Introduction

Immigration and the Politics
of Divide and Conquer

"Nestled deep in the Pocono Mountains," began a segment of CBS's *60 Minutes*, "Hazleton, Pennsylvania, has the look and feel of an all-American town."[1] The first visual of the telecast is a glimpse of the city's landscape. The screen then switches to images of smiling high school cheerleaders wearing red-and-white uniforms, walking down the street waving their pom-poms in unison. The viewer can hear the drumbeat of a marching band. The narrator continues, "Most of the people who turned out for the town's annual end-of-summer parade are descendants of immigrants, including the mayor, Lou Barletta."

"The Barlettas came from Italy," the voice specifies, "and ended up with a street named after them." We then see the mayor sitting atop the backseat of an antique convertible that parades him down the road. He waves to his constituents, who are all cheering him on. "Good job mayor! Way to go!" shouts one of his fans.

The narrator then chimes in with the story's hook. "Now the mayor is making a name for himself by going after a different kind of immigrant." Above the still audible cheers from the crowd, you can hear another shout from a vocal onlooker: "Keep the illegals out!" The camera zooms in on the mayor, whose bright white shirt and red tie stand out against the empty

maroon-painted brick storefront in the background. He smiles, nods, and waves again.

The scene then briefly shifts away from the parade to show a snippet from an interview with Lou Barletta—"I'm going to eliminate illegal aliens from the city of Hazleton," he says—and just like that, we return to the jovial celebration. Now there is a tuba blaring, the crowd continues to cheer, and there is another picture of the mayor smiling and giving a thumbs-up.

That portion plays on for a few more seconds before the celebratory sounds abruptly go silent. The visual changes over to a close-up of a clear glass door, presumably to a small grocery store. Hanging from the door is an advertisement handwritten in black marker on white poster board: "PLATANO Verdes 8 x 1.00." Someone wearing a dark red flannel shirt and blue jeans opens the door and walks inside. We cannot see a face; we see only a rear view of the person, from shoulder to calf. Over this image the narrator explains in more detail what motivated Hazleton's passage of the Illegal Immigration Relief Act (IIRA): "Barletta believes what's been going on in Hazleton is a microcosm of what's been going on all over the country: that illegal immigrants are overwhelming his city, draining its resources, and ruining the quality of life."

The *Local* Latino Threat Narrative

This book has two primary aims. The first is to problematize how misconceptions about Latina/o immigrants coupled with nostalgic collective imaginings of "Small Town, America," contribute to the construction of a racialized community identity that embraces exclusionary immigration policy. The powerful juxtaposition in the *60 Minutes* telecast introduces this argument quite well. Celebratory music, imagery of cheerleaders and marching bands, allusions to tradition, and references to European immigrants who "made it" bolster the description of Hazleton as a place with the "look and feel of an all-American town." In sharp contrast, the broadcast speaks only briefly of a "different kind of immigrant"[2] depicted as a shadowy—indeed, *faceless*[3]—figure that confronts unquestioned accusations of ruining what we are led to assume is an idyllic quality of life.[4]

The anthropologist Leo Chavez has examined the pervasive nature of such representations around Latina/o immigration, which coalesce into what he calls the Latino Threat Narrative. The taken-for-granted "truths"

that this narrative comprises, he writes, are that "Latinos are not like previous immigrant groups, who ultimately became part of the nation."[5] "Rather, they are part of an invading force from south of the border that is bent on reconquering land that was formerly theirs (the U.S. Southwest) and destroying the American way of life."[6]

As locales across the United States take action against undocumented immigration,[7] we see an extension of this familiar script. Thousands of Latina/o migrants arrived in Hazleton in the years leading up to the IIRA, and, as we will see, the story of what led them there is quite complex (see Chapter 1) and their experience is rich. The *60 Minutes* report, along with other, similar descriptions, however, narrowly depicts an unlikely "hero" emerging to "stem the tide" as the so-called "problem" of undocumented immigration "seeps" into the interior and afflicts an "All-American town."[8] It will become even clearer as I trace the politics surrounding Hazleton's IIRA over several stages how tales of a harmonious small town in peril represent a local-level iteration of the nationalistic threat of reconquest that Chavez describes. Regardless of the geographic space it imparts to protect, the narrative remains characterized by strong assertions that "they" have arrived with the intent to harm "us."

Part of my objective is to show how race permeates this narrative. I use two concepts to accomplish this: *Latina/o degradation* and *White affirmation*.[9] By Latina/o degradation, I mean the subordination that accompanies the (often subtle, but nonetheless consequential) symbolic linking of negative traits to Latina/os. Although this debate begins as a backlash against so-called "illegal aliens," cloaked race-neutrally as a defense for the rule of law, it will become apparent that exclusionary rhetoric about legal status is often simply an entry point for a discussion about larger racialized fears. Indeed, there are examples throughout the book of how this narrative extends its reach to encompass Latinas/os who are not undocumented immigrants.[10] There are also examples of how it is used to vilify pro-immigrant activists who resist.[11] The narrative holds strong to the notion that traits such as criminality, fiscal burdensomeness, and a penchant for seeking "special privileges" *characterize* "outsiders," even though these assumptions are grossly inaccurate,[12] problematically narrow,[13] and drawn from a long history of racism and nativism.[14] Quoting Lisa Marie Cacho, rhetoric that appears throughout this debate therefore constructs the undocumented and others by racialized association as "*ineligible for personhood.*"[15] What becomes taken-for-granted conventional wisdom is that "they" are *perpetu-*

ally incapable of following the law, *always* undeserving of public services, and *never* entitled to legal recourse. Put another way, Chavez explains how degradation amounts to *virtualization*. Epitomized by the facelessness of the figure in the *60 Minutes* report, "The virtual lives of 'Mexicans,' 'Chicanos,' 'illegal aliens,' and 'immigrants' become abstractions and representations that stand in the place of real lives. . . . They are no longer flesh-and-blood people; they exist as images."[16] It is in this context that it troublingly becomes acceptable to discuss "eliminating" a group of people.

By White affirmation, I refer to the parallel process—that is, (again, non-explicitly) associating positive characteristics with Whiteness while asserting whom in particular the alleged "immigrant invasion" has harmed. Importantly, White affirmation works *through* Latina/o degradation. Because "whiteness is a relational concept, unintelligible without reference to nonwhiteness,"[17] the defining of Latinas/os as inferior becomes a necessary step in the construction of White superiority.[18] Idyllic depictions of who "we" are—the cheerful parade, and so on—become more comprehensible when placed alongside assertions of who "we" *are not*.[19] Racialized binaries are apparent at each stage of Hazleton's immigration debate I explore: lawbreakers and law abiders; fiscal drains and hardworking people; separatists and egalitarians; neighbors who are noisy, messy, and careless and neighbors who are quiet, kempt, and careful.[20]

Beyond reinforcing difference and belonging, these binaries amplify the perception of the Latino Threat by *specifying who is threatened*. Representations of "invaders," in other words, are used to construct the identity of the "invaded." Encapsulated in the notion of White affirmation is thus what Cacho has elsewhere referred to as the *ideology of white injury*.[21] Even though it is Latinas/os and other people of color who endure degradation and confront institutional barriers because of their race, in this narrative Whites are continually constructed as *victims* of undocumented immigrants' criminality, as *suffering* because of "their" burdensomeness, and as *treated unfairly* by "efforts to remedy racial discrimination."[22]

The Politics of Divide and Conquer

The second aim of this book is to highlight how this narrative contributes to the perpetuation of social inequality at the intersection of race and social class. My thesis here is that, on one hand, Latina/o degradation enhances the exploitability of immigrant laborers and imposes limits on

meaningful resistance. On the other hand, White affirmation prompts an embrace of a White collective identity that not only degrades but also misdirects animosity and stunts the formation of class-based coalitions that could pursue economic justice.[23]

The history of U.S. immigration policy is largely an intertwining of economic exploitation and nativism.[24] In the particular case of immigrants from Latin America, U.S. officials have had a long history of calling on migrants when they needed them—during wartime labor shortages, for example—and forcibly removing them when labor demands subsided and anti-immigrant hostilities intensified.[25] In the contemporary political economic context, near-record numbers of immigrants are arriving in the United States.[26] However, the vacancies they fill this time around are the result not of labor shortages but, rather, of "*structural transformations.*"[27] Amid globalization and rapid technological change, jobs in sectors such as manufacturing are leaving the United States, and immigrants are filling the often temporary, low-wage employment opportunities that crop up in their place. Companies competing in the global economy doing all they can to cut costs have grown increasingly reliant on "inexpensive" immigrant laborers—many of whom have been uprooted from their home countries by the same processes, including especially the so-called free-trade agreements that leverage U.S. control over other national economies.[28]

In contrast to the American dream narrative, which suggests that newcomers who start at the bottom can work their way up, the reality of a system that requires so much low-wage work is that it thrives on the labor of the marginalized.[29] When we realize that "exploitation can be more easily justified if the exploited are placed within a fixed hierarchy,"[30] Latina/o degradation emerges as an ideological tool that caters to such arrangements in the current historical moment.[31] While many reap the economic benefits of exploited immigrant labor, virtualization makes it harder to realize immigrants' place in the social structure and it belittles the various social harms that many who live their lives on the social, economic, and legal margins confront. From this perspective, we can delink the presence of undocumented immigrants from the notion of "unsecure borders." As Nicholas De Genova puts it, capitalists in a cutthroat global economy prefer "the continued presence of migrants whose undocumented legal status has long been equated with the disposable (deportable), ultimately "temporary" character of the commodity that is their labor power."[32] Because citizenship is often "visibly inscribed on bodies"[33] and,

as Kitty Calavita writes, "immigrants' position in the economy inevitably *reproduces* the visible markers of poverty, and further generates . . . material and social exclusion," many migrants who do have authorization also find themselves caught up in this web of marginality and exploitability.[34]

For poor and working-class U.S.-born Whites such as those who make up the bulk of Hazleton's population, economic uncertainty also abounds under these conditions. The structural patterns that have attracted immigrants to places like Hazleton have also enhanced insecurity for many people accustomed to stable, decent-paying work.[35] For example, Hazleton's Luzerne County has lost more than half of its manufacturing jobs since the late 1970s, with low-wage industries filling that void; temporary employment agencies seem to be popping up on every corner; and the city struggles with budget issues at the same time that many recently arrived firms are enjoying lavish tax breaks (see Chapter 1).[36] In short, de-manufacturing, demographic shifts, and austerity are all of a piece. However, just as few openly or accurately discuss the role of immigrant labor in the economy, I show how what some have called "depoliticized neoliberalism" (see Chapter 1) has helped conceal the relationship between these patterns, effectively removing them from the public debate. Individualistic assessments of economic circumstances predominate,[37] for example, and acknowledgments of job quality rarely accompany boasts of job creation.

This context provides fertile soil for the Latino Threat Narrative.[38] It plays simultaneously to the powerful sentiments of those experiencing insecurity and mourning the economic decline of their hometowns and to negative assumptions about people of color that are so deeply embedded that many accept them even in the face of clear contradictory evidence.[39] For this reason, part of this story is about pure political ambition. As an extension of the "Southern Strategy" launched by the Republican Party in the 1960s to attract racially aggrieved poor and working-class White voters,[40] many politicians have begun deploying racially coded rhetoric as they "[search] for electoral gold in warning about the Hispanic threat."[41] Electoral success accordingly follows the politician who can best depict himself or herself as tough on "illegal immigration," willing to "take a stand," "stem the tide," or "take back" "our" city or country.

When the *Washington Post* interviewed Mayor Barletta about the IIRA in the summer of 2006, he commented, "I lay in bed and thought, I've lost my city. I love the new immigrants; they want their kids to be safe just like I do. I had to declare war on the illegals."[42] These words concede that things

are not going well in Hazleton. The city is *lost*. Yet rather than providing commentary on how Hazleton should weather the economic storm, I argue in this book that this kind of rhetoric shifts the blame. Resembling what the legal scholar Ian Haney López refers to as "dog whistle politics,"[43] statements such as this are at the heart of the Latino Threat Narrative, portraying people without documentation narrowly and inaccurately as posing a profound (i.e., requiring a declaration of "war") and urgent (i.e., "I had to") problem and drawing attention to the politician who is accordingly prepared to lead the "fight." What makes this rhetoric especially powerful is that it is capable of withstanding any charges of racism that may arise—note here how race is never mentioned explicitly and how an expression of "love" for immigrants is sandwiched between the realization of loss and the declaration of war.

Ultimately, however, this is not a story about individual politicians.[44] *Undocumented Fears* connects the proliferation of the Latino Threat Narrative to a broader ideological project designed to divide and conquer poor and working people. While degradation assures the existence of exploitable immigrant laborers, *affirmation* encourages poor and working-class Whites to embrace their racialized rather than class-based identities. Akin to what some scholars refer to as a "racial bribe,"[45] the Latino Threat Narrative in this way promises a symbolic uplift to those White workers who choose to ally with White political and economic elites instead of conspiring with their fellow workers of color to protest their shared economic plight. Although it does little to improve their socioeconomic standing, the bribe is, and long has been, enticing for many, particularly at these moments of uncertainty, because it grants "public deference" and a "psychological wage."[46] Thus to paraphrase W.E.B. Du Bois, members of the White working class often become content with their class position once they come to see themselves, in this case, as "not Latina/o."[47]

The ideology of White injury factors in here, as well. More than simply evoking race *instead of class*, the rigid "us" and "them" binaries in this narrative *reinforce particular understandings of socioeconomic relations*. The politics I describe in this book use race to promote an individualistic worldview that attributes, quoting Katherine Beckett, "the plight of the average American" to people said to be "looking for the easy way out":[48] "'cheats,' 'thieves,' 'freeloaders[,]'"[49] and, in this case, "illegals." That is to say, my argument in this book is that the Latino Threat Narrative is embraced, at least in part, for its "*capacity to explain* the declining social and economic position of work-

ing people."[50] As opposed to concern about financial burdens imposed on *workers*, the understanding that has prevailed suggests that the behavior of racialized outsiders is *economically injurious to Whites* (e.g., "'Our' community is destitute because 'they' commit crime and milk the system").

In short, the Latino Threat Narrative reconstitutes the terms of the debate, controlling what we see and what we do not in a way that allows existing hierarchies to remain intact. Degradation reasserts the subordinate social and economic position of many Latina/os. Yet its color-blind rhetoric masks racism, its virtualizing of real people "blunts the empathetic response,"[51] and its scapegoating makes exclusionary policies appear justified. Mobilizing for immigrants' rights and racial justice in this context is therefore not surprisingly an uphill battle (see Chapters 3 and 4). Existing economic arrangements that concentrate wealth in the hands of just a small number of people also avoid contestation by remaining invisible to many. Working-class politics are drowned out along with the potential for class-based, cross-racial/ethnic solidarity as the prevailing narrative depicts immigrants not as workers but as fiscal burdens and encourages working-class Whites to see themselves *in contrast to* such racialized representations. The "harm" that the Latino Threat Narrative suggests Whites experience *as Whites* in this way becomes the harm around which activists in favor of laws like the IIRA can successfully mobilize. Consequently, it is this problematic conception of harm that garners the lion's share of attention. What we end up with, I argue, are counterproductive, *de-democratizing* local-level mobilizations:[52] calls for additional state power and control over racially marginalized populations and collective efforts that reinforce the market ideology responsible for perpetuating global and local economic inequality.

Plan of the Book

The book begins with an examination of how the structural arrangements I have just described filter down to the local level. In many nations striving to enhance their economic standing in the increasingly competitive world of global capitalism, immigrants are attracted for their inexpensive labor and subsequently demonized.[53] Domestically in the United States, many small cities and rural towns are also struggling to remain economically viable as their industrial base withers and they compete with other locales to attract industry. Many communities in this situation are settling for

exploitative firms and, as a result, are attracting large numbers of immigrant laborers who, in turn, are subject to backlash.[54]

In Chapter 1, I provide an account of this by studying the history of Hazleton's primary community economic development group, CAN DO. This organization provides a window through which we can see how broader political economic forces have affected Hazleton. By tracing CAN DO's evolution from its founding in the 1950s, through the introduction of a market-centric ideology in the 1980s, and into the present, we become aware of the structural shifts that both created economic uncertainty among local residents and prompted Latina/o immigration to Hazleton. My analysis also suggests that CAN DO has responded to recent economic shifts and demographic changes with a depoliticized approach that is characteristic of the current political economic order. In short, Chapter 1 documents the setting of the structural and ideological stage for the politics that ensue.

Chapter 2 begins with a comparative analysis of the media coverage of two homicides committed in Hazleton. The first is a Latino-on-Latino murder that prompted calls for calm. The second is the killing of a White Hazleton resident, for which two undocumented Latino immigrants were initially charged. The second homicide prompted a moral panic and catalyzed passage of the IIRA. This analysis introduces us to how politicians and other city officials draw from the broader Latino Threat Narrative and mold it to fit the local context. In the reaction to the Latino-on-White homicide, the notion that "they" have harmed "us" and that we therefore must "get tough" is very apparent. That is not so in the case featuring a Latino victim.

I follow the moral panic over the murder of the White resident into City Council debates, where it became the impetus for the introduction of the IIRA. Here, I suggest clear instances of Latina/o degradation and White affirmation are on display. Officials extend the implications of this single criminal incident with blanket constructions of undocumented immigrants as "crime-prone" and Hazletonians as potential innocent victims of their criminality. I show how officials also bring other issues in at this juncture—claiming, for example, that immigrants are a drain on city resources—as they construct what I interpret as an alternative explanation for Hazleton's economic decline.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore how members of the community majority respond to various pro-immigrant efforts put forth by local Latina/o com-

munity leaders and their allies. The first of these chapters focuses on how the majority used a particular strand of the Latino Threat Narrative to fend off pro-immigrant mobilizations that directly contested the IIRA. In this version of Latino Threat, which is similar to what scholars have documented in other local contexts and emblematic of national immigration debates,[55] we see Latina/o activists' efforts to claim discrimination and assert their rights dismissed by the majority as "inappropriate" evocations of race and "excessive" demands for "special rights." At the same time, the majority constructs its own rights claims and legal mobilizations as acceptable, even necessary, to ensure continued community harmony.[56] Thus, the backlash to the initial protests by Latina/o community leaders quelled pro-immigrant mobilizations and added "self-interested," "reverse racist" activists to the list of those who supposedly pose a threat to a previously "harmonious" Hazleton.

I also explore in Chapter 3 how these activists had a similar experience when they later turned to litigation, challenging the ordinance in the high-profile case *Pedro Lozano et al. v. City of Hazleton* (hereafter, *Lozano v. Hazleton*). Although pro-immigrant groups were ultimately victorious in court, the lawsuit and subsequent decision prompted some of the most vitriolic politics of the entire debate. Even in the shadow of the IIRA's defeat, we see how the conception of local Latino Threat further intensifies as "powerful litigators" and "activist judges" face accusations that they, too, have undermined this "innocent small town."

In Chapter 4, I examine subsequent pro-immigrant efforts—specifically, a volunteer coalition of Latina/o and White residents who mobilized with the goal of building a bridge between recent immigrants and established residents and institutions. As an adaptation to the backlash the initial pro-immigrant mobilization faced, this group was able to make important progress by avoiding contentious issues. For example, some infrastructure is emerging to support immigrants, the issue of integration has gained visibility and positive press, and there has even been cooperation from some who previously championed backlash politics. In this respect, what we see is a pattern that mirrors a common refrain in national immigration debates: Things will get better as time goes on, and conflicting groups are able to compromise. Remaining cognizant of how meaningful these gains have been, but also questioning this uncritical assessment, I argue that here, too, the Latino Threat Narrative still looms large and that the debate remains on the ideological turf of those who sit atop racial

and economic hierarchies. Specifically, I point to several key political limitations that activists continue to confront, including an ability to bring attention to the specific harms and burdens Latina/o immigrants endure, to directly contest the ideology of White injury, and to introduce class-based politics into the debate.

I conclude by recounting an example from Hazleton's history that I think takes on particular significance in light of these contemporary events. Back when it was a coal mining town, Hazleton was riddled by ethnic strife and labor-capital disputes. I argue that collective engagement with this history is but one tactic that has the potential to foster new community identities capable of resisting the politics of divide and conquer in Hazleton and beyond. As immigration law and politics localize, in other words, it becomes vitally important that we contest top-down constructions of community identity that have their basis in racialized myths and economic distortions and replace them with engaged, bottom-up activity that authentically and democratically confronts racial and economic inequality.