

Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities

Volume 4

Issue 1 *Threats to the American Dream*

Article 16

2015

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Recommended Citation

Mejía, Cárol E. (2015) "Mixed-Status Latinx Families: Love and Chosen Family as a Means of Resistance to the American Dream," *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 16.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries/vol4/iss1/16>

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Mixed-Status Latinx Families: Love and Chosen Family as a Means of Resistance to the American Dream

Cárol Mejía

As a child, I found myself confused by introducing my White friends to my “cousins” and “aunts” at family gatherings. I knew some cousins and aunts and uncles in my family—the ones we always celebrated big holidays, birthdays, and graduations with—were not related to me by blood. Beyond that, I didn’t know how to explain the fact that more than half of my family was in another country. My Latinx friends understood, but communicating across racial differences was a revealing process for me as a child. I knew that although my family seemed “complete” to me in that I had aunts and uncles, two parents, siblings, etc., I knew that my family was different because the people in those positions filled in gaps for my relatives still in Honduras. Two summers ago, I found a letter I wrote to my grandmother in Honduras that was never sent because she passed away before I could do so. The words in the letter reveal the painful separation and gaps that mixed-status families—defined as a family made up of U.S. citizens and undocumented folks—must face. Although written in Spanish, in English it read:

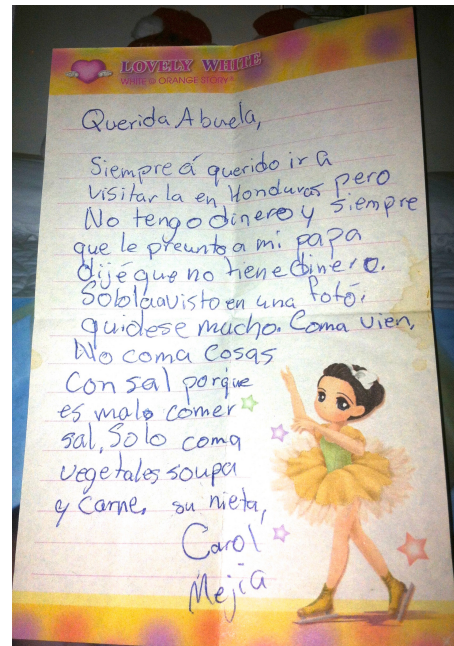
Dear Grandma,

I have always wanted to visit you in Honduras but I don’t have any money and when I ask my dad he says he doesn’t have money either. I have only seen you in photo. Take care of yourself. Eat well, don’t eat things with salt because it’s bad to eat salt. Only eat vegetables, soup, and meat.

Your granddaughter,
Carol

I came to realize that unsent the letter represents not just the absence of my grandmother in our family structure, but also the relatives of other families that left their country of origin either never to be heard from again because of the deadly conditions migrants face when trying to

cross the border, or never to be seen again because of traveling restrictions. This absence represents the material consequences on Latinx families of USA regulation of land and people through the construction of borders.



A photo of the unsent letter to my grandmother

In *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon brings forth the revolutionary figure of the ghost. According to Gordon, a haunting signifies a something-to-be-done, unravels alternate dimensions of life and demands that the visible members of the present imagine a life otherwise, with the invisible leading a visible life. Avery Gordon writes that “disappearance is not about death...[it] is a thing in itself, a state of being repressed” (Gordon, 115). Avery Gordon writes that ghosts haunt with a utopian element, as they signify things that could be, and my grandmother’s letter to me represents the possibility of a future with immigration policy allowing movement between the U.S.-Mexico border allowing families to visit and love one another in whatever way they choose; the repressed letter is also the manifestation of a love left silenced by those

policies. Although I never met my grandmother, and although some of my relatives were not blood-relatives, I know one thing for sure: I love them all equally and consider them part of my family tree. I am distanced from members of my family by space, time, border and even blood— but these distances are only hollow spaces, disappearances, under which lay a construction of love and family that transcends those barriers.

The idea of love as a cultural phenomenon in a mythological nation of immigrants begs the following question: what is the relationship between love, the American Dream, and family, and how does this complicate notions of citizenship and belonging in mixed-status families? According to a report by the CAP Immigration Team, half of undocumented migrant populations in the U.S. have children that are U.S. Citizens. The discourse surrounding this information is usually around the assimilative potential of mixed-status families. However, I hope to speak back to the desire to assimilate mixed-status Latinx families by putting love, the American Dream, and family in conversation because they each represent different fragments of an ideal U.S. citizen. Meaning, assimilation discourse relies heavily on heteronormative family structures, violence against women, and buying into the American Dream. I also refute the notion that immigrant families must buy into the American Dream to lead meaningful lives by drawing attention to acts of love and granting immigrant bodies agency in their lives, as opposed to characterizing them as helpless victims looking to be taken in by the United States. Mixed-status Latinx chosen family structures— meaning a family structure that includes non-biological relatives— are brimming with agency and run counter to this narrative of helplessness. By highlighting the relationships between love, family and the American Dream, I argue that chosen family is a form of resistance employed by mixed-status families that reveals the performative elements of the American Dream, and undermines

efforts to assimilate immigrants.¹ In performing heteronormative family structures, the immigrant relatives in mixed-status chosen families reimagine heteronormative family structures manufactured by a Western myth of nationhood, in hope of surviving and reframing absence in their families.

Mixed-status Latinx Family Structures-Resisting a Western Nationhood

The United States bases its citizenship model on Greek mythology. According to Julia Kristeva in “The Greeks Among Barbarians, Suppliants, and Metics”, the nation-state was born out of violence against women, specifically in the act of rape committed against Hera by Zeus; this was the beginning of an exogamous nation, in which “not marrying blood-relation was the first condition” for the formation of the state (Kristeva, 45). Bringing non-blood related women into family formations via rape robs them of their humanity and roots in order to deem them worthy of forming a family lineage. Rape is a point of erasure and stripping the woman of what was, and creates a mythos of nationhood that requires a violent erasure of personhood and previous allegiance to a nation. This is the myth upon which the United States bases its immigration policy; it attempts to regulate immigrants by assigning them a feminized and infantilized position in a White patriarchal society. For mixed-status families, they are exogamous in nature because both parents are foreigners, but their children are endogamous and of blood relation to the nation.

This mythology that undergirds US

¹ While I observe that mixed-status families perform heteronormative family structures in efforts to survive and keep hope alive in their quest to redefine the American Dream, my intent is not to romanticize family formations and gloss over the homophobic environments that are created in attempting to perform the American Dream. The complexities that arise when understanding Latin-American immigrant bodies as colonized bodies does not excuse the homophobia in Latinx communities, but it does provide a context for understanding the roots of homophobic thinking. So while some mixed-status families have chosen family members, they may also be homophobic.

immigration is challenged by the love shared between members of mixed-status chosen families. When the relationship between migrant parents within mixed-status families is based on love, and not a violence against women as a part of their social contract to the United States, this redefines the nation-state because it centers love for all family members in their livelihoods and identity both within and without the nation. Kristeva observes that “the fact remains that in Greece the bride was thought of as a foreigner, a suppliant”. The children are the carriers of U.S. Citizenship, yet their parents and chosen relatives represent resistance against the violences orchestrated by the state and its desire to cast undocumented immigrants as invisibles. The undocumented relatives cannot be in the position of a suppliant because the survival of their children is at stake, and since their children—as U.S. Citizens—witness their resilience and love their full personhood, they undo the logic behind formations of the State, it’s immigration laws,. In addition, since “foreigner” has become a racialized term of distinction, the foreigner must always be in a state of surveillance, must always be in a state of petitioning for mercy, and must always seek acceptance from white citizenry.

Seeking acceptance in a white supremacist, patriarchal nation can play itself out in many ways, but I intend to focus on the ways mixed-status families have redefined the American Dream—the criteria for assimilation often used to assess foreigners—in order to survive in the United States in their own terms. After all, an exogamous nation requires that immigrants submit to their ideals, including the myth of the American Dream. So while it may appear mixed-status families are expressing themselves modestly in exogamous unions, they represent a combination of exogamy and endogamy; while the children of undocumented parents are from within the nation, their parents are not only from without, but they also are in the country in an unauthorized fashion, and perform citizenship in their day-to-day activities without having access to benefits given

to U.S. Citizens. Of course their invisibility to the U.S. government creates exploitative conditions for undocumented migrants,, but undocumented migrants find hope and resilience in the creation of loving mixed-status families and through supporting the relatives they left behind in their country of origin.

This love expressed across national borders is best expressed by a quote from my own mother: “Mi amor por ti no tiene fronteras, no conoce leyes. The reason you don’t read about my love for you is because people don’t care about it; it’s the reason immigration reform looks the way it does today”. Her love for me and my siblings and her family in Honduras was a primary motivating factor not only for her to migrate to the United States, but also for her to maintain resilience and take on dehumanizing jobs.

Love: A Subversive Act in the Face of the Nation-State

If love is an emotion that is felt within the body, then its expression is a performance of reflects one’s embodied social location. In *All About Love*, Black feminist scholar bell hooks seeks to reclaim this performance and redefines love as an action, a choice to be made and practiced, and reframes the emotion as an expression that can undermine patriarchal and white supremacist structures in U.S. society (hooks, xi). She writes, “[t]here can be no love without justice”, and fully connects a love ethic with justice (65-66).

When mixed-status families practice love as an action, it undermines the exploitative qualities of capitalism and patriarchy, and fundamentally transforms the way in which we interact with other people in our communities by creating family formations that are queer² in comparison to the

² Here I use Omis’eke Tinsley’s definition of queer in “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage”: “a praxis of resistance... making disruption to the violence of normative order and power in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own

heteronormative nuclear family. Within the American Dream, family formations ensure the transmission of “American Values”—defined as a mainstream normative that is capitalist driven, localized to one household with less than 5 people—to future generations of Americans, and the children in the family are used to measure the success of parental figures in climbing up the social ladder. Erich Fromm, one of the first to study Love in an academic light, defines love as, “an active concern for the life and growth of that which we love” (Fromm, 25). hooks adds to this definition by asserting that the crucial elements of radical love as knowledge, responsibility, care, commitment, respect, and trust (hooks, 176). Because mixed-status families center love in the construction of their position within the United States, they are engaging in interpersonal subversive acts that counter constructions of citizenship based on the Western Canon of nationhood, which requires the foreigner, a feminine figure, to remain in the role of a suppliant.

Love is both a self-loving and selfless act. According to Fromm, “love is the active concern for the life and growth of that which we love.” The active characteristic of love observed by Fromm includes the following elements: care, responsibility, respect and knowledge. Without these elements, Fromm argues, there is no love. If love is defined as “the active concern and growth for that which we love”, then migrants mastered this art form when conceptualizing their plans to migrate to the United States, as many migrate in hopes of improving the conditions in which their families live in their country of origin. But while Fromm’s definition is easily applied to familial love in migrant families, it lacks the intersectional approach found in bell hooks’s definition that situates love in a way that undermines the violence orchestrated by the U.S. government. bell hooks complicates Erich Fromm’s definition of love to

kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist” (Tinsley, 199).

include care, commitment, respect, knowledge, trust, and honest and open communication, and roots her analysis of love in political action (hooks, 5). According to hooks, choosing to love, thinking about and communicating one’s inner needs and desires, and loving another human being wholeheartedly is revolutionary and inherently feminist. For mixed-status families, especially children of the undocumented migrants who have U.S. citizenship, allowing oneself to love another human being wholeheartedly and committing to their well-being requires that they challenge inhumane immigration policy that stifles their families ability to lead wholehearted lives to their own tune. The formation of the United States as a nation-state relies on a gendered imbalance in family formations, as evident in the shift from endogamous relationships to exogamous relationships, which allow a foreigner—in heteronormative families, usually the woman—into a family formation, rather than depending on endogamy to build family formations from within.

The American Dream: Familial Love as a Subversion of the American Dream

The American Dream is an exported ideal that influences the ways immigrant bodies envision themselves within the United States. In “Acculturation Patterns of Mexican Migrants in Los Angeles”, Ivan Villanueva argues that the American Dream is a transnational project that influences people’s decision to migrate to the United States. However, while discussing the exportation of the American Dream through neo-liberal policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Central American Free Trade Agreement, Villanueva overlooks the importance of familial love in the decision to migrate abroad. A crucial component of the American Dream and citizenship in the United States is the heteronormative White family. The migrants he interviews all indicate that they work to sustain their families in their nation of origin. For example, Javier, a migrant interviewed for his study, says that “[work is] about getting what you want and that it is a reality for everyone

[in my family],” while another participant, Pedro, says “my dream is just to make money that I can in turn send back home” (Villanueva, 15). So while it may appear that family is not an important component of the American Dream sought by migrants, closer inspection of the words spoken by the participants in Villanueva’s study reveal that family formations are crucial to the migrants’ conception of the United States and the projection of their dreams on the American Dream.

The American Dream is driven by visual clues (i.e. owning a house, having a nuclear family, having college degrees) that provide information on what the transcendence of class is supposed to look like. Because it is an ideal driven by White, middle class aesthetics, it must be performative for Latinx mixed-status families because they do not have full access to its benefits because of their bodies and perceived race. Because the American Dream has performative elements, and because migrants embark on journeys that are themselves expressions of love, living out the American Dream is an act of translation for migrants coming from completely different nations. It requires the creative use of their social situations to instill hope and the value of love in the families they form in the United States, whether they are chosen families or biological families. They instill the value of love by practicing it as a full commitment to their growth and well being, which often comes in the devastating form of working long hours to maintain their families. But not only do migrants care for their immediate family, they also send remittances to their country of origin, thus communicating the American Dream and its reality to their relatives abroad. Villanueva’s assessment of the barriers to acculturation Mexican migrants face does not consider the survival skills Latinx families have employed in order to “acculturate” in the eyes of U.S. citizens. In “Transamerica Dreamers”, Leah Schmalzbauer argues that “despite the structural limitations that transnational migrants face, most continue to believe that the Dream is within reach” (Schmalzbauer, 3). She observes, “family and kin networks are critical to

the formation of transnational identity and the belief system of the American Dream” (22). According to Schmalzbauer, each participant in her study had at least one biological dependent in Honduras.

Again, for mixed-status families, especially children of the undocumented migrants who have U.S. citizenship, allowing oneself to love another human being wholeheartedly and committing to their well-being requires that they challenge inhumane immigration policy. Schmalzbauer shows that “[transnational] migrants are optimistic that someday their work will pay off, and they will be able to be reunited with their families and to live comfortably and peacefully. This hope should not be underestimated, for without it they are lost” (26). The hope for reunification of whole mixed-status families in the U.S. and the migrant parents’ biological family in their nation of origin is already an expression of contempt with immigration policy preventing this from occurring. The hope mixed-status families cultivate is deeply intertwined with action and love because reunification is an objective in their lives and becomes a part of the expression of family. But what does this objective look like and how does it subvert existing narratives of family and nation? Both Schmalzbauer and Villanueva bring up the performative aspects of the American Dream, which I contend is directly linked to the performance of family within the parameters of the American Dream. In attempting to perform the American Dream, mixed-status families thereby inherently evolve the Dream because the gaps in their family tree require that they fill in those spaces with other migrant bodies looking to build a family in the United States. These gaps are filled on the basis of love and do not rely on the blood relations; chosen familyhood is an act of love, care and compassion, as defined by bell hooks.

Chosen Family: Performativity in the American Dream

The available literature on chosen families can only be found in LGBT Studies, but I hope to

put this concept in conversation with U.S. Latinx studies. Chosen family is defined as “a group of people to whom you are emotionally close and consider family even though you are not biologically or legally related” (Dolliver, 1). When this definition is extended to mixed-status Latinx families, it reveals the loopholes that allow Latinx families to mirror White heteronormative families to their peers, thus appearing to emulate the American Dream in their behavior. On a superficial level, these families represent the success of the American Dream. Immigration policy and the U.S.-Mexico border function to disappear migrants and family members, and strip them of immediately physically available familial relations. As a result, many migrants find themselves navigating new terrain with the ghostly presence of their lost loved ones. In “The Living Arrangements of Children of Immigrants” by Landale et al, they argue that “key features of living arrangements [for children of immigrants] include parental marital and residential status as well as the presence or absence of grandparents, or other relatives, or nonrelatives in the household” (Landale et al., 45) In order to survive, mixed-status Latinx families create chosen families in communities of migrants, thus filling in gaps of missing aunts and uncles and brothers lost in the act of translating the American Dream, be it through embarking on a perilous journey up north, or be it in their redefinition of family once across the U.S.-Mexico border. This performance is based on the need to reconceptualize this carrot on a stick, the American Dream, because they are often forced to exist without biological relatives.

The nuclear family has become a symbol of a “true American”, therefore structuring love for another human being around the concept of a chosen family—when migrants are forced to exist with holes in their nuclear family tree— is a counter-hegemonic iteration of the family in the American Dream. Landale et al observe, “many immigrant families are poor, face discrimination, and have limited access to resources because of their legal status, yet these problems may be offset for children to some extent by benefits

associated with their household and family structures” (ibid). Chosen family is a form of coping with and surviving the horrific conditions mixed-status families endure. It gives them hope and a sense of community and family that U.S. immigration policy attempts to erase. Because of this chosen family structure, mixed-status Latinx families are queer compared to heteronormative constructions of the American Dream and casts them as forever foreigners, especially since the American Dream says love and financial support should not be shared with anyone outside the nuclear family, nor is love something that needs to exist in families. These families reveal the performative nature of the American Dream and also combat the assertion that the American Dream is a homogeneous ideal that all immigrants strive for, because they, in fact, redefine it and redefine nationhood in the process by placing love at the center of exogamous relationships.

Conclusion

We must question what is really happening in conversations on the acculturation of Latinx migrants in the United States. Mixed-status Latinx families in the U.S. have constructed a subversive notion of family that appears to be a heteronormative nuclear family to the naked eye. When studied carefully, most mixed-status families are formed in loving appreciation and concern for both biological and non-biological relatives. According to Kristeva, nations operate on the idea of a foreigner, a suppliant to the founding father of the land. However, if we are to consider mixed-status Latinx families with a chosen family structure, the suppliant becomes a rebel with survival skills that privilege love over White notions of success embedded in the American Dream—the standard through which acculturation is assessed. Families are important in the motivation to migrate; families are important in providing hope to migrants exploited by a capitalist economy; and families are absolutely essential to their survival in a xenophobic nation with inhumane immigration

policy designed to render undocumented migrants invisible.

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