don't know, we thought that there was no school Monday, because last week there was no school.

Parenting Difficulties and Norms

Besides just being a teenager growing up, I think [my] mother struggled at the same time trying to like make [us] listen to her. She buil[t] up these angers, like she would like hit us, me and my brother. I don't know if it's the right thing, but she kind of had a hard time raising us. She had a hard time understanding how to raise us in America. What is the best way to raise refugee kids in America?

I look back at it. A lot of times, I mean every refugee family goes through that, because it's not the norm to be put in a country that you know nothing of and try to raise

your kids, try to educate your kids on what is right and wrong. The interpretation is so different from where you are from. Because the lack of my father being there, is one, and the fact that she, I guess being poor at the same time and then your kids [don't] listen to you. [It] put a lot of stress on her. So she took out the anger on us. I don't blame her, because we gave her a hard time, because we don't know any better.

Sometimes she could work, but it wasn't enough. I mean they considered [being] on welfare or working and not be home. She [had] now it's just my brother and I. My oldest brother was also living there, but he has his own job.

Which has more benefit to be on welfare? I mean you don't get a lot but you get to watch your kids. In reality her choice was for the family. I think she did her best. I end up getting into trouble, my brother and I.

Living in The Projects

I wouldn't have understood what was going on at the time [but] there's other families, there's a lot of families who live in [those] particular projects [who] were refugees from Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and other minorities. We went to the same elementary school and ended up going to the same junior high.

As for support program, you have all these classes: ESL classes for the families and parents. But there's one thing that lacks, you know [it was] how to best raise your kids in this kind of environment. I mean my parents missed out on that and other parents too. The kids that I grew up with got into the neighborhood street gangs. Like me, it seemed like there was no other alternative. I am not going to say that I don't have any choices. I just made bad choices. Often, it was the choices that weren't clear.

Socio-economic Struggle and Cultural Trauma

There wasn't anything like [community centers that deal with transitioning to the United States] for the Khmer community. And I wonder why? I kind of know the answer, because if there were such a program like, here, if you have some particular problem especially, you struggle economically and socially, they [the Khmer community] would think you are crazy.

I guess that other community members other refugee community members would think you are crazy to go seek counseling. In our country, you don't do [that] kind of stuff. You know, you don't go ask. If you can't solve it yourself, then too bad, I mean they wouldn't ask for help. At the same time, I think the community really struggled from Post Traumatic Syndrome. I mean, you could see from other parents and my mom, you know, they would break down. When she [mother] was mad at us, she would break down. She tries so hard to bring us to America, and we screwed up. Why don't we understand, that we are fortunate to be in America?

At the same time, my mother wasn't educated, and she really didn't set a good example of how to make it. She doesn't know how. I mean, for a normal parent, a parent should be able to help with the homework and to help explain what's going on. I didn't have that I had to learn that myself, or friends, and TV. That's different from regular kids and immigrant and refugee kids that our parents really don't know much and I didn't have that many role model[s]. I mean no role model at all.

The elderly that I know w[ere] working class and that's it. Not that many standard[s] w[ere] being set to be a successful person. I didn't see that around me, until

late, really late into my adult life. I am not saying that there weren't refugee families that made it, somehow [they] did the right things and try hard, make it out of the projects, and buy a house, but the population that I grew up with we just didn't do that well.

Building Associations with Gangs

Since '85 I grew up [with] the same group of kids. We went to school together from tenth all the way to the twelfth [grade]. By the time I was in twelfth grade, my brother was already involved in the neighborhood street gang. At the time, this was the early 1990s in California and *Yo! MTV Raps* was a big hit on MTV. As kids we caught images on TV that gangs are cool and hip-hop is the thing right. We became a part of neighborhood street gang and not because someone from California made the gang. I mean we didn't join any outside gang from any other states or anything. We just became a gang in ourselves.

Before we were a gang, often, we would be labeled by the police as gangs because we always hung out in groups. While we were in junior high, it was only obvious that we already have enough people in our group already so we might as well be a gang.

We came from the same background. We are refugees. We [were] kids and we live in the project. We think similar. We think that [pauses] that we are not bright. You know? We are not bright kids at all. And that we have to stick together to fight against another gang, because we also get picked on when we were little.

I think one of the reasons was we were coming when we were growing up in the project you know, the first wave in the early eighties, was the first wave of Southeast

Asian immigrant[s], of refugees. I mean, the neighborhood that we were living, it was new to them and people.

We were teased on by other kids because we looked different and we couldn't speak English. To us it's a way to you know, to defend ourselves. You know, just coming together and just be a gang. I think it got away from us, and, because of the fact that, you know, we didn't learn our lesson. Like when we get put in juvenile hall, got into trouble. Still, we thought it was cool. Gang is the thing.

Gang Affiliation and School

When I was a gang member it was not the same anymore. You forget school. You know, "Who care's about school." A good thing to do is to land yourself in juvenile detention, to be tough. I didn't go to school or I would go to school late all the time. I was trying to like get into fights at school. It wasn't like I go to school to learn. That was [never] the intention at all. I [would] go to school to see what's up; if I could start a fight, rather than if anything was going on [involving] fighting or in gangs. I don't know why, but education wasn't on my mind at all.

I just went to school to satisfy my mom. My mom wanted me [to go] to school, keep that attendance. I wasn't interested in learning, because I wasn't really good at anything, either reading or history, or anything. I wasn't really good – "So screw it, you know, screw the education" - I thought it was the thing to do.

At the time, I thought that stealing car stereos in cars before [when] compact discs (CDs) [could turn a profit]... I mean this is when CDs had just came out and car stereos

were expensive; I think you can get 150 bucks for a car stereo. Now you can't get that anymore. You'd be lucky to get forty bucks for a CD car stereo.

Before weed was popularized in the area, it was crack. Crack was more popularized than weed. So my buddies [were] into selling crack-cocaine and I wasn't. I am not a big fan of crack-cocaine. I saw the commercial, "Crack Kills" and so [laughs], I wasn't a big fan of selling crack. I don't know why, but I guess not. I mean I'd sell weed and stuff but not a lot of weed. But, just to, like, for extra cash and stuff.

Substantive Rights and Community Awareness

Raksmei's affiliation with his gang was a counter-alternative to the Khmer community, and therefore was not legitimized by this community. While this gang organization engaged in criminal acts, it served a purpose of creating a sense of membership. Raksmei felt the Khmer community lacked awareness, access to political voice and membership since they lacked elected representatives that spoke on behalf of their socio-economic situation and their experiences as refugees. Since the new Khmer community did not have political representatives, it made no sense for their community to seek out citizenship. In this sense, citizenship wasn't relevant to this community if there was no substantive gain, such as a career or economic stability. The type of politics he described was primarily electoral politics, such as the right to vote. After he was found deportable, however, the Khmer community expected that within the authority of U.S. law, a morally just legal system should not justify indefinite detention. For them, Raksmei had served his time for the criminal charges and should not have been held without a release date. It was not until the morals of the U.S. did not hold true to the reality, that the Khmer community was able to see the relevance of obtaining legal status. Therefore, there was misinformation

within this community and the unjust human rights abuse of indefinite detention in order to understand why legality created injustice. In the following excerpt, Raksmei explains his process of raising consciousness:

We [had] permanent legal residency, a green card we obtained that in 1987. It's just that my mother really never took the initiative to become a U.S. citizen. There is all this criteria. She didn't speak English, read, or write. I don't think she would have passed a citizenship test in the first place. I knew she probably wanted to for a particular reason to be a US citizen, so she could travel to Cambodia and maybe or visit her relative. Besides that, I don't think she knew the advantage of being a US citizen. I remember she studied for some English classes, kind of like an ESL, but I don't think it was for US citizenship.

My mom was saying something; community leaders can lead the people [by] encouraging other community [members] to naturalize. Before 1996, this didn't happen much.⁴⁰ I think that everyone, I mean the educated refugees or immigrants, were you know about individualism, kind of like, "It's on their own." If they succeed they become US citizen, but I am not gonna take or use my efforts to encourage others to do the same thing [my emphasis].

For whatever reason, "That's not my job." Until 1996, the Welfare Reform and the change in immigration law, Welfare to Work program signed by Bill Clinton that made refugees and immigrants aware that we need to become naturalized. Since then, there's money put in to community based organization to help fund an educators [or] social workers to have the immigrant community naturalized—to be naturalized.

⁴⁰ Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996.

The folks that are more educated were able to become US citizens, [they] ha[d] higher paying jobs. They didn't live in the community that we live[d] in, which is the housing projects. You have to identify [that the] refugee communities and immigrant communities [haven't] dealt with deportation; they thought a green card was good enough. Actually it's permanent resident. That means permanent, right?

At the same time, they didn't see much difference between being U.S. citizen and being a green card holder. There's a lot of baggage put into...at that time, to become a US citizen.

Khmer Community and Social Justice Work

As for the community, they never came out and spoke about it – because they just didn't understand the system. They thought, “How could you [Raksmei] do this? How could you?” My mother and her friends they're like, “No, you can't send him back. Just release him.”

What [was] stopping them was the law. Okay, look, the law says this: that Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE] can hold you indefinitely. With that being said, that was the answer for them really to not pursue anything further. They live in America. You know, America is what to them? It is the country that is supposed [to] follow the American law. [To them] that is the right thing. Challenging the system, they never ha[d] to do it before because in Cambodia, in the Communist Regime [sic], to speak out about certain things [would mean] they would get killed. They were really inexperienced and my generation, the group that my mother hung out with, or the older

generation, said the first generation was unaware of being progressive of being into the social justice movement.

They have better things to worry about: survival, taking care of the family. Not being in a working class, not [having] such benefit of fighting for social justice, like other people have, and maybe enjoy doing. The inexperience, in America, or in especially in Washington State, the Cambodian Community also never had to fight for something like this; never had to stand up for immigrant rights.

I would explain to them that I am going to be in immigration jail, for maybe three to six months, and then will be released. They could understand that. But then again, when it [came] to the long period of time [in indefinite detention], they start to question. I guess [it was] more of guilt on themselves. [They thought that] maybe I [had] done more serious crimes to not be released from immigration custody. And they start, blaming who's at fault. What was my mom saying? That we can't fight the justice system because we just don't know how.

There was discussion going in the community, when I was going through indefinite detention. They really [did not] know what to do. Nobody who [was] around my age was doing advocacy around that. There was a lack. There was nobody to take a lead on it, to make the community aware that this is an injustice.

If you look at it right now, it's a little bit different. [Now] I am able to explain to the community why it happened and what's wrong with it, and how could we correct it. And what approach could we have toward this: whether [it] is a band-aid approach or long-term approach. [Now] you can have those kinds of discussions, but at the time, when we [were] serving time under indefinite detention, there wasn't any of that going

on. Then, it was more, like, “What the heck is going on,” and “we can’t do anything about it” and “that’s just too bad.”

You ask yourself, “Am I Americanized [enough] to be a US citizen?” Then you are not Khmer anymore or Cambodian anymore, you are American. It’s an identity thing, also. If you are a US citizen, I think you lose the citizenship of your other country, when you are from Cambodia.

And so, during my talks we often times don’t feel American enough to be a U.S. citizen. By that, I mean, speak enough English or write well to communicate fluently, to obtain US citizenship. The elderly, the parents, felt that they are not that like that. So they’re not really obligated to become a US citizen.

If I were taught or explained about the consequences of [not] having citizenship versus having legal status - a green card, would I do it differently? Would my parents be more involved in getting me to become a US citizen [and] other families [too]? It might but not in a large proportionate way, because refugee and immigrant parents don’t expect their kid to screw up in America.

They believe in a moral system of like, “How could you deport a kid that came here since he was a baby?” There must be some form of justice that considers that. Khmers kind of like figure out, “Well if you come here a long time and you commit a crime, and your family is all here, and you have nobody in another country and you would suffer, America wouldn’t do that to you.”

With all this being explained, I think only a minority a small percentage, would make an effort to become US citizens. There not much advantage, when you really think about it in the refugee community, to become a US citizen. If they become a US citizen,

there [would] be a difference and kind of advantages if they didn't become US citizen. They wouldn't get welfare or public assistance or food stamps.

If they were encouraged - "If you get in trouble." - but nobody wants to think that they are going to be in trouble. That wouldn't be an issue.

There weren't any immediate advantages to becoming a United States citizen. One thing about immigrants and the refugee communities that I grew up with [is that we are without] civil engagement, and do not have the rights to vote. So they think of themselves, "What do I know about politics?" What do I know about votes? Really they don't.

You don't have a community that says your vote counts because at the time they didn't even have US citizenship, so they didn't have any target population that was the refugee leaders.

[So] trying to get their community to build around a vote or do civil engagement, was one of the reasons why the refugee community didn't really, before 1996, they didn't really [think] seriously [about] becoming a US citizen.

One of the things they thought was as an advantage, to being a U.S. citizen, was you could travel and you could sponsor immediate family. Then again, you need money to sponsor your immediate family and so on. And you have to have enough income, but that was one of the reasons, like voting. I think, they ask themselves, "Does it matter?"

Deportation Orders

Raksmei was convicted of a criminal offense in 1994. Immediately after he served time for the criminal offense, he went into custody of Immigration Customs Enforcement [ICE]. Had

he understood his option to appeal his case in immigration court under a 212 (c) waiver, perhaps his indefinite detention could have been avoided. Without an immigration lawyer, Raksmei was unable to understand the legal stakes and chose not to appeal his case.

Deportable offense

I can say that I was sentenced to being an accomplice [to an armed robbery]. This was in 1994, in May I think. So it's actually like committing a crime also, but I was the driver. The motive was there, my buddy wanted to get some money from this guy. I was involved because my buddies needed some money. Money for some weed, and it wasn't a lot.

In reality, I wouldn't sit down and say, "Oh let's go and rob this guy or that guy." I mean if I had said no, I would have been a sissy. Certain gangs are different, saying no to certain things means that you are weak.

The police caught us about, half a mile away.

I didn't have a trial. If I had a trial, I would end up testifying against my own buddies, or my buddies they will testify against me. We didn't go through the trial. I ended up plea-bargaining in November of 1994. I was sent to prison. I stayed in prison until July 1997.

It shouldn't even matter if it's [an] aggravated felony. Before 1996, [there] was only certain crimes that involve[d] - a sentence more than 60 months or 65 months.

That's whatever immigration considered, what not to qualify for section 212 (c).

I have to explain something else. During the '90s, I don't know if they still do it now, but they had an immigration court [sic] its actual immigration court; it's recorded and everything, they would bring people, maybe once a month or maybe once every two

months. People facing deportation would get transferred and have this hearing. They would have this immigration judge there. And if possible, if you can get a lawyer, you can argue your case there. So actually, I had at the time, I had a chance. I qualified for a section 212 (c) waiver, but I didn't have a lawyer. I remember sending a request to get [a pro bono] attorney at the XX, but by the time they returned the letter back, my case was over already. So I end up pleading guilty again. I said, "Just send me back. I am not going to fight this immigration case." They said, "Are you sure?" And I said, "Yeah. I am not going to appeal or anything. Just send me back." I did not choose to fight my immigration case. I had a chance, but I didn't. Please remember: I had a chance, but I didn't. And this was - I am trying to remember if this was November 1995 - I had a final order back then. This was before 1996.

What affected me was what I went through; the indefinite detention. ICE implemented - in 1996 [sic] - got really strict on aggravated felonies. When your country doesn't accept you, you get to be in jail, I mean, held in custody, [in] immigration custody for life, unless the attorney general otherwise says so.

When I was released from prison it was 1997 right after I was released, I was put in immigration jail and was waiting to be deported. I waited for about 28 months. That's a long time.

Indefinite Detention

There was no reason for me to be held more than three months, because of the fact that I don't have a place to go to? It's unconstitutional. It was ruled unconstitutional.

The court said it was the law. It was. The law states that they can deport you. They can hold you for however many years they want. Months, days, or how long they would want. They come up with all kind of reasons.

[Hypothetically] immigration [court] comes up with the reason: “Oh, you’re a threat to the community.” The reality is, the courts [came up with this] argument there’s no reason that this person can’t be released if he has a place to stay. [H]e already served his time it doesn’t make sense to hold a person after you review his or her case. I mean, if [the courts] say no, what have [the courts] given the detainee or the individual to rehabilitate oneself? It’s because you have no such program. But [immigration detention] have none of that, so you can’t use, “A threat to the community,” or “A flight risk,” or any other kind manner against [the detainee], besides having an address to go to.

Since the day I got into immigration [my deportation] was supposed to be [processed] administratively, but it turned out to be a life sentence. But actually I [was] just waiting to be deported. I went into immigration custody the summer of 1997. I knew people [who] were there, close to a year and so on. I saw what was going on, Cubans folks from the former Soviet Union, Southeast Asian, Asian groups; China was one too, Vietnamese, Laos.

I mean, nobody, I don’t think anyone can explain waiting 28 months. Just waiting. Just waiting. You don’t know when you are going to get out. You do prison time - you know when you are going to get out. If you behave good—whenever. You have this exact date that when they are supposed to release you.

In immigration you don’t know. You are like—“When am I going to get out?”—that’s the bad part.

Personal Experience and Advocacy for Policy Change

What detainees will do when their right of their person is constrained is complicated. Raksmei and his peers had nothing to lose. They were awaiting their individual cases. The holding facilities were substandard even in comparison to federal detention centers, prisons, and county jails. They were not criminal under immigration law, because this category of law is civilly administered. These conditions again led Raksmei to look for alternative means to influence his life. Only this time the system he sought to change was immigration policy. While the organizing strategies that Raksmei and his peers took were radical, e.g. the hunger strike and flooding the courts, there needed to be social change within the system of immigration policy:

My experience being indefinitely detained plays a role in policy change because of the fact that I can use my experience, having committed a crime, going through the immigration justice system, and also being detained in immigration jail. That plays a large role that would be a tool that I have to affect immigration policy.

I mean who else has gone through this and [is] able to tell about their experience and still be in the U.S. to talk about it? Not that many people would be able to because they either get deported right after they get out of prison, and [do] not have a chance to advocate for change in immigration law.

I have to use this to my advantage. This is what I can do. I don't think I can do even more. I use what I have. I've learned enough to articulate the things that I have learned and make the efforts to advocate for change. Sharing experience with other people affected by it is also the tools that I have because I am around people that's going

through the same thing and the family, so I am able to share that with the advocates and legislators what they [are] going through.

I mean that the immigration experience will be one component and the other component would be and this is just my thinking, “Who is going to speak for you?” You are not going to let others speak for you. I mean, you have to fight for yourself.

I believe strongly that if I don’t speak up, if I don’t talk, if I don’t say anything, then nothing is going to get changed. If I don’t, then somebody else is going to say that for me. Are they saying it correctly, are they speaking from your people, from your experience?

I honestly believe that there are more people in my situation [who should] speak up, so I will take a rest sometime. Sometimes its hard work, but you know it’s about being able to mobilize your own community to feel confident that you are making people know that you exist. You know? That you don’t stand down for this kind of injustice.

Demographics of the Detention Population

I thought about a particular group of people, and this group of people are not the well off people; they’re [undocumented], they’re minority or they’re the immigrants. They’re the one that wants to survive in another country, wants to make a living. That’s all they are trying to do. Maybe with that and there’s the consequences. Wow, detention, that’s like a punishment for them for just trying to make it in another country.

Mostly you see women and children that suffer; [who] go to visit these men in the detention center. It’s not right when you see things like that in the waiting room. All you see is children and women and the fathers [are] locked up. That’s how I look at it. Maybe

it's different from other people. I look at it, like there is a class of people that America felt [sic] don't belong in this country. For whatever reason, we consider that these group of people are illegal or they don't deserve to be in America, but at the same time, the family value is still there; they have families and children and they work.

Action Against the Conditions while in Detention

Then when I got out of prison, I went to the immigration jail; I was in the immigration detention center at the downtown location. Somehow [immigration law] had this rule, where you can't be held there more than six months in the same location. I think, February or January 1998, I was transferred to the location Northern City Jail (NCJ) leased out a space, actually a dorm, it's called a Q dorm. The NCJ had approximately 45 beds. Separate cells. It has doors and your own bathroom and stuff.

I was the first group. We were the first group to be transferred there. We [detainees] had the whole unit to ourselves in immigration. We thought it was just for immigration, but it didn't turn out that way. *They put other inmates in our units.* When I say other inmates, it's the general population, the county population. They're charged with a crime. They [the people charged with committing a crime] are not under administrative custody, but they are in county custody, awaiting a court hearing. It was conflicting. We [the immigrant detainees awaiting deportation] did not— I mean [there] was something wrong with that. We mentioned that to immigration. We said, "Look, why are you putting us with these guys." So, they did that for, I think, about two months. Somehow, they got rid of that.

I stayed in the NCJ for a year. And, it was [like] jail because you can't go anywhere else. We had a rec-yard; that was it. We had a basketball court. The food was bad. It started out that we didn't have anything. The guys didn't have any religious service, you know. There wasn't any classes that [were] offered. We end[ed] up, sort of fighting for it.

Struggle for Better Conditions

So first we got the religious service. I'm not, you know, I don't go to church. But there's a friend that I know, he does, and we was able to get [access to] this. There were ESL classes offered, but it was kind of like basic. It was in a small room for individuals that did ESL learning. And I know one time we went to make greeting cards. This was the first time I went outside of the unit, to another like, space, another room to make greeting cards. It's actually worse than the inmates' population, the regular general population. I met some of the guys [from the inmate population], when I went to the hospital, and stuff like that, inside. At the clinic and they said that it's different, they have like movies twice a week, or something. We don't even get that. What the hell? Why are we so different? So anyway, it sucks and you get all white, because you don't get the sun. You know? [laughs]

Often, these guys are really waiting on their appeals. It's different from the detainees in the in downtown immigration jail. In the downtown immigration jail, somehow, it's like a transit. Immigration Customs and Enforcement picks up people, from say, Central America, or Mexico and they deport them the next week.

It wasn't like that at the NCJ. At the NCJ, you are going through trial, immigration court or appeals or waiting to be appealed or something. Kind of like the long-timer for the immigration cases. I didn't see any people go in one week and leave, but there were people from all over.

After that, I was transferred to Federal Detention Center. [laughs] Federal Detention Center, it's not an immigration detention center! It's a federal jail! Ah, man.

By the end of 1997, in the immigration—jail system. It's overcrowded and they start sending people, like, for example, they put me into the NCJ, then the Federal Detention Center. Some of us [detainees] w[ere] transferred to Yakima County Jail. There was another one the Island County Jail. Some of my buddies were sent to King County Jail, and you don't want to go to King County Jail.

A Self-Taught Lawyer

In late 1997, I started looking into immigration law a little bit. [I] thought that I could actually get out on parole. At that time, I still believe there must be some justice [in the] system. There must be some procedure that I can get out, right? You can't just hold a person for life! Somehow, I was guessing. Okay, I wasn't sure. I was like "*I am guessing that, you can't hold me without a date.*" But [the courts] were doing it. Going through this process, I was learning—"Are they [the courts] doing this right?"

"Am I doing anything wrong?" For me, to still be in custody, I did my time. My country doesn't accept me, so it's time for me to go. I was looking into that. I was doing everything the right way. I have an address. I asked for letters of support, [and I had] a

job, if I was to be released and so on. I submitted everything to my A-file. A-file is your alien file number, which did keep a record.

I submitted all of that, and wrote the letter of request for release—a request for parole. The first time I wrote it was after three months being detained. I got no answer. All I got was a verbal answer from INS officers saying that, “No you can’t get out.” And so I couldn’t differentiate between aggravated felony and no felony. All I knew was that I had to get out, that this detention was wrong.

I mean, for me, it was a different issue. My case was totally over already. It was over since 1995. So I had nothing to go back to. Well you know, unless I wanted to reopen my case. I didn’t want to reopen my case [remember, because Raksmei elected not to appeal]. I just wanted to get out of custody. So, all I did was [look] into the custody review, the parole review, and so on. You know, that’s when I started being a jailhouse lawyer.

I got to the North City Jail, and I got hold of some cases. I think the first case I got was I read [sic] was a similar case about indefinite detention. I read into that and filed habeas corpus.

Flood the Courts

I got a hold of some more cases through the law library and read into it. You know start writing my own little brief file for memory injunction. [I] got everybody I knew, like the whole unit to file habeas corpus.

So, at the time, my intention was to overcrowd the court system, and I knew if [we] overcrowded the court system with all these petitions by other detainees that

somehow the attorney general would look into it, and say, “Wow you have so many petitions, so many claims, why don’t you just release these guys?” under supervision or what not. That was my purpose. I calculated [it], kind of like money-wise. Like, maybe they’re spending too much money.

If we get so many people to file habeas corpus, it would cost the court so much money. So all these numbers pop in my head like, okay, say, \$20,000.00 on a case. If we have ten people file - but I did not know that the government has unlimited cash. Actually, my strategy didn’t work but it worked the other way around. It worked the other way. So many people filed from the Adult Detention Center and so many people filed from the Federal Detention Center and some people filed from the Eastern Washington County Jail that the magistrate judge ordered a freeze on these particular cases that dealt with indefinite detention.

The judge picked five leading cases and one of the cases, one of the leading cases, became one of the cases that I helped file. And so that particular case went all the way to the 9th circuit court—the U.S. Supreme Court and actually won. And so, so that’s one of the proud moments that I have.

So, anyway, the court picked five specific cases and all of them actually won. They appealed to the 9th Circuit Court. When they went to the U.S. Supreme Court it was combined with one case. It’s called Zadvydas case. [This] lost in the circuit court there. But, the U.S. Supreme Court decided to take that case a joint case with XX [sic]. I think the decision was in 2001. The 9th Circuit ruled against indefinite detention. After the circuit court decision, it ended up going to the Supreme Court combined with [this] case.

My habeas corpus petition was frozen, waiting for these five cases to go to the Western District Court.

Denied Parole, No Protocol

At the time, immigration didn't have procedures. There's parole procedure, regional procedures, where they're supposed to kind of like, you know, have a parole hearing; a formal procedure. I remember the incident. I knew that there was a memo out from INS. INS had to conduct this kind of parole.

Through my research, with the newspaper, and immigration rights organization, outside, [I knew that the] immigration court [was] supposed to have this. But, immigration did it in a different way. I was approached one day by immigration officer. They [the officers] came to me and said, "Hey [do] you have a place to live when you get out?" I am like, "Dude, I sent all that stuff in my file. Why don't you just look in my file?" The next thing I know I was denied parole. If there were protocol to follow and everything, they would [have] actually given me a letter verbally or [in writing] saying that, "Either tomorrow or next week, you are going to have a parole hearing. Have your information ready." Or, "If you want an attorney—" You know? So I can advise my attorney or who whatever needs translation or whatnot. But, there wasn't any such procedure. It was very informal. I was pissed off at them. At the same time, I was arrogant because I knew that somehow the court system will free me, because my paperwork was in the federal court already.

It was the time where I was doing [the] brief and I was arguing. Mine was a rebuttal argument. So I knew that it was almost there. I [thought] I am almost getting a

judgment. But [not] knowing that at the same time it was about to be frozen as well. And so, [it happens that] mine was delayed so long because of the fact that it was frozen. So I got denied on my first parole hearing. And this was happening even though I didn't do anything wrong. This was when I was at the NCJ. They gave me a letter that I was denied.

The next hearing took, I think, six months. Hey, six months is a long time. Let me think, was it six months or three month? Ah, I don't remember, but anyways. My second parole hearing was more professional; they gave me a letter. Hey, a parole hearing: "Do you want to have your lawyer be there with you?" Okay fine. You know, that. So I was granted parole.

Later on in October of '99 I was denied media access. I mean, people came because I wrote a lot to media outlets, newspapers, and stuff, about the situation. They [the media] tried to come and visit me. And they couldn't; it was denied. Like, they [the media] need a paper from immigration approval. One time, I got a request, a media request. Through immigration saying, "This media group wants to talk to you." I said, "Do I know who, can you tell me who they are?" They are like, "No we can't tell you who they are." Then what you want me to sign it for? You know, it was like those kinds of things. They don't want you to talk to the media.

Stop Procedure Show Power to the System

This one time, I instigated a riot in the NCJ because of the bad food. Me and my buddies decided, "Look, if we do something like this we can get transferred to a different facility, which is probably better than this county jail, or maybe get better food through

commissary,” and so on. The police called, [it an] instigated riot. I took the tray and threw it at a door and threatened the cops. And they took me to solitary confinement. I was cool about it. I have done solitary confinement, and its nothing. And it’s kind of an eye opener for the guards to know how to make them aware these guys are not regular inmates like, the general population. We are not violent at all. [laughs] But, anyways, he was scared shitless though. I remember the guards, man. After we kicked the trash-can and threw the tray at one of the door, [the guard is] like, “What’s wrong gu-u-uys?” [sing-songingly] Like that. I mean that was his tone. He was scared, man.

There were many other times when I was in immigration jail downtown. I was new, only like maybe a couple of months there. There was going to be a hunger strike in the detention center, and there’s a strategy behind doing a hunger strike or any kind of protest in the jail system.

My buddy—he [was] in a different unit, but I was able to communicate with him through seeing him in the mess hall. I have to explain to him that there’s a strategy, that if you hold off, if you have a work strike, rather than a hunger strike to start with, then you accomplish more a things.

The purpose of the hunger strike was against indefinite detention, against the treatment, because we had some junky clothes to wear. We had some dirty sheets that haven’t been changed. We kind of like knew the policy of being in jail, like you supposed to exchange uniforms, twice a week. We knew that. It’s not like you can have a person wear[ing] the same uniform for more than four days a week. You have to have, you know, like sheets and [a] pillow case, and we need those exchanged.

I knew the strategy going in. They, [were] kind of like, what professional call, “rookies.” In order to have a successful strike or hunger strike, you have to stop inmates from working. You only need to stop say, for a population in the immigration jail, you just need to stop like six people. If these six people don’t go to work [that day], then everything stops.

When everything stops, the guards have to take over. And the guards [don’t] have the capacity to take over and maintain the unit quality at the same time. If there’s no guard, there that is serving to the inmates - excuse me, I don’t want to use, I never want to use [the word] inmates in [this context to describe detainees in] immigration custody. So, this is the prison strategy, in the ICE in the immigration population. [When] there’s no guards serving food and only detainees are working in the kitchen and serving food, and if these guys stop, then no food is being served, and by law you have to serve the food to the inmates- to the detainees.

Whether it’s in front of [the guards] serving food into the unit or having [the detainees] come to a chow hall, the detainees are supposed to be given food three meals a day. So the strategy is to have the worker not go to work. If you don’t go to work, everything stops. It stops from the main line. It stops from the food. If these six people didn’t go to work, the guards have to take over. And the guards don’t have the capacity to serve the food. So everything stops and everything gets delayed and everything gets backed up. And you cost all kind of crap in the immigration system itself. Even the court gets messed up.

That was the strategy. The only thing wrong was a couple people did go to work. I mean, a couple people is okay. Right? A couple goes to work. Okay. The [workers] are

having some problem. Okay, only a couple of people go to work. There's some kind of movement going, there's some kind of system going on. But now, the inmates gotta stop [eating.]

There's that part. And how do you control, like, twenty-nine people, in your unit? How do you try to convince them, "Look we are doing this thing for these particular purpose." I mean, it works for the morning, because most of the detainees are lazy to wake up in the morning. We wouldn't eat breakfast anyway. But it worked.

Messing Up the System

You are making a statement. It's even better, if on the next time around, on lunch time [if] half of the inmates [don't] go to eat. By law, the guard has to ask you, to make sure that you have eaten or not eaten. And if they, and if [the detainees] are not, they have to write it down. They have to log it down: Maybe there's something wrong with the person. Maybe he's sick. You know whatever. They [immigration custody] are liable for that.

With that being said, it's also the guard's responsibility to log down the names of who is not eating. By doing that, you're causing something to make [the immigration custody] know that [they're] messing up the system, the procedure. To make them aware [that] this particular action is able to cause that. Reality is [that] you could have just [not] gone to work strike rather than [have a hunger strike].

So that's my first hunger strike. I went a whole day without [eating]. But, there's a strategy behind doing a hunger strike without starving yourself [laughs]. In custody, not

outside of custody. Outside of custody, you gotta make sure you don't eat, but inside of custody you can hide food without anybody knowing that you're snuck something to eat.

For my unit of about 29 people, I think they think it was a success. I think everybody walked away at the end of the night smiling and saying that did something. Some of the guys just want new sheets, new uniforms and just want to be deported right away to Mexico. They were being hold forever and for whatever reason. Why they are being hold for so long? They just want to be on the next bus to go back to Mexico.

They were satisfied because some kind of mutual communication between myself from Cambodia and another individual from Mexico, from Central America, you understand that you have to do this kind of things. Maybe that doesn't exist in a different unit. You have to have some kind of a mutual communication to understand between you as inmates fighting against the immigration system.

They had a plan going on. I remember people mentioning that they had family outside [who] contacted the newspaper, and TV station. I remember that they were outside. I remember looking out the window, and there was people telling me that there's a news station that is outside. But, the guards was denying what's going on inside.

Rise for Survival “Nothing to Lose”

The organizing contributions of the detainees, regardless of legal status, and each person's individual cases were vast and transformative. They detainees learned that in order to bring about change it would take drastic and collaborative work. The strategy was to understand how the immigration system worked and that messing with it would bring about the dignity that each detainee sought:

If the people [who are] organizing make it more [than] making a statement, or [they] up rise because some of the guys have nothing to lose but to be deported back. I want[ed] something out of it. Actually all I wanted was a parole hearing. I didn't even— what I got [while in immigration custody] was like, “Oh, okay, we're gonna look into it further, see if we get back to you.” It wasn't good enough for me. If the other guys say, “You know what? They're doing what they can,” and “So, let that be.” But you know, I wasn't afraid at all. I had nothing to do, because I understood that whatever I did in immigration custody wouldn't reflect on my good behavior credits or anything, because I [was] being held without a release date. Unless, immigration gave me a release date, then I would [have] behaved.

There's people [who] were against this, because some of them...[who] had a visa violation, were put in custody. We had this group from Sri Lanka; they came with the fake passport and so on and got put into custody. From Vietnam, they [were] really new, [they have not] done jail time. [They were] very afraid of what immigration might do to them as a consequence of holding a hunger strike.

Costs of Organizing: Segregation Unit

There was another hunger strike. I was put into segregation when that second one happened. Probably two or three months later, I think. There were people [who] found out what I did [in] the first hunger strike and they want[ed] to do it again. Somehow they thought it was cool or [thought] that it worked. I think they want to use me, or something. But somehow [the second hunger strike] didn't work as planned.

I got mad at one of the guys. I was at a different unit. I got mad—really pissed off at this individual. He was planning to be in the hunger strike. He was like “Yeah, I’m down.” I am like, “Okay man.” So everybody in my dorm; we planned to go all together. At the last minute he was like, “Aw man; forget it man. This ain’t going to solve anything. Man, I ain’t going to do it.” And you know, I got mad at him. I didn’t beat him up, but I poured water on his bed. The camera caught me. I got put in segregation for destruction of state property.

Doing the Best Thing

If I didn’t have any immigration hold and got out of prison, and [did] my own thing, I wouldn’t be more socially conscious. Growing up, there’s always [been] a part of me that wanted not to do the right thing, but wanted to do the best thing to help whoever out. I think that part of that was already in me and then when I got to the immigration system, I don’t think it really molded me that much. It was the courage to was basically stand up to the immigration system and challenge it, using whatever resources I had. And with that experience it impacted my life. When I got out of immigration custody, in the beginning, I was somewhat burnt out. I felt like I am done with this immigration thing. I have gone through it.

The reality is that it came back at me again. September 11th; then the signing of MOU, Memorandum of Understanding between Cambodia, the agreement, and then it start snowballing again. Damn, you know - what immigrants have to go through! I mean, they have to go through a lot of crap to just be, to have what the privilege of what people have right now, as a U.S. citizen.

I wasn't really motivated to do much until, until later on after I got out. You kind of like have to get yourself situated first, before you want to decided to pursue, to do something that's not financially [laughs] friendly. So, I think it has to do a lot with the immigration, that I had to go through, that really shaped my life today.

Summary

Culminating from experience as a young refugee, an English language learner, and growing up poor, Raksmei's formative years did not fit the expectations of privilege in the U.S. Representations and images on TV taught his fellow youth that gangs were hip and cool. As young Cambodians, the police racially profiled Khmer youth and associate them as gangs. The actions of the police institutionalized racial profiling, based on a pre-textual categorization that ultimately had devastating repercussions in Raksmei's life. Instead of attempting to take care of the refugee community, local government and police authorities failed these youth. While the Khmer community did not accept gang membership as a valid option for their youth, the youth desperately needed a space for membership and belonging and to defend one another from being bullied. Raksmei suggests that the Cambodian refugee community should have had a support network (e.g. resources) for new refugee families, since they needed education on how to raise refugee children in the U.S. culture. Additionally, Khmer parents and other refugees needed cultural awareness trainings on how to adjust their legal status, and on the naturalization process.

Raksmei continuously centralizes his identity on family values. Raksmei and his family were uprooted by war, and his family settled into public housing in the Puget Sound Region. Raksmei's mother struggled economically and culturally to survive in Washington State. She chose to seek public assistance to have time to focus on raising her children. Despite his mother's efforts to parent, Raksmei was not prepared for the American way of life.

The Khmer Southeast Asian refugee community, having specific experiences, shaped their responses within their community. It was citizenship status, not just legal status, that was not well understood. The refugee community was not aware that naturalization would secure their rights. Unlike Marco, Raksmei does not explicitly reject the legitimacy of legal status. However, he points out that the justice system in the immigration law is flawed. Most refugees thought citizenship was unnecessary, it was unclear why the Khmer community should take the time to obtain it. Citizenship and English classes were expensive, time consuming, and challenging for a community that was low income and just struggling to get by.

In his case, this legal status was a misnomer because legal permanent resident never guaranteed Raksmei had protection against indefinite detention. After he was found guilty of an aggravated felony and found deportable, he lacked legal representation that would have explained his right to appeal his case, or give awareness about how to plea a hardship to the court. Raksmei, like many detainees, are not provided with free legal assistance in immigration law. Raksmei handled most of his motions himself, due to limited or non-existent legal representation. He mostly had to take control of his own immigration case, which is a very complex task for someone with no legal background in immigration law.

Raksmei and other detainees' experienced abusive and substandard conditions in immigration detention. Detainees are often treated like criminals, even though their deportation cases are processed administratively, and this exposes the injustices within the immigration "system." The lack of legal representation and poor conditions created a sense of solidarity between legal permanent residents and undocumented immigrants' experiences in detention. In detention, because Raksmei's unit organized a hunger strike to protest indefinite detention, they had advanced a common cause despite the specifics of their immigration cases, e.g. Raksmei told

me he just “wanted a parole hearing,” but he was able to harness his individual work into collective action in order to influence the immigration system in his favor.

The sense of solidarity Raksmei developed with other detainees moved beyond the specific individual needs of the particularities of each person’s legal case. Raksmei identified primarily as a Cambodian refugee, who knew and understood American values, his refugee experience, legal status, and the proper procedure that should have been followed according to immigration law. Raksmei was able to understand the system and the moral values behind dominant U.S. culture and law, enough to launch a successful community response of detainees against indefinite detention. The solidarity of detainees, legal knowledge, and family values influenced a Supreme Court ruling so that he was able to secure a release date.

Raksmei identified how the U.S. government may have educated the broader community of Cambodian refugees on becoming naturalized before 1996.⁴¹ He suggested that identifying the cultural difference of refugees and informing this community about adjusting status could have made the difference for youth like himself. After 1996, immigration law expanded what constituted a deportable offense. Raksmei explained that the first generation of Cambodian Americans did not understand these laws and were not politically involved in the electoral process, mainly because they did not have the right to vote. Therefore, the community had no avenue to cultivate leadership to advocate for the types of an immigration policy that would have represented their political interests. They also could not cultivate Cambodian American leaders to fight for issues of poverty, jobs, healthcare, and education in their particular ethnic niche when socio-economic resources were lacking. In previous chapters, Marco and Guillermo indicated the importance of their ethnic affiliation and the traditions that lead them to organize for social and

⁴¹ Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996.

economic rights. Similar to these previous narratives, Raksmei conveyed camaraderie with communities outside of their specific ethnic identities. Lastly, Raksmei implies that U.S. citizenship potentially meant a loss of a Cambodian cultural identity.

This story suggests that solidarity in immigration detention builds on collective political potential through direct action. While detainees have similar spatial experiences in detentions, their interests may be simultaneously competing and collective. They harnessed their individual needs in solidarity, despite individual legal case logs, in order to purposely rattle procedure in immigration detention and improve the conditions of many other detainees.

Since childhood, Raksmei sought to find a place of belonging within his community. Due to social economic status and as a new refugee, he ended up marginalized and associated with an alternative, street gangs. Later he also faced substandard conditions and was held indefinitely as a detainee. Other detainees continue to face new and similar conditions under the current immigration system. Raksmei's work teaches us of the collective struggle and potential power among detainees, who were experiencing poor living conditions and their own immigration cases. Thus, the hunger strikes and habeas filings fought against injustice, based on collective responses, immediate needs, and they channeled the survival experiences from his youth.

Through its successful organizing, the immigrant rights movement has challenged the ideal of exclusion that relates to one's legal status. Immigrant and refugee uprising, struggle, and resistance, such as Raksmei's life narrative, calls for action against the poorly defined and inadequate legal attempt to narrowly categorize lived experiences into the legal-illegal binary. The justification of indefinite holds is a primary example of human rights abuses in the United States. Possibly ever-more pressing is an in-depth analysis of refugees' contributions to the immigrant rights movement. Among various legal statuses, how refugees are the future of

successful organizing should be viewed as a major theme with regard to the evolution of a thriving immigrant rights movement, and a most glaring indication of the injustices embedded within the security culture of enforcement that is immigration policy today.

Chapter VII: Zoila from El Salvador, 52

In her early fifties, Zoila exudes strength and charisma. When I met her in 2008, a street theater skit had convened in a local open market. The skit intended to educate local residents and tourists on Secure Communities and Immigration Customs Enforcement's use of immigration raids, and Zoila was one of the lead actors. I was struck by Zoila's confidence, knowledge, and "no bull" position around solidarity for immigrant rights as a way of educating the community.

Later, when I interviewed Zoila in her home, style once again became a backdrop for her narrative, by way of *papas con arroz*. As I typed notes in her kitchen, soaking in the aroma of *maiz*, to the left of me a poster hung on the wall. The color photo showed herself and another woman. There she stood, wiry jet-black hair, fitted khaki pants and a short-sleeved shirt, she was in her late teens, holding rifle. This image still keeps me wondering about her life, before she crossed the border from Mexico into the United States.

In 1980, Zoila fled El Salvador to settle in Mexico, where she had refugee status but no work permit. Once registered as a refugee and able to work, she faced discrimination by Mexican employers and harassment by the Mexican police. In 1982, she and her eldest daughter crossed the Mexico-US border, clandestinely, in search of a means to survive. When she described her legal statuses, she directly responded that she is a naturalized citizen. Then she explained how she crossed the Mexico-U.S. border to survive, even though her experiences in El Salvador kept her wanting to avoid this migration. Zoila's emphasis on her legal status and community organizing practices clearly state that her actions have always been about needing to meet her basic needs.

When Zoila moved on to discuss her organizing practices, she suggested that a network of

people gathered resources in the U.S. to help undocumented refugees survive. The Sanctuary Movement, for her and many other individuals fleeing war, meant economic survival within the United States, in immigrant communities specific to the Pacific Northwest. Zoila also suggested that the principles of organizing her life are based on meeting the needs of undocumented communities. Toward the end of the narrative, Zoila imparts knowledge about legality, an awakening, and a “web.” Like all other participants in this study, Zoila advocated for a community-based response to the lack of substantive protections and resources that many undocumented immigrants experience, such as access to doctors and jobs. She describes the importance of family unity and rising up to develop a strong network of resources. In the following narrative Zoila explains:

Legal Statuses

I am a [U.S.] citizen right now. I left El Salvador in 1980. I went to live in Mexico for two or three years as a refugee. I was registered with a refugee world organization in Mexico. I came to the United States in 1982. I was really not interested in coming to the United States at the time. That was not my purpose.

Recalling Torture in El Salvador

My husband was tortured. He disappeared for about a month. He was lucky to be [alive] at the time that he was captured. There was so much pressure throughout the international level, telling everyone that there was a lot of violation in El Salvador jails, and then they would disappear. The Inter-American Commission Human Rights [IAHRC] was on the lookout. They used to go to El Salvador in a watch situation. They used to go to the jails to see whether there were political prisoners.

You are supposed to be considered openly and legally as a political prisoner, but that was not the case in El Salvador, instead the National Guard took you.⁴² You were tortured, and then you disappeared. There were only a few who passed as a political prisoner. They were passing a few just to show the public that, “Yeah, we are passing people. We are passing them, the political prisoners.” But there were dozens of people in the jails. When the IAHRC⁴³ came to the jails, the Salvadoran military would move the prisoners.

Nico told me the reason he [was] alive [was] because when they would come to clean the jails the guards forgot to put some of the prisoners away. Nico was one of them. He was blindfolded. For some reason, his blindfold fell down a little. He saw a gringo—a Norte American passing by, somebody who looked white. He had a badge. Nico recognized it, it was the IAHRC and started yelling his name, “My name is Nico, and I was captured.” The guard turned, “What?” “Nico - Nico!” So, this man went to the IAHRC. They had a report that Nico was captured. That is the reason Nico did not disappear. It was luck. Not very many people were as lucky.

Refugee Status, stereotyping in Mexico

I was living in Mexico, and thinking I would eventually go back to El Salvador, but the situation in Mexico was so hard for refugees, especially Salvadorans. Mexico had accepted us as refugees, and we were registered as refugees, but they did not give us a

⁴² Report on Human Rights in El Salvador (1982) document the National Guard’s involvement with murders of El Salvadorans (51).

⁴³ Report on Human Rights in El Salvador (1982) document the IAHRC concern with the National Guard beginning in 1978 over reports of disappearances and of torture by the National Guard. The IAHRC found clandestine holding cells and names of missing persons hand etched into doors of these cells (62).

chance to work. They did not give us a work permit. We had to go every week to present ourselves in front of the Mexican police. It was hard, especially for the people from El Salvador. They [Mexican government] put the police to chase us after our visits. One day, the Mexican police took me. They put me in the car. Then, they were driving me around the whole city. They were asking me questions on what I was doing, whether I [was] doing stuff with FMLN,⁴⁴ whether I was doing subversive activities in Mexico. At that time, I had a job. They drove me around for fifteen minutes. It was more intimidation tactics.

I started working in a high school, working with my real name at that time. There were some problems at the high school, and the students were not happy with the administration at the school. They were organizing themselves, and I didn't have anything to do with it. The students took the facilities [at the high school] to raise some demands. The principal came to me and asked me to call the police on the students, but that was against my values. I told her, "I am not going to call the police; if you want to call the police, that is your call." She was so mad at me.

After the conflict happened, she called me to her office. She told me she thought I was organizing the people [students]. She told me she was going to call [Mexican] immigration on me. I told her I did not have anything to do with it. I had a good relationship with the students, because I was tutoring them, especially the ones who had

⁴⁴ Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) was formed in October 1980 after Archbishop Romero was assassinated when he encouraged the poor not to open fire on their own people. It was a political front comprised of guerilla groups who joined forces and by mid-1981 had some 5,000 member. The FMLN declared the State of Siege Decree (151) that was renewed every 30 days and attempted to restore peace to El Salvadorans.

problems with algebra.

Impact of Globalization on Mexico/El Salvador

Like Marco conveyed in Chapter II, many refugees and migrant workers experience abusive labor practices and misjudgment. Zoila conveyed that this manipulation by employers also came from the Mexican police. Because of the discrimination she faced and due to the economic crisis in Mexico, she felt she had no other choice but to go through informal labor channels. Like her undocumented and refugee peers, when Zoila's rights were not being met by international institutions, she was faced with having to react to the lack of human rights protections, including the right to maintain socio-economic means of survival. Zoila explains her experiences with these larger economic and institutional systems:

It was so hard in Mexico. I decided, "You know what? I was in a job with my real name and here it is, the woman [principal] knew I was a refugee from El Salvador." They were always thinking I was causing problems in there. So, at that time, I decided I was not going to work with my real name. I started to work with a different name and getting documents. I started passing as a Mexican. The United Nations did not give us a chance to work; we were being harassed by the Mexican police, and at the same [time], whenever we did find a job, the people knew we were refugees and were suspicious of us, and we would be harassed all the time.

So, it was hard; [the] Mexican economy was horrible. We had just finally found a job, as "Mexicans"; the Mexican economy went through a major crisis in 1981. We lost our jobs. At the time, my mom was living in the United States. You go to sleep, and you have jobs, and you wake up one day, and all the news in Mexico say the National

Treasury is gone.

Survival versus the Political

My mom was already in Los Angeles. She left us when I was fifteen years old. She left us alone, and we were five girls. She was forced to leave El Salvador. [My mother] always kept saying, “Come over here, come over here [Los Angeles].” And I told her “No, I am not going to go.” I was so anti-imperialist. I was not going to go to a country that was causing so much damage into my country. But, you can have all of these political views, but your stomach is more important.

I had my eldest daughter with me at that time, and we were just trying to survive in Mexico. So that is why when we were left with no jobs and no options, I told my mom “ok.” And my mom paid for the coyote. That is why I decided to come. What happened is that I crossed the border with my [eldest] daughter. In 1982, my mom paid \$1000.00. One thousand dollars for a domestic servant, which is what my mom [paid], was a lot of money at that time. But, my mom paid that so I could cross safely with my daughter.

The Sanctuary Movement

My husband, he had to go through the other route. He was caught and sent back. It was tough for us [me and my daughter] because we did not have money. So he went back [to Mexico] and got connected with a church in there, where they were doing work with the Sanctuary Movement [SM]. The priest in that church was working with the SM throughout the United States. He [the priest] asked Nico about his story and decided to [introduce] him to the SM. Nico passed with the SM, and they [the churches] knew we

had a story to tell. At the time, the churches were bringing refugees throughout the United States to tell our story to American citizens to bring awareness about the bombing that was going on in Central America.

From No Culture to an Awakening

Zoila's anti-imperialist feelings toward the U.S. were largely shaped by the U.S. fiscal investments in funding the war in El Salvador, and subsequently her forced displacement. When she began to organize with the Sanctuary Movement, it became clear that there were U.S. allies who were willing to organize against their own government to bring about awareness to change policy for Central American refugees through the adjudication of immigration legal relief:

At that time [in the Pacific Northwest of Washington State], there were not that many Latino people. There was nothing; it was horrible – in terms of culture. There were no stores. It was hard for me. I used to open the door – the window door, in the little apartment where we used to live. I used to scream my lungs out, “I am bored! I don't want to be here!” Like I was so frustrated to be here [it was] so different. The cultural shock was very hard. There were not that many Latinos to rely on. For Nico, he blended in faster than me. He learned the [English] language so fast. Compared to me [for whom] it took forever. I was kind of resistant – a lot [she laughs].

The SM would organize a caravan, bringing people throughout the West Coast to stop in every church. At every town, we would tell them our story. It really changed my mentality about Americans, thinking everyone was an imperialist, because then I got to

know the real people. It is not like I didn't know that – you know what I mean. But when you are forced to mingle with the people, you realize it is the government and the system. Not everybody is in agreement with that. This was a very interesting process for me to understand. It was an awakening. You know, because these people were trying to bring awareness to their own people, about the situation in El Salvador, and the only way was to tell the stories.

The SM was doing this work because Salvadorans and Guatemalans were not considered refugees [in the U.S]. Why? Why people from Cuba were considered refugees? Why every other people from war, throughout history, over other continents were considered refugees? Why Bosnian people? Why were Somalian people considered refugees? It was very interesting. It was because [the] United States, we are talking about the Reagan Administration, and the Sr. Bush Administration, they were really supporting 100%, the Salvadoran military. They were really involved in all the police training, in everything that went on in El Salvador. The reason we were leaving was because of that situation. I would have never thought about leaving my country; I would never have thought of that. The people left because they were forced to, at least in our situation.

I think that movement helped us gain what is known as the ABC law and NACARA.⁴⁵ NACARA is a law that intended to give papers to the Nicaraguans. The ABC was a provision where if you were provided documentation that you were in danger, you would be able to apply for papers [legal permanent residency]. I think it was

⁴⁵ ABC (American Baptist Churches lawsuit, 1983) and NACARA (Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act 203) are two pieces of immigration legislation that define certain types of relief as asylees. These immigration laws came about in the early to mid- 1980s and were focused on the rights of certain Central American who have settled in the U.S.

a triumph of the SM; just to be able to mobilize here in the United States to raise awareness of the bombing, in Central America, in Guatemala.

Organizing Principles of Personal Experience

For undocumented migrants and refugees, allies within the community meant that there were jobs and resources available in the informal economy. Zoila's experiences with the Sanctuary Movement's organizing showed her how immigrant rights were developed through a collective of socio-economic support. She also expresses the vulnerability many people experience when they have undocumented status:

The people who gave jobs [in the U.S.], were people who knew we were refugees, and knew we had no documents. So they willingly accepted that. Through the SM, they had built a web system, for example, if we needed a doctor they took care of us. I had a doctor [through the "web"]. They did it through solidarity. They were very well organized. It was not only that, they were taking care of our health. It was amazing; that movement was incredible. There is so much to learn from that movement.

A movement now for sanctuary for immigrants, with what we are facing, maybe it would be different. The SM had a network that included all these resources. If we had problems with something we had somewhere to call. If we had problems, everybody was pitching in. They really had it laid out. For example, if we didn't have a job at the beginning, someone could say,

"Well, I want to paint my house." And Nico went and painted their house by himself. One of the members of the church cut the grass. So they were providing us with some jobs within the network. But, then when the government—I think that they

dismantled the movement after the trials.

Undocumented as a refugee

We decided these were the consequences of being undocumented. I was already undocumented in L.A. For a year and a half, I was undocumented in Mexico. I mean I was registered as a refugee. That did not mean I was going to get papers. But that is the problem with aspect of being undocumented as a refugee. I mean, I already went through so many things. There are some things I would rather not say because that could come up against me as a citizen.

Applying for status

When the amnesty came with the Clinton Administration, that is when we were able to apply for papers, at the time, [the] Reagan administration was giving papers to people who could prove they could work a minimum of one month in the fields.⁴⁶ That was one requirement, and if there were people in there who were willing to write an affidavit to say, “Yes this person worked in the fields” [a] minimum for a month. That was in 1986. The other part of the law was if you had come to the country before a certain date. That was for the urban worker – the people who worked in the urban cities. There was a cut off date, if they [the urban worker] could prove that they were here before a certain date. If you could prove for a month that you worked in the fields, then you got it.

⁴⁶ Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, under the Reagan Administration established certain amnesty to seasonal agricultural workers.

There were many people at that time who were taking advantage of people. Middlemen in the fields were willing to write an affidavit for workers. The middlemen were asking for \$1000.00, \$500.00, for every letter, and people were paying for it. Because the terms were so loose that people got it [amnesty]. Many of the affidavits were fake. They did not work in the fields. I always believed that if I was going to apply that I was not going to be lying to the government. What if they catch you in the lie? It would be terrible.⁴⁷

Summary

As a survivor of human rights abuses and state repression, Zoila's experiences informed her perspectives on identity, legal statuses, and collective action. We know that macro-influences and legal institutions under a brutal government regime indicated her need to flee El Salvador. Zoila's approach to organizing in the Sanctuary Movement challenged the binary legal-illegal claim for rights. As a refugee and undocumented immigrant, her personal experiences humanize non-legal statuses. Her problematizing of the structural influences of state repression provides an avenue for discussion on how legality has been socially constructed to address the so-called problem of immigration. When Zoila and others in this study have brought this to light about migration and organizing practices, they have created an organizing space of liberation. This awareness-making through community organizing engaged a wider community of citizens and non-citizens that otherwise would not have been able to contextualize the war in El Salvador and see how it relates to their lives. Through the method of sharing experiences on the structural forces that brought Zoila, along with other refugees and undocumented immigrants to the U.S.,

⁴⁷ Personal interview January 8, 2011, conducted in English.

the complexities of war suggests that the binary understanding of “legal” and “illegal” is too limiting. That is, Zoila illustrates her complex understanding of macro-structures, such as imperialism, repression, access to jobs/resources, and the multiple statuses as a non-citizen to address within a local community in the context of her unique history and basic needs for survival despite legal categorization and spatial proximity to her home nation state.

The macro-level failures of economic policy and social control that come about from U.S. funding of death squads in El Salvador validate the human rights abuses her family experienced. As a survivor, she conveyed her story of these abuses, beginning with her husband’s experience as political prisoner. Another institutional failure is apparent, that the government of El Salvador had a responsibility to observe Nico’s status as a political prisoner under international law.

Zoila’s experience with multiple legal statuses in two different countries, which eventually established a legitimate relationship, as a member of two nation states, again highlight the limiting nature of defining rights based on legality. Zoila points out correctly that her refugee status in Mexico did not protect her from institutionalized harassment by the Mexican police and discrimination from employers who expected that she was involved with organizing Mexican students. Moreover, despite the legal classification as a refugee in Mexico, and as a naturalized citizen in the U.S., her protection on paper did not guarantee access to jobs, safety from intimidation tactics by employers, or treatment encompassing dignity and respect at work.

Left with limited options for survival, Zoila, as a twenty-year-old mother, did not want to cross the border to the U.S. with her young child, but felt that she was left with no other option. Actually, like Ramona, she did not want to settle in U.S. But due to the economic relationship of the U.S. funding death squads in El Salvador, which she describes as imperialist,

she was forced to flee (e.g. right before Archbishop Romero was murdered in the early 1980s). Zoila also conveyed her awareness of the instability of legal status, when she mentioned that her rights may be taken away if she were to tell me certain things. With her migration being a repercussion of human rights abuses and war, her wariness of the impermanence of legal status is solidified with her preoccupation with what may or may not lead her to lose her rights as a citizen.

In 1980, the Mexican economy was failing, so she felt that she had not other option than to cross clandestinely into the U.S. Zoila had also struggled to maintain a job in Mexico prior to the U.S. and elected to “pass” as Mexican and work underground, because she would rather not deal with discrimination and harassment from employers and the Mexican police.

Like Guillermo, she conveyed her mistrust for the U.S. Zoila also discussed her process of an “awakening” that gave humanity to U.S. civil society. Based on the sharing of refugee/immigrant experiences, her perceptions of Americans and imperialism gave her the sense that conscience raising included working alongside American allies who wanted to protest in solidarity against the imperialist “system.” She realizes that social change is possible when individuals work toward ending a system of injustice.

The Sanctuary Movement came out of a community of citizens and non-citizens, residents in the U.S. who participated in building a community for immigrant rights. When Zoila recalled her work with the Sanctuary Movement, pointing out that its successes were due to a network of people who provided informal resources of emotional support, jobs, and health care, we can see what specific examples of substantive change remain necessary to accommodate for the loss of nation, jobs, family, and human rights. This story is one of millions of undocumented

individuals in the U.S. that shape the political landscape of immigration today.

Conclusion

Life narratives are essential to explaining undocumented immigrants' and refugees' emigration and survival experiences in the U.S. These stories challenge nationalism, security culture, and the political pundits who seek to eradicate the "problem" of immigrants. Future contemplation and discourse should continue to account for the macro-economic influences and oppressive institutions that seek to control immigrant and refugee movement and their labor. Yet, through an examination of the lived experiences of immigrants and refugees, the struggle for immigrant rights looks beyond reformist policies that seek to advance liberation. In other words, while immigration policy may grant legal relief for some individuals, it does not transform communities who want to ascertain human rights, socio-economic rights, cultural rights, and to maintain family unity. It is true that legal status grants specific protections for members of a community. However, legal status also reifies a hierarchy of protections that maintain privilege for some at the expense of the "other."

My findings indicated different articulations of identity, legality and collective action that intersect similarly through the ways Marco, Ramona, Guillermo, Amara, Raksmei, and Zoila described legal status. Through their narrative, legal status was relevant because in its absence, it did not protect them from being detained or deported. For all subjects except Marco and Ramona, legal permanent resident or green card holders provided, at least, limited protection from deportation. Although, a green card did not guarantee the basic socio-economic needs for survival, all subjects implied that their socio-economic means for survival was of primary importance.

An overarching theme was my respondents' ability to survive migration and settle by any means necessary. This survival involved their navigation of structures and institutions that forced

them to flee their home countries to the United States. In other words, by and large, these immigrants and refugees made life in the face of eminent death. Marco conveyed this through his indigenous narrative about economic displacement and a pre-border existence. Ramona saw her peers in Mexico, who were involved in political movements, be threatened with the Mexican state repression. Guillermo's trauma in childhood, fleeing war, had a tremendous influence over his ability to recognize institutions of authority that sought to maintain the status quo (e.g. the U.S. government intervention in El Salvador and in the U.S. public school curricula). Amara and Raksmei both were overwhelmed by the vast U.S. cultural differences of success and prosperity. Like Guillermo, each had fled their home countries of Cambodia and Laos, and lived in refugee camps. Their experiences with trauma, due to war, motivated their work of rising up and speaking out against the injustices they faced as political refugees and later as poverty-stricken youth. Zoila was a young political refugee from El Salvador who crossed more than one border clandestinely with her children. Her experiences with trauma from a politically repressive war compelled her to organize alongside U.S. citizens who were friendly toward undocumented immigrants.

As demonstrated by these immigrants and refugees, their concerns about family unity also meant to provide economic stability through the access of the basic needs (e.g. jobs, food, and shelter). This was addressed through their organizing work against oppressive institutions. In Chapter II, Marco's P'urhépecha traditions emphasized familial unity and respect for indigenous traditional lifestyle, outside of the social norms of modern European value of success and rights. Marco's communal way of living and strong affiliation with his indigenous community meant fighting for a broader community of indigenous and Mestizo workers against unfair employers,

who sought to take advantage of racialized labor force (e.g. Spanish-speaking and brown workers who were coerced and intimidated on the job). In Chapter III, like Marco's community organizing, Ramona's Latino radio work and anti-oppression training was motivated by family unity. In Ramona's organizing practices, she utilized media to develop talking points that were current and relevant for Latinos, such as current events in Mexico and social justice issues related to the undocumented community. Thus, she applied her political organizing work that she developed in Mexico to unravel traditional American ideals⁴⁸ of rights through Latino media, legal, and anti-oppression workshops. Guillermo, in Chapter IV, who emigrated at a very young age, experienced a traumatic childhood. After he migrated through several countries, he was united with his parents. Subsequently, after Guillermo's parents fled the war in El Salvador, he developed a strong mistrust for the U.S. government, due to its funding of military death squads that displaced his family. These early years, combined with racial discrimination from a public school teacher, and systemic lack of *Raza* history curricula, informed his organizing. Guillermo's experiences of surviving extended to a long-term focus on community through political work and May 1st solidarity.

In Chapter V, Amara channeled her childhood trauma as refugee and legal permanent resident by acting as an ally for anyone who did not have the ability speak up and communicate their socio-economic and legal rights for themselves. Before her organizing work began as a refugee youth, she faced trouble fitting into U.S. culture. Her experiences at home, due to her

⁴⁸ Drawing from T.H Marshall, Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2002) outlines my perspective on American ideals. Glenn provides a good example, based on her discussion of citizenship. Citizenship is based on membership to a nation-state, and its aspects include civil, political, and social rights. Whereas *civil citizenship* is based on the individual and encompass "liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought, faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice;" *political citizenship* explains that the individual has the right to hold office and vote. *Social citizenship* is defined as the ability to secure a "mode of economic welfare," such as a job with a living wage and health benefits (19).

strained relationship with her Laotian parents, who wanted her to maintain her cultural traditions and rigid gender norms, pushed her into homelessness. But ultimately Amara has found a political voice as an advocate for homeless youth. As a runaway and a young mother she felt no other option but to steal to provide food and shelter for her children. Later, she was able to harness her tremendous struggle as a refugee and through her experiences with homelessness to defend homeless youth and domestic violence victims. In Chapter VI, Raksmei's experiences adjusting to U.S. culture after he was uprooted by war also left him to face tremendous trauma. His family was ripped apart by war, and his mother left to raise him and his brother on public assistance left him disadvantaged. When Raksmei became involved in a gang his criminal activity led him into a very complicated world of the immigration detention system. Both Amara and Raksmei became empowered by learning this system to take control of their legal cases in the absence of a failed legal system that does not provide the much-needed legal assistance for detainees facing detention deportation.

In the final chapter, Zoila's refugee and transnational labor experiences helped her advance immigrant rights in her community. She had experienced the impact of U.S. intervention in El Salvador, which caused so much harm in her home country. Her experiences of discrimination in Mexico, when she was a political refugee, also gave her the ability to organize alongside U.S. citizens against the imperialist aims of the U.S. in El Salvador.

Non-citizen narratives have shown that surviving is also about the direct political action they take. This organizing should continue to be part of immigration studies. Future studies may complicate binary legal codifiers, particularly those that socially distinguish the binary between legal and "illegal." In addition, they must also continue to examine the complex interrelationship

between macro-processes such as imperialism and repression via the lives of immigrants and refugees who are forced to flee their respective countries. For example, Marco's indigenous narrative challenged established paradigms through his pre-border counter narrative. These stories might be useful for critical perspectives of immigration policy, and it may be useful for those interested in community organizing alongside the multiple identities of race, class, gender and sexuality. As Krissman (2002) tells us, ethnicity has been used by employers to perpetuate an informal economy and used to divide union activity. That is why it is imperative that identity-based research and mobilization continue to analyze the ways various workers and community leaders develop articulations of difference and similarities in order to mobilize against injustices around local policies and procedures.

Additionally, at the very least, I hope these responses have complicated refugee and immigrant's lives to reveal the media misrepresentations of immigrants and refugees. Lastly, I hope these illustrations have demonstrated how community organizing involves immigrant and refugees, who magnificently articulate immigrant rights in such a way that enhances and changes the landscape of the limited binary (pro or con) political debates on immigration reform. Individuals and families have been able to access U.S. citizenship, therefore, are not helpless. They are vibrant communities who rise up in the face of colonization.

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Appendix A: Information Form

**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
Information Form**

Immigrants and Refugee Life Narratives and Community Organizing

Researchers: Star Berry, MA student Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Washington Tacoma, 253-222-5606; Professor Emily Noelle Ignacio, University of Washington Tacoma, 253-692-4542

Researchers' statement

We are asking you to be in a research study. This form is intended to provide information to help you decide whether to be in the study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research study or this form that is not clear. When I have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." I will give you a copy of this form for your records. You are not required to sign a consent form. You are only required to give verbal authorization.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Immigration in the United States is one of the most pressing human rights issues today. It is considered a political, social, labor, and community issue. This study is interested in learning about your lived experiences as both refugees and/or immigrants, to see how you organize within the Puget Sound region of Washington State.

STUDY PROCEDURES

This study asks that you explore your life history in depth. An in depth story means you will share your knowledge about coming into the United States. I also ask that you share your community work in the Puget Sound region. You will be asked 4 open-ended questions, in order to explore your life and your community organizing experiences. You will be interviewed one time, no more than three, in two-hour increments. The interviews will be audio recorded. We will meet in a quiet place of your choosing.

You may choose to not to answer any question or discontinue your participation at any time, for any reason.

RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT

You may refuse to answer any question and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

Since this study will be audio-recorded. You should be aware that the study questions will involve your upbringing, journey to the United States, and involve themes of interpersonal (working relationships) or skills. Some of these questions will lead to responses you may not have shared before. Other questions will attempt to explore your community organizing experience(s). For these reasons, your responses may be emotional for you, depending on the

information you share. I will be careful to consider your comfort level all the times. Again, you should feel free, at any time refuse to answer any question for any reason.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

You will not personally benefit from this study. However, generally speaking, there is need in academic research and the community to have the opportunity to hear personal narratives of immigrant and refugee organizers and their work.

OTHER INFORMATION

Some questions will be personal and sensitive. Because of the sensitive and personal nature of these questions, all correspondence provided will be kept anonymous. Since all data will be kept anonymous, all data will be protected to ensure the anonymity of persons recruited and interviewed. All personal identifiers will be removed from audio and transcriptions, immediately. This begins from the time you choose to meet for the initial interview and any subsequent correspondence we have, and when you are being recorded.

You also have the right to review the transcriptions of the interviews should you wish.

The responses you provide may be used in for a future publication or manuscript. Subjects' anonymity will be kept in publications and study dissemination, e.g. use of names, quotes or identifiable information in manuscripts will be changed to a pseudonym.

Government or university staff sometimes review studies such as this one to make sure they are being done safely and legally. If a review of this study takes place, your records may be examined. The reviewers will protect your privacy. The study records will not be used to put you at legal risk of harm.

Subject information and inquiries

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later about the research, I can ask one of the researchers listed above. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call the Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098.

Star Berry, Researcher