

## Transitional Latina Mother Activists in the Américas

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### The Case of Elvira Arellano and Flor Crisóstomo

*This paper analyzes the political activism of two immigrant women—Elvira Arellano and Flor Crisóstomo—and describes their involvement in the transnational struggle for immigration reform and working rights in the age of neoliberal globalization. These two undocumented Latina working mothers in the city of Chicago became political actors in the larger context of a post-9/11 era of deportations and immigrant mobilization. We argue that their political activism represents an important chapter in the history of women’s activism in the Américas. Their experiences need to be seen as part of a growing spectrum of activism organized around women’s mothering and reproductive experiences in the age of neoliberal globalization. Although both women represent different elements of a common struggle—one seeks the right to be reunited with her children without penalty and the other was deported with her son who is a U.S. citizen—when analyzed together their stories reveal the complexities of women’s mothering subjectivities and how these inform mobilization strategies.*

Women’s perspectives have attained the significance of a new enlightenment, overtaking the Seventeenth century Enlightenment ... women’s mediating positions linking families to communities, and communities to larger political, economic, and social circuits, become crucial to survival where global development processes have undermined social reproduction. —June Nash (145)

This paper focuses on the life stories of two Latinas—Elvira Arellano and Flor Crisóstomo—and their involvement in the transnational struggle for immigration reform and working rights in the age of neoliberal globalization. The story of Arellano and Crisostomo unfolds in the Midwest, a geographic landscape

that has been historically connected to the ever-shifting and treacherous U.S. Mexico border (Rosas). At different points in time, both women crossed the border without documentation, followed the migrant travel routes through the U.S./Mexico border to the U.S. reaching Chicago. They both work and lived “under the radar,” a term used by anthropologist, Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz to describe the experience of undocumented workers in the city. In the aftermath of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon attacks on September 11, 2001, the U.S. neoliberal state reorganized and (re)consolidated a border-control-enforcement bureaucracy accompanied by sweeping immigration and law enforcement policies that resulted in the widespread persecution, criminalization, and deportation of low wage undocumented workers and their families (DeGenova and Peutz).

In the aftermath of 9/11, Arellano and Crisóstomo were arrested for working without authorization and found themselves enmeshed in a criminal-legal system that perceived them as a threat to the security of the nation and as criminals bound for deportation. Arellano was arrested in the aftermath of a work-raid at O’Hare’s airport in 2001 where she worked as part of a cleaning crew. Crisóstomo was arrested in a work raid at the IFCO-Chicago plant in 2006. In Chicago, both women sought the help of *Centro Sin Fronteras (CSF)*, a local organization that offers a range of social and legal services to immigrants. There they gained legal and emotional support, but more importantly were also initiated into political activism.

The main objective of this article is to examine how Crisóstomo and Arellano, two undocumented Latina working mothers in the city of Chicago, became political actors in the most recent chapter of the immigrant rights movements in Chicago. We argue that the political activism of Elvira Arellano and Flor Crisóstomo represents an important chapter in the history of women’s activism in the Américas. Their experiences need to be seen as part of a growing spectrum of activism organized around women’s mothering and reproductive experiences in the age of globalization. We propose that Arellano and Crisóstomo belong next to the *Madres de La Plaza de Mayo in Argentina*, *CO-MADRES* in El Salvador, *CONAVIGUA* in Guatemala, and other women’s grassroots movements in the Américas (Berajano). Although both women represent different elements of a common struggle—one seeks the right to be reunited with her children and the other wanted to remain in the U.S. with her citizen son—when analyzed together their stories reveal the complexities of women’s mothering subjectivities and how these inform mobilization strategies in the neoliberal era.

In 2006, Arellano’s legal appeals had been exhausted and an immigration judge ordered Arellano to report for deportation. In an act of public and legal defiance, she sought refuge in the United Adalberto Methodist Church (UAMC)

in the heart of the Puerto Rican community in Chicago. This act placed her in the midst of the ensuing controversy about immigration reform and the status of undocumented immigrant mothers of U.S. citizen children. As Nicholas DeGenova writes, she became the “most famous undocumented immigrant in the United States” (DeGenova and Peutz 35). In fact, Arellano appeared as *Time Magazine’s* list of “People Who Mattered in 2006” and *Latina Magazine’s* list of “Phenomenal Latinas of 2006,” alongside Salma Hayek, Jennifer Lopez, and Eva Longoria, among others.

Defying Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) authorities by seeking sanctuary in a local church became a strategy to avoid deportation and an openly public challenge to a neoliberal state that perceived most undocumented immigrant mothers like Arellano and Crisóstomo as criminals. Their arrests and detentions contributed to their politicization and radicalization in profound ways. From the small church in the heart of the Puerto Rican community, Arellano held frequent press conferences to call attention to the plight of families like her own: parents of U.S. born children who are in the U.S. without documentation. Crisóstomo visited her frequently, many times staying with her overnight to offer her company, and collaborated with her in political campaigns. During Arellano’s year long refuge in the United Adalberto Methodist Church (August 2006–August 2007), their friendship, solidarity, and activism grew exponentially. When Arellano left sanctuary in August, 2007—an act that resulted in her arrest and deportation to Tijuana, Mexico—Crisóstomo took her place at the United Adalberto Methodist Church. Like Arellano, she too had exhausted all her legal appeals and had been ordered to report for deportation. Unlike Arellano, Crisóstomo’s claim to remaining in the U.S. was based on her right to work as a transnational working mother displaced by neoliberal policies.

In this paper, we examine Arellano and Crisóstomo’s journey as immigrant-mother activists. First, we offer an overview of Arellano and Crisóstomo’s lives in Mexico and examine how neoliberal globalization policies shaped their lives and border crossing experiences. Next, we shift our lens to Chicago, where Arellano and Crisóstomo worked and lived for many years and where they quietly sought to create awareness of the plight of undocumented immigrant women. Arellano and Crisóstomo’s lives intersected in the context of an evolving immigrant rights social movement that enveloped cities across the U.S. and that led to massive demonstrations. Amalia Pallares and Nilda Flores-Gonzalez argue that this movement differs significantly from the 1960’s and 1990’s civil rights movement in that this movement focuses exclusively on immigrant and worker’s rights, many of whom are in the U.S. without proper documentation. Both women defied deportation orders by openly speaking about their plight as workers, as mothers, and immigrant or indigenous women. They are no

longer in Chicago, but they continue to be active in what has now become a transnational civil rights movement. We conclude our paper by exploring the significance of this new wave of activism for Latina working mothers in the Americas. This paper is based on interviews conducted with both Arellano and Crisóstomo during and after sanctuary. We also collected newspaper articles, editorials, and other materials written by both Arellano and Crisóstomo. Both women have Facebook pages and active blogs where they speak openly and freely about their activities.

### **Two Lives Intertwined by Neoliberal Globalization and Migration (Dos Vidas Entrelazadas....)**

As Mexican women, Crisóstomo and Arellano represent two worlds that have been seriously disrupted by the forces of neoliberal globalization taking place in Mexico since the 1990s. More specifically, the most recent chapter of Mexico's neoliberal globalization took place in the context of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), under the auspices of President Carlos Salinas (1988-1994). Political scientist Peter Andreas reminds us that NAFTA was "only one component of a much broader process of economic restructuring in Mexico that has helped stimulate illegal immigration" (105). It has been widely documented that in an effort to restore the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) confidence in Mexico's economic miracle, Salinas implemented a range of neoliberal policies, such as increased export-production by the expansion of the *maquilas*, reduced tariffs for international corporations, deregulation and privatization of state-owned enterprises, and development of infrastructure (such as highways) to facilitate transportation and tourism. Both Arellano and Crisóstomo's family felt the impact and consequences of these policies in deeply personal ways.

Arellano grew up in small village (Tamaulipas) in the state of Michoacan and, like other working daughters of Latin American families, she joined the labor force in the service sector to help support her family as soon as she reached adulthood. Arellano lost her job when her employer went bankrupt as a result of the economic crisis that hit Mexico in the mid 1990s. As Arellano says, "I saw the situation that my boss faced up-close. I saw how my boss counted the money to cover the expenses and the money was not enough.... Eventually they lost it all." Faced with unemployment, she migrated to the U.S.- Mexico border to work in the *maquilas*. Arellano's work experiences in the *maquilas* confirms what social scientists have documented over decades of social science research: that work in the *maquilas* is unreliable, hard, and dangerous (Salzinger; Tiano). Because of the low-wage and difficult work conditions, she began to contemplate moving across the U.S./Mexico border.

By contrast, Crisóstomo is an Indigenous woman from the state of Oaxaca, where she grew up and lived until her parents separated, and her mother moved the family to the state of Guerrero in search of a better life. This is how Crisóstomo remembered these events:

*My mother took us to the state of Guerrero because she thought that we would have a better life there. Instead, life was very, very, hard! My mother looked for work but could not find anything until my Aunt offered her a job in one of her restaurants. We helped my mother with her work in order to have a little bit more for food....*

It took Crisóstomo's mother over three years but she was able to open her own road-side restaurant serving home-made food to mostly working men in the trucking industry, a modest but reliable source of income for the entire family. Crisóstomo was still going to school, but family working demands were greater on her, since she had to take care of her siblings and help with the restaurant. Seeking to escape her situation, she became pregnant at 15 years of age and moved in with her boyfriend's family who treated her like a servant. When he moved away, she returned to her mother's house. Soon, she became involved with a man, twenty years her senior and had two children with him. Working as a truck-driver allowed him to support Crisóstomo and the children but he was abusive and controlling. Strict licensing requirements for truckers implemented after NAFTA led him to lose his job, and soon after he abandoned Crisóstomo and their children. Unable to support her children, Crisóstomo returned to live with her mother. But by then, her mother's prosperity had ended as the construction of the Sun Highway provided a faster and safer route for truckers and resulted in the loss of clientele at the family restaurant. Crisóstomo's brothers, like their grandfather before them, left for the U.S., first to California and later to Illinois.<sup>1</sup> Crisóstomo's search for waged work was unsuccessful and she made the heart wrenching decision of migrating in order to provide for her children. Crisóstomo was 21 years old when she migrated to the United States, leaving her children ages six, four and two with her mother. This is how Crisóstomo remembered that fateful day.

*When I was going to get on the bus my children hugged me and I kissed them. I tried not to look at them, not to hold them too long. My son Josue grabbed my leg and Carlos cried with a lot of anger. A little boy, four-and-a-half years old, kept looking at me with lots of anger. It was very difficult. When the bus left and I turned to look back at the Bus station, my children were still uncontrollable.*

Given the dangers of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border without documentation and the difficulties of traveling with children, Crisóstomo could not bring her children with her. In doing so, she became part of the growing number of mothers who leave their children in the care of relatives in order to migrate to find employment that will allow them to support their families. Neoliberal policies have led to the intensification of women's role as primary wage earners, the reorganization of family life in the context of migration, and the creation of transnational families. Neoliberal policies have also impacted mothering ideologies resulting in the politicization of some immigrant working mothers, like Crisóstomo. The decisions to leave or not to leave, and to take their children with them or leave them back home, are heart-wrenching decisions that these mothers must make as they struggle to provide for their families.

In the 1990s, the “contradictions of economic integration” (Andreas 103) would become even more evident as the political imperative of border enforcement took place in the context of increasing economic integration—some may say dependence—and market reforms. Peter Andreas writes that, “the tension between facilitation and enforcement is played out on a daily basis at border ports of entry” (103). It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe and analyze these women's border crossing experiences, but it is important to point out that these experiences also contributed to these women's politicization and growing awareness of their plight as working mothers. Both women crossed the border and were caught by the border patrol, and returned to Mexico several times. For Crisóstomo, the crossing was particularly difficult in the aftermath of 9/11 since by then anxieties about border control and border enforcement were repacked as “anti-terrorism” programs (Andreas).

### **Latino Chicago, City of Immigrants**

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Chicago's place in the larger landscape of Latino settlement was well in place after several decades of continuous migration from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and other parts of Latin America. Chicago's Mexican community, a fairly well established ethnic enclave going back to the turn of the early decades of the twentieth century, offered newly arrived immigrants a place to feel comfortable, a place to find food, music, and cultural connections that made the distance between Mexico and Chicago less visible.

Arellano and Crisóstomo arrived in Chicago within a few years of each other. Arellano came to Chicago to be close to her extended family. While in the state of Washington, she had become involved with a man and had given birth to her son, Saul. As a single mother, she wanted to be near Saul's godparents and secure a more stable source of employment. Crisóstomo, too, had lived

and worked briefly in California, but as she put it: “there was little work and I had to support my family that stayed back home.” She left California for Illinois, where she had relatives.

When they arrived in Chicago, the city was in the midst of a major economic transformation under the auspices of neoliberal policies that sought to transform it into a global city. Chicago, popularly known as the city of big shoulders, because of its long-standing industrial employment base that provided significant employment opportunities for earlier waves of European and some Latino immigrants, had become a post-industrial city. By the time Arellano and Crisóstomo arrived in the city, neoliberal globalization policies had transformed immigrants’ source of employment from industrial to service-sector jobs and the informal economy, with a handful of factories that relied on immigrant labor. Added to these structural changes, Arellano and Crisóstomo’s employment opportunities were further hindered by their undocumented status, limited knowledge of English, low pay, and lack of job security. For Arellano, working shifts interfered with her mothering responsibilities. This is how Arellano described her situation:

*It was very hard! First I tried searching for work through temporary employment agencies. Sometimes they had work, other times there was nothing and I needed something more reliable. It was hard because I had to pay rent, buy food, and other things. I also had to pay for Saul’s care and the car payment.... It was so hard!*

Arellano found steady work at the airport as part of a cleaning crew. During the evenings, she worked with three other women cleaning airplanes and earned the minimum wage of \$6.50 per hour. Although she worked 40 hours per week, her monthly salary was barely over \$900.00 before taxes, making her part of the expanding working poor. In order to make ends meet, Arellano supplemented her airport cleaning work by cleaning private homes. Crisóstomo encountered her share of problems finding work and securing a reliable source of income that would give her enough to send to her growing children in Mexico.

Furthermore, gender rendered Arellano and Crisóstomo vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and sexual harassment. Ruth Gumberg-Muñoz argues that undocumented workers are forced to negotiate their identity and self-worth in the context of profound stereotypes and racism in the workplace (120). Single working mothers endure untenable work conditions because they are the sole supporters of their children. For instance, Crisóstomo put up with sexual harassment in the workplace because as a single mother, she could not afford to lose a good paying job.



*Our work hours are those of a modern slavery system. The worse part is that as a woman, I suffered abuse from my supervisors and neglect from the managers of the company. Many years passed, I endured all of this abuse because as a woman and as a mother I had to work to sustain my family. Year after year they added 25 cents per hour, which was the biggest joke for the workers and for our families that depend on our labor. Today I know and understand that even though we're undocumented we still have rights in this country....*

These experiences represent an important part of the larger story of how both women become mother-activists and how they were able to speak on behalf of those that like themselves had lived in the shadows for so long. This is also what connects them in profound ways to the experiences of other women of color who supply cheap labor to the global north. Next, we turn to the events that propelled them into social action.

### **Mothering and Activism: Immigrant Mobilizations and Protest**

*My decision to enter sanctuary was a decision based on my faith, my love and responsibility for my son Saul and my commitment to my people and the four million other U.S. citizen children like Saul....[We] must take action in September to stop the raids, deportations and separations of families that are destroying millions of lives across this country.... We cannot just sit by and watch our families be torn to pieces for the next three years. I cannot...."*  
—Elvira Arellano

*I am Zapoteca, I am 28 years old and I live in the E.U. I am the second generation of my family which finds itself in economic exile. The first generation affected by forced displacement were my parents, whose rights to self-sufficiency were destroyed along with the loss of land and right to traditional artisanry.*

*I am a single mother of three children, which I have not seen in the past seven years. The only option for me to reunite with my children is to live in extreme poverty without any way to better our living conditions. That is why I am forced to live apart from them in order to provide their basic needs; food, housing, and education. —Flor Crisóstomo, May 21, 2007. Deposition, United Nations, Forum on Indigenous Matters*

We open this section of our paper with quotes by Arellano and Crisóstomo that exemplify their own analysis of their situation as working mothers and the impetus behind their activism. Arellano and Crisóstomo's narrative of



protest and resistance centered on the rights of working mothers, whether they are separated by regressive immigration policies or forced to leave their children behind as a result of neoliberal globalization. While their migration and work experiences are shaped by the increasing immigration enforcement, their political activism develops within the immigrant rights movement that boomed in 2006.

In the late 1990s, a series of immigration policies—Operation Gatekeeper (California), Operation Hold the Line (Texas), and Operation Safeguard (Arizona) signaled a dramatic shift from a policy of benign neglect to increased surveillance and stricter enforcement at the U.S.-Mexico border to deter undocumented immigration from Mexico. As a result, crossing the border without authorization became increasingly dangerous and costly. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the United States reorganized its administrative structure, and implemented stricter enforcement of immigration laws. One of the first actions was Operation Tarmac which sought to secure airports around the nation by matching names and social security numbers of airport personnel. The so-called “no match letters” resulted in the mass firing of workers, and in some cases to the arrest of workers for immigration offenses—such as Arellano. As anti-immigrant feeling increased, and proposed legislation sought to further criminalize undocumented immigrants,<sup>2</sup> other measures, such as worksite raids, intensified—Flor Crisóstomo was arrested in a worksite raid in 2007. Within this context of increasing enforcement, undocumented immigrants like Arellano and Crisóstomo were rendered more vulnerable. Furthermore, the national context under which these policies had been discussed contained a racialized and gendered language that made immigrant women, in particular, subjects of vicious racist and sexist attacks as “welfare abusers” “mothers to anchor babies,” law breakers of the worst kind and a serious national threat.

Although most undocumented immigrants are quickly and quietly processed and deported, Arellano and Crisóstomo fought their orders of deportation loudly and publicly. When everything else failed, they defied deportation orders by seeking sanctuary in a church. These actions would not have been possible for them without the support of Centro Sin Fronteras, an immigrant rights organization in Chicago. Centro Sin Fronteras was founded in 1987 to address a range of social issues facing immigrant families in the city of Chicago such as school overcrowding, housing, and access to health care. Although immigration had been addressed by Centro Sin Fronteras, in the new context of increased enforcement immigration took front and center on its agenda. More specifically, Centro Sin Fronteras focused on fighting family separation that resulted from the deportation of a parent. Pallares observes that the possibility of deportation pushed many immigrants and their families to become

active in different facets of the immigrant rights movement. She adds that underlying their activism was their own desire to make their plight public and to affirm the moral value of their worth as individuals and the violation of citizenship rights that they had suffered in the aftermath of 9/11. According to Pallares, “these activists also challenge a liberal political framework based primarily on the notion of individual rights, arguing that the deportation of parents violates the rights of citizen children to be raised by their parents in their country of birth” (219).

Centro Sin Fronteras provided Arellano and Crisóstomo with legal aid to fight deportation, but more importantly it provided the political education and training to become organizers in their own right. While appealing her case in court, Arellano became the lead voice of *La Familia Latina Unida*, a group affiliated with Centro Sin Fronteras that sought a deportation moratorium. She staged various hunger strikes and traveled to Washington D.C. to lobby members of Congress for a private bill that would allow 35 families to avoid the deportation of one of the parents. By 2007, Elvira Arellano had exhausted all her legal appeals to stay in the country and sought sanctuary at the United Adalberto Methodist Church, an event that catapulted her to the center stage of the immigration rights battle. Again, as Pallares and others have argued this action made her a national symbol for both sides of the battle (221). As a working mother of a U.S. child, she spoke about her responsibility to provide for Saul and how her deportation would break their family apart.

Those who opposed immigration reform viewed Elvira Arellano as the poster child for all that is wrong with immigration in this country: an immigrant mother using her son as her ticket to staying in the country. Pallares also notes that there were some immigration rights activists that also rejected Arellano as a symbol for immigration reform (221). During her year-long refuge, Arellano spoke openly and freely about her situation and those like her, and most importantly she was frequently interviewed by Spanish language media creating even more awareness among Latino communities in the U.S. helping to legitimate her struggle (Aparicio).

Flor Crisóstomo, on the other hand, became part of this struggle as an indigenous working mother who was separated from her children. This subjectivity placed her in contrast with Arellano and complicated a movement narrative that sought to maintain families together. In the following quote, she expresses her growing discomfort: “I thought, maybe I’m not the appropriate person, because I felt like I couldn’t advocate as a mother. My children are in Mexico, they were born in Mexico and they continue in Mexico.” Instead of family separation, Crisóstomo’s activism centered on the effects of neoliberal policies on families, and particularly on the indigenous.

In a speech delivered to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Matters at the United Nations in May 21, 2007, Crisóstomo spoke eloquently and forcefully about the plight of indigenous people under neoliberal globalization. Crisóstomo's politicization intensified as Arellano's departure from sanctuary and arrest and deportation in April 2008 created a vacuum in the struggle to represent the plight of undocumented families. She travelled around the country giving her testimony. After exhausting all legal recourse to stop her deportation, Crisóstomo also entered into sanctuary in January 2008. The day she took refuge at the United Adalberto Methodist Church she spoke to the press and stated:

*I have exhausted all my legal appeals and I have been ordered out of the country today. I am expected to be one of the flashing yellow warning lights that tells the 12 million undocumented to leave their families and "self-deport." I am not leaving. I have asked and been granted sanctuary in my church. I am not defying the laws of this country and I am not hiding. I am taking a stand of civil disobedience to make America see what they are doing. I hope that adding my grain of sand to the struggle will help to get the U.S. Congress to act to fix a broken law and an inhuman system of undocumented labor. I will not be used as symbol of fear. Instead, I will continue to add my light to others to make America See what they are doing to 12 million human beings and their families. I hate the system of undocumented labor. It has separated me from my children for seven years. I believe with all my heart that Mexico and the United States together must end this system.*

Her decision to seek refuge was based on her conviction that she had to help "America see" the exploitation she endured as a working mother, how the system of undocumented labor separated her from her family, and the need for immigration reform. Even within the physical confines of sanctuary, Crisóstomo's activism continued albeit it took an "electronic" form, such as blogging, aided by technology. In October 2009 she held a press conference to announce that she was leaving sanctuary:

*I am writing today to inform my supporters and all undocumented people concerned with this struggle that I am no longer in sanctuary in the Adalberto United Methodist Church of Chicago, but have moved to a different location. The decision to move was prompted by my realization that after two years my sanctuary had begun to lose its political effectiveness for the immigrant rights movement. I came to the decision to leave sanctuary in order to begin what would be the next phase of my*

*activism and to more effectively serve this struggle in the days, months, and years ahead.*

Although both Arellano and Crisóstomo left sanctuary, they both continue their activism, one from Mexico and the other from an undisclosed location in the United States. Arellano continues to be ever more vocal but her sphere of influence is now Mexico, where she seeks to create awareness about the role of the state of Mexico in protecting its citizens in light of massive deportations that continue to this day. She has also been part of other marches and activities with the ever-growing number of Central American mothers searching for their migrant sons and daughters who disappear while crossing Mexico. Arellano is still connected to the immigrant rights movement and frequently sends press releases voicing her concerns about the growing number of deportations, the need for the Dream Act, and continued need for immigration reform. Crisóstomo's sphere of activism has also expanded with her departure with a blog has gone global and her joining of a larger indigenous movement in the Americas.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Sociologists Denise Segura and Elisa Facio assert that “across geographic borders and historical space, Latinas have engaged in diverse forms of activism and leadership in their communities and families” (295). They maintain that “Latina ways of being and knowing create global and pan-ethnic connections critical for social change.” This paper seeks to contribute to this emerging body of work by documenting the life stories and political activism of two Latinas—Elvira Arellano and Flor Crisóstomo—and how these women emerged as important voices in the struggle for immigration reform and the working rights of mothers in the age of neoliberal globalization. Taken together their struggle has been one of individual and collective defiance, resistance, and political mobilization both in the United States—where Crisóstomo continues to “live under the radar”—and in Mexico, where Arellano currently resides with her son, Saul.

Here we have documented how for working daughters, like Arellano, and working mothers, like Crisóstomo, migration represents one way to resolve the contradictions of neoliberal globalization in Mexico. Arellano and Crisóstomo took the decision to migrate within Mexico, across the U.S./Mexico border and internally within the United States in the larger context of expanding familial obligations and economic needs to provide for themselves and their families. We know that historically, migrations—whether internal or international—represents one way that indigenous, working class,

and working poor Mexicans have dealt with the economic instability produced by U.S. sponsored colonialism, industrialization, and now neoliberal globalization. These processes magnify gender inequality and reconstitute women's wage earning abilities through migration as evidenced in Arellano and Crisóstomo's lives.

Our work seeks to contribute to recent research that focuses on the rise of transnational families. Studies of transnational working mothers have helped us understand the emotional difficulties women encounter in mothering their children from afar (Parrenas 2001); how many of them have become incorporated into low-wage occupations such as domestic work (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1997); the impact on the children (Parrenas 2005); and how they strive to form families within the constraints of state immigration policies (Boehm). We know that transnational working mothers struggle with deeply gendered notions of mothering as caregiving and that the money they earn allows them to provide for their children beyond their daily needs. But, they are also keenly aware of the dangers that their absence entails. Researchers have proposed that in the midst of all of these new familial practices, women are creating new definitions of what constitutes mothering and transforming notions of motherhood and mothering for working women. Here we have offered evidence of how Crisóstomo and Arellano, through their transnational activism focused on their roles as working mothers, are also infusing political meaning to these mothering practices.

But most significantly, we hope our work contributes to theorizing how women subjectivities as mothers, working women, immigrants, and indigenous people shapes their activism and desire for social change. Anthropologist June Nash writes that women's marginality shapes their consciousness of injustice and provides an important base for understanding their collective actions. She adds that "a woman is not only a woman but she may also be an underpaid maquiladora worker and/or Indian" (150). Thus women's subjective positions as women, people of color, workers, immigrants, provides them with a multiplicity of spaces to begin to construct an analysis of their own awareness. Nash contends that, "whether their marginality stems from social, ethnic, gender, or class positions, their consciousness of injustice provides a baseline for understanding global trends in embodied terms" (147). Clearly, Arellano and Crisóstomo embody Nash's conceptualization of women's subjectivities. Here, we show how their work and family experiences in Mexico, crossing the border without documentation, and the problems they faced as undocumented working mothers in Chicago contributed to their political awareness. Their ability to openly defy the neoliberal state and speak truth to power was also made engendered by the historical events that engulfed them in the process of their radicalization.

In closing, Arellano and Crisóstomo have created a vast corpus of interviews and documents that speak in more detail of their experiences, views and everyday struggles. It has been beyond the scope of the present effort to offer an exhaustive analysis of their lives, partly because the events and details of the last ten years in these women's lives are far too numerous to be able to analyze here. Instead, we have offered an analysis broad in scope in an attempt to begin to document the journey these two women undertook as they became mother-activists.

<sup>1</sup>It is important to point that indigenous groups in Mexico have felt the brunt of Mexico's economic development since its colonization by Spain. Today, one of the most active groups resisting neoliberal globalization are the indigenous people of Chiapas (Nash). In Oaxaca, a decline in agriculture as a way of life coupled with NAFTA policies has created the need for internal and international migration as exemplified by Flor's family history of migration. Anthropologist, Lynn Stephen writes that because of their knowledge of agriculture, Oaxacan men were recruited to work as part of the Bracero Program in the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, Flor's grandfather was part of that migration to Chicago! Historically, migration has been a strategy of survival for cash-strapped indigenous communities. Stephen adds that Oaxacans have a high rate of return to their native communities and in doing so they have become agents of change by bringing capital to construct homes, schools, and businesses, such as the formation of weaving cooperatives. This, in turn, has expanded the social and political role of women in Zapotec culture. Remittances not only support families strapped for cash, but more importantly reconstruct community. This has placed Zapotec women, like Flor, at the forefront of an important struggle organized around cultural production as a political process of indigenous affirmation, a struggle she takes on herself in Chicago.

<sup>2</sup>The most significant effort to pass punitive immigration reform took place in December 2005 when Republican Representative, James Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin, introduced in Congress the *Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act*, popularly known as HR 4437. This bill proposed to make undocumented status a felony and also made it a crime to assist an undocumented to stay in the country, among other restrictive immigration provisions. Flores-Gonzalez and Elena Gutierrez argue that this bill "served as a catalyst for the Spring, 2006 mobilizations" (7) pushing masses of people to demonstrate across the nation. The bill did not become law because it failed to be ratified by the Senate. However, key features of the bill were eventually introduced as separate pieces of legislation and thus created an atmosphere of hysteria and hostility toward immigrants and immigration reform.

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