



# DREAMING OUT OF THE SHADOWS: LEGAL STATUS AND MENTAL HEALTH IN REYNA GRANDE AND DIANE GUERRERO'S MEMOIRS<sup>1</sup>

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This article aims to explore how legal status affects the lives and mental health of migrant families in Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us* and Diane Guerrero's *In the Country We Love*. These two memoirs portray the lives of young Latinas who struggle to succeed and overcome the various barriers faced as members of mixed-status families, where at least one family member is undocumented.

In this paper, I argue that regardless of their individual legal status, the protagonists are affected by multigenerational punishment (Enriquez 2015); legal status affects the success, sense of belonging and unity of all family members, and it has an impact on the mental health of the protagonists. I will support this literary analysis with studies in psychology and sociology that assess the wellbeing of migrant families.

Nowadays, a significant part of the undocumented population in the U.S. is being affected by family separation and

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mass deportations. It can therefore be argued that both memoirs describe situations that are relevant to a big part of the Latinx community, and the resilient attitude of the protagonists can be truly inspiring, especially for younger audiences. They may raise consciousness and contribute to the ongoing conversation on migration, one of the central topics in our society.

**Keywords:** migration; Latina literature; mental health; resilience; DREAMers

## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, migration has become one of the key topics in U.S. politics. The complicated situation in many Latin American countries has often led to abrupt migration and the current legislation poses numerous legal challenges for those who migrate. Due to this, many migrants have undocumented status for years. Legal status affects numerous aspects of migrant families and it determines their chances of succeeding and in the U.S., as well as their sense of belonging.

Given the social stigma attached to undocumented status, DREAMers, that is, undocumented migrants who arrived in the U.S. as children, have taken an active role in sharing their stories and breaking that stigma through collective resilience. This movement, also promoted by the prominence of social media, has led to numerous cultural productions across disciplines. Specifically, in Latinx literature, there is a growing body of narratives that depict what it is like to live undocumented in the U.S. These stories are narrated from different perspectives and legal statuses but show many commonalities of living in mixed-status families.

The aim of this article is to analyze Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us* (2013) in relation to Diane Guerrero's *In the Country We Love* (2016). Reyna Grande is a well-established author who writes about migration from the perspective of an undocumented child living in the U.S. Diane Guerrero is an actress and writer who shared her story as a citizen child growing up with undocumented parents. The protagonists have different legal statuses and their stories differ considerably, but they also resonate

at numerous levels: both families strive to achieve the American Dream and prioritize legal status and education to in order to prosper. However, family unity is broken and all family members experience barriers associated with undocumented status. These difficulties have an impact on the mental health of the protagonists, who overcome the hardships and psychological distress through numerous coping mechanisms. During their healing process, both authors feel the support of their community and are inspired by a sense of collective resilience. Years later, when writing their memoirs, both authors prove to have developed a strong sense of responsibility for the Latinx community.

This literary analysis will be supported by studies in psychology and sociology that assess the emotional wellbeing of the Latinx community, placing a special emphasis on migrant families and their children. This article will attempt to establish a relation between the findings in social sciences and the episodes described in both memoirs. Numerous similarities are found, and thus these literary works could be used in classroom contexts to introduce additional views on the topic of migration. These novels could also relieve those who have had similar experiences.

## 2. The Sociohistorical Context

Nowadays, there are more than 60 million Latinxs living in the U.S. and they are therefore one of the largest ethnic groups (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). Historically, many Latinxs have migrated to the U.S. due to geographical proximity and relations between the U.S. and Latin American countries. However, in the last decades, there have been some shifting trends. When looking at the country of origin of migrants, there has been an increase in the number of Central American migrants and a decrease in Mexican migrants (Krogstad et al. 2019). Regarding gender, while traditionally men migrated more often, nowadays the number of women migrants has increased considerably (Ehrenreich and Russell Hochschild 2003). In addition, many children also travel unaccompanied hoping to meet their relatives in the U.S. These changes in migration patterns show a need to take a family-centered approach when studying and regulating migration.

In this regard, U.S. immigration laws are undergoing relevant changes that affect families. While previous laws encouraged migration and prioritized family unity, current laws focus on individual migrants (López 2015) and there is a higher tendency to separate family members (Enchautegui and Menjívar 2015). The laws regarding asylum and protection have also become more restrictive and many asylum seekers have not been granted relief. Given the emergency at their home countries and the long time needed to process petitions for legal status and asylum, it is estimated that over 11 million people are undocumented in the U.S. (Passel and Cohn 2012). The current legislation has also led to a considerable increase in deportations; the Obama administration had the highest deportation rates in history (Department of Homeland Security 2020) and the Trump administration has taken numerous measures to regulate border security and undocumented migration.

In addition to restrictive legislation, migrant families are experiencing social tensions. These tensions that often target the Latinx community could be due to the views of the current administration and the media coverage on undocumented migration. There is an increasing perception that migration and illegality are directly linked (Ayón 2016). Moreover, the Trump administration has contributed to the racialization and criminalization of migrants (Abrego et al. 2017) by targeting the Latinx community and holding views that criminalize and stereotype them. These opinions contribute to the existing social stigma around undocumented migration which clearly affects the emotional wellbeing of migrants.

Legal status plays a pivotal role in the migrants' lives, since those who are undocumented may be at risk of deportation and consequent separation from their families. Undocumented migrants tend to hold worse social status (Abrego and Lakhani 2015) and are more likely to live in poverty (Passel and Cohn 2009). Due to the increase in migrant families, it is necessary that immigration laws take a family-centered approach. However, the differences in legal status between family members can lead to various scenarios: in some cases, all family members are undocumented; in many others, they have various legal statuses; these are known as mixed-status families or "mixed-legal status families," as described by Fix and Zimmerman (2001, 397). Indeed, according to a 2017 survey by the

Center for American Progress, 16.7 million people belong to mixed-status families in the U.S. and almost half of them have documented status (Mathema 2017).

In mixed-status families, those individuals who are full-right citizens are affected by the undocumented status of their relatives. This phenomenon is known as “multigenerational punishment,” a concept introduced by sociologist Laura E. Enriquez that refers to “a distinct form of legal violence wherein the sanctions intended for a specific population spill over to negatively affect individuals who are not targeted by laws” (2015, 939). This damage to life quality happens as a result of the restrictions of being undocumented and also due to the fear of deportation. Multigenerational punishment may be faced by family members across generations (Enriquez 2015). As a consequence, all members of mixed-status families tend to avoid their presence in the public sphere for the fear of their undocumented status being unveiled (Ayón 2016). In other words, they often live “in the shadows.” Research has shown that this fear does not only keep families from accessing public services and benefits (Fix and Passel 1999; Zimmerman and Fix 1998; Vargas 2015) but it also affects their sense of belonging (Abrego and Lakhani 2015). In addition, the undocumented status of some parents poses multiple challenges for their children (Androff et al. 2011) and has very negative consequences for their emotional wellbeing (Brabeck and Xu 2010; Chaudry et al 2010; Androff et al. 2011; Delva et al. 2013; Dreby 2015; Vargas and Ybarra 2017). Given the high prevalence of mental health issues among children in mixed-status families and its implications, it is necessary to ensure the wellbeing of these children (Zayas 2015).

This growing body of evidence proving the impact of migration on the psychological wellbeing of children is crucial to the study and regulation of migration. Heide Castañeda and colleagues believe that more attention should be paid to the connection between migration and health, since migration is not an isolated factor but it permeates in the social parameters of migrants and “it places individuals in ambiguous and often hostile relationships to the state and its institutions, including health services” (2015, 378). Castañeda and others conclude that

immigration is not only a factor determining health but also a potential strategy to develop resilience (2015).

Children of migrants are at the heart of the immigration debate and occupy a unique position, as they are protected by the universal rights of the child and their lives are led by the decisions of their parents. Over the last decade, the undocumented youth population, known as DREAMers, have gained increasing public attention; The DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education for Minors Act) proposed by the Obama administration led way to the implementation of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) in 2012. The over 700,000 eligible recipients of DACA were granted temporary residency and a work permit (USCIS 2018) until it was rescinded by the Trump administration in 2017 and later revoked. These decisions have generated a backlash and, due to their psychosocial characteristics, DREAMers have taken a very active role in the media and on the streets. By sharing their personal stories, they have created a sense of community and collective resilience (De la Torre and Germano 2014). Many of their stories have been turned into artistic projects that show the deep impact of living undocumented.

Since the consolidation of Latinx literature in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, migration has been a central topic. However, during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been an upsurge of narratives focusing on undocumented migration. This is the case of Reyna Grande and Diane Guerrero, two Latina authors belonging to mixed-status families that have written their stories.

Reyna Grande was born in Mexico, where she grew up with her siblings and grandparents while her parents were in the U.S. At age 9, Grande and her siblings migrated to Los Angeles to live with their father. She worked as a teacher at LAUSD and has written several literary works; *Across a Hundred Mountains* (2007), *Dancing With Butterflies* (2009), *The Distance between Us* (2013), *The Distance Between Us (Young Readers Edition)* (2017) and *A Dream Called Home* (2019).

Grande's *The Distance Between Us* begins when her mother leaves for the U.S., years after her father's migration, and Reyna and her siblings are raised by their grandparents while occasionally

seeing their parents. The second part of the book narrates her crossing of the U.S.-Mexico border at age 9 and her new life with her father and siblings in Los Angeles. She describes her learning process until she becomes the first person in her family to earn a college degree, as well as her struggle to negotiate her identity and process the constant longing to be a united family.

Diane Guerrero is an actress born in New Jersey into a Colombian family. While being raised in Boston, her family was suddenly deported, and she found herself alone in the U.S. She has pursued a successful acting career, and she also collaborates with organizations aimed at informing the migrant population and promoting the Latinx vote. She published her memoir *In the Country We Love* in 2016, which was adapted into a young adult novel in 2018.

Guerrero's *In the Country We Love* describes her first years growing up in Boston, when her parents struggled to legalize their status while fearing their deportation. The turning point in the novel comes when Guerrero's family is deported. Alone at age 14, she decides to stay in the U.S. She describes growing up to pursue an acting career while processing the distance that will remain between her and her parents.

Even if the backgrounds of these authors differ considerably, the stories of Reyna Grande and Diane Guerrero resonate at various levels; Grande grows up undocumented and Guerrero is a U.S.-born citizen, hence they both belong to mixed-status families and their lives are marked by their legal status. Both stories depict migration as a complex and multilayered process from two different points of view and the emotional suffering of migrant families.

### 3. Legal Status and Multigenerational Punishment

Both stories begin with the migration of the families to the U.S. Diane Guerrero's family migrates after her parents experience difficulties and lack of opportunities in Colombia, while Reyna Grande's parents migrated in order to build a house for their family in Mexico. The American Dream has always been illustrative of upward social mobility and owning a house is precisely one of the

symbols of this myth (Menjívar et al 2016, 20). Young Reyna holds mixed views on *El Otro Lado* (The Other Side) as it simultaneously represents progress and family separation. Consequently, her motivation to migrate is family unity: “*I want to live in that perfect place. I want to have a father. I want to have a family*” (Grande 2013, 157).

Both families will soon realize that accomplishing the American Dream is to a great extent determined by legal status. In Grande’s case, Reyna, her older siblings and parents are undocumented, whereas her younger siblings Betty and Leonardo are U.S. citizens. In Guerrero’s case, however, Diane is the only U.S. citizen, and her brother and parents are undocumented. Having legal status is one of the main motivations for both families, as it is regarded as the path to belong and interact with the U.S. society, as explained by Reyna’s father: “Just because we’re illegal doesn’t mean we can’t dream (...) one way or another (...) we will stop living in the shadows” (Grande 2013, 228-229). In Guerrero’s words, legal status would mean “a safe passage out of hiding. A passport from the underworld. The next chapter of our story” (Guerrero 2016, 41). In both cases, living in the shadows implies that there is little interaction with institutions and a sense of not belonging to the U.S. In other words, they experience a profound “alienation (the process through which individuals come to be defined as illegal aliens” (Coutin 1993 qtd. in De Genova 2002, 423). Feeling illegal is experienced by migrants as a strong fear of being deported (De Genova 2002, 439). The struggle of both families to legalize their status takes years and while Reyna and her relatives obtain their green cards, Diane’s family is a victim of fraud and later deported (Guerrero 2016, 69). To this day, Diane Guerrero’s family remains in Colombia.

Apart from the economic hardships that both families endure as a consequence of their job insecurity, both families experience the social stigma attached to undocumented status. Indeed, they face racism, as other Latinxs call Diane ‘wetbacks’ (Guerrero 2016, 35) and at school, Reyna’s work is rejected for being written in Spanish (Grande 2013, 217). These tensions lead them to question their sense of belonging and the worth of their effort (Guerrero 2016, 35).



Legal status also affects family unity. From the very beginning, it creates both a physical and emotional distance between family members. In the case of Reyna Grande, the physical distance with their parents also becomes an emotional one; the only father she remembers is ‘the Man behind the Glass,’ that is, a photo of her father that acts as her paternal figure for years. Their mother does spend some time in Mexico, but she is absent, and the children feel constantly abandoned (Grande 2013, 221). Scholars Alicia Muñoz and Ariana E. Vigil argue that the resentment of Reyna and her siblings towards their mother may be influenced by patriarchal and heterosexist views that are present in society, as their mother “has failed to embody ideas of the self-sacrificing mother” (2019, 229). On the other hand, Guerrero spends her childhood with her family, but once her parents and brother are deported, it is made clear that legal status does impede family union.

Migration is also one of the main causes of emotional distance between family members. Years after migrating to the U.S., Reyna’s parents end their relationship. Since then, Reyna’s mother seems detached from her children and acts like a different woman (Grande 2013, 76). Once Reyna and her older siblings move to Los Angeles, they live with their father and her younger siblings Betty and Leonardo stay with their mother. At this point, family unity seems to be permanently affected: “It was because of Mami’s selfishness that now Betty didn’t know us. It was her stupid, stupid pride. I looked at my five-year-old sister and wondered how long it would take for us to finally feel like a family.” (Grande 2013, 223). As the excerpt illustrates, Reyna blames her mother for the situation, which may be due to the fact that migrant mothers tend to be judged more harshly and the relationship with their children is more easily deteriorated (Abrego and Menjivar 2011). Similarly, after Diane’s parents are deported, the distance between family members grows and she also seems to be more resentful at her mother.

Both memoirs therefore prove that legal status constantly shapes all members of mixed-status families and their ties. In other words, the various barriers and the distance both protagonists face show the impact of the multigenerational punishment (Enriquez 2015), as every member in these two mixed-status families experiences the consequences of being undocumented. The

consequences are long-lasting, as both authors conclude that their distance with their relatives is permanent (Grande, 2012, 321; Guerrero 2016, 233)

The impact of the multigenerational punishment is aggravated in Diane's case. Despite being a citizen, she constantly fears her parents' deportation and wishes "to be a normal child" (Guerrero 2016, 35). Even after her parents are deported, she is afraid of standing out and the U.S. authorities do not get it touch with her, which makes her feel invisible. Her mother also warns her to be vigilant after their deportation (2016, 101) and that secrecy and alienation threaten her self-esteem (2016, 123).

In both memoirs, despite having different legal statuses, all family members encounter the consequences of being undocumented. They have limited interactions with institutions and society and fear the deportation of their relatives. At a more individual level, they experience the social stigma attached to undocumented status and their sense of belonging to the U.S. as a family is deeply affected. This set of experiences will undoubtedly have a negative impact on the psychological wellbeing of the protagonists.

#### 4. Legal Status and Mental Health

As stated above, the multigenerational punishment that the members of both families suffer determines many aspects and dimensions of their lives and it also has a clear impact on their mental health.

Both novels portray the complex relation between undocumented status and mental health by showing how all family members face adversities that affect their psychological wellbeing. When Diane's mother is deported for the second time, the tensions between her father and brother increase and her brother's mental health is particularly affected. Regarding her brother's wellbeing, Diane makes two relevant claims: on the one hand, his undocumented status affected his sense of belonging to the U.S.: "my brother fell into an emotional slump. He couldn't see a future for himself in this country; it's nearly impossible to dream big when you don't even have your legal papers." (2016, 21). Secondly,

among migrants facing job insecurity, mental health becomes invisible not only due to social stigma but also owing to economic factors that silence the importance of emotional wellbeing. In other words, “Emotional Wellness is a First World luxury” (Guerrero 2016, 37). These claims go in line with research that points at multiple barriers to access healthcare faced by the Latinx community (Ruiz 2002; NAMI) and the importance of considering migration as a factor when assessing mental health (Castañeda et al. 2015).

The hardest emotional breakdown comes when Diane’s family is deported. There are numerous reasons that make it a devastating and traumatic experience for her. Firstly, Diane learns about their detention when she arrives to an empty house after school; that abruptness allows her no time to process what is happening (2016, 89); when she goes to the detention center prior to the deportation, Diane struggles the criminalization of her parents, who are dressed as prisoners (2016, 91; 101).

At this point, Diane is devastated because all the efforts her parents made to legalize their status and her fears were futile. In addition, while Diane was not to blame for her parents’ detention, she carried the guilt and stigma associated with deportation. The long distance with her parents faces Diane with her adult life by herself and begins to feel like a burden to the family she is staying with, and her self-confidence sinks. Her mental health deteriorates progressively until she arrives to college; the economic hardships, added to the family situation and the need to remain silent overwhelm Diane, and she experiences anxiety, depression, alcohol abuse and self-harm. The turning point comes when she contemplates suicide, but the relationship with her parents leads her to seek treatment (2016, 155).

As she admits, this spiral comes after trying to prove that she could handle the situation all by herself, and she also acknowledges feeling the social stigma around depression that prevented her from sharing her thoughts and story: “I said nothing about my condition to anyone. That’s the thing about depression: It’s not a topic for a breezy, polite dinner conversation. It’s easier to tell someone, ‘I have a headache,’ or even ‘I have cancer,’ than it is to say, ‘the bottom has fallen out of my life.’” (2016, 153). After

this episode, Diane seeks help and begins her recovery. These passages are in line with research that suggests that stigma around mental health is very present in the Latinx community (Caldera 2014; Nadeem et al 2007)

The portrayal of mental health issues in Reyna Grande is less explicit. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the story is focalized by the child version of Reyna (Muñoz and Vigil 2019, 223). However, as children, Reyna and her siblings struggle with abandonment, as they are constantly called “little orphans” (Grande 2013, 17) and they feel abandoned by their mother (2013, 67). The relationship with their father is also complicated; as stated before, when Reyna lives in Mexico, her father is only present as a picture. When he takes Reyna and her older siblings to Los Angeles, they realize that there are two sides to their father: the loving, encouraging and supportive one, and the abusive one (2013, 250). Her father is psychologically distressed and drinks alcohol regularly and the scenes of domestic abuse against Reyna and her siblings are frequent. These episodes create psychological distress on Reyna and her siblings that is long-lasting. His attitude also weighs heavily on his children’s decisions, as he disapproves of the decisions made by Reyna’s siblings and discourages Reyna to attend college: ““You can forget all about going to that university. You’re going to be a failure, too, just like them, so don’t even bother.”” (2013, 288)

Later on in the novel, we learn that Reyna’s father was a victim of domestic abuse as a child (2013, 200) and, at one point, he tries to commit suicide. This whole situation suggests that there is a set of unresolved mental health issues that the father has not been able to process and then affect other people. This also shows the importance of taking care of mental health and breaking the social stigma traditionally attached to these issues. As also shown in Guerrero’s memoir, Grande’s work suggests that the economic and social barriers when trying to access mental healthcare can be devastating not only for those suffering from them but for the people around them. This set of episodes described in both novels point at the emotional toll that migrating and being undocumented has taken on all family members, regardless of their legal status. Reyna Grande closes the memoir by discussing the possible trauma that her parents may have experienced when migrating:

I thought about the border that separates the United States and Mexico. I wondered if during their crossing, both my father and mother had lost themselves in that no-man's land. I wondered if my real parents were still there, caught between two worlds. I imagined them trying to make their way back to us. I truly hoped that one day they would. (Grande 2013, 315).

These passages show how migration creates psychological distress on both families. Among all aspects, deportation and deportability are the most detrimental experiences. On the other hand, access to mental healthcare also proves to be limited among migrant families, primarily owing to socioeconomic factors and stigma attached to mental health. Interestingly, in both cases, younger generations are more aware of the social stigma, which could be interpreted as a positive shift. The underlying idea is that more critical attention should be paid to the emotional suffering of migrants and their children in particular.

## 5. Conclusions

The current global situation and immigration laws are posing numerous challenges to those who migrate to the U.S. Deportations and consequent separation of family members are particularly affecting the wellbeing of migrant families and their children. Whether documented or undocumented, these children are deeply affected by this situation and they are receiving increasing critical attention.

This study has analyzed Reyna Grande's and Diane Guerrero's memoirs to examine the impact of legal status on their emotional wellbeing. Reyna grows up undocumented and Diane as a U.S. citizen, which has different legal implications. However, both belong to mixed-status families and they endure hardships related to undocumented status. In this article, I argue that both protagonists are affected by the multigenerational punishment, since the undocumented status of some family members affects other family members in multiple ways.

The literary analysis of both memoirs has shown that legal status also has a clear impact on the mental health of the protagonists and their families, as undocumented status poses risks and fears that

threaten their emotional wellbeing. These memoirs go in line with studies that show the profound impact of migration on mental health, as well as the social stigma attached to mental health conditions. These texts also attest that access to healthcare is complicated for migrants. Even if both protagonists overcome difficulties and their mental health improves considerably, there is a permanent physical and emotional distance that prevents family unity and affects them emotionally. In both cases, as explained by Reyna Grande, “immigration took a toll on us all” (2013, 207).

These two stories make relevant contributions to the current immigration debate, as they show multiple nuances of migration that are far from being stereotyped and dehumanizing. It can be said that both protagonists manage to step out of the shadows of undocumented status. Diane Guerrero and Reyna Grande succeed in their own version of the American Dream, while exposing limitations to the long-lasting myth. Through their experiences, both protagonists experience the dichotomy of the legal = good migrant versus the illegal = bad migrant that contributes to the criminalization of migrants and justifies their deservingness to succeed in the U.S. By overcoming the dichotomy, the protagonists question the validity of the American Dream and prove that there are more factors that determine success in the U.S.

Reyna Grande and Diane Guerrero give voice and human dignity to the migrant community and place a special focus on the suffering of migrant children. As described by literary critic Concepción de León, Diane Guerrero (and I would add Reyna Grande) are “a casualty of American immigration policy” (2018, 18), that is, two out of many migrant families. These narratives illustrate a need for policy reform, as they shed light on how documented status does not always ensure wellbeing. At a healthcare level, they show the pressing need to assess the emotional wellbeing of children within a family-centered approach that acknowledges the impact of migration.

Having developed a strong sense of community has allowed both authors not only to write complex and relatable memoirs, but also to advocate for immigration reform and take an active role in society. Just as these narratives have contributed to the personal journey and healing process of Reyna Grande and Diane Guerrero,

they could be used in learning environments to break the stigma around undocumented migration and mental health. This may be the reason why both texts have been adapted into Young Adult literature.<sup>2</sup> Future work needs to be carried out on the effects of reading these texts within different environments and age groups. Due to their unique position in the immigration debate, the works portraying children of migrants could act as catalysts for social change. Within classroom environments, reading these memoirs could diminish the social stigma around mental health and contribute to the ongoing conversation on migration. On the other hand, clinical studies assessing the potential health benefits of using these narratives would also be a vital issue for future research.

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