From Citizenship to Custody: Unwed Fathers Abroad and at Home

Albertina Antognini

University of Kentucky College of Law, albertina.antognini@uky.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/law_facpub

Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Faculty Publications at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Law Faculty Scholarly Articles by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.
From Citizenship to Custody: Unwed Fathers Abroad and at Home

Notes/Citation Information
Harvard Journal of Law & Gender, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Summer 2013) pp. 405-468

This article is available at UKnowledge: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/law_facpub/516
FROM CITIZENSHIP TO CUSTODY: UNWED FATHERS
ABROAD AND AT HOME

ALBERTINA ANTognini*

The sex-based distinctions of the Immigration and Nationality
Act ("INA") have been remarkably resilient in the face of numer-
INS, and most recently United States v. Flores-Villar—collectively
the "citizenship transmission cases"—the Supreme Court has up-
held the constitutionality of the INA's provisions that require un-
wed fathers, but not unwed mothers, to take a series of affirmative
steps in order to transmit citizenship to their children born abroad.

The conventional account of these citizenship transmission
cases is that the Court upholds sex-based distinctions that would
otherwise fail heightened scrutiny because the immigration and
citizenship context in which they arise typically affords plenary
power to Congress. This Article argues that the conventional ac-
count is incomplete. The citizenship transmission cases are not
best understood as examples of immigration law exceptionalism.
To the contrary, they are remarkably consistent with the Court's
treatment of unwed fathers and mothers in its equal protection ju-
risprudence generally. An in-depth comparison of the citizenship
transmission cases with the Court's decisions regarding the rights
of unwed fathers in a variety of other legal contexts reveals a uni-
form picture of how the Court approaches parental roles in the
absence of a marital union—the Court assumes that the absence of
legal ties with the father at the time of his child's birth results in
his real absence for purposes of establishing both paternity and a
father-child relationship. The corollary to the unwed father's ab-
sence is the unwed mother's presence—the unwed mother is pre-
sumed throughout these decisions to remain with the child.

Underlying both the INA and the Court's decisions endorsing
the statute is therefore a consistent custody determination: the un-
wed mother, whether she is foreign or American, is understood to
invariably retain custody over the child. This Article evaluates the
potential consequences of making explicit the custody determia-

* Stanford Law Fellow and Lecturer on Law, Stanford Law School. I am deeply
grateful for the feedback and guidance of Kristin Collins, Andrew Gilden, Heather Ger-
ken, Jack Goldsmith, Janet Halley, Judge Rosemary S. Pooler, Norman Spaulding, Chris-
topher Terranova, Andrew K. Woods, and the participants of the Stanford Law School
Fellows Workshop. I also wish to thank Alletta Brenner and the Harvard Journal of Law
and Gender staff for their editorial assistance. The Stanford Law Librarians, especially
George Wilson, were invaluable. All errors are mine alone.
tion that is implicit in the Court’s citizenship transmission cases; uncovering the custody decision assumed by these rules, and assessing it on its own terms, provides reasons to question this recurring sex-based determination. This Article concludes by noting an important limitation of focusing on the gender-related aspects of the statute, namely the exclusion of any discussion concerning its citizenship-related repercussions.

Introduction .................................................... 406
I. Immigration Deference and Denial of Difference: Fiallo v. Bell .................................................... 413
   A. Dual Justifications: “Perceived Absence” of Family Ties and “Problems of Proof that Usually Lurk” 414
      1. “Perceived Absence” of Family Ties ................................ 416
      2. “Problems of Proof That Usually Lurk” ....................... 420
   B. Plenary Power: Deference over Difference .................. 425
II. The Citizenship Transmission Cases: Unwed American Fathers Abroad ........................................ 428
   A. Enduring Justifications and the Rise of “Real” Difference: Miller and Nguyen ..................... 429
      1. “Opportunity to Develop a Meaningful Relationship” .................................. 431
      2. Problems of Proof Still Lurking ........................................ 440
      3. Heightened Scrutiny: Rise of “Real” Difference ............ 444
   B. A Move Toward Custody: Flores-Villar .................... 446
      1. Perceived Absence of Country Ties ....................... 447
      2. Problems of Statelessness ................................. 449
III. Toward a Custody Framework .................................. 454
   A. Some Preliminary Proposals .............................. 456
   B. Custody as Critique ......................................... 460
Conclusion .................................................... 465

Introduction

Few sex-based distinctions survive heightened constitutional scrutiny. Yet those that distinguish between unwed American fathers and mothers are remarkably resilient. Section 309 of the Immigration and Nationality Act ("INA") contains one such distinction: under its provisions, an unwed American mother who has a child abroad with a non-American partner transmits her citizenship automatically to her child, while an unwed American father in the same position can do so only after satisfying a series of affirma-
tive requirements, including agreeing in writing to provide financial support to his child until the child is eighteen years old.1

The Supreme Court has upheld the difference between fathers and mothers in the face of equal protection challenges brought by unwed American fathers first in *Miller v. Albright*,2 and then again a few years later in *Nguyen v. INS.*3 Scholars have been uniform in their agreement that these cases are "sexist, narrow-minded, and patently conservative."4 Yet the Court has continued to confirm the constitutionality of the INA’s distinctions. Two terms ago, it had occasion to revisit the issue in *Flores-Villar v. United States*, where it affirmed the lower court’s opinion, once more upholding a similar sex-based classification in an evenly split per curiam opinion.5

The conventional account of why these “citizenship transmission” cases survive heightened scrutiny is that the Court eschews the analysis it typically applies to sex-based distinctions for something weaker.6 Scholars and practitioners have attempted to explain this weaker scrutiny by pointing

---

1 Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) § 309(a), (c), 8 U.S.C. § 1409(a), (c) (2006).


5 131 S. Ct. 2312 (2011) (per curiam). *Miller, Nguyen* and *Flores-Villar* are difficult cases, as indicated by the frequent split between the justices. However, all three are consistent in upholding the sex-based distinctions.

to the context in which the decisions are made, arguing that because the Court is considering issues related to citizenship, it applies the extreme judicial deference known as plenary power that is found in immigration law. The concern over immigration law exceptionalism has led a number of scholars, joined by some of the Justices, to urge the Court to consider these cases not to be about immigration or even citizenship, but rather to address them as decisions about the rights of American citizen mothers and fathers. Implicit in these claims is the assumption that the Court treats unwed fathers and mothers differently than it would in a purely domestic context, and upholds otherwise outdated sex-based distinctions because of the anomalous context of citizenship and immigration.

---

7 See, e.g., Nina Pillard, Case Comment, Plenary Power Underground in Nguyen v. INS: A Response to Professor Spiro, 16 Geo. Immig. L.J. 835, 846–47 (2002) ("Rather than viewing the distortions in the Court's equal protection analysis as evidence that it was straining to avoid overt reliance on the plenary power doctrine, we could equally understand the version of equal protection that the Court applied [in Nguyen] as ... employing the functional equivalent of plenary power deference without acknowledging that it is doing so."); Cristina M. Rodríguez, The Significance of the Local in Immigration Regulation, 106 Mich. L. Rev. 567, 628–29 (2008) ("Though Justice Kennedy claims not to address whether the plenary power should continue to modify the scrutiny given to federal government's classifications [in Nguyen], it is difficult to accept his equal protection analysis without a suspicion that the special context of immigration is influencing the outcome."); Weinrib, supra note 4 at 248 ("The most palpable difference between [Nguyen] and other equal protection decisions, including those involving non-marital children, is that Nguyen is about immigration and citizenship.").

8 See, e.g., Linda S. Bosniak, Membership, Equality, and the Difference that Alienage Makes, 69 N.Y.U. L. Rev. 1047, 1062 (1994) (explaining "immigration law exceptionalism" whereby "[c]ourts have routinely emphasized that constitutional principles applicable elsewhere are of little effect within the immigration domain."); Stephen H. Legomsky, Ten More Years of Plenary Power: Immigration, Congress, and the Courts, 22 Hastings Const. L. Q. 925, 937 (1995) ("Immigration commentators are well aware that our field has long been a constitutional oddity. For the most part, the Supreme Court has not applied to immigration cases the constitutional norms familiar in other areas of public law.").

9 See, e.g., Kristin Collins & Linda Kerber, Sexing Citizenship, Slate, Nov. 9, 2010, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2010/11/sexing_citizen ship.single.html ("Flores-Villar isn't a case about keeping out illegal immigrants. It is a case about the rights of American mothers and fathers to equal protection of the law."); Miller v. Albright, 523 U.S. 420, 476–78 (1998) (Breyer, J., dissenting) (arguing that because "[t]his case is about American citizenship and its transmission from an American parent to his child" rather than the "naturalization of aliens" then "the same standard of review must apply when a married American couple travel abroad or temporarily work abroad and have a child as when a single American parent has a child born abroad out of wedlock").

10 See, e.g., Joanna Grossman, The 2000-2001 Supreme Court Term On Women's Rights: A Mixed Bag of Split Decisions, FindLaw (July 3, 2001), http://writ.news.findlaw.com/grossman/20010703.html (arguing that "Nguyen turns back the clock nearly three decades, eroding the equal protection jurisprudence that had been successfully eliminating gender-based stereotypes from the law."); Aubry Holland, Comment, The Modern Family Unit: Toward a More Inclusive Vision of the Family in Immigration Law, 96 Cal. L. Rev. 1049, 1085 (2008) (arguing generally that "[u]nlike the advancements made in family law, immigration policies have failed to adequately modernize and accommodate the growth of non-traditional family structures," noting that unmarried fathers have been
This Article argues that the conventional understanding of the citizenship transmission cases is critically incomplete. These cases are not best described as examples of immigration law exceptionalism. Rather, in determining the respective rights of unwed American fathers and mothers to transmit citizenship to their children born abroad, the Court relies directly on its treatment of unwed American fathers and mothers in its equal protection doctrine domestically. This point has been mostly overlooked in the literature, and there has yet to be an in-depth analysis comparing the laws governing unwed parents in the citizenship transmission to those in other state law contexts. That analysis is the principal task of this Article.

Somewhat complicating this undertaking is the fact that the INA and the family it addresses sit uneasily on the border of two “exceptional” fields. The sections of the INA addressing citizenship do not clearly fall within the plenary power doctrine of immigration law, and many unwed fathers and mothers fall outside of what is traditionally considered to be family law. The family indicated by the provisions of the INA exists on the

recognized in family law where they have undertaken custodial or personal responsibility over their children).

A small number of scholars have noted the similarities in the Court’s treatment of unwed parents although in different contexts and varying depth. See, e.g., Kim Shayo Buchanan, The Sex Discount, 57 UCLA L. REV. 1149, 1175–97 (2010) (addressing the similarities among equal protection cases concerning “[i]llicit heterosex,” in arguing more broadly that the Court applies a less demanding equal protection analysis in cases involving the consequences of illicit sex); Gabriel J. Chin, Essay, Is There a Plenary Power Doctrine? A Tentative Apology and Prediction for Our Strange But Unexceptional Constitutional Immigration Law, 14 GEO. IMM. L.J. 257, 258 (2000) (arguing that many cases understood to be a product of plenary power would have come out the same domestically, including those addressing race, Communist affiliation, and sex and illegitimacy); Kristin Collins, Note, When Fathers’ Rights are Mothers’ Duties: The Failure of Equal Protection in Miller v. Albright, 109 YALE L.J. 1669, 1673 (2000) (suggesting that heightened scrutiny, as shown by Miller, is ill-equipped to address the question of parental rights because “both weak and strong applications of the equal protection test fail to reveal the coercive nature of the legal regime underlying § 1409”); Jennifer S. Hendricks, Essentially a Mother, 13 WM. & MARY J. WOMEN & L. 429, 430 (2007) (arguing that the constitutional test applied to unwed fathers throughout the Court’s equal protection jurisprudence including the cases addressing citizenship should apply to the consideration of surrogacy contracts and reproductive technology).

While immigration law exceptionalism has been nearly entirely defined by judicial deference, see supra note 8, “family law exceptionalism” has been considered to be more widespread and refers to “the myriad ways in which the family and its law are deemed, either descriptively, or normatively, to be special.” Janet Halley & Kerry Rittich, Critical Directions in Comparative Family Law: Genealogies and Contemporary Studies of Family Law Exceptionalism, 58 AM. J. COMP. L. 753, 753 (2010).

Given that the Court upheld the sex-based distinctions between unmarried parents for the transmission of citizenship to children born abroad under equal protection scrutiny, the Court explained that “[i]t need not decide whether some lesser degree of scrutiny pertains because the statute implicates Congress’ immigration and naturalization power.” Nguyen v. INS, 533 U.S. 53, 61 (2001).

For instance, standard family law textbooks do not consider many of the unwed mother and father cases. See, e.g., Judith Areen et al., Jr., Family Law Cases and Materials xx (Robert C. Clark et al. eds., 6th ed. 2012) (including Lalli v. Lalli, but excluding Trimble v. Gordon and Gomez v. Perez, cases about inheritance and child support, respectively, where the parents are unmarried). I use the terms “family” and “fam-
border in two other ways—it lies outside of a legally recognized relationship as the man and woman are unwed, and outside of the territory of the United States as these rules only become relevant abroad.15

Yet a close reading of the Court’s equal protection cases addressing unwed parents across borders, both geographical and doctrinal, shows that its decisions consistently reflect an assumption that the unwed father is absent and the unwed mother is present—not just at birth but in the child’s life thereafter. As a result, the unwed father at home and abroad must prove both a biological link and an ensuing relationship with his child.16 Looking beyond the citizenship transmission cases to the Court’s general treatment of unwed fathers and mothers reveals that the family designated by the INA—which I term the “citizen family”—and the family addressed by state law—which I term the “domestic family”—overlap in core respects. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to separate the citizen family, which is composed of the mixed-status couples before the Court in the citizenship transmission cases,17 from the domestic family, given the Court’s myopic focus on the American parents in its citizenship transmission decisions.

The goal of this Article is not to question immigration law exceptionalism,18 but rather to go beyond what is understood to be exceptional and uncover deep-seated similarities that span across different bodies of law considering the relationship between unwed parents and their children. An examination of the decisions concerning unwed parents is essential in an era where the prevalence of births to parents who are unmarried is increasing.

15 There are two recognized means of transmitting citizenship based on birth in the United States: by place, *jus soli,* which is recognized by the U.S. Constitution, or blood relation, *jus sanguinis,* which is recognized by statute. *Stephen Legomsky& Cristina Rodríguez, Immigration and Refugee Law and Policy* 1290–94 (5th ed. 2009) (describing each means of citizenship transmission). Both ultimately depend on place of birth, for *jus sanguinis* comes into play only outside the borders of the United States. *Id.*

16 See discussion infra Part III. I use the term “unwed father” to describe the male parent of a nonmarital child so as to not have to rely on the “legitimate” or “illegitimate” status of the child, unless the characterization of a particular case or situation requires it. While the father of a nonmarital child can technically be married at the time, I mean to invoke the father’s relation to the child he has fathered in the absence of a marital relationship with the child’s mother. As a factual matter, none of the citizenship transmission cases address an otherwise married father at the time of the child’s birth. In employing this term I also aim to equalize the use of “unwed father” and “unwed mother,” with full awareness of the very different socio-cultural connotations surrounding each figure.

17 Miller v. Albright, 523 U.S. 420, 424 (1998) (noting that the specific challenge in that case was to “the distinction drawn by INA § 309 between the child of an alien father and a citizen mother, on the one hand, and the child of an alien mother and a citizen father, on the other”).

18 For one account of plenary power and its repercussions see Hiroshi Motomura, *Immigration Law After a Century of Plenary Power: Phantom Constitutional Norms and Statutory Interpretation,* 100 YALE L.J. 545, 548 (1990) (examining the contradiction between constitutional norms subject to the plenary power doctrine of immigration law and “subconstitutional” norms that seem to circumscribe the problems posed by plenary power).
domestically and abroad. Although rarely acknowledged, the Court defines the bounds of the family in its decisions addressing citizenship as it defines the borders of citizenship in its domestic decisions addressing the treatment of the family by state laws. It is important to note then where the Court makes assumptions about unwed American parents domestically and abroad, and where it extends those assumptions to the non-American halves of the relationship the INA considers.

Although framed in the terminology of unwed parents, these assumptions are, at their most basic, decisions about who will retain custody over the child. The INA sets forth rules based on the expectation that the mother will always retain custody in the absence of a marital relationship; and the Court affirms this sex-based allocation of parental rights, on which citizenship depends. It does so, however, without looking to a contemporary law of custody that has developed beyond a reliance on explicit gender-based preferences. Thus, embedded in the Court’s decisions, is an alternate framework for understanding and ultimately critiquing the contours of the family incorporated by the citizenship transmission cases—that of custody law, which is hidden in plain sight.

---


20 Family law textbooks do not include Fiallo, or for that matter Miller, or Nguyen, in their discussions of custody or paternity. See, e.g., Areen et al., supra note 14, at 376–83, 524–34, 984–1000 (discussing unmarried fathers, children born out of wedlock and custody issues between unmarried couples without any mention of Fiallo, Miller, or Nguyen; including the Ninth Circuit’s decision in Flores-Villar under the section addressing marriage, sex-discrimination, and the Fourteenth Amendment without any reference to paternity, custody, or children born out of wedlock). Scholars have, however, initiated the call to awareness of the various ways in which family and immigration law overlap some years ago. See, e.g., Kerry Abrams, Immigration Law and the Regulation of Marriage, 91 Minn. L. Rev. 1625, 1631–32 (2007) (“Just as family law scholarship has neglected to consider immigration law as family law, immigration scholarship has largely passed by the family law aspects of immigration.”); Kristin Collins, Federalism’s Fallacy: The Early Tradition of Federal Family Law and the Invention of States’ Rights, 26 Cardozo L. Rev. 1761, 1762–69 (2005) (examining the federal government’s role in the regulation of the family and arguing that the paradigm of state sovereignty over domestic relations should be understood as an “invention”).


22 See Anthony G. Amsterdam & Jerome Brunner, Minding the Law 113 (2000) (“Well-wrought narratives are so successful in making their answers to [ ] questions seem like ‘the real thing’ that they virtually blind us to the subtle architecture of their construction.”); see also discussion infra Part III.
This Article proceeds in three parts. Part I analyzes *Fiallo v. Bell*, the first Supreme Court case to consider an equal protection challenge to the INA's treatment of the unwed father in the context of immigration legislation. Because *Fiallo*, decided squarely as an immigration case, is understood to be emblematic of the plenary power doctrine, it is not typically analyzed in conjunction with *Miller, Nguyen, or Flores-Villar*, in the treatment of sex-based distinctions. *Fiallo*, however, sets forth the two central justifications for differentiating between unwed fathers and mothers that have defined the Court's citizenship jurisprudence in the subsequent four decades: the perceived absence of family ties between unwed fathers and their children, and the lurking problems of proof that arise in paternity determinations. While there is no dispute that plenary power dictates *Fiallo*'s analysis, I argue that its effect is evidenced not in the substance of its joint justifications, which are taken directly from the Court's cases considering unwed parents in the state statutes of the time, but in the absence of any elaboration for its reasons.

Part II examines how these justifications are maintained and expanded in the citizenship transmission context beginning with *Miller* and ending with *Flores-Villar*, which left differential sex-based residency requirements intact. The deference that characterized *Fiallo*'s adherence to plenary power is replaced by the discussion of "real" difference in the Court's decisions that directly assess the equal protection challenges. These two Parts focus on the mother and father figures, which are not initially considered in conjunction and are only gradually brought into a direct comparison by the Court in its citizenship and domestic state law cases. Part II concludes by disclosing

---

24 But see Kristin A. Collins, *Fiallo v. Bell in Congress: Plenary Power, Coordinate Branches, and Gender-Based Nationality Laws* (forthcoming) (on file with the author) (tracing the significance of *Fiallo* in both Congress and the courts with the aim of contextualizing the transmission of citizenship cases within the larger institutional life of the plenary power doctrine); Satinoff, *supra* note 6, at 1358–64 (analyzing *Fiallo* in conjunction with *Miller*, which at the time were the only two cases to have been decided by the Court).
26 131 S. Ct. 2312, 2313 (2011) (per curiam).
27 *Nguyen v. INS*, 533 U.S. 53, 73 (2001) (Scalia, J., concurring) ("The difference between men and women in relation to the birth process is a real one.

---

28 The focus of this Article is on the father, the mother, and their unwed status, rather than on the child and his or her "illegitimacy." While the issue of illegitimacy is certainly relevant, this Article examines instead the Court's treatment of the parents, and their relation. This focus mimics the law's treatment of citizenship transmission both in the INA and by the Court in the citizenship transmission cases. Since 1995, the INA no longer distinguishes on the basis of "legitimacy" or "illegitimacy," but on the basis of "in wedlock" and "out of wedlock" which refers to the relations between the parents. Immigration and Nationality Act, Amendment, Pub. L. No. 104-51, § 1, 109 Stat. 467 (1995) (codified as amended at INA § 309; 8 U.S.C. §1409 (2006)) (defining the application of citizenship and nationality laws to children "born out of wedlock."). For a consideration of the different treatment of unwed father and mothers through the lens of illegitimacy, see Martha F. Davis, *Male Coverture: Law and the Illegitimate Family*, 56 Rutgers L. Rev. 73, 83 (2003) (discussing *Nguyen v. INS* and *Fiallo v. Bell* as examples
the custody determination that underlies both the INA and the Court's opinions, thereby identifying an alternative framework to understand the citizenship transmission cases.

Part III presents the potential repercussions of addressing this custody determination directly. I suggest that the Court's reliance on the unwed father and mother paradigm in determining citizenship is unnecessary. A better approach would be for the Court to acknowledge explicitly the custody determination that is implicit in its analysis and to make use of the insights provided by contemporary custody law. Unlike the Court's current approach—which compares the unwed U.S. citizen mother with the unwed U.S. citizen father in what becomes an abstracted and strictly American family—adopting a custody-like framework overtly would force the Court to address the two mixed-status parents and their child before it. The turn toward custody would also require the Court to openly decide rather than surmise which parent will remain with the child, a decision that custody law directly considers. Finally, this custody-based critique elaborates on views already raised, piecemeal, in the Court's dissenting voices and the parties' articulation of the harm caused by differentiating between unwed parents based on sex.

This Article concludes by questioning the Court's focus on heteronormative notions of motherhood and fatherhood, which persist even within a custody framework. The emphasis on the sex-based nature of the INA's distinctions may also not be conducive to reviewing how the regulation of citizenship takes place. Rather, such an emphasis may conceal considerations regarding the limits set on the number of citizens recognized by the statute and their potentially race-based repercussions. Ultimately, the aim here is to enable critical consideration of the concepts that are being employed, under an account that reveals how they are being deployed.

I. IMMIGRATION DEFERENCE AND DENIAL OF DIFFERENCES: FIALLO V. BELL

Despite its laconic take on unwed fathers and their children, Fiallo v. Bell set forth the framework the Court adheres to in its decisions regarding the citizen family to this day. Justice Powell, writing for the majority, upheld the exclusion of unwed fathers, but not unwed mothers, from the statutory definition of a parent-child relationship. While Fiallo was decided under of sex-based illegitimacy classifications); Linda K. Hill, Equal Protection Misapplied: The Politics of Gender and Legitimacy and the Denial of Inheritance, 13 WM. & MARY J. WOMEN & L. 129, 150–53 (2006) (describing unequal citizenship transmission law as an example of Congress exercising "the bias of bastardy against non-marital fathers").

While this turn may counsel a move away from equal protection entirely, see Silbaugh, supra note 4, it is not a necessary implication and can merely supplement, rather than displace, the current constitutional framework.

the judicial deference required by immigration legislation, the subsequent citizenship transmission cases have preserved this distinction between unwed parents under the intermediate scrutiny applied to sex-based categorizations.31

The Court sanctioned the exclusion of unwed fathers and their children from attaining preferential immigration status by virtue of their parent-child relationship, which would have enabled the recipient to, depending on the situation, bypass the applicable numerical quotas or the labor certification requirement.32 In so doing, Fiallo provided two central justifications for why unwed fathers and their children could reasonably be excluded: the absence of family ties between unwed father and child, and problems with proving paternity.33 The Court, however, reached its decision without addressing the presence of the family directly, instead equating it with any other entity Congress regulates in the realm of immigration where the scope of judicial review is "limited."34

This Part begins by addressing the two justifications laid out by Fiallo and situates them squarely within the terrain of decisions addressing unwed American fathers and mothers in state law. It follows with an analysis of how the standard of review dictated by the plenary power doctrine allowed a near total absence in the Court’s opinion of a discussion of the family recognized by immigration law.

A. Dual Justifications: “Perceived Absence” of Family Ties and “Problems of Proof That Usually Lurk”

Fiallo involved a challenge brought by three fathers and their biological children to Section 101(b)(1) of the INA alleging equal protection and due process violations based on a finding that they were statutorily ineligible for preferential immigration status.35 Upholding Section 101(b)(1)’s exclusion of unwed fathers from the definition of “parent,” and their children born outside of marriage from the definition of “child,”36 the Court emphasized its limited role and briefly reasoned: “Congress obviously has determined

31 I refrain here from engaging in the debate as to whether the scrutiny for sex-based distinctions in general has been heightened by United States v. Virginia, 518 U.S. 515 (1996). See discussion infra note 297.
32 Fiallo, 430 U.S. at 789-90.
33 Id. at 799.
34 Id. at 792.
35 Id. at 791. Appellants challenged the constitutionality of INA § 101(b)(1), defining child, and § 101(b)(2), defining parent, on the basis of the First, Fifth, and Ninth Amendments.
that preferential status is not warranted for illegitimate children and their natural fathers, perhaps because of a perceived absence in most cases of close family ties as well as a concern with the serious problems of proof that usually lurk in paternity determinations.\textsuperscript{37} In choosing these two particular bases to rely on, the Court articulated its reasoning in terms of that which cannot actually be observed—a perceived\textsuperscript{38} absence as opposed to an actual one, and lurking\textsuperscript{39} problems of proof as opposed to present ones. Together, the "perceived absence" of close family ties and the concern with "serious problems of proof that usually lurk" in paternity decisions have enabled provisions of the \textit{INA} differentiating between men and women in their parental roles to withstand various equal protection challenges.

Stated without much elaboration, these justifications seem difficult to reconcile with the Court's treatment of unwed fathers and their children in its domestic equal protection decisions. A few years prior to \textit{Fiallo}, the Court held in \textit{Stanley v. Illinois} that the statutory exclusion of unwed fathers from a definition of "parent" in a dependency proceeding was constitutionally unacceptable, violating due process and equal protection.\textsuperscript{40} Addressing the treatment of unwed fathers by Illinois law in \textit{Trimble v. Gordon}, the Court similarly held that problems of proof with paternity determinations "do not justify the total statutory disinheritance of illegitimate children whose fathers die intestate."\textsuperscript{41}

While some scholars consider the Court's holding in \textit{Fiallo} to be plainly contradictory to the principles articulated in cases like \textit{Stanley} or \textit{Trimble},\textsuperscript{42} a continuous theme runs through all these cases: an unwed father, unlike an unwed mother, begins from an absence he must refute both in terms of proving paternity and establishing the existence of a parental relationship with

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Fiallo}, 430 U.S. at 799.
\textsuperscript{38} "To apprehend through one of the senses, esp. sight; to become aware of by seeing, hearing, etc.; to see; to detect." \textit{Perceive Definition}, \textit{Oxford English Dictionary}, \url{http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/140537} (last visited Mar. 28, 2013) (subscription required).
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{430 U.S. 762, 772} (1977). There is some scholarship that addresses \textit{Fiallo} in conjunction with the proof of paternity cases such as \textit{Trimble}; those that do, however, are in the illegitimacy context, which assume, rather than assess, the overlap among the decisions. See, e.g., Laurence C. Nolan, "Unwed Children" and Their Parents Before the United States Supreme Court from Levy to Michael H.: Unlikely Participants in Constitutional Jurisprudence, 28 \textit{Cap. U. L. Rev.} 1, 19–31 (1999) (discussing \textit{Fiallo} and other federal cases addressing illegitimacy in surveying the Supreme Court cases between 1968 and 1989).
his child. A comparison of the family in both contexts reveals that the Court's treatment of the citizen family and the domestic family are more similar than they are distinct.

1. "Perceived Absence" of Family Ties

The "perceived absence ... of family ties" between father and child kept a discussion of the family largely absent from the Court's decision in *Fiallo*, given that little justification is required for what is visibly not there. This perceived absence was also present in *Stanley*, functioning as the baseline from which the Court allowed the unwed father "to make his case." Both decisions were reached without addressing the difference in treatment between unwed fathers and mothers directly. *Stanley* compared the unwed father with all other Illinois parents, and *Fiallo* evaluated whether the unwed father was similar to the INA's other statutory exclusions, which addressed children. The unwed mother's absence from the Court's opinions implied her presence with respect to her child—to the Court, the mother's family ties were too obvious to address.

In both the immigration and domestic equal protection cases, the unwed father begins from an absence—the absence of the legal tie of marriage—which the Court extends to indicate an absence of real ties with his children. The demand for proof of the unwed father's relationship with his children relies heavily on the legitimation paradigm—in demonstrating a bona fide relationship with his child, the father does the work that legitimating a child, through marriage or other means, would have accomplished. The Court in *Stanley* held that states may not discriminate against unwed fathers by presuming them unfit parents, but left undisturbed the fact that states may hinge their legal recognition of the unwed father on requiring him to prove his relationship by affirmative, legally cognizable acts, equivalent to the affirmative act of marriage. *Fiallo* rigidly instituted *Stanley's* assumption of paternal absence, with no opportunity for even a hearing to prove the exception.

The limited reference to the family that took place in *Fiallo* was in the context of recognizing that the provision granting preferential immigration status was aimed at keeping families united. Unwed fathers, however, were excluded from this family in the first instance. Justice Powell justified the

---

45 *Fiallo*, 430 U.S. at 797–99.
46 Stanley v. Illinois, 405 U.S. 645, 657 n.9, 658–59 (1972) ("Extending opportunity for hearing to unwed fathers who desire and claim competence to care for their children creates no constitutional or procedural obstacle to foreclosing those unwed fathers who are not so inclined.")
47 *Fiallo*, 430 U.S. at 795 n.6 ("It is true that the legislative history of the provision at issue here establishes that congressional concern was directed at the problem of keeping families of United States citizens and immigrants united.") (internal citations omitted).
exclusion by looking to the legislative history of the INA, where he emphasized Congress's specific concern with the plight of the unwed mother.\footnote{Id. at 797 (discussing amendments made to the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1957).} Noting that unwed fathers were not the intended beneficiaries of the amendments, Justice Powell concluded that they were reasonably excluded from the family that Congress intended to reunite.\footnote{Id. Compare Brief for Appellees at 16, 38, Fiallo v. Levi, 426 U.S. 919 (1976), sub nom. Fiallo v. Bell, 430 U.S. 787 (1977) (No. 75-6297), 1976 WL 181347, at *16, *38 [hereinafter Fiallo Appellees Brief] (explaining that "Congress sought to encourage families to reunify when they became separated by the immigration of a close family member to the United States, and then only under circumstances where it was likely that the separation had occasioned extreme emotional, financial, or social hardship to the family," arguing that including the children of unwed fathers would not "advance the goal of reunifying family members who would be living together" given that "[n]o such intimacy generally exists between natural fathers and their illegitimate children, especially those who have never chosen to legitimate their son or daughter") with Brief for Appellants at 31–37, Fiallo v. Levi, 426 U.S. 919 (1976), sub nom. Fiallo v. Bell, 430 U.S. 787 (1977) (No. 75-6297), 1976 WL 181347, at *31–37 [hereinafter Fiallo Appellant Brief] (arguing that the legislative history shows a general aim to reunite the family regardless of legitimacy, without focusing on the unwed mother).}

Despite the appearance of the unwed mother in the discussion of the Act's legislative history, the Court in \textit{Fiallo} avoided a direct comparison with the father. Instead, the Court compared the exclusion of the unwed father from preferential immigration status under INA Section 101(b)(1), with the exclusion of a child over twenty-one years of age, or a child who was adopted after the age of fourteen.\footnote{Id.} That is, the Court compared the unwed father to grown or married children—the unwed father, similar to the child over twenty-one years of age, did not exhibit the family ties required by Congress for preferential immigration status. The unwed mother remained estranged from a comparison with the unwed father and mostly absent from the Court's opinion. The mothers who were before the Court in \textit{Fiallo}, however, did not fit easily into this perception. Nowhere did the Court mention the mother who left her child, married another, and expressed a desire to leave her son.\footnote{Fiallo, 430 U.S. at 797–98. Not all distinctions in the law relating to immigration preference of immediate relatives are based on age; the one other distinction is based on the marital status of the child.} Nor did it discuss the mother who supported the family financially and who chose not to marry,\footnote{These are the facts of Cleophus Warner and his son Serge, appellants in \textit{Fiallo}. While Serge was visiting his father in the United States, Cleophus received a letter from Serge's mother saying that she had married, was moving to an undisclosed location, and did not want Serge to return to her. Serge had been born in the French West Indies. Fiallo Appellant Brief, supra note 49, at *7–8.} or the mother who died.\footnote{Ramon Fiallo-Sone, a citizen from the Dominican Republic, was the primary caretaker of his son, Ramon Fiallo, while Celia Rodriguez, Ramon Jr.'s mother, worked and provided for both Ramon and his son; for "personal reasons," the parents decided not to marry. \textit{Id.} at *10–11.} These were the actual mothers in the facts before the Court, yet the only

\footnote{\textit{Id.} at 797 (discussing amendments made to the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1957).}
mother present in the opinion, foreign or American, was the mother who remained with her child and who Congress intended to help.54

The mother was also largely absent from the Court's decisions addressing the domestic family, and did not figure prominently in Stanley. Similar to Fiallo, the Court in Stanley did not engage in a direct comparison between the two unwed parents; instead, it addressed the equal protection violation based on the argument that the unwed father was denied a right given to all other parents.55

The Court was not, however, directly presented with the question of whether a sex-based distinction between unwed fathers and mothers violated the Constitution.56 Fiallo and Stanley can be further distinguished by Justice White's acknowledgment in Stanley that the unwed father may have a relationship with his children. The Stanley Court faced the question of whether Illinois could constitutionally define "parents" to mean "the father and mother of a legitimate child, or the survivor of them; or the natural mother of an illegitimate child, [including] any adoptive parent, but [ ] not [ ] unwed fathers" for the purpose of a neglect hearing.57 Answering in the negative, Stanley relied on the aim of the Juvenile Act which, similar to Section 101(b)(1) of the INA, was partly "to strengthen the minor's family ties whenever possible."58 Discussing the family writ large, the Court asserted that its decisions have "frequently emphasized the importance of the family," noting that the law has not "refused to recognize those family relationships unlegitimized by a marriage ceremony."59 The Court concluded that Peter Stanley,60 the unwed father, "was entitled to a hearing on his fitness as

without either of their parents. Trevor and Earl, at the time of the lawsuit, were permanent residents and their father, Arthur Wilson, was in Jamaica. Id. at *12.

54 The majority of the Court's brief discussion of the mother is during its explanation of the legislative history, noting "Congress was specifically concerned with the relationship between a child born out of wedlock and his or her natural mother. . . ." Fiallo, 430 U.S. at 797.

55 The father in Stanley is compared to other parents and not their children. Stanley v. Illinois, 405 U.S. 645, 658 (1972). Moreover, the decision relies mostly on due process grounds, rather than on equal protection grounds. See Case Comment, The Emerging Constitutional Protection of the Putative Father's Parental Rights, 70 MICH. L. REV. 1581, 1602 (1972) ("[S]ignificantly, in Stanley v. Illinois the Court avoided a clarification of the sexual classification issue as well as the fundamental interest issue.").

56 The Supreme Court of Illinois engaged in a direct comparison, holding that "[t]he distinction between the class of mothers and the class of fathers is rationally related to the purposes of the Juvenile Court Act, . . . and thus it is not constitutionally mandated that Stanley be accorded the rights which accrue to the class of natural mothers of illegitimate children." Stanley v. Stanley, 256 N.E.2d 814, 815 (III. 1970). Peter Stanley argued the equal protection violation in State court, yet enlarged the comparison to encompass all other parents on appeal before the Supreme Court. See Stanley, 405 U.S. at 665 (Burger, J., dissenting).

57 Stanley, 405 U.S. at 650 (internal quotation marks and citation omitted).

58 Id. at 652 (internal quotation marks and citation omitted).

59 Id. at 651–52.

60 Petitioner's name was introduced in the first line of the opinion, as was the name of the mother of their children, which was Joan Stanley. Stanley, 405 U.S. at 646. By contrast, the names of Appellants in Fiallo appeared only once in the majority's opinion, in a
a parent before his children were taken from him and that, by denying him a hearing and extending it to all other parents whose custody of their children is challenged, the State denied Stanley the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.” 61

Crucially, however, the Court’s decision remained largely at the level of paternal possibility. It did not assess the actual relationship between Stanley and his three children, nor did it address the relations between unwed fathers and their children generally. The only question before the Court was whether the unwed father merited a hearing prior to having his children taken away upon the death of their mother. “It may be,” the Stanley Court admitted, “that most unmarried fathers are unsuitable and neglectful parents”; or even that “Stanley is such a parent and that his children should be placed in other hands.” 62 These perceived family ties were not germane to the Court’s decision; 63 it was sufficient merely that “all unmarried fathers are not in this category.” 64 The gains made by Stanley were real insofar as the Court rejected a “one-dimensional” construction of unwed fathers. 65 Yet despite its bold language, Stanley’s holding was limited—it extended only to allow the unwed father “to make his case.” 66

While Fiallo rejected even the opportunity for a hearing given the Court’s blanket reluctance to assess the statute’s means vis-à-vis its ends, 67 Stanley did little to attack the conceptual underpinnings Fiallo would later rely on. Unwed fathers must prove the existence of parental relations, which are otherwise presumed to be absent. Under the current version of the INA section that was challenged in Fiallo, the unwed father, like Peter Stanley, receives only an opportunity to prove that he is in fact “unusual”; 68 he must show he has a bona fide relationship with his child. 69 By contrast, the unwed mother has no bona fide relationship requirement. 70

footnote. Fiallo v. Bell, 430 U.S. 787, 790 n.3 (1977). If anything, this difference tracks the acknowledgment by the Court of the parties, and the facts, before it.
61 Stanley, 405 U.S. at 649.
62 Id. at 654.
63 The Court’s choice to rely on a due process rationale facilitated avoiding this determination. See discussion supra note 55 (analyzing Stanley’s decision to rely principally on due process instead of equal protection grounds and potential repercussions thereof).
64 Stanley, 405 U.S. at 654.
65 Id. at 655.
66 Id.
68 Stanley, 405 U.S. at 666 (Burger, J., dissenting) (“Stanley depicts himself as a somewhat unusual unwed father, namely, as one who has always acknowledged and never doubted his fatherhood of these children.”)
69 The current version of INA §101(b)(1) still requires some affirmative action on behalf of the father and not the mother. Amended in 1986, the statute presently reads that a child born out of wedlock will be considered a child “by virtue of the relationship of the child to its natural mother or to its natural father if the father has a bona fide parent-child relationship with the person.” Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, Pub. L. 99-603, 100 Stat. 3359 (1986) (amending INA §101(b)(1)(D)) (current version at INA §101(b)(1)(D), 8 U.S.C. §1101(b)(1)(d) (2006)) (emphasis added).
2. "Problems of Proof That Usually Lurk"

The second justification Fiallo offered for excluding unwed fathers was based on "the serious problems of proof that usually lurk in paternity determinations." Biological ties were subject to problems of proof abroad and domestically, and Fiallo relied on a state law case discussing the significance of paternity determinations for support. While many of the cases addressing the domestic family differed from Fiallo in outcome—in that the problems of proof were not insurmountable—the difference can be explained not by any different views concerning the unwed parents, but largely by their focus on the distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate children. This focus also obscured the fact that the state laws in these cases nearly unanimously placed restrictions on the relationship between the child and the unwed father, rather than the child and the unwed mother. Both domestically and abroad then, problems were particular to the unwed father rather than the unwed mother. In the context of immigration, problems that were merely lurking were sufficient to exclude the unwed father under INA Section 101(b)(1).

In providing the paternity justification in Fiallo, Justice Powell cited to Trimble v. Gordon, one of the many cases addressing illegitimacy during the late 1960s and 1970s. In Trimble, which he also authored and which was issued during the same term as Fiallo, Justice Powell explained that "[o]ur... decisions demonstrate a sensitivity to 'the lurking problems with respect to proof of paternity,' and the need... to draw 'arbitrary lines... to facilitate potentially difficult problems of proof.'" Justice Powell did not find those problems fatal in Trimble, holding that the exclusion of illegitimate, but not legitimate, children from the ability to inherit from their fathers violated equal protection. Acknowledging the difficulties in

---

71 Fiallo, 430 U.S. at 799.
72 Id. (relying on Trimble v. Gordon, 430 U.S. 762 (1977)).
73 See, e.g., Trimble, 430 U.S. at 770 (reasoning that while "parents have the ability to conform their conduct to societal norms, [ ] their illegitimate children can affect neither their parents' conduct nor their own status" in striking down a statute that discriminated against illegitimate children); Gomez v. Perez, 409 U.S. 535, 538 (1973) (striking down a statute that excluded illegitimate children from a right to support from their natural fathers, reasoning that "a State may not invidiously discriminate against illegitimate children by denying them substantial benefits accorded children generally"). See also discussion infra notes 83-91.
74 See, e.g., Trimble, 430 U.S. at 764 (statute excluding the illegitimate child of a natural father from inheriting his estate); Gomez, 409 U.S. at 535 (statute granting a right of support to the legitimate, but not illegitimate, children of the natural father); Weber, 406 U.S. at 164 (statute preventing the illegitimate child of a natural father from recovering workmen's compensation benefit). See also discussion infra notes 83-91.
75 Trimble, 430 U.S. 762.
76 Fiallo, 430 U.S. at 766 n. 11 (listing cases and noting "[Fiallo] represents the 12th time since 1968 that we have considered the constitutionality of alleged discrimination on the basis of illegitimacy.").
77 Trimble, 430 U.S. at 771 (citations omitted).
78 Id. at 765-66, 772.
determining paternity, he nevertheless reasoned that while "'[t]hose problems are not to be lightly brushed aside, [ ] neither can they be made into an impenetrable barrier that works to shield otherwise invidious discrimination.'" 79

The Court heeded problems in Fiallo that it did not in Trimble or in the other cases addressing proof of paternity in the context of state law classifications. Yet the difference in outcome is not properly located in a different understanding of the roles of the unwed parents, or in the substantive effect of plenary power; rather, it is better located in the Court's focus on the children in the domestic state law cases. 80 That is, while the paternity determination in Fiallo was raised in the context of a child's relation vis-à-vis the unwed parent, the domestic cases compared the differential treatment between children, legitimate and illegitimate, a choice largely dictated by petitioners. 81 Thus, an important basis for the distinction between the cases is how the equal protection challenge was framed—whether it addressed the children or the parents. 82

The domestic cases considering proof of paternity did not have to confront the legal distinctions between unwed fathers and mothers because they did not have to. Accordingly, these state law cases did not address the relationship presumed to exist between parents and their children, or that the illegitimate child was generally suing for legal recognition of the unwed father-child relationship that the unwed mother-child relationship already had. 83 These cases also largely failed to raise the issue that the children of unwed fathers in particular were disadvantaged. Instead, they tended to fo-

---

79 Id. at 771 (quoting Gomez, 409 U.S. at 538). For the initial case that contained the language exhibiting concern about the lurking problems in paternity determinations, see Gomez, 409 U.S. at 538. Gomez held that a Texas court could not prevent an illegitimate child from receiving a judicially enforceable right of support from her natural father. Id.

80 Appellants in Fiallo challenged the law on grounds that it was discriminatory "on [the] double-barreled bases of sex and illegitimacy founded on archaic and overbroad stereotypes." Fiallo Appellant Brief, supra note 49, at *54. The Court briefly considered and dismissed both arguments in tandem. Fiallo, 430 U.S. at 794. While I argue that the Court's decision to disregard these arguments is very much linked to its adherence to plenary power, see discussion infra, Part I.B, its justifications nevertheless reflect the standard conceptions of unwed fathers and mothers present in the cases of the time.

81 See Davis, supra note 28, at 89–97 (discussing the history of the legitimacy litigation and the various factors leading to a strategic focus on the illegitimate child rather than the sex-based distinctions between unwed parents).

82 In the citizenship transmission context, Miller likely dissuaded petitioners from bringing sex-discrimination claims based on the effects on the child; in that case, two of the Justices believed the child could not raise a gender discrimination claim given that "the discriminatory impact of the provision [fell] on petitioner's father, Charlie Miller, who [was] no longer a party to this suit." Miller v. Albright, 523 U.S. 420, 445–46 (1998) (plurality opinion) (O'Connor, J., concurring).

83 Louisiana was an anomaly; it excluded the child of an unwed mother from bringing a suit for wrongful death of a mother. Every other state allowed illegitimate children to sue for a mother's death, but precluded them in differing ways from suing for an unwed father's death. See, e.g., Levy v. Louisiana, 391 U.S. 68, 72 (1968) (addressing the relation between an unwed mother and her child); see also Davis, supra note 28, at 95 (citing Harry D. Krause, Illegitimacy: Law and Social Policy 69–70 n. 44 (1971)).
The assumptions about the mother’s presence and the father’s accompanying absence embedded in the structure of the claims brought before the Court also emerged in its reasons for striking down the state statutes. Despite not speaking directly to the parental roles, the illegitimacy cases exhibited an understanding of the respective roles of unwed fathers and mothers consistent with the unwed parents in Fiallo and Stanley. In Levy v. Louisiana, for instance, the Court held that preventing illegitimate children from being denied recovery upon the death of their mother was a violation of the constitutional guarantee of equal protection. The Court took care to explain that “the[ ] children, though illegitimate, were dependent on [their mother]; she cared for them and nurtured them; they were indeed hers in the biological and in the spiritual sense; in her death they suffered wrong in the sense that any dependent would.”

84 There are only two cases from this period that address a child’s relation with an unwed mother, both from Louisiana. Levy, 391 U.S. 68 (right of illegitimate children of to inherit from mother); Glona v. Am. Guarantee & Liability Ins. Co., 391 U.S. 73 (1968) (right of mother of illegitimate child to cause of action for child’s death where Louisiana wrongful death statute barred recovery to parents of illegitimates). In Glona, the sole concern postulated and quickly dismissed with regard to motherhood was the “conceivable... temptation to some to assert motherhood fraudulently.” 391 U.S. at 76.

85 Moreover, the illegitimacy cases were not entirely consistent in holding for the illegitimate child—in Labine v. Vincent, the Court upheld a statute differentiating between legitimate and illegitimate children in Louisiana by placing a higher burden on illegitimate children to be able to inherit as within the state’s power to make laws for the distribution of property. Labine v. Vincent, 401 U.S. 532 (1971); see Davis, supra note 28, at 96 (noting that while Labine was “ostensibly at odds with the result in Levy, the Court’s reasoning was fully consistent with Levy’s analytical approach insofar as both cases focused exclusively on the impact of the law on children and implicitly accepted sex-based distinctions between parents in the illegitimacy context”).

86 Levy, 391 U.S. at 72. Louisiana was alone in this matter because it was the only state at the time that did not allow for a suit for wrongful death of a mother by her illegitimate child; every other state allowed illegitimate children to sue for a mother’s death, but were precluded in differing ways from suing for an unwed father’s death. It was also an anomaly in that it required both fathers and mothers to support their children born out of wedlock. See Davis, supra note 28, at 94–95 (discussing the persistence of illegitimacy classifications and the different litigation strategies which have addressed them); see also Brief for Appellant at 12–13, Levy v. Louisiana, 391 U.S. 68 (1968) (No. 58), 1967 WL 113865, at *12–13 [hereinafter Levy Appellant Brief] (discussing the strangeness of the Louisiana death statute and its unreasonableness given that both mothers and fathers of illegitimate children are legally required to support them).

87 Levy, 391 U.S. at 72. This was also an argument advanced by Appellant’s brief: “Whatever the result with regard to fathers, the argument against recovery is without any force whatever as to mothers of illegitimate children, with whom, as in this case, they will usually have a more intimate relationship.” Levy Appellant Brief, supra note 86 at *18.
In a subsequent case, *Weber v. Aetna Cas. & Sur. Co.*, the Court followed Levy's reasoning, holding that excluding illegitimate children from sharing equally in the workmen compensation benefits of their deceased father violated equal protection. Conspicuously absent from *Weber*, however, was the language regarding the "biological" and "spiritual" connection between a father and his child that the Court had invoked with respect to a mother and her child in *Levy.* Instead, Justice Powell conceded without much difficulty that "[i]t may perhaps be said that statutory distinctions between the legitimate and illegitimate reflect closer family relationships in that the illegitimate is more often not under care in the home of the father nor even supported by him." Thus, the state law cases, while different in outcome, are not fundamentally at odds with Fiallo's constitutional assumptions about the respective roles of unwed fathers and mothers.

In addition to the domestic problems of proof present in paternity determinations, *Fiallo* expressed concern with problems of fraud in a foreign land. Placing *Trimble* closer to home, the Court appeared wary of the problems that could arise "when [paternity] depends upon events that may have occurred in foreign countries many years earlier," which it linked to the "problems of proof and the potential for fraudulent visa applications."

A closer analysis provides reasons to be skeptical of the Court's emphasis on the foreign in general. For one, such concerns are specific to the unwed father who has not legitimated his child. Where a father married the child's mother or legitimated his child abroad, actions that are equally dependent on procedures in foreign countries, this foreign aspect did not raise concerns for either the Court or the government. Further, the type of paternity-establishing evidence an unwed father would likely offer in support of his relation to his citizen child is the same kind of proof required of parents who are recognized by the statute. Needless to say, the Court exhibited no concerns with foreign procedures when the unwed American woman traveled abroad; the element of the foreign was only suspect when tied to deter-

89 *Id.* at 165.
90 *Id.* at 173.
91 Although the stirring rhetoric of the state law cases is used spiritedly by the dissent in *Fiallo.* See *Fiallo* v. *Bell,* 430 U.S. 787, 809, 813, 815 (1977) (Marshall, J., dissenting).
92 See *Fiallo,* 430 U.S. at 799 n.8 ("[O]ur cases clearly indicate that legislative distinctions in the immigration area need not be as ‘carefully tuned to alternative considerations’ as those in the domestic area.’") (quoting *Trimble,* 430 U.S. at 772).
93 *Id.*
94 A child may be legitimated under the law of the child's residence or domicile, or under the law of the father's residence or domicile. INA § 101(b)(1)(C), 8 U.S.C. § 1101(b)(1)(C) (1976) (current version at INA § 101(b)(1)(C), 8 U.S.C. § 1101(b)(1)(C) (2006)). A father may also be wed abroad.
95 See *Fiallo* Appellant Brief, *supra* note 49, at *45* (explaining that the proof of paternity required of a U.S. citizen stepmother to petition for the entry of her U.S. citizen husband’s illegitimate non-citizen child would, functionally, be the same as the proof that that father would hypothetically furnish to establish paternity himself—but that the statute, perversely, accepts such proof in the former scenario only).
minations of paternity, as opposed to maternity. Rather than being worried about foreignness per se then, the Court’s expressed concern is with the American man in a foreign country and the foreign woman he might encounter.96

The government located its concerns with paternity more explicitly on the act of birth, which became the focal moment given the lack of marital ties. In *Fiallo*, the government relied on what can and cannot be seen at that moment, which confirmed the presence of the mother and the absence of the father: "Unlike the identity of the mother, which will often appear on the birth certificate and which frequently can be corroborated by the testimony of relatives, midwives, or medical personnel, the sole evidence that a man has fathered a particular child is often the testimony of the mother, and she may not know."97 Even if the father were to be present during birth, the government rendered the import of such presence questionable, given the mother’s suggested promiscuity—"she may not know" who is the father of her child, and "two or more men may claim paternity of the same child."98

In due course, the Court would recognize a concern based on the perception that "[t]here are . . . men out there who are being Johnny Appleseed."99

Although the government portrayed the unwed foreign mother as having numerous, even simultaneous, sexual partners such that she may not be aware of the biological father, these were not the foreign mothers before the Court in *Fiallo*, who remained absent from the opinion.100 The only unwed foreign mother recognized by the Court and the statute is the mother of an American citizen or legal permanent resident, hinging her recognition entirely on her status as mother.101 Similar to the cases addressing illegitimacy of the time, the *Fiallo* Court considered only one possible set of unmarried

96 In the context of the American military, the government encouraged marriage of soldiers with the “war brides” of World War II while instituting procedures making it more difficult to do so during the Korean and Vietnamese wars. See Kristin A. Collins, Essay, *A Short History of Sex and Citizenship: The Historians’ Amicus Brief in Flores-Villar v. United States*, 91 B.U. L. Rev. 1485, 1492-93 (2011) (discussing the race-salient repercussion of these gender-based laws and the change in military practice post-WWII to encourage casual sexual relations in lieu of marriage to discourage American soldiers from marrying their South East Asian girlfriends during the Korean and Vietnam wars); see also Susan Zeiger, *Entangling Alliances: Foreign War Brides and American Soldiers in the Twentieth Century* 5 (2010) (discussing the category of “war bride,” which established the rights of the foreign wives of American soldiers, but was denied to many couples in intercultural war marriages, especially African-American GIs with European wives and white and black GIs with Japanese wives or fiancées).


98 *Id.* at *24.


100 See *supra* notes 50–54 and accompanying text.

101 See *Fiallo*, 430 U.S. at 797 (noting that the INA was amended to allow for inclusion of the mother-child relationship including “both the illegitimate alien child of a citizen mother and the alien mother of a citizen born out of wedlock”) (internal citations omitted).
parents: the present-by-default mother and the absent, unreliably identified, father.\(^{102}\)

The *Fiallo* Court addressed neither the illegitimacy nor the sex-based discrimination arguments that were raised by the appellants, but the foundation for future decisions considering sex-based distinctions was nevertheless laid. The baseline role for the unwed father in the context of biological paternity was set to be uncertain and potentially non-existent, akin to the baseline role set for the unwed father in the context of family ties.

**B. Plenary Power: Deference over Difference**

The *Fiallo* majority began its analysis of INA section 101(b)(1) by overtly appealing to the context in which it was made: “At the outset, it is important to underscore the limited scope of judicial inquiry into immigration legislation.”\(^{103}\) This judicial deference does not, as we have seen, necessarily implicate a “different” jurisprudence addressing unwed fathers and mothers; it does, however, account for the lack of elaboration provided by the Court in justifying Congress’s decision. In its decision to defer, the Court rejected repeated requests to treat this matter concerning the family as unique, or different from a typical immigration case. Instead, the family was approached like any other entity within immigration law. In so doing, the Court assumed that the citizen family was like its domestic counterpart, but under the cover provided by plenary power.

Appellants in *Fiallo* presented numerous arguments for why the Court should consider its facts “unique,” most of which centered on the subject of the family.\(^{104}\) The family unit—and the ideology of altruism associated with it—were deployed by appellants to distinguish the case from the Court’s prior immigration-related decisions.\(^{105}\) Pointing to the different nature of the claim, appellants argued that their situation did not involve “foreign policy concerns” or reflect a legislative desire to exclude certain groups “who were specifically and clearly perceived to pose a grave threat to the national se-

---

\(^{102}\) For the purpose of transmitting citizenship to a child within a marriage, there is no distinction between a foreign father and a foreign mother, or between an American father and an American mother, given that the rules are gender neutral. INA § 301(a), 8 U.S.C. § 1401(a) (1952) (current version at INA § 301(a), 8 U.S.C. § 1401(a) (2006)).

\(^{103}\) *Fiallo*, 430 U.S. at 792.

\(^{104}\) See *Fiallo* Appellant Brief, supra note 49, at *52 (arguing that “[n]o other immigration case has come to this Court with the unique coalescing of factors which exist in this case”).

\(^{105}\) See id. at 19–23, 53–55 (discussing the “fundamental constitutional interests in family association” and arguing that “none of the prior cases implicated the fundamental constitutional interests of United States citizens and permanent residents in a familial relationship and association in this country with their parents or children or the privileges or immunities of their citizenship and residency”). Janet Halley describes this notion of “family,” as invoked by the appellants, as an ideology of domestic intimacy. See Janet Halley, *What is Family Law?*, 23 *YALE J.L. & HUMAN.* 1, 3 (2011) (“In the corresponding ideology, the husband, wife, and child constituted ‘the family’ and lived in an affective, sentimental, altruistic, ascriptive, and morally saturated legal and social space.”).
curity." They further argued that *Fiallo* was atypical as an immigration case, given that it involved the rights of United States citizens and legal permanent residents to form familial relationships. Appellants even ascribed the family's altruistic associations to congressional motives: "Congress was motivated by a benevolent and generous desire to confer a benefit on United States citizens and permanent residents."

Appellants' arguments were unsuccessful. The Court's nearly exclusive focus on the immigration-related aspects of *Fiallo* meant that the opinion discussed neither the particulars of the families before the Court, nor the family relations the INA was intended to facilitate. Symptomatic of this silence was the majority's refusal to acknowledge the existence or potential relevance of *Stanley* despite appellants' insistence, and despite the dissents by Justice Marshall and the lower court.

Instead, Justice Powell analogized *Fiallo* to *Kleindienst v. Mandel*, an immigration case that did not involve familial relations and upheld the Attorney General's denial of a visa to Ernest E. Mandel, a self-described "revolutionary Marxist." The Court noted that Mandel, a non-resident who was at the time outside of the United States, did not have a constitutional right of entry and the First Amendment right of American citizens to hear Mandel speak at a series of engagements in universities across the United States did not mandate his admission. The Court in *Fiallo* and *Kleindienst* cited in turn to *Galvan v. Press*, a decision upholding the deportation of a once-member of the Communist party who had lived in the United States for thirty-six years. Relying on these cases, the *Fiallo* Court explained its def-

---

107 See id. at *30, *53–55 (arguing that the law served to "deny [petitioners] their constitutionally fundamental interests in familial association and companionship, solely because of the gender of the parent and the illegitimate status of the child"; and that none of the prior cases cited by the government involved this combination of constitutionally protected interests).
108 Id. at *38.
109 See id. at *20 (citing *Stanley* v. Illinois, 405 U.S. 645 (1972), and arguing: "The invalidity of stereotypes which depict the father of an illegitimate child as having little interest in and only a superficial relationship with his child and with the child's mother is confirmed by current social science literature and by the facts of the plaintiffs' cases.").
110 See *Fiallo* v. Bell, 430 U.S. 787, 810 (1977) (Marshall, J., dissenting) (referring to *Stanley*'s discussion of the importance of a father's relationship with his child and noting that "[i]t is no less important for a child to be cared for by its . . . parent when that parent is male rather than female." (citing *Stanley*, 405 U.S. at 651)).
112 408 U.S. 753 (1972).
113 Id. at 756 (internal quotation marks omitted).
114 Id. at 762.
115 Id. at 770.
117 Id. at 532 (Black, J., dissenting).
ference to Congress in matters of "the admission of aliens and their right to
remain" as a necessity, "touching as it does basic aspects of national sover-
eignty, more particularly our foreign relations and the national security." The
deference required by plenary power therefore negated any sort of spe-
cial, or exceptional, treatment for the family that was at the center of the
challenged provisions.

In likening *Fiallo* to *Kleindienst* and *Galvan*, the Court very conspicu-
ously placed the family distinctly in the realm of the political. The mini-
mal acknowledgment that *Fiallo* did give the family—in discussing the
purpose of the statute—was placed exclusively within "the Nation's sover-
eign power to admit or exclude foreigners in accordance with perceived na-
tional interests." Regulating the family, by defining what constituted that
family, was positioned as merely a way of regulating the entry of aliens, in
line with Congress's general power over the entry and removal of, for in-
stance, Communist party members. The family was therefore identified
with the sole purpose of being subsequently normalized as another vehicle of
immigration regulation.

Significantly, the Court noted that the family that was being normalized
within the exceptional realm of immigration included that of the citizen:
"[C]ongressional concern was directed at 'the problem of keeping families
of United States citizens and immigrants united.'" The question of what
constituted the citizen family was subsumed into the larger question of im-
migration regulation. Doing so did not mean changing the family as it was
recognized in domestic law in any substantial way; rather, it meant that the
Court did not have to explain the assumptions it incorporated about that
family, as long as there was a facially legitimate and bona fide reason. The
Court provided not one, but two justifications.

The Court concluded that Congress was allowed to reach such a deci-
sion, even if "it could be argued that the line should have been drawn at a
different point and that the statutory definitions deny preferential status to
parents and children who share strong family ties." The decision about the

---

"[o]ur cases have long recognized the power to expel or exclude aliens as a fundamental
sovereign attribute exercised by the Government's political departments largely immune
from judicial control." *Id.* at 792–93 (citations omitted).

119 The Court explicitly cited to both *Galvan* and *Kleindienst* as examples of recent
cases where it had not departed from the rule that Congressional power over immigration
limited any judicial review in that area and stated that "[w]e are no more inclined to
reconsider this line of cases today than we were five years ago." *Id.* at 792–93 n.4.

120 *Id.* at 795 n.6.

121 *Id.* Justice Black's dissent in *Galvan* appealed to petitioner's long residence in the
United States and the family he was a part of: "He has an American wife to whom he has
been married for twenty years, four children all born here, and a stepson who served this

122 *Fiallo*, 430 U.S. at 795 n.6 (quoting H.R. REP. No. 1199-85, at 7 (1957); 1957

123 *Id.* at 798.
strength of family ties was made by proxy; that proxy, based on sex in the absence of marriage or legitimation, was constitutional both domestically and abroad insofar as it involved the unwed father. In the domestic context, that absence formed the frequently unevaluated baseline for the Court's decisions. In the immigration context, the perceived absence of the father's family ties with his child and physical relations with the mother were the only justifications necessary. The principal effect of the Court's immigration deference was that it enabled the proxy to go unanalyzed, and obscured the work that the assumptions about the domestic family were doing in the Court's decisions regarding the citizen family.

II. THE CITIZENSHIP TRANSMISSION CASES: UNWED AMERICAN FATHERS ABROAD

Over two decades after Fiallo, the Supreme Court again addressed the INA's treatment of unwed fathers, mothers, and their children born abroad in Miller v. Albright, which resulted in a much-discussed plurality opinion. The Court considered the same issue a few years later in Nguyen v. INS, where it held that the imposition of affirmative acts on the unwed father and not the unwed mother does not violate equal protection; most recently, the Court in Flores-Villar v. United States, affirmed a decision upholding a longer residency requirement for unwed fathers in a related provision of the INA. While Fiallo was decided explicitly within the ambit of immigration law, Miller, Nguyen, and Flores-Villar considered provisions that address the transmission of citizenship "at birth." This Part analyzes Miller and Nguyen alongside the contemporary cases considering unwed fathers domestically, including Caban v. Mohammed and Lehr v. Robertson, under the rubric provided by the two justifications first articulated in Fiallo. It concludes by examining the arguments

---

124 See id. at 799 ("In any event, it is not the judicial role in cases of this sort to probe and test the justifications for the legislative decision.").
126 See, e.g., Pillard & Aleinikoff, supra note 6, at 2–4 (arguing that Miller represents a decline in the plenary power doctrine and urging the political branches to use full-fledged constitutional norms); see also Nikki Ahrenholz, Miller v. Albright: Continuing to Discriminate on the Basis of Gender and Illegitimacy, 76 DenV. U. L. Rev. 281, 281–82 (1998) (arguing that the plurality applied the incorrect level of equal protection scrutiny in deciding Miller).
128 131 S. Ct. 2312 (2011) (per curiam).
129 See United States v. Flores-Villar, 537 F.3d 990, 996–98, 1000 (9th Cir. 2008).
130 See Miller v. Albright, 523 U.S. 420, 429–33 (1998); Nguyen, 533 U.S. at 58–59; Flores-Villar, 536 F.3d 990 at 993 (each considering INA §§ 390(a), (c), 8 U.S.C. §§ 1409(a)).
133 430 U.S. at 799.
presented in Flores-Villar and evaluating what that case reveals about fathers and mothers in the absence of marital ties. In particular, the arguments raised in Flores-Villar render explicit the custody determination that underlies the transmission of citizenship defined by the INA and sanctioned by the Court, based on a uniform decision about which parent will remain with the child.

A. Enduring Justifications and the Rise of "Real" Difference: Miller and Nguyen

Both Miller and Nguyen involved a challenge to INA Section 309(a)(4), which requires the unwed father to complete one of three affirmative actions before he can transmit citizenship to his child born abroad: legitimating his child under the law of the child’s residence or domicile; acknowledging his paternity under oath; or establishing paternity through adjudication of a competent court, all before the child reaches the age of eighteen. The unwed mother has no similar requirements. The prerequisites she must satisfy are possessing American nationality at the time of the child’s birth and having lived in the United States for a period of one year; the unwed father also must satisfy equivalent, if not more rigorous, conditions along each of these dimensions.

The Court replaced its cursory deference in Fiallo with a jurisprudence of “real” difference in its decision to apply strict scrutiny to the distinctions between the unwed American father and mother. While Miller and Nguyen declined to decide whether the deference applied in Fiallo was mandatory in this context, the justifications first voiced in Fiallo remained the two inter-

134 See Miller, 523 U.S. at 429–33; Nguyen, 533 U.S. at 58–60; see also INA § 309(a)(4), 8 U.S.C. § 1409(a)(4) (2006). While technically possible that the child or the mother undertake these requirements, the unwed father still retains a fair amount of control over that decision. See Pillard & Aleinikoff, supra note 6, at 23 (“As a formal matter, Section 304(a)(4)(C) does permit a child to seek a paternity adjudication against an unwilling father . . . . As a practical matter, however, his decision will virtually always be definitive.”).

135 INA § 309(a)(1), 8 U.S.C. § 1409(a)(1) (2006) (requiring blood relationship with father); INA § 309(b), 8 U.S.C. § 1409(b) (2006) (referring to residency requirement for father in 1401(g), which is being "physically present in the United States . . . for a period or periods totaling not less than five years, at least two of which were after attaining the age of fourteen years"); INA § 309(c), 8 U.S.C. § 1409(c) (2006) (conferring automatic citizenship on the children of United States citizen mothers if the mother had previously been in the United States continuously for a period of at least one year).

136 See Nguyen, 533 U.S. at 73 (“The difference between men and women in relation to the birth process is a real one . . . .”); Hendricks, supra note 11, at 450 (arguing that “[t]he Court’s starting point in the unwed father cases was the premise of the real difference between biological motherhood and biological fatherhood, a premise that is intuitively justified even if sometimes exaggerated”).

137 In both Nguyen, 533 U.S. at 60–61, and Miller, 523 U.S. at 434 n.11, the Court held that the challenged provisions satisfied heightened scrutiny. The Court in Nguyen applied heightened scrutiny throughout, and declined to decide whether the deference explicitly espoused in Fiallo was required. Nguyen, 533 U.S. at 61 (“[W]e need not
ests that shaped the Court's reasoning and subsequent outcomes: the perceived absence of family ties transitioned into "the opportunity to develop a meaningful relationship" between the unwed father and his child, while the problems of proof specific to paternity determinations still lurked, despite the separate requirement of a blood relationship in INA section 309(a)(1).

Although the majority's opinion has been criticized as a "stranger to our precedents," Nguyen is very much at home in the Court's domestic jurisprudence addressing unmarried men and women, as was Miller before it. Prior to these opinions, the Court considered a series of equal protection challenges to various state law schemes treating unwed fathers and mothers differently, including the two seminal family law cases of Caban v. Mohammed and Lehr v. Robertson. These cases, among others relied on by the parties and the Court, are deemed to have settled the constitutional recognition of unwed fathers upon proof of a biological connection in addition to a verifiable relationship with their child, otherwise known as the "biology plus" test.

This Part traces how the dual justifications in the citizenship transmission cases mirror the "biology plus" requirement of the domestic cases; it follows with an analysis of the Court's heightened standard of scrutiny, which requires reasons that Fiallo's deference did not demand, and depends heavily on the act of birth in defining the real difference between the unwed parents.

decide whether some lesser degree of scrutiny pertains because the statute implicates Congress' immigration and naturalization power.".).

138 Miller, 523 U.S. at 440.
139 A father will be able to transmit citizenship to his child born out of wedlock if "a blood relationship between the person and the father is established by clear and convincing evidence." INA § 309(a)(1); 8 U.S.C. § 1409(a)(1) (2006).
140 Nguyen, 533 U.S. at 74 (O'Connor, J., dissenting).
143 These additional cases are discussed infra at Parts II.B.1-2.
144 See Melanie B. Jacobs, My Two Dads: Disaggregating Biological and Social Paternity, 38 Ariz. St. L.J. 809, 832 (2006) ("The 'biology-plus' cases demonstrate the legal landscape for unwed fathers in constitutional jurisprudence: biology, on its own, does not entitle a man to the rights of parentage. . . . [T]he Court has defined paternity as something more than biology and appears to have included a functional component in its analysis.").
145 Hendricks makes a similar claim about this line of cases that includes Lehr, 463 U.S. at 248, Caban, 441 U.S. at 380, and Stanley v. Illinois, 405 U.S. 645 (1972), in proposing that the Court should adopt a model of equality informed by the mother's gestational period and act of birth. See Hendricks, supra note 11, at 472 (arguing in support of the "biology plus" criteria that "treats the mother's gestation both as biology and as analogous to the affirmative acts of parenting required for men to establish parental rights under the unwed father cases"). In fact, Hendricks criticizes Nguyen for minimizing the importance of the biological difference between men and women. Id.
1. "Opportunity to Develop a Meaningful Relationship"

The Court in *Miller* and *Nguyen* recognized that one of the two central governmental objectives in placing additional requirements on the unwed father is to foster the development of a relationship between citizen parent and child. The particular interest defined by *Nguyen* was "to ensure that the child and the citizen parent have some demonstrated opportunity or potential to develop not just a relationship that is recognized, as a formal matter, by the law, but one that consists of the real, everyday ties that provide a connection between child and citizen parent and, in turn, the United States."146 While the Court framed the requirements in gender-neutral terms, INA section 309(a)(4), by its own account, applies only to fathers.147 The state law cases affirmed a similar statutory structure requiring the unwed father to prove a relationship with his child before being granted legal recognition,148 given the Court's acknowledgment of only the possibility that the unwed father may form one. The perceived absence of family ties continues to define the unwed father, a necessary precondition to ensuring the opportunity for developing a relationship.

Enunciated first in Justice Stevens's *Miller* plurality opinion, the Court justified the affirmative acts imposed on the unwed father based on the presence and absence perceived at the moment of birth, an argument that had been previously raised but not considered.149 Justice Stevens explained that "[u]nlike the citizen father," the mother "certainly knows of her child's existence and typically will have custody of the child immediately after the birth." The father, on the other hand, "due to the normal interval of nine months between conception and birth ... may not even know that his child exists, and the child may not know the father's identity." Writing for the majority in *Nguyen*, Justice Kennedy likened the acts contained in INA section 309(a)(4) to the event of birth for the unwed mother—"the opportunity for a meaningful relationship between citizen parent and child inheres in the very event of birth" while that "same opportunity does not result from the event of birth, as a matter of biological inevitability, in the case of the unwed

---

146 *Nguyen*, 533 U.S. at 64–65.
149 See *Nguyen* v. INS, 533 U.S. 53, 64 (2001) (noting "the mother is always present at birth but [ ] the father need not be"); *Miller* v. Albright, 523 U.S. 420, 440 (1998) (noting that Congress may have reasonably intended the formal requirements of 8 U.S.C. § 1409(a)(4) to ensure fathers the opportunity to develop a meaningful relationship with their children that mothers have based on the fact a mother knows of her baby's existence and often has custody at birth). The government raised an argument based on the event of birth in *Fiallo*. See *Fiallo* Appellees Brief, *supra* note 49, at *44–45.
150 *Miller*, 523 U.S. at 440.
151 Id.
father." Accordingly, he noted: "[The statute] takes the unremarkable step of ensuring that such an opportunity, inherent in the event of birth as to the mother-child relationship, exists between father and child before citizenship is conferred on the latter."

While the opinions treat the event of birth as the central distinguishing act—a "biological difference" difficult to contest—the Court's justification for the different requirements imposed upon unwed mothers and fathers depends on what occurs after that event. What counts, according to the Court, is the subsequent relationship—"the real, everyday ties that provide a connection between child and citizen parent and, in turn, the United States." As the government argued in Miller, the requirements of INA Section 309(a)(4) are important because they "provide some assurance that the father's commitments to the child will be real, not formulaic, and that the child's ties to his or her citizen parent, and therefore to the United States, will at least begin to develop during childhood."

In recognizing the real event of birth as legally significant, the "real" relationship rapidly becomes indistinguishable from its legal recognition. The government followed this line of reasoning in Miller, arguing that the "mother has an established legal relationship with her child from the moment of birth," while for the American father, "there is no such established legal relationship at birth." The fact of birth quickly assumes legal relevance for both the government and the Court, to the exclusion of any other reality, including the father's potential presence at that moment. Indeed, it is insufficient that the father may be physically present at birth, or that he be aware of that birth. The premise that matters is the father's legal absence at birth, which points to his real absence—the absence of family ties—afterwards. The statute is thus geared toward ensuring that a real relationship takes place by requiring a legal one: the unwed father must legitimate his child, acknowledge his child, or have his paternity adjudicated by a court.

The opinions in Miller and Nguyen confirm as much—they are not concerned with the real relationships the unwed fathers may have developed with their children but with whether the requirements of INA Section 309(a)(4) have been satisfied. The only father recognized by the Court con-

---

152 Nguyen, 533 U.S. at 65.
153 Id. at 66-67.
154 Id. at 64.
155 Id. at 65.
157 Id. at *24-25, *28-29 (relying on the family statute in Texas, where Boulais lived, establishing legal obligations on unwed mothers and fathers).
158 See Nguyen, 533 U.S. at 86 (O'Connor, J., dissenting) ("Under the present law, the statute on its face accords different treatment to a mother who is by nature present at birth and a father who is by choice present at birth even though those two individuals are similarly situated with respect to the 'opportunity' for a relationship.").
continues to be the married father, whose affirmative act of marriage must be replicated by other means. Unless there is a legal tie that binds, the Court has difficulties finding a real one.

The unwed father finds his apex in the itinerant figure of the military serviceman, whose absence is central to the government’s briefs and the Court’s opinions. Charlie Miller, the unwed American father in Miller, was in the service of the United States Air Force during the time of conception; Joseph Boulais, the unwed American father in Nguyen, was also once a serviceman. In both cases, military men feature prominently not only in the facts, but also the reasoning employed by the Court.

In Miller, the government presented its version of the facts as “the usual scenario” of how U.S. citizen men become dubious fathers: the account is that of a single “American man, overseas briefly on temporary military duty [who] has an affair of unclear origin, duration or substance with an alien woman.” The murky origins of the affair colored the government’s explanation of the ensuing paternity: “Having allegedly fathered a child who remains with her mother,” the government postulated, “he returns home, developing no parent-child relationship with his putative daughter during her minority.” While the facts of Miller did involve a serviceman and a daughter who lived in the Philippines, little else was discussed regarding their relation.

Instead, the Court agreed with the government that the scenario is commonplace: “Given the size of the American military establishment that has been stationed in various parts of the world for the past half century, it is reasonable to assume that this case is not unusual.” In dissent, Justice

---

160 Miller, 523 U.S. at 425.
161 At the time of Nguyen’s conception Boulais was in the employ of a military contractor. Boulais did serve in the United States Army; he was, however, stationed in Germany, not in Vietnam, where he later fathered a child. Brief of Petitioners at 4–5, Nguyen v. INS, 533 U.S. 53 (2001) (No. 99-2071), 2000 WL 1706737, at *4–5 [hereinafter Nguyen Brief of Petitioners].

162 Miller Brief for the Respondent at *29 n.16. The choice to include the origin, in addition to the duration or substance of the affair is an interesting one, and functions to minimize the active participation of the father even at the time of conception.

163 Id.

164 Neither the briefs to the Court nor the Court itself elaborated upon the nature or the extent of the relationship between Charlie Miller and his daughter, Lorelyn Penero Miller. See Miller Brief for the Respondent, supra note 156 (discussing blood relationship of parties only); Brief of Amici Curiae the American Civil Liberties Union and NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund in Support of Petitioners at 2, Miller v. Albright, 523 U.S. 420 (1998) (No. 96-1060), 1997 WL 327565, at *2 [hereinafter Miller Brief of Amici Curiae the ACLU] (same); Miller, 523 U.S. 420 (noting Miller’s physical absence from the Philippines but failing to discuss whether he had a relationship with his daughter).

165 Miller, 523 U.S. at 439. Cf. Stanley v. Illinois, 405 U.S. 645, 666 (1972) (“Stanley depicts himself as a somewhat unusual unwed father, namely, as one who has always acknowledged and never doubted his fatherhood of these children.”) (Burger, C.J., dissenting).
Breyer reminded the Court that the statute affects “all Americans who live or travel abroad,” not just military personnel “stationed in the Far East.”166

The Court continued to rely on the military man in Nguyen, taking care to note how many servicemen were stationed abroad the year in which Boulaïs’s son, Tuan Anh Nguyen, was born.167 Boulaïs himself was not a service- man at the time, but was working overseas as a private citizen for a military contractor.168 The Court was nevertheless explicit in its concerns “with young people, men for the most part, who are on duty with the Armed Forces in foreign countries.”169 In this context “the [nine]-month interval between conception and birth” that takes place “overseas and out of wedlock,” exacerbates the man’s inevitable absence.170 The government also appealed to the military man’s associations with national security, linking the necessity of the American military presence abroad with the weakness of the borders at home: “At a time when democracy was under attack throughout the world and the United States faced grave problems in defending its interests and citizens abroad, Congress undertook . . . ‘to protect the United States against adding to its body of citizens persons who would be a potential liability rather than an asset.’”171

While the Nguyen Court emphasized the absence of the serviceman father, who is presumed to be fighting a foreign war to protect the borders at home, the Court assumed that the mother could give birth on American soil—even if serving abroad in the Armed forces. As Justice Stevens noted, had the citizen parent been “a female member of the Air Force,” then “[INA Section 309J quite probably would have been irrelevant and petitioner would have become a citizen at birth by force of the Constitution itself.”172 Justice Kennedy later repeated this same point in Nguyen: “[A] citizen mother expecting a child and living abroad has the right to reenter the United States so the child can be born here and be a 14th Amendment citizen.”173 Even if the father were present, at birth or otherwise, it would be inconsequential, given that “the unmarried father as a general rule cannot control where the child will be born.”174 The father is removed entirely from the comparison, as the Court considers the relative situation of different mothers—“the statute simply ensures equivalence between two expectant

---

166 Miller, 523 U.S. at 486 (Breyer, J., dissenting).
168 Id.
169 Id.
170 Id.
173 Nguyen, 533 U.S. at 61.
174 Id.
mothers who are citizens abroad if one chooses to reenter for the child's birth and the other chooses not to return, or does not have the means to do so."

The military man and woman are merely their domestic counterparts who have decided to enlist and are stationed abroad. Indeed, by assuming the absence of the unwed father and upholding the affirmative requirements placed on him by the INA, Miller and Nguyen draw upon assumptions from the various decisions addressing the treatment of unwed fathers in state laws. In doing so, the Court relied most heavily on *Lehr v. Robertson*, in which it held that "the mere existence of a biological link does not merit equivalent protection" where the father failed to "grasp the opportunity to develop a relationship with his child." Though *Lehr* is typically understood as distinct from other domestic unwed father cases decided since *Fiallo*, all of these cases preserved similar distinctions between unwed parents.

In particular, *Lehr* is understood as a departure from *Caban v. Mohammed*, a case decided a few years earlier. In *Caban*, Justice Powell, writing for the majority, held that a New York State statute allowing an unwed mother, but not an unwed father, to veto an adoption of their child, violated equal protection. However, while the outcome in *Caban* favors the unwed father, the Court did little to attack its uniform assumptions concerning unwed parents, which laid the foundation for its later decision in *Lehr*.

The Court in *Caban* does seem to reject rigid presumptions about parental roles. In analyzing the sex-based distinction, Justice Powell asserted that "maternal and paternal roles are not invariably different in importance." Leaving aside the question of an unwed father's relation to his newborn, he explained that "the present case demonstrates that an unwed father may have a relationship with his children fully comparable to that of the mother." In striking down the statute, the Court recognized different types of unwed fathers and mothers—the statute failed precisely because it "excludes some loving fathers from full participation in the decision whether their children will be adopted and, at the same time, enables some alienated mothers arbitrarily to cut off the paternal rights of fathers."

Yet the Court allowed for the more standard conception of unwed fathers to remain intact, explaining that in "cases where the father never has come forward to participate in the rearing of his child, nothing in the Equal Protection Clause precludes the State from withholding from him the privi-

---

175 *Id.*
178 *Id.* at 382, 388–394.
179 See Chin, supra note 11, at 272–73 (arguing that *Caban* and *Stanley* are "egregious cases" that can be distinguished from other unwed fathers cases in that "what was at stake was the right to have any relationship whatsoever with their children, or when they satisfied conditions which other parents were not required to meet").
180 *Caban*, 441 U.S. at 389.
181 *Id.*
182 *Id.* at 394.
lege of vetoing the adoption of that child."183 Where the father had not proven that the baseline absence is inapplicable to his particular situation, the Court may find that unwed fathers and mothers are not similarly situated. Accordingly, as in Stanley, the unwed father in Caban must still prove that he is "unusual," in that he has a relationship with his child, to receive the recognition automatically given the unwed mother.184

The limits of Caban’s paternal acknowledgment seem particularly clear when analyzed alongside Parham v. Hughes, which was issued the same day and upheld the denial of a wrongful death action brought on behalf of a child born to unwed parents.185 In a plurality opinion, the Court considered a Georgia statute requiring that the unwed father legitimize his child before being able to sue for wrongful death, while allowing the unwed mother to sue without taking any affirmative steps.186 In what the dissent deemed "a startling circularity,"187 the plurality reasoned that the statute did not classify based on gender given that fathers and mothers are not similarly situated in the first instance—mothers cannot legitimate their child, while fathers can—without questioning the initial difference that required the father, but not the mother, to do so.188 The Court thus effectively replaced the legal fact of legitimation for any "real" difference between unwed fathers and mothers.

The unwed father’s presumptive absence was decisively sealed in the case of Lehr v. Robertson.189 The Court held that neither equal protection nor due process were violated by preventing an unwed father who had not enrolled in the “putative father” registry from being notified of his child’s adoption.190 The Court explained that “the existence or nonexistence of a substantial relationship between parent and child is a relevant criterion in evaluating both the rights of the parent and the best interests of the child.”191 Again, although the Court framed the relationship in the gender-neutral terminology of “parent and child,” the only relevant criterion for the mother was, by default, the fact that she gave birth to her child; just the father had to supplement the fact of biology with the establishment of a perceptible relationship.192 Relying on the escape valve provided by Caban, the Court noted that where a father had not come forward to claim a relationship with his child, the mother and father were not similarly situated.193

---

183 Id. at 392.
184 See supra note 68 (discussing Stanley Court’s treatment of Peter Stanley as “unusual”).
185 441 U.S. 347 (1979) (plurality opinion).
186 Id. at 348–49.
187 Id. at 361 (White, J., dissenting).
188 Id. at 356.
190 Id. at 265, 267–68.
191 Id. at 266–67.
192 Id.
193 Id. at 267–68. See Caban v. Mohammed, 441 U.S. 380, 389, 392 (1979) ("In those cases where the father never has come forward to participate in the rearing of his
Like the citizenship transmission cases, the extent to which the Court recognized an unwed father’s relationship in the domestic equal protection cases was in large part dependent on the relationship’s legal visibility, that is, on whether it had been formalized.\(^9\) The Court distinguished the father in Lehr from the father in Caban because the latter had a sustained custodial relationship with his child.\(^9\) But, while purporting to make this distinction on the basis of the absence of real ties, the Court in Lehr did so based on the absence of legal ones. Because the father was not listed in the putative registry and did not satisfy the statutory definition of any of the other categories of fathers recognized for purposes of receiving notice,\(^9\) the Court refused to recognize any ties he may have actually had with his child.

The dissent in Lehr raised a set of facts that were nowhere discussed by the Court—the father, Jonathan Lehr, argued that he had visited Lorraine Robertson and their daughter Jessica M. in the hospital after birth until Lorraine began to conceal her whereabouts from him.\(^9\) He repeatedly attempted to locate Lorraine and his daughter, with varying success until he decided to hire a private detective, and offered to set up a trust fund for Jessica, which Lorraine refused.\(^9\) While these facts are contested by Lorraine,\(^9\) the Court is satisfied purely by proxy—because the unwed father did not complete the affirmative steps required by statute, he is not recognized by law. Similarly, in Parham the plurality found no equal protection violation, despite recognizing that the father “sign[ed] the child’s birth certificate and contribute[d] to his support”;\(^9\) and that his child took his name child, nothing in the Equal Protection clause precludes the State from withholding from him the privilege of vetoing the adoption of that child.”

\(^9\) Melissa Murray submits that many of the unwed father cases decided by the Court under state law can be best understood as upholding a preference for the marital family, or families that approximate the marital family. Melissa Murray, *What’s So New About the New Illegitimacy?*, 20 AM. U. J. GENDER SOC. POL’Y & L. 387, 400–12 (2012) (arguing that the series of unwed father cases are better understood as exhibiting a preference for placing a child in a marital or marital-like family over a non-marital or non-marital-like family, rather than purely as decisions about the relationship of the parent to the child). She notes, however, that “[t]hough Stanley and Caban vindicate the rights of fathers who function in the manner of married fathers, the Court is quick to note that the easiest—and preferred—way to perfect one’s paternal rights is to not only act like a married father, but to actually be married to the child’s mother.” *Id.* at 408 n.115.

\(^9\) *Lehr*, 463 U.S. at 261.

\(^9\) The categories of fathers entitled to receive notice under the law include those who have been formally recognized as such by legal process, such as any person adjudicated in court to be the child’s father or any person recorded on the child’s birth certificate, as well as those who have otherwise been established as the father, for example by living with the child and holding themselves out to be the father, or where the child’s mother identifies them as the father. N.Y. Dom. Rel. Law. §§ 111-a(2)(a), (2)(d), (2)(e), (2)(f).

\(^9\) *Lehr*, 463 at 269–72 (White, J., dissenting).

\(^9\) *Id.* at 269 (White, J., dissenting).


and was visited by him on a regular basis.  

The absence of the father's formal legitimation during the child's lifetime resulted in the Court's inability to recognize the unwed father's presence after his child's death.  

The desire for a legally recognized relationship can be understood even more literally as a marriage-like alternative. The Court makes its reasoning explicit in Quilloin v. Walcott, 203 which considered the different veto powers granted in cases of adoption between fathers, wed and unwed, rather than between the unwed father and mother. 204 In order for the unwed father to acquire the same veto power as a wed father, he must have legitimated his offspring, either through marriage or recognition. 205 The brief on behalf of the unwed father quoted testimony that he "had loved and cared for the child," had provided him with "food, clothing, and medical care . . . and sen[t] [his] child to kindergarten and actually [took] him most of the time." 206 The brief continued by asking "[i]n what manner does this factual situation differ from the cases of many short-lived marriages and divorce?" 207 Justice Marshall, writing for the Court, answered by relying on the fact, or form, of marriage, reasoning that "legal custody of children is, of course, a central aspect of the marital relationship, and even a father whose marriage has broken apart will have borne full responsibility for the rearing of his children during the period of the marriage." 208

Despite the Court's general reluctance to recognize the unwed father's actual attempts to form a relationship with his child, the Lehr Court, as in Miller and Nguyen, nevertheless emphasized the opportunity to do so: "The significance of the biological connection is that it offers the natural father an opportunity that no other male possesses to develop a relationship with his offspring." 209 The father has a choice "to grasp[ ] that opportunity and . . . enjoy the blessings of the parent-child relationship." 210 This is a choice, however, that the unwed mother does not possess. 211 And it is a choice that

---

201 Id.

202 See also Michael H. v. Gerald D., 491 U.S. 110, 111 (1989) (plurality opinion) (holding under substantive due process that a presumption that the married father is the actual father of a child born in wedlock does not violate the rights of the biological father, despite blood tests that prove the unwed father's paternity and despite holding out his biological daughter as his own).


205 Quilloin, 434 U.S. at 248-49.

206 Quilloin Brief for Appellant, supra note 204, at *19.

207 Id.

208 Quilloin, 434 U.S. at 256.

209 Lehr, 463 U.S. at 262 (analyzing the due process claim).

210 Id.

211 This element of choice is cabined to becoming a father; being a mother is more of an imperative. See, e.g., Collins, When Fathers' Rights are Mothers' Duties, supra note 11, at 1700 (noting that "[t]he current citizenship regime recognizes that women are obliged by law to assume responsibility for a nonmarital child, and that fathers have a choice to assume that legal burden"); see also discussion infra Part III.B.
carries with it constitutional consequences—if the father "fails to do so, the Federal Constitution will not automatically compel a State to listen to his opinion of where the child's best interests lie."\textsuperscript{212} Nor would the Court find the unwed parents similarly situated until the unwed father had decided to grasp that opportunity.\textsuperscript{213} The necessity for an opportunity only arises from a deficiency; the unwed fathers in the domestic and citizenship transmission cases are similar in the assumption that they both begin from a dearth—of marriage and thus of family ties.

The Court's opinions in the citizenship transmission cases are comparable to its domestic equal protection cases dealing with unwed fathers in another important respect—they address only the American parents. While in \textit{Miller}, Justice Stevens acknowledged that INA Section 309 deals with "the distinction drawn . . . between the child of an alien father and a citizen mother, on the one hand, and the child of an alien mother and a citizen father, on the other,"\textsuperscript{214} the "alien mother" makes few appearances in the cases. The potentially present foreign mother is nowhere addressed,\textsuperscript{215} nor is the mother, foreign or American, who is absent from her child's life, either by choice or accident.\textsuperscript{216} The Court only considers the American mother who will carry her child and take responsibility for its care.\textsuperscript{217} While the nature of the equal protection claim focuses the Court's analysis on the American parents, it does not necessitate the exclusion of the other parents involved in the relationship. The American mother and father are, however, the only relevant actors in both the Court's decisions addressing the domestic family of state law and the citizen family of federal law.

The absence of the foreign parent in the citizenship transmission cases addressing the American father and the non-American mother is striking. This is especially so given the Court's determination that the citizen mother, unlike the citizen father, will typically retain custody over the child—"[w]hen a child is born out of wedlock outside of the United States, the citizen mother, unlike the citizen father, certainly knows of her child's existence and typically will have custody of the child immediately after the birth."\textsuperscript{218} Understood in conjunction with the Court's determination that the American father will likely be absent from birth and the child's life thereafter, the Court reaches the decision that the foreign mother, like her American

\textsuperscript{212} \textit{Lehr}, 463 U.S. at 262.
\textsuperscript{213} See id. at 265–68 (analyzing the equal protection claim).
\textsuperscript{215} Petitioner Lorena Penero lived in the Philippines at least until she was twenty-one years of age, presumably living with her mother, Luz Penero. \textit{id.} at 425.
\textsuperscript{216} Boulais lost contact with his son's biological mother and she never again contacted him. Nguyen Brief of Petitioners, \textit{supra} note 161, at *5–6.
\textsuperscript{217} See Nguyen v. INS, 533 U.S. 53, 65 (2001) ("In the case of a citizen mother and a child born overseas . . . [t]he mother knows that the child is in being and is hers and has an initial point of contact with him.").
\textsuperscript{218} Miller, 523 U.S. at 438.
counterpart, will also retain custody over the child. This decision of some significance is, however, made by implication only.

2. Problems of Proof Still Lurking

The Miller plurality and Nguyen opinion reiterated the concern initially voiced in Fiallo over proving a blood relationship between father and child, and the difficulties particular to paternity determinations. The Court continued to emphasize blood ties as a justification for the post-birth requirements imposed on fathers, despite a statutory scheme that already requires "clear and convincing" evidence of a blood relationship between father and child;219 it also remained despite the increased accuracy and prevalence of paternity testing.220 The Court's insistence on proof of biological ties can be understood, however, by its adherence to the biology component of the "biology plus" cases, relying on the unwed father framework it erected domestically in its equal protection jurisprudence.

The Court's concerns with "assuring that a biological parent-child relationship exists" in the citizenship context continue to center around birth, relying on the familiar absence of the father and presence of the mother during that crucial event.221 Its reasons were again stated in terms of what can be observed: "The blood relationship to the birth mother is immediately obvious and is typically established by hospital records and birth certificates; the relationship to the unmarried father may often be undisclosed and unrecorded in any contemporary public record."222 The Court explained that even if the unwed father were present at birth, "that circumstance is not incontrovertible proof of fatherhood"223 given, as previously noted, the potential promiscuity of the foreign woman, and the otherwise murky origins of the conception. The Court thus situated the biological difference in the act of birth, even though what takes place before, at the moment of conception, is arguably the determinative factor in establishing paternity.224

220 See Miller, 523 U.S. at 484–85 (Breyer, J., dissenting) (noting that "the added protection is unnecessary in light of inexpensive DNA testing that will prove paternity with certainty" and that "a different provision of the statute . . . already requires proof of paternity").
221 Nguyen, 533 U.S. at 62; see also Miller, 523 U.S. at 435–36.
222 Miller, 523 U.S. at 436.
223 Nguyen, 533 U.S. at 62.
224 The Court does not recognize this prior event, despite its importance in terms of biology, and so what takes place during the moment of conception is not directly addressed. See Weinrib, supra note 4 at 251 (addressing the absence of sex and sexuality in the Court's equal protection jurisprudence with a focus on Nguyen). Cases involving in vitro fertilization or surrogacy have proved challenging to the government given the Court's emphasis on the event of birth. The State Department has, at least in one instance, found that where the mother has used assisted reproductive technology, the acts of carrying and giving birth to the child does not confer citizenship but rather the "nationality" of the egg or the sperm, determined by the citizenship of the donor. See Joanna L. Grossman, Flag-Waving Gametes: Biology, Not Gestation or Parenting, Determines Whether
As in *Fiallo*, the Court relied on the language and reasoning of *Trimble v. Gordon*\(^{225}\) a case about the right of illegitimate children to inherit, which is also captured in other similar cases of the period, most notably *Lalli v. Lalli*.\(^{226}\) The plurality in *Lalli* upheld the constitutionality of a statute denying a child born to unwed parents the inheritance of his father because he had failed to obtain proof of paternity during the father’s lifetime.\(^{227}\) Its reasoning is nearly verbatim to that of *Miller* and *Nguyen*: while “[e]stablishing maternity is seldom difficult,” there are “peculiar problems of proof” involved in questions of paternal inheritance.\(^{228}\) Elaborating on those peculiar problems, the Court explained that the birth of the child takes place in the presence of others, and “in most cases, the child remains with the mother and for a time is necessarily reared by her” whereas “[p]roof of paternity . . . frequently is difficult when the father is not part of a formal family unit.”\(^{229}\) This is especially so where the American mother, like her foreign counterpart, “may not know who is responsible for her pregnancy.”\(^{230}\)

Similar to the fixed eighteen-year cutoff in INA Section 309(a)(4), the Court in *Lalli* upheld the exclusion of a child born out of wedlock from being included as a distributee of his father’s estate, on the basis that there was no judicial decree establishing paternity during the father’s lifetime, despite facts that indicated the existence of a parental relationship during the father’s life.\(^{231}\) The lack of formal family ties between unwed father and child trumped any acknowledgment of real physical ties with the mother, or his child—even in situations where the latter was proven to a 99.98% certainty.\(^{232}\)

Similar to the concerns raised in *Fiallo*, the problems with proving paternity domestically were geared toward the issue of fraud more than difficulty. In *Parham v. Hughes*, the Court recognized the State’s “interest in avoiding fraudulent claims of paternity,” and expressed concern that “a defendant may be faced with the possibility of multiple lawsuits by individuals all claiming to be the father of the deceased child.”\(^{233}\) The absent father during the life of his child has transformed into a legion of men claiming.

---

*Children Born Abroad Acquire Citizenship From U.S. Citizen Parents*, VERDICT (April 3, 2012), http://verdict.justia.com/2012/04/03/flag-waving-gametes. This decision is arguably in tension with the Court’s opinions.


\(^{226}\) 439 U.S. 259 (1978) (plurality opinion). Neither *Miller* nor *Nguyen* cite directly to *Lalli*, which was decided the term after *Fiallo*.

\(^{227}\) Id. at 274–76.

\(^{228}\) Id. at 267–68.

\(^{229}\) Id. at 269.

\(^{230}\) Id. (quoting *In re Ortiz*, 303 N.Y.S.2d 806, 812 (1969) (emphasis in original)).

\(^{231}\) Id. at 262–64 (evidence of the parent-child relationship that was excluded from consideration included notarized documents where the deceased father referred to appellant as “my son” as well as several affidavits acknowledging relationship openly).

\(^{232}\) See *Nguyen* Brief of Petitioners, supra note 161, at *7* (noting that DNA test results indicated to a certainty of 99.98% that Boulais was Nguyen’s father).

paternity for the purpose of wrongful death suits. The image of the fraudulent and opportunistic father affirmed the Supreme Court of Georgia's reasoning in Hughes v. Parham, which postulated that the Georgia General Assembly may have concluded that the unwed father who failed to legitimize his child "suffers no real loss from the child's wrongful death."234

These claims of fraud could similarly apply to unwed mothers, given the separation of the fraudulent act from the biological act. Moreover, as Justice O'Connor noted in her dissent in Nguyen, there is a difference between the occurrence of an event and proof of that event.235 While it is conceivable that some women may submit a fraudulent birth certificate, that possibility is entertained neither by the Court nor the present regulatory scheme. In assessing paternity fraud, the current United States State Department's Foreign Affairs Manual allows for the possibility of unconscious and conscious mistakes by unwed fathers, and provides pointers for determining when fraud may occur. One of the six guidelines it lists for paternity fraud is that the child is born out of wedlock.236 The very fact of an unwed father is sufficient to raise suspicions. The fact of being unwed for a mother is not, however, determinative. Rather, such "[c]ases in which an unmarried U.S. citizen woman falsely claims a child as her natural child for citizenship purposes are relatively rare but can occur."237

In cases dealing with unwed fathers domestically, the Court's initial reluctance to allow DNA testing in lieu of some form of legal legitimation238 waned as it began to recognize the DNA test's ability to resolve problems of proof in paternity actions. As the Court acknowledged in Pickett v. Brown, a case involving a Tennessee law that placed a two-year statute of limitations on paternity legitimation: "[T]he relationship between a statute of limitations and the State's interest in preventing the litigation of stale or fraudulent

234 Hughes v. Parham, 243 S.E.2d 867, 869–70 (Ga. 1978) (postulating the different ends served by the Georgia statute excluding the fathers of illegitimate children from the benefits of a wrongful death action). The perceived lack of loss upon death mirrors the assumption of lack of ties during the child's life.

235 Nguyen, 533 U.S. at 85 (O'Connor, J., dissenting). Justice O'Connor distinguished between the requirement that a child and unwed father develop ties before the age of eighteen and that the proof also be satisfied before the child turns eighteen, noting that "it is difficult to see how the requirement that proof of such opportunity be obtained before the child turns 18 substantially furthers the asserted interest" given that "it is entirely possible that a father and child will have the opportunity to develop a relationship . . . without obtaining the proof of the opportunity during the child's minority." Id.

236 7 Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) 1131.5-3a(1) (2012). Congress has delegated to the State Department the administration and enforcement of citizenship laws with regards to individuals who are outside the territory of the United States; the Foreign Affairs Manual sets forth the Department of State's interpretation of the rules regulating citizenship. See Grossman, supra note 224 (explaining what the Foreign Affairs Manual sets forth in determining who is a parent for purposes of citizenship transmission).

237 Id. at 1131.5-4a.

238 See Mills v. Habluetzel, 456 U.S. 91, 98 n.4 (1982) ("We previously have recognized that blood tests are highly probative in proving paternity, but disagree with appellant's contention that their existence negates the State's interest in avoiding the prosecution of stale or fraudulent claims.") (internal citation omitted).
paternity claims has become more attenuated as scientific advances in blood testing have alleviated the problems of proof surrounding paternity actions."239 Pickett, however, was decided in the context of an equal protection challenge based on the rights of children, rather than on the rights of their unwed parents.240

In the citizenship transmission cases, the Court declined to allow even this small inroad of recognition considering the rights of unwed parents; it paired the problems of proof with a concern about what happens abroad, and the potential unavailability of genetic testing in foreign countries.241 The real anxiety over the influence of the foreign—woman or territory—remained fastened exclusively to the unwed father, preventing the Court from adopting even the gradual acceptance of DNA testing allowed by the state cases.

While the Court did not acknowledge the redundancy of the lurking problems of proof justification where proof of paternity was already required by "clear and convincing" evidence under INA Section 309(a)(1), the government did gradually eliminate the paternity justification from its arguments. In Miller, the government recognized that the biological connection demanded by INA Section 309(a)(1) satisfied proof of paternity and conceded that subsection (a)(4) "must therefore reflect, at least in part, some other congressional concern."242 The government identified that concern as the development, before the child reached the age of majority, of ties to the citizen parent and, in turn, to the United States.243 The government abandoned the biological ties justification entirely in Nguyen. The two interests it presented were those of ensuring the establishment of a "sufficiently recognized or formal relationship" between the citizen parent and the United States, and "preventing such children from being stateless."244 The statelessness justification, which would become the government's central argument in Flores-Villar, made its first real appearance in the context of INA Section 309(a)(4).245 The Court, however, remained silent on the issue of statelessness, continuing to rely on its biology-plus justifications in the context of citizenship.

240 See id. at 17–18.
242 Miller Brief for the Respondent, supra note 156, at *27.
243 Id. at *28.
244 Nguyen Respondent Brief, supra note 171, at *11.
245 The government argued that it had already raised arguments about statelessness in Miller. Id. at *11 n.6. However, the statelessness justification had only been advanced in the context of discussing the different residential requirements imposed on men and women in INA § 309(a) and (c), not in the context of § 309(a)(4). See Miller Brief for Respondent, supra note 156, at *24, *33–34 (explaining that while the only provision at issue is INA § 309(a)(4), "[f]or the sake of completeness, however, we shall address the other features of Section 309 as well").
3. **Heightened Scrutiny: Rise of “Real” Difference**

Where plenary power permitted the Court in *Fiallo* to avoid considering the family, the heightened scrutiny analysis of the citizenship transmission cases compelled the Court to directly address the unwed parents before it. The rise of a jurisprudence of “real” difference, based on the event of birth and its attendant circumstances, replaced the silence allowed by judicial deference, without fundamentally different results.

Although scholars have criticized the Court’s equal protection analysis in *Miller* and *Nguyen* as uncharacteristically weak, it is very much in line with the Court’s gender-based analysis of unwed fathers and mothers in the domestic context. What has changed with the advent of a jurisprudence of difference is that, perhaps paradoxically, the continued use of the family as an entity of citizenship regulation has been increasingly obscured. The site of the family, however, persists as a means of regulating entry into the nation, and the demarcation of family relations occupies a functional role in the Court’s citizenship transmission decisions.

At a basic level, the shift to heightened scrutiny meant that the unwed mother and father figures that were avoided in *Fiallo* had to be directly addressed. In *Nguyen*, the Court defined the distinction between the unwed parents as one based on a “real” difference, located in the event of birth: “The difference between men and women in relation to the birth process is a real one, and the principle of equal protection does not forbid Congress to address the problem at hand in a manner specific to each gender.”

The difference the Court articulated was not, however, the physical act of birth itself but the “relation to the birth process.” The Court simultaneously relied on a biological distinction—men do not give birth—while locating the relevant comparison in the parents’ post-birth conduct. The Court depended on the fact of birth only insofar as it is connected to the relations between parent and child that occur thereafter.

According to the Court, birth must remain part of the equation because where the mother has no post-birth requirements a direct comparison between the post-birth conduct of the parents is difficult. The Court first set forth this reasoning in *Miller*, noting that “it is not merely the sex of the citizen parent that determines whether the child is a citizen under the terms of the statute; rather, it is an event creating a legal relationship between parent and child—the birth itself for citizen mothers, but postbirth [sic] con-

---

246 *Nguyen*, 533 U.S. at 73.
247 *Id.*
duct for citizen fathers and their offspring.” The Court’s statement is telling in that the event of birth creates not only a child but also a “legal relationship,” collapsing the real difference into a legal one.

The American father and mother exist parallel to each other in Sections 309(a) and (c) of the INA, yet the Court’s citizenship transmission cases bring them together as if they formed the contours of a domestic family. The Court’s decision to directly address the equal protection challenge comparing the unwed mother and father places these two figures at the center of its citizenship opinions. Focusing on the distinctions between the unwed parents, however, conceals the explicitly political question of who is recognized as an American citizen. The Court has exchanged the deference that enabled its silence on the reasons for upholding a statute excluding unwed fathers for discussions of difference that shield the political nature of the decision to transmit citizenship. That Congress’s choice to recognize family relations impacts the regulation of American citizenship—explicitly acknowledged by Fiallo in the context of immigration—is obscured by the discussion of domestic-based gender issues.

Although the presence of the military abroad injects some awareness of the foreign into the Court’s opinions, the domestic family remains squarely at their center. Accordingly, the citizenship-related consequences of how the INA defines, and the Court decides, the transmission of citizenship, are unaddressed. Those consequences may take a variety of forms; the Court’s current decisions fail to consider any possible repercussion. Looking to concerns animating past discussions leads to some fundamental reasons to question the Court’s silence on the issue. In 1933, for instance, Congress considered a proposal to amend a precursor to the INA that would have

---

249 Miller v. Albright, 523 U.S. 420, 443 (1998). This is not meant to imply that the difference based on birth is not a “real” one, but rather to attempt to pin down and understand the Court’s assignment of difference. Scholars such as Laura Weinrib note the potential pitfalls of retrofitting to formal equality in light of this “real” difference between men and women. See Weinrib, supra note 4, at 230 (“One must be careful, however, not to conclude too hastily that laws burdening fathers must uniformly be stamped out in the interest of equality. There is indeed a set of real differences between fathers and mothers for the purposes of pregnancy law in particular and for family law more generally.”).

250 The American family is also the focus, in its domestic form, of the briefs before the Court in these cases. See, e.g., Brief of the National Women’s Law Center et al. as Amici Curiae Supporting Petitioners at 9–12, Nguyen v. INS, 533 U.S. 53 (2001) (No. 99-2071), 2000 WL 1702034, at *9–12 [hereinafter Nguyen Brief of the National Women’s Law Center] (discussing statistics relevant to out-of-wedlock births for fathers and mothers in the United States); Miller Brief of Amici Curiae the ACLU, supra note 164, at *7 (citing to domestic studies showing fathers to be as competent as mothers in raising children). But see Nguyen Brief of the National Women’s Law Center, supra at *11 n.10 (discussing family planning services available abroad).

251 Legal scholars have undertaken the project of recuperating the race-based origins of the sex-based citizenship laws. See Kristin A. Collins, “Illegitimate Half-Castes” and the Citizen Family: Race, Sex, and the Practice of Citizenship Past and Present (forthcoming) (on file with the author) (linking the history of the jus sanguinis citizenship laws to the 1864 case of Guyer v. Smith to support the claim that the sex-based rules were also deeply race-salient in logic and operation).
allowed American married mothers to transmit citizenship to their children on the same terms as married fathers. Congressman Charles Kramer, expressing unease about the composition of the nation, asked Burnita Shelton Matthews, an attorney speaking in support of the amendment, about the effects of such a change: "Don't you feel," he questioned, "that we are increasing the probability of bringing in more of the Chinese and Japanese, and 'what have you', from those nations over there, by reason of this bill?"\(^2\)

The plainly racist inquiry is telling in that it reveals an essential element missing from the Court's current discussions. The question expresses Congress's concerns with how citizenship transmission affects which, and how many, potential citizens it recognizes; it also discloses underlying prejudices and preferences that are encoded into that decision. The Court's opinions evade that question entirely, as they once evaded the direct comparison between the unwed father and mother. In so doing, possible prejudices remain unsaid and restrictions unnoticed. Thus, by focusing only on the American halves of the citizen family, various citizenship-related consequences for how the family is defined in the first instance, and of the inherently political nature of such a determination, remain unanalyzed.\(^2\)

**B. A Move Toward Custody: Flores-Villar**

The final equal protection challenge to reach the Court addressed the differing residency requirements imposed on unwed fathers and mothers prior to transmitting citizenship to their child. The Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit upheld the constitutionality of the differential requirements placed on each unwed parent. After granting certiorari, the Supreme Court was ultimately silent on the question, affirming the judgment in an evenly split per curiam.\(^2\)

Both the Ninth Circuit's opinion and the arguments presented by the government to the Supreme Court followed the reasoning set in place from *Fiallo* to *Nguyen*. Nevertheless, *Flores-Villar v. United States* signaled the potential for a fundamental shift with the emergence of the foreign woman, the "alien

---


\(^2\) The acknowledgment of the family as a political entity also has repercussions for the domestic family. Decisions addressing the bounds of family relations and family membership raise questions about what outcomes are being generated and how. See Janet Halley, *What is Family Law?: A Genealogy Part II*, 23 *YALE J.L. & HUMAN.* 189, 290 (2011) ("The division of intellectual labor between Family Law and Poverty Law or Welfare Law . . . obscures the state's constant, conscious use of the family as a private welfare system.").

\(^2\) *Flores-Villar v. United States*, 131 S. Ct. 2312 (2011) (per curiam).
mother." For the first time in this line of cases, the existence of the alien mother was confronted and her role in the statute and the opinions was more directly set forth in the oral arguments before the Court. The discovery of the unwed mother beyond her domestic guise, and the relationship she is presumed to have with her child, present a possible departure from the Court's strict reliance on unwed parenthood and a move toward the framework provided by a custody determination.

1. Perceived Absence of Country Ties

Ruben Flores-Villar, the son of an American father and foreign mother, was denied American citizenship because his father had not satisfied the residency requirement of INA Section 309(a). Complying with the residency requirement demanded that the unwed father be present in the United States for ten years, five of which had to take place after his fourteenth birthday, a physical impossibility for Ruben Trinidad Floresvillar-Sandez who was sixteen years old when his son, the petitioner, was born. Had Ruben Flores-Villar's mother been the parent with American citizenship, he would have had American citizenship transmitted to him at birth; the unwed American mother only had, and continues to have, a one-year continuous physical presence requirement.

While the prior citizenship transmission cases did not directly address the INA's residency requirement, the Nguyen Court identified the relevant state interest as ensuring that the citizen parent and child "have some demonstrated opportunity to develop not just a relationship that is recognized, as a formal matter, by the law, but one that consists of the real, everyday ties that provide a connection between child and citizen parent and, in turn, the United States." The Court thus raised the triangular relationship between parent, child, and territory, but mainly analyzed only one angle—the opportunity to develop a real relationship between parent and child. The focus of the residency requirement is on another possible, yet previously ignored relation—between parent and territory.

The reason for requiring the unwed father to live in the United States for a longer amount of time than the unwed mother is not obvious. Neither

256 United States v. Flores-Villar, 536 F.3d 990, 994 (9th Cir. 2008).
257 INA § 301(a)(7), 8 U.S.C. § 1401(a)(7) (1970). The statute has since been amended and currently reads that the unwed father must be physically present in the United States for a total of five years, two of which must be after the age of fourteen. INA § 301(g), 8 U.S.C. § 1401(g) (2006).
258 Flores-Villar, 536 F.3d at 994.
259 INA § 309(c), 8 U.S.C. § 1409(c) (1970) (current version at INA § 309(c), 8 U.S.C. § 1409(c) (2006)).
the government nor the Ninth Circuit in *Flores-Villar* provided an account of how the increased residency requirement for unwed fathers in particular furthered the "connection between child and citizen parent and, in turn, the United States."\(^{261}\) Instead of considering the specific relation between parent and territory that the statutory requirement directly addresses, the Ninth Circuit adhered to *Nguyen*’s general tripartite formulation, without explaining how or where the length of residency potentially figures.\(^{262}\)

The government similarly avoided connecting residency to parental or territorial relations. Before the Ninth Circuit, the government argued that the State’s "interest in fostering ties between the foreign-born child and the United States" was furthered "by ensuring that the father developed significant ties with the country at an age of maturity," without explaining how.\(^{263}\)

Before the Supreme Court, the government emphasized the importance of residency requirements and of actual ties to the United States in defining citizenship in general.\(^{264}\) Missing from its analysis was a reason why such ties differed according to gender—why the unwed father needed more time than the unwed mother to build a connection to the territory of the United States before being able to transmit that connection to his child.

While the link between father and country is at the forefront of the residency requirement, the relation between father and child remains in the background. It is this second, tacit connection that provides the structure in which the Court can uphold the differential statutory requirements. As the government disclosed in its oral argument to the Supreme Court: "One of the important factors Congress has looked at is [the child’s] connection to a U.S. citizen that is in turn a proxy for what likely connection to the United States will be."\(^{265}\) The articulation of the relation is not principally between father and country, but between American citizen and child, in this case, father and child.\(^{266}\) And it is the relationship between father and child that determines the child’s relationship with the United States.

The framework that allows the residency requirement to endure is the one established and carried forward from *Fiallo* to *Nguyen* and *Stanley* to

---

\(^{261}\) *Id.*

\(^{262}\) The extent of the Court’s consideration of the relationship between the residency requirement and the government’s stated goal was upholding the requirement because “it furthered the objective of developing a tie between the child, his or her father, and this country.” *Flores-Villar*, 536 F.3d at 997.


\(^{264}\) *Brief for the United States at* *20–21, Flores-Villar v. United States*, 131 S. Ct. 2312 (2010) (No. 09-5801), 2010 WL 3392008, at *20–21 [hereinafter Flores-Villar Brief for the United States].


\(^{266}\) The government acknowledged that "the residency requirement is what measures the connection of the parent to the United States, not the child to the parent," but quickly transitioned to an argument that "the same point obtains, that at the moment of birth in another country... the father doesn’t have a meaningful connection to the child[.]" *Id.* at 50:50.
Lehr—the perceived absence of ties between father and child, and thus the need for the potential to develop a relationship that would otherwise not exist. The "real, everyday ties" that matter are those between father and child, not between father and country. The unwed father's absence and mother's perennial presence continue to form the interpretative framework through which the father can be required to be "more" present, and the mother "less," even in the territory of the United States.

2. Problems of Statelessness

The statelessness justification that the government first advanced in Miller and then in Nguyen under INA Section 309(a)(4) was finally relevant to the residency requirement at issue in Flores-Villar. The government focused on this second state interest, which evolved from a concern about problems of proof with paternity to a concern about the statelessness of children born abroad. The Ninth Circuit sustained the validity of the interest without much difficulty, holding that avoiding stateless children was an important objective substantially furthered by the chosen means.

The government relied on the general notion that unwed parents are not always similarly situated for purposes of equal protection and specifically that children of unmarried women are at a greater risk of statelessness given that most jus sanguinis countries recognize only the nationality of the mother. In contending that the shortened residency requirement for unwed mothers is constitutional, the government explained that "[t]he difference in each parent's situation is attributable to what this Court in Nguyen described as the 'significant difference between the respective relationships of unwed mothers and unwed fathers to the potential citizen at the time of birth.'" The government therefore linked the possibility of statelessness to the different relationships that an unwed mother and father are presumed to have with their child.

In so doing, it relied on the slippage between the "real" and the "legal" by reasoning that the real differences based on the act of birth identified in Nguyen became the legal ones the Court ultimately sanctioned: "Congress's decision to apply a shorter physical-presence requirement to unwed mothers was based on the legal reality . . . that an unwed mother is established at the time of her child's birth as the child's legal parent while the unwed father usually is not." Taking Nguyen as the starting point, the government extra-

268 See supra text accompanying notes 244–245.
269 United States v. Flores-Villar, 536 F.3d 990, 996 (9th Cir. 2008).
270 This "state of affairs create[s] a substantial risk that a child born to an unwed U.S. citizen mother in a country employing jus sanguinis laws would be stateless at birth unless the mother could pass her citizenship to her child." Flores-Villar Brief for the United States, supra note 264, at *33.
271 Id. at *32 (internal citation omitted).
272 Id. at *39.
The logic employed is a familiar one. In *Parham*, the plurality looked to the reality of the legal difference between unwed parents to affirm the statutory distinctions between unwed fathers and mothers. The "fact" is, the Court in *Parham* explained, that mothers and fathers of illegitimate children are not similarly situated; yet the Court’s recognition of this real difference was based on the legal one that "only a father can by voluntary unilateral action make an illegitimate child legitimate." Thus, the "fact" of birth that was the starting point for the differences between parents had become a legal axiom that cannot be assailed.

Beneath the surface of the statelessness justification remain the lurking problems of proof with paternity determinations. The government in *Flores-Villar* relied on the unwed father paradigm in explaining its particular concern with the unwed mother—"the application of foreign law, combined with potential problems of proof and paternal inaction, puts the foreign-born child of an unwed U.S. citizen mother at a significantly greater risk of being stateless at the time of birth." It does not seem to matter that the twin problems of proof and paternal inaction are rendered obsolete by the statute’s operation—the residency requirements are triggered only once the unwed father has satisfied INA Section 309(a), including the affirmative acts of (a)(4). Indeed, the government remained silent about the possibility that, according to *Nguyen*’s reasoning, the unwed mother and father would at this point be similarly situated.

In its justifications, the government replaced its concern with being unable to identify a child’s father—fatherlessness—with a concern for being unable to identify a state for that child—statelessness. Similar considerations animated both asserted objectives. What disappeared from the government’s

---

273 *Id.* at *40 (internal citation omitted). The accuracy of the ultimately empirical assumption that the child of an unwed American woman is more likely to be stateless is debated at length in the briefs submitted to the Court, and will not be addressed here.


275 Justice Ginsburg questions the government based on a similar line of reasoning, trying to flesh out the difference between facts, opinions, and laws: "you said... this has nothing to do with stereotypes, this is the way the law was. But wasn’t the law shaped because of the vision of the world of being divided into married couples where the father is what counted, and... the law didn’t regard [unwed fathers] as having any kind of obligation?" *Flores-Villar Oral Argument*, supra note 255, at 49:55.

276 *Flores-Villar Brief for the United States*, supra note 264, at *38.

277 INA § 309(a), 8 U.S.C. § 1409(a) (2006) (stating that the provisions of INA § 301(g) shall apply only "if" the requirements of INA § 309(a) are satisfied).
arguments was the Court’s recognition of the unwed mother’s mobility, even though such mobility would seem relevant to the question of her child’s potential statelessness and her ability to prevent it.

3. Silent Scrutiny: The “Alien” Mother

While asserting that it was following the heightened scrutiny of *Nguyen*, the Ninth Circuit’s pithy statements affirming the interests asserted by the government were reminiscent of the Supreme Court’s reticence in *Fiallo*. Its abridged equal protection analysis revealed little about the unwed mother and father. The briefs to the Supreme Court were more informative, and presented the relevant considerations for the purpose of an equal protection analysis.

Appellant’s brief and those of amici focused on a direct comparison between the unwed mother and father, while the government treated the unwed mother as exceptional. The government thus reverted to the familiar comparison between the unwed mother and all other American parents, expanding the focal point of the equal protection lens to the pre-*Miller* and *Nguyen* analyses undertaken by the Court.

The most accurate comparison considering the statutory requirements imposed on parents is a bit more complicated. Under the law as it applied to Flores-Villar and as it remains today, married parents who are both Amer-

---

278 *Nguyen v. INS*, 533 U.S. 53, 61 (2001) ("[A] citizen mother expecting a child and living abroad has the right to reenter the United States so the child can be born here and be a 14th Amendment citizen."); *See Appellant’s Opening Brief at 34–35, United States v. Flores-Villar, 536 F.3d 990 (9th Cir. 2008) (No. 07-50445), 2008 WL 891254, at *34–35 [hereinafter Flores-Villar Appellant’s Opening Brief] ("Furthermore, there is no rational reason to... render it physically impossible for [the unwed father] to confer citizenship on a child born abroad and out-of-wedlock, especially when a woman, who has a greater ability to cho[o]se where a child is born, can confer citizenship on her children.").

279 *See Flores-Villar, 536 F.3d at 993* (summarizing holding that even applying intermediate scrutiny, the residency requirements of the INA sections 301(a)(7) and 309 survive).

280 *See, e.g., Brief of the National Women’s Law Center Brief of the National Women's Law Center et al. as Amici Curiae Supporting Petitioner at 7, Flores-Villar, 131 S. Ct. 2312 (2011) (No. 09-5801), 2010 WL 2602010, at *7 [hereinafter Flores-Villar Brief of the National Women’s Law Center] (describing how statute facially discriminates on the basis of gender); Flores-Villar Appellant’s Opening Brief, supra note 279, at *7 (arguing that the residency requirements in the INA “discriminate against United States citizen fathers on the basis of both gender and age in violation of the equal protection clause of the Fifth Amendment of the United States Constitution”)

281 *See Flores-Villar Brief for the United States, supra note 264, at *22–23* (arguing that unwed mothers and fathers are not similarly situated with respect to the risk of statelessness and that this justifies the exceptional treatment given only to unwed mothers in the form of a lower residency requirement). The title to one of the sections in the government’s brief is illustrative of this attempt to avoid a direct comparison: “Congress Constitutionally May Apply A Shorter Physical-Presence Requirement To Unmarried U.S. Citizen Mothers of Foreign-Born Children Than To All Other U.S. Citizen Parents of Foreign-Born Children.” *Id.* at 22.
can citizens need only have had one of them reside in the United States, for no specified period of time, before transmitting citizenship to their child born abroad. The American citizen of a married couple composed of a citizen and an American national must have lived in the United States for a continuous period of at least one year—like the unwed American mother. Meanwhile, the longer residency requirements that are imposed on unwed American citizen fathers are the same as those imposed on the American citizen spouse in marriages of mixed nationalities.

Thus, considering the unwed mother in the context of how the statute treats various parental couplings reveals a slightly different picture than the one initially presented. The relevant comparison is not between the unwed American mother and all the other parents, but rather between the unwed American father and married couples with only one American citizen, and the unwed American mother and married couples who are composed of one American citizen and one American national. These particular pairings, placing each unwed American parent alongside different couples, raise the question of what makes each group alike for purposes of citizenship transmission. One reason the government articulated in its brief was that in addition to its interest in reducing statelessness, the State had an interest in the child’s American-ness, noting that a child born abroad to parents of different nationalities “is likely to be more alien than American in character.” The government explained that this concern over an adequate connection to America was what, in 1952, motivated Congress to add a residency requirement for the unwed mother before transmitting citizenship to her illegitimate child: “Congress sought to strengthen the assurance of a connection to the United States.” Yet this consideration alone does not explain why the unwed mother is placed with the group that is “more” American in character, and the unwed father with the group that is “less.”

Putting aside whether Congress’s additional interest in reducing statelessness together with ensuring that citizens have a connection to the United States may account for the differential residency requirements between unwed fathers and couples of mixed nationalities on the one hand, and unwed mothers and married American citizens and American nationals on the other,

283 INA § 301(d), 8 U.S.C. § 1401(d) (2006).
284 INA § 301(g), 8 U.S.C. § 1401(g) (2006).
285 The government explained the rules more clearly in its brief. Flores Villar Brief for the United States, supra note 264, at *2-3 (citing INA § 301(a); 8 U.S.C. § 1409(a) (1970)).
286 The term American nationals indicates persons who are not citizens but live in the outlying possessions of the United States, as distinguished from foreign nationals who are not citizens and live outside United States’ territory entirely.
287 Id. at *27 (internal quotations omitted) (quoting To Revise and Codify the Nationality Laws of the United States Into a Comprehensive Nationality Code: Hearings on H.R. 6127 Superseded by H.R. 9980 Before the H. Comm. on Immigration and Naturalization, 76th Cong. 431 (1940)).
288 Id. at *29-30.
the government raised a third consideration. During oral argument before the
Court, the government characterized Petitioner’s argument to be that the un-
wed mother, “as this Court understood in *Nguyen*, may be the only either
legal parent or the only parent at the moment of birth with the requisite
connection to the child.”289 From that starting point, the government rea-
soned, “the mother in that circumstance is very much like the two citizen
parent family, the only parents . . . with a connection to the United
States.”290 The unwed father, however, is not in the same position, given that
at the moment of birth there is “likely to be no recognized father” but “only
the mother.”291

The government further explained that the unwed father remains dis-

tinct from the unwed mother even where he legitimates his child—“the rea-
son why, is [that] when a child is legitimated, there are two parents who
have the strong connection that was described in this Court’s decision in
*Nguyen* to that child, the U.S. citizen father, but also the mother, the alien
mother in that country. So you have two parents whose interests have to be
taken into account.”292 In other words, the father who has legitimated his
child is assumed to always be accompanied by the unwed mother who, under
the government’s account, will remain with her child, akin to a family of
mixed-nationalities. Meanwhile, the American mother, who under the gov-
ernment’s account would remain with her child and unaccompanied, would
be more similar to a family composed only of American citizens and nation-
als. In support of its contention, the government turned to *Lehr*, noting that
“the cases involving illegitimates that this Court has had in a domestic con-
text . . . [are] instructive.”293

The lines spoken by government’s counsel directly reveal the foreign
individuals who have heretofore been obscured by an unswerving focus on
the unwed American parents. In so doing, two unmarried mixed status
couples are uncovered—that of the American man and the foreign woman
and the American woman and the foreign man—along with the presumed
interaction between them: what the statute assumes and the Court ratifies is
that the mother, whether American or foreign, will retain custody. The deci-
dion made by Congress and the Court is the same every time, for every
situation in which the parents are unmarried, even where the father may have
legitimated his child—the unwed mother, regardless of the unwed father,
America or foreign, will retain custody over her child. Under this formula-

---

290 *Id.* at 36:31.
291 *Id.* at 40:15; see also Brief for the Respondent at 17, *Nguyen v. INS*, 533 U.S. 53
(2001) (No. 99-2071), 2000 WL 1868100, at *17 (noting that the mother’s legal right to
custody and control of her illegitimate child was established not only under domestic
laws, but under “the law of most other nations” at the time of the child’s birth in that
case).
293 *Id.* at 40:23.
It is unsurprising that the Court looks to its domestic decisions for direction in cases considering the unwed American father and mother abroad. It does not, however, follow that the Court must recreate the domestic family on foreign soil. Despite the Court’s nearly exclusive focus on the American father and mother in its citizenship transmission cases, it is deciding how each parent interacts in the context of a relationship with their foreign partners and their children. What emerges—most directly in *Flores-Villar* but also throughout the Court’s prior cases—is that the decisions about how each parent can transmit citizenship are actually premised on a particular custody determination embedded in INA Section 309. The provisions of the INA dictate the transmission of citizenship based on the assumption that the unwed mother, whether she be American or foreign, abroad or in the United States, will retain custody over her child. The Court endorses that custody determination by affirming these rules and, in so doing, potentially reinforces it.

The Court reaches these decisions, however, without ever openly addressing the question of custody. Rather, it relies on an implicit custody determination and cites to a line of its own cases that begin from the assumption that the mother, not the father, will retain custody of the child in the absence of marital ties. This is problematic for a number of reasons. These unwed father cases are not explicitly decisions about who retains custody over the child. As such, these cases lack a framework for addressing the determination of which parent should retain custody. They also have little to say about the foreign mother, and whether she actually will retain custody over her child.

---

294 Although each of the unwed father cases can certainly be understood as allocating custody, they do not openly engage in assessing the parents’ relations with their children and deciding which parent should remain with the child. In *Stanley*, for instance, in deciding that the unwed father is entitled to a hearing upon the death of the mother, the Court was essentially deciding that custody could not be removed from him automatically. *See Stanley v. Illinois*, 405 U.S. 645, 658 (1972) (stating that “the dismemberment of his family” was at stake). *Lehr* can also be understood as ultimately allocating custody of the child with the mother insofar as the Court allowed the adoption of Lehr’s children by another man to go forward. *Lehr v. Robertson*, 463 U.S. 248, 250 (1983) (holding that state law requiring fathers to take specific affirmative steps to receive notice of the impending adoption of their biological children); *see also Murray, supra* note 194, at 400-12 (discussing a custodial preference for the marital family in the unwed father cases).

295 It is difficult to clearly delineate the bounds of cases addressing custody law, given that there is much overlap with other fields, including trusts and estates, juvenile law, and so on. This Article uses custody law to encompass the various state law schemes addressing parents’ custody over their children at a moment of separation.
Acknowledging the custody determination that is inherent in these citizenship decisions triggers a set of rules and assumptions different from those the Court currently relies on. The shift away from the unwed father cases to a more direct acknowledgment of custody and its analytic framework would allow the Court to move beyond the circumscribed focus on the unwed father and mother and more fully address the relationship between the American parents, their foreign partners, and their child. Looking to custody would also impact the substance of the Court's decisions. For, custody law has considered and mostly abandoned the absolute maternal presumption that undergirds the rules transmitting citizenship. Finally, this move toward a custody framework is particularly relevant to the citizenship transmission cases—the custody decision is not only embedded in the Court's analysis, but custody-based notions addressing the role of gender in determining who is a parent are present in the Court's own criticisms and in the parties' attempts to articulate the harm at stake in differentiating between fathers and mothers as such.

Custody law therefore provides a robust alternative framework not only to understand but also to critique the Court's citizenship transmission decisions. The following considerations regarding the turn toward custody assume the continued relevance of the equal protection analysis generally; while it is not the only legal approach available, it is important to address how the doctrine may function in the citizenship transmission context beyond a limited adherence to the unwed father cases. This Part offers some preliminary proposals for how conceptualizing the decisions about citizenship in terms of custody may affect the determination of who should be able

296 State laws regulating custody consider all three actors who are addressed by INA Section 309—the mother, father, and child. See, e.g., V.A.M.S. § 452.375(2) (2012) ("Joint legal custody' means that the parents share the decision-making rights, responsibilities, and authority relating to the health, education and welfare of the child . . . .").

297 This proposal stands despite the impact that United States v. Virginia, 518 U.S. 515 (1996), may have on the Court's equal protection jurisprudence addressing sex-based distinctions. While I remain skeptical that Virginia would affect the Court's enduring equal protection analysis in the unwed parent cases, support for this contention is unnecessary—even if Virginia set forth a more searching standard, turning to custody provides a rubric that is most relevant in the citizenship transmission context. A tangential but important point is that this turn should not be taken as a necessary indictment of the biology-plus framework in the domestic context.

298 Some scholars question the efficacy of having equal protection address parental or familial rights. See Silbaugh, supra note 4 (arguing against the constitutionalization of family law issues given the Supreme Court's reluctance to address the complexities of family law, as exemplified by its decision in Miller v. Albright); Collins, When Fathers' Rights are Mothers' Duties, supra note 11 (questioning the ability of the equal protection analysis to ferret out discrimination in the context of parental relations, relying on the circular reasoning espoused in Parham v. Hughes as support). States have, however, incorporated equal protection ideals in reforming their custody laws to adhere to gender-neutral alternatives. See Alexandra Selfridge, Equal Protection and Gender Preference in Divorce Contests Over Custody, 16 J. CONTEMP. LEGAL ISSUES 165, 168–70 (2007) (describing states' need for gender-neutral standards for resolving custody disputes and their ensuing adoption of gender-neutral statutes).
to transmit citizenship to their children and how it might take place. This Part concludes by identifying the ways in which custody-related notions are already present in the Court’s dissenting voices and the parties before it, as well as noting some of the limits inherent in the approach.

A. Some Preliminary Proposals

The Supreme Court has little case law addressing custody, as it is by and large a product of state law. The Court, however, looked to state law when considering matters related to the family, just as Congress has looked to the states when fashioning citizenship rules based on family relations. The potential relevance of custody to the decisions addressing citizenship is two-fold: the regulations set out by Congress can be understood as fashioning rules based on the assumption that the unwed mother will always retain custody over the child, and the Court can employ lessons learned from custody about the use of sex-based distinctions in order to assess those assumptions. Having already identified the custody determination that undergirds the INA as it does the Court’s decisions, this section focuses on what use that recognition may serve. While my proposal centers on the Court’s mode of analysis, the turn toward custody is equally, and vigorously, applicable to Congress, in particular when choosing specific state laws to consider in designing the rules regulating citizenship.

At its most obvious, insights from custody law provide an easy critique to the assumption underlying these decisions, vocalized in Justice Scalia’s query to probe the petitioner’s lawyer in *Flores-Villar* on whether the argu-

---

299 *See In re Burrus*, 136 U.S. 586, 593–94 (1890) (“The whole subject of the domestic relations of husband and wife, parent and child, belongs to the laws of the States, and not to the laws of the United States.”). *But see*, e.g., *Palmore v. Sidoti*, 466 U.S. 429, 433 (1984) (holding state courts may not consider a parent’s decision to enter an interracial marriage and the negative consequences that doing so may have on the child in determining custody).

300 *See*, e.g., *Troxel v. Granville*, 530 U.S. 57, 69–70 (2000) (observing how state law schemes take into account the parental relationship in allowing or denying nonparental visitation).


ment against a stereotype is in fact an argument against a reality: "Do you say it is not true that if there is an illegitimate child, it is much more likely that the woman will end up caring for it than the father would?" The question is fundamentally about who retains custody over the child. The answer provided by the Court and Congress is that it will always be the mother. Recognizing that the citizenship rules are based on an implicit custody determination identifies the maternal preference embedded in the rules, as well as in Scalia’s question. Employing a custody law framework to analyze it provides well-trodden reasons for at least questioning the tenacious adherence to this sex-based model.

Custody law has on the whole eschewed sex-based allocations of parental responsibilities in favor of a gender-neutral approach to parenting. In particular, custody law today has rejected sex-based rules that reflect the conclusion that the woman, as the mother, is the only parent who always will, or should, have custody over the child. This is not to say that because custody law has abandoned a sex-based framework, so should the Court in its citizenship decisions. What custody law provides is the imprint of a history of reforms and the experience of a productive dialogue regarding the roles of the father and mother figures. This dialogue contains well-developed arguments on either side of the debate that prove instructive, including propositions that gender-neutral alternatives may not actually lead to the most equitable outcomes for fathers or mothers if custody over the child is

303 Flores-Villar Oral Argument, supra note 255, at 1:07.
307 See Julie E. Artis, Judging the Best Interests of the Child: Judges’ Accounts of the Tender Years Doctrine, 38 Law & Soc'y Rev. 769, 770 (2004) (noting arguments of fathers’ rights groups who criticize judges for continuing to enforce a maternal presumption despite gender neutrality, as evidenced by the fact that judges award mothers custody in the majority of cases).
the desired end. Thus, the central benefit of custody lies not in its substantive conclusions but in uncovering its presence and incorporating its more nuanced discussions surrounding gender-neutral alternatives, which have the further benefit of hindsight given the experience of reforms.\textsuperscript{309}

Regardless of the particularities of the custody decision imported by the Court, an awareness of the custody determination \textit{tout court} would expand the narrow focus of the Court's current jurisprudence to consider the foreign parents. There is otherwise little occasion to identify and analyze how Congress is defining the interaction between the American parent and his or her partner. Moreover, given the scrutiny required by equal protection, Congress's seemingly empirical assessment about which parent remains with the child can, and should, be explicitly addressed by the Court, rather than implicitly affirmed.\textsuperscript{310}

The move away from the abstracted American family of the opinions would also allow the focus to fall on who functions as a parent to the child. The citizenship transmission cases are currently fixed at a level of abstraction in which the mixed-status parties that are addressed by the statute are not recognized, and the absent mothers and present fathers before the Court are ignored. Yet, given that a motivating concern for the requirements in INA Section 309(a)(4), expressed by both the government and the Court, is who will remain with the child, custody law facilitates that determination by looking to a series of considerations captured in any of its gender-neutral alternatives, including joint custody, the primary caretaker presumption, or an inquiry into the best interests of the child.\textsuperscript{311}

Replacing the Court's abstractions with a contextualized inquiry would flesh out the analysis that it currently assumes. At their core, decisions about custody are decisions about who can be a parent to the child, in the embedded context of a relationship. In custody determinations, the unwed father is not absolutely differentiated from the unwed mother—rather, he has re-


\textsuperscript{309} Diverse opinions pepper the debate throughout family law. Compare Rena K. Ullever, \textit{Fathers' Rights and Feminism: The Maternal Presumption Revisited}, 1 HARV. WOMEN'S L.J. 107, 130 (1978) (arguing that while "it is disquieting to conclude that the maternal presumption should be defended and preserved . . ." it is also the case that "at this point in history the law should recognize a woman's option to keep the children whose daily care she has so disproportionately assumed"), with Pusey v. Pusey, 728 P.2d 117, 120 (Utah 1986) ("[T]he tender years doctrine was perhaps useful in a society in which fathers traditionally worked outside the home and mothers did not; however, since that pattern is no longer prevalent . . . the tender years doctrine is equally anachronistic.").

\textsuperscript{310} The form of this argument would follow those made with respect to statelessness in Flores-Villar. See generally Flores-Villar Brief for the United States, \textit{supra} note 264.

\textsuperscript{311} These proposals would likely still be subject to an age cut-off in determining whether citizenship was transmitted at birth.
ceived both recognition and custody over his child.\footnote{See, e.g., Ragghanti v. Reyes, 123 Cal. App. 4th 989 (2004) (affirming trial court’s order of custody to unmarried father when the mother sought to move away, on the basis of the child’s best interests).} A study published a few years prior to Nguyen already noted the substantial numbers of unwed fathers gaining custody over their children in court disputes.\footnote{See Johnson v. Louis, 654 N.W.2d 886, 891 (Iowa 2002) (holding that a statute preventing the child of an unmarried father from receiving child support for postsecondary education when a child whose parents were divorced would have been entitled to such a subsidy, did not violate equal protection); Mary Ann Mason & Ann Quirk, Are Mothers Losing Custody? Read My Lips: Trends in Judicial Decision-Making in Custody Disputes—1920, 1960, 1990, and 1995, 31 Fam. L.Q. 215, 230–31 (1997) (noting that “[i]n the twenty years following [Stanley], unwed fathers have made appreciable strides toward achieving equal footing with that of unmarried mothers in securing custody of their children” and that “a substantial number of unmarried fathers [are] seeking court-ordered awards and winning”). This is not to imply that unwed fathers are always recognized in custody determinations on equal terms as divorced fathers, but more so than in the strictly unwed father context. See, e.g., Quilloin v. Walcott, 434 U.S. 246 (1978); see also, supra notes 203–08 and accompanying text.} These decisions provide a strong counterpoint to the recurring custody determination that the rules and the Court assume in the citizenship transmission context. Significantly, the turn to custody would also direct the emphasis away from the “unweddedness” of the parents, as once was the case with the “illegitimacy” of the child, the legal marker the Court presently relies on in place of the actual ties shared by the parent and child.\footnote{See supra notes 185–13 and accompanying text.} Such a development is especially timely given the steady rise of children born to parents who are not married.

Addressing the custody determination embedded in these rules also emphasizes the mutability of the Court’s initial allocation and raises the question of how custody itself is affected by the automatic grant of citizenship via the American mother or father. Allowing a parent to transmit citizenship automatically to their child may be a factor in the decision regarding which parent remains with the child in the first place.\footnote{There may of course be variations of how this could play out as an empirical matter, and many variables would have to be accounted for, including whether there is an awareness on behalf of the parents of the potential to transmit citizenship. For the purpose of this discussion it is sufficient to note that it raises a question to be further developed. See Robert H. Mnookin & Lewis Kornhauser, Bargaining in the Shadow of the Law: The Case of Divorce, 88 Yale L.J. 950, 950–52 (1979) (proposing an alternative framework for understanding the role of the law by considering the effects of the legal system on private relations outside of the courtroom).} This would mean that the INA’s automatic allocation of custody facilitates the unwed mother’s retention of custody, and does not just endorse a static, \textit{a priori} custody decision.

The question of which parent retains custody must be considered in conjunction with how citizenship is transmitted in order to assess the effect both may have on the three relevant actors. For instance, granting the unwed American father the ability to transmit citizenship automatically, based on DNA testing or on some other proof of parentage, may in turn facilitate his ability to retain custody over his child. The father’s ability to transmit citi-
zenship automatically may then turn out to actually be harmful to the unwed mother by creating an uneven power dynamic between the American father and the foreign mother, but may be desirable for their child; these different possible schemes are accompanied by varying degrees of normative desirability, which depend on the perspective of each actor.\(^\text{316}\) Decoupling the transmission of citizenship from the decision of who retains custody is therefore important to understand the potential consequences each decision may have on the different actors.

These are merely some introductory observations of the ways in which the recognition of custody, on its own terms, may impact the Court's analysis or Congress's amendments; they require further research and development.\(^\text{317}\) It is worth emphasizing that the move to sex-neutrality in custody determinations has not been without its detractors. On the contrary, there have been many, and varied, criticisms, ranging from whether the different gender-neutral standards are actually sex-neutral in practice,\(^\text{318}\) to whether they are effective in advancing sex equality.\(^\text{319}\) These criticisms do not eliminate the relevance of the custody framework. Rather, they merely complicate the discussions surrounding the role of sex in deciding custody in the citizenship transmission context.

At the very least, looking to the developments in custody law provides a familiar point of comparison. The rules of custody law reflect an understanding, in theory if not in reality, that the mother, unwed or divorced, is not always presumed to be the parent with whom the child will, or should, live. This rather uncontroversial realization is one that the rules regulating citizenship, and the decisions affirming them, have yet to consider.

**B. Custody as Critique**

The alternative framework custody law provides is especially appealing for yet another reason—it is already implicit in the arguments raised by the parties and in the Court's dissenting voices. In developing the harm at stake

---

\(^{316}\) See, e.g., Weinrib, *supra* note 4, at 247–48, 271–72 (considering the potential benefits and pitfalls of allowing citizenship to transmit automatically from unwed father to child in the context of *Nguyen v. INS*, 533 U.S. 53 (2001)).

\(^{317}\) One concern, for instance, is that the custody framework is based on an adversarial model as questions typically arise in moments of separation. This may not always be true of the citizenship cases before the Court.

\(^{318}\) See, e.g., Artis, *supra* note 307, at 771 (finding that gender preferences factor into judges' gender neutral custody determinations); Jacobs, *supra* note 308 (arguing that best interests of the child is a vague standard allowing for judicial subjectivity and gender bias, but also noting that other gender neutral alternatives are no better in promoting equality).

\(^{319}\) See Martha L. Fineman, *Custody Determination at Divorce: The Limits of Social Science Research and the Fallacy of the Liberal Ideology of Equality*, 3 Can. J. Women & L. 88, 91 (1989) (arguing that a "gender-neutral framework" in custody determinations "masks real inequalities between women and men" given that it is "applied in a gendered world to gendered lives").
in the citizenship cases, the parties before the Court rely on an articulation of the harm that has been recognized by courts deciding questions involving custody—that of the limited roles assigned to fathers and mothers. The parties use custody in a more substantive way as well: the harm in the citizenship transmission cases has been defined as the inability of fathers and mothers to retain custody over their child. Much of the criticism leveled by the Court itself also relies on concepts adopted directly from custody, as seen in the Justices’ use of certain gender-neutral parenting terms. Thus, custody provides the parties and the Court with both a concrete harm, and a language to articulate the harm that accrues in deciding who is a parent based purely on sex.

In defining the harm initially, parties contesting the sex-based laws in the immigration and citizenship cases exhibited a concern with the limited recognition granted the father, and the repercussions on the mother’s ability to remain with and care for her child. The discrimination-based arguments raised in *Fiallo* recognized the harm to the father as “rest[ing] upon archaic and overbroad stereotypes concerning the character of unwed fathers and their relationship to their illegitimate children.” The harm to the mother in these rules not recognizing the unwed father was characterized as the increased difficulty of being a mother and the potential damage to her ability to care for her children.

By the time of *Miller* and *Nguyen*, the parties’ arguments understood the law’s treatment of unwed fathers and mothers as problematic because it reinforced rigid gender roles along both axes. One of the harms of the INA, as articulated by amicus in *Miller*, was that the statute was rooted in the notion “that the American father is never anything more than the proverbial breadwinner who remains aloof from day-to-day childrearing duties” while the American mother “has a natural and primary function of caring for the children and the home, so that no further proof of her connection to her

---

320 See, e.g., *In re Marriage of Hansen*, 733 N.W.2d 683, 692–93 (Iowa 2007) (“While some families function along traditional lines with a primary breadwinner and primary caregiver, other families employ a more undifferentiated role for spouses or even reverse ‘traditional’ roles. A one-size-fits-all approach in which joint physical care is universally disfavored is thus subject to serious question given current social realities.”).

321 See *Miller* Brief of Amici Curiae the ACLU, *supra* note 164, at *11–12.


323 *Id.* at *24 n.17. A similar argument appeared in *Trimble*, where appellants asserted that the Illinois law prohibiting the illegitimate child from inheriting from his father discriminated against the surviving mother. *Trimble* v. *Gordon*, 430 U.S. 762, 766 (1977) (concluding that the statute is unconstitutional because it discriminates against illegitimate children and declining to reach the sex discrimination argument). The concern was that “[t]he child’s mother, his sole surviving parent, . . . has the onerous task of supporting a child who has no claim against his father’s estate,” which in turn “will burden or frustrate the mother in obtaining, retaining, or exercising the custody and care of the child.” Brief of the Appellants at 57, *Trimble* v. *Gordon*, 430 U.S. 762 (1977) (No. 75-5952), 1976 WL 181301, at *57.
children is necessary.' Petitioners in *Nguyen* followed similar reasoning, arguing that INA Section 309(a)(4) depended on overbroad generalizations regarding men and women, with dire consequences for families who did not follow the familiar roles—*Nguyen* itself "clearly underscores the danger . . . of permitting sex-based stereotypes to define legal rights." These arguments exhibited a further understanding that the heightened role required of mothers and the lesser role required of fathers made it more difficult for each unwed partner to parent. The harm was thus understood as the prevention of men and women from functioning as fathers and mothers. Indeed, amicus in *Miller* defined the harm at stake as the interference with the natural parents’ ability to retain custody over their children: "The stereotype on which [INA Section 309] is based—the image of the mother as connected by nature to her children while fathers are not—is harmful to both mothers and fathers in many areas, particularly in custody determinations."

The various opinions in the citizenship transmission cases demonstrated little consensus between the majorities, pluralities, and dissents about when the law’s different treatment of unwed fathers and mothers was harmful, and to whom such harm accrued. Characterizing INA Section 309(a)(4) in *Miller*, Justice Stevens asserted that the statute actually favored the father and disadvantaged the mother. Reasoning that the requirements imposed by INA Section 309(a)(4) were minimal compared with the requirements imposed by the decision to carry and birth the child, Justice Stevens concluded “[i]t seems obvious that the burdens imposed on the female citizen are more severe than those imposed on the male citizen.” Justice Kennedy echoed such observations in *Nguyen*, noting that while the mother’s requirement was satisfied at the moment of birth, the unwed father or his child had the benefit of eighteen years to satisfy the demands of INA Section 309(a)(4).

Dissents in both cases reflected an understanding of the harm more akin to the arguments presented by appellants before them. In *Miller*, Justice Breyer defined the harm in terms contradictory to the plurality, arguing that the statute made it more difficult for the unwed father to transmit citizenship to his children born abroad. The effect, Justice Breyer argued, was to deny recognition to the different familial roles undertaken by both mothers and fathers—"either men or women may be caretakers . . . either men or women may be ‘breadwinners.’" In *Nguyen*, Justice O’Connor broke away from the standard definition of the injury by raising a point that had previously

---

324 Miller Brief of Amici Curiae the ACLU, supra note 164, at *8. But see Silbaugh, supra note 4, at 1155 (criticizing the ACLU’s brief in *Miller* for “speak[ing] of the roles of fathers and mothers in an almost cartoonish way”).

325 Nguyen Brief of Petitioners, supra note 161, at *15.

326 Miller Brief of Amici Curiae the ACLU, supra note 164, at *11.


329 *Miller*, 523 U.S. at 481 (Breyer, J., dissenting).

330 Id. at 488.
only been implied—namely, that taking care of a child born out of wedlock was a burden, not a benefit that falls on the woman but escapes the man. Justice O'Connor characterized INA Section 309(a)(4) as a law that the mother is "'bound' to serve": "'when it comes to the illegitimate child, which is a great burden, then the mother is the only recognized parent, and the father is put safely in the background.'" Thus, Justice O'Connor defined the harm not as being to motherhood, but stemming from motherhood. The desirability of retaining custody was no longer understood as an unquestioned good, but demanded a different normative assessment.

In presenting alternative proposals, Justices Breyer and O'Connor advanced criticisms informed in particular by custody law. Instead of sex, Justice Breyer offered the categories of "Caretaker" and "Noncaretaker Parents" in order to satisfy Congress's ends and also avoid equating sex with caretaking. His criticism of the Court's endorsement of a sex-based requirement when a gender-neutral one would satisfy the government's asserted aims stems directly from developments in custody law recognized well over a decade prior to Miller—"we hold today that there is a presumption in favor of the primary caretaker parent, if he or she meets the minimum, objective standard for being a fit parent . . . regardless of sex." Justice Breyer's appeal to recognize a parent on the basis of a caretaker standard instead of on the basis of sex succeeded the evolution of a sex-neutral rule in decisions concerning who should retain custody over a child in the event of a divorce or separation. The parties in Miller relied on custody law to articulate the harm produced by sex-based distinctions in the parental

---

331 Nguyen, 533 U.S. at 92–94 (O'Connor, J., dissenting).
333 See Collins, When Fathers' Rights are Mothers' Duties, supra note 11, at 1682–1703 (arguing that history of coverture explains the allocation of parental responsibilities in INA Section 309, allowing men to remain sexually active without the bearing the consequences of children born as a result). Arguably, Justices Kennedy and Stevens share a similar view, given their position that the unwed father's requirements are less onerous than the unwed mother's. See supra notes 327–28.
334 Miller, 523 U.S. at 487 (Breyer, J., dissenting).
336 See James G. Dwyer, A Taxonomy of Children's Existing Rights in State Decision Making about Their Relationships, 11 Wm. & Mary Bill Rts. J. 845, 917–19 (2002) (describing the rise of the gender-neutral primary caretaker presumption and how it is currently one factor to consider in the more dominant best interests of the child analysis); see also Marcia O'Kelly, Blessing the Tie That Binds: Preference for the Primary Caretaker As Custodian, 63 N.D. L. Rev. 481, 537–42 (1987) (noting that while its justifications are genuinely gender-neutral the primary caretaker presumption may be critiqued by
context;\textsuperscript{337} Justice Breyer's appeal to custody law aimed to recognize that both fathers and mothers, even if unwed, may be caretakers of their children.

While Justice Breyer acknowledged the ability of both partners to parent, Justice O'Connor focused on the choice not to parent, also by relying on the framework provided by custody. In arguing that INA Section 309(a)(4) reflected outdated stereotypes of mothers and fathers, Justice O'Connor turned directly to domestic custody laws, observing that "our States' child custody and support laws no longer assume that mothers alone are 'bound' to serve as 'natural guardians' of nonmarital children."\textsuperscript{338} As proof, Justice O'Connor cited to statutes addressing these areas—an Arizona statute establishing equal duties of support for mothers and fathers\textsuperscript{339} and a California rule abolishing the tender years presumption in custody decisions.\textsuperscript{340} That is, the framework Justice O'Connor relied on to challenge the majority's sex-based assumptions was one that developed by addressing mothers, fathers and their children in the context of a custody determination.\textsuperscript{341}

Moreover, Justice O'Connor's suggestion that motherhood itself can be a burden is also a possibility that could be acknowledged by a custody determination. Basing the citizenship transmission cases on a custody framework would more easily take the decision not to parent, by both sexes, into account. In particular, bringing the two parents into the analysis required by custody would recognize that there may be an element of choice in the decision of whether to be a mother, not only a father, that is mostly absent from the unwed parent cases.\textsuperscript{342}

Far from being a monolithic entity, family law provides different models of parenting that Congress and the Court can consider in fashioning rules based on family relations. Accepting that the principal aim is to eradicate sex-based inequalities, questions must be asked regarding which custody rule should be adopted in the citizenship context either by the Court or Congress and what it should look like. Should it be modeled on joint custody or

\textit{some as a maternal presumption in disguise given that it is a role usually filled by women).}

\textsuperscript{337} Miller Brief of Amici Curiae the ACLU, \textit{supra} note 164, at 9–10 (discussing the various negative effects that sex-based distinctions have been reported to have in custody determinations for both men and women).


\textsuperscript{339} \textit{Az. Rev. Stat. Ann.} § 25-501 (1999) ("every person has the duty to provide all reasonable support for that person's natural and adopted minor, unemancipated children").


\textsuperscript{341} This framework was adopted also by the amici in this case. \textit{See Nguyen Brief of the National Women's Law Center, supra} note 250, at *19 (relying on a series of state statutes addressing support of children, some decided in the context of custody and dissolution of a marriage, to support its contention that gender-based distinctions have been abandoned).

\textsuperscript{342} The limited discussion of maternal choice recognized by the Court in the citizenship transmission context is the choice to abort. \textit{See Miller v. Albright}, 523 U.S. 420, 433 (1998) ("If the citizen mother is an unmarried female, she must first choose to carry the pregnancy to term and reject the alternative of abortion["]").
the primary caretaker presumption? Would it require affirmative steps on behalf of both the mother and the father or render the transmission of citizenship automatic for both parents? In striving for equality, should the Court or Congress equalize up or down?

This focus on the respective roles of the parents in designing rules regulating citizenship is, ultimately, limited. Looking only to the rules’ impact on gender does not provide a complete proposal for reform, as numerous constructions could feasibly render the mother and father “equal.” The importance of sex and parental roles inevitably comes up against the question of what citizenship or immigration policy Congress chooses to institute. The issue is not only, or most immediately, about which direction sex equality should take. Rather, it is also about which, and how many, United States citizens Congress decides to recognize.343 Looking to custody provides a starting point—it introduces the child to whom citizenship may accrue into the analysis and identifies the conditional nature of the relationship between the determination of who receives citizenship and who retains custody. It also forces the analysis into the next step, which is to more explicitly unite the considerations of sex with politics in deciding how citizenship should be transmitted.

CONCLUSION

The deep-seated similarities present throughout the Court’s equal protection jurisprudence addressing unwed fathers have been largely overlooked. The decisions beginning with Fiallo and ending in Flores-Villar are most completely understood as the product of a larger legal structure that treats mothers one way and fathers another. Yet the unwed father cases are rarely considered in tandem, spanning fields as diverse as family law, trusts and estates law, and immigration and nationality law. Bringing these seemingly discrete decisions together into a larger whole unifies an otherwise disjointed thread and reveals the law’s role in shaping our conception of unwed parents and their children.

The Court’s citizenship transmission decisions are part and parcel of its jurisprudence addressing fathers and mothers who are unwed—the unwed father exists dubiously in the absence of a legal relation, while the unwed

343 The question of what remedy is available were the Court to find that the INA was a violation of equal protection raises similar issues. The Justices’ discussion here switches from gender to politics, disagreeing as to whether it is within their power to rule on a remedy. In Nguyen, Justice O’Connor suggested that severance of the provision addressing men would be the appropriate course of action. Nguyen, 533 U.S. at 94–97 (O’Connor, J., dissenting). In contrast, in Miller, Scalia hesitated to find any role for courts in expanding or limiting the statute as it would entail conferring or denying citizenship. Miller v. Albright, 523 U.S. 420, 457–59 (1998) (Scalia, J., concurring) (“I know of no instance, however, in which this Court has severed an unconstitutional restriction upon the grant of immigration or citizenship. It is in my view incompatible with the plenary power of Congress over those fields . . . .”).
mother exists certainly given the biological fact of birth. Uncovering the way men and women are treated in their roles as unwed fathers and mothers is crucial to the formulation of any relevant proposal for reform. It is particularly important where, as here, a certain set of decisions is understood to be "exceptional"; describing as different what is actually the same is deeply troubling, all the more invidious because it remains invisible.

An analysis of the citizenship transmission cases alongside the Court's domestic cases provides glimpses into the source of its reasons for continuing to uphold sex-based distinctions. An especially salient strand that emerges is the Court's conception of, and reliance on, the fact of birth. The extent to which the fact of birth does work in the citizenship transmission cases becomes clear as they proceed; the attenuated relation between the act of birth and the status of citizenship is, once exposed, rather easy to grasp. Indeed, the event of birth has justified decisions about who is an American citizen and how long a parent must live in the territory of the United States, depending on whether that parent is a man or a woman.

This particular difference is more difficult to see when it does work in the "natural" context of unwed mothers and fathers. Understanding its role within the citizenship transmission cases raises reasons to be wary of the work it is doing in the context of unwed mothers and fathers writ large. The fact that women as a class have the potential to give birth will arguably always be present in such comparisons. Yet the progression of these unwed father cases reveals the various ways in which "real" biological differences become legal ones that perpetuate the entrenchment of a discourse of difference. In these cases, the real difference of the act of birth has prevented unwed fathers and mothers from being similarly situated for the legal purpose of transmitting citizenship. The line between the legal and the real, as between the act of birth and the creation of an ensuing relationship, is perceptibly porous. For this reason, we should question the Court's reliance on the real biological difference of the "event of birth" as the basis for its comparisons between men and women; the link between these real differences and the legal distinctions they are used to justify must be carefully scrutinized.

This Article has analyzed the differences between men and women as fathers and mothers. The questions raised herein have, however, wider appli-

---

344 See Spence v. Durham, 198 S.E.2d 537, 547 (N.C. 1973) ("It is universally recognized that the mother is the natural custodian of her young...[O]ther things being equal, the mother should be given their custody, in order that the children may not only receive her attention, care, supervision, and kindly advice, but also may have the advantage and benefit of a mother's love and devotion for which there is no substitute...") (quoting 2 Nelson, Divorce and Annulment §15.09 at 226-29 (2d ed. 1961)).

345 Nguyen v. INS, 533 U.S. 53, 65 (2001) ("...the opportunity for a meaningful relationship between citizen parent and child inheres in the very event of birth.")

346 See discussion supra, note at 272-304; see also Dan Slater, Op-Ed., Darwin Was Wrong About Dating, N.Y. Times, Jan. 12, 2013, at SR1 (describing the difference between the evolution of biology and the evolution of the culture surrounding that biology).
cability. Not only are births to unwed parents increasing, but so are births with the use of assisted reproductive technology. While heterosexual partners are the most common users of the technology, same-sex couples are included in this demographic.\textsuperscript{3} Cases in which a biological link may be partly or entirely absent between the intended parent and child test the limits of using birth, at times decoupled from biology, in defining who is an American citizen.\textsuperscript{4}

The backdrop of difference based on sex also obscures the racial component associated with births to unwed parents domestically,\textsuperscript{3} and the race-based restrictions that once explicitly defined who could be a citizen.\textsuperscript{5} Decisions about how to define the bounds of illegitimacy and who to allow into the borders of the United States have a deeply racist history. The emphasis, by the parties and the Court, on unwed American mothers and fathers functions to marginalize the racially exclusive nature of the decisions that always recognize the children of mothers, but only sometimes those of fathers.\textsuperscript{3}

Accordingly, little attention is paid by the Court or the parties before it to the question of how Congress decides to confer citizenship—rather than define difference—or how the rules in place affect the number of American citizens who are born abroad—rather than which unmarried parent they disadvantage, or benefit.

What was clear in \textit{Fiallo} that has been lost in the cases focusing on the American parents is how the family functions as one of the many entities

\textsuperscript{3} See Scott Titshaw, \textit{Sorry Ma'am, Your Baby Is An Alien: Outdated Immigration Rules and Assisted Reproductive Technology}, 12 FLA. COASTAL L. REV. 47, 115–16 (2010) (noting that while the majority of couples using assisted reproductive technologies (ART) are of different sexes, immigration and nationality rules regulating ART will disproportionately affect same-sex couples whose options for creating a family include, significantly, ART).

\textsuperscript{4} Id.; see supra note 224 (explaining the unintended consequences of the State Department’s regulation allowing a child born through ART or a surrogate to acquire citizenship only if sperm or egg is a U.S. citizen); see also 7 FAM 1131.4-2 (recognizing child if citizen mother and/or citizen father provided either egg and/or sperm).

\textsuperscript{5} See Murray, supra note 194, at 413–16, 425–26 (analyzing the costs of coupling the stigma of illegitimacy with same-sex marriage advocacy efforts, emphasizing the importance of recuperating the racial component of out of wedlock births and their association with young, single, African American mothers).


\textsuperscript{31} See Collins, "Illegitimate Half-Castes" and the Citizen Family, supra note 251 (discussing the race-salient origins of personal status laws governing citizenship in a gender asymmetrical fashion).
Congress deploys in the realm of immigration and citizenship legislation.\textsuperscript{352} Recovering the use of the family as a site of regulation is important in the decisions defining citizenship, as it is in the Court's domestic decisions defining parenthood. Significantly, while the citizen and the domestic families overlap in core respects, they are nevertheless distinct for the purpose of determining if, and how, they are to merge, by both Congress and the Court.

\textsuperscript{352} In the immigration context, the political nature of regulating the family is especially salient in current proposals for reform that focus on reducing or eliminating family-based immigration. See Editorial, \textit{Time to Strengthen Family Immigration}, \textit{N.Y. Times}, March 24, 2013, at A22 (supporting the importance of family unification in immigration law, in the face of conservative political opposition to family-based immigration).