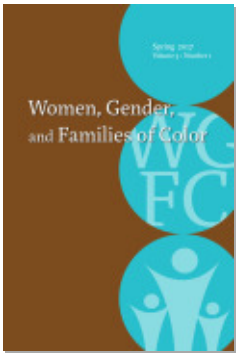
Becoming Legal: Immigration Law and Mixed-Status Families by Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz (review)



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Book Reviews

Becoming Legal: Immigration Law and Mixed-Status Families, by Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

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In this unique academic approach to how immigration processes work, Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz challenges, defines, and articulates the intimate relationships created between immigration policy and practices and families from Mexican descent who have decided to make the United States their home. On the book cover, a young man holds an emblem that reads "We want our mother here!" The phrase resonates throughout the book, with its emphasis on the reunification of families whose migratory mixed status in the United States has become complex and perilous. The signal phrase also underscores the lack of humanity embedded in immigration laws that specifically target people of Mexican descent. Gomberg-Muñoz tackles head on and without apology the cynicism and hypocrisy of civil society when she confronts general questions about unauthorized migration. Questions such as "Why don't undocumented people wait their turn to enter the United States legally?" and "Why don't they legalize their status once they have U.S. citizen relatives?" display "convenient naiveté." But Gomberg-Muñoz answers these questions nonetheless, contributing in the process two main arguments to immigration and transnational studies.

Gomberg-Muñoz underlines how immigrants with mixed-immigration statuses in the United States experience immigration processes quite differently, depending on their place of origin, their gender, race, and sexuality. Second, she attests to the fact that the criminal justice system is tightly linked to the immigration system, insofar as immigration categories are not arbitrary but are imposed on some immigrants who are deemed unacceptable.

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Undocumented Mexican immigrants—those who crossed illegally and those who overstayed their visa—she argues, not only work very hard to make a living, but they also create and nurture social and intimate networks in their new communities. They form transnational families who have members with mixed-immigration statuses, thus problematizing and reconceptualizing what "family" is in the United States. Gomberg-Muñoz concludes by demonstrating how immigration policies and practices are neither unidirectional nor static but are constantly challenged by these social and familial networks.

To humanize her argument and in an effort to de-demonize her subjects, the author begins her chapters with evidential anecdotes (changing names and certain information as to protect her subjects) that slowly illuminate the financial hurdles, emotional desperation, and gruesome social and intimate humiliation that families with mixed-immigration status suffer while undergoing immigration processes in the United States. Gomberg-Muñoz opens up her analysis by offering a concise historical overview of how intersections of race, class, gender, and nationality are threaded into immigration laws that have embraced racist and misogynist ideologies since the border with Mexico was tightened in the 1920s for the first time. While some undocumented immigrants may have entered the United States with their parents when they were minors, others may have crossed the border with the use of a middle-person—a coyote; yet others may have crossed walking through the desert or the mountains.

Gomberg-Muñoz underscores in Chapter 3 how the exploitative maze of expensive forms and the demand to collect numerous official documents—some available in the United States but some in Mexico—compounded by the dehumanizing procedural labyrinths immigrants must go through, fragment and emotionally drain many Mexican families who are undergoing the process of "legalizing/justifying" their existence in the United States. The financial impact on families who are undergoing legalization processes is striking and troublesome, but, to add insult to injury, many individuals have to undermine themselves and their ethnic/racial origins, as well as devalue and condemn their country and communities of origin. One of the vignettes narrating a couple's ordeals while trying to appeal their immigration status exemplifies how documents, including visual imagery, are influenced by legal processes: "To boost their case, Jane's attorney asked for photographic proof of how difficult life is in Mexico" (104). The couple felt that they had to tap into diminishing and detrimental stereotypes about Mexico and Mexican people in order to prove complete hardship.

The most important contribution is in Chapter 4 where the author maps out the objectification and vilification of the Mexican immigrant's body. Gomberg-Muñoz links the militarization of immigration processes and policies and the criminalization and dehumanization of Mexicans and their bodies: "The U.S. consulate in Ciudad Juárez is not a single building, but a secured compound. . . . The entrance to the consulate is kept clear by masked and armed security guards" (84). Inasmuch as the Mexican immigrant is indelibly criminalized, his or her body is also objectified, probed, and assumed to be medically incompetent and inadmissible. Gomberg-Muñoz provides an example of such objectification and dehumanization of Mexican immigrants' bodies, analyzing how doctors and immigration agents scrutinize tattoos, for example. Not only are tattoos thoroughly inspected, but they are deemed tropes of gang membership; and immigrants who have them or have any trace of them are constantly questioned as to their mental and physical fitness.

The author's ethnographic work included more than 100 interviews with her subjects; Gomberg-Muñoz also aided and worked with Mexican immigrants who were undergoing these difficult migratory processes that, rather than help their families stay together, are designed to keep many of them apart. Because the intimate vignettes are so important to the author's narrative, one is left wanting to hear more of some of the protagonists and how they adapted to their newly acquired immigration statuses. The last chapter of the book attempts to do just that, and it leaves the door open for more immigration and transnational studies scholars to challenge an immigration system that, rather than being "broken," is carefully drafted to create havoc among many families who are trying to process a path to legality.

Becoming Legal: Immigration Law and Mixed-Status Families is a great addition to a dynamic academic production on transnational and immigration studies, condemning an inhumane immigration system that continues to violate many individuals' basic human rights. While Gomberg-Muñoz humanizes her subjects, she denounces the militarization of an immigration system that needs to be revamped completely to address the global movement of Mexican families in the 21st century. The sign on the cover that reads "We want our mother here!" echoes Gomberg-Muñoz's demand to value all families equally beyond the "need" to justify why families "want" to stay together. Clearly the conservative call for an American emphasis on "family values" ignores the constant assault that Mexican immigrant families undergo while trying to build transnational families and communities in the United States.