

Introduction

Agency, Action, and the Material Moorings of Immigrant Movements

La participación es la única cosa que nos va a salvar.

—Esmeralda, primary informant

Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything,
but because it comes from everywhere.

—Foucault, *History of Sexuality*

De-escalation, Nonparticipation, and Everyday Immigrant Politics

The immigrant rights marches of 2006 were a historic touchstone in the evolution of Latino and immigrant political power.¹ Replenished by waves of predominately Mexican immigration after 1965,² the political power of Latino immigrants is illuminated in these massive displays of social movement activism. And yet immigrant collective action on the scale of the *primavera del inmigrante* had not been witnessed before and has not been seen since that historic outpouring of immigrant protest. And whatever electoral faith Latinos placed in the Obama administration to address the immigration issue was dashed by the record numbers of deportations executed under his watch.³ We have before us a question not only about the escalation of immigrant politics, but also about their rapid *de-escalation*.⁴ What explains this oscillation? How do we make sense of Latino immigrants' participation or lack thereof in these spectacular manifestations of collective resistance?

I think the answer lies in the everyday. Social movement organizing and the marches of 2006 are but the tip of the iceberg. These enormous displays of political power are both enabled and constrained by the

material exigencies of immigrants' everyday lives as low-wage laborers whose exploitation is sustained by the most extensive immigration enforcement regime in US history. The metaphor is meant to illustrate not the relationship of something small to something large, but rather the way that the submerged portion of the iceberg both anchors and buoys the visible tip. This necessary and daily work of sustaining self and family inspires a set of widely shared grievances that become fertile ground for collective action. To protect what material gains they have reaped, immigrants, as a matter of necessity, avoid and insulate themselves from local police, immigration enforcement, and the unfamiliar. They avoid risk to protect their gains. And yet, their risk aversion simultaneously forms a counterweight against participation in protest. Their first priorities remain family and work.

In this study of two Mexican immigrant communities on California's Central Coast, the periodicity of immigration participation was a central dilemma for La Unión community organizers who sought to cultivate an immigrant political constituency. In both North City and South City,⁵ organizers were regularly met with reticence and reluctance from the Mexican immigrants, undocumented and documented alike, whom they sought to recruit to social movement work. These were not insurmountable barriers for many potential immigrant activists. Collective mobilization emerged when it was organized by activists who were organically connected to the communities they sought to mobilize, when those activists were supported by robust organizations, and when they drew upon narrative frames that stressed immigrants' linked fate,⁶ the efficacy of political action,⁷ and their responsibility to act on their own behalves. And still, the action that emerged remained moored to the urgent material pressures of work and family.

Consider this exchange at the first La Unión house meeting that I attended just before the start of the new year in December 2011. The house meeting is a classic organizing strategy widely used during the farmworker struggle that began in the early 1960s and was led by the co-founders of the United Farmworkers (UFW), Dolores Huerta and César Chávez. The idea is simple: the activist asks a volunteer, friend, or family member to host a gathering at her home to which she invites neighbors, family, friends, and coworkers of her own. The community organizer will typically offer some combination of know-your-rights training and

legislative updates, followed by a question-and-answer session and a call to participate in a future action. Three major goals are advanced: organizers share reliable and up-to-date information, personal networks become the springboard for political community, and, in a step-by-step fashion, a base of immigrant activists in waiting is cultivated with an eye toward future mass mobilizations and strategic efforts to influence legislators (e.g., lobbying, telephone campaigns, marches and rallies, etc.). The house meeting is an ideal site for observing the linkage between the everyday and social movement organizing because it is where the pain of precarity is made political, where the quotidian is remapped in historical terms.⁸

Primary informant and La Unión volunteer organizer Esmeralda organized this first house meeting. Dissatisfied with dwindling attendance at La Unión meetings, she decided that we should go out into the community instead of asking the community to come to us. I met Esmeralda at Vicky's home on the predominately Mexican eastside of South City. It was her daughter's 18th birthday, and so Esmeralda decided to piggyback on the occasion by scheduling this house meeting at the start of the birthday party. When I arrive, I'm greeted by a group of young girls, maybe 14 or 15 years old, who open the door and stare at me. I introduce myself as a friend of Esmeralda's here to meet our host Vicky. Of this group of four girls at the door, a young lady at the rear breaks an increasingly awkward silence by stepping forward and inviting me inside. As I move into the small living room, I am reminded that Christmas has just passed. A decorated Christmas tree stands in one corner. Two large couches are placed together in the shape of an L. An end table, bookshelves, and a television complete the living room furniture. In the kitchen around the corner, Esmeralda and her husband Ernesto are sitting at a dining table. Esmeralda introduces me to Vicky, who is busy making enchiladas for the party, serving them to us as they finish cooking, one plate at a time, so that we can eat before we begin the meeting.

As we eat and exchange pleasantries, Esmeralda peppers the young people in the room with questions. She asks a young man who is attending an alternative school about how things are going. He is clearly nervous, offering clipped responses. She isn't forceful though, signaling care and confidence. She commands the room by assuming the role of interlocutor.

As we finish our food, Esmeralda asks Ernesto and me to move chairs into a circle in the living room so that the other guests, adult neighbors and family members who are arriving, can sit. As people settle into the chairs that encircle the living room, Esmeralda begins the meeting by talking about why we are all here, turning first to the issue of car impoundments that has affected the immigrant community for quite some time. Esmeralda knows that having a car confiscated because they are undocumented and driving without a license, more than the fear of deportation, is the most common grievance in South City. She hooks the audience by leading with the topic she thinks will capture their attention. She also asks me to explain La Unión's mission to support working-class and immigrant families by building political power and cultivating leaders from within the community.

Esmeralda follows by running down a list of the major issues that affect immigrants locally and at the state and national levels. She talks about the California Dream Act, which had recently been signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown, allowing undocumented students to apply for private scholarships and state-funded financial aid. She also discusses the local-federal deportation program Secure Communities, E-Verify, the possibility of city identification for undocumented residents, and the national movement for immigration reform. The group asks questions. Will local police offer a grace period at checkpoints (*re-ténes*) for a licensed driver to retrieve an undocumented driver's vehicle? Not unless state legislation passes that mandates officers offer one. Do local police work with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)? Not directly, but Secure Communities operates at the local jail, so if you get into trouble you can be deported. Will there be immigration reform? Unless we demand change and get involved, we will never see reform.

In the final part of the meeting, Esmeralda turns to the recruitment of testimonies for an upcoming community forum with the police chief where we plan to ask for relief from car impoundments for undocumented drivers. As she solicits testimonials, she coaches attendees to deliver their accounts with confidence and precision. One middle-aged man in his 40s, husky, bald, and sitting in the corner of the room, raises his hand and shares that he has had no fewer than five cars impounded. He is soft-spoken, and I notice other attendees lean forward in their chairs to hear him. The last time police impounded his car he was

parked briefly, but illegally, on the street while he collected bottles that he would later recycle to earn a little money. When the police stopped him, they confirmed it was his car that was parked illegally and asked for his identification—standard operating procedure for South City police. He turned over his passport. The officer asked if he had a driver's license. The man handed over his *matrícula consular*, a form of identification issued by the Mexican consulate to its expatriates living abroad. The officer repeated his question: “How can you drive without a license?” The man responded, “Well I need to work.”

As he is telling this story, Regina interrupts him, “You say you’ve had five cars impounded [*cinco cinco!*]” She tells him to raise his hand, hold all five fingers out, and in a clear, loud voice say, “I’ve had five cars impounded.” She is encouraging him to be assertive and confident in the face of authority, to clearly communicate the extent of the damage wrought by impoundment after impoundment. Esmeralda collects three testimonials in all. Meeting participants write down a brief description of the events on a one-page form that she has created: name, date, officer's name, description of events.

As the meeting draws to a close another attendee sitting to my right, in his late 30s and sporting a hat, says that he's heard around town that people don't come to these forums or attend immigration committee meetings because they're afraid that immigration enforcement (*la migra*) will be there. Regina forcefully responds that ICE would never be at one of our meetings because that is the group that we are working against.

Esmeralda solicits hosts for future house meetings by going around the room, asking almost person by person, focusing on women in particular, whether they could commit to hosting the next house meeting. She repeats several times that the meeting can be at a time that is convenient for them. She understands everyone works, so she is happy to plan around schedules. Participants often respond that they cannot commit to hosting a house meeting because they have children or a job. Esmeralda responds that everybody has kids and a job and yet Vicky, tonight's host, is managing very well. In some cases, she seems to know when to stop pressing. One woman, in particular, gives more vague excuses like she has a lot going on with her family right now. Regina pushes her a bit, saying she can adjust the time to whenever works best for her. The

woman responds stoically, repeating that she cannot. Esmeralda does not press any further.

We end the house meeting in the same way that we end most gatherings with La Unión: a practice sometimes called the unity clap, a rhythmic clap that starts slowly and increases in tempo. The unity clap was a common ritual employed during the farmworker struggle and continues to be used among organizers, especially those working in Latino communities. Esmeralda explains that it is a tool for demonstrating solidarity and for communicating between Filipino and Mexican farmworkers during the time of the UFW. We clap together as a group. The clapping synchronizes, growing louder and faster and ending in *gritos*, whistles, and whoops.

Those immigrants who toil under the weight of global capitalism and the most extensive deportation regime in US history are also those least available to combat their oppression. This dilemma lies at the heart of immigrant political action in the present: potentially transformative, but also moored to the pressing material needs of life as a Mexican immigrant. The house meeting is an ideal site to observe the confluence of the everyday and the historic. Here organizers work to translate individual grievances as a group condition best addressed through collective action. That the house meeting occurs just before Vicky's daughter's 18th birthday party reveals the central role of networks of kin, coworkers, comadres, and compadres in the cultivation of a political constituency.⁹ The everyday is both the seat of grievance and the place where collective redress may begin.

But note also the way that party attendees balked at invitations to future movement work like hosting a house meeting or showing up to a community forum. Widespread fear of *la migra* and the more mundane priorities of work and family trump movement participation. For working-class Mexican immigrants, especially those without documentation, their social movements cannot be understood without attention to the quotidian conditions of their everyday lives, which simultaneously enable and constrain their political expression.

This proposition can be specified further. The dynamics of the house meeting are linked to broader demographic, political, and legal shifts begun in earnest in the mid-1960s. A major unanticipated consequence of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Hart-Celler), which re-

placed the racist national origins system with the system that we have today,¹⁰ was that migration from Asia, Africa, and especially Latin America increased dramatically.¹¹ Now privileging family reunification and employer preferences, this shift in immigration policy and the waves of immigration that followed spurred the “browning of America.” In 1960, the US immigrant population was approximately 84 percent European and Canadian, 4 percent Asian, 10 percent Latin American, and 3 percent from other regions. By 2015, these figures had changed drastically, with 13 percent of immigrants coming from Europe and Canada, 27 percent from Asia, 51 percent from Latin America, and 9 percent from other regions.¹²

This transformation in the demographic composition of immigration translated into a broader shift in the United States in general. Consider that in 1965 Latinos represented 4 percent of the US population, Asian Americans less than 1 percent, and African Americans 11 percent, with the remaining 84 percent white. Driven by the historic shift in immigration policy, by 2015 Latinos represented 18 percent of the population, Asian Americans 6 percent, African Americans 12 percent, and whites 62 percent (with 2 percent from “other” groups).¹³ Fall 2015 marked the first time the majority of all K–12 public school students were racial minorities.¹⁴

Consequently, Latinos have become an increasingly important electoral constituency that regularly gives the majority of its vote share to the Democratic Party.¹⁵ Growing numbers of Latinos have produced new political constituencies whose growing political power has destabilized political arrangements related not only to immigration law and policy (e.g., Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), but also to education (e.g., bilingual education and in-state tuition), public safety (e.g., the California Values Act, limiting cooperation with ICE and driver’s licenses for undocumented immigrants in California and 11 other states), health care (e.g., undocumented immigrants’ access to the benefits of the Affordable Care Act in California), and current policing strategies (e.g., prosecutorial discretion and the rebranding of Secure Communities as the Prioritized Enforcement Program, focusing solely on serious and violent convicts).

At the same time, the issue of immigration generally and undocumented immigration specifically has reached crisis proportions.

Ramped up enforcement, beginning in the early 1990s with Operations Hold the Line in El Paso, Safeguard in Tucson, and Gatekeeper in San Diego,¹⁶ interrupted what were previously cyclical migration patterns in which predominantly Mexican immigrants would come to the United States for the harvest season and then return home. As the border was fortified, clandestine crossing became both more dangerous and more expensive, thereby encouraging migrants to settle permanently in the United States.¹⁷ Consequently, the numbers of undocumented immigrants skyrocketed from 3.5 million in 1990 to a peak of 12.2 million in 2007, then declining slightly and stabilizing at approximately 11 million through the present. In the post-9/11 moment, the Department of Homeland Security has doubled down on enforcement by bringing state and local governments into the work of immigration enforcement through a series of collaborative programs, a development referred to as devolution.¹⁸

As a consequence of these dual movements—greater numbers of migrants beleaguered by a more extensive immigration enforcement apparatus—immigrants’ grievances have become both more urgent and more important to American politics. Though a powerful and bipartisan “anti-migrant bloc” has thwarted many attempts at immigration reform,¹⁹ the growing political power of immigrants in the ballot box and in the streets represents a potential watershed in American politics. This situation, in which immigrants are economically necessary but socially undesirable, sustains their exploitation in the present, producing both a broadly shared set of grievances, as well as the conditions for redressing them.

How immigrants choose to confront their grievances brings us to the heart of this book. I am interested in the *relationship* between what I call the shell, or private strategies of avoidance and isolation, and immigrants’ instrumental activism, or their public and collective mobilization for material change. Considering the link between the everyday and the collective, between private and public contention, a different dilemma comes into view than the one signaled by the simultaneity of immigrants’ economic necessity and social undesirability. Though this theme has come to dominate the sociology of immigration, especially studies of migrant illegality,²⁰ I am interested in a rather different question. How do immigrants’ primary strategies for avoiding dispossession, de-

tention, and deportation by isolating themselves from risk both inspire and constrain their social movement organizing? Not simply the fact of their economic precarity, the material moorings of immigrant activism refer to the way that their activism is inspired and constrained by an imposed vulnerability that is sustained by increasingly greater numbers of state actors enforcing immigration law over larger swaths of geographic space. These historical forces create a context in which this gathering of Mexican immigrants at Vicky's home to discuss their grievances and their hopes for the future becomes possible, even probable. Turning inward, avoiding risk and isolating oneself and one's family from danger, is a necessary private strategy that simultaneously inspires and constrains the broadest expression of their resistance: social movement organizing. Everyday and individual acts of resistance exist on a continuum with collective mobilization. How are immigrants' strategies for managing their imposed vulnerability connected to what they do about it? Under what conditions do immigrants oscillate from reticence in private to resistance in public?

This tension between the everyday and the historic produces a certain periodicity of participation in social movements. The escalation and de-escalation of immigrant social movements, both in 2006 and in this study of local immigrant activism in California, reflect a choice between coping with dispossession, detention, and deportation in private versus in public. When Mexican immigrants are not taking to the streets or organizing legislative visits with their local congressional representatives, they have not forgone resistance. Rather the form of that resistance has slid to the other end of this continuum: toward private strategies of coping with risk by avoiding it in the first place. While the social movement literature offers useful tools for understanding when potential activists are moved to participate in social movements, such an account is incomplete without attending to the conditions of their everyday lives that both create the potential for public contention and form a counterweight against it. In this way, the material moorings of immigrant daily life enable and constrain their activism. When collective mobilization emerges, as we know it does, the result is an immigrant politics anchored in the material conditions of their lives that seek not to transcend but to burrow into the institutions of work and family that attend legal status and substantive belonging.

Power and Precarity

This dilemma of recruiting immigrants to social movement work is as historical as it is biographical. Immigrant action is tethered to the economic, political, and social history of migration out of which it arises: a history that I detail in the next chapter. That the effects of these historical transformations echo into the present teaches us that the past is not past. It is a “seething presence,” conditioning the present and shaping the horizons of their expectations for the future. This is a question of agency: purposive human action, individual and collective, undertaken from a particular social location.²¹ Given its central place in this text, how might we make sense of it?

In *Ghostly Matters*, Gordon describes the abiding grip of the past on present arrangements and its influence on the horizons of our expectations.²² Immigrant agency, arising as it does from a history of dispossession and the threat of future displacement, is not the opposite of subjection exactly. Instead it is both enabled and constrained by it. To understand the double bind of precarity and power, we must first define power and clarify its relationship to agency. Power is typically defined negatively as domination or oppression. Power can certainly take this form, but Foucault famously countered this popular notion, arguing instead that power refers to networked relations of force that are as productive and disciplinary as they are repressive.²³ Power does not weigh down on us from above. Instead, it produces subjects from below. Power is not an object to be acquired or wielded, but a name for the complex ways that these relations of force unfold all around us, producing in us desires, orientations, and commitments that we come to understand as uniquely our own. In this formulation, power and agency are not counterposed to one another. Because there is no “out” to power, no a priori standpoint that is not inflected by these relations of force, we can think of agency not as opposed to power, but instead as arising from it. Agency arises from the histories, structures, and situated desires of subjects for whom we must reserve in our analyses a “complex personhood”:

Complex personhood means that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves. Complex personhood means that even those called “Other” are

never never that. Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society's problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward. Complex personhood means that people get tired and some are just plain lazy. Complex personhood means that groups of people will act together, that they will vehemently disagree with and sometimes harm each other, and that they will do both at the same time and expect the rest of us to figure it out for ourselves, intervening and withdrawing as the situation requires.²⁴

Because immigrant power arises from conditions of precarity, a diversity of responses is assured. Whether individual or collective, aimed at transforming institutions or simply inhabiting them, immigrant action is both inspired and constrained by the asymmetric relations of power that mark the Mexican immigrant experience in the United States. The politics that emerge from this double bind of precarity and power are at once liberatory and pragmatic. To hold to such an expansive (and also limited) notion of immigrant power is to eschew both romanticizing and underestimating immigrant agency, haunted as it is by a long history of exploitation, dispossession, and displacement. By embracing situated agency and complex personhood, this book offers a novel consideration of the way immigrants' lives form both the aspirational basis for their politics and their material mooring.

From Social Control to Situated Resistance

The notion that immigrants are economically essential but socially expendable constitutes one of the defining features of the Mexican immigrant experience. This contradiction is sustained by legal violence that hampers the life chances of immigrants²⁵—documented, undocumented, and quasi-documented alike—in the deportation nation.²⁶ Deportability, or the threat of deportation, sustains the exploitation of undocumented immigrants:²⁷ a dynamic amplified by the growing overlap between criminal and immigration law (crimmigration)²⁸ and the increasing involvement of state and local government in immigration enforcement (devolution). This focus on social control, what is done to

immigrants, is evident in studies of the many facets of the immigrant subordination, whether related to deportation,²⁹ detention,³⁰ sentencing,³¹ border control,³² global capitalism,³³ devolution,³⁴ everyday life,³⁵ work,³⁶ terrorism,³⁷ education,³⁸ or the family.³⁹ And yet, how immigrants who are caught in this contradictory situation manage and respond to their imposed vulnerability, individually and collectively, has received far less attention in the immigration literature.

Though the structure of immigrant subordination provides indispensable context for this study, it is not its focus. Josiah Heyman has called on immigration scholars “to shift our thinking about migration illegality from what is done to people, a certain status imposed upon them, to how they experience and act on it.”⁴⁰ And, indeed, immigration scholars have increasingly examined what immigrants do in response to their marginalization.

Organized in a typology, immigrants’ responses to precarity can be described as (1) “slantwise” activity, (2) “everyday” resistance, (3) advocacy and civic participation, and (4) social movement organizing. Slantwise, as Campbell and Heyman define it, refers to behaviors and actions that may either obstruct or reinforce existing relations of power and that are engaged in out of necessity, survival, or convenience, but do not *intend* resistance.⁴¹ Everyday resistance, or “weapons of the weak,”⁴² by contrast, includes strategies such as ignoring a deportation order or burning off one’s fingertips in order to avoid deportation.⁴³ Advocacy refers to working within and against legal systems to contest a deportation order or otherwise advance the social standing and political power of immigrants from within institutional channels, like elections or participation in civic organizations.⁴⁴ Collective mobilization includes participation in social movement organizing that seeks to alter legal and political structures from their outside and in a significant and lasting way.⁴⁵

The focus of a particular scholar’s work from slantwise to social movement organizing produces varied empirical portraits of the scope and efficacy of immigrant agency and action. In Angela García’s “Hidden in Plain Sight,” for instance, she argues that undocumented immigrants, who have settled in restrictive locales that have embraced local immigration enforcement, strategically pass as US-born Latinos by performing assimilation—remaining calm in the presence of a police officer, speaking

English, keeping their cars clean and without dents—in order to avoid the scrutiny of police.⁴⁶ Contrast García's focus on passing and assimilation to Kim Voss and Irene Bloemraad's examination of immigrant social movements in their edited volume *Rallying for Immigrant Rights*.⁴⁷ In their introductory chapter, Bloemraad, Voss, and Lee draw on the social movement literature to explain the escalation and de-escalation of immigrant rights movements.⁴⁸ To explain those historic marches, they highlight the importance of mobilizing structures like civic and community organizations, threats to immigrants' rights and resources, and compelling narrative frames related to work and family. These important studies produce rather different expressions of immigrant agency ranging from reticence to resistance. And while some scholars have examined the relationships between different forms of immigrant agency, such as the way civic participation in schools, churches, and hometown associations undergirds collective mobilization,⁴⁹ this book distinguishes itself by centering the relationship between the most dissimilar forms of immigrant agency: everyday avoidance or insulation and social movement organizing.

Respondents' narratives illustrate the difference in the scope of and motivation for immigrant action individually in private versus collectively in public. Consider the experience of Xiomara, housekeeper and undocumented single mother of three. Xiomara is the kind of person toward whom many people gravitate. Short in stature with her tight curls tied back in a short ponytail, she radiates positivity and warmth. She exudes an indefatigable energy made all the more impressive in spite of, or perhaps because of, all that she has endured. And endured she has, largely for her three sons, one of whom, like her, is undocumented. When I sat with Xiomara in the light-filled kitchen of her small first-floor apartment, she shared openly, pausing thoughtfully before she answered a question.

Xiomara fled to the United States because of the domestic violence she faced from her husband in Zacatecas. She encountered a similar situation when she arrived in the United States in 2001. Afraid to call the police because of her status, she called them for help only after her abuser began threatening her young son. Until that point, she had made a habit of avoiding police and other authority figures to ward off the threats of car impoundment and deportation.

When I asked her about her previous interactions with police officers, she said, “I know and understand that I don’t have a license and I’m breaking the law, but it is purely out of necessity. Purely out of necessity.” She understands her relationship to the law, but knowingly violates it out of necessity. Garcia documents a similar sentiment in an exchange between an undocumented immigrant and an immigration judge in the mid-1950s in the midst of the deportation program pejoratively dubbed “Operation Wetback”: “The judge asked the man: Don’t you respect the laws of this country?’ To which he replied, ‘Our necessities know no law.’”⁵⁰ These examples reveal knowing violation of the law, but done as a matter of necessity, not intentional defiance. Similar strategies emerged in my conversations with other respondents: avoiding driving when it was not absolutely necessary for fear of having their cars impounded, locking their children in the bathroom when ICE came knocking, and generally avoiding contact with those outside their networks of immediate family and close friends.

The question of whether these actions “count” as resistance hinges, in large part, on intent,⁵¹ or knowing defiance even when the action is motivated, primarily or in part, by necessity or survival.⁵² In Scott’s seminal *Weapons of the Weak*, peasants in Sedaka, Malaysia, during the green revolution engaged in “everyday” resistance, such as poaching from private land.⁵³ In Campbell and Heyman’s study, by contrast, the immigrants living in an impromptu *colonia* along the US-Mexico border developed unconventional housing arrangements and generally distrusted census takers, making their enumeration difficult and confounding the state’s attempt to identify these migrants.⁵⁴ While the peasants in Sedaka knew they were defying the law in order to survive, the migrants in this *colonia* did not clearly understand the law or its role in their lives. For Scott, peasants in Sedaka intended to resist. For Campbell and Heyman, immigrants living in this *colonia* did not *intend* to resist and, moreover, did not often *know* that they were impeding the efforts of the state or violating the law.

The Mexican immigrants with whom I worked, by contrast, *knew* that they were breaking the law, but did not *intend* to. They used avoidance—hiding when ICE was nearby, limiting their driving all the while knowing that they needed a license but did not qualify for one—to insulate themselves from the risks that they knew they ran as

undocumented immigrants, but did not do so intentionally in order to defy the state. Instead, they did so as a matter of necessity. These strategies compose the shell: to turn inward in an effort to limit exposure to risk. As I argue in Chapter 3, these strategies mitigate risk at the same time as they form a barrier against broader civic and political engagement.

The risk management that Xiomara must undertake is markedly different from the work of a community organizer. Esmeralda—primary informant and longtime volunteer organizer with La Unión—is also small in stature, but brimming over with charisma. She speaks with a pronounced Mexican accent that lends her fluent English a certain rhythm and also a certain self-possession. A longtime South City resident and naturalized citizen, she recounts the story of her late father who immigrated to the United States from Mexico City under the Bracero Program during World War II. Sitting across from her desk at a local elementary school where she works as a community liaison, she recalls a story that her father used to tell around the dinner table. Just shy of 20 years old, he worked laying railroad ties. As injured soldiers returned from war, the Red Cross held blood drives nearby. The *capataces* or foremen demanded that the braceros participate. Esmeralda recounts her father's challenge to the bosses: "That's funny because, see, I cannot drink from the same water fountains, I cannot sit in the same places that they do on the bus, I cannot get into a bar." He ultimately convinced many of his fellow braceros not to give blood. As a child, Esmeralda thought these were just stories, all bombast. Later, taking Chicano studies courses in college, she realized:

Oh my God [she'd often exclaim "OMD," short for "Oh my Dios"], my father, it was bigger than that, bigger than that, so that's why I totally believe in what I do. Because since my father passed away a few years ago, but he would be very upset if I'm here doing this and not doing it properly, you know, so it's like, "I have to do it, I have no choice."

A family legacy of activism incubated by the protections of citizenship and her role as a community leader suggest the way the confluence of biography, law, and place animates Esmeralda's commitment to community organizing.⁵⁵ This orientation is markedly different from Xiomara's

relationship to politics and contention. Their overlapping social locations as Mexican immigrant women are differentiated by the varying class, legal, and occupational spaces that they inhabit. Their motivation for activism is inflected by these differences.

Xiomara, with Esmeralda's encouragement, participates actively in La Unión campaigns, but her motivation remains inspired and constrained by the material urgency of making life as a single undocumented mother of three children. By contrast, Esmeralda's motivation for activism is driven by a necessity of a rather different kind. The example of her father, her secure legal status, and her position as a community leader to whom many immigrants turn to for support inform an expansive sense of responsibility for others. She is also not beleaguered by the deportation regime that proliferates an immobilizing fear and uncertainty among her undocumented counterparts, nor is she beset by the material insecurities that are sustained by that regime.

These two examples of immigrant agency provide useful bookends for the spectrum of immigrant agency I observed over the course of my fieldwork: avoidance and insulation, on the one hand, and social movement organizing, on the other. The former is individual in scope and immediate in term, engaged in out of necessity and not necessarily intending resistance, while the latter is collective, future-oriented, and intent on the transformation of those exploitative structures that have hemmed in immigrants. The material moorings of immigrant activism refer to the way the former type of agency both motivates and constrains the latter. It is here that scholars of social movements and resistance more broadly provide a springboard for theorizing this relationship between everyday risk management and historic collective action.

Continuums of Contention

Social movement scholars have long recognized that grievances alone do not spur collective action. Immigrants' grievances are many and widespread, while collective action is a far rarer thing. So, under what conditions is grievance addressed collectively? When do immigrant expressions of agency slide along this continuum of contention from the private risk management characteristic of the shell to the public and collective resistance that defines a social movement?⁵⁶

Over several generations of study, social movement scholars have offered various theories that explain the emergence of social movements, moving through breakdown and strain theories to resource mobilization and political process theory. The last of these is the dominant approach today. Pioneered by Charles Tilly and Doug McAdam, political process theory explains social movements with three factors: mobilizing structures, political opportunities, and framing processes.⁵⁷ Social movement organizations cultivate both the economic and human capital needed to sustain social movements. Mobilization emerges when cues in the broader political environment signal that an opportunity to press a claim may be successful or when threats to vulnerable communities' rights and resources motivate people to come together to protect them (as with the marches of 2006, which were largely a response to the Sensenbrenner Bill [H.R. 4437] that would have funded 700 miles of double-layered fencing along the US-Mexico border, among other things). Participants are drawn to social movements when organizers use narrative frames that resonate with activists.⁵⁸

Political process theory emphasizes structures and institutions. Scholars focused on "micromobilization,"⁵⁹ by contrast, offer a corrective to this structural emphasis by focusing on the way movements develop cultures and build collective identity through ongoing interactions between organizers and potential activists. Threats must be interpreted as such and attributed to responsible parties, opportunities for action must be perceived, and motivation for participation must be cultivated, sustained, and channeled. In conversations between organizers and local residents, they stressed both the broadly shared quality of their grievances and their collective responsibility for redressing those grievances. The cultivation of this social movement culture leverages already existing immigrant networks to enhance participation by reinforcing and politicizing already existing ties among neighbors, family members, and friends.

While networks and frames have long been a part of social movement theory, the social movement organization itself is very often the locus of these inquires. And rightfully so given that organizations are so often the site where consciousness is raised, collectivity is fostered, and strategy is devised. And yet, so much of what undocumented Mexican immigrants specifically and vulnerable populations generally do to manage what threatens them happens outside the purview of social movement

organizations and so the social movement literature. The avoidance and isolation that make up the bulk of immigrants' responses to the deportation regime and its abettors inform and constrain their social movement work. Though attention to the everyday is not new to the social movement scholars,⁶⁰ it is not only the disruption of the quotidian that inspires social movement participation. Immigrants' primary strategy for managing risk in everyday life—the shell—encumbers, inspires, and shapes the tactics and demands of their social movements. The interview data, in particular, allow for this attention to everyday forms of agency outside my observations at La Unión.

The everyday, in other words, is prior to the organization. And it is in the everyday practices of the shell that we find the bulk of immigrant agency, which seeks not to transform their surroundings, but to manage and cope with its risks. My point is not simply to highlight the diversity of immigrants' responses to their imposed precarity. The *relationship* between these two distinct forms of immigrant agency must be theorized if we are to understand the concrete barriers immigrants face to political engagement, as well as the scope of their activism when those barriers are overcome.

The Everyday and the Historic

In my view, then, this link between the everyday and the historic, between the shell and collective mobilization, is a crucial piece of the immigrant social movement puzzle. Working both within and across disciplines, several scholars have looked closely at the relationship between quotidian survival and mass movements. In Vicki Ruiz's study of women cannery workers in 1930s southern California, for example, she argues that Mexican women's labor organizing was successful, in part, because it was sustained by a cannery *culture*. "The extension of family and friend networks inside southern California food processing plants," she explains, "nurtured the development of a closely-knit work environment" that supported later labor organizing efforts.⁶¹ A similar network of kin and neighbors was evident in the house party that opens this book.

Asef Bayat offers perhaps the most elaborated theory of this connection with the "quiet encroachment of the ordinary,"⁶² which he defines

as a “silent, patient, protracted, and pervasive advancement of ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive hardships and better their lives.”⁶³ Bayat goes on to argue that largely leaderless and unstructured episodic collective action emerges when their gains are threatened.⁶⁴ Bayat’s explicit consideration of the relationship between individual and collective modes of survival and politics is an especially useful touchstone because, as with Mexican immigrants in this study, it moors the politics that emerge from this encroachment to the daily struggle to better oneself and one’s family. In both cases, we see the agency of subordinated groups in their gradual transformation of the demographic and political composition of the nation, claiming rights and resources commensurate with their contributions to community and economy.

Unlike the collective action Bayat describes, however, immigrant social movement organizing is not leaderless and unstructured. In line with emerging scholarship on immigrant collective action,⁶⁵ their mobilization is not simply spontaneous or reactive, but cultivated in fairly traditional social movement organizational settings and emerges under conditions of both threat and growing political opportunity (see Chapter 5).⁶⁶ Importantly, Bayat’s argument is set against the backdrop of an assault on civil society by authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and abetted by Western states, which requires the development of a new vocabulary for agency and politics. Civil society in the United States may well be under siege by the forces of neoliberalism, and still Central California is not Baghdad. Formal social movement organizing is still possible, so the challenge in the context of US immigration is to rethink not “life as politics,” but rather the way that life tethers politics to its exigencies. Immigrant participants engaged in the collective work of making history are both enabled and constrained by the necessary work of making life, of erecting some bulwark of stability in the face of precarity.

The material moorings of immigrant activism that I propose are much closer to Richard Flacks’s analysis that he lays out in *Making History: The American Left and the American Mind*.⁶⁷ There he argued “the individual is best understood as acting politically out of a commitment to his or her everyday life.”⁶⁸ Daily life is marked by a dialectic relationship between our egocentrism and our capacity for “cooperation, coordination, and harmony.”⁶⁹ He refines this proposition by noting that those members of

the power elite, whose everyday lives are engaged in the work of making history, like engineering social policy, guiding economic development, and so on, will feel as though these two realms overlap substantially. For those on the margins of social life, like (undocumented) Mexican immigrants, these realms will feel rather more distant from one another. For this latter group, then, to intervene in the historic requires a disruption or a break from the routines of the everyday. In the context of a broadly shared American culture that stresses individual liberty (in exchange for often alienating, boring, and unfulfilling labor) over collective democratic practice, troubles are often resolved or managed in private. And unless we experience strong positive attachment to an ethnic group or party, we cope with grievances through the expansion and enjoyment of time and resources in the private realm.⁷⁰

So, when do movements emerge? Flacks, echoing political process theory, argues that major and minor disruptions to everyday life can lead to collective action when those communities have the space to physically gather, to communicate and attribute their grievances in a shared language, and to lay out credible lines of action that might reasonably result in the reduction or elimination of that threat. Resistance, therefore, begins with the “*conservative* impulse to preserve the ways of life that are felt to be endangered.”⁷¹ Which is to say that movement actors will engage in the work of making history out of a commitment to their daily lives. De-escalation will follow mobilization when those threats are reduced or when the organizations that sustain these movements are weakened by either internal mismanagement or reductions in funding as a consequence, for instance, of the Great Recession of 2008 (see Chapter 5).

The idea of the material moorings of immigrant activism builds on these insights by examining the way this dialectic relationship between the everyday and the historic informs both the hopes immigrants have for themselves in the future and their motivations for participation in social movement work, as well as in the tactics that participants and organizers adopt to pursue those goals. Moreover, the break from routine that participation in social movement work necessitates is not simply a break from the routines of daily life, but a break from a habituated response to deportation and dispossession (in the case of undocumented immigrants) and the expenditure of what scarce free time Mexican

immigrants have for activities beyond the reproduction of the family. The tension between the everyday and the historic is exacerbated by a formal and informal immigration enforcement regime that sustains immigrants' exploitation and necessitates these protective strategies of avoidance and isolation. In other words, this tension between the everyday and the historic is both more acute for Mexican immigrants than for other activists and carried through to their motivation for activism. This relationship between the everyday (the shell) and the historic (social movement organizing) produces an instrumental politics that engages in protest to the extent that the small treasures that immigrants have secured through the travails of everyday life may be shored up by participating in historic collective action. The central contribution of this book, therefore, is a conceptualization of the way immigrant politics are both animated and limited by their social location as a racialized and economically subordinated group: what I refer to as the material moorings of immigrant action.

The Study

Before conceiving of the research study that forms the basis of this book, I was a volunteer for La Unión. My experience there raised a series of questions about immigrant incorporation and politics. As I sat in local immigrant families' living rooms, attended know-your-rights workshops, marched and rallied with coalitions of community leaders, the broad questions that were raised in my work with La Unión narrowed and came into conversation with the academic literature on immigration and social movements. First, what are the barriers to participation in social movement organizing and civic engagement for Mexican immigrants in these two cities? How are these barriers connected to wider structures of apprehension, deportation, and dispossession, which Mexican immigrants, especially the undocumented, must manage on a daily basis? Second, what are the micro-interactional processes among community members and community organizers that bring people into the social movement work of La Unión? And when they decide to become involved in this work, how can we conceptualize their activism? Finally, if we take a comparative meso-level view of these two communities, under what political conditions does immigrant mobilization emerge?

What is the relationship between broader political conditions and the social form of immigrant mobilization? In general, I examine the barriers to social movement participation and ask how they are overcome, at both the micro level of interaction and the meso level of social movement organizing.

The data for this study were collected using a multi-sited ethnography that included three years of participant observation from November 2009 through August 2012, but most intensively in the eight-month period between January and August 2012, and in depth, semistructured interviews with 61 respondents. Broadly, the goal for this fieldwork was to understand the challenges immigrants faced to incorporation in their local communities; how they encountered and negotiated the risks of apprehension, deportation, and property loss in their daily lives; and whether and when they were moved to act collectively. To collect these data, I volunteered with and eventually became a board member of *La Unión*: a small immigrant advocacy organization on California's Central Coast.

In the early 2000s, *La Unión* emerged out of a local living wage campaign and later evolved into a formal, multi-issue, social movement organization focused on workers' rights, public housing, and immigrant rights. *La Unión* operated as an advocacy organization and did not offer direct services, except to refer their immigrant constituents to places that did. A central part of *La Unión*'s organizing strategy involves cultivating organic leadership by providing its constituents with the tools, training, and resources to advocate for themselves. Using a committee structure, organizers identified and worked closely with core community leaders who were then responsible for gathering neighbors, friends, and family members together for a variety of activities related to the particular issue they were working on. These activities included house meetings, know-your-rights workshops, precinct walks, legislative visits, and so on. Campaigns were developed with the input of the community and addressed local issues related to improved access to public transit, for instance, and dovetailed with national efforts for immigration reform. During moments of national mobilization, for example, we hosted local press conferences in support of immigration reform but also traveled to nearby large cities to join in solidarity with larger, regional organizations. During the bulk of my observations, however, no opportunity

existed for national reform. Consequently, organizing efforts focused on local and sometimes state-level targets.

The fieldwork began as I helped to organize house meeting campaigns in South City and then in North City. It immediately became clear that the support of primary informants would be essential in this study. Organizers in both North City and South City urged meeting participants to “tell their stories” and vouched for my trustworthiness. Having unsuccessfully tried to approach immigrant residents on my own in other community settings, I was acutely aware of the importance of the word of a trusted community leader in securing their participation in this project. Over time and with the essential help of primary informants, I slowly developed trust with members of the Mexican immigrant community, which enabled me to build a snowball sample and to expand the number of participants, most of whom were not previously involved with the social justice work of *La Unión*.

Comparative Ethnography

One of the distinguishing features of the contemporary immigration enforcement apparatus is that state and local governments have gotten in on the act. As I describe in greater detail in the next chapter, programs like the Criminal Alien Program,⁷² composed of Secure Communities (rebranded as the Prioritized Enforcement Program) and 287(g), among others, have shouldered local police with the responsibilities typically reserved for ICE.

But these programs have been rolled out unevenly and met by resistance from many immigrant rights social movement organizations (SMOs) and some local police. The resultant geography of local immigration enforcement is “multilayered” and “patchwork.”⁷³ Given the uneven quality of the contemporary deportation regime, I chose two cities that capture the empirical variation in local political climates that exists from city to city across the United States: from the conservative and restrictive attitudes and policies typical in places like Hazelton, Pennsylvania, and Maricopa County, Arizona, to the relatively more progressive typical of places like San Francisco and Bell, California. The two cities I consider are located at the southern and northern ends of one county in Central California; South City represents the more progressive case, North City the

repressive case. Though immigrant respondents in both North City and South City shared grievances in common—fear of detention, deportation, and car impoundments—the distinctly conservative climate in North City incubated anti-immigrant sentiment and made life more challenging for immigrant residents there. As I recount at the beginning of Chapter 5, for instance, the mayor of North City barred the Mexican consulate from hosting “mobile consulate” events, in which the consul would offer various services to those Mexican expatriates living several hours north of the consul’s Los Angeles office. At about the same time, in South City the mayor had made a public statement of support for the TRUST Act, which was ultimately signed into state law and mandated local police noncooperation with the Secure Communities deportation program (except in cases where an individual was charged with a “serious” offense).

These cities are also characterized by different immigrant demographics: South City, home to long-term immigrants with families and working in service work, home care, and local restaurants, and North City, home to a larger population of seasonal agricultural laborers. Organizers and community members themselves often compared the cities. La Unión maintained offices in both places, and some North City residents attended the university in South City. Because these cities were both situated in one county jurisdiction and shared some elected officials, their comparison emerged from residents’ and organizers’ own conceptualization of their sphere of influence. I adopt this comparison here not only because it reflects the empirical variation in local political climates and threat for immigrants, but also because the contrast was often drawn in the minds of Mexican immigrants living in either place.

In my observations, these differences in climate mattered most not in the daily work of avoidance and insulation in which immigrants in both cities engaged, but in the social movement tactics adopted when collective mobilization emerged. Though the chapters in this book are meant to be read in order, for readers interested in the comparative quality of the data and social movement theory, Chapter 5 will be of particular interest.

The Role of the Researcher

Participants were initially cordial to me, a biracial Mexican American and white graduate student collecting data in Mexican immigrant

communities, but were far from trusting. Despite several years working with La Unión, I was unfamiliar with many members of the community, especially the majority of participants who had not worked with La Unión prior to these house meetings. It was not until well-known and respected organizers in North City and South City vouched for me that immigrant residents began speaking to me, agreed to be interviewed, and shared their stories. I believe that over time respondents began to regard me less as a categorical outsider and more as a tenuously trustworthy ally whom they could support and even regard as a role model.

My proficient, but still formal, Spanish became less of a boundary marker of my outsider status and was increasingly regarded as an admirable (but perhaps still tragicomic) effort to reclaim language and culture after generations of assimilationist pressure. After interviews, respondents often commented that they were glad to see me working toward an advanced degree, something several respondents mentioned they wanted for their own children. While I was never regarded as an insider, my relationships with respected community leaders and my ongoing work with La Unión transformed the way respondents viewed my educational background, racial identity, and language skills. At a minimum, respondents came to regard me as a well-meaning, albeit awkward, ally and, at best, as a model of the kind of occupational and educational mobility they wanted for their own children.

For the sake of brevity, readers interested in an expanded discussion of the methodology—including details related to access to the community, the study timeline, respondent demographics, additional sampling considerations, and the interview process—can turn to the appendix.

Limitations

The dynamic interplay of the everyday and the historic that I attempt to capture with the material moorings of Mexican immigrant action begs a question about whether this same dynamic is present in the social movement work of other immigrant groups, especially the DREAMers. Comprising the 1.5 generation, or the generation of immigrants who came to the United States as children, the DREAMers initially adopted anonymous and more subdued forms of activism only to later become more radical in their tactics and their demands: engaging in

civil disobedience, calling for executive action in the face of stymied reform, and expanding their claims to legalization for their parents. Leisy Abrego explains that this difference between the limited activism of first-generation immigrants compared to the contentious activity of the 1.5 generation stems from their differing legal consciousness.⁷⁴ The first-generation experience is distinguished by an abiding fear of deportation instilled at the time of their crossing. Their illegal status remains salient at work: the primary institution in which they are socialized. This fear leads to the sense that collective mobilization is too risky or ineffective. Members of the 1.5 generation, by contrast, do not viscerally recall the experience of their clandestine crossing as children and are therefore less culpable for their status than their parents. They are often unaware of their legal status while they are in school: an institution that lends them a sense of safety and stimulates their political consciousness. This alternate socialization leads to a willingness and availability for protest that is not shared by their parents.

This study is of the former, first-generation group. Consequently, the material moorings of immigrant activism are likely to apply to the first generation and not to 1.5-generation immigrant youth, a small minority in my sample. Most respondents were between 40 and 60 years old and were first-generation immigrants of varying statuses who were married, working, and raising children. Their social location was one of biographical unavailability for protest, to reverse Doug McAdam's proposition,⁷⁵ and not only because they were fearful of deportation, though this was a powerful disincentive. First-generation undocumented Mexican immigrants managed that fear through the avoidance and isolation characteristic of the shell and thereby shored up the fragile economic gains they have made since their migration. In this way, fear is not a monolithic force that stands outside of them, but is threaded through their own sense of agency. Their default mode is to avoid and isolate themselves and their loved ones for whom they are responsible in order to protect them from deportation and dispossession and to ward off the material precarity that attends life as a working-class immigrant in California.

Material Moorings and the Horizons of Latino Politics

“We want your labor, but we don’t want you”: observers critical of the current immigration enforcement regime have long highlighted the untenability of a political and economic system dependent on immigrant labor, yet unwilling to provide reasonable pathways to full membership. Immanent to this dilemma of economic necessity, on the one hand, and social marginalization, on the other, is also the possibility of renewed democratic practice, an invitation to politics as a consequence of migration. Much of the immigration literature does not account for immigrants’ individual or collective expressions of agency as they negotiate this dilemma, nor the link between them. Among social movement scholars, an overreliance on organizations as the point of entry for understanding movement emergence risks ignoring the everyday. And not only its disruption, but the way the quotidian inspires and constrains movement participation, producing a certain periodicity of participation and an orientation to collective mobilization for the sake of securing the gains made in the realm of the everyday.

Decades of sustained Latin American migration, predominated by Mexican immigrants, from the margins of the global economy back to one of its imperial centers has transformed community and country. Immigrants alter the landscape and rhythm of the communities where they settle. Performing cultural citizenship,⁷⁶ they speak their native languages, worship, engage in leisure, create art, open businesses, and labor in formal and informal economies, all the while contributing to and utilizing local, state, and national resources.⁷⁷ These demographic and cultural transformations are accompanied by political change. As the “browning of America” proceeds apace, Latinos, many of whom are or are related to immigrants, exercise their growing political power at the ballot box and in the streets. This growing constituency, which breaks to the left, introduces a potentially transformative element to the American political scene. Evidenced in the most recent election returns, the May Day marches of 2006, the activism of the DREAMers and their parents, and state- and local-level struggles unfolding around the nation, the emergence of a broad and vigorous Latino politics may represent a watershed in American politics more generally.

From immigration reform to bilingual education, these battles have consolidated a Latino constituency whose aspirations are tethered to their quotidian struggle to *adelantarse*. This is a rather different dilemma than the one signaled by the scholarly refrain that “we want your labor, but we don’t want you.” Their condition is not only one of deportability and marginalization, but also one of latent political power. The historical and political dynamic by which decades of immigration have ushered in a new and potentially transformative political constituency raises questions about opportunities for and barriers to immigrant social movement organizing. When immigrant activism does emerge, as we know it does, what motivates immigrants’ participation and what claims do they articulate? What can immigrant social movements teach us about power and resistance?

Over the course of my fieldwork, I have been struck by the pragmatic scope of immigrant demands: for driver’s licenses, a social security number, access to credit, better educational opportunities, and basic economic mobility. The material moorings of the immigrant rights movement reflect this oscillation from the everyday to the historic not for the sake of making history itself, but in an effort to secure through collective action those material gains that inspired their migration in the first place. The scope of immigrant political claims—the horizons of their expectations—is shaped by the urgency of their material demands: demands made urgent as a consequence of the racialization of their communities and the subordination of their labor.

Here, I counter the claims of some scholars who have observed in immigrant politics a radical challenge to nationalism, the liberal state, territorial borders, emphasizing freedom of movement over immigrants’ incorporation into US cultural and economic life.⁷⁸ To make this counterclaim, however, is not to argue that such radical politics are necessarily at odds with the pragmatic claims making I observed in this study. It is rather to assert the empirical variation that exists among immigrants as they engage the complex calculus of naming injury, blaming actors or institutions, and claiming rights.⁷⁹ What explains these differing portrayals of immigrant agency and activism? Different SMOs embrace different organizing philosophies and strategies, shaping the tenor and content of the immigrants’ claims.⁸⁰ Scholars must also reckon with the irreducible variation that will always be present in a community as large

as the one denoted by the useful fiction of the terms “Latino” and “Latino immigrant.” Powerful and revolutionary constituencies, moreover, can be built out of campaigns making more modest and reformist claims. And yet, the de-escalation and fragmentation of the immigrant rights struggle after 2006, as well as my own observations of the reluctance that organizers regularly faced trying to recruit immigrant community members to social movement activism, suggest that while a more radical politics might be possible, it does not often emerge. Why not?

The notion of material moorings is meant to explain why immigrant activism emerges despite obstacles, and, when it does, why immigrants adopt certain claims and not others. To do this, I situate immigrant activism both in a broader historical context marked by massive demographic change and unprecedented enforcement, as well as in relationship to those other forms of everyday agency, like avoidance and insulation, that reflect the material exigencies of daily life as a Mexican immigrant in California and that moor their activism to those exigencies. My claim is not that a radical immigrant politics is not possible, but that those portrayals circulating in academic texts diverge from my observations in Central California. Immigrant respondents were less interested in transcending or undermining the nation-state than in burrowing more deeply into it so that they might avail themselves of the material resources and dignity that attend full membership.⁸¹

My observations illuminate what I see as a central dilemma in immigrant politics. Immigrant activism is linked to immigrants’ lived experience of legal and material precarity, and specifically to their everyday strategies for mitigating that precarity. When immigrant activism emerges, it remains tethered to its material inspiration, which, in turn, shapes immigrants’ goals. To inhabit the norms of citizenship, to avail themselves of those resources denied noncitizens, is to engage in a transformative immigrant politics whose focus remains instrumental in its effort to make history so that they might make life unburdened by the national hypocrisy of recruiting labor without expanding membership.⁸² The historian Walter Johnson argues that “collective resistance is, at bottom, a process of everyday organization, one that, in fact, depends upon connections and trust established in everyday actions.”⁸³ When organizers and community leaders build upon connections established among family and neighbors and when politics are introduced as a potential

remedy, then their grievances may be framed not as shame or solitary hardship, but as evidence of their “linked fate”⁸⁴ and the “political efficacy”⁸⁵ that can animate collective action.

What political action that emerges is not simply a counterpoint to the forces of social control and immiseration: state-guided global capitalism; immigration enforcement at all levels of government; myriad mechanisms of class subordination from wage theft to illegality as a bar to occupational mobility; and a Latino threat narrative buoyed by a long-standing American culture of racism and xenophobia.⁸⁶ These elements of global political economy and American law and culture themselves shape the social location out of which immigrant politics emerge. As with the “American letters” of a previous generation’s immigrants, today’s Mexican immigrants circulate the promise that abundant work opportunities can transform their quality of life: that hard work trumps the many impairments of inequality, that the wealth generated will be shared, that risks pay off. These material and cultural contexts powerfully shape the scope and character of immigrant agency in its many forms.

With the idea of material moorings, I wish to offer a complex and empirically grounded framework for understanding the way that resistance is not power’s counterpoint. Instead, relations of power shape resistance in profound ways. Consequently, the strategies for survival and contestation that emerge are better conceptualized as tethered to the everyday and historical forces that have brought large numbers of immigrants to the United States and created the conditions of inequality from which a pragmatic and potentially liberatory immigrant politics emerges. Born of the exigencies of material deprivation and the urgent work of stewarding family, the Mexican immigrants in this study largely sought to capture those benefits that attend citizenship, including a fair wage, access to credit, property, and education (especially their children’s), and to exit this life knowing they have provided those around them with a certain material comfort. These desires are born of the experience of precarity and inform immigrant agency in its various manifestations, big and small.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter 1, I provide a brief historical overview of immigration and immigration policy. I argue that early American history was marked by the categorical exclusion of certain racialized immigrant groups, while the 20th century witnessed the emergence of a new hegemony under which immigrants and their descendants were “included through exclusion.” This transformation is coextensive with the shifting meaning of race and new geopolitical and domestic policy interests. While US industry has long relied upon and recruited immigrant labor, these economic trends chafe up against nativist forces of exclusion at all levels of social life from local and popular opposition to national and legal restriction. Immigrants’ economic necessity coupled with their political and social exclusion sustains their exploitability in a segmented labor market.

If Chapter 1 offers a broad historical overview of immigrant marginalization, Chapter 2 hones in on one contemporary and informal practice of immigrant subordination: the car impoundment. Impoundment is an informal technology of immigration enforcement that impoverishes undocumented, unlicensed drivers and constitutes an instance of what Devon Carbado terms “racial naturalization.”⁸⁷ This local police practice, while nominally about traffic safety, constitutes a ritual of humiliation that impedes the economic and physical mobility of undocumented Mexican immigrants and naturalizes them not to US citizenship but to US racial hierarchy. This chapter also examines immigrants’ assessments of police in general. These range from the strongly positive to the strongly negative, revealing important variation in immigrants’ experience of police. Interestingly, even when immigrants’ assessments of police were strongly negative, they still reported an ambivalence about whether police can be trusted. While negative regard of police by working-class people of color is certainly not a new phenomenon, I argue that this ambivalence indicates an ongoing normative investment in the police as an institution despite the widespread understanding that they are engaged in racial profiling.

In Chapter 3, I argue that Mexican immigrants (both documented and undocumented alike) employ savvy strategies of avoidance and insulation to mitigate the threat of deportation and the confiscation of

their vehicles. Extending a metaphor passed down from Max Weber and Derek Sayer, I conceptualize these strategies and the general sense of fear and isolation articulated by many of my respondents as a “shell”: something that both protects Mexican immigrants from these risks, and serves as a barrier to participation in social movement organizing and the wider civic life of the communities in which they live and work. In other words, the same strategies engaged in as a form of protection also function as a barrier to civic engagement.

In Chapter 4, I argue that Mexican immigrants “come out of the shell” when they are engaged consistently by trusted community leaders supported by sustainable SMOs. These community leaders use a range of rhetorical strategies at the micro-interactional level to draw immigrants into social movement organizing. Immigrants themselves contribute to this process, often articulating a sophisticated understanding of their personal troubles and the wider social issues to which their troubles are connected. I describe those immigrants who decide to become involved in community organizing as “instrumental activists” who are willing to participate in social movement organizing, not due to a broad sense of social justice or a commitment to radical politics, but in order to secure the quotidian makings of a dignified and decent life composed of good work opportunities for themselves and educational and social mobility for their children.

Local political opportunity structures play an important role in shaping immigrants’ social movements, particularly the tactics they choose to press their claims. The comparative quality of the data comes into focus most clearly in Chapter 5. I compare one relatively progressive city to one relatively conservative city. Given the geographic expansion of immigration enforcement to state and local governments, I draw primarily on social movement theory to illustrate the way that the local political environment shapes the tactics that immigrants use to press their claims. I argue that growing threat does not repress mobilization, but leads to more confrontational social movement tactics. In the comparatively less threatening site, tactics took on a more collaborative tone.

In the conclusion, I explore three ways that immigrant politics, from the everyday to the collective, dovetail with and three ways they diverge from the expectations of neoliberal citizenship and its attendant emphases on individualism, self-reliance, flexibility, and self-discipline.

The notion of material moorings is presented here as a name for the dilemma in which many immigrants find themselves: inspired to action by urgent material grievances, but also constrained by that same quotidian urgency. I characterize these politics as neither wholly conformist nor radical, but as embodying both pragmatic and liberatory elements. This simultaneity suggests that immigrant politics contain within them a renewed democratic practice at the same time as they seek to inhabit the norms of hardworking, law-abiding, family-oriented citizens in waiting in order to erect a bulwark against the churn of precarity that inspired their migration in the first place.