“What Part of Illegal Don’t You Understand?”: Negotiating the Boundaries of Latino Inclusion in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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Through an analysis of published opinions in Milwaukee, Wisconsin’s largest circulating newspaper, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, this article examines how Latinos and the white, non-Latino mainstream are negotiating the concepts of ethnicity and illegality; factors that can serve as boundaries to Latino inclusion in the city. Despite the successful establishment of a public presence in Milwaukee through the city’s annual immigrant rights march, the production of immigrant illegality and the economic scapegoating of immigrants at national and sub-national scales inscribe conceptual boundaries that contribute to the differential inclusion of Latinos in the city. By focusing on the political process of assimilation, this research complements contemporary assimilation studies that measure socio-economic difference based on race, ethnicity or national origin using segmented assimilation theory.

Introduction

Latinos, the fastest growing minority group in the U.S., have spread beyond traditional immigrant gateway cities to communities throughout the country (Massey & Capoferro, 2008). These newcomers can upset established notions of community identity, as members of dominant groups now find that they are working, living, or, at least, sharing public services with people that may not look, or act, like them (Massey, 2008). Challenges to community identity are further complicated by exclusionary narratives and practices that are produced and deployed at a variety of scales and directed at new immigrants (Coleman, 2007; Ellis, 2006; Ridgeley, 2008; Varsanyi, 2008). More established members of the local community are left to sort out who belongs and under what terms. Despite their minority status in new immigrant destinations, Latinos take part in this process too. From everyday interactions to ethnic festivals and political demonstrations, Latinos are negotiating their inclusion in the community; they are asking that their ethnicity not be considered a boundary to inclusion (Loyd & Burridge, 2007; Pulido, 2007; Shutika, 2008). It is this process of negotiation – a reworking of the conceptual boundaries to inclusion – that is the focus of this paper.

Following Caroline Nagel’s (2009) call to “rethink the geographies of assimilation,” this paper argues that in order to understand the process of assimilation for new immigrant groups, a deeper understanding of how conceptual boundaries – such as race, ethnicity, or nationality –
function, or no longer function, as barriers to inclusion is needed. This paper examines the process of assimilation for Latinos in Milwaukee through a focus on negotiations over the conceptual boundaries of ethnicity and illegality in the city. These negotiations are explored through an investigation into the immigrant rights marches that have taken place in Milwaukee since May 2006, and public reactions to those demonstrations and immigration more generally. Local reactions are captured through an analysis of editorials and letters to the editor in the city’s largest circulating newspaper, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, over a 16 year period.

By examining the public discourse about immigrants – how they are represented vis-à-vis mainstream culture – in the decade leading up to the marches and the six years since the first march was held, this paper illustrates how the local mainstream discourse about Latinos has evolved. It allows for a contextualization of the local assimilation discourse within a national discussion that has been stimulated by such events as the passage of California’s Proposition 187 in November of 1994, the terror acts of September 11th, 2001, the passage of HR4437 in 2006, and Arizona’s SB1070 in April 2010. This paper finds in the case of Milwaukee, Wisconsin that the discourse of “immigrant illegality” and the social and economic costs illegality implies, has come to function as the primary conceptual boundary to the inclusion of the city’s growing Latino population. Though Latino activists and participants in the immigrant rights demonstrations have tried to update this narrative by highlighting common social norms with Milwaukee’s mainstream and the economic contributions of immigrants and Latinos to the local economy, the discourse of illegality continues to contribute to the differential inclusion of Milwaukee’s Latino population. However, before moving on to discuss the production of the discourse of immigrant illegality and the case of Latinos in Milwaukee, I make an important distinction between research into the conceptual boundaries to assimilation and studies that highlight the structural barriers to assimilation.

**Shifting Conceptual Boundaries to Assimilation**

In their text on assimilation, *Remaking the American Mainstream*, Richard Alba and Victor Nee make the distinction between three processes by which migrants assimilate (2003). *Boundary crossing* corresponds to the classic version of assimilation where a population moves from one group to another without any real change to the boundary itself (e.g. the integration of Jews (Brodkin, 1998) or Irish immigrants (Ignatiev, 1995) into the Anglo mainstream in the U.S.). *Boundary blurring* implies that the social profile of a boundary has become less distinct and the clarity of the social distinction involved has become clouded (e.g. interracial and interreligious marriage). The final process, *boundary shifting*, involves the relocation of a boundary so that populations once situated on one side are now included on the other.

Segmented assimilation, arguably the most influential concept in contemporary assimilation studies (Stepick & Stepick, 2010), focuses on the first and second assimilation processes. A spatially attentive theory of segmented assimilation argues that immigrants are trying to overcome socioeconomic barriers to their upward assimilation into a white dominated middle class, often located in the suburbs (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Once freed from the downward pressures of life in low-income, disadvantaged neighborhoods, sustained contact, including interracial partnering (Ellis, Wright, & Parks, 2004), with the mainstream population will result in the blurring of social boundaries and the crossing of middle-class individuals – and
their well-educated children – into the American mainstream (Massey & Denton, 1985). Through studies on the relative positions of minority and dominant groups in segmented labor markets (Yeoh, 2006), educational attainment (Newbold & Foulkes, 2004; Stepick & Stepick, 2010), and, most prominently, residential location (Allen, 2009; Brown & Chung, 2006; Clark, 2006; Ellis & Wright, 2005; Ellis, Wright, & Parks, 2004; Johnston, Poulsen, & Forrest, 2006; Jones, 2008) researchers evaluate the segmented assimilation hypothesis. The results often highlight the structural barriers to assimilation for immigrants and their children – such as uneven access to educational and job opportunities. However, by focusing on measures of socio-economic and locational difference based on ethnicity or nationality this body of work can obscure the ways that minorities are actually being accepted into mainstream society (Ellis & Wright, 2005; Nagel, 2009; Stepick & Stepick, 2010). The third assimilation process, boundary shifting, is left largely unexamined.

It is this process of boundary shifting that Caroline Nagel captures in her call for researchers – especially geographers – to investigate the ways in which migrants are “making sameness” with mainstream society (2009). She calls on scholars to not just focus on how social differences – nationality, religion, race, or class – act as structural barriers to inclusion; rather she asks researchers to consider how particular forms of difference have no longer come to function as boundaries to membership in the wider society. After all, it is this categorical focus on difference that can obscure the complex ways that individuals and society actually perceive difference, and how difference dissolves. Indeed, collective understandings of “who we are” are derived from ongoing negotiations between members of minority groups and mainstream society at both the individual and group level. Identity construction is “a dialectical process in which immigrants and host societies define the ‘other’, and thereby themselves” (Ehrkamp, 2006). But identity is also representational, shaped by politicized discourses that can use social difference to influence individual and collective understandings of “who belongs in which group.” Thus, the process of producing and shifting conceptual boundaries of inclusion is more social and political than ecological (Nagel, 2002b). By investigating these negotiations and the discursive environments in which they take place we are able to come to a better understanding of the multiple ways that migrants are strategically positioning themselves within host societies (Nagel, 2002a). This focus on the politics of assimilation and belonging requires an analysis of arguably the most salient contemporary conceptual boundary to Latino inclusion in the U.S. mainstream – immigrant illegality.

(Re)Drawing Boundaries: The Production of Immigrant Illegality

Since the end of the national origin quota system and the passing of civil rights legislation in the 1960s, immigration politics in the U.S. have focused on the presence of undocumented immigrants and the social costs of immigrant inclusion (Tichenor, 2002). These issues persist in an era of greater global economic integration and relatively high levels of immigration, as migrants primarily from Asia and Latin America have poured in to fill the demand for low-skilled jobs and to fuel growth in high technology industry (Hanson, 2007). During this period, business interests, often allied with civil and ethnic rights groups, have had an influential role in maintaining an ineffective system of employment enforcement, thereby allowing employers to “unknowingly” hire undocumented workers (Tichenor, 2002). Meanwhile, immigration
restrictionists have reluctantly allowed only minor expansions in the visa quota system while stripping benefits from non-citizen permanent residents and criminalizing immigration violations through reforms to federal immigration law (Coleman, 2007; Ridgeley, 2008). An insufficient allotment in visas, particularly for low-skilled workers, has resulted in high levels of unauthorized immigration to the U.S. (Hanson, 2007; Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002). By 2010, there were an estimated 11 million undocumented migrants residing in the U.S., representing about 28% of the foreign-born population and 3.5% of the total U.S. population (Passel & Cohn, 2011). About three-quarters of the country’s unauthorized population are from Latin America, primarily Mexico.

Nativist rhetoric and a popular appreciation for “law and order” have combined to blame this undocumented population – often arbitrarily including authorized immigrants – for putting a strain on social services and taking jobs from “American” workers. These “matter-of-fact” statements are used to rail against the government for being out of touch with the “real America” and beholden to business interests. The government’s response to these accusations since at least the 1980s has been greater territorial enforcement and the criminalization of illegal immigration, while essentially maintaining the conditions that lead to a large undocumented population (Coleman, 2007; Nevins, 2002). Following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, the territorial enforcement of immigration took on a new form. In 2002 the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (I.C.E.) was created within the newly formed Department of Homeland Security and charged with the task of enforcing immigration law throughout the interior of the country, resulting in significant increases in worksite arrests and non-criminal deportations (U.S. I.C.E., 2008). In addition to I.C.E. raids, a number of initiatives have been taken up at local and state levels to exclude undocumented immigrants from obtaining housing, driver’s licenses, and employment (Varsanyi, 2008). Hundreds of police departments have deputized local officers to enforce federal immigration law using provision 287g of the 1996 Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (Ridgeley, 2008). These combined initiatives have effectively reterritorialized immigration enforcement from a focus on national border control under the exclusive purview of the federal government to policing the country’s interior using a host of federally sanctioned agencies at a variety of scales.

It is instructive to see this reconfiguration of the spatiality of state power as both a post-9/11 reaction to perceived external threats and a way for the federal government to reassert itself at the sub-national level without disrupting dominant neoliberal narratives (Ellis, 2006; Purcell & Nevins, 2005). Fiscal calculations suggest that states and municipalities often bear the cost of immigrant incorporation through health care and education, while a financial surplus from immigration accrues at the national level (Hanson, 2007). Popular frustration with financially strapped states and municipalities, whatever the causes of those budget shortfalls, is treated with state and local immigration control measures intended to assuage citizen concerns. This multi-scalar immigration enforcement strategy, however practically ineffective, is a wise use of political capital because it fuses international security concerns with sub-national public policy preoccupations, while placing a disenfranchised population at the center of the problem (Coleman, 2007; Coleman, 2008; Nagel, 2002b).

This is clearly a disadvantageous position for immigrant groups to be in. The narrative that undocumented immigrants are threats to both security and social welfare, reified by a shifting
spatiality of state power, is becoming the dominant discourse on immigration. As the host society takes for granted the notion that unauthorized immigrants are a social and economic threat at a variety of scales, from the national to the individual, their position as outsiders is discursively and materially reinforced and their subordination justified. Those who are here without authorization become illegal, “deportable” subjects; a temporary status that affords only a limited set of rights (De Genova, 2005). The lived experience of “deportability” furthers the divide between unauthorized immigrants and the mainstream population by creating a pervasive sense of surveillance for the undocumented, who then avoid interaction with other members of the community (Harrison & Lloyd, 2011). These self-disciplinary behaviors are not solely exhibited by the undocumented population, however. The construction of immigrant illegality is also a profoundly racializing process for many Latinos, because it can conflate illegality with “Mexican”-ness; an identity that is then interpolated into U.S. race relations dominated by a white mainstream society and a black underclass (De Genova, 2005). This “othering” of the immigrant population works against the assimilation of all Latinos through discriminatory social and legal relations and the internalization of one’s status and the reproduction of race (Loyd & Burridge, 2007).

However, even with the development of an increasingly dominant discourse on immigrant illegality, the reterritorialization of immigration enforcement, coupled with the uneven landscape of state and local exclusionary and inclusionary polices, leaves room for more localized discourses to develop (Ridgeley, 2008; Wright & Ellis, 2000). These localized discourses play out in particular places and can be conditioned by such factors as the relative concentration of immigrants vis-à-vis the white majority, local race relations, immediate economic conditions, progressive or restrictionist local leadership, and historical narratives about immigration. The result then is a more complex geography of belonging where immigrants try to position themselves in the mainstream society by responding to and participating in the development of local assimilation discourses (Ehrkamp, 2006; Mee & Wright, 2009; Nagel, 2002a).

Research Design

This paper investigates the process of assimilation for Latinos in Milwaukee, Wisconsin through a focus on negotiations over the conceptual boundaries of ethnicity and illegality in the city. These negotiations are examined through a study of the immigrant rights marches that have taken place in Milwaukee since April 2006, and the reactions of the local community to those demonstrations and immigration more generally over a 16 year period. Local reactions are captured and contextualized through an analysis of editorials and letters to the editor in the city’s largest circulating newspaper, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (MJS), from January 1995 through September 2011. The LexisNexis® Academic search engine was used to collect “editorials”, “opinions” and “letters to the editor” from the MJS using the broad search terms “immigration” and “immigrants.” These search terms retrieved hundreds of articles of which over 110 letters to the editor and 50 editorial pieces were seen as relevant to the study.

Though I have spent over five years living in Milwaukee conducting ethnographic research on the city’s Latino community, I chose as my primary data source the MJS because it is the unrivalled mainstream daily newspaper in Milwaukee with a combined online and newsprint
readership of over 700,000 in a state with a population of about 5.7 million (Gores, 2010). Furthermore, the *MJS*’s parent company, *Journal Communications*, is a publicly-traded firm headquartered in Milwaukee. Publicly-traded media outlets, more so than private ventures, have been shown to both slant their coverage and editorialize in favor of positions held by their actual and potential readership (Branton & Dunaway, 2009). Meanwhile, media outlets also play an active role in the construction of social issues (Abu-Laban & Garber, 2005). For example, Dunaway, Branton, and Abrajano (2010) found that increased negative coverage of immigration in local papers is correlated with “immigration” being perceived as one of “the most important issues facing the nation.” This effect was even stronger in states that were farther from the U.S.-Mexico border, highlighting the prominent role of local media in places like Milwaukee in framing the immigration discussion.

However, Martin (2000) reminds us that the opinions and perspectives expressed in alternative publications often challenge the dominant discourse of the mainstream press, and Milwaukee is no exception. For example, the opinions expressed in suburban Milwaukee’s most prominent publication, the *Waukesha Freeman* are likely to strike a much more conservative tone on immigration, while contributors to the city’s most widely-circulated African-American paper, the *Milwaukee Community Journal*, have a perspective that is surely underrepresented in the *MJS*. Nevertheless, the *MJS* has both an economic incentive to incorporate a variety of opinions and perspectives, as long as they do not alienate its existing readership, and the readership numbers to most effectively set the public conversation. Therefore, by examining the issue of immigration through the lens of the *MJS*, I am able to gain insight into the most widely-circulated, publicly acceptable (i.e. mainstream) discourse about immigration in Milwaukee. It is this public discussion about immigration that sets the boundaries within which new immigrant groups publicly negotiate their position within the mainstream society (Ehrkamp, 2006).

**Latinos in Milwaukee**

The exclusive focus on Milwaukee is intended to highlight how a community far from the U.S.-Mexico border with its own racially-inscribed, working-class identity is coming to terms with the recent influx of a large Latino population. It is also intended to situate Latino migrants within a historical narrative about immigrants and immigrant assimilation in Milwaukee. After all, immigrant assimilation is an ongoing process in Milwaukee, as the prosperity of the city has long been dependent on the incorporation of foreign workers and their families. Indeed, after the expulsion of the native population from the majority of Wisconsin’s territory in the first quarter of the 19th century, the state began to promote immigration as a means to industrialization and development, with most migrants settling in southeastern Wisconsin. The city’s first Anglo settlers were primarily from New York and New England; however, by 1850 one-third of the state’s population was foreign born, mostly from Germany and Ireland. The drafters of the 1848 State Constitution took a decidedly liberal attitude toward immigrants, giving “aliens” the right to vote if they resided in Wisconsin for six months and formally declared their intention to become citizens (Ranney, 1999).

By the late 1800s, the large German population, allied with a growing Polish community, was a major political force in the state, successfully overturning a law that required all schooling
to be in English (Ranney, 1999). Despite legislative battles over the “Americanization” of immigrant groups, foreigners continued to contribute to the rapid expansion of the city attracted by a booming manufacturing industry. One historian noted that at the turn of the century an outsider walking through the neighborhoods of Milwaukee would have seen what appeared to be a “loosely knit collection of European villages” that together fashioned Milwaukee into the most “foreign” city in the United States (Gurda, 1976). As late as 1920, 24% of the city’s population of 465,000 was foreign born, mostly from Germany and Poland, but with significant numbers from Russia and several other southern and eastern European countries.

Latinos had been coming to Milwaukee since at least the 1880s, however, they started settling in larger numbers in the 1920s (Rodriguez & Sava, 2006). Many of these predominately Mexican immigrants had previously been agricultural laborers seasonally migrating between Texas and Wisconsin, who found more stable, higher paying work in the tanneries and foundries of Milwaukee (Rodriguez, 2011). These young single men started off living in factory housing and were often joined by their families, settling in the near south side alongside mostly Polish and German immigrants with whom they frequently intermarried (Rodriguez & Sava, 2006). Aside from the Great Depression era, Latino migrants from Mexico and, beginning in the 1940s, Puerto Rico slowly but steadily continued to settle in Milwaukee. By 1970 there were an estimated eight to ten thousand Latinos living in the city (Gurda, 1976). By that time Milwaukee was entering a period of population decline with upwardly mobile white residents moving to the suburbs in search of professional and service-sector employment as the city entered a period of deindustrialization marked by racial tensions between the growing African-American population and white residents (Levine, 1998).

Milwaukee remains one of the most segregated cities in the U.S. with a highly concentrated population of African-Americans in the west and northwest sides and new immigrants groups still settling on the south side. Despite ongoing economic challenges in Milwaukee, including high unemployment, the city’s Latino population has boomed over the last twenty years, more than doubling from 1990 to 2000 when it reached over 71,000. By 2010, there were an estimated 103,007 Hispanics living within the city limits, representing 17.3% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). 67.6% of the city’s Hispanic population is of Mexican origin, a large share of which is likely undocumented.1 Though many have moved on to traditionally white, non-Latino neighborhoods to the south and west, the largest concentration of Latinos remains on the near south side. They are now part of the city’s highly segregated residential pattern characterized by extremely high unemployment and poverty rates in the largely black neighborhoods of the west and northwest sides and in the predominantly Latino near south side (Levine, 2012). However, the residential segregation patterns and socio-economic differences that dominate the city tell us only so much about the ways in which the conceptual boundaries of ethnicity and illegality affect the assimilation of

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1 The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that there were between 65 and 140 thousand undocumented immigrants residing in Wisconsin in 2010, up from an estimated 10,000 in 1990 (Passel and Cohn, 2011). Between 81% and 95% of the undocumented population in the state is of Mexican origin. Given that nation-wide 94% of undocumented immigrants live in metropolitan areas (Passel and Cohn, 2009), it is likely that a large share of the Mexican-origin population of 69,680 in Milwaukee is undocumented.
Latinos into Milwaukee’s white, non-Latino mainstream society. To get at the local negotiations over those boundaries we turn to a description and analysis of the immigrant rights marches in Milwaukee and the relationship between these demonstrations and the mainstream discourse about immigration in the city.

A Day without Latinos

On May 1st, 2006 over a million people, mostly Latinos and their supporters, marched through streets across the country in response to an immigration control bill that had passed the U.S. House and was on its way to the Senate. HR4437, commonly known as the “Sensenbrenner Bill” for its chief sponsor in the House of Representatives, Republican Jim Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin, would have further criminalized undocumented immigration by making “unlawful presence” in the United States a felony instead of a civil offense, thereby requiring the federal government to take custody of undocumented immigrants detained by local authorities. At the time, many feared that this legislation, if passed, would result in mass deportations for the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. at the time. Not only did the legislation have the potential to tear people from their livelihoods and even their children, many of whom are legal citizens; it could have drastically affected the U.S. economy. The potential economic consequences of large scale immigrant deportations are what many of the demonstrators were highlighting under the theme, “A day without Latinos.” They were asking the country to imagine daily life without Latinos in the workforce or as consumers (Pulido, 2007).

Milwaukee was the site of a relatively large demonstration on that day, with as many as 70,000 taking part in a march that led from the heavily Latino south side through downtown to Veteran’s Park on the shores of Lake Michigan (Pabst, 2006). Demonstrators waved U.S. and Mexican flags. Some held up signs that read “Stop HR4437” and “Justice and Dignity for All U.S. Immigrants,” while children wore shirts imprinted with the words “We Are Not Criminals”. The demonstrators were greeted at the lakefront rally by Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett who thanked them for “fighting for peace and dignity.” The Head of the Wisconsin Restaurant Association also addressed the crowd, acknowledging the contribution of immigrants to the industry and vowing to work with them to stop HR4437 and pass immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship. In addition to the large street presence, Christine Neumann-Ortiz, the leading local march organizer, estimated that 200 businesses in Milwaukee closed for all or part of the day.

Under the strong leadership of Neumann-Ortiz, the May 1st immigrant rights march has become an annual event in Milwaukee, even while other city’s demonstrations have faded. In 2007, Milwaukee held one of the largest demonstrations in the country at a time when workplace raids by federal authorities were growing in intensity and the window on comprehensive immigration reform was closing. Demonstrators’ pleas to “Stop the Raids” and for “Fair Immigration Reform Now” were complemented by speakers, like Ricardo Chavez (the brother of the late farmworker advocate Cesar Chavez), who called on workers from across the country to unite in their struggle for immigrant rights. A representative of the local chapter of the Laborers International Union voiced his support for immigration reform, “because [immigrant] workers contribute to the economy and have a right to be here too” (Pabst, 2007).
Between election year politics and the economic recession, the May 1st marches in 2008 and 2009 continued but were not as well attended as the mass demonstrations of the previous two years. However, in 2010, the number of marchers swelled in response to Arizona’s controversial immigration enforcement measure, SB1070, signed into law just one week earlier. On May 1st 2010, tens of thousands of activists, students, and, mostly, families packed the streets for eight or nine blocks in a march down National Avenue to a rally at a south side park (Author observations). According to Neumann-Ortiz, the march was intended to “send a message of solidarity and humanity against hatred and intolerance” (Pabst, 2010).

On May 1st 2010 a large demonstration followed the original march route and returned to the theme of solidarity among all Wisconsin workers. Carrying red placards with the words, “MAYDAY! Wisconsin Solidarity March for Immigrant and Worker Rights,” demonstrators voiced their frustration with the newly-elected governor who they accused of blaming immigrants and public sector workers for the state’s fiscal problems (Author observations). Notably, I found no evidence of anti-immigrant protestors at any of the demonstrations.

How do these demonstrations shift the boundaries of inclusion to encompass Latinos in Milwaukee’s mainstream? The obvious answer is that demonstrators are calling for comprehensive immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship for the undocumented; they are asking for a shift in legal boundaries to include all Latinos as legal members of the country. To achieve legal inclusion, the demonstrators are temporarily occupying public space, while highlighting the contributions that Latino immigrants make to the economy and society. The potential success of this strategy, however, hinges on the Latino population’s ability to appeal to the white, non-Latino mainstream as parents, workers, students, consumers, and business owners. Thus, by emphasizing shared social norms with the mainstream population the demonstrators are asking for more than legal inclusion, they are asking to be accepted as full members in the community. The effectiveness of this strategy is measured by how this message articulates with the evolving public discourse on immigration in Milwaukee over a sixteen year period. A longitudinal analysis of the editorials and opinions on immigration in the MJS thus provides historical context to the conceptual boundary of immigrant illegality in Milwaukee while highlighting the role of the local immigrant rights marches in negotiating that boundary.

The Local Mainstream Discourse on Immigration

Acculturation and Globalization

In the six years leading up to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, there were only about a dozen letters to the editor referencing “immigration” or “immigrants” in the MJS. The most written about issue from 1995 to 1998 was whether the state of Wisconsin should adopt English as the official language of the state. Those in favor of an English-first resolution argued that the nation would be stronger if everyone spoke the same language (2 letters). Several voiced their opposition, arguing that all immigrants understood the benefits of learning English and requiring all official state material to be written in English was counterproductive to the inevitable assimilation of these new groups (4). In any case, the issue faded as the state Assembly failed to bring the resolution to a vote and Republican Governor Tommy Thompson voiced his opposition to an “English-first” bill (Pabst, 1997). This perennial issue appears to
have been reignited by the passage of Proposition 187 in California in 1994, but there were no letters or editorials advocating the denial of social services, such as education, to immigrants or their children. To the contrary, two letters and one article by the lead reporter on immigration issues, Georgia Pabst, were sympathetic to the loss of social security benefits for non-citizen legal residents that resulted from welfare reforms in 1996 (Pabst, 1997).

The lead editorial writer on immigration issues for the MJS from 1995 to June 2004, Richard Foster, chose not to focus on the issues of immigrant acculturation. Instead, Foster took a decidedly pro-free-market, internationalist perspective through which he cautiously advocated for a greater legal flow of migrant workers. In 1996, with Patrick Buchanan vying for the Republican presidential nomination, Foster warned against the dangers of nationalism and economic protectionism, arguing that Buchanan’s economic strategy of imposing trade barriers and making cuts in legal immigration ignores the reality and benefits of global economic integration (1996²). A 1999 piece on President Clinton’s trip to Latin America is consistent with this internationalist perspective as Foster (1999) advocated greater coordination with Latin American nations in managing “problems such as illicit drugs and immigration.” Foster’s characterization of immigration as a “problem” is perhaps indicative of a growing concern with the rapidly growing undocumented population in the U.S., and Milwaukee, during the 1990s. In September 2001, just days before 9/11, Foster (2001a) wrote his first piece on immigration legislation. In it he argues that a “guest worker” program and post-secondary education for children of illegal immigrants should seriously be considered; however, he advocated against the suggestion that the 3.5 million undocumented Mexicans in the U.S. should have their status “regularized” on the grounds that it would be “inconsistent” and “unfair” to the millions of other immigrants seeking legal entry into the US.

Post-9/11 Security Threat

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, a renewed focus on national security altered the local discourse on immigration. The editorialists at the MJS made some effort to avoid conflating the immigrant terrorist threat with the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who come to the U.S. every year to study and work. Richard Foster (2001b; 2001c) wrote two editorials on immigration in the weeks following the attacks, both of them focused on efforts to increase security and surveillance without compromising the ideals of liberty and democracy, and the practical benefits from international education and labor mobility. Following the lead of Foster, another editorial writer, Ernst-Ulrich Franzen took up the mantle of immigration for the MJS, publishing four editorials between 2001 and 2002 focused on measures for revamping the Immigration and Naturalization Service. In the first of these editorials, Franzen (2001) acknowledges that “The vast majority of immigrants here now – legally or illegally, student or guest worker – are hard-working, law-abiding people simply seeking better lives, just as the massive waves of immigrants before them.” However, in his last piece on immigration, Franzen (2002) applauds President Bush for passing legislation aimed at “tightening U.S. borders against illegal immigration and even terrorist attack.”

Interestingly, between September 11th, 2001 and the introduction of immigration legislation in early 2005, there were no published letters to the editor about immigration. The

² See Appendix for Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Editorial References
local community had clearly turned its gaze abroad towards the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. National security threats were no doubt on the minds of many Americans, including locals, but there is no evidence from the MJS that these concerns were being translated into a domestic threat posed by undocumented immigrants. With the economy continuing to grow on ample credit and an inflating housing sector, there was likely less concern about the economic costs of immigration as well.

The Immigrant Rights Marches

In June 2004, O. Ricardo Pimentel took over as the Editorial page editor and the point man on immigration for the MJS. Having spent most of his journalism career in California and Arizona, Pimentel’s (2004) first piece on immigration focused on the Governor of Wisconsin’s creation of a Hmong Resettlement Task Force and the openness which Wisconsinites seem to have towards new immigrant groups. Acknowledging that his was only a preliminary assessment, he commented on how little anxiety immigration seems to have generated in Wisconsin and how “folks here don’t seem to make much of [the] lack of Eurocentricity” of new immigrant groups. Pimentel went on to write numerous editorials in support of comprehensive immigration reform and immigrant rights (2006a; 2006b; 2006c; 2007a; 2007b; 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2010d; 2010e; 2011a; 2011b; 2011c; 2011d).

In response to the debate on federal immigration legislation that was heating up in late 2005 and 2006, the MJS editorial position has been very consistent in supporting comprehensive immigration reform and rejecting piecemeal enforcement policies. This stance has placed them firmly in support of the annual demonstrations in Milwaukee (Franzen 2008; Pimentel 2006d; 2007b; 2010b). Furthermore, in a series of editorials following the passage of Arizona’s SB1070, the MJS editorial staff denounced the state law as promoting racial profiling (Kane 2010; Causey 2010) and for being ineffective absent comprehensive immigration reform (Pimentel 2010b; 2010c; 2010f; 2011b; 2011c). The lone editorialist who cautiously supported SB1070, Patrick McIhleran, has consistently argued that SB1070 simply codifies existing law and is, perhaps, a necessary precursor to a more comprehensive approach that includes a greater flow of both high skilled and some low skilled labor (2010a; 2010b; 2010c). The largely pro-immigration stance of the MJS, however, does not necessarily represent the position of the local community. To get at that I turn to the more than eighty letters to the editor on immigration that have been published since 2005 in the MJS.

The Mainstream Stance on Illegality

From early 2005 through September 2011, the majority of letters published in the MJS took a negative view of undocumented immigration, while only seven letters advocated an unqualified “pro-immigration” stance (see Figure 1). By far, the single most common argument against immigration has been focused on the “illegality” of undocumented workers (27 letters). For these writers, there is no room for debate; undocumented immigrants broke the law by coming to the U.S. without authorization and should not be rewarded with any form of “amnesty.” “What part of ‘illegal’ don’t lawmakers (and the MJS Editorial Board) understand?” is a common rhetorical question in these letters.
The second most common theme among these letters is the fiscal costs associated with immigration (16 letters). These contributors took it as a given that undocumented immigrants, by not paying taxes (a false assumption), were costing U.S. taxpayers through their demands on social services like health care and education. Particularly in the latter half of this time period, at the peak of the economic recession, many writers (14) expressed frustration with the supposed wage suppression and high unemployment resulting from an influx of workers willing to work for low wages.

In addition to these largely legal and economic reasons for controlling immigration, four published letters mentioned the environmental costs of the growing U.S. population, while only one letter highlighted the criminality and “diseased” nature of some illegals. Three writers expressed concern that the Spanish-speaking immigrant population was not acculturating. In the words of one contributor, they “should come here legally and assimilate. Learn United States history and learn English. Embrace what it means to be an American.” The solution to the “problem” of undocumented immigration to the U.S. and Milwaukee in these letters was a fairly even combination of border enforcement (12 letters), local policing and employment enforcement (10 letters), and more comprehensive reform that would regularize the undocumented population (12 letters).

**Discussion**

The majority of the above opinions were published in the weeks following the annual May 1st immigrant rights demonstrations in Milwaukee and the April 2010 passage of Arizona’s SB1070. The general tone of these letters, like most published since 2005, is one that

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*Individual letters can be classified in multiple categories*
demonstrates a clear concern for “immigrant illegality” and the local economy. Apart from a couple of letters that characterized the demonstrations as “A day without illegal immigrants,” there were no rebukes of the demonstrators’ right to protest. There was no mention of race or ethnicity, and only one cultural trait, the lack of English language acquisition, was mentioned three times. With the exception of one letter, migrants have not been characterized as dangerous criminals. The popular discourse on immigration in Milwaukee appears to be firmly focused on the legal and economic implications of immigration.

At some level, it seems that the immigrant rights marches were successful. Over a six year period, Latino activists have staked their claim to the public realm through the regular occupation of public space. Within that space they have highlighted common social norms with the larger public while making claims of legitimacy without any significant backlash. Indeed, many of the writers who expressed concerns about immigrant illegality acknowledged the contributions that immigrants have made to Milwaukee or the nation. They are thus placing Latino immigrants in the rich historical narrative of immigration to Milwaukee and the U.S. However, despite these acknowledgements, the acceptance of a Latino voice in the public realm does not mean an acceptance of Latinos in the hegemonic and imagined “polity” of the nation (Staeheli, Mitchell, & Nagel, 2009). The actual or perceived lack of formal citizenship for members of the Latino community is still seen as an impediment to full inclusion in the community by those who see citizenship as a purely legal attribute (Staeheli L. A., 2008). An expanded concept that envisions citizenship as a social practice that transcends the state and is contingent on participation in civil society (Ehrkamp & Leitner, 2003) has little resonance with Milwaukee’s mainstream. The immigrant rights movement in Milwaukee is more likely to have created an alternative public (Staeheli, Mitchell, & Nagel, 2009) that is now in a position, however unequal, to negotiate with the larger public.

Though, creating an alternative public of Latinos, many of whom are not first generation immigrants, marching under the banner of immigrant rights reinforces a connection that may work against the assimilation of Latinos. Before the first immigrant rights demonstration there was very little public discussion about immigration in the MJS. It is only after the emergence of a highly visible immigrant rights movement in Milwaukee that the discourse of illegality came to dominate the opinion pages of the MJS. The local articulation of this discourse, however, should not be seen as causally related to the immigrant rights demonstrations. The production of immigrant illegality is a multi-decade project; the product simply reemerged at the national scale in 2006 after the passage of HR4437 (Loyd & Burridge, 2007). Nevertheless, the rise of a Latino public presence in Milwaukee coincides with the reemergence of the themes of immigrant illegality, abuse of social services, and wage suppression. It could thus be argued that one, or more, of these characteristics could easily be transposed onto Latinos, regardless of immigration, occupational, or social status.

Indeed, from “the native’s point of view,” the question of assimilation presupposes that the immigrant will conform to a certain set of norms and values that are determined by the host society (De Genova, 2005). Certain differences are allowed to persist while others must be eliminated. When behaviors that are deemed un-“American” are seen as present in the second generation and beyond, the lack of full integration into the host society for ethnic minorities must then be a result of ethnic difference. This “differential inclusion” in the mainstream society is a key way in which racial and ethnic hierarchies are formed (Loyd & Burridge, 2007;
Omi & Winant, 1996). Thus, if Latinos are assumed to be abusing social services or driving down wages through their willingness to work in exploitive conditions it must then be a result of something fundamentally different about being Latino, something un-“American.”

However, in showing solidarity between immigrants and Latinos this differential inclusion is exactly what many of the demonstrators are resisting. Though many of them are not immigrants themselves, demonstrators are making the argument that immigrants work hard and pay taxes, just like everybody else. They are stressing that immigrants and Latinos alike are workers, students, soldiers, and dedicated parents. By emphasizing both a similarity with the mainstream and a Latino identity, the demonstrators are trying to shift the boundaries of inclusion in Milwaukee (Alba & Nee, 2003). They are trying to “make sameness” with the larger public not by abandoning their identity, but by asking that a particular form of difference, Latino ethnicity, no longer function as a barrier to entry into the mainstream (Nagel, 2009).

The inclusion of Latinos is, of course, further complicated by the fact that a high proportion of Latino immigrants are undocumented. However effective activists and editorialists are in stressing the legitimacy and commonality of the immigrant population, actual legal status can be a very marginalizing factor for both undocumented and documented immigrants (De Genova, 2005; Harrison & Lloyd, 2011). As evidenced by the letters to the MJS, legal status is also at the forefront of local mainstream concerns about immigrants. Many of the letter writers stressed that their parents, grandparents or great-grandparents were immigrants too, but they were quick to point out that their ancestors entered the U.S. legally. Those that entered legally in the past are nearly always talked about in positive terms, mostly for their hard work, determination, and willingness to “play by the rules.” The local immigrant rights movement has tried to update this narrative by emphasizing the contributions that contemporary immigrants make to the local and national economy. However, as observed elsewhere (Pulido, 2007), these messages do not seem to resonate with the mainstream population. Immigrant illegality remains at the forefront of mainstream concerns, followed shortly after by its real or imagined fiscal costs.

Loyd and Burridge (2007), drawing from Omi and Winant (1996), correctly place the current “fiscal fetishism” of the anti-immigrant movement within the neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state. With welfare reform already on the books, the blame for national and local budget shortfalls often falls on the shoulders of immigrants. Local exclusionary ordinances and the reterritorialization of federal immigration enforcement do the work of supporting this narrative (Coleman, 2008; Ellis, 2006; Ridgeley, 2008; Varsanyi, 2008). Again, the local immigrant rights movement has tried to shift this narrative by situating the immigrant population within the working class. At the 2008 rally, the Wisconsin president of the AFL-CIO announced his solidarity with the marchers, declaring that “All workers have rights. We’re all in this together” (Pabst, 2008). The Service Employees International Union continues to be active in the movement, dispensing placards to demonstrators, coloring the crowd with strokes of purple and gold, the union’s colors (Author observation 2010). In 2011, demonstrators harnessed popular frustration over the governor’s attack on public employees by returning to the theme of solidarity between workers and immigrants (Author observation).
Conclusion

Many Latino immigrants in Milwaukee have successfully entered the middle class and moved out of the predominantly Latino near south side; perhaps, crossing into the mainstream in the eyes of their neighbors and co-workers (Rodriguez & Sava, 2006). However, it is likely that much of the Latino population will continue living in a relatively poor, largely ethnic neighborhood, while working in the lower tier of a segmented labor market (Massey, 2008). For this population to be included in the mainstream, Milwaukeeans will need to shift their concept of what it means to be a full member of the community. This shift will surely be affected by pending immigration legislation. If immigration reform provides a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants in the U.S., the concept of illegality will likely lose its salience as an exclusionary boundary. Still, appropriate legislative changes will need to be complimented with a progressive discursive shift. The discourse of immigrants and, by extension, Latinos, as a drain on the economy and social services will need to be replaced with one that stresses the economic contributions made by a young and active labor force. However, it is unlikely that such a shift will happen absent a stronger worker and class consciousness that transcends ethnic and racial boundaries and recognizes the shared benefits of collective action (Pulido, 2006; Loyd & Burridge, 2007). Wisconsin has long been at the vanguard of labor struggles (Ozanne, 2011), yet it remains to be seen if the movement is strong enough to overcome the splintering effects of contemporary neoliberal and, indeed, neoconservative (Omi & Winant, 1996) discourse and practice. As long as Milwaukee’s white mainstream frames the city’s fiscal challenges in terms of race, ethnicity, and illegality, the actual causes of the city’s economic and social problems will remain obscured and the differential inclusion of its residents will endure.

Through an investigation into negotiations over Latino inclusion in Milwaukee, this paper demonstrates the importance of considering process in assimilation studies. It does not deny the measurable social differences that exist between minority groups and the mainstream population; rather, it shifts attention to the political and discursive processes that reinforce the concept that minorities are, in some fundamental way, truly different from the mainstream. In so doing it also allows for an understanding of how minorities are actively challenging their differential inclusion in local communities by highlighting their similarities with the mainstream. These negotiations over the conceptual boundaries to assimilation ultimately shape popular conceptions of who belongs and who does not. Assimilation research that is attuned to these context specific processes provides necessary balance to the structural assimilation theories that dominate the day.
APPENDIX – MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL EDITORIAL REFERENCES

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Franzen, E.
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McIlheron, P.
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(2004, July 8). Newest wave of immigrants welcome in Wisconsin.
(2005, July 19). Immigration; Reform requires compromise.
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(2006c, April 5). Immigration; Let’s really talk about the issues.
(2006d, August 24). Illegal Immigration; Tapping fear and division.
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