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## Reinforcing Gendered Racial Boundaries: Unintended Consequences of the Mainstream Immigrant Rights Discourse

In this paper I analyze the story of Alma, a Mexican migrant woman deported after being imprisoned for five years, and Isabel, Alma's fifteen year old daughter. Immediately after her deportation, Alma became active in the movement for immigrant rights. When Isabel joined her in Tijuana during her summer vacation, she suddenly became the voice for children of undocumented parents. Isabel was interviewed by the media and was scheduled to speak at the Democratic National Convention in Denver, Colorado. However, the story that they were asked to tell was very different from their actual experience. Rather than speaking of Alma's imprisonment, she was represented as a dedicated working mother who was detained by ICE while at work. Through an analysis of the media's narrative, I argue that the representation of their story reinforces gendered racial ideas about who deserves protection and who deserves punishment. The production of Alma as a working mother reinforces both disciplining ideas of "good immigrants" and "good mothers." For one, rather than questioning the criminalization of immigrants, their media story reinforced the masculinized construction of the immigrant identity—"Immigrants are not criminals/Immigrants are hard workers." Two, Alma's work ethic was used to include her in the identity of "good mother," which supports the notion that some mothers deserve protection, while others do not. My analysis demonstrates that the mainstream immigrant rights discourse negotiates for the inclusion of some while re-criminalizing and asking for the punishment of those outside of the masculinized "good immigrant" identity.

Isabel and Alma's story was first afforded media attention when "No More Borders", a grassroots coalition dedicated to fighting the construction of a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, invited Isabel and Alma to speak at an August 3, 2008 Ecumenical Gathering at the San Diego-Tijuana Friendship Park. Alma spoke about the difficulties faced by deported parents and introduced Isabel, "It is very difficult...very difficult. More than anything, the separation of the family. Material stuff is just

material stuff...but our loved ones, especially our children suffer a lot. And here is my daughter to tell you something.” Isabel took the microphone and with tears in her eyes she said “Hello, good afternoon. I am Isabel and I am actually a citizen of the United States. And I am not only here to help and support my mom, she’s from Mexico, but everybody here on the other side of the border...I really don’t like what is happening right now.” Then Isabel returned the microphone unable to continue because of her emotions and they both hugged for a moment. After this event Alma and Isabel were continuously sought out by media sources. The story that Alma and Isabel told was a very different story than their actual experience. The narrative Alma and Isabel recited over and over was one in which Alma is represented as a working mother and Isabel as a distressed daughter left behind in the care of relatives, both victims of ICE raids. The following examples from various media sources illustrate the construction of their narrative.

On Thursday, July 31, 2008 Isabel and Alma conducted a radio interview with Samuel Orozco, a Radio Bilingue conductor. The show, titled “The Repatriated,” focused on the mental and physical health of children of deported parents. In this case Alma is represented as a single mother who was deported in May after she was stopped at a police checkpoint. Samuel Orozco asked her what was the most difficult part of her deportation and Alma says “The family separation. The instability of my daughter because of her school.” Next Alma talks about how Isabel depends on Alma’s family to sustain herself, “...precisely last night she was telling me that she missed many opportunities at school because she did not have money to pay...for school stuff...And I tell her that, well that she should not feel bad, that she is very young and that she is going to get better opportunities. This is going to pass and everything is going to be fine.” Afterwards, Orozco interviews Isabel and asks why she has decided not to follow her mother in her return to Mexico Isabel responded that she needs to finish school first. Orozco asks “What is the most difficult part of living this way? I know that it has not been that much time yet but in these few weeks that you have been separated, what is the most difficult?” “Well that I see my friends...that they are with their mom and everything and I feel bad

because I have not been with my mom for two months. So, I missed her a lot. Then well, I was feeling very bad.” The interview ends with Isabel sending a message to listeners, “Well...what happened already happened and we have to move forward...and support those that supported you.” There are several important points to be noted here. First, what the construction of this narrative erases is that it was not a two month separation, a fabrication that is necessary to fit their story into the current moment. Rather, it was a five year separation caused by Alma’s imprisonment. Thus, the opportunities that Alma notes Isabel missed out of, are not those that arose in a two-month time period, but rather five years of missed opportunities because of Alma’s absence. Furthermore, when Isabel responds to the question of what was the most difficult part for her, her response could not include how she would be hassled by her peers to talk about why her mother was in prison and the pain this caused her. She also could not discuss an important aspect of her experiences, which is the absence of her mother during her teen years and how seeing her friends’ relationships with their mothers reminded her of what she was missing out of. To fit their story into the current immigration debate required an erasure of the violence generated by imprisonment. Violence against bodies constructed as criminal is justified on the basis that they themselves “acted Un-American.” In other words, the identity of “criminal” is in direct contrast with the “American” identity and thus social protection is made unavailable.

Omar Millán González, contributor to the San Diego’s Union-Tribune's Spanish-language newspaper, *Enlace*, wrote several stories on *Albergue de Mujeres Migrantes*, the migrant shelter where Alma lived, and part of his coverage included an *Enlace* article in Spanish titled “‘Quiero que me escuchen’: Hija de madre deportada hablará durante la convención” (August 22, 2008) and a shortened and translated version of this article in the *Union Tribune* titled “ U.S. teen whose mom was deported to tell story at convention” (August 25, 2008). For this presentation I will focus on the English version, which is shorter than the Spanish one.

The account that Alma, Isabel, and Norma Velazco, the shelter's director, provided Millán González is a modified version of the actual story. According to this narrative, Alma "was a cook at a seafood restaurant and managed apartments" and Isabel was "a typical American teenager" until one day in May, "while at her best friend's house, Isabel received a call from her mother, who told the teen that she had just been deported," suddenly shattering Isabel's world. Millan Gonzalez writes that Alma "was arrested by immigration authorities near her home in the San Francisco Bay Area. The next day, at 4 a.m., she was dropped off in Tijuana, along with 50 others." Instantly, according to this narrative, Isabel "became one of the thousands of children caught up in the nationwide crackdown on illegal immigrants." Millan Gonzalez goes on to discuss Isabel's invitation to speak at the Democratic National Convention in Denver about her experiences as representative of all children suffering because of their parents' deportation. Then Norma is cited as stating that Isabel was selected by Unidad Mexicana, an advocacy organization for the human rights of immigrants which Norma forms a part of, because "of the strength she displayed after her mother was arrested," referring to her supposed ICE arrest. Norma states that Isabel "represents the typical example of this humanitarian crisis that's happening when families are separated by immigration raids." The article ends by quoting Isabel, "I want to say that (the U.S. authorities) are driving families apart, little by little. I want people to hear me, to hear us." This narrative presents Alma, a hard working mother, and Isabel, a "typical American teenager," as victims of ICE practices of separating families. Here we witness additional erasures of their actual experiences. Isabel is "one of the thousands of children caught up in the nationwide crackdown" immigrants. However, this account obscures how prisons are a fundamental part of this "nationwide crackdown." The imprisonment of immigrants has dramatically risen in the last decade, resulting in immigrant family separations that occur through state parental rights terminations because parents in prison are often unable to meet the requirements to keep their children. Additionally, the required deportation of noncitizens convicted of an aggravated felony creates additional barriers to keeping their children. Thus, the happenings of the

current moment in terms of deportations and family separations are not new; they have an extended history in prisons. In this sense, prisons served as laboratories for what is currently happening with immigrant families. However, the dominant immigrant rights discourse's unyielding efforts to distance immigrants from criminality limits the ability to include the experiences of people in prison and their families. In this sense, immigrants and their families become not only expendable, but violable in the struggle for immigrant rights.

The construction of this narrative is a combination of Alma and Isabel's lived experiences merged with the current moment's demands to engage the immigration debate in the context of "good" and "bad" immigrants. During an interview I conducted with Isabel she described her experience five years earlier, at the age of 10, when Alma was imprisoned. Similar to the story told to Millan Gonzalez, Isabel was at a friend's house when she was suddenly separated from her mother. That day Isabel got permission from Alma to spend the night at her friend's house. A family friend arrived asking for Isabel and asked to talk to Isabel's friend's mom. Isabel relates, "They went into the kitchen and I got this really bad vibe...those vibes like, something bad is going to happen or something happened." After they talked they told Isabel that she would be picked up the next day. When Isabel and the family friend arrived at the apartment in the morning Isabel kept asking about her mom and was told she was working. That evening Isabel received a phone call from Alma but rather than telling Isabel what occurred, Alma told her she was deported and would be with her soon. Isabel kept asking Alma "Why'd they take you? Why'd they take you?" The next day Isabel's godmother picked her up and took her to Union City for fear that she would be placed in foster care. Isabel's world was altered five years prior to that reported in the Union Tribune story. Alma's imprisonment turned their lives around, separating them for five years without the ability to see each other, not the two or three months reported in the media. Isabel remained with her godmother during Alma's imprisonment. The difference between Isabel and Alma's reality and the story told in the media represents the limitations of the dominant immigrant rights discourse. Mother and daughter are

asked to tell a distorted version of their story to fit into the category of deserving “good immigrants.” The sanitized version’s effort to distance Alma, and by extension immigrant mothers in general, from criminality reinforces boundaries between deservingness and undeservingness. There is a willingness to advocate for individuals “like” Isabel and Alma when they conform to disciplining narratives of citizenship, particularly hard workers with clean criminal records. However, once lines are crossed, as in the case of Alma who is constructed as criminal, the willingness not only dissolves, but in some cases turns into demands to punish individuals that transgress these lines in order to protect “American”-behaving immigrants. For example, consider the National protest/press conference held in San Diego in front of the Federal Building on August 22, 2008. During the event co-sponsored by several immigrant rights groups, Enrique Morones, president of Border Angels and one of the individuals that Alma worked with in the struggle for immigrant rights, spoke on behalf of immigrants and maintained that immigrants are not criminals. If individuals crossing the border are found to be “criminals,” they should be put in jail. However, those that are found innocent should be protected. What Morones’ logic, as representative of the immigrant rights discourse, fails to understand is that the line between criminal and non-criminal shifts and changes depending on the current socio-political moment. Thus, the boundaries used to regulate deserving and undeserving individuals constantly change depending on the organizing logic of the moment. Currently, the logic of criminality, of cracking down on crime, organizes society and is used to regulate racialized and gendered boundaries of belonging. In other words, the idea of crime is useful because it can be changed in order to target specific bodies while erasing how this process is racialized and gendered. Thus, no matter how much of an effort is made to decriminalize immigrants, this boundary can and is constantly shifting. However, efforts to include immigrants into “America” are still productive in the sense that they strengthen divisions of belonging.