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# Negotiating Boundaries of Social Belonging

## Second-Generation Mexican Youth and the Immigrant Rights Protests of 2006

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Second-generation Mexican youth in San Diego actively engaged with the immigrant rights movement by participating in protests they organized and orchestrated in spring 2006. The protests highlighted the encounter—and clashing—of different categories of immigrant social belonging in U.S. society. State-oriented constructions of social belonging clashed with the teens' own notions of belonging developed in relation to the lived experiences of members of their social circles. The teens generally constructed their own boundaries of belonging to be more inclusive of “contributing” immigrants; however, they also internalized—and self-defensively rearticulated—negative messages about immigrant “illegality.” The teens' engagement with the immigrant rights movement demonstrated they were not merely “partial” citizens, as youth are typically portrayed. Rather, the teens had their own ways of navigating extant categories of belonging and articulating messages about cultural citizenship. The protests were ultimately transformative for the teens because they were both consciousness-raising and identity affirming.

**Keywords:** *social belonging; cultural citizenship; youth activism; identity formation; second-generation youth*

### Introduction

When she heard about the student protests for immigrant rights taking place in San Diego in March 2006, 16-year-old Paulina Santos<sup>1</sup> felt compelled to participate. After the protests, she recounted:

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I just knew that I wanted to go. What motivated me to go was my family. I have some, I guess you would say, illegal family members that work here. And I don't think they're criminals for being here working. They're working and they're helping out the U.S. and I don't think that's right. That really hit me hard.

In addition to disliking the characterization of her family members as criminals, Paulina recalled,

I also heard something about how, if later on the laws do pass or whatever, that we will be considered criminals for hanging out with them, like if we're caught with them. And I'm not a criminal. I'm not gonna go around and be like, "Hey, I need to check your papers before I'm your friend!" You don't do that!

Paulina's statements highlight an anxiety—both personal and public—about immigrant social belonging. The question of who deserves to “belong” and claim membership in the United States emerged as a core issue in the nationwide immigrant rights protests of spring 2006. National concern with immigrant social belonging came to the fore after the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R. 4437 (The Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005) in December 2005. Most of the public outcry about H.R. 4437 concerned the provisions that made “illegal U.S. presence” an aggravated felony (rather than, as now, a misdemeanor) and furthermore made it a crime for anyone to assist an unauthorized immigrant (Curtius, 2005). During the week beginning March 27, thousands of San Diego high school students—including many of the second-generation<sup>2</sup> Mexican<sup>3</sup> teenagers with whom I had been conducting research—joined the immigrant rights movement by participating in walkouts and protests that they helped to organize and orchestrate.

The immigrant rights protests highlighted the encounter—and clashing—of different categories of immigrant social belonging in U.S. society. At that historical moment, state-oriented constructions of social belonging articulated in legal terms and in the realm of civil society clashed with second-generation teens' notions of social belonging developed and developing in relation to the lived experiences of members of their social circles. The teens with whom I conducted research, such as Paulina, participated in protests to voice their disapproval of the proposed laws that would adversely affect them, their family members, and friends and to publicly challenge widespread images of immigrants that did not resonate with their own lives. Ultimately, the teens also asserted their own messages about social belonging, highlighting the complexities of their senses of belonging.

The youth perspectives presented in this article emerge from research conducted in a predominantly Mexican immigrant neighborhood in San Diego from July 2005 to August 2006. The teenagers<sup>4</sup> with whom I conducted research were all members of mixed-status families—families that contain some combination of U.S. citizens,

legal immigrants, and/or undocumented immigrants (Fix & Zimmerman, 2001; Fix, Zimmerman, & Passel, 2001).<sup>5</sup> I met the teenagers while volunteering at a community-based nonprofit that offers afterschool college preparatory programs for neighborhood children. I conducted ongoing participant observation at the center, joining in the teens' daily activities (tutoring, mentoring, and workshops) and other special events (like community service projects, college visits, and graduations). In addition to participant observation data, this article also draws on findings from freelistings, focus groups, and semistructured interviews.<sup>6</sup> During the protest period, I interacted extensively with the teens as they discussed and interpreted the events that were taking place. The immigrant rights protests, called a "teachable moment" by many local newspapers, were thus an incredibly fortuitous "researchable moment" for me. I found that the teens held strong opinions and were in fact quite eager to express their viewpoints about social belonging.

### **Nation-State Citizenship: The No-Longer Normative Model of Belonging**

Nation-state citizenship has traditionally been the normative model of social belonging; however, social scientists who examine the complicated nature of belonging in a globalized world have recently been challenging this model by documenting the ways in which the lived experiences of immigrants fail to fit neatly into such a model. In trying to capture the more "substantive" aspects of belonging (Glick Schiller & Fouron, 2001), scholars have moved toward more inclusive constructs of citizenship, ones defined by people and their lived experiences rather than by nation-states.

In developing these alternative constructs, several scholars have argued that the concept of citizenship needs to be more supranational, accommodating various forms of belonging in more than one nation-state (Bauböck, 1994; Fitzgerald, 2000; Glick Schiller & Fouron, 2001; Laguerre, 1998). A second group of scholars has highlighted the subnational incorporation of immigrants into communities, identifying the city (Bauböck, 2003; Holston, 1999) and localities (Tsuda, 2006; Varsanyi, 2006) as important sites of analysis. As Tsuda (2006) pointed out, immigrants' "lack of formal citizenship rights does not mean that they are deprived of substantive citizenship rights, because other institutions and organizations besides the nation-state confer rights on immigrants based on their membership in non-national communities" (p. 8). A third set of scholars has examined how these groups whose access to citizenship has been restricted have claimed a place within U.S. society—both through formal political actions and everyday practices (Flores & Benmayor, 1997). These forms of social participation have been framed as social citizenship (Del Castillo, 2002; Park, 2005) and cultural citizenship (Benmayor, 2002; Flores & Benmayor, 1997; Horton, 2004; Mirón, Inda, & Aguirre, 1998; Ong, 1996, 2003; Rosaldo, 1997; Stephen, 2003).

Cultural citizenship—my focus in this article—has been conceptualized in two distinct ways. Flores and Benmayor (1997) proposed that cultural citizenship encompasses “a broad range of activities of everyday life through which Latinos and other groups claim space in society and eventually claim rights” (p. 15). Ong (1996), however, argued that it is important to account for state regulation from above and accordingly conceives of cultural citizenship “as dialectically determined by the state and its subjects” (p. 738). Recognizing that state power is never absolute, she chronicled how different groups of immigrants participate actively within institutional constraints (Ong, 2003; Ong, 1996). Cultural citizenship as I conceive it encompasses both how immigrants operate within the institutional constraints placed on them by the U.S. nation-state and civil society and the ways in which immigrants themselves claim space and rights in society. Cultural citizenship allows for a more multistranded approach to examining belonging, one that is ideally suited for individuals who traverse traditional categories of belonging, such as the children of immigrants.

Most alternative constructs of citizenship have drawn upon the experiences of adult immigrants; few scholars have investigated the particular lived experiences of immigrant or second-generation youth (Ong, 2003; Park, 2005) and Latino youth in particular (Aparicio, 2006; Benmayor, 2002; Mirón, Inda, and Aguirre, 1998). Inasmuch as they have been included in broader discussions of citizenship, children have been portrayed as holding “an ill-defined partial membership” or “semi-citizenship” (Cohen, 2005, p. 221)<sup>7</sup> that is typically framed relative to their parents and characterized as a relation of legal and social dependency (Bulmer & Rees, 1996; Cockburn, 1998; Leiter, McDonald, & Jacobson, 2006). Cooks and Epstein (2000) pointed out that research examining how children understand citizenship has also been rather limited, particularly in reference to differences in race/ethnicity; Giroux (1988) drew attention to another crucial variable of difference: generation. I believe that it is important to seek out and attempt to explain variance between and within particular generations, making it important to discern how distinct groups of children (for my purposes, second-generation Mexican youth) understand and experience citizenship.

In particular, how do these children whose inner circles are composed of a range of immigration statuses make sense of these differential layers of belonging? To decipher how the teens navigate belonging, I first situate their understandings of citizenship—and more broadly, social belonging—in relation to the prevailing classification systems to which they are responding. Accordingly, I present both the legal/formal and social/informal classification systems before turning to the teens’ conceptualizations and enactments of cultural citizenship.

### **Legal/Formal Categories of Immigrant Classification**

Legal/formal<sup>8</sup> categories of immigrant classification are directly enacted by the state. According to Coutin (2000), representatives of the state (e.g., immigration officials, judges, and lawyers) “depict everyone as having an immigration status of one

sort or another” (p. 51). The presupposition of immigration status, she argued, stems from a “nation-state model of citizenship, according to which an individual’s relationship to a state confers rights and responsibilities” (p. 51). In this sense, the state “produces subjects and identities” by subjecting people to the law (Nevins, 2002, p. 163).

Current U.S. immigration law consists of four formal (legal) categories for classifying individuals residing within the territorial borders of the U.S. nation-state: *citizens*, *legal immigrants*, *nonimmigrant visitors*, and *undocumented immigrants* (Heyman, 2001).<sup>9</sup> The first classification category, citizen, encompasses individuals born in the United States and those who become citizens through naturalization; both have full access to all of the constitutional rights and duties associated with nation-state citizenship, such as voting, paying taxes, and living within national laws.<sup>10</sup>

Legal immigrants, the second classification category, are issued visas, also known colloquially as “green cards,”<sup>11</sup> that give them official permission to reside in the United States (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2006a). Legal immigration operates through a system of quotas and preferences established by the Immigration Act of 1990 (Heyman, 2001). Both citizens and legal immigrants have the right to reside within the United States on a permanent basis.<sup>12</sup> The third category, nonimmigrant visitors, consists of foreign nationals who enter the United States only temporarily and for a specific purpose (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2006b).

The fourth category produced by immigration law, undocumented immigrants, or illegal immigrants, reside within the United States without explicit permission from the government by entering the country extralegally, overstaying their visas, or having their legal status revoked (Coutin, 2000). They pose a challenge to the nation-state model of citizenship because they are present within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state but are not deemed official members of the national body. Coutin (2000) argued that “official law produces illegality by demarcating the legal” (p. 50).

Unlike the other three categories, undocumented immigrants are subject to exclusion and deportation.<sup>13</sup> As Heyman (2001) pointed out, immigration law seeks to exclude these individuals from formal membership by forbidding them from entering the United States, arresting them, jailing them, trying them in court, and removing/deporting them when the occasion arises. Deportation is a specific act rendered by an immigration official at a specific point in time. However, DeGenova (2002) argued that “it is deportability, and not deportation per se” (p. 438) that marks the life of the undocumented immigrant who must live under the constant fear that he or she could be forcibly removed from the United States at any point.

These legal/formal classification categories are not fixed in time. The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, for instance, converted the legal identities of 2.7 million previously “illegal immigrants”—including the parents of many of the teens I studied—into “legal immigrants.” In addition, these categories are not neutral legal distinctions: They also demarcate differential levels of social belonging in U.S. society. DeGenova (2002) argued that “immigration law constructs,

differentiates, and ranks various categories of ‘aliens’” (p. 439). Aleinikoff (1997) likened this ranking process to the inscription of circles of membership, with citizens at the core and all other categories on the outside (see also Heyman, 2001) and observed that this circle was ever-tightening in the anti-immigrant climate of the mid-1990s.

I examine immigrant social membership instead through the idiom of boundaries. Conceiving of the lines of difference as boundaries rather than circles highlights the ways in which boundaries between categories of social belonging come to be constructed, shifted, and redrawn in different historical periods. Boundaries of membership and entitlement have shifted through these relatively recent changes in immigration and immigrant policy.<sup>14</sup> In the decade subsequent to the passage of the immigration and welfare reform laws in 1996, the broader categories of noncitizens (encompassing legal immigrants, nonimmigrant visitors, and undocumented immigrants) have experienced a deterioration in their protection from the law, an expansion of who has been deemed to be potentially deportable, a decline in their ability to access social benefits, and an overall devaluation of their belonging to the nation-state. Increasingly, citizens are the only category whose membership is protected.

### **Social/Informal Categories of Immigrant Classification**

While legal/formal categories of belonging are set forth by the state’s formal membership structure, social/informal categories of classification also concurrently operate in society (Heyman, 2001). As Coutin and Chock (1997) pointed out, it is “social categories [that] help define legal notions such as ‘citizenship’” (p. 124). While these informal categories may have their origin in the state’s formal system of classification, they have subsequently become redefined and reified in the realm of social life, defining socially how immigrants are integrated into U.S. public life. As Kearney (2004) noted, “formal, legal identities coexist and interact in complex ways with informal popular patterns of sociocultural classification” (p. 134).

Rather than existing “on the books,” social/informal categories of classification are animated via discourses that circulate on the topic of immigration. Discourse, Nevins (2002) argued, is “one of the most important ways in which social actors construct and reproduce social boundaries” by “establishing binary oppositions between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (p. 162). In immigration discourse, “us” represents people who rightfully claim membership within the United States while “them” represents those who are perceived as being outside the bounds of the nation-state. Of the latter, undocumented immigrants in particular are the most egregious nonbelongers because they operate “outside of the law.”

Foucault (1980) contended that the production of knowledge and ultimately what is perceived as truth is intimately connected with relations and strategies of power in society. One of the traits of the “political economy” of truth is that it “is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political

and economic apparatuses” (Foucault, 1980, pp. 131-132). Knowledge about immigration and the characteristics of immigrants is subsumed in those apparatuses of power. This truth is created, legitimized, and reproduced both from the state and within the realm of civil society and is reinforced through such entities as schools, churches, and the corporate-controlled mass media (Rouse, 1995). Indeed the mass media—through outlets such as newspapers (Coutin & Chock, 1997; Nevins, 2002), magazine covers (Chavez, 2001), television programs (Tsuda, 2003), and the Internet—are a primary site for locating such discourses. As Nevins (2002) pointed out, “the media are important because they are a highly significant source of information about society and politics for the general population and because of their ability to set the agenda of the public debate” (p. 119).

Contemporary media discourses about immigration highlight social/informal categories of classification. The most predominant category in use today is the *illegal immigrant*, which DeGenova (2006) pointed out has become a “discursive formation encompassing broader public debate and political struggle” (p. 68). Nevins (2002) chronicled the rise of the term and concluded that the *illegal* label has been “increasingly employed” to describe undocumented immigrants “to the point where, today, it is almost exclusively the term of choice” (p. 96). A related term is *illegal alien*, designating an individual who is beyond illicit and constructed as “the morally questionable Other” (Chavez, 2001, p. 44).

Immigrants not only fail to belong to the U.S. nation-state by virtue of their purported “illegality;” state elites (Heyman, 1999) and “bourgeois-dominated coalitions or ‘ruling blocs’” (Rouse, 1995, pp. 361-362) within the realm of civil society project ideas about social belonging that preserve hegemonic views of “the nation” (Chavez, 1997), which is implicitly White and English speaking. Within these formulations, immigrants are not symbolically valued as members of U.S. society for reasons beyond their ostensible “illegal” behavior; indeed, they are viewed as “a threat to the social fabric of the United States” (Nevins, 2002, p. 120). Such discourses display an underpinning of nativism, which as Nevins (2002) highlighted, “is not simply anti-immigrant sentiment but is opposition to sociocultural difference” (p. 97). Accordingly, nativist discourses in the popular media describe immigration with metaphors of war and natural disaster, viewing it as an “invasion” or a “flood” (Chavez, 2001).

Nagengast (1998) pointed out that immigrants have also been demonized as “an internal threat to the security and well-being of the nation” through “subtle and not-so-subtle forms of symbolic violence” (p. 38). In the post-9/11 social milieu, connections between immigration and national security have intensified and immigrants have been portrayed as potential terrorists (Oboler, 2006). Whether the underlying logic then is “illegality,” a threat to the social fabric of the nation, or a security risk, immigration has been characterized as a problem that needs to be debated and solved with immediacy. Hegemonic constructions of the “immigration problem” or in even more alarmist terms, “the immigration crisis” obscure the manifold economic and social contributions that immigrants make to U.S. society.



While anti-immigrant notions are in theory applicable to all immigrants, people of Mexican descent have been particularly racially stigmatized in the public eye. Thus, immigrant classification also intersects in pernicious ways with racialization processes in U.S. society. Even the teens in my study recognize the strong association between Mexicans and “illegality.” To this end, 16-year-old Wilson observed,

I think when they hear illegal immigrant, they automatically assume that it’s a Mexican. They just think of Mexicans cuz that’s all they see is just Mexicans trying to cross the border and get a job. But obviously the media or other people use this as a way to make us look bad.

Miguel also discussed how Mexicans serve as an opportune scapegoat, elaborating:

America does that all the time. It will be one group and that group will tag another group and then the attention will be on that new group. If you think about it, really, psychologically, it’s a good way to keep a nation united because as long as you always find an enemy within the nation you make the borders of who’s who. They ask, “Are you American or not?” And I think that’s ridiculous.

Miguel became particularly attuned to the ways in which immigrants are perceived more broadly in U.S. society once he started attending a primarily White university.

The predominant discourses that currently frame the immigration debate “make the border of who’s who,” as Miguel stated it, between “us” (the lawful citizenry of the United States) and “them” (the immigrant interlopers). Discourse about what exactly constitutes an immigrant—and specifically an “illegal” or an “illegal alien”—blurs boundaries between legal/formal immigration categories and takes the discussion about illegality outside the realm of the legal system. Socially, even people who hold official U.S. membership are encumbered by the social/informal categories of classification. Boundaries of exclusion have expanded to encompass people of color more broadly, and particularly people of Mexican descent, who have become the symbolic face associated with immigrant “illegality.” Even native-born citizens—like Wilson and Miguel—feel themselves to be the target of anti-immigrant attacks, though they technically “belong” in U.S. society by virtue of their citizenship. Therefore, immigrant classification does not merely have to do with how the state structures belonging but also how people themselves understand their own and others’ location within the social topography of the United States.

### **Conceptualizing Social Belonging: Emic Perspectives**

Both the legal/formal and the social/informal systems of classification operate on a macro level and tend to be disseminated from the top down. However, the people

whose social identities are shaped by these categories also have their own ways of classifying immigrants and drawing boundaries around belonging. For as Coutin and Chock (1997) pointed out, “when immigrants and others negotiate the meaning of such categories as ‘citizen’ and ‘illegal alien,’ they . . . manipulate the meanings that are implicit in these allegedly universal categories” (p. 141). These “meanings” are much more grounded in life experiences and take place on a more localized stage. The teens in my study interpreted existing classifications both by reinscribing legal/formal categories of belonging and by engaging with social/informal categories of exclusion in different—and sometimes contradictory—ways.

### **Reinscribing Legal/Formal Categories of Belonging**

The teens utilized a different frame of reference for conceptualizing immigrant social belonging. Instead of adopting the four legal/formal categories of the nation-state, the more salient distinction for the teens was between “people who have papers” and “people who don’t have papers.” Virtually all of the teens in my study referred to a person’s immigration status using this language. Having papers means that a person is in the United States legally—whether they are citizens (native-born or naturalized), in the process of becoming citizens, long-term lawful permanent residents, or in possession of a temporary visa. An example of the term’s usage is exemplified by Casandra, a 17-year-old, who opined: “I’m not sure it would be possible to give everyone papers. Some of those people that don’t have papers maybe shouldn’t have them.”

The teens’ distinction between having papers and not having papers reflects a reinscription of the categories of membership prescribed by the state; they have collapsed the formal lines between the citizen, legal immigrant, and nonimmigrant visitor categories. While they did not utilize the category labels set forth by the law, the teens were acutely aware of whether their different family members or friends had papers or did not. In fact, Beto, an undocumented immigrant who came from the Mexican state of Guerrero at the age of 4, identified high school as the time period in which teenagers come to awareness about who has papers and who does not. High school was a difficult time for Beto when he started realizing the limitations of his “situation,”<sup>15</sup> such as not being able to drive legally or attend a 4-year university.

Even teens who were U.S. citizens identified additional limitations faced by people who did not have papers, such as crossing the border freely, voting, securing a better job, having better access to education, owning property (houses, cars, land), and facing deportation. The teens also clearly understood the advantages inherent in their own immigration status. Sal, whose mother, aunts, and numerous close friends are undocumented, reported that he feels privileged to be a U.S. citizen “all the time. *All the time.* I have the advantage of crossing the border, going to college. Doors open for me wherever I go. People sometimes see the citizenship more than they see the person in and of themselves.”

One keen way in which having papers came to the fore for the teens during the time of the protests was in thinking about what would happen to their families if their parents without papers were deported. Isabel reflected on her fate in this scenario, querying,

If they're trying to do all of this stuff to immigrants, where do they think we're gonna go if they kick out our parents that don't have papers? What are they gonna do, put us all in a foster home?

Isabel's concern was valid since her parents are both undocumented and therefore have the potential to be deported at any time. Thus, if her parents were deported, Isabel and her younger sister would be effectively without a guardian because no other adult family members live in San Diego. Isabel clearly understood that even though she was a native-born U.S. citizen, she would unquestionably be directly affected by the potential deportation of her family members.

While the teens clearly delineated between having papers and not having papers, and furthermore recognized the benefits and detriments associated with each category, many nevertheless felt that those who don't have papers should be included in the social body. Consequently, they defined potential criteria for belonging to the U.S. nation-state in different terms. In the freelisting activity, many of the teens included noncitizens in their definition of what a citizen should be. In this vein, 14-year-old Raquel asserted: "In my opinion a citizen is a resident wherever they live even if they are illegal or not." When we discussed their answers as a group, the other six members of Raquel's group agreed with her that citizenship should be based more on contributing to where one lives than the technical distinction between who is legal and who is not. The teens' vision of who should be allowed to belong in U.S. society is not constrained by legality; if it were, then numerous people in their inner circles would be excluded from their social worlds.

Instead, the teens almost unanimously asserted that citizens should be those who "contribute" to greater society. In the freelisting exercise, Blanca wrote that a citizen "is anyone who is living in the territories of the United States legally." She then continued, "What a citizen should be is anyone who lives in the U.S. It should not matter if you are legal or not, just that you are working hard to contribute to the country." Even though the teens may realize that particular immigrants are undocumented, they consider these individuals as belonging to the U.S. nation by virtue of their contribution. Paz even went so far as to call her undocumented uncle a "good American," saying,

I know that there's a lot of people here who have really proven to be like good Americans. Like my uncle, he has a family and all he has ever done here is work. He's the kind of dude that would never do drugs or crimes or any of the other things people think we do. He's been here for so long, but he's just never had the opportunity.

The teens in my study did not directly utilize the categories of classification promulgated by the state as such. Instead of citizens being the foil against which all other immigrants are defined, the teens' primary distinction was a more practical one between having papers or not, regardless of citizenship status. They had very acute insight into the implications of not having papers on people they knew who were restricted in their mobility, access to rights, and general participation in U.S. social life. In a sense, the teens' reinscription of these legal/formal categories distinguished between who belongs to the United States freely and who has restrictions placed on their ability to belong; however, the criteria they use to classify immigrant individuals have less to do with legal/formal citizenship as such and more to do with contribution to the social good.

### Engaging With Social/Informal Categories of Exclusion

The teens were much more aware of the social/informal classification categories present in discourses surrounding immigration in the media. Most of the teens were critical of the one-sidedness of these discourses; David, for instance, commented: "What you see on T.V. . . . it's like what the country wants to hear about the immigrants . . . not like what's really happening." On a school field trip to Tijuana in May 2006, David saw CNN filming news clips about immigration. As he stood on the Mexican side of the border, he saw the bright lights and television crew through the cracks in the border fence. In recounting the experience, he commented, "Of course they were on the other side filming. No one ever comes to the Mexican side of the border to get the real story." David himself crosses the border frequently as his family spends a significant amount of time at their second residence in Tijuana.

The teens also contested the labels, such as *illegal alien*, used to describe their immigrant family and friends, expressing great distaste for them. This partial transcript derives from one of the focus groups in which we discussed terminology used to describe immigrants:

Christina: So why exactly does this term—illegal alien—bother you?

Victoria: It makes it seem like . . . like they're not even human.

Paulina: Yeah, that they're creatures—creatures you can step on.

Imelda: Maybe since they don't really connect with them, they can just put them aside and call them aliens. You know, you don't really understand aliens.

Christina: So it's just a way of casting them aside?

Imelda: Yeah, um hmm.

Christina: What about the term illegal immigrant—is that any better?

Victoria: I think they should just use another term when you're talking about people. I know the meaning, but they should still use another word.

Wilson: We're all immigrants. We all came from somewhere. I understand that there's supposed to be laws by the government to keep us all in place. But we all deserve a chance to come and live in this place and go after the dream—the American dream.

As Wilson's response indicates, he included himself in the membership group that the term *illegal alien* targeted even though he is a U.S. citizen. His comment demonstrates that the teens did not always envision themselves as belonging to the United States unconditionally, despite being born there.

Given that the teens' statements revealed commonality with immigrants in some contexts, it was surprising that their ideas about what citizenship should be based on strongly reflected elements of dominant discourses, in a sense erecting a boundary between them and immigrants. Statements made in this vein reinforced common stereotypes of immigrants as job thieves, welfare cheats, tax evaders, and criminals. In his assessment of who should be entitled to citizenship, Wilson started out utilizing a rhetoric of inclusion—stating “I think people should have an equal opportunity to get papers”—but amended his statement shortly thereafter, adding, “I mean, not everyone—not the criminals. There should be a security check and all, since that's a problem.” Wilson's comment emphasizes that this inclusivity is not boundless—that noncitizens must earn their place in U.S. society. The teens' absorption and reiteration of these dominant discourses underlines just how deeply ingrained these hegemonic messages actually have become, even for individuals like Wilson who recognize at some level that they are being targeted by them.

Another curious aspect of the teens' rearticulation of dominant discourses is that the ideals that they reinforced often did not reflect the realities of their lives. For instance, Isabel maligned immigrant use of social welfare programs, stating,

They shouldn't depend on welfare and all of that. If you come over here to work, to do something better with your life, you shouldn't get the money from the government. You know, it's like, you're here to better your life, but not to depend on the country to give you the money cuz you had your kids here. If you're having kids here, it's like, you raise them, with your own money.

Isabel and her younger sister actually do have state-funded Healthy Families health insurance. In the household survey, her mother also reported that the family had accessed Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) for a period of time. Consequently, Isabel's statements about “them” not relying on the state's welfare system are inconsistent with the reality of her family's economic situation.

The teens' integration of these dominant discourses into their constructs of citizenship reflects what Ramos-Zayas (2004, 2003) described as the assertion of a “U.S. citizenship identity” (see also DeGenova & Ramos-Zayas, 2003). Ramos-Zayas described how Puerto Ricans living in Chicago deploy their identities as legal U.S. citizens to clearly differentiate themselves from Mexicans as a response to the racializing politics of citizenship that have socially marginalized Latinos of every national background and legal status. This citizenship identity entails a “self-defensive re-racialization” of Mexicans as “others” and of “illegality” as a condition inextricably tied to being Mexican—but not Latino more broadly (Ramos-Zayas,

2003, p. 34). In a completely different city and context, the teens similarly distance themselves from “illegals” who take away “American” jobs, overuse social services, refuse to pay taxes, and engage in criminal behavior in a self-defensive manner. While the San Diego teens are not denying their Mexicanness in this process of “othering,” they are nonetheless attempting to distance themselves from the socially stigmatized “illegal” category.

### Asserting Cultural Citizenship

While the teens negotiated competing legal/formal and social/informal constructions of belonging in their daily lives, the protests prompted them to formulate and articulate their own complex positions on social belonging.<sup>16</sup> As Paz stated, “Because of the protests, I had to like develop an opinion. And of course I side with the people—with immigrants.” The immigrant rights protests were an identity-making historical moment for this generation of California teenagers of Mexican descent, much in the way that Proposition 187 (the California ballot initiative designed to deny “illegal immigrants” social services, health care, and public education) had been for teenagers more than a decade before.<sup>17</sup> Through the protests, the teens expressed previously unconscious or tacit sentiments about social belonging and group identity. As a result, the immigration protests provided a richly productive lens for viewing the ways in which second-generation Mexican youth articulated their messages of cultural citizenship.

Based on their characterizations of the events, the San Diego teens initiated the youth protests in direct response to H.R. 4437 and on the heels of the massive march that took place in Los Angeles on Saturday, March 25, to protest its passage. Most of the teens were unfamiliar with H.R. 4437 until they heard about the L.A. march, at which point they started organizing their own student protests via MySpace.<sup>18</sup> During the entire last week of March, thousands of teenagers throughout San Diego County participated in a series of walkouts, protests, and gatherings. The protests culminated on Friday, March 31, which was fittingly César Chavez’s birthday.<sup>19</sup> Some teens also participated in the more formally organized protests that took place in San Diego on April 9 and May 1, often with siblings, parents, and other family members.

The new legal/formal category of classification proposing to make both undocumented immigrants and those who assisted them criminals really enraged the teens and prompted them into action. In this respect, the teen protests can be read as counterhegemonic actions taken specifically to contest the ways in which the state was constructing social belonging. In discussing why H.R. 4437 offended him, Sal stated,

The bill makes illegal immigrants criminals and those that give them a ride, employ them, or whatever criminals. So that’s a lot of people I know—my family members, friends, acquaintances. That’s why I don’t support it. It’s not fair to them—or me.

Sal had keen insight into how the legislation would make the conditions of these individuals' lives even more precarious; he reflected, "They have so much to contribute back to society. And they're not allowed to . . . that's why I feel for them and want to show them that I care."

Because they were relatively secure in their own status as citizens, some teens felt comfortable taking to the streets and asserting themselves to "represent" those who were being targeted by the legislation. In discussing her reasons for protesting, Blanca reported, "I participated cuz most of my family here right now are illegal immigrants, and they have no way to represent themselves. They can't really do much about anything." Blanca very clearly drew on a rhetoric of fairness in critiquing the bill and advocating for her family members, including a cousin who was unable to attend UCLA—despite being offered admission—because she was ineligible for financial aid due to her undocumented status.

In addition to family members, other teens related that they participated in protests to defend their undocumented friends. Isabel shared a story about a classmate:

I have one friend who is really super close to me. She's like a straight A student, she's involved in school, she's like a really great role model and everything. She also doesn't have papers. And she's like, "You guys have that number—that number that can secure your future, the social security. I don't." As she was telling us this, it hit us, you know? She's one of us, someone that we hang out with. And it was like, wow!

Isabel's statement that her friend "is one of us" unquestionably signals that she believes her friend—whom she also identifies as a role model—deserves her rightful place in U.S. society. Isabel critiqued the state's distinction between her and her friends on the basis of immigration status and the practical consequences of this differential categorization. She also offered an implicit critique of the notion that undocumented immigrants do not contribute to the social good in any meaningful way.

Various teens did also comment on the continuing use of informal/social classifications that stigmatized immigrants—and even them. Miguel felt that the racialization of Mexicans was deeply embedded in the immigration debate, stating,

I feel like a lot of people use the immigration issue as an excuse to show their true colors or their racial views. And I mean, a lot of people just say immigration, what they really mean is Mexicans. Because why would you put up the wall on the southern border and not the northern border?

During the protest period, Miguel felt some of this racist sentiment acutely at his university. Miguel was one of the few Mexicans with whom many of his college peers had any contact; because of this, he felt the need to insert himself into debates about immigration out of a sense of duty. He explained,

When people are having political discussions about “We should close the borders and kick all these immigrants out, all these Mexicans out” . . . in that scenario I have to voice my opinion. I know that a lot of these people—they might not understand, they might not like what I’m gonna say, but I feel like sometimes it’s my duty, it’s my responsibility to stand up just because that’s a part of me.

The teens constructed advocating for family, friends, and Mexicans more generally as the “right” reasons for protesting. They also identified others who participated for the “wrong” reasons—like skipping school, throwing gang signs, and getting into trouble. Such actions detracted from the messages of inclusion and affirmation that “those who actually knew what was happening” (as Casandra phrased it) were trying to convey. The local San Diego media mostly highlighted people who participated for the wrong reasons, which irritated the teens. Frustrated at the take-away message of the news reports, Sal related to me, “That’s what the media chose to highlight—the *cholo*-type people throwing gang signs or waving Mexican flags or not knowing anything about the bill.”

Indeed Sal was quite knowledgeable about the bill, having completed several homework assignments on immigration even before the passage of H.R. 4437. Other teens reported researching the House bill online right when the protests started in order to better understand its specific details. In this respect, the protests served as a consciousness-raising experience for many of the teens. Paulina admitted that she did not know about the bill before the protests but that now she knew “more than just what I heard. I actually did research on the Internet and found out what the bill was.”

The protests were also an exercise in consciousness-raising by forcing the teens to stake out their positions on immigration issues. Wilson chose not to participate initially, saying, “I had nothing to gain from it then, I wasn’t informed yet. So I would’ve been like the others that just walked and didn’t know what they were doing.” About 3 months later, Wilson reported that he was “still learning” about the topic but had learned much more about immigration in the interim. In a focus group conducted 2 months after the student protests, he shared, “I saw something kind of disturbing on the news about the Minutemen. You know how most of them are White Americans? Well, some of them are Mexican, too! I just don’t understand that.” Wilson, then, went from not feeling knowledgeable about the issues to comfortably discussing them with his peers and actually bringing new points to the table. Hence the learning process for the teens extended beyond the period of the protests themselves.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to being consciousness-raising, the immigration protests were also identity affirming for the teens. Carmen recalled that before the protests,

I would be like, “I’m Latina, Chicana, whatever you want to call me.” I didn’t really pay much importance [to] it. But everything going on has changed my personal . . . way of seeing things. I know I’m lucky being who I am. I can’t picture myself being ashamed of what I am. I grew up Mexican. I am Mexican.



Carmen's comments reveal a transition in her sense of self—from being somewhat ambivalent about her Mexican heritage to proudly asserting it. Instead of feeling as if being Mexican were stigmatizing, she came to see being Mexican as a source of pride, something that she would not choose to change.

Carmen also noted that the protests and accompanying classroom discussions helped her to see her parents in a new light, sharing:

I never really paid so much importance that my dad crossed the border illegally, you know? Also that my mom worked the fields picking up melons and lettuce. I never really thought [about] that until a class when we were talking about all the hard work immigrants do and what not. We were talking about how immigrants have to suffer crossing back and forth and [how] they risk their lives. I was like, "Oh my God—that's what my parents did!" And that's when it hit me because back then they didn't really talk about it. But I'm not ashamed of my parents getting here the way they did.

The heightened consciousness about immigration actually caused Carmen to not view their "illegality" as a stigmatizing marker but rather to be proud of the tenacity they had displayed in crossing into and working difficult jobs in the United States.

Most teens also criticized peers who had "forgotten" their roots or lost sympathy for immigrant causes. In a focus group session, Isabel stated,

There are those dumb people that go against their own race. They're like, "It doesn't affect me so why am I supposed to help you guys out?" I'm like, "Okay, I'm from here, you know, but you came from Mexico, too. And now you're saying that it doesn't affect you? What if you didn't have those papers?" They become blind. They're just like, "Oh, it doesn't affect me, so I don't really care what happens."

Many teens like Isabel helped cultivate a social pressure to remain connected to one's roots despite one's citizenship status instead of promoting assimilation and "becoming American."

Perhaps the teen who became most empowered by the immigration protests and who most strongly asserted messages of cultural citizenship was Sal. When the protests started, Sal deliberately chose not to participate, stating, "I thought I was doing a much better service by disproving the continuous stereotype that we just like to ditch school and that we're uninformed. I was pretty much trying to play the other role—of the actual informed person." Sal stayed behind at his public high school so that he could "make more of a contribution [by] talking about it with the people there at school." He continued:

I was like the only Mexican [who remained] at school. When I got to school I heard some people say stuff like, "Oh, it's so clean around here today without all the Mexicans." That pissed me off. But the whole day I was just talking, talking, talking, explaining everything. And people really seemed interested in what I was saying and I

felt like I had things to back up what I was saying. I felt kinda honored—some people were like “Wow, you know a lot about this stuff!”

As the weeks went on and plans were being made for the next set of protests, Sal became increasingly frustrated at the school’s lack of attention to the protests, which were very contentious among the students. He wrote a letter to his principal, expressing disappointment that the school had not seized the opportunity to promote critical dialogue about immigration and suggesting that a forum should be held to tackle the issues. The principal called him into the office on the Friday afternoon before the planned May 1 “Day Without an Immigrant” protest and asked him to help her plan a forum, which he helped moderate. A few hours after the forum had taken place, Sal recounted to me what had happened:

We had the forum in the auditorium. We didn’t know if people were gonna come or anything. At first, there weren’t that many, but then tons of people came in. There were like 600 or something! At first, I was a little nervous. But then I got warmed up and it was all good. I would say something and then people would make their comments. Sometimes I would respond, sometimes others would jump right in and say something. And that was my goal—that’s what I wanted. Not that we all agree about everything, but that we’re open to each other. That we treat each other good instead of calling each other beaners and other names. And that wouldn’t have happened if I was out on the streets—I would have just been another face in the crowd.

Beyond combating stereotypes about Mexicans and immigrants and encouraging critical dialogue among his peers, the forum was an immense boon to Sal’s self-esteem. A few hours after the event, he reflected,

It was one of the best days of my life. I just couldn’t believe that so many people came. And I got such a great response from the principal—she was like, “Good job. This is great.” And some of my teachers, too. It felt so good. The whole thing is just so crazy. I still can’t believe it happened. And the news even came—Channel 10—and interviewed me. I’m just on such a high right now!

In fact, Sal was featured on the nightly news and in local newspapers. He eventually won an award from a local organization dedicated to nonviolence that heard about the forum he spearheaded.

The debate surrounding the immigration protests provided Sal the opportunity to cement his pro-immigrant outlook and articulate it in a very public forum. Sal had spent many years struggling to feel comfortable with his immigrant roots. For a long time, particularly when he attended a (predominantly Anglo) private high school on scholarship, Sal said that he felt “kind of strange or embarrassed” by his mother and just wanted to fit in with his peers. In talking about that time period, he said “I was pretty much saying to my parents that I was embarrassed of their struggle, of what

they put up with . . . I'll regret that for the rest of my life." After many years of working though this conflict however, Sal came to the point where he stated, "You've gotta be proud of who you are and proud of what your parents have done for you to get you where you're at." As May 1 of the 2007 school year approached, Sal's principal asked him to come back and facilitate another forum, even though he had graduated the year before. Sal happily agreed, admitting to me that he felt extremely "honored" to do so when I saw him in July 2007.

### **Legacies of the Protests**

Through the protests and ensuing events like Sal's forum, the teens learned more about the legal/formal and social/informal classification schemes that sought to categorize—and punish—they and their families and friends. They became informed about state policies that targeted immigrants negatively and developed their own corresponding messages about why these policies were unfair. What prompted many of the teens to participate in the protests initially was their desire to set the record straight on the true nature of immigrants' contributions to U.S. society. In the end though, the protests gave the teens the space to comment positively about their own belonging.

The protests ultimately taught the teens that they could take action to fight against forms of inequality directed at them, their families, and their friends. It was acceptable for them to assert their ideas about cultural citizenship—and in fact, doing so was often rewarding. A focus group discussion 2 months after the protests addressed birthright citizenship and how some legislators were fighting for its elimination. The issue, of course, hit home for the teens as they would have been the targets of this legislation had it been in effect when they were born. Paulina was quickly dismissive of the birthright citizenship measure, asserting, "It won't go through." I asked her why not, and she responded, "If you think about it, we'll start another march!"

In a different focus group session, Guillermo had a similar response, stating, "We were born here, we're U.S. citizens. If they put the law in progress, everyone's gonna fight back, like in a good way, to make it stop." While their conclusion is perhaps overly optimistic (that protests are always effective in changing the national thinking on a given topic), the sentiment behind it reflects that the teens have internalized a new way of responding to state policies and civil society practices that target them and their loved ones. Some of the other youth recognized that "protesting's not the only thing at all," as Sal stated. Instead, he felt that

The important thing is educating people about the issues—if not, then what's the point? I think that's one of our worst problems—just that people don't listen and don't bother to know about what's going on. I've also learned how important voting is—not everybody gets that.

In the time since the protests, scholars have wondered if the teens' activism in the realm of nonelectoral politics will translate into an increase in voting rates for this demographic. It remains to be seen whether they will participate actively in electoral politics in the future. What is quite clear though is that the protests enabled the teens to develop a much keener sense of who they are. The teens have come to understand how their identities are circumscribed by issues surrounding national belonging; however, they have also come up with their own formulations as to why nation-state belonging is not the best measure of where someone belongs to and who they are.

## Conclusion

The teens' engagement with the immigrant rights movement demonstrated clearly that they did indeed have their own ways of navigating extant categories of belonging and articulating messages about cultural citizenship through vehicles like the protests. Their actions—epitomized in the youth protests that they initiated and orchestrated—did not signal the partiality of their belonging. Quite the opposite, the teens were actively advocating for the social inclusion of their family members and peers who were not being adequately included in legislative and social views of the nation. The protest period was an instructive time that helped them to articulate the generally inclusive, pro-immigrant stance that forms the basis of their vision of cultural citizenship and allowed them to claim space and rights in greater U.S. society (Flores & Benmayor, 1997).

Nevertheless, it would be too simplistic to focus exclusively on the affirmative experiences of the protests in trying to understand how the teens frame belonging. As Ong (2003) highlighted, it is important to chart how the state and civil society partially frame the ways in which categories of belonging are designated and immigrant social inclusion is brokered. By analyzing the ways in which the teens talked about citizenship in the abstract, it is clear that their ideas about social belonging have been partially filtered through the dominant discourses that have so penetrated their consciousness. Because of this influence, their vision of cultural citizenship is not limitless, all inclusive, and unabashedly pro-immigrant. Not all immigrants are deemed to be worthy of belonging in the United States in their assessment; however, that determination is made by an individual's own actions as opposed to being decided by government officials or political pundits.

Conventional ideas about social belonging are made quite complicated by children whose notions and experiences of belonging traverse the ever-intensifying citizen-immigrant dichotomy. The Mexican teens in my study did not have permanent social boundaries set up between citizens and immigrants or between them and the members of their inner circles who happened to have different immigration statuses. Instead, they developed multiple—and in some cases, competing—notions of inclusion and exclusion through which they teased out layers of similarity and

“otherness” with regard to immigrants. During these complex and ongoing identity negotiations, sometimes the teens saw immigrants as being “them” (people who were not like us), while at other times they conceived of immigrant family members and friends as being just like “us” (people who contribute to the social good and therefore have a legitimate place in U.S. society). The teens’ boundary maintenance requires that they reconcile two sometimes very different goals: affirming their immigrant roots versus proving their worth as deserving American citizen–subjects.

Second-generation youth find themselves at the nexus of several systems of classification that have contrasting ways of assessing social belonging. Each of these systems evolves and changes over time, reinscribing boundaries of social belonging in the process. It is entirely possible that the national immigration “debate” will be significantly reframed yet again in the future—perhaps even by the children of immigrants as they mature into adults and contest the exclusionary discourses and practices that have so profoundly affected both them and their inner circles.

## Notes

1. Following anthropological convention, pseudonyms have been supplied for all people to protect the privacy of the research participants.

2. Second-generation youth are those who were born in the United States to immigrant parents. Rumbaut and Ima (1988) coined the term *1.5 generation* to refer to children born abroad but educated (partially or completely) in the United States. Hereafter, I refer to both 1.5- and second-generation youth by the label *second generation*, recognizing that the label itself is not unproblematic.

3. I use the label *Mexican* because most of the teenagers in my study most frequently self-identified as Mexican. The teens’ predominant use of the label *Mexican* is significant in that it encompasses all the people of Mexican descent in their lives, including Mexican nationals as well as those individuals who were born in the United States.

4. My research population consisted of 54 teenagers between the ages of 14 and 19. In 2006, 42 of the teens were in high school, while 12 were college students I had originally met (in 2004) when they were still in high school.

5. At the turn of the 21st century, 1 in 10 children in the United States belonged to a mixed-status family. In California, that number was even higher—3 in 10 children were part of such families (Fix, Zimmerman, & Passel, 2001). Most of the families of the teenagers in my study had arrived in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s (as revealed in the household survey). Thus, the families have more of a settlement trajectory as opposed to being more newly arrived immigrants. Virtually all of the teens’ parents were undocumented at some point, though many of them have subsequently regularized their legal statuses.

6. I conducted freelistings with 28 teenagers (66% of the high school sample) to assess how they understood concepts like citizenship, immigrant, and citizen. The focus groups centered on public debates about immigration. I conducted five focus group sessions (4 to 5 participants each) with 21 students (50% of the high school students); the sessions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviews spanned six domains—family history, immigration, relationship with Mexico, border-crossing experiences, citizenship/national belonging, and identity—and lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. I conducted 27 interviews with high school and college students (half of both samples). For both the focus groups and interviews, participants were stratified on the basis of gender (equally divided, consistent with the overall sample), grade in school, and type of school attended (public, charter, or private). In addition to these research activities, I also completed a population survey with all of the teens and a household survey with a representative from each teen’s household.

7. This partiality derives from the way in which childhood has been socially constructed in Western societies (Kulynych, 2001). In such constructions, children are portrayed as “gain[ing] ‘degrees’ of citizenship as they move up the chronological age or ‘developmental’ ladder” (Cockburn, 1998, p. 112) with “full citizenship” as the “final destination of childhood” (Jans, 2004, p. 40).

8. In discussing categories of classification, I merge the terms utilized by both Heyman (2001), *formal–informal*, and Coutin (2000), *legal–social*. Both sets of terminology capture important elements of classification.

9. Heyman (2001) actually used the term *undocumented migrant*; my term of choice is effectively coterminous.

10. Of the 54 teens in my study, 51 were native-born U.S. citizens. In addition, 1 was a naturalized citizen, 1 was a legal immigrant, and 1 was an undocumented immigrant.

11. In Spanish the green card is simply referred to as *la mica*, which is derived from the verb *enmucar*, which means to cover in plastic (Collins, 1993).

12. Lawful permanent residents are allowed to remain in the United States provided they do not commit or have not committed a crime, per proscriptions in the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996.

13. Theoretically, undocumented immigrants are the only category of immigrants subject to exclusion and deportation. However, in practice, immigrants of all legal statuses are regularly deported from the United States, both historically (see Balderrama & Rodríguez, 1995) as well as contemporarily. Deportation on inaccurate grounds is one way in which the fixity of formal categories of classification is challenged.

14. Padilla (1997) made a clear distinction between immigration and immigrant policies. Immigration policies are centered on regulating who enters the United States, while immigrant policies are those that facilitate the social and economic integration of immigrants into U.S. society. Padilla pointed out that the U.S. government has historically tended to focus on immigration policy while immigrant policy has not been as high of a national priority.

15. Beto always spoke rather cryptically about not having papers, referring to his lack of papers as his “situation” or “problem.”

16. Approximately half of the 42 teens in my high school sample participated in protests, while 4 out of the 6 college students I interviewed participated in protests on their college campuses. The teens who chose not to participate in the protests cited not wanting to miss school and not being informed as the main reasons for not participating. Regardless of whether or not particular teens participated in protests though, I argue that all of them were affected by the protests and sharpened their opinions on immigration during the protest period. The protests were a widespread topic of conversation in school, among friends, and within families as everyone sought to make sense of the events that unfolded.

17. Abrego (2006), García Bedolla (2000, 2005), and Seif (2006) chronicled the political engagement of Latino youth in the post–Proposition 187 era in California.

18. MySpace is a social networking Web site in which users create interactive profiles that contain blogs, photos, music, videos, and links to other friends.

19. César Chávez’s birthday (March 31) is a state holiday in California.

20. This is not to say that the teens are now immigration experts—there is still much that they do not know or understand. However, they have substantially concretized their own positions on the issues and can back them up.

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