

HOW IMMIGRANTS BECOME “OTHER”

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Illegal immigration is a hot-button topic. Extremists liken those who enter the United States illegally to drug-dealers and rapists, and advocate construction of a triple-layered fence on the Mexican border monitored by predator drones. Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Carola Suárez-Orozco represent the flip side of this debate, presenting the human face of unauthorized immigration. Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco is Distinguished Professor of Education and the Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA, where his wife, Carola, is also a Professor of Education. Both are leading experts in immigration studies, having jointly won Harvard’s Virginia and Warren Stone Prize for Outstanding Book on Education and Society (2007) for their *Learning a New Land: Immigrant Students in American Society*. Together and separately, they have edited a number of books on Latinos and immigration, and cowrote *Children of Immigration: The Developing Child* (2002). In 2009–2010, Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco was a Fellow at Princeton’s Institute for Advanced Study, and in 2012, he served as Special Advisor to the Chief Prosecutor at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands. This essay originally appeared in *Arizona Firestorm: Global Immigration Realities, National Media, and Provincial Politics*, edited by Otto Santa Ana and Celeste González de Bustamante (2012).

Unauthorized Immigration

No human being can be “illegal.” While there are illegal actions—running a red light or crossing an international border without the required authorization, one action should not come to define a person’s existence. The terms *illegal*, *criminal*, and *alien*, often uttered in the same breath, conjure up unsavory associations.¹ Unsettling and distancing ways to label people, they have contributed to the creation of our very own caste of untouchables.

In many cases, “illegal status,” or what we prefer to term unauthorized status, may not be voluntary. We prefer this term to *undocumented*

¹Santa Ana, O. (2002). *Brown tide rising: Metaphoric representations of Latinos in contemporary public discourse*. Austin: University of Texas Press. [All notes are the Suárez-Orozcos’, except 13.]

immigrant as many have documents or could have documents but often find themselves in a limbo state pending a formal legal outcome.

In the mid-1990s, Sonia Martinez, mother of four children, all under the age of ten, became a young widow when her husband was stricken with cancer. With a limited education and no means to support her family on a rancho in rural southern Mexico, she reluctantly left her children behind in the care of her mother and crossed the border without papers. The week after arriving Sonia took up a job as a live-in housekeeper and nanny in the Southwest. Every month she faithfully sent money home to her family. She called them every week. Each time she called, they had less and less to say to her. Lovingly, she selected presents for each of her children over the course of the year. By Christmas she would make the pilgrimage back to her rancho to see her children and, Santa-like, shower them with American gifts. But the sweet visits home were always too short and she would soon have to face the dangerous and expensive crossing back to California, relying on the help of treacherous *coyotes* (smugglers) she hired each time. After September 11, as border controls tightened, she no longer dared to make the trek back and forth. She has stayed behind the trapdoor on this side of the border and has not seen her children since then.²

Sonia found herself a young widow and in a post-NAFTA [North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement] Mexican economy with promised jobs that simply never materialized and in an unforgiving economy for poorly educated, unskilled, rural workers. Plentiful jobs in the Southwest economy in the mid-1990s, relatively comfortable working conditions as a live-in housekeeper and nanny in a middle-class neighborhood, and an extremely advantageous wage differential proved irresistible. Although not raising her children came at a high emotional cost, the ability to support them was its own reward.

In 1998, Hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras, leaving little in the way of work opportunities. Like many others, Gustavo Jimenez made his way north, dangerously riding atop trains through Central America and Mexico and then crossed with a hired *coyote* into Texas. He worked a series of odd jobs but found it difficult to find steady work. Then, yet another hurricane changed his fate. When Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, ample work opportunities opened—dirty work in horrific conditions were hard to fill over the long haul of the cleanup and reconstruction. Mr. Jimenez quickly found work: "Who but us migrants would do these hard jobs without ever taking a break? We worked day and night in jobs Americans would never do, so that the Gulf could be rebuilt." But he found that he would be treated with disdain. It left him mystified. On one hand, "I know that by coming here illegally I am

²Note that we have used a pseudonym; this case is from IS @ NYU data—see http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/ef58/metrocenter/Online_Supplemental_Notes.pdf.

breaking the law," but he added, "I did not come to steal from anyone. I put my all in the jobs I take. And I don't see any of the Americans wanting to do this work."³ Gustavo's story is both old and new. Unauthorized immigrants have always been called upon to do the jobs on the dark side of the American economy. The post-Katrina cleanup is a fitting example. Adding insult to injury, these workers are the target of disdain and disparagement. The stigma of the work gets attached to them—as if those doing dirty, demanding, and dangerous jobs themselves by mimesis become dirty, despised, and dispensable.

Hervé Fonkou Takoulo is a college-educated professional with a knack for stock trading in his spare time. Mr. Takoulo arrived in the United States in 1998 on a valid visa from the troubled African nation of Cameroon. He took to New York like a duck to water. He graduated with an engineering degree from the State University of New York and married a U.S. citizen hailing from California. She was the vice president of a Manhattan media advertising company. The biracial professional couple was ecstatic when President Obama spoke of his dual African and American roots. Takoulo's wife, Caroline Jamieson, "recalled that she cried when Mr. Obama said during a 2008 campaign speech, 'With a mother from Kansas and a father from Kenya'—I said, 'Oh, Hervé, even the alliteration is right—with a mother from California and a father from Cameroon, our child could do the same!'" She cried again but for a very different reason when the letter she wrote to President Obama resulted in her husband's arrest. The letter to the president "explained that Ms. Jamieson, 42, had filed a petition seeking a green card for her husband on the basis of their 2005 marriage. But before they met, Mr. Takoulo, who first arrived in the country on a temporary business visa, had applied for political asylum and had been denied it by an immigration judge in Baltimore, who ordered him deported." Surely, this president with his extensive personal experience in Africa would understand that Cameroon had a horrendous record of human rights abuses. Instead of the hoped-for presidential reprieve, the asylum seeking Obamista was met by two immigration agents, "in front of the couple's East Village apartment building. He says one agent asked him, 'Did you write a letter to President Obama?' When he acknowledged that his wife had, he was handcuffed and sent to an immigration jail in New Jersey for deportation."⁴

When she was four, Marieli's father was assassinated in front of his wife and children. Left as a widow responsible for her family, Marieli's mother reluctantly left Guatemala for the United States, as she put it, "in order to be able to feed my family." Once in California, she applied for

³Gustavo's quotes are to be found in Orner, P. (Ed.). (2008). *Underground America: Narratives of undocumented lives*. San Francisco, CA: McSweeney's.

⁴Bernstein, N. (2010, June 18). Plea to Obama led to an immigrant's arrest. *New York Times*.

asylum status and waited patiently for her papers to be processed. The unforgiving bureaucratic labyrinth took six years and a small fortune to complete. Only then could she begin the process of applying to reunite with her children. In the meantime, the grandmother, who had been raising the children in her absence, died. With no one to care for them and after having patiently waited for years, Marieli's mother made the drastic choice of having her children make the crossing without papers. Finally, at age eleven, after having spent more than half her childhood away from her mother, Marieli arrived in northern California after being smuggled into the country by *coyotes*. Recognizing she "owed everything" to her mother but at the same time angry she had been left behind for so long, the reunification with the mother she barely knew was a rocky and bittersweet one. Marieli is now an unauthorized immigrant waiting in limbo.

The Reagan-inspired U.S. wars of proxy in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua of the 1980s resulted in systematic killings—largely of noncombatant civilians, massive displacements of people, and the beginning of an international exodus of biblical proportions not only to the United States but also to neighboring Latin American countries. The U.S. invasion of Iraq has made Iraqis top the list of formally admitted refugees in the United States in 2009. While those escaping our foreign policy debacles often make it through the legal maze, thousands of others fall through every year.

The cases reveal how war and conflict drive human migration. But the heart also plays an unanticipated but powerful role. Work, war, and love are behind almost every migrant journey—authorized or unauthorized.

Many come here fully aware that they will be breaking a law by crossing without the proper documents, but in other cases accidents, misunderstandings, and an unforgiving bureaucracy can turn good faith errors into labyrinths without exit.

During his tour of duty in Iraq, Lt. Kenneth Tenebro "harbored a fear he did not share with anyone in the military. Lieutenant Tenebro worried that his wife, Wilma, back home in New York with their infant daughter, would be deported. Wilma, who like her husband was born in the Philippines, is an illegal immigrant. . . . That was our fear all the time." When he called home, "She often cried about it. . . . Like, hey, what's going to happen? Where will I leave our daughter?" The Tenebros' story, like many others, began as a love story and an overstayed visa. They met several years ago while Wilma was on vacation in New York at the end of a job as a housekeeper on a cruise ship. Love kept her from returning to the Philippines, and ultimately she overstayed her visa. Today, the lieutenant and the wife face an unhappy choice: "Wilma is snagged on a statute, notorious among immigration lawyers, that makes it virtually impossible for her to become a legal resident without first leaving the United States and staying away for 10 years." Lt. Tenebro is not alone—thousands of U.S. soldiers facing dangerous tours of duty

have the additional burden of worrying that loved ones close to them will be deported.⁵

Combined, these testimonies embody the varieties of unauthorized journeys into the United States. Synergetic “push” and “pull” factors coalesce, luring immigrants away from familiar but relatively scarce surroundings to an alluring unknown. Immigrant optimism springs eternal. While some fly in with documents and visas and simply overstay, more immigrants come undetected through the southern border. Often they hire dangerous *coyotes* (typically from Mexico or Central America) or *snakeheads* (working from as far away as China, India, or Russia). Immigrants pay a very high price for these unauthorized journeys. While the crossing from Mexico to the United States can run approximately \$3,000, the costs of longer passages are substantially higher, running up to an exorbitant \$30,000 per journey. Those who arrive under the long shadow of transnational smuggling syndicates often face a period of protracted indentured servitude, as they must pay back exorbitant crossing fees. Whether the journey begins in Fujian, China, or Puebla, Mexico, tough border controls have made the crossing more dangerous than ever before—on average more than a person a day dies at the southern border attempting to cross.

The Children of Unauthorized Immigrants

Unauthorized immigrants are neither from Mars nor Venus. The majority have roots in American society. While some are married to U.S. citizens, others partner with migrants already here. Nearly half of unauthorized immigrants live in households with a partner and children. The vast majority of these children—79 percent—are U.S. citizens by birth.⁶ The number of U.S.-born children in mixed-status families has expanded rapidly from 2.7 million in 2003 to 4 million in 2008.⁷ Adding the 1.1 million unauthorized children living in the United States (like Marieli) means that there are 5.1 million children currently living in “mixed-status” homes.⁸

Nowhere is the story of the unauthorized immigration more dystopic than for the children who grow up in the shadows of the law. On an unbearable steamy afternoon in July 2010, Carola Suárez-Orozco found herself in a somber congressional chamber testifying on behalf of the American Psychological Association in front of an ad hoc committee of the United States House of Representatives headed by Arizona’s Congressman Raúl Grijalva (D-Tucson). At her side were two children—

⁵Preston, J. (2010, May 8). Worried about deploying with family in limbo. *New York Times*.

⁶Passel, J. S., & Taylor, P. (2010). Unauthorized immigrants and their U.S.-born children. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=125.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

precocious, overly serious. A congressional photographer afterward whispered to Carola that in over twenty years on the job he had never seen such young children testify before the U.S. Congress.

Eleven-year-old Mathew Parea was poised and collected as he spoke in the august chamber. At a tender age, he had already been active in social justice causes for several years including a four-day fast honoring the patron saint of migrant workers, César Chávez. Mathew spoke on behalf of thousands of children of migrant families. His steady voice was riveting: "I am here to tell you about my fears growing up in Arizona. Children want to be with their parents because we know that our parents love us. The laws in Arizona are just unjust and make me fear for my family. I am always worried when my family leaves the house that something might happen to them. I think about it when my dad goes to work that he might not come back or when I go to school that there might not be someone to pick me up when I get out."⁹

Heidi Portugal physically appeared younger than twelve, yet she carried herself in an unsettling serious manner. Her story embodies the immigrant dream turned nightmare: "At only 10 years of age I had a sad awakening the day of February 11th. When I woke up, I found out that my mother had been arrested. . . . My biggest preoccupation was my two little brothers and sister. What was going to happen to them? And what about my little brother that my mother was breast feeding?" She went on to explain how as the eldest sister, she took on the responsibility of caring for her younger siblings, how her mother was deported, and how she has never seen her mother again. She went on, "Before, I would admire all uniformed people that protect our country . . . [but they] took away the most precious thing that children can have, our mother. With one hit, they took away my smile and my happiness."¹⁰

Mathew and Heidi are part of an estimated one hundred thousand citizen¹¹ children whose parents have been deported. They face an impossible choice no child should have to make—staying in the United States with relatives or going with their parents to a country they do not know. These youngsters are a caste of orphans of the state, citizen children who day in and day out lose "the right to have rights"¹²—for them the protections of the Fourteenth Amendment¹³ are an elusive mirage. Children whose parents are detained and/or deported by Immigration and Customs Enforcement exhibit multiple behavioral changes in the aftermath of parental detention, including anxiety, frequent crying, changes in eating and sleeping patterns, withdrawal, and anger. Such behavioral

⁹See Testimony of Carola Suárez-Orozco before the United States House of Representatives, www.apa.org/about/gr/issues/cyf/immigration-enforcement.aspx.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Arendt, H. (1966). *The origins of totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt.

¹³**the Fourteenth Amendment:** Provides equal protection and due process under the law. [Eds.]

changes were documented for both short-term after the arrest as well as in the long-term at a nine-month follow-up.¹⁴

They also experience dramatic increases in housing instability and food insecurity—both important dimensions of basic developmental well-being. Such insecurities, while heightened for children whose parents are detained, is ongoing for children growing up in mixed-status households. These insecurities exist even though unauthorized immigrants have very high levels of employment; among men, fully 94 percent are active in the labor force (a rate substantially higher than for U.S.-born citizens—83 percent and legal immigrants—85 percent). At the same time, more than 30 percent of children growing up in unauthorized households live below the poverty line. Harvard psychologist Hiro Yoshikawa, in his detailed study of infants and their families, documents the range of penalties American-born preschool children of unauthorized parents face. First, the children's housing and economic situation was often quite fragile. Second, unauthorized parents were less likely to take advantage of a range of benefits to which their citizen children are entitled (like Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Head Start, the Women, Infants and Children Nutritional Program, Medicaid, and others). Lastly, they had less access to extended social networks that can provide information, babysit, or lend money in a crisis.¹⁵

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While the majority of children of unauthorized immigrants are citizen children (4 million), there are some 1.1 million children who just like Marieli have no papers. Many arrive when they are very young, others in their teen years. These children grow up in America, attending American schools, making American friends, learning English, and developing an emerging American identity. Every year approximately 65,000 young people graduate from high schools without the requisite papers either to go on to college or to legally enter the work force.

Unauthorized immigrants live in a parallel universe. Their lives are shaped by forces and habits that are unimaginable to many American citizens. Work and fear are the two constants. They lead to routines, where the fear of apprehension and deportation is an ever-present shadow in their lives. Dropping off a child to school, a casual trip to the supermarket, a train or bus ride, expose them to the threat of apprehension, deportation, and the pain of being separated from their loved ones.

Mass unauthorized immigration has become a social phenomenon with deep structural roots in American institutions. The responsibility must be shared beyond the immigrants themselves to the businesses that thrive on their labor, the middle-class families who rely on them for

¹⁴Chaudry, A., Pedroza, J., Castañeda, R. M., Santos, R., & Scott, M. M. (2010). *Facing our future: Children in the aftermath of immigration enforcement*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

¹⁵Yoshikawa, H. (2011). *Immigrants raising citizens: Undocumented parents and their young children*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

housekeeping, babysitting, landscaping, and other amenities, consumers who have come to expect their affordable produce and rapid delivery services, and all citizens who have consciously or unconsciously enabled a dysfunctional system to flourish. Above all the political class shares the bulk of the responsibility by oscillating between denial, grandstanding, and hysterical scapegoating. They have brought us demagogic, unworkable, and self-defeating policy proposals.

Broken Lines

Outcry over our broken immigration system is focused on the borderline. Frustrated and fearful, Americans ask, "Why won't these illegals get in line like everybody else?" On the surface that is a perfectly reasonable question.

The reality, however, is that there is no orderly line to join. The terrorist attacks of September 11 threw sand in an already rusty machinery of legal immigration. In countless U.S. consulates and embassies the world over and in U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services offices all over the country, millions wait in interminable queues. New security considerations brought an already inefficient system to a near standstill.

There are nearly 3.5 million immediate family members of U.S. citizens and permanent lawful immigrants waiting overseas for their visas.¹⁶ In U.S. consulates in Mexico alone, approximately a quarter of a million spouses and minor children of U.S. citizens and permanent lawful residents wait to legally join their immediate relatives north of the border. In the Philippines, approximately 70,000 spouses and minor children are in the same situation. The average wait in line for these countries is from four to six years for spouses and under-age children. If you are a U.S. citizen and your sister is in the Philippines, you will have to wait twenty years before she can join you. If you are a U.S. citizen and would like to sponsor your unmarried adult child in Mexico, you will wait sixteen years and spend considerable resources.

The visa allocation system for work permits is no more functional.¹⁷ The annual quota for work visas is 140,000 per year; as this includes spouses and children, the actual number of workers is much lower. There is no systematic queue for low-skilled workers. There are a million people waiting in Mexico alone in any given year.¹⁸ As Roxanna Bacon, the chief counsel for the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services in Washington, D.C., succinctly stated, "Our housing industry,

¹⁶Anderson, S. (2010). Family immigration: The long wait to immigrate. Arlington, VA: National Foundation for American Policy. Retrieved from www.nfap.com/.

¹⁷Anderson, S. (2009). *Employment-based green card projections point to decade-long waits*. Arlington, VA: National Foundation for American Policy. Retrieved from www.nfap.com/.

¹⁸U.S. State Department (2009). Annual report on immigrant visa applicants in the family sponsored and employment based preferences registered at the National Visa Center as of November 1. Annual Report on Immigrant Visas. Washington, DC: U.S. State Department.

our service industry, our gardening, landscape industry, you name it—it's been dependent for decades on Mexican labor. None of these people qualify for an employment-based visa. So when the hate mongers say, 'Why can't they wait in line? Can't they get a visa?'—there aren't any visas to get! There is no line to wait in! And that's why everyone who knows this area of law says without comprehensive immigration reform you really aren't going to solve any of these pop-up issues."¹⁹

Reasonable voices have been driven off stage, while demagogic venting, grandstanding, and obfuscation saturate the airwaves, the print media, the Internet, and town halls throughout the nation. Rather than offering new solutions, an amalgamation of cultural xenophobes and economic nativists has joined together to fuel the fire. Xenophobes see mass immigration, especially from Latin America, as a growing menace to the pristine tapestry of American culture that would be stained by new arrivals from the "Brown" continent. Economic nativists wring their hands: immigration presents unfair competition for ever-scarcer jobs as well as putting downward pressure on wages. For them, immigration has come to embody the globalization in all its pathologies. Immigrants are tangible representations of enormous and amorphous problems—the globalization of terror, the outsourcing of jobs, and the discomfort of being surrounded by strangers (dis)figuring the social sphere with exotic languages, cultural habits, and uncanny ways.

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¹⁹Bacon, R. (2010, May 22). One border, many sides. *New York Times*. Retrieved on 22 February 2012 from www.nytimes.com/2010/05/23/opinion/23deavere-smith.html?sc=8&sq=Deveare-Smith&st=cse&pagewanted=1.



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ENGAGING THE TEXT

1. According to the Suárez-Orozcos, how do the stories of immigrants like Sonia Martinez suggest that unauthorized immigration “may not be voluntary” (para. 2)? What “push and pull factors” do these stories reflect?
2. In what ways do the children of unauthorized immigrants routinely face insecurity and deprivation? What physical, psychological, and emotional problems do U.S.-born children experience when their parents are detained or deported? How is it that “for them the protections of the Fourteenth Amendment are an elusive mirage” (para. 14)?
3. How do the Suárez-Orozcos respond to the suggestion that unauthorized immigrants “get in line like everybody else” (para. 19)? How did the terrorist attacks of 9/11 complicate legal immigration? How long do U.S. citizens’ immediate family members have to wait for a visa? What further problems do people seeking work visas face?
4. If the decision were up to you, which of the immigrants named by the Suárez-Orozcos would you allow to stay in the United States legally? Would you grant green cards to all of them, some of them, or none of them? What is the rationale for your decision? Compare your response to those of your classmates and debate.

5. **Thinking Rhetorically** What emotional or logical impact do the individual immigration stories have on the essay? What effect does the first-person testimony of the children have? The Suárez-Orozcos supplement the stories with statistics and expert testimony: How does this influence their argument? How would relying exclusively on storytelling affect the essay's credibility? Do the authors succeed in convincing you that "unauthorized immigrants live in a parallel universe" (para. 17)? Why or why not?

EXPLORING CONNECTIONS

6. In Darrin Bell's cartoon on page 675, what does he imply about the long history of anti-immigrant attitudes in the United States? What does he suggest about the immigrants themselves, and why does he construct the cartoon in reverse chronological order? To what extent would he agree with the Suárez-Orozcos that in the immigration debate, "reasonable voices" have been drowned out by "cultural xenophobes and economic nativists" (para. 23)?
7. The authors do not include any agricultural workers among their portraits of immigrants. Drawing on Kevin Bales and Ron Soodalter (p. 443), write a profile of an unauthorized Haitian immigrant picking tomatoes for a large agribusiness. Where does he live and what are his working conditions? What kinds of hours does he work and for how much money? What happens if he's injured or gets sick? Why would he submit to these conditions? Why is he excluded from the rights afforded to other American workers?

EXTENDING THE CRITICAL CONTEXT

8. As a thought experiment, assume for a moment that all unauthorized immigrants have suddenly disappeared. How would "middle-class families who rely on [immigrants] for housekeeping, babysitting, [and] landscaping" (para. 18) cope with their losses? What would be the consequences for agriculture, construction, restaurants, other businesses, and the overall economy? How do you think politicians would respond to this catastrophe? Write a story in which you imagine the consequences of the disappearance.
9. In 2014, the Obama administration, in response to the increased number of families fleeing violence in Central America, announced the development of family detention centers under the control of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE). The administration requested congressional funding for 6,300 spaces to accommodate the mothers and children who have entered the United States illegally. Research and write an essay on these ICE family detention centers: Who operates them? What conditions exist for the women and children housed there? Why are these centers facing legal challenges?
10. Examine the language used by news reporters, politicians, or pro- and anti-immigrant groups in discussing immigration issues. What terms are used to describe unauthorized immigrants, what metaphors are used for the number of immigrants entering the United States, and what are their implications? What racial frames underlie this language?