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Model (undocumented) minorities and “illegal” immigrants: centering Asian Americans and US carcerality in undocumented student discourse

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ABSTRACT

As the numbers of immigrant apprehensions, detentions, and deportations increase, and in context of anti-immigrant sentiment, education scholars must better contend with the way that carcerality affects undocumented student experiences. Carcerality refers to social and political systems that formally and informally promote discipline, punishment, and incarceration. Guided by Critical Race Theory, I examine interview data from 15 undocumented Asian Americans to show that the portrayal of undocumented student exceptionalism that typically characterizes the discourse on their experiences obscures the centrality of carcerality in shaping how young people with undocumented status navigate their lives. The narratives of undocumented Asian Americans represent a shift in undocumented discourse as these students de-emphasized their academic mobility, demonstrated a hyper-awareness of punitive immigration policies, and were traumatized by and practiced nondisclosure in response to deportation threats. However, while these students developed resistance strategies that they believed would both physically and psychologically protect their presence in the US, some reinforced white supremacist perceptions of the illegality of other undocumented immigrants. Undocumented Asian American experiences illuminate the nuanced relationship between the criminalization of undocumented immigrants, race, and education, and how a legacy of carcerality is vital to deciphering the contemporary educational experiences of undocumented students in the US.

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Introduction

Immigration reform efforts in the US have centered undocumented students for more than a decade, with researchers, educators, students, and community members attempting to illuminate the challenges these young people routinely face. In particular, researchers have produced a burgeoning amount of scholarship detailing the social, political, and economic barriers with which undocumented students must contend to successfully pursue education (Abrego 2008, 2011; Castro-Salazar and Bagley 2010; Gonzales 2009; Olivas 2012; Perez 2009; Price 2010; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011). Success stories of young people who culturally identify as American and maintain unwavering resilience and resistance have largely characterized both research and public discourse on undocumented students (Enriquez 2011; Madera et al. 2008; Wong et al. 2012). The portrayal of undocumented student exceptionalism

distinctly contrasts the stereotypical characterization of undocumented workers generally (Gleeson and Gonzales 2012), and has served as a strategic mechanism to gain public sympathy for these youth, garner bipartisan support for immigration reform, and reveal the contradictions within the American immigration system. Yet explicit discussions of the state-imposed criminalization of undocumented immigrants are starkly absent from such discourse, including the ways that they are surveilled, detained, and deported (Gonzales 2014; Hernández 2008; Lawston and Escobar 2009-2010; Negrón-Gonzales 2013). Further, few studies have centrally examined how processes of racialization differentially impact undocumented student experiences (Buenavista 2012, 2013). The focus of this paper, moreover, addresses the subsequent impact of immigrant carcerality on how students negotiate such punitive conditions. In shifting the discussion to better consider the relationship between the criminalization of undocumented immigrants, race, and education, I utilize the experiences of Asian Americans with undocumented status to demonstrate how a legacy of carcerality is vital to deciphering the contemporary educational experiences of undocumented students in the US.

Guided by Critical Race Theory, I rely on the perspectives of undocumented Asian-Americans to portray how they have come to understand the relationship between race, status, and illegality, as well as how they have experienced and resisted criminalization, albeit in sometimes 'self-defeating' ways (Solorzano and Bernal 2001, 310). My agenda is to acknowledge how state-sanctioned criminalization and the subsequent construction of 'illegal' immigrants precisely impacts those who do not support the dominant narrative of the 'model (undocumented) minority,' yet whose perspectives at times actually reify such a construction. In other words, I examine how Asian American students simultaneously resist *and* reinforce racial stereotypes to contend with their undocumented status, as a response to the punitive treatment of undocumented immigrants. Explicitly contending with this phenomenon enables us to reconceptualize educational access and pathways to legalization that do not just favor immigrants deemed exceptional, but provide all undocumented immigrants an opportunity to establish sustainable and humanizing lives within the US regardless of their educational access and potential to economically contribute. In doing so, I aim to assert the link between education, immigration, and carcerality within scholarship on undocumented students and to move away from the devaluing of undocumented immigrants pushed out of education.

Undocumented Asian Americans

More than 11 million undocumented people live in the US (Baker and Rytina 2013). The vast majority of individuals have emigrated from Mexico, and Central and South American countries, but undocumented immigrants from Asian and Pacific Islander geographies have steadily increased (Passel and Cohn 2014). More than one million are undocumented Asian immigrants, or 12 percent of the total undocumented population. Most undocumented Asian Americans originate from countries that have sociopolitical and economic relationships with the US, including India, China, the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam (Buenavista 2014b). Further, there are individuals of Asian descent who have demonstrated nonlinear migration patterns between multiple countries prior to their arrival to the US, including ethnic and multiracial Asian immigrants from Brazil, Mexico, and Peru (Buenavista 2014b; Chan 2010).

Scholars have often utilized an additive treatment of Asian American stories to demonstrate the ethnic and racial diversity of undocumented immigrants (Chan 2010; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011). Pieces in edited collections have featured the narratives of undocumented Filipino, Korean, Indian, and Vietnamese American students to show how they comprise an important segment of the undocumented student community and have also been involved in political organizing efforts around immigration reform (Madera et al. 2008; Wong et al. 2012), or are a segment of the Asian American population that warrants more attention (Buenavista and Chen 2013). In other instances, statistics on undocumented Asian American students have shown the different rates of college access for Latino students (Buenavista 2013; Gonzales 2010).

More frequently, writers for news media outlets (Chang 2012; Guzman-Lopez 2011; Huang 2014; Lim 2013; Vargas 2011) and policy reports (Buenavista 2014a; Wong et al. 2013) have detailed the presence and hardships of undocumented Asian American and Pacific Islanders, and to inform audiences how contemporary laws and policies will affect certain ethnic communities, including Chinese, Pilipino, Korean, and Tongan American communities. These examples have been noted to assess the impact of contemporary reform measures. For example, undocumented Asian Americans recently have been at the center of journalistic accounts and policy briefs that have revealed their underutilization of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a 2012 executive order that grants temporary work authorization and deportation reprieve for certain undocumented immigrants (Wong et al. 2013). While Asian Americans represent about 12 percent of the undocumented population, they constitute 6 percent of the 1.2 million DACA-eligible individuals (Buenavista 2014a). Although it has been reported that Asian Americans have a higher than average DACA approval rate, they represent only 2.8 percent of DACA applicants (or 20,000 of more than 700,000 applications). To put it simply, undocumented Asian American applicants are underrepresented relative to their DACA eligibility.

While the underutilization of DACA by Asian Americans points to the differential impact of contemporary immigration reform efforts, removal statistics also emphasize the potential role of race in shaping undocumented student lives. The US deports more than 400,000 immigrants every year (Simanski 2014). These numbers include not only undocumented immigrants, but also legal permanent residents (Hernández 2008). However, removal figures often do not account for undocumented immigrants who have ‘voluntarily returned’ – those who leave the US without removal orders. Although the vast majority of undocumented immigrants targeted for removal and deportation are from Mexico and Central American countries like Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, Asian Americans comprise more than 20 percent of immigrants who are deemed inadmissible to the US and more than 20 percent of undocumented immigrants who have returned each year (Simanski 2014). The range and plurality of experiences of undocumented Asian Americans validate the need to further examine this group.

Further, the current treatment of Asian American experiences within undocumented student literature is often simplistic. Specifically, authors have blamed cultural deficits for the invisibility of undocumented Asian American individuals without critically discussing the structural factors that might influence cultural practices. It has been both implied and reported that one of the biggest barriers for undocumented Asian Americans is a static culture of shame, secrecy, and silence around undocumented status (Chan 2008, 2010; Chang 2012; Gonzales 2009; Lim 2013). While I do not deny that stigma exists, it must be acknowledged that it is not because of, and/or limited to, Asian American culture and communities. Rather, stigma is a product of the policing and criminalization of undocumented immigrants in the US (Abrego 2011; Buenavista 2013). I have argued that the emphasis on ‘Asian American shame’ inadvertently reinforces racial stereotypes, namely the culturally deficit idea that Asian Americans are simultaneously quiet and universally academically successful (Buenavista 2013). That is, the discourse on undocumented Asian Americans depict them as inherently silent, which in turn prevent them from seeking support networks and resources among the larger undocumented immigrant community; yet despite such absence of support, they appear to demonstrate academic mobility like college access. Rather than propagate such simplistic notions of Asian American culture, I found that undocumented young people had developed practices of nondisclosure to both protect themselves and avoid revealing their families’ status. These findings led me to describe the subsequent educational hardships that emerged from such non-disclosure practices, including racial microaggressions committed against them by their peers and teachers. In this paper I further examine the non-disclosure practices demonstrated by some Asian Americans, particularly in context of a culture of fear indicative of American carcerality.

Illegality as a manifestation of carcerality

Carcerality refers to social and political systems that formally and informally promote the discipline, punishment, and incarceration of individuals; ultimately, these systems maintain and reinforce

capitalism (Lawston and Escobar 2009-2010; Rodriguez 2006). Contemporary manifestations of US carcerality include the criminalization and mass deportation of undocumented immigrants, which are direct consequences of the intimate relationship between punitive immigration laws and policies and the privatization of immigration enforcement agencies and detention centers (Golash-Boza 2009; Gonzales 2014). With state and federal governments creating policies that have fueled this immigrant prison economy, detention has swelled to a profitable business. Although most education scholars are not focused on examining the barriers of undocumented students in context of US carcerality, I argue that such a context is central to understanding undocumented youth experiences. Some education scholars, moreover, have also begun to make this link. For example, Gildersleeve and Hernandez (2010, 2012) conducted a discourse analysis of in-state resident tuition policies and found that they have produced a 'discourse of security' and represent new 'surveillance technology' within higher education. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge how these factors shape educational trajectories, especially the reality of immigrant illegality. In the following section, I draw on various disciplinary treatments of undocumented immigration to explain the structural conditions undocumented students must navigate while they attempt to pursue education.

Undocumented immigration cannot be examined in a vacuum devoid of the punitive laws and policies that define immigrant illegality (Gonzales 2014; Hernández 2008; Lawston and Escobar 2009-2010; Ngai 2004; Wong 2014). In her book, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Mae Ngai (2004) conducted a historiography on the period of 1924–1965 to delineate the social, political, and economic factors that created the phenomenon of 'illegal' immigration. During this time, the US established legal precedents that clearly communicated the desirability of white European immigrants and explicitly limited the migration of People of Color. Ngai argued that this period of harshly restrictive immigration policies comprised a widespread movement against unwanted immigrants of color in the US, whose status became known as 'illegal.' Policies and laws ascertained that deportation was an omnipresent threat, one that became central to the construction of immigrant illegality:

The illegal immigrant cannot be constituted without deportation – the possibility or threat of deportation, if not the fact. The possibility derives from the actual existence of state machinery to apprehend and deport illegal aliens. (Ngai 2004, 58)

In other words, undocumented status and deportability became inextricably linked through the ability of the federal government to remove humans deemed undesirable; as such, undocumented status equated to criminal activity. It is important to reiterate that immigrants of color – whose dark bodies racialized them as unassimilable – were least desirable in the US. Ironically, the threat and practice of deportation acknowledged and continues to acknowledge the actual presence of undocumented immigrants; although deportation did not deter the recruitment and participation of immigrant labor in the US economy, it enabled the persistent exploitation and marginalization of undocumented people.

Since deportation is endemic in undocumented immigrant lives, it is important to tackle this phenomenon head-on in studies that seek to holistically understand undocumented student experiences. Research that examines the way that carcerality pervades undocumented communities is particularly significant in understanding contemporary undocumented student experiences because a record number of deportations have occurred during the past decade. In 2013, more than 438,000 people were deported, an 'all-time high' in the history of the US (Simanski 2014; 6). Further, many of those forced to leave have not committed serious offenses, or have already served time and are deemed rehabilitated (Hernández 2008). It is also crucial to acknowledge that mass deportation is not new, but rather it is the normative US practice in the treatment of immigrants (Golash-Boza 2012). In fact, in the past 80 years, more immigrants have been removed from the US than actually admitted (Wong 2014).

Ngai's (2004) assertions of the centrality of state-sponsored removal and the reality of mass deportation help contextualize a critique of contemporary discourse on undocumented immigrant students. Although scholars have seldom paid attention to the ways undocumented students understand, experience, and resist criminalization within a nativist US carceral state, these perspectives still remain

at the core of their lived experiences. Yet the dominant discourse paints a monolithic picture of undocumented immigrant youth who clearly demonstrate their academic and/or civic merits, and subsequently their deservedness to remain in the US. Lawston and Escobar (2009-2010) denounce the tendency to highlight undocumented immigrant success stories as ultimately detrimental to larger and more diverse immigrant communities because such an approach is grounded in what they call the ‘hegemonic logic of the “good immigrant/bad immigrant” dichotomy’ (2). While undocumented immigrant success stories might seemingly challenge the stereotypical characterization of undocumented immigrants as criminal and parasitic, these portrayals inadvertently obscure the reality of the majority, who experience poverty, policing, lack of access to education, and, overall, dehumanization. The dichotomy also downplays the relevance of these issues even among those youth who are able to demonstrate material academic success, such as college access. Further, those undocumented immigrants tracked into detention and incarceration are formally deemed criminal, regardless of the way that the prison industrial complex has institutionalized mechanisms to control dispossessed communities in the US.

The good immigrant/bad immigrant dichotomy invokes the ‘model minority’ construction that has tirelessly plagued Asian Americans and other People of Color. The model minority construction posits the false idea that Asian Americans have been able to achieve universal educational and economic success based on a culture of strict values and hard work (Chou and Feagin 2008; Coloma 2006; Osajima 2005). Such a construction has repeatedly been proven problematic as it essentializes Asian Americans, obscures their marginalization, and predicates the disparate outcomes for other People of Color on cultural deficits instead of the institutional racism embedded in US society. Yet, many Asian Americans, other People of Color, and whites have internalized the model minority myth, socially and politically positioning Asian Americans against other People of Color and simultaneously as a threat to – and othered from – whites. In these contexts, it becomes imperative that we interrogate how the model minority/deficit minority can contribute to our understanding of the consequence of the good immigrant/bad immigrant dichotomy, and how Asian Americans might position themselves among other undocumented immigrants of color.

In light of the need to better examine the relationship between race, carcerality, and undocumented student experiences, the following questions guided my research: How does carcerality shape the experiences of undocumented students? What is the impact of criminalization on the ways that undocumented students understand and navigate their daily lives? And what role does race play in the strategies undocumented Asian American students employ to resist criminalization? To address these questions, I use Critical Race Theory to highlight the nuances of Asian American racialization within undocumented student discourse.

Methodology

Developed as a framework by legal scholars, Critical Race Theory (CRT) asserts that white supremacy permeates the US legal system, and by extension, everyday life (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 2001). White supremacy manifests in various ways and includes multiple and dynamic systems of oppression. Scholars have described such systems to include anti-Black racism as a means for and toward capitalism, indigenous genocide (both literal and cultural) as a mechanism for colonialism, and immigrant Orientalism to justify international war and the domestic policing of People of Color (Smith 2006; Tuck and Yang 2012). Whereas most scholars have used CRT to show how education policies and practices have been constructed to perpetuate racial inequities for students of color while simultaneously benefiting white students (Dixson and Rousseau 2006; Lynn and Dixson 2013), a more multidimensional conceptualization of white supremacy depicts how the educational experiences of undocumented Asian American students comprise both a resistance to and perpetuation of racial hierarchies within the US. My application of CRT was not only concerned with uncovering the ways that white supremacy detrimentally impacted undocumented Asian Americans, but also how it enabled them to develop strategies that benefited their educational trajectories while reinforcing

the marginalization of undocumented Latinos – the latter of which became evident during the data collection process with undocumented Asian Americans.

In turn, CRT also guided the qualitative approach I utilized during the data collection process. CRT scholars in education heavily rely on the notion of experiential knowledge as a core strategy to challenge dominant discourse that exclude or oversimplify student-of-color experiences (Ledesma and Calderon 2015; Solorzano and Yosso 2002). That is, if we seek to learn and understand the multiple ways that students of color have been subordinated in and by education, we must centralize student voices as we portray their realities. I captured student voices by conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 15 college-aged individuals who self-identified as undocumented and ‘Asian American,’ a member of an Asian ethnic community, or being of Asian descent (e.g. someone of Asian descent from a Latin American country and who might culturally or nationally identify with the latter). The interviews comprised part of a larger ethnographic project that focused on the relationship between immigration and education (Buenavista 2013). Whereas undocumented immigrants are often treated as objects in the media, in this project participants played principle roles in constructing critical representations of their lives.

The students were primarily from two ethnic communities: five were Korean and ten were Pilipino, including one student who identified as multiethnic Chinese and Pilipino from the Philippines. The participants reflected the ethnic composition of the undocumented Asian American population in the US and the primary geographical location in which I conducted my work – the San Fernando Valley area of Los Angeles County in California. Korean and Pilipino Americans constitute two of the largest ethnic communities among the undocumented Asian American population (Baker and Rytina 2013) and also the Asian American population in Los Angeles County (Hoeffel et al. 2012). There were nine men and six women in my sample, and their ages ranged from 19 to 26 years old during the time of the interviews.

The majority of participants were recruited through personal relationships that I established through my community-based work and role as an undocumented-student ally at a large, public university in the Los Angeles area. In particular, I am the faculty principal investigator for the undocumented student resource project on my campus, which is one of five such projects within the statewide system. Due to the tendency of literature on undocumented students to feature academically exceptional college students, it is important to mention that the interview participants demonstrated a range of educational trajectories. Two students did not complete high school. Of the 13 high school graduates, four were enrolled at four-year public universities, one of whom had transferred from community college; an additional six students had community college experience, although only three of them were enrolled at the time of the interviews; and three did not pursue higher education. All participants were employed in the informal economy with jobs that included domestic work, retail, food service, and caretaking.

A semi-structured interview approach (Creswell 2014; Merriam 2009) provided an opportunity for me to conduct a general inquiry on the ways that Asian Americans understood undocumented status relative to previously published accounts, while simultaneously allowing me to honor experiences as specific to each individual’s context (e.g. socioeconomic status and educational attainment) and not necessarily as essential to their racialized identities. Interview questions focused on individual and family immigration, K-12 education, higher education access and retention, and employment experiences. I conducted interviews in a location preferred by the participant and audio-recorded and transcribed content verbatim. Subsequently, I coded transcripts for emergent themes. Codes related to immigration processes (e.g. strategies of entry into the US and undocumented status acquisition), instances of race and racism (e.g. Asian American stereotypes and racial microaggressions), and carcerality (e.g. punitive immigration policies, criminalization and deportation) shaped the major findings of this paper.

Findings

Contrary to widely disseminated scholarship that details the aspirations and resiliency of undocumented students (Wong et al. 2012), the overall tone of the narratives provided by the participants with

whom I worked could be characterized by fear, pessimism, and ‘self-defeating resistance’ (Solorzano and Bernal 2001). In the following I lay out how Asian Americans with undocumented status understand the relationship between punitive immigration policies and their undocumented status, their exposure to immigrant criminalization and deportation, and the varying strategies they employed to resist detection. I focus on these aspects of undocumented realities to communicate that while we must be hopeful in immigration reform efforts that target some undocumented young people, we must also be honest and acknowledge the large segment of the community devalued in such efforts and the material conditions shaping all undocumented immigrant lives. In doing so, we begin to challenge the discourse that promotes an unreasonable standard of American exceptionalism that marginalizes individuals who have not been able to surpass the insurmountable number of barriers imposed by the US carceral state.

Punitive policies and state-sponsored criminalization

Central to CRT is the position that laws are designed and redesigned to perpetuate white supremacy (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). American jurisprudence regarding immigration is designed to reflect carcerality and more specifically, for People of Color. That is, US immigration policy and law facilitate the ability to police, detain, and deport immigrants of color, and represent the state-sponsored violence against undocumented people. Students expressed grave concerns over the criminalization of immigrants, which each student demonstrated when they mentioned at least one example of a punitive immigration law without being prompted to discuss them. While most students did not necessarily speak in-depth of such policies, some offered scathing opinions. For example, when Miriam, a 23-year-old Pilipina community college student, discussed the everyday fear her family experiences as undocumented immigrants, she described the irony of the federal Secure Communities program:

Secure communities? Secure for what community? Which community is supposed to feel secure? They aren't talking about us *TNTs* [undocumented Pilipinos]. My siblings are scared everyday that one of these days we will come home and either one of us or our parents won't be there. We haven't even done anything.

‘TNT’ is an acronym for *tago-ng-tago*, which translates to ‘hiding’ and is a colloquial term in the Pilipino community that refers to undocumented immigrants. Miriam explained how undocumented Pilipinos are at risk because of programs like Secure Communities, or ‘S-Comm,’ as many of the students referred to it. As an example of carcerality, Secure Communities is a federal deportation program that relies on the calculated partnership among federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies to apprehend, detain, and deport immigrants (Kohli, Markowitz, and Chavez 2011). For Miriam, Secure Communities only instilled a high level of anxiety that she and her family members could easily be separated. Other students also mentioned Senate Bill 1070 in Arizona and House Bill 56 in Alabama, two recent examples of how states have further criminalized undocumented immigrants. Both pieces of legislation provide state law enforcement permission to surveil and detain individuals suspected of being undocumented, a practice grounded in the racial profiling of People of Color (López, Tsitouras, and Azuma 2010–2011; Magaña and Lee 2013). The students’ hyper-awareness of these policies evoked a culture of fear that permeated their interviews.

Undocumented students had poignant insights about the institutionalization of immigrant criminality. Concurrent with my work with undocumented Asian American students was a general societal fervor surrounding the ‘Gang of Eight’ and the federal Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act, which more than half of the students mentioned. The Gang of Eight, a bipartisan group of senators, had attempted to draft one of the more recent versions of a comprehensive immigration reform bill which included policies related to undocumented immigration. Significantly, the bill offered the ability for undocumented immigrants to apply for Registered Provisional Immigrant (RPI) status, which would provide a 10-year pathway to legal permanent residency, subsequently followed by a 3-year pathway to citizenship; or a minimum 13-year pathway to naturalization (Gonzales 2014; Schey 2013). However, as indicated by the bill’s title, central to the legislation was a multi-billion

dollar budget for increased (southern) border patrol and new grounds on which to deport or deny admission to individuals who have been convicted of certain crimes: being gang members, multiple accounts of drunk driving, or domestic or child abuse. Students critiqued how instead of transform a broken immigration system, the focus of comprehensive immigration reform appeared to more easily identify and deport ‘bad’ undocumented immigrants.

Students further assessed how laws and policies that perpetuate the illegality of certain forms of migration shape the broader ways in which society at large understands undocumented immigrants. For example, when explaining what it felt like to be undocumented, Patrick, a 26-year-old Korean American, showed how unauthorized status and criminality are sometimes socially indistinguishable:

Every time you turn on the TV, all they ever say about us is that we’re threatening. Everyone’s believing in the hype and it’s hard to see that the majority of us who are just regular people . . . You know how they say you’re innocent until you’re proven guilty? But if you’re undocumented, it’s the other way around, because to be undocumented is to be guilty, to be “illegal.”

Patrick, who had attended community college part-time over several years, highlighted the media’s role in shaping how American society perceives undocumented immigrants. He attempted to downplay undocumented immigrants as ‘regular people,’ to better depict the uphill battle against the presumed criminality that characterized their daily experiences. Through Patrick’s perspective, we witness a consciousness of the social and political normativity of undocumented immigrant criminality. In essence, immigration policy in the US reflects the state-sanctioned criminalization of undocumented individuals, which in turn shapes how students begin to understand themselves.

Threats of disclosure and deportation

A critical race analysis of student experiences enabled me to see beyond the ways that state and federal legislation constructed undocumented immigrants as marginal members of society to how undocumented immigrants must then contend with the material consequences of such social positioning. For the individuals with whom I worked, their narratives teemed with instances where they constantly thought about the repercussions tied to their status, namely disclosure of their status and, more alarmingly, the reality of deportation. Despite the severe social, political, and economic challenges they endured on a daily basis, they also articulated anxieties about getting caught, detained, and removed from the life they and their families had established in the US.

Undocumented Asian Americans were often threatened with the potential of deportation, which translated into suppressed help-seeking behaviors. As a mechanism of control, the threat of deportation keeps undocumented immigrants subordinate and quells criticism of their conditions, which consequently could impact their access to resources. For example, as she explained why it was difficult to receive academic assistance at school, Aileen, a 20-year-old Pilipina, reflected on how she learned to never reveal her status to anyone outside of her family due to the domestic violence her mother experienced:

I didn’t think I should ever tell anyone at school. I never talk about it [being undocumented] to anyone . . . one time my mom told one of her old boyfriends; he was crazy. He tried to use it [our status] when she wanted to break up with him, and he said he would report us if she left, so we ran away. After that, my mom always told me never to tell anyone.

She went on to detail the larger implications of potentially revealing her status: ‘It’s literally me and my mom, and that’s it. So what happens when I say something and me or my mom are caught? I’m not sure sharing is worth it.’

Aileen did not complete high school. The history of domestic violence between her mother and an old boyfriend emerged amidst her description regarding how she lacked academic support and did not seek out school resources. Rather than attribute her academic difficulties to challenges within her home life, she explained them in context of deportation and as a result of learning not to disclose her status and needs. Preoccupied with the safety of her family, Aileen’s practice of nondisclosure affected her school experiences and access to resources.

13 of the 15 participants had direct relationships with someone who had been returned, detained, and/or deported, including family, friends, and community members. The material reality of state-facilitated removal was traumatic for undocumented Asian Americans, who due to their racialization are often described as being able to fly under the radar (Buenavista 2013). For example, in sharing difficulties faced in high school, Jordan, a 19-year-old self-identified ‘Tsinoy’ (Filipino of Chinese descent) offered a story regarding the deportation of his uncle:

The neighbors called the cops on them [my uncle and his girlfriend] because they were fighting . . . I don’t know how ICE [Immigration Customs and Enforcement] got involved but we didn’t hear from him for awhile. Next thing you know, he’s in the Philippines! I don’t know what happened really because my parents don’t talk about it much, but he had to sign some papers before we could get a lawyer.

Jordan barely graduated high school and had made some attempts to enroll in the local community college. It was difficult to prioritize his academics because of the immigration challenges his family faced, which he contextualized with his uncle’s story. Jordan recounted how the detention of his uncle initially occurred after law enforcement responded to a domestic violence incident. Following his uncle’s detention, his family had a lapse in communication with him and although Jordan was unfamiliar with the details of his uncle’s departure, the instance in which Jordan refers to his uncle signing papers could indicate the signing of removal documents. The impact of removal had a profound effect on how Jordan would see himself:

I think about him a lot. Not that I was close with him, but everyone always said we looked alike. So I think about how it could’ve been me. It doesn’t even matter how long I’ve been here. To the higher ups we’re all the same. They keep getting rid of us, left and right.

Jordan saw himself in his uncle. He would be similarly racially profiled and such a realization made him understand that no undocumented immigrant was safe in the US. He posited that regardless of the circumstances, all undocumented immigrants were considered ‘the same’ by the ‘higher ups.’ Simply put, Jordan believed that the government deemed undocumented immigrants disposable, and deportation, commonplace.

Different than essentialized portrayals of their experiences, students revealed the complexities of undocumented Asian American experiences. Undocumented student discourse often assumes that Asian Americans do not disclose their status due to an inherent cultural tendency for this racial group to be silent. Self-silencing has been used to explain the barriers to identifying and understanding the needs of undocumented Asian immigrants (Chan 2010). However, such culturally deficit notions of undocumented Asian Americans obscure the structural factors that indeed mediate their decisions to not disclose their status (Buenavista 2013), namely the punitive consequences. Undocumented Asian Americans practiced nondisclosure to avoid situations that would put them at risk of detection and deportation.

Resisting criminalization

While CRT scholars have been crucial to conceptualizing multiple facets of resistance, less often have we considered how resistance is contextual. The increased criminalization and subsequent policing of undocumented people impose a constant state of fear among immigrant communities. This point is significant because it shows that fear among undocumented communities is essentially state-mediated and consequently normalized. The normalization of fear has then served as the foundation to the varying ways that undocumented Asian Americans have resisted criminalization and detection. Students exemplified resistance in terms of pragmatic strategies such as an acute awareness of their surroundings. However, the tendency to reify racial stereotypes to avoid detection was practiced by some undocumented Asian Americans, which showed the internalization and maintenance of white supremacist notions of undocumented communities.

I asked all of the students what it was like to live as an undocumented immigrant in the US. Many of the students articulated their belief that there were no safe spaces. Cecilia, a 21-year-old Filipina,

explained how her everyday routine consisted of a socially conditioned response to her undocumented status:

It's like living in a constant state of paranoia. I'm always looking over my shoulder. Even at school, I'm thinking someone's following me or watching me. One eye is always open. Like when I go to class or when I enter a room, the first thing I do is look for an escape route. You never know what's going to go down . . . I used to ride the [public transit], but as much as possible I try to get rides with friends who drive. Nothing is fail proof, but some [options] are smarter than others. That's part of what my life has become.

Cecilia employed multiple strategies to avoid detection, ranging from constantly surveying her surroundings, to determining exit strategies when she entered new places, and traveling with friends who are documented – the latter she further explained as a response to being susceptible to the random searches that had become a phenomenon on public transportation. Perhaps most compelling was Cecilia's cognizance that she practiced such strategies in schools and developed them over her lifetime as she became increasingly aware of undocumented immigrant policing.

Participants described educational institutions as sites where processes of policing occurred in both explicit and unintentional ways. Such was the case for Carlos, a 23-year-old undocumented Korean student at a public four-year college. Carlos recounted a story of how he was 'outed' as an undocumented immigrant at a university awards event. Faculty nominators had revealed the retention challenges Carlos overcame in spite of his status, resulting in a public award to honor his academic resilience. Although some of the faculty and students were well aware of his undocumented status, many more in the audience were not. Carlos' nomination information should have remained confidential but the award presenter had been so impressed by his story that when she introduced Carlos she proceeded to disclose his status to the entire room.

Not only did the faculty award presenter initially identify Carlos as undocumented, she continued to highlight his immigration status to emphasize the significance of his award. Rather than Carlos having the opportunity to relish in the moment of being honored, he explained how he went into 'high alert, and scanned the room for potential threats. . . . Every time she said "undocumented," the audience got more quiet.' In reflecting on the moment, Carlos expressed what Cecilia had described earlier: the harsh reality of surveillance and the conditioned response to find the quickest exit out of the room should anyone display any animosity toward him. He also did not outwardly display his anxiety because he did not want anyone to realize his stress and 'draw more attention' to him, again perpetuating the notion of Asian American silence. Though no one approached Carlos during or after the event, the discomfort in the room had been evident as audience members minimized the award presenter's disclosure. Carlos' experience of his status being revealed shows how we can sometimes unintentionally participate in practices that perpetuate the surveillance of undocumented immigrants.

Carlos and Cecilia's awareness and subsequent strategizing represent how many of the participants in the project frequently demonstrated resistance against their criminalization. On a daily basis, they directly challenged threats of detection, apprehension, and detention. Yet undocumented Asian Americans also engaged in resistance practices that were problematic. In particular, eight of the 15 participants differentiated their migration experiences from that of undocumented Latinos as an attempt to deflect attention away from their status. For example, Eric, a 21-year-old who arrived in the US from Korea when he was six, shared:

We came here the *right way* [emphasis added]. We had visas. We didn't enter illegally My mom always tells me that, I think because she doesn't want me to feel like we're bad. Because that's all we ever hear, that undocumented Mexicans are illegal. I think she thinks that if we can show how we are different than them [undocumented Latinos], we might be more accepted one day.

Eric's explanation of how he entered the US began with a clear distinction between migrating the 'right way' and 'illegally.' Eric's family experienced what I have previously called the process of 'undocumented status acquisition,' or the result of overstaying visas (Buenavista 2013). Despite Eric's flawed assumption that all Latino entry is not permissible, his thinking reflects how his mother attempted to justify their own presence in the US while simultaneously questioning others. The differentiation between their entry from that of Latino immigrants was meant to deter the negative characterizations

generally associated with undocumented status, as well as to validate their potential legality and social acceptance.

Not all students made distinctions between Asian American and Latino undocumented students. Carlos, who had migrated from South Korea to Mexico and lived there prior to moving to the US, would often use his Spanish language fluency to seek information on policies and resources for undocumented immigrants. Other students acknowledged the invisibility of Asian Americans among a more populous Latino undocumented community, but did not attempt to separate themselves from their counterparts. Since more than half of the participants echoed sentiments similar to those expressed by Eric, these viewpoints warrant more attention to the way that sociopolitical conditions of US carcerality reinforce processes of racialization.

Discussion and implications for future research and practice

A nuanced racialized analysis of undocumented Asian Americans in higher education illustrates that we cannot separate their everyday experiences from the intensifying sociopolitical reality of American carcerality. In describing their living conditions, contextualizing their academic barriers, and explaining their daily routines, these students show how their behaviors of survival are primarily concerned with criminalization, detection, and deportation. Undocumented Asian Americans were hyper-aware of the punitive character of current immigration policies without being prompted, were traumatized by and practiced nondisclosure in response to deportation threats, and developed resistance strategies that they believed would both physically and psychologically protect their presence in the US. Highlighting their realities is not intended to minimize the significance of scholarship that has focused on undocumented student exceptionalism to counter the dominant negative portrayals of the larger community. Rather, this discussion stresses that in research, policy, and practice we must better account for how all undocumented immigrants are subject to state-sanctioned violence regardless of their accomplishments and contributions.

Asian American perspectives demonstrate several points to consider in moving forward with our learning and understanding of undocumented student experiences. First, Asian American communities are impacted by undocumented immigration. This issue directly concerns more than one million Asian Americans, yet immigration reform discussions rarely consider their voices. One recommendation is to conduct more research on the ways that undocumented status differentially affects ethnically and racially diverse segments of the population. For example, Pacific Islander and Southeast Asian communities tend to be more deviantly stereotyped and policed at higher rates than their East Asian counterparts (Mayeda, Pasko, and Chesney-Lind 2006; Ngo and Lee 2007). How might the intersection between ethnicity and policing exacerbate undocumented immigrant surveillance, detention, and deportation? How might this contribute to lower educational attainment rates imposed onto these populations?

Second, the range of educational attainment demonstrated by the Asian Americans in this project reflects the nascent attention paid to the diversity of educational trajectories of undocumented students. While most participants were able to graduate from high school, two students were pushed out and others attended less selective institutions, and sometimes inconsistently. Yet, regardless of where students were located, they all still faced various barriers associated with their status. Barriers included the inability to seek assistance without the potential of detection and educators who did not fully comprehend the ramifications of publicly disclosing students' status. More work must be done to create schools and institutions of higher education as safe sites of support and information for undocumented students. This includes establishing fiscal support for undocumented student resource centers and institution-wide professional development for teachers, faculty, and other education professionals. Such professional development must focus on examining undocumented student educational opportunity as an issue of equity and access.

However, the point I want to most emphasize is the revelation that US carcerality has conditioned some Asian American students to separate themselves from the larger undocumented population. In a sense, these students invest in the idea that they are the undocumented immigrants who merit US

citizenship while others, on the other hand, do not deserve amnesty. Undocumented immigrants are subject to state-sanctioned criminalization, which not only led to the perpetuation of Asian American stereotypes (nondisclosure interpreted as silence), but also the hyper-criminalization of Latino immigrants ('illegal' border crossing). The latter was demonstrated in the attempt by some undocumented Asians Americans to differentiate their entry and position themselves away from undocumented Latinos. The consequence of such logic was the reinforcement of the 'good immigrant/bad immigrant' dichotomy that Lawston and Escobar (2009-2010) previously warned us against. This dichotomy, as demonstrated by the othering of undocumented Latinos by undocumented Asian Americans, reflects the relationship among racialization and criminalization, and the subsequent construction of 'model undocumented minorities' and those who are 'illegal.'

Undocumented Asian Americans who permissibly entered the US and other undocumented immigrants who have demonstrated educational exceptionalism represent the notion of 'model undocumented minorities.' Everyone else constitutes the 'illegal' immigrant. The dichotomy falsely implies that the interests of these groups diverge, which then makes it more difficult to bring these communities together to work toward critical immigration reform that takes into account the segments of the population who lack educational access. All the while, contemporary immigration reform focuses more on the apprehension, detention, and removal of undocumented immigrants. As this trend is unlikely to change, the ability for undocumented immigrants to not only avoid criminalization but also achieve academic success to demonstrate their economic potential will continue. Thus, one major goal for this research is to help facilitate critical analysis of issues such as carcerality, enhance our efforts to empathize with undocumented people beyond those who have demonstrated educational exceptionalism, and raise consciousness among students about their capacity to build alliances and affect social change. However, this goal cannot be accomplished without shifting education discourse to better consider the role of carcerality in undocumented student lives.

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