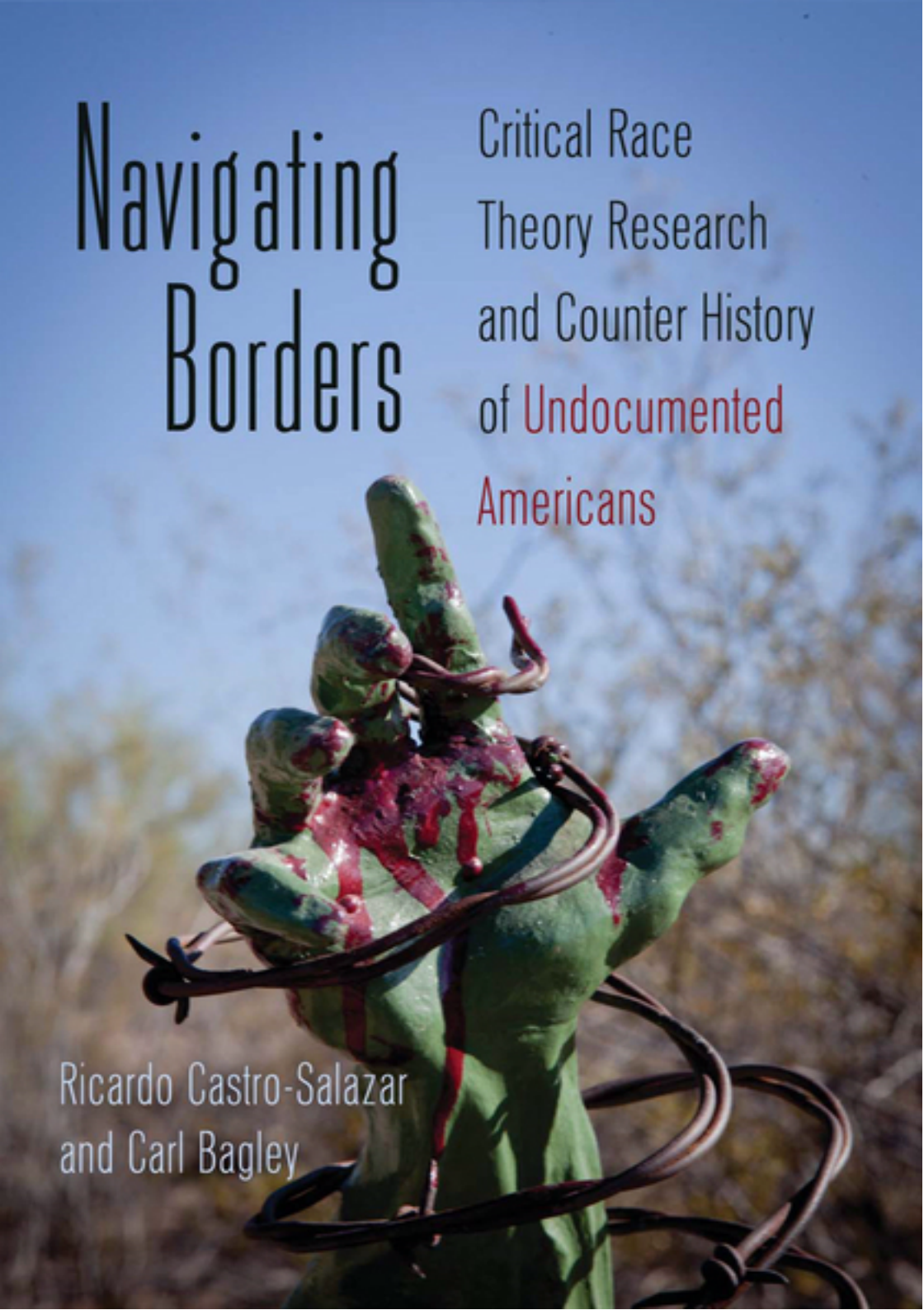
Navigating Borders

Critical Race Theory Research and Counter History of Undocumented Americans



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Navigating Conceptual Borders: Demarcating Coordinates and Boundaries

> History cannot "speak" except through human ventriloquism
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> —Donald Kelley (2006: 240)

> One can be impartial, and fair, and factual, and be untrue
>
> —Chris Hedges (2010)

History is not what occurred in the past, but merely a story of what people thought and experienced at the time an event occurred. Inevitably, the belief system and context of the narrator (the historian or individual recalling the past) influence any interpretation, modern or otherwise. Thus, historical narratives are continually retold and elucidated, undergoing vast transformation as they are reinterpreted at different points in time. As famously expressed in 1936 by G.M. Young, "the real central theme of history is not what happened, but what people felt about it when it was happening" (quoted by Brading, 1991). Since then, historical narratives of remote and current events have evolved dramatically, be they about crucial transformations like the French Revolution and the arrival of Europeans en masse to the Americas, or about the interpretation of historical texts like the Maya Codices and the Bible. Without changing a single word, successive reinterpretations of the U.S. Constitution have transformed into new paradigms providing for desegregation, gender equality, labor rights, political dissent, the expansion of civil rights, and the evolution of the political process. In order to make the new political reality continuous with the past, history had to be reexamined and revised in each of these cases. Such reinterpretations indicate an understanding by U.S. politicians and historians of the importance of historical narrative and its effect on national mindset. This makes damaging omissions and marginalizations of historical narratives even more damning, particularly when one considers the reputation the U.S. has earned of possessing a far-reaching amnesia. Scholars have repeatedly pointed

out that U.S. people and their leaders tend to be "chronic ignorers of history" (Molineu, 1990: 6).

This amnesia becomes damaging when it forms the boundaries of inclusiveness in modern narratives of U.S. identity and citizenship. The quotidian narratives of history and current events in the United States overlook that "America" encompasses two continents and includes Argentineans, Brazilians, Canadians, Colombians, Cubans, Dominicans, Guatemalans, Haitians, Jamaicans, Mexicans, Salvadorians, Venezuelans, and many other nations traveled by European explorers in the 1500s. In a proclivity for simplification and abbreviation, many U.S. people, *United Statesians* (we consider this term further later in the chapter), have forgotten that the United States is *of* America and not the other way around. The United States is located in North America but has shaped the realities of Central and South American nations. Those less conspicuous "Americas," also referred to as Latin America, are home to well over half a billion people who live in some of the most inegalitarian countries on Earth, whose economic and social disparities resemble a caricature of their northern, much richer neighbor. Those Americans, like peoples from underdeveloped nations around the globe, emigrate to industrialized countries in search for survival and opportunity. For historical, financial, geographical, and social reasons, most Latin Americans who emigrate seeking economic survival and opportunity move to the United States.

Like Americans from the United States, Americans from Latin America express many different identities, ethnic origins, and histories. This book tells the story of Americans who have been deprived of full Americanness both in the United States and in Latin America. It is about United Statesians who were born in Mexico and brought as minors, sometimes infants, to the United States. Many of these involuntary immigrants do not remember the land of their parents. They could have been born anywhere in the world, but their ethos still would be United Statesian. They are involuntary immigrants not only because they were brought to the U.S. involuntarily, but also because the U.S. legal system has labeled and discursively positioned them as "illegal immigrants." For them, however, being "American," having a United Statesian identity—like any other national identity—means having a sense of place, values, language, behaviors and attitudes that define one's sense of belonging to a particular society. Therefore, although they are not officially "U.S. citizens," they are historical, economic, cultural, linguistic, social, emotional, and even spiritual members of the U.S. and are indistinguishable from other United Statesians. They lack a U.S. birth certificate but possess all the intrinsic attributes of U.S. born citizens, have been educated in the U.S. system, and

have grown up pledging allegiance to the U.S. flag. They are undocumented Americans.

History forms a particularly important emphasis in the case of Mexican-origin Americans because of their unique foundation in the United States. Undocumented Americans of Mexican origin represent the modern echo of U.S. history, but their memories and stories are not predominant in the accepted historical "facts" of the majority. Their history, vis-à-vis the dominant version of American history, evokes Donald Kelley's assertion that

> There are no "facts." There were facts, no doubt; but all we have is their recollection, records, or remains; and again such evidence will be viewed differently by different historians. This is not a deeply epistemological argument, for if we can often establish that a particular event did occur, its historical presence remains a product of human imputation. In the forest the tree does not "fall" without an observer; the fact is meaningless, indeed nonexistent, without human apprehension (2006: 239–40).

Ironically, undocumented Americans of Mexican origin have a double American identity (United Statesian and Mexican) and possess a stronger historical connection with the American continent than the majority population in the U.S. People of Mexican origin, meaning those with a blend of indigenous and European heritage, lived in the lands that are now the Southwestern United States centuries before U.S. expansionism dispossessed Mexico of half of its territory. Those who perceive Mexican-origin Americans as a threat to American "Anglo-Protestant identity" do not overlook this; they fear that "No other immigrant group in U.S. history has asserted or could assert a historical claim to U.S. territory. Mexican and Mexican-Americans can and do make that claim" (Huntington, 2004a: 35). This book is not an apology for such a claim, nor does it support the Mexican takeover of the southwestern U.S. that some extremists accuse Mexicans of plotting. Such a naive pretension would be like demanding the return of all Native American lands to their original owners.

It has been expressed that Native Americans, or Amerindians, are the "true Americans" or "the only Americans who are not immigrants." Nonetheless, in contrast to the minuscule proportion of Amerindians who have survived European colonization in the United States, 30% of the Mexican people are predominantly Native American and 60% are *Mestizo*, meaning a mixture of Amerindians with Spanish and other Europeans (CIA, 2010). Statistically, this means that 90 percent of Mexicans have more Native American DNA in them than 99% of United Statesians who are not of Latin American origin. Furthermore, since Mexican-Americans have so much more indigenous ancestry than Anglo-Americans and, since the Amerindian legacy was stronger among the poor in Mexico (the majority of Mexican immigrants to the U.S.),

it has been argued that Mexican-Americans are the largest Native American group in the United States (Forbes, 1964). Hence, although Mexican-origin United Statesians have not been subject to the "blood quantum" laws used in the U.S. to determine Native Americanness, they also have a powerful reason to feel American in the most extensive sense.

This book has been written in the midst of growing anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican sentiment in the United States. Since the beginning of the century, xenophobia, nativism, ethnic hate, and racism have expanded like apocalyptic curses due to economic conditions, socio-political events, and demographic transformations. By October 2010, 61% of all Latinos in the U.S. felt that discrimination against Hispanics was a "major problem" across the nation (Lopez et al., 2010). FBI hate crime statistics support this perception: The previous year, a staggering 62.3% of all crimes committed due to the victims' ethnicity or national origin were perpetuated against Hispanics, the highest proportion in recorded history (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2010). Furthermore, according to FBI figures, out of 6,604 hate crimes perpetuated in the United States in 2009, 3,816 "were racially motivated" (*Ibid.*: 3).

Immigrants from Latin America are increasingly seen as a threat and, irrespective of their status, they are conflated with "illegals." Similarly, dark-skin Latino Americans, irrespective of their national origin, are commonly conflated with "Mexicans." Contrary to these negative trends, we argue that undocumented Americans, who are fully integrated to their communities, speak English, and are part of United Statesian socioeconomic structures, constitute an asset to the country. Furthermore, while their struggles, values, courage, and aspirations have been disparaged by anti-immigrant narratives, they have stories that are more complex than what is covered in the media. Their values are consistent with the principles on which the United States of America was founded. Their undocumented stories reveal honor, respect, hard work, liberty, and entrepreneurship that benefit the U.S. Many have faced racism, discrimination, and ostracism, and some have overcome great obstacles despite the odds. This book explores their stories and their history.

Although the research focuses on the stories of undocumented Americans of Mexican origin, their narratives echo the stories of innumerable other undocumented individuals in the United States. The stories in this book not only intersect with the lives of involuntary immigrants who came to this country as minors, but they are microcosms of the millions of human beings who live in the darkness of "illegality" as economic refugees. They have no official voice and are victims of human rights abuses, labor law infringements, and discrimination; thus they share similar untold stories of pain, human

resilience, and hope. Although our stories occurred in the state of Arizona, they resemble the undocumented stories of countless Americans across the nation who silently suffer similar uncertainties and fears. In this context, the narratives in this book become an act of "counter-storytelling": giving voice to those whose voices have been marginalized by the dominant discourse (Solorzano and Yosso, 2000/2001/2002). Similarly, we create "counter-history" as we explore an alternative version of history that challenges the majoritarian memory. Placing the stories of undocumented Americans in the interpretive light of a colonizer-colonized relationship challenges the stories and dominant ideology of those in power. Their counter-narratives, counter-majoritarian stories situated in a counter-historical dimension, contest the colonizers' constructed histories and oppose the exclusionary notion of who "belongs" in the United States.

Research shows that, irrespective of origin, immigrants in general tend to be entrepreneurial, creative, and hard-working. Yet it would be worthless to deny that immigrant populations of all historical eras have included individuals good and bad, bright and unintelligent, inspiring and dull. This book focuses on hard-working, perseverant young people who do not fit into a neat category of "immigrant" because their cultural and social upbringing makes them a developmental product of the United States. They have been raised, nurtured, and educated in the United States and, after spending most of their lives there, have no significant connections with their birthplace. This is the story of youth who speak English, know the National Anthem, think of themselves as "American" and, for all practical purposes, are United Statesians. The undocumented Americans in our stories have proven their worth to the country by succeeding in school in spite of great obstacles like living in poor socioeconomic neighborhoods, experiencing the daily uncertainty of an undocumented family, and not having access to financial support for their studies. They express a great appreciation for the opportunities they have received, but they live in a judicial limbo through no fault of their own. They did not choose to be undocumented; they did not choose to be United Statesian or Mexican, but they now find themselves as young adults in an impossible in-between space. They are neither yet both United Statesian and Mexican. They experience tensions in both dimensions, but do not renounce their love for either one, just like children love equally nurturing parents. These are the children of history and hope, and they have lessons for us if we open our hearts and laws to receive them.

In summary, this book ennobles and dignifies the stories of Mexican-origin United Statesians and their larger historical context, which have been obscured by what Ronald Takaki (2008) has termed "the Master Narrative of