

Transformative Effects of Immigration Law: Immigrants' Personal and Social Metamorphoses through Regularization¹

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This article examines the enduring alterations in behaviors, practices, and self-image that immigrants' evolving knowledge of and participation in the legalization process facilitate. Relying on close to 200 interviews with immigrants from several national origin groups in Los Angeles and Phoenix, the authors identify transformations that individuals enact in their intimate and in their civic lives as they come in contact with U.S. immigration law en route to and as a result of regularization. Findings illustrate the power of the state to control individuals' activities and mind-sets in ways that are not explicitly formal or bureaucratic. The barriers the state creates, which push immigrants to the legal margins, together with anti-immigrant hostility, create conditions under which immigrants are likely to undertake transformative, lasting changes in their lives. These transformations reify notions of the deserving immigrant vis-à-vis the law, alter the legalization process for the immigrant population at large, and, ultimately, shape integration dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship has highlighted the effects of immigration law, through the legal statuses it creates, on various aspects of immigrants' lives. Researchers

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have noted the deeply divergent courses that legal status can configure as it channels immigrants to educational and job opportunities and to public services or leads them to exclusion and marginalization (De Genova 2002; Donato and Armenta 2011; Menjívar and Kanstroom 2014). The legal regime can affect immediate aspects of life, such as employment and wages (Takei, Saenz, and Li 2009; Massey and Gelatt 2010; Donato and Sisk 2012; Flippen 2012; Hall and Greenman 2015), access to social benefits (Hagan et al. 2003; Capps et al. 2007) and health care (Menjívar 2002; Kandula et al. 2004; Cummings and Kreiss 2008; Viladich 2012; Willen 2012), housing conditions and crowding (Drever and Blue 2009; Hall and Greenman 2013; McConnell 2015), educational attainment and trajectories (Menjívar 2008; Gonzales 2011; Greenman and Hall 2013), and even friendships and the social lives of immigrants (Bloch, Sigona, and Zetter 2014). The legal regime and the statuses it ascribes also have long-term consequences for immigrants in the host society (Van Meeteren 2010; Friedmann Marquardt et al. 2011; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011; Yoshikawa 2011; Menjívar and Abrego 2012; Bean, Brown, and Bachmeier 2015). It also has been demonstrated how the enforcement of immigration law can alter subjective understandings of the self (Gonzales and Chavez 2012; Menjívar and Abrego 2012). Thus, it has been well established that the legal context that receives immigrants, through the classifications it enacts and the implementation tactics it employs, can shape life for immigrants in multiple ways (Menjívar 2006; Takei et al. 2009; Abrego 2011; Donato and Armenta 2011; Fassin 2011; Quesada 2011; Dreby 2015).

Less attention has been given to the effects that the legalization process itself can have on immigrants. As immigrants come into contact with U.S. immigration law through entering the country, applications for regularization, detentions or deportations, and the institutions and bureaucracies through which immigration policies are enacted, immigrants internalize their position vis-à-vis the law, becoming aware of who they are and who they need to become. This awareness arises from dealing with a varied cast of players in the U.S. immigration system—attorneys, notaries, bureaucrats, and enforcement agents—during interactions ranging from collaborative to

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adversarial. It also comes from individuals' own knowledge of the power of the law, which is cultivated in ordinary settings (see Menjívar 2011).

In this article we examine how contacts with the law can transform immigrants' lives in the short and long term, particularly when immigrants have spent long periods in "liminal legality" (or legal limbo; Menjívar 2006) and live in hostile climates. Empirically, we focus on the experiences of immigrants from a wide range of national origin groups in Los Angeles and Phoenix as they pursue various types of legalization. Regardless of individual characteristics, migratory histories, or the specificities of their cases, these immigrants acquire new behaviors and adopt novel practices and lifestyles as they learn that such practices will move them closer to deservingness for permanent residency or citizenship through naturalization. Our findings suggest that these changes often constitute fundamental alterations to the self, rather than superficial or temporary modifications, demonstrating both the power of the state to exert control over individuals through law and the ability of individuals to shape how that control manifests in their lives. Our results show how immigrants' discrete changes in their activities and mindset have implications for immigration as an evolving sociolegal phenomenon and that these changes are more likely to occur when specific configurations of contextual forces (e.g., anti-immigrant hostility) and legal frameworks created by the immigration regime (e.g., expansion of temporary legal statuses, increased enforcement, and long waits for legalization) are in place. In turn, immigrants' individual-level transformations reaffirm the normative profile of the legally "deserving" immigrant, thereby altering what the legalization process becomes for the immigrant population at large. At a fundamental level, our study sheds light on how individuals apply state power to themselves. Our findings point to the self-perpetuating aspects of immigration as a mutually constitutive social experience among the state, its laws, and immigrants themselves.

There are two caveats we would like to make. First, we identify a key distinction between what individuals do to comport with categories of legal admission at the time of application—where they may highlight their prior experiences in application documents to help legitimize their claims—and lasting transformations they undergo as they internalize standards of deservingness. The latter constitute changes usually initiated in relation to the submission of an application to secure legal status or naturalization, but they become consequential and enduring beyond the moment of application, approximating genuine metamorphoses. We examine these kinds of changes.

Examinations of how immigrants anticipate and conform to apparent measures of deservingness in immigration law when submitting legalization requests include Coutin's (2000) work on Salvadoran immigrants' efforts to redefine their legal status and their struggles over the legitimacy of their political asylum claims, Berger's (2009) examination of how 1994 Violence

Against Women Act (VAWA) guidelines and requirements encourage battered women to remake themselves into neoliberal subjects, and Villalón's (2010) study of Latina immigrant domestic violence victims who highlight on their VAWA applications how their experiences fit with certain conceptions of who warrants protection under the remedy.² Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas (2012, p. 249) refer to these proofs of deservingness as a "fetishism of papers," insofar as undocumented immigrants are encouraged to maintain a paper trail to document their productive contributions to society for the possibility of future legalization. This scholarship has been instrumental in bringing attention to how immigrants attempt to fit with legal classifications and underscores the law-abiding practices in which undocumented immigrants engage, such as the civically accepted acts of work and paying taxes. Such acts can be documented post factum and square with neoliberal citizenship norms, enabling immigrants to later position themselves as deserving. The production of the paperwork to prove these civic acts allows immigrants to accentuate aspects of themselves that can help offset their "illegality" and demonstrate adherence to the cultural constructs of a deserving applicant (Bhuyan 2008).

In contrast, our work goes beyond how immigrants have learned to present themselves in an application. We examine transformations that immigrants themselves undertake in intimate as well as in civic spaces, beyond the acts of work and tax paying that are usually examined in this research. Although individuals initiate changes in their behavior in efforts to submit compelling cases for regularization, our observations show that these do not seem to stop, whether or not the goal is met. The lasting nature of these changes suggests that they constitute significant shifts in individuals' mentalities and views of themselves that begin with initial encounters with immigration law but have enduring spillover effects as immigrants seek incorporation in society and legal membership. As in related research, immigrants in the cases we examine also seek to increase their "civic capital" (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2012, p. 253), but they do so through what seem to be substantive transformations in their lives.

Second, we focus on immigrants who are already in the country and go through the legalization process (having spent lengthy periods in "liminal legality"), not the many who do not have a chance of doing so. The great majority of undocumented immigrants in the United States today simply have no recourse for legalization. There is a growing literature that documents how these immigrants alter their daily routines and practices to avoid being detained and deported, enacting discrete changes they would presumably abandon if legalization were obtained (Abrego 2011; Gonzales and

² For an interesting discussion of the role of documents in acquiring citizenship, or what he calls "documentary citizenship," see Sadiq (2009).

Chavez 2012; Nicholls 2014). Our work parallels this scholarship as we also examine alterations of behavior in direct response to the legal regime, except that in the cases we study, individuals undergo seemingly long-lasting, permanent changes in order to become and remain visible beyond their encounters with immigration law.³ In doing so, we reveal how the state exerts its power as it remakes those immigrants who can transform their lives into participants in the control of immigrant populations in general. This is what we refer to as the “transformative effects of the law.”

We do not argue that an application for legalization or naturalization triggers uniform transformations in all immigrants or that immigrants undergoing any and all types of legalization experience equally powerful changes in their lives. However, our cases suggest that for those immigrants who do enter the process of regularization and naturalization, the process itself (e.g., knowledge of application requirements) may trigger transformations that can be enduring and that are nuanced. These changes are shaped by social cleavages (e.g., socioeconomic status, age, gender, and ethnicity), social context, and the legal framework in place at a particular point in time.⁴ Our cases elucidate a consistent pattern we identified in Los Angeles and Phoenix, which, we argue, points to the disciplining power of the state beyond formal interactions with state institutions. From our observations, individuals for whom paths to legalization are the most arduous and lengthy also seem to experience these transformations in the most enduring fashion; it follows that living in a context devoid of anti-immigrant hostility, both formally through law and informally through public attitudes, will likely not trigger the same effects we present here (and immigrants without any opportunities to enter the legalization process will not experience these effects either).⁵ Given that the immigrants in our study have spent lengthy periods in legal limbo navigating a labyrinth of forms, fees, backlogs, intractable deadlines, and the like, this is not altogether surprising (see Kim 2015). In this sense, our exam-

³ The changes in behavior and routines that immigrants go through to avoid detection and deportation can certainly be deeply transformative, with repercussions for their future sense of belonging (see Menjivar 2011; Gonzales and Chavez 2012; Menjivar and Kanstroom 2014). The changes we examine here differ in that they are observable in individuals’ conduct in society, their personal relationships, or their mind-sets and beliefs, both in private and in public and in the short and long term.

⁴ Social cleavages also map on to the legalization and naturalization process so that their interaction exacerbates existing inequalities (see Aptekar 2015).

⁵ Batalova, Hooker, and Capps (2014) compare Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals applications by state and find that Arizona, with higher anti-immigrant hostility, has the highest number of applications in the country. In contrast, Massachusetts, with lower anti-immigrant hostility, has the fewest. Legal status acquires significant value in contexts where even a traffic stop can get immigrants deported. It is plausible that immigrants in hostile climates are more pressured to institute changes in their lives to comport to standards of deservingness.

ination is relevant beyond our empirical observations because the overwhelming majority of immigrants today face the obstacles of a generalized anti-immigrant context, few opportunities to regularize their legal status, and lengthy waiting times for responses to legalization requests (Menjívar 2006; Abrego and Lakhani 2015; Lakhani 2015).

Our focus is on those immigrants who have already petitioned for their legalization or will do so in the near future, via a family member or an employer. Alternatively, they may have undergone a violent or extraordinary incident that qualifies them to apply for a humanitarian benefit. Importantly, the immigrants in our studies act within the same hostile immigration regime that drives those who face legal dead ends to tailor their activities and aspirations to prevent removal. The intensification of restrictions and tightening of federal immigration controls have created more demands to prove belonging, and at the same time such restrictions have intensified the need for immigrants to demonstrate their civic deservingness (Filindra 2012; Batalova et al. 2014). However, our study participants change their lives not out of fear of deportation per se (arguably the ultimate form of exclusion) but in hopes of inclusion, of being considered as deserving of membership and accepted as legitimate members of society. The moment of legalizing—particularly if a positive outcome is anticipated—represents a validation of the ways these immigrants stake membership claims through their personal and social lives that distances them from negative anti-immigrant stereotypes. Indeed, the current regime exerts its power over immigrants through overt forms of enforcement but also through these less visible and less overtly coercive strategies of opportunities for inclusion (see James 2010; Ticktin 2011; Lakhani 2014).

We draw attention to these less evident but equally critical ways in which immigration law shapes individuals' lives. Immigrants adopt and reaffirm moral conventions that fulfill the subject position of a deserving citizen in the eyes of the state and its laws (Bhuyan 2008). To document the transformations they undertake, we focus on intimate spheres of life—including marriage, separation, and childbearing decisions—and less intimate domains of civic society, as individuals perform volunteer work and participate in other “mainstream” settings by attending churches and engaging in other activities to signal integration and a commitment to normative American values (see Alba and Nee 2003; Ong 2003). We show that the pursuit of regularization or naturalization can have profoundly metamorphosing effects on individuals, such that when they alter their behaviors and lifestyles to “fit” a presumed legal requirement, they change their mentalities, their views of themselves, and the very constitution of the self to emerge from the process as new subjects: new “citizen” subjects. These discrete alterations in behavior and mentalities affect the broader legalization process and immigrant integration dynamics, as these transformations entrench

norms of inclusivity and exclusivity around the “kinds” of immigrants who deserve legal membership.

MIGRANTS’ METAMORPHOSES IN LIGHT OF THE LAW

Legal scholars and social scientists have highlighted the power of the law to delimit individuals’ claims in immigration as well as other areas, constricting the platforms and identities with which individuals may mobilize law. Studies have examined how, in calling on law’s authority, individuals may emphasize certain preexisting aspects of their personalities or life histories that they believe square with legal norms or conventions that will enable them to achieve the results they desire. In her examination of battered Latina immigrants seeking legalization through VAWA, Berger (2009, p. 201) contends that these women had to portray themselves as “powerless” victims and as economically self-sufficient “good neoliberal citizens” (see also Merry 2003; Villalón 2010; Lakhani 2013; Nicholls 2013). Bhuyan (2008) examines the “ideological investments” (p. 155) that the U.S. government made through the enactment of VAWA. She argues that while the legislation is offered to free “trapped” (p. 167) domestic violence victims, it ultimately replicates their subject condition through mechanisms of control that limit applicants to match narrow stereotypes by gender, race, ethnicity, and heteropatriarchy. Kim (2011) explores how migrants in South Korea invoke various “identity tags”—documents, performance, or biometric information—to try to present themselves as fitting categories of inclusion promoted by the state. Similarly, Nicholls’s work on immigrant rights movements in France and the United States examines the discursive strategies that immigrant activists and their supporters use to derive rights. In contexts marked by political hostility toward immigrants, Nicholls observes, strategies signaling immigrants’ possession of cultural attributes that resonate with nationals are most effective in compelling social recognition (2011, 2013).⁶

Research on lawyers and clients often discusses the “framing” (Goffman 1959; Gitlin 1980) or “scripting” (Heimer and Staffen 1998, p. 5) performed by attorneys on behalf of their clients, whose stories are molded and reshaped by legal representatives into a “papereality” (Dery 1998) with the intent to appease legal decision makers (Mertz 1994; Coutin 2000). In the arena of immigration law, scholars emphasize that lawyers may engage in targeted story or fact elicitation (or nonelicitation) with their clients in order to complete the “scripts” that are likely to resonate with the law (McKinley 1997; Lakhani 2013). Sometimes this entails subtly or more overtly educating

⁶Immigrants who undertake strategic changes of behavior in order to square with relevant social norms also find themselves well positioned regarding mainstream assimilation paths (see Garcia 2014).

clients and promoting their immigration-related “legal consciousness” (see Merry 1990) by providing knowledge of how particular legal processes work and of ways the law might be used in clients’ favor (Coutin 2000).

In turn, research has explored how legal complaints themselves may evolve over time. Mather and Yngvesson (1980–81) analyze the “transformations” of legal disputes as a result of the involvement of participants in the legal process itself. Katz’s study of legal aid attorneys and low-income clients in Chicago examines how claimants’ positions and identities are forged via “an interactive process,” their legal narratives being “produced through negotiations” with their lawyers (1982, p. 23; see also Sarat and Felstiner 1995). Coutin (2000) observes that in establishing immigrants’ legal histories, attorneys inquire into clients’ interactions with U.S. immigration institutions as well as aspects of their personal lives that could have legal meaning, such as kin ties that can transmit legality even when immigrants do not perceive their kin in the way lawyers do (e.g., with an eye toward legalization). In other cases, lawyers see their role as helping immigrants see themselves as deserving of refuge, so they help immigrants recall information that will improve their asylum petitions. This scholarship has mostly focused on how and why individuals’ claims may be rephrased or amended to compel benefits as they interface with legal actors or institutions at the moment of application. Researchers have conceptualized this kind of framing in various ways, ranging from the coercive (see, e.g., Villalón 2010) to the agentive (see, e.g., Kim 2011, 2015).

In contrast, less attention has been given to how individual applicants transform their personal lives and social behaviors in order to fill legally relevant “spaces” that they imagine exist, by developing in themselves the very “characteristics” and “roles” they believe the law will recognize (Gilkeron 1992, pp. 871–72). Sometimes immigrants have ample understanding of the law, conceptualizing it as omnipresent, omnipotent, and capable of destroying—or at least controlling—their lives (Calavita 1998; De Genova 2002; Menjívar 2006; Abrego 2011), but they also recognize the empowering potential of the law (Menjívar 2011; Kim 2015). Other times, the cumbersome nature of the law opens up opportunities for misinformation to circulate among immigrants, a situation that highlights their vulnerability (Menjívar 2006). Some studies have emphasized how immigrants’ understandings of the law inform how and with what objectives they present themselves to lawyers or other legal actors to procure legal benefits (Kyle and Siracusa 2005; Ryo 2006; Broeders and Engbersen 2007; Kim 2011, 2015; Levin 2012). Turning to the postapplication implications, however, there is a dearth of research on how immigrants’ identities and behaviors are transformed in enduring ways through their legalization attempts, although select studies have pointed to lasting shifts in migrants’ identities prompted by legal phenomena such as cross-border moves, deportation, and the pro-

tracted regularization process itself (Miller 2012; Bletzer 2013; Canizales 2015; Kim 2015).

In sum, few studies have explored how immigrants who engage with law through the legalization process attempt to fit legal categories of admission by undertaking transformations that are substantive and enduring (i.e., not likely to be reverted if or when the objective is achieved) beyond the moment of application. Ong's (2003, p. xvii) ethnography of Cambodian refugees in San Francisco demonstrates how acquiring U.S. citizenship entails a "dual process of being made and self-making" through which refugees "learn to belong" in American society by "construct[ing] and contest[ing]" a new sense of self that squares with local institutional norms and the expectations of powerful institutional figures. Ultimately, Ong finds that immigrants become "citizen-subjects," bending their Buddhist cultural traditions to conform to the U.S. state's idealized notions of a "good" member of society (see also Kibria 1993).

Our examination parallels Ong's (1996) concept of "family biopolitics," a term she coined based on Foucault's concept of "biopolitics" to describe the practice by Taiwanese and Hong Kong Chinese families of deploying individual members to the United States to obtain higher education and U.S. legal standing so as to ensure the success of the rest of the family. We expand this analytical optic to focus on the enduring effects of immigrants' efforts to constitutively refashion themselves to fit categories of inclusion constructed by law.⁷ As immigrants refashion themselves in the legalization process, they convert not only themselves but also the nature and meaning of the concept of citizenship more broadly (see Coutin 2000, p. 586; Silbey 2005). By producing versions of themselves more in line with categories of legal inclusion, immigrants (albeit unwittingly) reify constructed categories and notions of who is fit to belong as a permanent and full member of society and who is not. In doing so, they reproduce the exclusionary principles at the heart of the legal regime that bar individuals unable to realize these transformations (see Nicholls 2013) and normalize images of those fit to belong. Through this process, immigrants unintentionally help to solidify the stratified system in their own communities that separates those who can conform to ideals of citizenship and those who do not have the resources to do so. Thus, the dual process of "being made and self-making" (Ong 2003, p. xvii) that applicants undergo reinforces the regulating mechanisms inherent in the law, which serve as the basis to evaluate immigrants along dominant ideological values for different social markers (Katz 2001; Bhu-

⁷ See also Fassin's (2011) use of Foucault's concept of governmentality to understand "the subtle and complex games involved in the 'biopolitics of otherness,'" which he defines as "a politics of borders and boundaries, temporality and spatiality, states and bureaucracies, detention and deportation, asylum and humanitarianism" (p. 214).

yan 2008; Nawyn 2011; Lakhani 2013) and to exclude those who are less able to fit (see also Vilallón 2010; Willen 2014).

Invoking Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality, our examination allows us to understand the tools that the state uses in its control of immigrant populations in addition to and apart from overtly coercive tactics, threats of deportation, and fear-inducing practices. Through providing the apparently noncoercive benefit of legalization (or naturalization), the state exerts its power over immigrants by "taking control of life . . . [and] ensuring that they are not only disciplined but regularized" (Foucault 2003, pp. 246–47), to craft themselves into the individuals the state evidently needs and will reward. Foucault's (1993) conceptualization is particularly helpful, as the legal status application process not only stipulates what the state wants and what kind of individuals it will reward with legal inclusion; it entails the governing of individuals on a constitutive level as well, by directing ideology and behavior through techniques that encourage an equilibrium between coercion and "processes through which the self is constructed and modified [by itself]" (pp. 203–4). The state thereby engenders transformations in the subjects it seeks to control (see Rose, O'Malley, and Valverde 2006), and the practices of "the state become increasingly oriented toward the cultivation and management of life itself" (Kretsedemas 2011, p. e3). As Chauvin and Garcés-Masareñas (2012, p. 254) observe, "migrants take active part in the process. . . . Being part of the concrete, legal, bureaucratically existing population, they may, perhaps, more successfully and more legitimately claim a space among the people." By focusing not on temporary changes in behavior but on seemingly long-term transformations that precede and follow application for legalization in direct response to bureaucratic requirements, our examination is therefore useful in understanding the enduring, disciplinary power of the state.

In highlighting the specificities of the current historical moment—a time when immigrants who can regularize their status may be more compelled to adopt behaviors and practices to evoke deservingness so as to avoid exclusion or mistreatment—we are also contributing to the scholarship on law as constitutive. This scholarship, based on the legal consciousness framework (Silbey 2005), examines how people understand, experience, and use the law (Merry 1990; Ewick and Silbey 1998). One's legal consciousness may develop through formal contacts with legal institutions or actors such as lawyers or via informal, quotidian activities or disputes that involve legal or quasi-legal dimensions. Drawing on Foucault's notion of governmentality permits us to highlight how the contemporary sociolegal context around immigration, including a more expansive presence of the state in disciplining immigrants and their behavior and in the increasing spaces of state-ascribed illegality, can trigger transformations in immigrants' ideology and practices. But our study also stretches this conceptualization to demonstrate how im-

migrants interpret and apply state-initiated expectations about the types of immigrants who deserve legal legitimacy and what incorporative social behaviors are appropriate. Therefore, we reveal individuals' capacity to pragmatically mediate the state's role in their legal destinies. In this way, our work builds and expands on the scholarship that has attended to the constitutive aspects of law.

BACKGROUND

Individuals applying for different forms of temporary legal status or legal permanent residence (lawful permanent resident [LPR] status) may do so from either outside the United States or within the country (for what is called "adjustment of status" in the case of residency applicants, or "adjustees", see Jasso 2011). In this article we concentrate on the latter group, the applicants who are already in the United States and are in the process of applying for a dispensation for which they may qualify. (It is estimated that over half of applicants for LPR are already in the United States [Jasso 2011]). These individuals include certain undocumented immigrants and those who hold temporary legal statuses (and are pursuing permanent residency).⁸ We also include LPRs who are seeking citizenship through naturalization. Having resided in the United States for years, these immigrants are already familiar with expectations of behavior and civic engagement, with what is considered to be a desirable citizen, and with what U.S. society presumably values.⁹ Indeed, except for formal legal recognition, these immigrants are *de facto* members of society, living the paradox that Coutin (2000) has called attention to: they are physically present but legally absent. These individuals thus do not seek physical entry into the country; they seek full, formal, *de jure* membership in society and the rights (and obligations) that come with it.

All immigrants applying for temporary visas or other statuses, such as permanent residency and citizenship, must demonstrate certain status-specific criteria to qualify, including practices that highlight the traits of productive citizens, like paying taxes and holding jobs (Nawyn 2011; Chau-

⁸ Persons who come to the United States with visas and overstay them may not have to leave the country to adjust their status, whereas those who enter without authorization must return to their country of origin to adjust their status. This shift is consequential for individuals seeking regularization through marriage, for example. For those who initially enter the United States without inspection by crossing the U.S.-Mexico border and must return to their countries of origin to acquire standing, 10-year bars to readmission are triggered; this situation disproportionately affects Latinos (see Gomberg-Muñoz 2015).

⁹ Researchers have documented immigrants' internalization of U.S. norms, especially about meritocracy, by virtue of participating in various U.S. institutions (see Abrego 2006).

vin and Garcés-Masareñas 2012). Meeting these conventional markers of neoliberal citizenship “assures immigration officials that . . . immigrant[s] will not be a drain on the resources of the state” (Bhuyan 2008, p. 165), a long-standing concern about immigration. All immigrant petitioners must also show “good moral character.” A fairly nebulous legal concept, precise requirements for good moral character vary (see Lapp 2012).¹⁰ It is generally recognized as the absence of the following behaviors and activities: conviction of murder or of an aggravated felony or federal crime, failing to register for the Selective Service, providing false information in documents, and falsely claiming U.S. citizenship.¹¹ However, there is little guidance as to what behaviors and practices are affirmatively needed. Thus, in practice, good moral character is often understood to mean staying out of trouble with the law altogether and acting in civically expected ways. The vagueness of what constitutes good moral character and the fact that immigrants’ possession or lack of it is largely determined on a case-by-case basis by immigration authorities sometimes create challenges for applicants and legal advocates trying to anticipate officials’ reactions to potential red flags (Lakhani 2013). Aptekar (2015) notes the immense power that immigration officials have in determining good moral character in reviewing applications.

Requirements to apply for LPR status vary by whether the adjustment is employment based, via a victim-based form of relief, or through family reunification.¹² However, basic requirements for permanent residence specify that individuals must be eligible for one of the immigrant categories established in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the primary body of U.S. immigration law that determines admittance; have a qualifying immigrant petition filed and approved; have an immigrant visa available to them; and be admissible to the United States.¹³ There are many grounds for inadmissibility that could potentially bar an individual from becoming an LPR, including health-related, criminal, security-related, and other grounds, which are assessed via immigrants’ answers on their permanent residency applications and appended documents (see Lakhani and Timmermans 2014). Most immigrants whose LPR applications have been

¹⁰ Lapp (2012) examines in depth the different categories of immigrants affected by the good moral character requirement, while Aptekar (2015) traces it to the first citizenship laws passed in 1790 and argues that this requirement reflects the commingling of the idea of the nation with morality that has existed historically but that today is also linked to the emphasis on enforcement and screening.

¹¹ See Immigration and National Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1427(a) (2012), 8 C.F.R. § 316.10 (2012).

¹² These are the most common paths to LPR, but there are other ways (e.g., being an Amerasian child of a U.S. citizen, an American Indian born in Canada, or a member of the Armed Forces). See <http://www.uscis.gov/greencard>.

¹³ See <http://www.uscis.gov/green-card/green-card-processes-and-procedures/green-card-eligibility>.

approved are granted “conditional permanent residence” status for two years, during which they are expected to demonstrate the behaviors on the basis of which they have been granted LPR status (e.g., to be “married in good faith” if they applied through marriage). At the end of the probationary period, the “condition” is removed and they can become LPRs. Once permanent residency is granted, the status endures indefinitely, albeit with strings attached. For example, individuals are expected to carry their “green cards” (the identity document associated with LPR status) with them at all times (not doing so constitutes a misdemeanor offense), not engage in an aggravated felony offense, and renew their residency standing every 10 years. If certain conditions are not satisfied, permanent residency may be revoked, calling into question how “permanent” this status may be (Menjívar and Kanstroom 2014).¹⁴ Individuals applying for citizenship through naturalization must have resided continuously in the United States as LPRs for a minimum of five years (three for those married to a U.S. citizen); be able to read, write, and speak English; and have knowledge of U.S. history and government. They must also exhibit good moral character by demonstrating that they are “attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States, and well disposed to the good order and happiness of the United States during all relevant periods under the law” (USCIS 2012; see also Aptekar 2015).

DATA AND METHODS

We draw on data collected in two sites through two independent studies with intersecting foci: the lives of immigrants and their experiences in liminal legal standings. Data come from an ongoing series of studies of Latin American–origin immigrants that Menjívar has conducted in the Phoenix metropolitan area since 1998 using a purposive approach to identify study participants and relying on the expertise of key informants in churches, community organizations, and neighborhood shops and restaurants to locate study participants and to gather views on immigration. The study participants had to be at least 18 years old at the time they left their home countries, and they chose the location of the interviews (usually their homes), which provided an opportunity to gain valuable insights into their lives. Together with a team of assistants over the years, Menjívar has conducted 93 formal interviews (and reinterviews) with Guatemalan, Honduran, Mexican, and Salvadoran immigrants, has followed a core group of study participants since

¹⁴ LPRs may also lose their status if they are found to have “abandoned” it or if it is found that the application or grounds for obtaining permanent residence was fraudulent. See <http://www.uscis.gov/green-card/after-green-card-granted/maintaining-permanent-residence>.

1998, and has spoken with many others, such as community workers, religious leaders, teachers, consuls, and social workers. The core group has consisted of five extended families that have changed in composition over the years; following them longitudinally for a decade and a half has permitted her to capture complexities within these families but also to directly observe changes among these family members in response to developments in immigration legislation.

The formal interviews were semistructured and were akin to oral histories, complemented with hours of informal conversations before and after interviews. Formal interviews covered themes such as migration history, work history in the origin country and the United States, family composition and gender and generational relations, health and well-being, perceptions of safety in the neighborhood, schooling plans and views, church attendance and religiosity, links to immigrants' origin communities, and aspirations for the future. The interview format and complementary conversations allowed individuals to bring up topics of their own interest that were not included in the interview schedule, which they often did. Thus, unprompted, study participants regularly talked extensively about their legality, legalization attempts, current status, and in general their experiences with the law.

In addition, Menjívar and her team have undertaken fieldwork in the Phoenix metro area and spent time in places where immigrants conduct their daily lives, such as health clinics, schools, supermarkets, sports events, and churches. (For further details on the study participants, see Menjívar [2001, 2008] and Salcido and Menjívar [2012]) This longitudinal, in-depth research approach and long-term contact with Central American and Mexican immigrants in the Phoenix area have been critical in capturing what protracted legal uncertainties translate into in real life, how changes in immigration law affect individuals' lives, and how immigrants understand the law.

Lakhani conducted a three-year ethnography at a legal nonprofit organization in Los Angeles starting in 2009. Volunteering several days a week as a law clerk at Equal Justice of Los Angeles (EJLA), she helped lawyers and immigrants apply for victim-based forms of immigration legal relief that included deferred action status through VAWA, U and T visa status, political asylum, permanent residency, citizenship, and reunification petitions for family members still abroad.¹⁵ Immigrants soliciting legal status at EJLA were women, men, and children from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. In addition to working on immigrants' legalization

¹⁵“Equal Justice of Los Angeles” is a pseudonym. On VAWA, see <http://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/battered-spouse-children-parents>. On U and T visa status, see <http://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/victims-human-trafficking-other-crimes>. On political asylum, see <http://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-asylum>.

petitions, Lakhani interpreted for Spanish-speaking EJLA clients during interviews with adjudicators at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) field offices and observed removal proceedings in the Los Angeles Immigration Court.

To supplement ethnographic research within EJLA, Lakhani observed initial case consultations at two other legal nonprofit organizations in the Los Angeles area for six months in 2011. She also completed a total of 88 formal interviews (and reinterviews) with 40 immigrants, 23 immigration lawyers, and 12 legal staff, as well as focus groups with 33 asylees about their experiences. The core topics of interviews with immigrants included how immigrants learned of regularization opportunities and how they located attorneys, the “easy” and “difficult” aspects of petitioning for legal standing, how acquiring legal status (or not) affected their lives, and whether they intended to pursue other legalization avenues. In ethnographic fashion, study participants were not directly asked about the phenomena on which we focus in the article; however, respondents often brought up these issues as they discussed their migration histories; family composition; the legal standing of children, parents, and relatives; educational and work experiences in their countries of origin and the United States; and physical and mental health. Interviews with attorneys and legal staff examined their career trajectories and goals, day-to-day casework activities, “challenging” and “rewarding” cases, and other aspects of their jobs. Lakhani’s extended time in the field provided a valuable window through which to witness immigrants’ and lawyers’ interpretations of and responses to legalization quandaries as they unfolded.

Collectively, we have amassed ethnographic field notes, in-depth interviews, informal conversations, and focus group accounts from close to 200 immigrants from several national-origin groups in Los Angeles and Phoenix over a sustained period (a decade and a half in Phoenix and over three years in Los Angeles), covering immigrants’ experiences pursuing many forms of membership under U.S. immigration law.

For each of the areas on which we focus in this article, we present a few cases from each site to illustrate our main analytical points. However, these cases are not isolated, nor are the individuals in them the only ones in similar situations. Rather, each case presents a dimension of how individuals transform their lives through interactions with immigration law, each instance illustrating a clear pattern that emerged in observations at both sites.

INTIMATE TRANSFORMATIONS: MARITAL UNIONS, CHILDREN, AND FAMILY

The regulatory power of the current immigration regime, through instigating changes in the immigrants who can undertake them, reaches to con-

trol those immigrants who cannot transform their lives. This is how the governmentality of the current system works (see Foucault 1991), as immigrants become active participants in governing themselves. This phenomenon highlights how the discrete behaviors of individual immigrants in response to perceived requirements can shape the legal and social lives of the immigrant population at large.

While we focus on those immigrants who have lived in legal limbo in the United States but who have the opportunity to enter the legalization process, we would like to underscore that many immigrants in our studies could not realistically contemplate legalization because they did not have the social and financial resources—such as a family member with enough income or an employer willing to petition for them—to initiate the process. Their situation poses a counterfactual to our argument, as these immigrants did not seem to alter their behaviors and practices in the ways we observed among those who began the legalization process. The case of Flora, a Mexican immigrant, and her family in Phoenix exemplify this situation.¹⁶ Although the family members work several jobs, pay taxes, abide by the law, and would want nothing more than to acquire even temporary work permits, they have no close family members who can petition for them. Their employers (several homeowners for whom Flora cleans and the owner of a small gardening company for Flora's husband) are not in a position to do so either. Flora summarized the lengths they would go to if any legal avenues were available to them: "We would stand on our heads, we would jump, I would kiss the officer, do anything and whatever if anyone tells us that we would get our papers! Those papers are like life itself! But there is no way we can even submit any papers because we have no basis, nothing we can claim [to do so]." Flora and her family face quotidian anti-immigrant hostility in the Phoenix area but have no way to claim deservingness and therefore no reason to undertake the transformations in their lives that the immigrants on whom we focus do. Thus, the current immigration regime and its system of exclusionary practices that closes doors to immigrants like Flora and her family is sustained by those immigrants who do transform their lives in legally attractive ways.¹⁷

Our cases demonstrate that the transformations we examine, whether they occur in private or public spheres of individuals' lives, are nuanced. However, while transformations took place among individuals seeking adjustment to a wide range of statuses, such as political asylum, U visa status,

¹⁶All names for respondents used in this article are pseudonyms.

¹⁷Our observations parallel Villalón's (2010). In her study, the Latinas who were most vulnerable, poorest, and lacking resources and information were those whose cases were less likely to fit the requirements for VAWA protection and also less likely to receive the services of organizations helping women submit applications.

permanent legal residence, and citizenship, we noted no significant differences in the depth of transformation that our study participants went through in relation to legalization. In some cases, study participants' personal and social metamorphoses led to desirable outcomes and, in their view, to lasting improvements in their lives; in other instances, such changes led to less desirable results or to situations that cannot be so easily classified into "good" or "bad." In any case, our emphasis is on how these transformations are substantial, seemingly long lasting, and the result of conscious decisions, which illustrates how viewpoints, mentalities, and the self may be altered in anticipatory and durable ways via the legalization process to have a spill-over effect beyond the application itself.

The case of Manuel, a 39-year-old Salvadoran immigrant who has lived in Arizona for 21 years, illustrates this point. Manuel is a member of one of the core families that Menjívar has followed over the years, in this case since 1998. She has been able to document Manuel's contacts with the law for close to 15 years through interviews and conversations but also via direct observation, as on several occasions Menjívar has accompanied Manuel to lawyers' offices and translated documents for him. Even though by now Manuel has spent more years of his life in the United States than in his native country, he is still quasi-documented, living in "liminal legality" (Menjívar 2006) because his applications for various dispensations have not been approved and he only holds temporary status. He has spent more than \$25,000 in fees to notaries, legal aides, and lawyers and still finds himself hanging by the legal thread of a temporary permit to work. Manuel first tried to apply for legal permanent residence through his father, who is a permanent resident. But they hired an unscrupulous lawyer who kept them waiting (and charging them fees) until Manuel turned 21; by then, the lawyer told them, it was too late to submit an application because Manuel had become an adult and would lose his visa priority, moving to a lower family preference category with an even longer waiting time. His father had also petitioned for Manuel's mother, and the lawyer told them that this would complicate Manuel's case. Thus, Manuel applied for temporary protected status (TPS) and continued to renew this temporary permit until TPS ended for Salvadorans in 1995.¹⁸ With his only legal avenue closed, Manuel's friends recommended that he marry someone for a green card. He contemplated this option but did not feel comfortable with a "fake" marriage and abandoned the idea. Manuel never tired of looking for honest and legitimate alternatives, and whenever he heard news about a change in immigration policy, he would ask notaries and lawyers (as well as Menjívar) if this was

¹⁸ On TPS, see <http://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/temporary-protected-status-deferred-enforced-departure/temporary-protected-status>.

something he qualified for in order to obtain legal permanent residence. Thus, for two decades, he has lived “hyperaware” of the law (see Menjívar 2011).

Manuel eventually fell in love with and married a Mexican American woman, who at the time, he told Menjívar, “stole my heart.” They had a baby daughter and everything seemed to be going well, but they did not stay married for long. A year later, during a Christmas gathering at Manuel’s parents’ house, Manuel confided to Menjívar that he could no longer live with this woman. After a brief period together, right after the birth of the baby, Manuel had decided to go back to living with his parents. Menjívar responded that sometimes couples are incompatible and separate. Manuel agreed but then shared what he said was the “real” reason for his decision to separate.

She and I had lots of disagreements over many things. She was jealous; we could not agree on how to raise the girl, even whether drinking soda is bad; she criticized the clothes I wear . . . well, it’s a litany of things. It’s like night and day between us; we had nothing in common. . . . You would think this is why I decided to leave her, right? Well, yes and no, because look, I had so many disagreements with her, sometimes real fights, screams, and insults and everything. So I thought, hmm, if I stay with her, this will get worse and one day I’m going to lose it and maybe even hit her, and then what? The police come and I’m arrested. I will get deported, or if I’m not, this is going to go on my record and then for sure I’ll lose any chance at a green card. So no, I need to avoid everything so that I can show good behavior. So this is the real reason I am separating. I swear to you, this is true.

Rather than risking a blemish on his record that could keep him from obtaining permanent residence, as a lawyer had explained to him, Manuel decided to separate from and eventually divorce this woman, even if this was not what he personally wished. He also lamented the fact that their parting limited the time he could spend with his U.S. citizen daughter. In retrospect Manuel thinks his decision worked out for the best. A couple of years later, at a special pupusas dinner gathering at his parents’ home, he reflected on his marriage and his life and came to the conclusion that “because of the law and my wish to be legal I have become a different person. I am not the person I used to be, the person I *thought* I would be. I don’t go out like to discos or those things; that is gone. I’m really focused on behaving well to get my papers.” What started out as Manuel’s strategy to obtain his LPR had transformed him and his view of himself in a more enduring fashion, even without attaining his green card. This is the kind of transformation in individuals’ lives that we examine here.

Josefina, a Salvadoran woman in her late fifties also living in Arizona, changed her life in the opposite direction from Manuel. Josefina is also a member of one of the families that Menjívar has followed for more than a

decade. Whereas Manuel separated from and eventually divorced his partner, Josefina married her long-term partner in order to obtain legal permanent residence. This was not a “fake” marriage only to acquire her green card; she was adamant about this and would seem slightly offended at the insinuation.¹⁹ Josefina married Armando, the father of her three adult sons (and with whom she shares five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren), when she arrived in the United States because this would allow her to file her application for a green card. Josefina and Armando had lived in a consensual union for many years back in El Salvador but had not contemplated marriage. As she put it, “There was no need to marry because over there [in El Salvador], you know, one gets together to live with a man and one doesn’t marry and it’s a common thing.” Josefina arrived in Arizona after a decade of separation to join Armando, who had already obtained his green card through marriage (he was not officially married to Josefina and thus was able to marry a U.S. citizen woman to obtain his residency). Once divorced from the U.S. citizen woman, Armando was free to marry his long-term partner Josefina, a decision they made on the recommendation of the lawyer they hired to help them file the application for Josefina. However, the marriage to Armando changed Josefina’s life. As Menjívar was paying attention to changes in family structure, she documented in field notes the visible difference in Josefina’s comportment pre- and postmarriage. Not only was Josefina able to file her application and obtain a work permit within a couple of years after they submitted her application, but the marriage itself changed her self-concept, including what she thought of herself and her outlook on life in general. One Saturday evening, Josefina invited Menjívar to an event where many of Josefina’s and her husband’s friends had gathered to celebrate his accomplishments in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Menjívar noticed the deferential treatment that Josefina enjoyed and commented to her how well respected and liked she was in the community. Josefina reflected,

Who would have told me that at my age, with all my children grown and with grandchildren and even great-grandchildren, I would marry him? (laughs) We have been together for decades. I don’t even remember how many years anymore, and now we’re married! Imagine that! Well, yes, it feels different, but good, nice, more secure, I would say. Now I can be called “Señora” [Mrs.], not like the rest who just live together without being married. I don’t know, but I feel like I am more respected, more like a señora . . . it has more weight [to be formally married]. So yes, it feels nice to be able to feel this way now . . . yes, a husband and a green card all at the same time!

¹⁹Josefina’s marriage to Armando and the application took place before 2000, when a distinct regime set in for individuals who entered without authorization. Josefina, who entered without documents, did not have to go back to El Salvador to regularize her status. This is no longer the case today (see Gomberg-Muñoz 2015).

Josefina's comments allude to the class-based notion of marriage in the region she comes from.²⁰ In Guatemala and El Salvador, as well as in Central America in general, the type of union romantic partners undertake is generally related to social class background, with most middle or upper-middle class marrying formally and the poor in both urban and rural areas entering consensual unions (Menjívar 1999). Thus, in a way, her marriage to Armando, which was done in the context of her application for her green card, gave her a new sense of respect and "weight" (i.e., social status) because of the association between formal marriage and social class standing; it transformed the way she saw herself and how she thought others perceived her. Significantly, she specifically identified a legal requirement for her green card as the factor that triggered the transformations in her personal and social lives, changes not likely to end with the conferral of legalization. Like Manuel above, through her legalization Josefina has ended up not being the person she thought she would be. Both individuals effected enduring changes in their lives in direct response to the law, and although in Josefina's case the change turned to her favor, in both cases these changes were never conceptualized as temporary or revertible when or if the legal outcome was obtained. These cases show how the law shapes subjects' behaviors and mind-sets and also how individuals may not necessarily perceive the law as absolutely controlling. As in the previous case and the following one, immigrants approached the law in strategic yet nondevious ways, retaining some authority over how, when, and why it affected their lives.

Roberto, a 24-year-old welder from Mexico, immigrated to Los Angeles without legal permission in 2010, leaving behind his partner Liliana and their three-month-old baby girl. Like Josefina and Armando, Roberto and Liliana were not married but had been together for many years. Roberto and his cousins sought legal assistance in 2012, three months after a drive-by shooting that resulted in Roberto's bladder bursting from a gunshot wound. During a meeting with a lawyer, it came out that, on the attorney's advice, Roberto would return to Mexico the following month to legally marry Liliana. Then he would fax his marriage certificate to the organization, and the lawyer would file Roberto's U visa application together with one for Liliana and their daughter. Unmarried to Liliana, Roberto would only be able to apply for his daughter to join him in the United States. But petitioning as legal spouses with Liliana, if their U visa petitions were approved, all three could return to Los Angeles with U visa status, which would allow them to solicit permanent residency after three years. Roberto and Lakhani had an opportunity to talk about Liliana, family, and marriage. Roberto explained that marriage represented a

²⁰Josefina's assessment parallels the symbolic significance of marriage in the United States today (see Cherlin 2004).

chance for him to bring his family together again. But he drew a distinction between those who married “because of custom” and himself and between those who marry “for the papers” and himself; he was marrying “for love” and anticipated the intimate transformations that marriage to his now *prometida* (fiancée) would facilitate.

Marriage is an opportunity that I have right now to help my family. It's logical. . . . If I had my family with me, I would feel so much better. When I came [to Los Angeles], I left our daughter very small. . . . On the ranch at home [in Mexico], we may not have married, although it's not like we are unhappy to do it. When I asked Liliana about it, she was excited. I feel like a lot of people just marry because of custom, but really when you marry someone for love, it's beautiful to have a bunch of kids who call you Mommy and Daddy. Imagine marrying someone that you didn't love! You would suffer.

Although referring to marriage as an “opportunity” (vis-à-vis the U.S. immigration legal system) to enhance his family's quality of life, it was clear that marriage had a broader symbolic and personal significance for Roberto. Finding himself immersed in the U.S. sociolegal context and facing pressures to adjust his legal status, marriage became not only a “logical,” pragmatic way for Roberto to physically reunite his family but also a reflection of his sincere, long-standing romantic love for Liliana and his commitment to their family. Similar to Josefina and Manuel, Roberto would emerge from the legalization process a different person via alterations triggered through his interactions with the U.S. state and its legal infrastructure. Importantly, also like Manuel and Josefina, Roberto did not experience his transformation as coercive; in his mind, it was a proactive, practical change that would have multiple personal, legal, and social ramifications in his family's life.

Immigrants' transformations in intimate spheres of their lives resulting from their interactions with the law were apparent outside of marriage as well. In some cases, immigrants elected to have or not have children because of knowledge acquired about legal impediments or opportunities that could change the course of their lives. Roberto, for example, was plainly instructed by his lawyer to not have another child with Liliana until they reached the United States as U visa holders. “When you return to Mexico, please don't get pregnant until you come back here, OK? There's going to be much more paperwork if there are other derivative applicants made in Mexico . . . and it's riskier for you guys to obtain the U visas. So, coming here pregnant and having the baby here is all right, or coming here not pregnant and then getting pregnant here. It's going to delay the process significantly if she has another baby there.” For his part, Roberto responded receptively, although acknowledging that the lawyer's legal advice posed an inconvenience to his burgeoning family: “Yes, that's OK. It's good you told me that, because, well, once one [baby] arrives, you want to have four,

five. But we will wait for now, and then have as many as we want, made in America.” It is clear in this case how the authority of U.S. immigration laws and their interpretation by attorney intermediaries shape immigrants’ family-planning decisions.

The law reached into migrants’ private familial lives in other ways as well. Immigrants who had biological children in their home countries from whom they were socially estranged but for whom they could legally petition were faced with the decision whether to list them as family members on legal documents and application forms. This choice was significant in the case of Esequiel, an immigrant from El Salvador who, since moving to Los Angeles nine years earlier, had had two children with a new partner, Mayra. He had not seen his son Diego for 10 years, when he left El Salvador. Esequiel could not even recall his child’s last name. But in the course of talking with an attorney in 2012, he learned that he could give Diego an opportunity to live in the United States if he included him on his U visa petition. Adding Diego to his application could mean a substantial transformation to his and Mayra’s lives and to those of their two young daughters. It was a step that Esequiel would not have considered taking before his contact with the law: that of being a father to a son he hardly remembered. Nevertheless, Esequiel reacted to the news with a sense of obligation. “He doesn’t have my last name, and I’m not on his birth certificate, but I am his father. And what a possibility for him after all the struggle I went through to get here. He already has his life with his mother, so he might not want to come. But it’s certain that he would have better possibilities here. I need to talk to Mayra and see what she says, because she knows that I haven’t been married, but that I do have a son over there.” Esequiel had not thought of his son “for years,” but during the course of his exchange with a lawyer, his orientation toward Diego changed, a striking sense of responsibility setting in. He planned to contact Diego’s mother and inquire about bringing his son to the United States; even if she did not agree to send him right away, at the very least Esequiel would petition for Diego while he could.

At the time we observed them, Manuel, Josefina, Roberto, and Esequiel understood the changes in marital situations and childbearing decisions as lasting transformations initiated through contacts with the law (through legal actors), regardless of whether the legal status sought actually materialized.

COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATIONS: CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND VOLUNTEERING

The depth of changes in public and civic domains was similar to that in private spheres, and, like the transformations in private aspects of life, those in the public and civic arenas also surfaced across the various legal

statuses that the applicants sought. Like the transformations in the private sphere of the family, those in this ambit were also beyond the reach of those without resources to enter the legalization process.

One case that made these transformations visible was that of Ricardo, a Salvadoran in his late fifties who arrived in his early twenties and by now has lived in the United States for most of his life. Menjívar met Ricardo through one of the core families in the Phoenix study. When he first immigrated and “things were easier than they are now,” a friend advised him to join the U.S. Army because this would expedite obtaining his papers. He followed the recommendation and enrolled; he obtained his permanent residency within a few years, and as soon as he became eligible for naturalization, he submitted his application. Ricardo became a naturalized U.S. citizen and a proud U.S. Army reservist. He said he could not overstate the transformation his U.S. military service had effected in his life. “It changed the course of my life forever,” he stated. Ricardo perceives that it altered his life so much that he now wants his children and grandchildren to follow in his footsteps, not because they “need to get their papers,” as they are all U.S.-born citizens, but because of the “transformation” it could also spur in them. In his words,

There [in the Army] one learns, I would say, to be a responsible person, and great discipline, which is essential for success in anything. They teach you respect: to respect authority, the law, your superiors, your bosses, all things that you can apply in your life, in your family, in your place of work. And the more you see how beneficial it is, the more you love it, and the more you learn to love this country and want to defend it. I know that my children and grandchildren don't need this [joining the army], but I really want them to be part of the military because of what it does to a person for the rest of one's life.

An interesting take on the benefits Ricardo perceives in the military is the contrast he made with the military in his country of origin. “Oh no! It's not the same. People there go to the army to learn bad things, to be corrupt, to harm people. Here is the opposite.” Given these earlier ideas he had of what the army is, he stressed the profound transformation he had experienced in the U.S. military, how his perspective had changed, and how in the process, he had changed as well. “I wouldn't have done this if it had not been because I needed the papers! Me, in the military? Back there [in El Salvador] no. Never. But here, because of the papers, I did it. But once I learned what it is, and went through it, I said to myself, ‘this is a very good, clean thing,’ and now I tell people what a good thing it is, whether they need papers or not.” Ricardo, as he sees himself, is now a different version of the person he would have become, and his contact with the law (through the perceived benefit of permanent residence) has the potential to spill over multigenerationally. Ricardo's insecure legal standing, which informed his decision to join the U.S. military in order to derive regularization, had ram-

ifications for his social incorporation in the country. His metamorphoses vis-à-vis the law may also affect the assimilation trajectories of his immigrant-origin descendants.

Opting for separation from his wife was not going to be the only instance in which Manuel would transform his life in direct response to norms of behavior he wished to live by in order to “become legal.” In his quest for legalization, Manuel also applied for legalization through the Nicaraguan and Central American Relief Act and for TPS, which was opened to Salvadorans once again in 2001 after two earthquakes in El Salvador qualified the country for TPS designation.²¹ The submission of these applications has allowed Manuel to have a work permit, which he renews dutifully even before the TPS deadline. But his application for permanent legal residence (through his father, as discussed above, because TPS does not lead to LPR) has been stalled for over a decade. One of the immigration lawyers whom Manuel hired, who charged Manuel \$6,000, advised him that he needed to strengthen his dossier to highlight his civic responsibility. The lawyer suggested that Manuel demonstrate commitment to his community by volunteering, including doing work to improve conditions in his neighborhood and even donating blood.²² In the fall 2010, after close to a decade and a half of “chasing the intractable papers,” as he put it, Manuel explained, “She [the lawyer] said that I need to demonstrate that I love this country and want to do good things here. So she said that I should go clean the streets, pick up trash, and beautify the streets. She said that I should also donate blood. I need to do whatever I can to show that I am a good person and that this country will not regret giving me a green card.”

Since early 2011 Manuel has been trying his best to demonstrate civic engagement and model citizenship by volunteering at an organization, something he had been interested in before but had not pursued. Having lived through the absence of his father (who left Manuel as a child when he migrated to the United States), Manuel wanted to do work with children who grow up without parents. He decided to volunteer by organizing activities and providing entertainment for foster children, and through the organization he has financially sponsored one child. Manuel works long hours, and volunteering is not something that he can easily accommodate; nonetheless, he now volunteers once a month and enjoys interacting with the children. And although initially unsure about donating blood, he now

²¹ See <http://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-asylum/asylum/nacara-203-nicaraguan-adjustment-and-central-american-relief-act>.

²² This lawyer is not alone in this suggestion; promoting volunteering among immigrants has been seen as an effective integration mechanism, particularly when the host community practices volunteerism (Gerber 2014; see also Lakhani 2013).

donates every six months. He was previously unaware of the need for these donations in his community, especially given his rare blood type. He is now convinced of the intrinsic benefits of these actions and speaks to friends and coworkers about the importance of these blood donations and of volunteering, mentioning that even though he engaged in them in efforts to secure legalization, he now will continue this engagement independent of his legalization process. He repeatedly asserts that these actions make him feel like “a different person” and one day asked rhetorically, “If I have something that I know others need in order to survive, why not give it to them? But yes, this came to me from that lawyer.” Thus, Manuel’s new sense of civic duty appears to be enduring, directly related to his contact with the law but seemingly not subject to change with a particular legal outcome. Manuel’s efforts to comport with legal expectations morphed into consistent social activities that integrate him ever more into his community, pointing to how immigrants’ legal position and understanding of legal opportunities can shape processes of immigrant incorporation.

Aminta, a Mexican woman in her late forties in Phoenix who works cleaning office buildings at night, also has been trying to demonstrate civic engagement and adherence to the values of the United States by volunteering at church. She participates in committees that feed the poor as well as those geared to organizing events at church. Like Manuel’s, Aminta’s time is tight, but she started doing community work approximately 10 years ago, in 2006, in an effort to finally attain her LPR, which she has been pursuing through various means for approximately 15 years. As did other immigrants in our studies, she commented on the critical importance of “the papers,” particularly given the virulent anti-immigrant climate in the Phoenix area. Reflecting on her volunteering at church, however, she explained, “I would go to church and help anyway; I’m not doing this only for my papers. I do this because it is work for God. But if I can do good deeds, helping at church in whatever way I can and get my green card, then I think it’s all the better. It’s like killing two birds with one stone (laughs). I serve God and please the [immigration] authorities at the same time!” She hopes that the priest at church will be able to write a letter on her behalf that she can take to the notary she hired and submit it with her application packet. But she does not plan to stop volunteering even if or when she receives her green card. Now that she has discovered the “beauty” of volunteering, she said, she understands “why Americans like volunteering and serving others. It makes you a good person, it inspires one to be good, regardless of whether you have documents or not.”

Armando, a Salvadoran man in his late fifties in Phoenix, followed the same advice and decided to demonstrate civic engagement in order to become a naturalized citizen. In his case he had been a member of a local AA group for some time, but he was advised that it would be wise for him to show

leadership. Thus, in approximately 2001, he formed a group, within the larger AA group, for Spanish-speaking members of AA. Armando became very involved with this group, giving talks a few times a week, distributing pamphlets, and actively recruiting members. He would enlist potential members at work, in his neighborhood, and through referrals from friends, and, according to his wife, this had all helped him become a well-known and respected member of his community, which included immigrants and native-born citizens. However, Armando had to stop his naturalization process because, as he explained, in his “days of drinking” several years earlier, he received tickets and became involved with the law “in a bad way,” actions that not only could count against him and prevent him from naturalizing but, he had heard, could even get him deported. Since passage of the Illegal Immigration and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) in 1996, legal permanent residents with criminal convictions find themselves at risk of deportation.²³ Although Armando did not think his past encounters with the law amounted to deportable crimes, he was unsure what offenses the new law covered and did not want to risk calling attention to himself by continuing with his naturalization application; thus, he decided to remain a permanent legal resident.²⁴ But in the process of attempting to qualify for naturalization, he had become a leader in his community, and this had, indeed, transformed his life. This change had been apparently enduring, and Armando had never contemplated reverting it. In his words,

God works in ways that none of us can ever understand. He put this [naturalization application] in my path so that I could find what I am supposed to do on this earth. If I had not been trying to apply for this citizenship, I would not have tried to organize this group. And now look at me! I abandoned the idea of naturalization, but I will never give up my work for the drunk guys who need me, who think that no one cares for them. This is something God wanted me to see. God found a way to get me to do what I am supposed to do, and put this application in front of me, so that I can help these guys get out of the claws of alcohol. Now I am not going to naturalize, but I will always try to save these guys . . . it's my mission for the rest of my life.

As Armando explains, he would not have undertaken the task of forming this group—which further integrated him into a broader community—had it not been for the objective of naturalization, to acquire traits that he

²³ Although LPRs have always been subject to deportation for committing certain crimes, IIRIRA broadened the list of “aggravated felonies” for which LPRs can be deported. The list now includes a variety of nonviolent crimes previously considered relatively minor infractions. IIRIRA also applies retroactively. Thus, LPRs can be deported for crimes they were charged with years beforehand that were not then classified as removable offenses.

²⁴ See Lapp (2012) for cases of LPRs who never seek naturalization for this reason and Preston (2008) for cases of LPRs who become legally vulnerable as they pursue naturalization.

thought would make him visible and a desirable denizen. But the transformation seems to be long term, reflecting the power of the law to shape immigrants' behaviors and mind-sets.

In a 2009 meeting with her lawyer, Marianne, a political asylee and permanent resident from the Democratic Republic of the Congo who now lives in Los Angeles, mentioned that she was interested in applying for U.S. citizenship when she became eligible in a couple of years. Explaining what the application process would entail, the attorney added that there were things Marianne could do to facilitate her citizenship application if and when she decided to apply. For example, Marianne could consider participating in volunteer work to demonstrate her commitment to the country. The lawyer told Marianne about a Los Angeles-based organization that provides medical, psychological, and social services to torture survivors like her. In a 2010 interview with Lakhani, Marianne explained that she had become a regular volunteer there and had even spoken publicly on behalf of the organization at a few events.

In late 2010, Marianne's lawyer informed her that she would soon be eligible to apply for naturalization. Marianne sighed heavily, explaining that she was now reconsidering whether she wanted to go ahead with the petition after all. She cited several concerns, chief among them that if she became a U.S. citizen, she might lose credibility as a leader in the local Congolese refugee community. Similar to Armando, she explained that her work at the torture victims' organization had helped her realize her purpose in life: to be a voice for Congolese women who, like her, had suffered rape and torture but were too scared to talk about their experiences. Therefore, regardless of what she decided to do about citizenship, Marianne stressed that she would not stop her work with the organization. "I don't know [about naturalization]. . . . It might be more difficult to fight for my country. We need to change the politics [so] the [Congolese] people can be free in their own country. If others [asylees and refugees] can sleep and say, 'OK, I have everything, I have my [legal] paper[s],' no, this is not the case of me. The Congolese people, they don't know to fight because if you don't . . . know what is liberty, you don't know how to fight. I am American now, but still Congolese too." Like Armando, Aminta, and Manuel, Marianne seemed to have acquired a sense of personal and social responsibility for the people with whom she had been working, embracing the value of her volunteer work beyond its potential importance to her naturalization.

To be eligible for U visa status, immigrants must have experienced a qualifying serious crime in the United States, endured "substantial" harm, and collaborated with law enforcement in criminal investigations or prosecutions. Some undocumented U visa petitioners on whose cases Lakhani worked encountered difficulties while preparing their application packets

because their evidence of police cooperation was minimal in comparison to their testimonies of egregious violence. In many cases, because they feared reporting crimes to Los Angeles police officers, immigrants only reported one of the crimes they had experienced in a long history of related violence (Lakhani 2014; see also Menjívar and Bejarano 2004; Villalón 2010). In such instances, attorneys suggested to immigrants other ways to demonstrate their deservingness for U visa standing to decision makers at USCIS. For example, attending group or individual therapy could benefit immigrants' legal cases as well as provide considerable personal benefits. Lawyers perceived that the act of receiving counseling signaled that the violence immigrants had suffered was "substantial" enough to warrant the intervention of civil society to resolve. Participating in therapy could also help substantiate immigrants' civic engagement through their comfort seeking out and interacting with U.S. institutions. Along with enhancing their legal claims, undertaking therapy altered immigrants' personal and social lives in ways that endured beyond the moment of legal status application.

Adelina, a battered mother of three from Mexico, described how undergoing therapy with the immediate goal of strengthening her legalization case had the added effect of facilitating her recovery from more than 15 years of violence, a consequence she had not anticipated but was immensely grateful for. A few months after learning of her U visa approval in 2010, Adelina conveyed to Lakhani that her personal metamorphosis during counseling sessions had inspired her to write down her experiences with the goal of eventually completing a book. She hoped her effort would inspire other domestic violence victims—including immigrants and nonimmigrants alike—to leave abusive situations.

In an interview the following year, Adelina expressed anxiety about a son's pending U visa petition, but she told Lakhani that regardless of what happens with his request, the counseling she and her children completed during the legalization process had improved their lives in ways that could not be undone. They would continue rebuilding no matter what legal hand they were dealt by authorities in the end. Adelina explained that undergoing this therapy had promoted her "participat[ion]" in society.²⁵ She had recently discovered that an employee at the psychiatric institution where her son, Rubén, lived had bullied him when Rubén refused to take his medications. Adelina described that immediately after finding out, she called the hospital

²⁵In her research with young Guatemalan immigrants, Canizales (2015) similarly finds that the language immigrants learn through participating in therapy facilitates their social integration. This is in contrast to the literature on therapeutic culture, which argues that the individualistic frames people learn in therapy can lead to community fragmentation.

to complain, adding that if this had happened to Rubén years before, she probably would not have been so brave. At that time, Adelina noted, she had been scared to call the police to report her husband's abuse. "Now here I am, demanding they take care of my son!" The transformations Adelina experienced as a result of her contact with the law both preceded and followed her legalization application, demonstrating their enduring nature regardless of regularization results. In turn, the alterations in Adelina's self-concept and activities promoted forms of social incorporation and interaction with others. This illustrates the significance of immigrants' understanding of the law for their integration in U.S. society.

Lawyers in Lakhani's study tried to convey to immigrants the significance of attending therapy for their legal cases and personal well-being, and in most situations immigrants were amenable to counseling. Many expressed an initial reluctance, but most ended up going. Rosa, an undocumented mother from Mexico who had tolerated nearly 10 years of abuse by her husband, described her experience with group therapy while applying for U visa status:

My lawyer told me that the government wants us to be healthy, working in the community and with our families, and working on our mental and physical health. I didn't want to go, but afterwards I have more will and desire to live, and to live well. Before the therapy I didn't talk to anyone [about the abuse], not even my sister. Spending time with other women who have something in common and sharing ideas, well, it was difficult but it helped. More than anything I want to improve myself, so I can get past everything and be a stronger person for my children.

Rosa chose to take part in therapy to improve her chances of legalization, but the counseling she received actually transformed her "will and desire to live." In 2009, while her U visa petition was pending, Rosa explained to Lakhani that she was convinced "some damage from the abuse" may never "pass"; she sometimes imagined she heard her husband's voice when she was at home alone. Nevertheless, she reported that the "courage" she had gained during her counseling sessions and the legalization process had prompted her to start volunteering at her daughter's elementary school (collecting trash) while her U visa petition was pending. She also enrolled in an English course to improve her ability to communicate with her children's teachers, both acts she said she would never have undertaken before she started the legal process. After Rosa's petition was approved in 2010 and she returned to EJLA to collect her work permit, she expressed delight at the thought of looking for her first paid job in the United States but planned to continue her volunteer work and English classes to "improve [her]self." As in the case of Adelina, the transformation Rosa had undergone seemed to be enduring beyond the moment of legalization itself; her desire to volunteer, recover from violence, and improve the lives of others was irreversible.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article examines the alterations that immigrants undertake in their relationships and behaviors in both personal, intimate spheres as well as in civic, community-oriented ways, changing their lives initially because they think such shifts will advance their legal goals. As they engage in these changes, however, they learn certain values, norms, and new ways to think about themselves that persist after legal status applications have been submitted and regardless of the outcome. Such changes entail a veritable transformation unlikely to be reversed if or when the goal of legalization or naturalization is achieved. To be sure, such transformations in light of the law are present not only in immigrants' lives. However, migratory processes, according to Portes (1995, p. 2), provide what Robert Merton called a "strategic research site," that is, "an area where processes of more general import are manifested with unusual clarity." Our examination therefore highlights processes that can be more general and exist in other situations but manifest themselves with particular acuity in the context of immigrant life.

Prior studies have investigated how and why individuals' claims may be strategically scripted or amended in applications as they interface with legal institutions to obtain desired legal benefits (Coutin 2000; Berger 2009; Villalón 2010). We have examined unique transformations in immigrants' civic and personal lives that remind us of the long reach of the law; they spill over beyond the application process itself and carry long-term implications. In another line of research, we, along with other scholars, have pointed to how multiple daily constraints on immigrants' lives that derive from unstable legal statuses within a regime of enforcement can amount to a kind of "legal violence" in their cumulative eroding and pernicious effects (Menjívar and Abrego 2012; Abrego and Lakhani 2015; see also Gonzales and Chavez 2012). In this work, we have drawn attention to changes in response to this context that seem to be substantive and lasting and include immigrants altering not only certain behaviors but also their mentalities and perceptions of the self, with both immediate and long-term consequences. Immigrants' metamorphoses were geared to turning them into full, visible members of society.

The contemporary U.S. immigration regime creates barriers and loops that push immigrants to the legal margins, allowing in only those who are able to conform to certain ideals of model citizens. This does not mean that all immigrants will experience the effects of the law in similar fashion or that responsive changes always lead to enduring transformations. Nevertheless, as our study participants tended to have spent significant time in legal limbo within the current anti-immigrant context, where they seemed to be hyperaware of the law, they were more likely to undergo transformations even if regularization was not achieved.

The lawyers and other legal aides to whom immigrants in our Phoenix- and Los Angeles-based studies turned for legalization advice undoubtedly formulated their recommendations taking the social and legal contexts into consideration. Therefore, it is likely that place-specific factors including anti-immigrant rhetoric and stereotyping embodied in certain policies, such as Arizona's SB 1070, may contribute to the kinds of transformations immigrants make in their lives to stake membership claims (see, e.g., Flores 2014). But illegitimate traffic stops, deportations, and hate crimes against immigrants are also occurring in cities whose local governments seem to be more tolerant of immigrants, such as Los Angeles and elsewhere. Given the fundamentally federal purview of U.S. immigration law, we argue that the changes we observed among immigrants were less contingent on local dynamics than on the broader federal immigration policies and the spaces of temporary legality and norms of deservingness they promote. Thus, under today's legal regime, those immigrants who can adjust their legal status or naturalize will perhaps feel more compelled to demonstrate their deservingness and pursue whatever form(s) of membership they can.

The immigrants in our studies married people they had already committed themselves to upon realizing that formalizing their unions could significantly improve their lives. They separated from loved ones, took on new roles in their families, and altered reproductive plans, in the process reshaping the contours of what a family is and the meanings it has for them. They also joined the army and undertook volunteer work that contributed to both public well-being and their own personal fulfillment, in the process creating and reshaping their communities. Through these acts, immigrants unavoidably uphold ideals of behavior that are bound up with particular notions of morality, fashioning and perpetuating ideals of who belongs and merits state recognition (and who does not and is therefore excluded). Thus, via legal status requirements, the current immigration regime remakes these immigrants into participants of its control strategies. Indeed, the immigrants' transformations exemplify how techniques of state control through law (see Kanstroom 2007) reach beyond the focal immigrants to touch the lives of those connected to them in families, communities, and society in general, including U.S. citizens.

Our examination exposes the power that the state exerts on individuals through technologies of domination intertwined with technologies of the self, or what Foucault named governmentality (1991). In today's legal regime, where paths to legalization are either closed altogether or only narrowly open, immigrants experience in heightened fashion the disciplinary power of the law. As our examination shows, immigrants may experience the state's power through supposedly noncoercive legalization opportunities that ultimately integrate individuals into its folds (see also James 2010; Ticktin 2011; Lakhani 2014). Foucault's conceptualization of government

helps us to understand the connections between immigrants' personal transformations and immigration law, as he demonstrated that in addition to meaning state administration, "government" also meant internalizations of self-control and guidelines for the family as informed by legal rules and the norms they signal, as well as the (re)orienting of the soul (see Lemke 2011). Furthermore, our respondents' metamorphoses demonstrate that the regulatory logic of the state is not aimed solely at controlling individuals *per se* but at exerting ideological power over populations (see also Fassin 2011); immigrants' transformations show how this power is embedded in institutions and social actors that interpret and implement the law and how the self-disciplining effect of state power sets the constitutive conditions for government to control populations. Foucault's concept of governmentality allows us to see how state power turns individuals into active participants in their own governing.

This control manifests even in situations that are not explicitly formal or bureaucratic, as we observed in the changes immigrants undertook in their daily lives because they imagined such alterations would compel legalization. Whether or not the state granted individuals' legalization requests, the transformations immigrants had experienced seemed to persist, underscoring the entrenchment of the state's hold on populations. At the same time, our study participants' metamorphoses reflected agency in the face of mechanisms of control (see Brisbin 2010; Kim 2015). While state laws and policies triggered immigrants' perceptions of productive changes they could make in the intimate and civic spheres of their lives, initiating shifts as consequential and apparently long lasting as those documented here required agency. Our analyses demonstrate that law's authority even over vulnerable individuals—in this case, immigrants in unstable legal statuses—is not absolute. Instead, immigrants may approach law in ways that are "pragmatic and entrepreneurial" (Kim 2015, p. 47). Thus, we see how "law is not an alien power imposed upon individuals' isolated and anarchic minds" (Silbey 2005, p. 359) and simultaneously that law is not manifested solely through individuals' invocation of its authority and expectations. Rather, there exists a mutually constitutive relationship between individuals and law and the state, as the concepts of legal consciousness and governmentality capture (see Rose et al. 2006).

Throughout history, immigrants have transformed themselves in order to fit into the U.S. social fabric, altering their conduct, their ways of life, and even their names. In many ways, the receiving society expects immigrants to adapt their behaviors in order to "belong," to "act American," and to become "like us" (see Nicholls 2013). In a social and legal context of increased anti-immigrant sentiment, immigrants may feel more pressured to alter their lives to conform, as standing out can trigger exclusionary reactions. Our examination is therefore timeless and timely but relevant particularly so

now in light of the restrictive U.S. immigration regime and the dwindling legal “spaces” (Gilkerson 1992, pp. 871–72) available to newcomers.

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