

# QUEERING LA FAMILIA: A Redefinition of Mothering, Immigration, and Education

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*This article draws from Chicana/Latina feminist frameworks to critically interrogate normative understandings of la familia and mothering. I use my testimonio as a methodological approach to show how my mother redefined familia and mothering as survival, while also increasing our chances for employment, legal status, and educational opportunities, which were often denied to us. Furthermore, in queering la familia I was able to rewrite my family's immigration narrative by rereading our family story through a queer lens. This article sheds light on women's motivation and decision-making process in choosing to migrate with their children, their labor to sustain their families, and how they negotiate contradictory expectations and pressures of mothering and being a family. Ultimately, through my testimonio I argue that immigrant mothers and their children are not mere victims of economic exploitation or patriarchal control, but rather are redefining familia by relying on extended social networks to help them navigate the immigration legal system, gain access to stable employment, and overcome barriers to education.*

**Key Words:** Latino children and families, mothering, feminization of migration, testimonio, education, mixed-status households, global capitalism.

## My “Coming Out” Story<sup>1</sup>

September 1988. I walked into the house, and my mother and sister were sitting at the kitchen table. Why were they crying? Something in me told me not to ask. I stood still in the room not knowing what to do with myself. I heard my mother's voice telling me to sit, but I was too afraid of what would come after I did. With a quiver in her voice, my mother told me to say goodbye to my sister Nena because she was leaving that night for the US.

An overwhelming feeling of sadness, anger, and confusion took over my body. No! I screamed inside as thoughts of losing my sister flooded in full force. My sister had been like my second mother. When my mother had to work late, it

was Nena who looked after my brother Pepe and me. She would cook dinner for us and would pull our ears if we slacked off while doing our homework. Nena wrapped her arms around me as tears ran down her cheeks. That night she took a bus to Tijuana, where the coyotes<sup>2</sup> awaited to guide her across the border.

A year later, I walked inside the house and had the same visceral reaction I had felt when I found out my sister was leaving. My mother told my brother and me to sit down. Her words plucked at every nerve in my body as she explained that she was leaving for the US but could not bring both of us with her. Her words echoed in my mind as my brother and I looked into each other's eyes wondering who would be the lucky one. As she wiped away her tears, she told us that because I was the youngest, she would bring me. I was seven and my brother was twelve years old. My brother stayed with my mother's sister, who had agreed to take care of him, although she already had eight children of her own. A week later, my mother and I took a bus to Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.<sup>3</sup>

### **Introduction**

Major decisions in my family were always sudden, and it was always my mother who made them, allowing little room for discussion. My mother's decisions were always followed by a reminder that she wanted to give us a better life and a good education. As a child, there were moments where my family felt fragmented because we did not fit within traditional definitions of family that are embedded within Mexican culture, Catholic traditions, and school curriculum. As I got older, I realized that my family was not "broken," nor had my mother "abandoned" us; rather, she redefined familia and mothering as survival. In this article, I show how queering our family created opportunities for employment, legal status, and education. My sister and mother were able to find stable work as live-in caregivers. Second, I became a naturalized citizen through an open adoption. Lastly, as a result of my adoption, I gained full access to higher education.

I use testimonio<sup>4</sup> methodology to disrupt normative understandings of la familia, mothering, immigration, global capitalism, and women's resistance to heteropatriarchy. Testimonios about women's migration have increased our understanding of the workings of gender, class, and racial oppression within a capitalist system. I then examine how Chicana/Latina feminisms have challenged the foundation of la familia and have situated mothering from a position of agency intertwined with social and political change. I then turn to the systemic and structural injustices associated with the expansion of global capitalism and neoliberal policies. I show how my family's migration to el norte was connected to the economic crisis that hit Mexico between 1980 and 1990. My work demonstrates how lived educational inequalities, family dynamics, and the migration of women and children are shaped by global structures of capitalism.

Building on Chicana/Latina feminist critiques of patriarchy and gender, I retell my testimonio to describe how I (re)imagine queering la familia and home. My work challenges dominant social, cultural, and political discourses of mothering and what la familia represents in immigrant Latino families who do not always accept or fit under the compulsory heteropatriarchal family structure. By queering our family, my mother and sister established important social networks that helped them finance the migration costs, allowed them to secure better job opportunities, and enabled me to acquire papeles and access to a college education.

My work contributes to the emergent area of scholarship on gender, migration, children, and mixed-status families. While most research has focused on the experiences of women migrating without their families, my work looks at the negotiations and strategies that immigrant woman and their children make as they migrate together. I draw on my testimonio to show how my adopted family afforded me with the stability of home and the emotional

support to stay connected with my biological family. Through my testimonio, I disrupt normative understandings of mothering and la familia in the Latino community by showing how it was my mother and sister who migrated to the US and enacted empowering ways of staying connected as a family.

### **Testimonio as Methodology**

Testimonio as a form of resistance narrative can be traced back to the political participation of Latin America's indigenous communities and women's political activism against oppressive governments and patriarchal control (Beverly and Zimmerman 1990; Menchú 1984; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981). John Beverly (1993) describes testimonio as "an affirmation of the authority of a single speaking subject, even of personal awareness and growth, but it cannot affirm a self-identity that is separate from a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle" (83). In this sense, testimonio has been critical in sustaining social movements that promote human rights and consciousness-raising. Testimonios that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s were among the first to bear witness to the injustices created under global capitalism while also highlighting the role that women have played as agents of change in their families and communities. My testimonio is not unique. Rather, it is a product of global inequalities fueled by heretopatriarchy and the feminization of low-wage care industries in the US that have pushed women and their families to el norte.

Testimonio has evolved and shifted from the margins of social and literary formations to the center of Chicana/Latina feminist methodologies. The Latina Feminist Group (2001) created an intellectual space across disciplines to use testimonio as a method to produce theory and knowledge through lived experience. Recent scholarship in *Equity and Excellence in Education's* special issues on testimonios, Chicana/Latina feminist scholars Delgado Bernal,

Burciaga, and Flores Carmona (2012) describe testimonio as a methodology tool to “highlight the political urgency needed to address educational inequalities” (367). As such, testimonios have become an empowering and powerful form for Chicanas/Latinas to recover and reclaim their subjugated knowledge within academia.

Central to testimonios about mothering (González 2012; Flores Carmona 2014; Smith Silva 2011) and mother-daughter pedagogies (Garcia 2012; Villenas 2006) are the lessons about resiliency and the ability to survive through economic and emotional hardships that are passed from one generation to the next. They also reveal Latina mothers’ ways of knowing, teaching, and supporting their children’s education and educación in ways that reflect Latino cultural values and beliefs, such as sacrificios (sacrifice), to valerse por si misma (to be self-reliant), and el misterio (the mystery) (Delgado-Gaitan 1994; Montoya 1994; Villenas and Moreno 2001; Villenas 2006). Drawing from my childhood memories, endless conversations with my mothers and siblings, and my journey through conocimiento (coming to awareness), I retell my testimonio to show how queering mi familia allowed us to feel connected with each other and to feel at home despite the borders and extended periods of time that tried to divided our family.

### **Home and Place**

In the words of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981), “the revolution begins at home” (xxvi). Chicana/Latina feminist scholars have written about the home as a site of political struggle where we learn critical lessons of survival and resilience. A home is more than a house and the people that live in it. It is a place filled with contradictory practices and meanings, memories, and complex relationships. For many women of color, like my mother and sister, home has also been a site of domestic labor, alienation, and exploitation.<sup>5</sup> My family and

I had to move away from our home in Mexico for a chance at a better life. After we left, our meaning of home changed as we moved across borders. We eventually recreated a new sense of home in the US by carving out a place where we felt secured, respected, and loved; while also reclaiming our cultural identity through the dishes we cooked, our language, and the memories we carried with us from Mexico. Thus, home is not a fixed place where we can ever physically return; it is, rather, fluid and changes over time.

I have come to realize, like Anzaldúa (1999), that we all carry “home” with us; she writes, “I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry ‘home’ on my back” (43). Anzaldúa invites us to rethink home beyond a physical place by giving us the tools to recreate a sense of home wherever we go. She encourages us to look inward at those detailed memories of the places we once knew as home and the familiar aromas and flavors that can help us reimagine and recreate a sense of belonging. Home is within us in our corazones (hearts) and in our most intimate thoughts. We replay those heartfelt memories to remember the good times. We also replay and reflect on the pain from the struggles we have overcome in our lives to remind us of our strength to fight back. When we participate in the act of remembering, we are also (re)imagining new ways of defining home and la familia.

### **Expanding Queer Notions of La Familia**

Since the late 1970s, Chicana/Latina feminist scholars have contributed to research on the limitations and possibilities of la familia within the Chicana/o community by examining how ideologies of la familia are constructed, how they operate, and how they are enforced (Anzaldúa 1987; Baca Zinn 1979, 1982; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Pesquera 1984; Ruiz 1987; Segura 1989; Ybarra 1982; Zavella 1987). In particular, Maxine Baca Zinn’s research has been instrumental in challenging cultural deficit models of Mexican

American women and the Chicano family by examining how sociostructural factors shape family roles and relationships.

In addition, Chicana feminists Anzaldúa and Moraga were among the first to critique male dominance within the Chicano movement and patriarchy within the family that included a critique of gender oppression, sexism and sexuality, and machismo in the home and community. Both Anzaldúa and Moraga were also among the first scholars to use 'queer' as a lens to redefine la familia, mothering, and Chicana/o culture. In the play *Giving Up the Ghost* (2005), Moraga extends the meaning of familia through Marisa's character in the following passage, "It's like making familia from scratch / each time all over again . . . with strangers, if I must" (43). Moraga's work articulates the need to remake familia that is anti-patriarchal and anti-racist, and that allows for the increased agency in the creation of families of choice.

This queering of la familia and home connects to the work of cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1993) who reminds us to examine closely the "blurred zones" and "borderlands as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation" (208). Rosaldo's analysis of the border works to dismantle ideological boundaries in order to intervene in the social, cultural, and political discourses by looking closely at the lived experiences of those who fall in the blurred zones of these culturally constructed ideologies. Richard T. Rodríguez's (2009) *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicana/o Cultural Politics* is exemplary in that it interrogates the traditional notion of who and what counts as la familia and (re)imagines what it could be for those who fall outside of its borders. Both Rosaldo and Rodríguez draw from Anzaldúa's insights and border metaphors to examine the lived experiences of those who destabilize and fall outside normative understandings of la familia. According to Jasbir Puar (2007), the US nation has historically relied on heteronormative ideologies to

exclude those who do not conform to traditional gender norms; she explains, “[h]eteronormativity is held as temporally and spatially stable, uninflected, and transparent[ . . . ]there are indeed multiple figures of ambivalence, many strangers who trouble and destabilize the nation’s boundaries, suggesting a more complex imaginative geography of the United States” (48). Puar argues that heteronormativity remains deeply entrenched within historical, political, social, and cultural institutions and in our everyday practices. Ultimately, queering la familia and the home allows for a new radical understanding of the social and cultural norms embedded in the family structure of Chicana/o and Latina/o communities.

Within the emerging field of queer Latina/o Studies, Juana María Rodríguez’s (2003) work offers a bold and nuanced understanding of queer through the manipulation and transformation of language. She writes,

The breaking down of categories, questioning definitions and giving them new meaning, moving through space of understanding and dissention, working through the critical practice of ‘refusing explication’ is precisely what queerness entails. ‘Queer’ is not simply an umbrella term that encompasses lesbians, bisexuals, gay men, two-spirited people, and transsexuals; it is a challenge to constructions of heteronormativity. . . . Queer becomes but one more in a series of terms we can employ to define ourselves. (24–25)

I borrow from Rodríguez’s work on the use of queering as a metaphor, one that has the power to give the individual the right to self-define against the norm. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler’s (1993) critique of the term *queer* further reaffirms it as a site of collective contestation. She explains, “queer will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always

and only redeployed, twisted [ . . . ] and expanding political purposes” (228). These works acknowledge, challenge, and expand existing notions of queer and understandings of politicizing the term. Thus, queering *la familia* and home demands a practice that moves across social, cultural, political, geographical and legal borders. Furthermore, the appropriation of language by poor and working class Chicanas/os and Latinas/os has been used as a form of identity, resilience, and survival strategy (Anzaldúa 1999; Castillo 1994; Moraga 2000). Chicana feminists’ use of different forms of language in their scholarship such as Spanglish<sup>6</sup>, Spanish, and Nahuatl<sup>7</sup> has become a method to (re)claim a historical and political space, and as a means to develop a Chicana/Latina feminist discourse (Hurtado 2003). Nevertheless, by appropriating language, we also (re)claim and transform our communities.

### **Global Capitalism’s Demand for Racialized and Gendered Labor**

In the last thirty years, feminist scholars of migration studies have documented the growing feminization of migration, the gendered and racialized labor demand for migrant women in paid domestic work and elder care (Donato et al. 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 2001; Segura and Zavella 2007). The feminization of migration is attributed to the expansion of global capitalism and its demand for cheap labor in the service sector, thus forcing many poor women to migrate to the US (Chang 2000; Hong 2006). When women are the ones to migrate, they tend to take on more responsibilities as providers by sending back remittances more regularly, and they experience greater pressure to keep their families together (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 2007; Stephen 2007). The stories of women and children migrating not only complicate our understanding of gender and race, but also traditional frameworks for thinking about mothering, new arrangements of home, childhood, and family dynamics. These mothers are often blamed by their families and communities for ‘abandoning’ their children and stigmatized

as neglectful mothers for taking too long to reunite with them. Yet many of these women find creative ways of staying connected to their children and families by providing both financial support through remittances and emotional support through their words of *cariño* and encouragement of their children's education.

Political and economic structural changes in the 1980s and 1990s created the conditions that pushed many women from the global South to migrate in search of work. Currently, about 51 percent of immigrants in the US are women, and more than one-quarter of them are Mexican (Immigration Policy Center 2014). According to Katharine Donato, whose scholarship examines Mexican migration to the US, migration from Mexico has been dominated by males, but in the 1980s a shift in migration emerged as a result of a series of economic crises in Mexico. She explains, "So we see the single migrant woman motivated by economic reasons coming to the United States that we saw very little of thirty years ago" (Alvarez and Broder 2006, A1). This shift in migration patterns impacted women's decisions to immigrate as a way to seek "greater control over their mobility and standard of living" (Fry 2006). Grace Kyungwon Hong (2006) also documents the changing patterns of female migration to postindustrial nations in response to the expansion of global capitalism. Hong contends that racialized and gendered differences "are absolutely necessary to the hierarchization of workers and the extraction of capital" (xxiii). The expansion of global capitalism, including the establishment of free trade agreements have led to a dramatic increase in racial and gender inequality.

In the edited volume *Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age* Nilda Flores-González, Anna Romina Guevarra, Maura Toro-Morn, and Grace Chang (2013) argue that immigrant women have become vital to the US economy and show how neoliberal policies such as free trade agreements

conceal “a reality that is complex, contradictory, and disruptive of labor and family processes” (2). For instance, the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into effect in 1994, increased the number of women as heads of families and the need for more family members to earn money (Donato 1993). Although employment opportunities increased for Mexican women to work outside the home for multinational assembly factories or maquiladoras, they continue to struggle to support their families. These multinational factories favor female labor to work in the assembly lines because they know that women lack employment opportunities, which in turn subjects women to accept lower wages and inferior positions than those held by men (Fernández-Kelly 1983; Lugo 2008). These policies were supposed to stimulate economic growth and improve the living conditions in Mexico so its citizens would not migrate, but failed to do so, forcing many Mexican women and their children to migrate to el norte. At the same time that policies like NAFTA expanded capitalism across national borders, the US-Mexican border became more militarized and inspections became more intense (Segura and Zavella 2007; Lugo 2008). As a result, the US Mexico border has become more dangerous, especially for women and children who are the most susceptible to violence.

### **La Familia: A Strong Cultural Value**

Most Latinas/os would say that la familia is perhaps one of the most important cultural values that unify the Latino community. But we must be careful to not over-romanticize la familia, and consider how the institution of la familia has been oppressive to Chicanas/Latinas by imposing rigid gender-role expectations. The cultural value familismo (familism) and the good/bad mother dichotomy has been, in part, rooted in the Catholic Church’s attempt to reinforce patriarchal values and to maintain the idealized image of the self-sacrificing mother and wife that is celebrated in Mexican national identity (Anzaldúa 1999; Castillo 1994;

Herrera 2011; Moraga 2000). Furthermore, the construction of la sagrada familia narrative (baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph: the holy family) within the Catholic Church and Mexican culture has played a critical role in preserving the patriarchal family structure. In fact, some of the most celebrated traditions are firmly based on the birth of el niño Jesús and la sagrada familia (i.e. posadas). La sagrada familia narrative embodies the ideal family and mother while also reinforcing patriarchal values —José the husband that acts as the protector and breadwinner and Maria as the loving and self-sacrificing mother of el niño Jesús.

Growing up within Mexican culture, one is made to feel as if la familia is the heart and core of society, and it was difficult to fit into that reality because patriarchal ideologies and values were profoundly embedded within Mexican folklore, Catholic traditions, and in the school curriculum. My mother was a single mother and her family had turned their backs on her porque fracasó (morally failed or messed up) for having children out of wedlock with a married man. My mother's deviation from Catholic expectations and her failure to protect her reputation as una mujer decente<sup>8</sup> resulted in the loss of economic and social stability afforded to women who marry well in Mexico (Castañeda and Zavella 2008).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, my mother's lack of formal education, access to stable employment, and pervasive poverty pushed her to make the decision to migrate with the hope of providing my siblings and me with a fresh start and a better life. In queering la familia, my work acknowledges the reality of poor and working class families in countries like Mexico that are forced to redefine the family and rely on extended social networks as survival strategies, a process that begins long before immigrating to the U.S.

### **Heading to El Norte**

My siblings and I maintained strong ties with my mother, and we understood and appreciated her motivation for migrating. In fact, it was more difficult

to forgive and accept our father's absence because he never migrated to the US and did not always stay in touch with us. It was the women in my family who risked their lives crossing the US-Mexico border in search of better opportunities for our family. My mother and my sister shared the roles of breadwinners and caregivers of our family by sending remittances home to support my brother and to finish building our home in Mexico. We are a family that is committed to thrive and confront the challenges of being physically separated over long periods of time.

What is often ignored in this process is how women's experiences of migration and resettlement challenge dominant perceptions of immigration and family dynamics. Between 1988 and 1990, my sister, my mother, and I immigrated to the US. My mother grew tired of enduring the physical and emotional pain of working as a domestic worker in Mexico and rarely earning enough to support us or to spend quality time as a family. Both my mother and sister pushed the social, cultural, and economic boundaries of *la familia* by immigrating to the US and becoming the primary wage earners for our family.

First, it was my sister Nena who immigrated to the US in 1988. A year and a half later, my mother and I made the journey to *el norte*. At the age of fifteen, my sister dropped out of school and immigrated as a minor to the US to work as a live-in nanny for a middle-class white family in the San Francisco area. My mother was highly criticized by her family for sending my sister Nena to the US. However, many poor and working-class Mexican women subscribe to the notion of a "family economy," where all members of the family are expected to contribute to their family's economic survival (Segura 2007). My mother took a huge risk by sending my sister to the US, and a year later she made a difficult decision to immigrate with me because she knew that if we had stayed behind, we would have never found our way out of poverty. I was seven years old when my mother and I emigrated from

Durango, Mexico. My mother's friend and employer back in Mexico promised to cover all the costs to help us arrive safely to the US. However, my mother was told she could only bring one child with her and so was forced to make the heart-breaking decision to leave behind my brother Pepe. Soon after we arrived, my mother started working as a live-in caregiver for her employer's medically ill sister.

### **Negotiating Motherhood/Mothering**

The literature on transnational mothering primarily relates to the experiences of women who leave their children behind and negotiate motherhood abroad. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (2007) found that these new arrangements of mothering have expanded our understandings of motherhood and recognize the changing realities of these women and their children. They argue that "motherhood is not biologically predetermined in any fixed way but is historically and socially constructed" (549). My mother believed that living apart and entrusting other women to look after us had nothing to do with being a "bad" mother. She sees herself as a successful mother "porque nos sacó adelante"<sup>10</sup> despite the lack of support from her immediate family. My mother's experiences do not fit neatly within the literature of transnational mothering because she constantly negotiated her responsibilities, which were dependent upon her access to socioeconomic opportunities. For instance, at one point, my sister, brother and I were all living in the US but were not physically living in the same household. However, we maintained flexible, enduring, and profound familial connections. While I do not argue that my mother's experiences are exceptional, I suggest that her experiences offer productive clarifications that may be useful to understanding the complexities of transnational mothering and family dynamics. More important, I contend that mothering needs to be understood from the experiences of women like my mother who were forced to redefine the meaning of family by pushing the social, cultural, religious, political, legal, and geographical borders of mothering.

Feminists of color have reclaimed mothering as a political site of radical transformation and as part of a long intergenerational struggle for gender, racial, economic, and social equality (Delgado Bernal, Elenes, Godinez, and Villenas 2006; Gumbs, Martens, and Williams 2016). In “Social Constructions of Mothering,” Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1994) points out how poor women, especially women of color, have been perceived as “unfit” for mothering even though many of them have cared for other people’s children. Glenn also emphasizes how communities of color have expanded definitions of mothering in ways that deviate from the dominant model of the “biological mother as sole and exclusive caretaker” (5). In her research on the labor histories of African American, Mexican American, and Japanese American women, she found that these women shared mothering responsibilities with relatives and other mothers in their communities. Thus, mothers of color are constantly shifting, redefining, and renegotiating the practice of mothering by embracing collective mothering and resisting dominant ideologies of being a family.

My mother’s narrative illustrates the everyday reality of shared mothering, her physical and emotional labor to maintain and recreate familia in the face of forces that tried to break us apart. Because my mother could not afford to take care of me when she and I came to the US, I had to live with one of my mother’s friends (who later adopted me). At the age of seven, I was suddenly placed in a home surrounded by strangers who became my familia. At first, it felt strange for me to know that I could not live with my mother. At the same time I felt safe, loved, and happy in my new home. I lived on the same street where my biological mother lived. I never felt rejected by her. I knew that it was the best she could do and it became natural to embrace it. Although I was allowed to walk to my biological mother’s home, I would spend most my time with my adoptive family because my mother was always working. She raised me to respect her way of being a mother even if it meant living in separate

homes and spending less time together. My mother taught me to believe that hard work was essential to our survival as a family and to my future. Her decision to entrust another family to raise me produced a reliable home base where I could enjoy the privileges of having my own room to read, to do homework, and to play with my toys.

Although we lived apart from our mother, my siblings and I did not see her as emotionally unavailable. My mother maintained her mothering responsibilities by sustaining a strong emotional presence and providing us guidance through her *consejos* (advice). My mother's act of resilience resulted in queering what it means to be a mother by staying emotionally connected to us and refusing to accept dominant ideologies of mothering. To this day, my mother's family does not respect her decision to give me up for adoption or to leave my brother behind. It was easier for my mother's family to blame her for 'abandoning' her children than to comprehend the many challenges she had to endure. Is a mother who leaves her children behind in Mexico with extended family or gives them up for adoption a "bad" and "irresponsible" mother, or are her actions acts of resilience?

I remember the stack of receipts from the Western Union money orders. I found out later that my mother saved them because she knew that the day would come when my brother would question her about leaving him behind. Twenty years later, the day did come when my brother demanded answers. Why did my mother leave him behind? Why he did not receive the money my mother had sent him? My mother was never fully aware of how her only sister managed the money. Years later, my mother showed him the copies of the money orders she had sent him. This is a situation confronted by many women who leave their children in the care of extended family in their countries of origin. Smith Silva (2011) further illustrates the challenges and pressures confronted by transnational mothers. She explains:

Sometimes their stories are ones of frustration due to constant traveling; limited social networks and support systems; insufficient economic resources to visit their children; and societal enforcement of cultural gender ideologies, especially in regard to perceptions of ‘bad’ transnational mothers who ‘abandon’ their children. (3)

As observed by Smith Silva (2011), Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994, 2001), and Stephen (2007), immigrant women who have children on both sides of the border experience emotional distress and pressure to financially support them. Stephen (2007) further explains, “They feel additional pressures to send sufficient funds to support their children in Mexico as well as to provide the best lifestyle possible for their children in the United States” (205). These mothers develop their own strategies of raising their children abroad by mobilizing resources to provide the best care and education for them. In addition to sending monthly remittances to my brother in Mexico, my mother wrote him letters, sent him care packages that included the latest sneakers and clothing, and called him every Sunday. By maintaining regular contact with my brother, my mother asserted her mothering from afar. These works and my mother’s experiences make visible the many challenges and pressures that transnational mothers endure.

Because we lived in different households, my mother also had to negotiate her relationship with my sister and me. Although my sister lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, she lived an hour away from where my mother and I lived. My mother and I lived on the same street, but because she worked as a live-in caregiver, I had to live with a friend of my mother’s. Sunday was my mother’s only day off, but she was not allowed to leave until she had bathed, groomed, and fed her beloved pelona.<sup>11</sup> It was difficult to spend time together because we did not have a car and public transportation was slow and unreliable on the

weekends. My sister would take a bus from Mill Valley, California to the train station in San Francisco; she would then take BART<sup>12</sup> to Fremont and then another bus. It would take my sister three hours to reach where my mother and I lived. Public spaces, such as shopping centers and strip malls became the only places where we could spend time together as a family because both my mom and sister were live-in service workers. After five years of living in the US, my mother grew tired of earning \$100 per week to take care of her patient which included cooking two separate meals – one for her patient and her patient’s husband, cleaning up every day and the entire house once a week, laundry, and ironing. Although my mother had a legal Social Security number and was being paid by the state, her employer did not allow my mother to cash her own checks because he felt that she was not capable of navigating the system.

### **My Birthday Wish: A College Education**

Most thirteen-year-olds wish for stylish clothing or perhaps a pair of tickets to their favorite artist, but on my birthday I wished for a college education. I remember feeling anxious and scared when I first overheard my mother making plans to return to Mexico. I was unable to sleep and I could not concentrate in school because I did not want to experience another separation or return to a country that I did not know anymore. On my thirteenth birthday, I made one of the biggest decisions in my life. I had the option of returning back to Mexico, where I knew I would not have access to the same educational opportunities as the children of middle-class families. After all, I believed el norte was the place where most, if not all, dreams can come true. A few days before my birthday, and after contemplating my future, I remember writing my mother a long letter on my Pochacco Sanrio stationary paper asking her to consider letting me stay in the US. After reading my letter, my mother asked the family that was taking care of me if they would be willing to continue to look after me. Without any hesitation, they agreed.

Although it was a difficult decision for my mother and me, we were both convinced that by staying in the US I would have access to a better education. I was relieved. At the same time, I felt scared not knowing when I would ever see my biological mother, father, or siblings again. Before returning to Durango, Mexico, my mother gave up her parental rights, and I was adopted. The process for my adoption took much longer than what we had anticipated, because I was older and I had been living in the US without proper documentation. When I was adopted, however, nothing changed for me, except my last name and my legal status, which changed from undocumented<sup>13</sup> to permanent resident. My new family consisted of two mothers, two fathers, three sisters, and two brothers. My biological mother gave birth to me, but I was reborn through my adoption. This re-birth allowed me to find new love, stability, and a future filled with hope.

Commonly held perceptions of women who make the decision to give up their children for adoption or to leave them in the care of extended family, further reaffirm themselves as “unfit” women and “inadequate” mothers. By queering *la familia* my mother reimagined motherhood by sharing the responsibilities and joys of raising my siblings and me with extended family and friends. Although my mother lost her legal rights, she continued to affirm her role as a mother by maintaining regular contact through phone calls with my adoptive mother and me. However, we mostly communicated through letters.<sup>14</sup> My adoptive mother kept my biological mother informed about my well-being, my progress in school, and sometimes when I misbehaved. My mother reimagined her role as a mother by trusting my adoptive mother’s commitment to love me unconditionally as her own child, but most importantly she trusted that when I got older, I would understand and support her decisions.

I argue here that the migration of women is changing the ways we imagine *la familia*, home, and community. As documented by Stephen (2007), “Too

often, the perspectives of those who are the targets of U.S. border defense and immigration policies are invisible” (31). My mother’s decision to send my sister off to the US to work, to leave my brother behind, and to give me up for adoption were decisions that she felt were vital in order to secure the future of our family. I now think about how lonely and unsupported she must have felt to make such difficult decisions without the support of her parents or siblings. Despite fighting against immigration and economic policies driven by global capitalism, my mother did the best to keep us together as a family with the limited resources she had. Although anti-immigrant laws and national borders physically separated our family, our mother maintained a strong and positive influence in our lives.

#### **Papeles: Living in A Mixed-Status Household**

The phrase *con papeles*<sup>15</sup> (with legal documents) and *sin papeles* (without legal documents) is used in this section to discuss the legality within mixed-status households and the process of how I obtained my papeles. The Pew Hispanic Center has estimated that 16.6 million people live in mixed-status households (Passel and Cohn 2011). Mixed-status families are constantly faced with the threat of deportation and being separated from their family members. These families also experience inequalities of opportunities. For example, I achieved educational mobility because of my legal status, and I did not have to live in fear of being deported for minor infractions, but my mother and sister had to deal with the stigma and discrimination of living *sin papeles*. Thus, by queering the process of obtaining papeles, I examine how papeles queered my familia and home.

Papeles within mixed-status households can create tensions, conflicts, and disruptions in the lives of children. At the same time, papeles can have the power to facilitate the movement and unification of familias. Legalization would instantly improve the lives of both documented and undocumented

children who are part of mixed-status families by eliminating the separation of families. However, the option of obtaining *papeles* or permanent legal status in this country for Latinas/os has become practically nonexistent. In fact, the last time Congress approved a comprehensive immigration reform bill was in 1986, with the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA); it is estimated that 3 million people gained permanent legal status from this program (Fry 2006). Soon after the passage of IRCA, legalized immigrants were able to sponsor family members, mainly women and children. But by 1990, the number of unauthorized female migrants increased (Donato 1993; Donato et al. 2006). Women like my mother and sister migrated independent of the men in their lives, and they were and continue to be the main economic providers of our family.

Immigration policies also affect documented immigrants because of the growing number of immigrants living in mixed-status families. Within a single household, family members could include any combination of legal immigrants including undocumented immigrant, permanent resident, US born, and naturalized US citizens (Fix and Zimmerman 2001). Within my biological family, I am the only naturalized US citizen. Acquiring US citizenship has allowed me to take advantage of different educational opportunities that my siblings have not been able to access. I have also been able to travel back to Mexico and stay connected with my biological family. However, knowing that my biological sister could be detained and deported has been frustrating and daunting. For the past twenty-seven years, my sister has worked in the service industry, has paid taxes, and has avoided government assistance in order to avoid jeopardizing her chances for future legalization. There are currently 12 million undocumented people like her that live and work in this country and who have been waiting for over two decades for comprehensive immigration reform, including a pathway to citizenship (Pew Research Center 2013).

Furthermore, the increased militarization of the US – Mexican border and anti-immigration policies has pushed many Latinas/os to move back to their country of origin or they have made the US their permanent home because it has become increasingly expensive and dangerous to cross the US- Mexico border (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2012).

### **Acquiring Papeles through My Adoption**

Before coming to the US, I was aware that my mother and I did not have papeles, but I did not exactly understand what it meant to be undocumented. It wasn't until November 8, 1994, when I remember the tension and anxiety that was felt in our living room as we watched the live coverage on *Telemundo* of the statewide elections, including Proposition 187, the controversial “save our state” ballot initiative. We gasped in disbelief when the proposition passed. I remember my family shouting at the television screen and saying “¡no nos pueden hacer nada!” The next morning my mother gave me a small piece of paper with nine digits that she had handwritten. I was not sure what it was for, but she told me to put it in a safe place in my backpack and if any adult asked for a number to give them that piece of paper. My mother also gave me a small yellow button with the number 187 crossed out in red to pin on my backpack.<sup>16</sup> I recall my friends at school asking me why I had that yellow button on my backpack. I remember telling them that it was a bad thing because gringos<sup>17</sup> had something against us Mexicans. I now understand how Proposition 187 would have denied most basic services, including my own access to a public K-12 education (Garcia 1995). Lisa Cacho (2000) argues that Proposition 187 mainly targeted racialized immigrant women and children who “reflect the changing face of US immigration and the changing global economy that relies more and more on the labor of women and children in third world nations” (392). My mother, sister, and I were being blamed for the high cost of social services for receiving a “free” education and “draining” the US economy, yet these policies

failed to reveal the reality of how my mother's and sister's labor as caretakers made middle-class families' lives comfortable.

Gaining legal status or papeles contributed to queering la familia because traditionally the adoptive parents tend to have full control over the process. In my case, however, both of my mothers worked together throughout the adoption process. It was my only opportunity of gaining papeles and I had to face the reality that the rest of my family would continue to live and work in the US sin papeles. Thanks to the many sacrifices that my mothers made, I became a naturalized US citizen, which in turn provided me with access to different educational opportunities that enabled me to pursue a college education. My adoptive parents' friend from church had recommended an immigration attorney, but before speaking to the lawyer they consulted with his legal assistant. After sharing our story with the lawyer's assistant, she decided to provide her legal advice pro bono. I remember she was a young Latina of Mexican immigrant parents who had just graduated from Stanford University and was passionate about serving and educating the Latino community about their legal rights. It turned out that her parents had also migrated from the same small town where I was born. We met with her on the weekends and on her days off to go over different forms and to prepare me for my interview with an immigration officer. My biological mother was living in Mexico so she was able to send documents that my adoptive mother in the US needed, because my adoptive mother did not have the financial means to travel back and forth. Since I had just turned thirteen and the age limit to apply for an adoption was fourteen, my mothers had to be resourceful and work fast. My adoptive mother had to take time off from work and I had to miss several days from school for various appointments with the US immigration office and Mexican Consulate in San Francisco. I remember my adoptive mother and I always making sure we had the original documents and brought copies

of all the paperwork to each appointment because any missing information or document meant a costly delay in my adoption process. The process was a very meticulous undertaking that took filling out numerous forms, many visits to federal immigration offices, and waiting in long lines.

Although I was thirteen when the adoption process began, I was not granted legal status until my senior year in high school. I remember running home after school to check for mail from the Office of Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS). During the fall semester of my senior year, I applied to different colleges because INS had issued me a provisional Social Security number. Knowing that my Social Security number was provisional made me feel uneasy and anxious about the colleges finding out that I was in the process of gaining permanent legal status. There was also a chance that if there was a missing document, a missed deadline, or a change in immigration policies, they would deny my application and I would have to return to Mexico or live in the US with no documentation or legal protection. Queering la familia allowed me to gain papeles by allowing my mothers to reimagine the adoption process. The legal process of adoption, from beginning to end, can be lengthy, expensive, and emotionally draining, but my mothers were determined to make it work. My mothers did not go through an adoption agency; instead they relied on their informal social networks, *confianza* (trust), and the love they felt for me. My adoptive mother is also an immigrant and understood the effects of living without legal status. It also helped that she is charismatic and fearless about navigating the immigration system and confronting immigration officers who tried to use their intimidating tactics on her. My mothers worked together throughout the process and over the years they have developed a strong bond. My mothers redefined mothering by raising me and by redefining what it means to work together around power structures that are working against immigrant women and children. Furthermore, queering

la familia provided me with an opportunity to be part of two families and to gain papeles. I am also conscious that my mothers had a strong support network and access to different resources that many other immigrant women and children do not have. Although I faced many barriers throughout my education, I can only begin to imagine how much more difficult it would have been had my legal status remained as undocumented.

### **A Queer Familia: Changing El Destino**

Sharing my story has been painful, but I believe there are thousands, even millions of other stories like mine. Yet I have the opportunity to tell my testimonio. My goal is for others to be more informed about the realities of Latino immigrant families and their children. Undocumented immigrants are not asking for shortcuts. They want an equal opportunity to obtain lawful permanent residence. However, it is not easy to gain papeles in a country that refuses to pass comprehensive immigration reform. Immigrant families are not broken; we just have to make more sacrifices and redefine what it means to be a familia. Many of us were brought to this country as children leaving behind familia and friends. Yet, we made the US our home. Our mothers immigrated to this country to give us a better future. We grew up watching our mothers and siblings work hard as domestic workers, caregivers, farm laborers, and factory workers for less than minimum wage with no access to health care benefits. As a child, I knew that my mother and sister were often mistreated and humiliated by their employers. They have had fair employers too, but they have also been exploited by employers who underpaid them and made them work long hours under substandard working conditions. They did not have to tell me how they were being exploited: I could tell because we would spend less time together as a familia or I would see it in their tired faces or the ways the skin on their hands was cracking and peeling from excessive exposure to water and the chemicals in the cleaning products.<sup>18</sup> My mother

and sister helped me envision a different destino for myself, one where I knew that I did not have to labor in other women's homes.

My mother in Mexico will always be my mother; we share a queer bond of understanding, respect, and admiration for each other. We share a queer relationship, one that allows us to stay connected and loved despite the distance and separation of the border. Ultimately, queering la familia and home creates a space of inclusion and ideological contestation for marginalized communities. As I look back, and theorize about my familia, I can articulate the strength and courage I have found within the pain I felt when my familia was separated, when at the age of seven I crossed the border with my mother, and when at the age of 13 I asked my mother to give me up for adoption so that I could stay in the U.S. and pursue a college education. I have gained a new understanding of familia, one that crosses and (re)defines borders. I am part of two familias and I feel strongly connected to both. From my familia, I inherited the *fortaleza* (strength) to change my destino through my education.

By queering la familia, I invite new voices and hope to open up new conversations about how the migration of women and children is challenging what la familia and mothering represent for the Latino community. Many immigrant women migrate to build a better future for their children, which include providing a quality education. They find work as domestics who become "permanent guest workers" in the homes of middle- and upper-class families (Chang 1994). Immigrant women are raising their own children, while laboring in other women's homes. Yet, they continue to be perceived as "unfit" and "dangerous" and a "burden" and "threat" to the US nation (Chavez 2008). Despite their contributions, the US continues to deny undocumented women and their families the right to legalize their status, which would instantly improve their lives. By queering la familia we can develop a more

nuanced understanding of la familia within the Chicano/Latino community through the complex stories told by the often ignored voices of immigrant women and children. In this sense, la familia and home become transgressive sites that enable new perspectives and social realities for immigrant families who are constantly fighting back against global systems of exploitation fueled by patriarchal capitalism.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Coyotes are human smugglers who charge undocumented immigrants to transport them across the border.

<sup>2</sup> I borrowed the idea of “coming out” from the undocumented student movement where youth activists have redefined the act of “coming out” by publicly sharing their stories about the challenges they experience because of their status. Student activists recognize how both immigrant and LGBTQ communities have been targets of systemic oppression, thus taking inspiration from Gay Rights activist and politician Harvey Milk who saw “coming out” as a political act. The idea of publicly declaring their status was seen a risk because many of these youth had been taught by their family members to keep their undocumented status a secret (in order to protect themselves from being detained or deported and being separated from family and friends). However, many of them recognized the power of “coming out” as part of a strategy to transform a broken immigration system. Through the act of “coming out” undocumented youth enact their political agency by showing that they are willing to fight for their rights, including a path to legalization and citizenship.

<sup>3</sup> Having grown up in a Catholic household, my first introduction to *testimonio* was watching the film *Romero* (1989). The film tells the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero and how he was transformed by injustices committed against the poor campesinos and activists who spoke out against the government. I also remember sitting with my adoptive father as we looked through a stack of photographs from the women, children, and men who were raped and murdered during El Salvador’s civil war. Watching the film and discussing the war with my father left an everlasting impact on my consciousness.

<sup>4</sup>The home is also a site where both systems of patriarchy and capitalisms are inherently connected.

Thus, global capitalism maintains its profit from the exploitation of women as underpaid or unpaid workers (Flores-González, Guevarra, Toro-Morn, and Chang 2013; Segura and Zavella 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Spanglish: the mixing of Spanish and English together.

<sup>6</sup> Nahuatl was the language of the Aztec empire. It is still spoken primarily in south-central Mexico.

<sup>7</sup> *Una mujere decente* literally translates to “a decent or good woman” who follows patriarchal norms.

<sup>8</sup> Although immigrant women in the US experience greater control over their bodies and sexuality, they continue to be judge by transnational social networks.

<sup>9</sup> *Nos sacó adelante* translates to “got us ahead” or “worked hard to stay afloat.”

<sup>10</sup> *Pelona* (“Baldy”) was the nickname my mother gave to the woman she took care of for five years.

<sup>11</sup> Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) is a public transit and subway system serving the San Francisco Bay Area.

<sup>12</sup> I use the term “undocumented” to refer to immigrants living in the US without legal permanent residency status or citizenship. There have been conscious efforts to stop people and the media from not using the word “illegal aliens” and any other form of “illegal” because it is a dehumanizing and racist term. More politically appropriate terms include: undocumented, unauthorized, and just simply lacking legal status.

<sup>13</sup> My mother and I did not call each other as much because international calls were expensive. Prepaid calling cards were starting to become popular in the mid-90s but were difficult to obtain if you did not live near a *tiendita Mexicana* (i.e., a small grocery store serving the Latino community). Prepaid calling cards are now more accessible and affordable.

<sup>14</sup> *Papeles* literally mean “papers.” However, in this context and within the Latino community there are two types of papeles: legal documents and fraudulent ones. In this paper, I argue that papeles give immigrants the freedom to move across borders and the legal right to work in the US. Furthermore, undocumented immigrants have been forced to obtain false papeles in order to survive in the US, a market that is sustained by the lack of comprehensive immigration reform.

<sup>15</sup> In proposition 187, known as “Save Our State” initiative, the people of California declared “[w]e have suffered economic hardship caused by the presence of illegal aliens in the state . . . suffering personal injury and damage caused by the criminal conduct of illegal aliens.” (Declaration).

<sup>16</sup> *Gringo* is a Spanish slang term to refer to White Americans as the oppressors. The term is also often used in a humorous way.

<sup>17</sup> The undocumented women working in the domestic and home health care industries in the US are among the most vulnerable to exploitation and abuse because of their lack of legal status.

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