Introduction

Theoretical and Methodological Approach

Angela, Claudia, Julia, Luisa, Laura, Martha, Rosa, Manuela, Ana, Susana, Clara, Silvana, Rosario, Mónica, Samuel, Yolanda, Patricia, Ramona, and Leticia were all immigrants. With or without immigration documents, they had all left their native lands to help their families survive. In love, and in pain, they had all endured intimate partner violence in the United States. Courageously and fearfully, they had all tried to break free from their abusive relationships and sought help. Some found their way out. Others did not. In this book, I explore the disparate fates of Latina battered immigrants in their search for nonviolence, autonomy, and citizenship by uncovering and defying entrenched discriminatory principles and practices still at work in this country from a feminist of color perspective.

Latina, black, postcolonial, and critical race feminisms have been particularly acute in their contribution to the struggle to end violence against women. As the battered women’s movement developed, and violence against women was redefined first as a social problem (as opposed to an acceptable private matter) and later as a human rights violation, feminists of color underscored the need to shift from universalizing to differentiated accounts. While it is true that all women can be victimized on a gender basis (as “white” liberal and radical feminists initially claimed in order to legitimize the need to end violence against women and make it a policy priority), intersecting racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, immigration status, and sexual, religious, and political orientations also come into play in terms of the kinds of violence perpetrated, and the resources available to overcome abusive conditions.
For instance, immigrant women’s vulnerability is based not only on their
gender but also on nationality, race, ethnicity, language, religion, docu-
mented or undocumented immigration status, threatened legal status,
situational isolation from family and community, cross-national frames
of cultural and legal reference (including ideologies, laws, and practices
in regard to gender equality and sexuality), and socioeconomic status.5
Latina, black, postcolonial, and critical race feminisms have focused on
the specific constraints that limit minority battered women, with the aim
of elaborating strategies, programs, policies, and laws that better reflect
their experiences and improve their particular situations—as opposed
to those of the “universal” battered woman, which in fact were modeled
after white, middle- or upper-class heterosexual housewives.6 Similarly,
feminists of color have stressed the need to provincialize mainstream and
Western accounts of violence against women by taking into account the
specific cultural and social contexts of the community where the women
live or used to live, contrary to understanding oppression from a hege-
monic standpoint,7 which perpetuates “new forms of colonialism” and is
“out of touch with the realities experienced at the grass-roots level.”8 With
the goal of meeting the particular needs of the most disadvantaged, femi-
nists of color have adopted a methodology committed to building knowl-
edge from below, that is, in collaboration with the people about whom
the research is being developed, because “without them, the myriad indi-
vidual and collective histories that simultaneously run parallel to official
accounts of historic events and are their sequel, almost inevitably get sub-
merged”9 and become invisible.10

In this spirit, I developed activist research11 at a local nonprofit orga-
nization in Texas to learn about the experiences of Latina battered immi-
grants in their quest for U.S. citizenship through the Violence Against
Women Act (VAWA) and the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protec-
tion Act (VTVPA). Advocates, activists, and scholars alike have consid-
ered these laws as successful achievements for women’s and immigrants’
rights movements.12 In principle, VAWA and VTVPA legitimize battered
immigrants in their particular victimization and provide them with ser-
vices conducive to breaking free from abusive relationships and becoming
legally and economically autonomous U.S. citizens. However, through my
research I found that formal and informal barriers that filter immigrants
either as worthy to become legitimate citizens of the United States or as
illegitimate subjects remain in place. Intersecting gender, sexual, racial,
ethnic, and class inequalities not only permeate the current legislation
but also tend to be reproduced by nonprofit workers. This results in the exclusion of the most underprivileged immigrants (those Latina immigrants who are women of color, extremely poor, with few years of formal education, undocumented, in relationships with residents or other undocumented immigrants, originally from Mexico, homosexual, and/or unable to fit within “normal” standards of civil behavior) regardless of their histories of abuse.

My analysis of how and why the most disadvantaged battered Latina immigrants are left unprotected and my suggestions on how to turn this around are based on activist research at a legal nonprofit organization that I will call the Organization for Refugees of America/Organización para Refugiados de América (ORA). ORA proved to be an excellent example of how extreme cases contribute to the understanding of the construction of difference and normalcy, marginality and dominance, because of the type of services it offered, its location, the population it served, its organizational history, and its staff’s profile. From 2000 to 2008, ORA was the only organization in central Texas that provided free legal services to underserved immigrants, identified as individuals with earnings below 125 percent of the officially defined poverty line (i.e., annual earnings lower than $17,500 for a household of two in 2008); at the same time, it was the only organization providing these services that was not affiliated with a religious group. Four of its five legal programs were devoted to immigrant survivors of different kinds of abuse (domestic abuse; sexual abuse; extortion; false imprisonment; human trafficking; and political, racial, ethnic, religious, gender, or ideological persecution). Additionally, ORA's location in Texas, a border state with one of the largest numbers of documented and undocumented immigrants in the United States, and with a high proportion of incidents of family violence in terms of its population, made the organization a good selection for a case study, particularly during the hostile environment after September 11, 2001. An overwhelming majority of ORA's clients were from Mexico and Central America, but the organization served immigrants from all over the world. ORA, with its ethnically diverse staff, presented itself as an inclusive organization that provided services to all immigrants, regardless of their ethnic, religious, or political background, in their language of origin. In this way, ORA allowed me to explore the workings of culturally sensitive organizations, which have been both celebrated as safe havens for immigrants and questioned as colonial and patriarchal by many feminist researchers. Its history also made it a good choice for a case study: ORA developed from
a politically radical, volunteer-based grassroots legal group into a politically moderate employee-based nonprofit legal organization. While this kind of institutionalization process is common, the in-depth study of ORA provides clues to overcome its exclusionary effects.

I worked for two years as a part-time volunteer intern in the ORA’s battered immigrant assistance program, which provided legal services free of charge to low-income immigrants who qualified as applicants for citizenship under VAWA and VTVPA. As such, I worked with ORA staff in providing services to immigrants, including screening interviews on the phone and in person, collection and translation of immigration and abuse histories, translation from Spanish to English of affidavits and supporting documentation related to the cases, preparation of immigration forms and citizenship applications, and other on-demand tasks. My direct participation in these activities allowed me to gather data about the ways in which immigrants presented themselves; talked and wrote about their experiences of migration and violence; expressed their demands and concerns about going through the application for citizenship; showed their feelings, fears, frustrations, and hopes; made sense of their situations; and reacted to the formal and informal requirements of the application process. Furthermore, my participation also allowed me to observe the legal assistants, attorneys, and other ORA staff in their interactions with the immigrants (or “clients,” as they were called in the organization), such as how ORA staff expressed themselves, the verbal and body language they used with the clients and with their coworkers, their reactions to the histories of abuse, and their attitudes toward law enforcement officers and immigration authorities. I also participated in meetings related to immigration and women’s issues to which ORA staff were invited on a regular basis (such as meetings on legal advocacy and violence against women), which made it possible for me to collect primary data on how legal and social workers organize their activities and modify their services on the basis of changes in legislation and one another’s work experiences (e.g., in their discussions about successful or complex cases, or their conversations about lobbying activities). After my workday, I recorded my field observations in journal form, including not only immigrants’ and staff members’ stories but also my own role, feelings, and thoughts.

I complemented my participant observation by performing personal interviews with the attorneys, legal assistants, and other ORA staff. Through these interviews, I gathered primary data on how nonprofit workers comprehended (made sense of, rationalized, felt about) and embodied
(performed, implemented, applied) immigration and citizenship norms, rules, and regulations. I also addressed how they viewed themselves in their double role as subjects of law vis-à-vis the state and as officers of law in front of the immigrant applicants. What were their thoughts, perceptions, justifications, doubts, and feelings about their tasks and skills, their commitments toward the state and grantors, their responsibilities toward the local community, the immigrants, and their clients? How did they see themselves in their interactions with others? What would they like to change about their jobs and about gender violence and immigration laws?

Although I had these issues in mind when I conducted my interviews, I did not follow a rigid form but instead adopted a more informal frame of dialogue with the interviewees, which let me “emphasize the informant’s world of meaning and utilize the informant’s categories of understanding” rather than my own. In this way, both the participant observation and the unstructured interviews allowed me to reduce the hierarchical filters of data gathering (I say reduce because filters and interpretation dynamics are always at play during research or any other human interaction), as I intended not to purposely frame the subjects’ thoughts, views, feelings, and experiences as they emerge and develop.

Archival research and secondary sources contextualized my primary data collection. I conducted archival research and analysis of the text of laws, bills, and acts related to gender violence, and of immigration procedures and regulations. I researched websites of organizations working for or against these issues in order to understand how related knowledge is built and shared. I looked into these organizations’ brochures, informative manuals, advocacy tool kits, publications, and other materials, which in general were part of their outreach strategies to inform people about gender violence legislation and the struggles for and against it. Such archival data helped me explore the formal framework (i.e., legal parameters, profiles, requirements, uses of language, references, tactics, and strategies) within which the state and nonprofits interacted with battered immigrants. Naturally, my research has been inspired by the state of the art of the literature about intimate partner violence against Latinas, which for the most part tended to be written from social work and health care perspectives with the end goal of improving the services offered to this particular group of survivors. Examples of this kind of research are the recent studies by Hazen and Soriano, and Brabeck and Guzmán. Specific patterns of intimate partner violence among or toward Latina women who were U.S.-born, immigrants, or seasonal migrant workers were gathered
through interviews and surveys and statistically analyzed by Hazen and Soriano, who found “high rates of victimization”\textsuperscript{26} for sexual, psychological, and physical aggression, and thus underscored “the need for culturally appropriate screening for intimate partner violence in health care and other settings that serve Latina women.”\textsuperscript{27} Brabeck and Guzmán focused their research on Mexican-origin women to find differences and similarities between this group and other immigrant groups. They studied both the formal and the informal ways in which these women seek help to survive abuse and suggested strategies to better serve this population. On the one hand, they found that the vast majority of survivors had accessed “more than one formal help source”\textsuperscript{28} (such as shelters, police, counseling, and legal and medical services) and had a positive yet constructively critical perspective on them—these findings countered “the popular stereotype of ‘backward, submissive’ battered Latinas and immigrant women.”\textsuperscript{29} On the other hand, they found that “a slightly higher percentage”\textsuperscript{30} of the survivors in their study had accessed informal sources of help over formal sources, and they did so with greater frequency. Most Mexican-origin survivors had reached out to, in order of importance, immediate family members, friends, the abuser’s family, religious officials, and coworkers; these findings showed that in this regard Mexican-origin survivors acted similarly to survivors from other countries. Battered Mexican-origin immigrants also made use of similar personal strategies to survive abuse (like avoidance, defensive, spiritual/psychological, social/familial, and escape strategies), but they found that many of these were “unhelpful” and thus “less effective in terms of surviving abuse than accessing informal and formal sources of help.”\textsuperscript{31}

While such studies (gradually growing in number but still scarce) have been helpful in addressing the particular needs of diverse survivors, their exclusive focus on service provision has left broader questions unattended. The work by anthropologists Salcido and Adelman is, to my knowledge, one of the few exceptions in the academic literature devoted to Latina survivors of intimate partner violence, since it brings “a domestic violence perspective to immigration policy and an immigration perspective to domestic violence research.”\textsuperscript{32} By sharing the stories of four undocumented Mexican survivors, these authors defy dualistic understandings of migration as a documented/undocumented process, and medical interpretations of intimate partner violence as a pathological and traumatizing experience that must be successfully overcome. They show that battered immigrants may have become undocumented as a result of their batter-
ing and that they may have chosen to stay in the violent relationship as a survival strategy. Salcido and Adelman remind policy makers, researchers, and advocates of the contradictory and unequal character of immigration and domestic violence policies and call for a reconceptualization of intervention strategies for undocumented battered immigrants.

My work contributes to the understanding of violence against immigrant women by linking gender violence with citizenship and social inequality. These links have been analyzed before, but to my knowledge not in regard to Latina survivors in the United States and not in as much ethnographic depth as my activist research revealed. My work is in dialogue with the literature that has explored the triad of gender violence, citizenship, and inequality, among which I have been very much inspired by Crenshaw’s research on violence against women of color; the intersection of race, class, and other “patterns of subordination”; and the possibilities of advancing the rights of women of color by fostering coalitions between groups with intersecting oppressions that have tended to have diverging, essentialist agendas. I have also built on Abraham’s research about marital violence in South Asian immigrant communities in the United States as it exposes “systemic ways by which American cultural, economic and political institutions contribute to the violence against ethnic minority women, especially immigrant women, both legal and illegal” and emphasizes the role that community organizations and immigrants played in challenging the overlapping oppressions facing South Asian women. Rudrappa’s ethnography of an Indo-American center and a shelter for battered South Asian women has provided me with a fundamental counterpoint to Abraham’s positive take on ethnic organizations. While these organizations are perceived as “safe havens” for the maintenance of ethnic identity and autonomy beyond the influence of the state or any other external institutions, Rudrappa claims that, in fact, they reproduce existing structures of gender, racial, and class inequalities. Ethnic enclaves are not necessarily sites of social dissent and political challenge; on the contrary, they can foster dominant and oppressive practices and discourses that feed the hierarchical citizenship order of the United States. Similarly, Ong’s ethnographic analysis of Cambodian refugees in California looks into the particular ways in which racial, ethnic, class, and gender systems of inequality currently are embodied and re-created in local-level (well-intended) grassroots organizations in the United States. She notes that, on the one hand, Asian American and Hispanic feminist agencies have sought to “counteract images stigmatizing poor female immigrants as welfare
mothers or passive wives and empower them by providing an alternative structure of access that would help overcome male oppression at home.”37

On the other hand, “whatever the good intentions of individual social workers, the internal logic of compassionate domination produces this double submission—majority women dominating minority women, who dominate minority men . . . with the effect of feminizing ethnic men and masculinizing ethnic women.”38 Menon and Bhasin's research on the process of India's bloody partition of 1947 and its legacies, in which 1 million people perished and more than 10 million were displaced, has offered me another pivotal example of the contradictory workings of well-intended community organizations across borders. With the aim of contesting official historical accounts (which silenced the experiences of women and other oppressed groups), these authors include powerful narratives of women survivors of partition and look into women's organizations, female activists, and social workers, who devoted themselves to “rebilitate women”39 who had survived partition's extreme sexual violence and gendered brutality. While these organizations and workers frankly hoped that their assistance would ease these women's transition into well-being, the authors found that “they functioned very much within patriarchal structures, often displayed rather patriarchal attitudes and were influenced by urban middle-class conceptions of socially accepted roles for women and men.”40 Accordingly, their intervention attempted to liberate women by helping them become economically independent, develop a sense of self-worth, and learn accepted social codes “through a repetition of restrictions on sexuality and mobility”41 inherited from colonial structures of power and preexistent hierarchical systems of domination.

The work of all these authors points in the same direction—toward the complexity and embeddedness of gender oppression—and has led me to develop research that pays attention to the interplay of structural, institutional, and relational mechanisms of creating and reproducing difference and inequality. Gender violence per se, I have learned, always tends to be more than that; gender violence tends to be an expression of dominance in its intersection with sexual, racial, ethnic, and class oppression, as well as the construction of nationhood and citizenship. The respective works by Haney López,42 Omi and Winant,43 Feagin,44 Bonilla-Silva,45 Hing,46 and Johnson47 on the racialized and thus exclusionary structure of the immigration system in the United States, together with research by Glenn on the gendered and racialized character of citizenship and labor policies and practices in the United States;48 Ngai's historical analysis
of the exploitative use of undocumented immigrants in this country as they were conceived as “illegal aliens” and thereupon grouped as “a caste, unambiguously situated outside the boundaries of formal membership and social legitimacy”; 49 Luibhéid’s study of the preservation of a heteronormative patriarchal order through U.S. immigration controls of sexuality at the border; 50 Calvo’s critical analysis of the pervasive legacies of the doctrines of coverture and chastisement in spouse-based immigration laws; 51 and Chapkis’s close reading of the ambivalences in the treatment of victims of sexual trafficking by VTVPA when it was first enacted— all have informed my critical perspective on the construction of citizenship and nationhood in this country. In thinking about the latter, I have drawn on Foucault’s ideas about sovereignty, which is reflected in the “mechanisms of disciplinary coercion” by which the state is able to maintain and re-create social order. Power “is not that which makes the difference between those who exclusively possess and retain it, and those who do not have and submit to it. Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain.” 54 Because the key in the reproduction and exercise of power and domination is not in the center but in the “myriad of bodies which are constituted as peripheral subjects” and in the diverse mechanisms and techniques of power, which have been accompanied by ideological productions to determine social disciplinary structures, my focusing on how battered Latina immigrants and advocates in the community negotiate these forces seems crucial to collaborate in the effort to dismantle complex systems and practices of inequality and ultimately challenge oppression from the bottom up.

Because it shapes the activist research process from beginning to end, feminists of color have made an effort to stress the importance of acknowledging and incorporating one’s standpoint to one’s projects. As articulated by Anzaldúa, “The personal and cultural narratives are not disinterested, objective questionings of identity politics, but impassioned and conflicted engagements in resistance.” 56 One’s involvement in a particular struggle is never arbitrary or irrelevant; my commitment to the struggle to end violence against immigrant women and discrimination across the board is threefold. It emerges from my own history as a random survivor of state violence against my family during the Argentine military regime of the 1970s, during which women suspected of political activism were specifically targeted and tortured by state military forces, my experience as a victim of intimate partner violence in a context where specific laws
or services were not available,58 and, last but not least, my current status as a Latina immigrant in the United States. These three interconnected motivations (interconnected because none would have happened without the other) kept me moving forward with this project, which in turn was an “invitation to transformation”59 and a reaffirmation of “the continuing need for fundamental social change.”60

By adopting a “reflective practice,” as theorized by feminist ethnographer Naples, I was able to incorporate my standpoint and also remain “sensitive to the perspectives of others” and critically aware of the “power dynamics” at play in the community where the research was situated.61 For instance, even though my background gave me the opportunity to quickly gain access to and build trust with the immigrants and the non-profit workers, my involvement at ORA posed some problems regarding my double role as researcher and worker. While I was performing ORA’s job by respecting the organization’s rules and interests, I also had a critical understanding of the activities and processes that were taking place during my working days. To cope with tensions resulting from my double role, I maintained a transparent attitude with the members of the agency and the clients and regularly wrote about my observations, thoughts, and feelings in a journal. I also paid close attention to how my personal characteristics shaped “ethnographic encounters”62 “to reveal the inequalities and processes of domination that shape the ‘field.’”63 I wondered, how did my occupation, nationality, immigration status, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and age permeate my relationship with both battered immigrants and ORA staff? On the one hand, the immigrants tended to be comfortable with me because of my position as a volunteer and researcher, my sympathy as a woman survivor of intimate partner violence, my young age, our shared status as Latina immigrants in the United States (which took precedence over my light skin color or seeming whiteness), and my open attitude about sexual preferences. Class differences were mostly manifested in two aspects: immigration status and education. My documented immigration status as a researcher and my ability to speak and write Spanish and English fluently differentiated me from the immigrants seeking services at ORA, who did not seem uncomfortable with this gap as long as I was assisting them through their citizenship application process before U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). However, I often was the one who became upset because of the imbalances resulting from their underprivileged positionality as opposed to ORA staff’s or mine. On the other hand, ORA staff
tended to be comfortable around me and grateful for my volunteer work. They perceived me as similar to them in terms of class background, gender, openness in regard to sexual preferences, and age and different from them in terms of my nationality and occupation. Some of them took me as a foreign focal reference with whom they could either clarify or discuss cultural differences; others maintained some distance as they recalled my double role as a volunteer and researcher and occasionally thought of me as threatening their authority at the workplace.

My position as an “outsider within” at ORA yielded both advantages (such as the possibility of immersing myself in the organization while keeping a critical angle) and disadvantages (such as the possibility of becoming too involved and consequently jeopardizing my critical ability, or finding resistance from the staff against my attempted suggestions to address what I believed were problematic working practices). In retrospect, I faced four main challenges in conducting the research. The first challenge was the transition from having an enthusiastic and idealist perspective about gender violence–based immigration legislation as well as the organization to being frustrated with the laws and ORA staff as I discovered their biased character. I dealt with these changing feelings by incorporating them into my field notes, thinking about them critically, and, when appropriate, talking about them with ORA staff in order “to become aware of, and diminish the ways in which, domination and repression are reproduced in the course of research and in the products of [my] work.” Finding a way to handle my feelings (and “emotions are always present in personal interactions in ethnographic work”) was vital to the research process because they affected my work as a volunteer, my relationship with ORA staff, my access to the organization, and my analysis. The second challenge was deciding which data could be included: even if I had obtained informed consent from the participating research subjects, I considered some of the information they provided too private or compromising to be quoted in my writing. If these data were crucial to the analysis, I referred to them indirectly without exposing the subjects unnecessarily. Two examples of this dilemma were the inclusion of very sensitive details about the violence that immigrants had experienced, and of private comments that ORA staff made to me in confidence. My own ethics helped me to draw this fine line, which reflected my subjectivity and priorities as an activist researcher. The third challenge was barriers to activist research: while my role as a volunteer intern made my research participatory as I was providing services to the immigrant com-
munity, the extent of my activism was limited by ORA’s reactions to some (or most) of my proposals to modify what I considered to be problematic work practices. For example, my suggestions and efforts to provide child care options, expand counseling opportunities, and enrich outreach presentations were initially welcomed but then later ignored or rejected. These contradictory reactions were frustrating and disturbing as I realized that my interest in addressing ORA’s services with the aim of moderating unequal practices did not coincide with the goals of ORA staff and made me wonder if I was being too idealistic or demanding. These pitfalls were counterbalanced by my involvement with the broader community of immigrants’ advocates, specifically, by sharing the findings of my research in national meetings and online networks devoted to Latina battered immigrants. The fourth challenge was overcoming the temptation to expand my research: as I went forward with my fieldwork, I often saw potential ways to expand the scope of analysis and activism, both of which I had to contain to complete the project at hand. To keep focused, I took note of these thoughts for future teaching, research, and activist endeavors. Despite these four challenges, there was not a moment when I doubted the richness of qualitative research methods and the potential benefits of activist research. These tensions and reflections fed my research, which I hope will further our understanding of “what it is” and better our actions toward “what can be.”

In the following chapters, I weave the experiences of battered immigrants Angela, Claudia, Julia, Luisa, Laura, Martha, Rosa, Manuela, Ana, Susana, Clara, Silvana, Rosario, Mónica, Samuel, Yolanda, Patricia, Ramona, and Leticia and of founding, former, and current ORA staff, Sophia, Valerie, Cathy, Maggie, Jenna, Courtney, Lucy, Marina, Carlos, John, and me with theoretical debates about gender violence, citizenship, and inequality. Given that my research was in essence ethnographic and respected methodological principles of feminists of color who stressed the relevance of portraying as faithfully as possible the community where the research is being developed, I included the stories of all the immigrants with whom I worked at ORA at length, regardless of their country of origin, immigration status, or gender. Eighteen of the nineteen immigrants were originally from Latin America (sixteen from Mexico, one from Venezuela, and one from Colombia), and one was from Nigeria. Seventeen immigrants had entered the United States undocumented; only two had documents, which eventually expired. Eighteen immigrants were women, and one was a man. All of them were heterosexual. Sixteen were married
to their current abusers, and three were in common-law unions. Eleven abusers were U.S. citizens, six were legal permanent residents, one was an undocumented immigrant, and one was unknown (the victim did not know her abuser’s immigration status). Only four of the nineteen were interracial couples (the Colombian and three Mexican immigrants were in relationships with white/Anglo citizens). Six of the Mexican women immigrants were married to Mexican American citizens, five were married to Mexican legal permanent residents, one was married to an undocumented Mexican immigrant, and one was married to either a resident or an undocumented Mexican immigrant. The Nigerian immigrant was married to a legal permanent resident from Cameroon, but racially and ethnically she identified herself with him; the Venezuelan immigrant was married to an African American citizen (she identified with him racially because of her African roots, but differentiated ethnically because of her Venezuelan origin). All the immigrants were poor, seventeen had few years of formal education, and only two were fluent in English. In regard to the nonprofit workers included in the research, I included those with whom I interacted at the organization and also those with whom I was able to establish access despite the fact that they had left ORA; there were a few who had been influential in the development of the organization in the past but who, unfortunately, I was not able to contact at the time of my research.

My hope is for the actual stories of survivors and advocates to constitute the core of this book. Similar to Menon and Bhasin’s work, “the stories might supplement each other, or sometimes serve as counterpoints, but each is distinct and dwells on those experiences that related most directly to the themes which emerged with sharp clarity from the accounts”:68 the harsh complexities of the lives of Latina battered immigrants in the United States; the intersecting gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, and class inequalities embedded in the formality of the gender violence laws and reproduced in the informal interactions at the nonprofit organizational level; the nuanced ways in which immigrants and advocates negotiate structural forces; and the possibilities of challenging systems and practices of inequality that shape the very composition of U.S. society. Finally, an important note: while I base my analysis in the experiences of these nineteen immigrant survivors in their interactions with advocates at ORA, I do not intend to portray this as a universal account of battered immigrants and advocates in the United States, but as “part of an unfolding history.”69 Adapting Garfield’s methodological claim, “I recog-
nize that the experiences of any small and select group cannot capture the complexities and varied lifestyles that are of concern to all [immigrant] women [and advocates]. But I do believe that their particular experiences contribute . . . important chapters to the volumes of stories that make up the whole of what it means to be a battered immigrant and a nonprofit advocate of immigrant survivors of violence in the United States.

In chapter 2, I present a model case of violence against immigrant women and the legal remedies currently available under VAWA and VTVPA. By sharing the story of Angela at length, I begin to show the complexities beneath abusive relationships, migratory journeys, living in poverty as an undocumented immigrant, working under exploitative systems and practices, and finding refuge within laws and nonprofit services in place in the United States. Angela's story, an example of a woman who was able to succeed in her quest for autonomy, nonviolence, and citizenship through the existing legislation with the help of a well-intended community organization like ORA, is a testament to the concrete gains of the battered women's and immigrants’ movements. However, not all the battered immigrants that I met at ORA were as “fortunate” as Angela. The next two chapters uncover problematic aspects of VAWA and VTVPA and nonprofit organizations like ORA by looking into the stories of immigrants who, instead of finding protection, ran into exclusionary formal and informal obstacles in their search for personal, legal, and economic independence.

In chapter 3, I focus on what I will refer to as the formal barriers embedded in VAWA and VTVPA. Despite their achievements, these laws reproduce patterns of gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, and class discrimination that are embedded in the immigration law system of the United States. The stories of Claudia, Julia, and Luisa illustrate the patriarchal and heteronormative character of immigration laws inherited by VAWA and VTVPA. The stories of Laura, Martha, Rosa, Manuela, and Ana reflect historical racial and ethnic discriminatory parameters, which continue to prioritize U.S. citizens over immigrants and their experiences of abuse. Finally, the story of Susana exemplifies the historical classism of the immigration system as it pervades VAWA and VTVPA and bars the neediest survivors from access to citizenship. All in all, this chapter shows the intersection of gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, and class oppressions within the law itself from a critical race feminist perspective.

In chapter 4, I investigate the informal barriers that emerge at the nonprofit organization level. Besides the formal barriers within the legal
texts, informal obstacles surface in the interaction between immigrants and nonprofit workers. The stories of survivors Clara, Silvana, Rosario, Mónica, Samuel, Yolanda, Patricia, Ramona, and Leticia reveal the preferences that nonprofit advocates at ORA had in regard to their “clientele.” Immigrants who behaved in particular ways tended to be better served by nonprofit workers; immigrants who did not fit these patterns of civil behavior tended to be excluded from the process despite their eligibility under VAWA and VTVPA. The analysis of the relational aspects in the process of inclusion of immigrants into U.S. society contributes to the understanding of how disciplines of citizenship and principles of nationhood are reproduced beyond the direct intervention of state officials even by nonprofit advocates who are working to advance the lives of underprivileged immigrants.

In chapter 5, I focus on how formal and informal barriers can be reproduced or challenged by looking at the agency of battered immigrants and nonprofit workers and suggesting ways to dismantle systems of inequality. Here I bring back the stories of the immigrants presented earlier and include nonprofit workers’ views on these issues. I offer an explanation of what I will call nuanced agency and include notions from social movement theory in order to consider the possibilities for change. Humbly, I suggest ideological and practical alternative actions for change with the caveat that I would rather elaborate these in tandem with the workers in the organization that plans to put them into effect. To end the book, I provide concluding thoughts and articulate the theoretical and empirical contributions that my activist research provides to the knowledge about and struggle against violence against Latina immigrants.