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**“Complexities of Belonging: Compounded Foreignness
and Racial Cover among Undocumented Central
American Youth”**

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ABSTRACT

Legally excluded from the state through their status, undocumented Central Americans must also navigate belonging in social movement spaces that do not center their cultural experiences. Drawing on 25 interviews with Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans from multiple studies, we explore Central Americans’ agency and identity development in immigrant rights organizations and in daily life. We employ the term, *compounded foreignness*, to capture the layered practices of exclusion they face for being unauthorized and for not fitting into dominant conceptions of Latinidad. We demonstrate that undocumented Central Americans develop various strategies of belonging. For example, shared experiences of racialized illegality can lead to solidarity amongst undocumented immigrant youth across racial, ethnic, and national lines. When they are being

negatively targeted, however, they use racialized illegality as *racial cover*—that is, a way to divert attention away from their illegality in relation to the state, as well as social and cultural foreignness from Latinidad. This means that some choose to pass as Mexican by adopting Mexican cultural norms and colloquial speech, while others take pride in their cultural difference as Central Americans. In other instances, they seek spaces and people who share their cultural identity. Importantly, while racial cover may work as a strategy for navigating these different forms of marginalization, racial cover can also *cover up* and make invisible Central American identities and needs. Together, these experiences reveal a level of agency and nuance needed to deepen our understanding of undocumented immigrants, Central Americans, and belonging in the United States.

Complexities of Belonging: Compounded Foreignness and Racial Cover among Undocumented Central American Youth

One way to understand the experiences of undocumented immigrants is through the concept of racialized illegality—the process of becoming the target of exclusionary immigration laws and policies based on being racialized as criminal, alien, violent, and unwilling to assimilate to US culture. In the United States, immigration laws, political discourses, and media narratives connect perceptions of “illegality” to a stereotype of a “Mexican origin” or “Hispanic” person (Menjívar and Kanstroom, 2010). Central American immigrants are often racialized as Mexican in various geographical spaces across the United States (Oliva Alvarado, 2013). We know that people who fit these stereotypes face greater consequences associated with immigration enforcement (Armenta, 2017), but we know less about how immigrants shape their sense of collective identities and belonging within the competing and complementary forces of race, class, immigration status, and national origin.

This article examines the experiences of undocumented immigrant youth of Central American origin. Central Americans have a rich history of immigrant rights activism (Zimmerman, 2015; Orozco, 2000; Pérez and Ramos, 2007; Rodriguez, 1987; Tejada, 2015; Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001). Yet, in the many years that we, as long-term international migration scholars, have accompanied and conducted research with undocumented youth in the

immigrant rights movement, we have encountered relatively few Central Americans in those organizing spaces. Demographically, this makes partial sense. Although about half of all Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans are undocumented or have unstable legal status, together, Central Americans make up roughly only 16 percent of the total undocumented population (Warren, 2020: : 34). They are also often overlooked in scholarship and misrepresented in mainstream media (Abrego and Cárcamo, 2021; Abrego and Villalpando, 2021), making it difficult to learn about their national cultures and histories—especially when Black and Indigenous (Batz, 2014; López Oro, 2020). This institutional and cultural invisibility shapes how undocumented Central American youth negotiate their identities in different political and social contexts.

We are particularly interested in understanding how Central American undocumented youth experience a sense of belonging within social movement organizations and spaces. We begin to explore these experiences at the intersection of undocumented status, class, ethnicity, race, and nationality.¹ In particular, we are guided by the following research questions: How do undocumented Central Americans articulate their sense of belonging within the state (vis-à-vis legal status) and within Latina/o/x and undocumented immigrant groups in daily life? What strategies do they use to navigate experiences of inclusion and exclusion within these spaces, and how do these deepen our understanding of racialized illegality and Latina/o/x identity formation?

To address these questions, we bridge the literature on racialized illegality of Latinxs with research on Central Americans' specific experiences of racialization in the United States. Not surprisingly, we find that our participants strongly identify with other undocumented individuals regardless of differences in national origin, ethnicity, or culture due to shared experiences of racialized illegality and class backgrounds. However, we also identify a mechanism we refer to as "*racial cover*"—intentional acts of identity blurring or masking, in which undocumented Central Americans utilize their racialization as Mexican as a strategy to shield them from what we call, *compounded foreignness*. The

¹ Central Americans are racially diverse and include Garífuna, Maya, Creole, and other groups. In our studies, most participants identified as mestizas/os/xs at the time of the interview, while some have gone on to claim Indigenous and Black identities more recently.

concept of compounded foreignness captures the position in which Central Americans are rendered illegal in relation to the nation-state, as well as outside of dominant conceptions of Latinidad. Importantly, we demonstrate that even when racial covering acts as a shield from the stigma of illegality, it can also have the dual effect of *covering up* Central Americans' cultural identities. In response, when Central American undocumented youth find spaces of cultural affirmation in schools, peer networks, church, and other organizations, they undergo a process of uncovering. Together, these concepts allow us to shed light on some of the complexities of belonging that go beyond simple binaries of inclusion and exclusion.

Data and Methods

We bring together data from multiple studies that we each conducted over a series of years and in multiple locations, as well as our observations and participation in the immigrant rights movement through student and/or community organizations. Arely Zimmerman is drawing from interviews conducted in Los Angeles with members of undocumented student organizations visiting from across the country between 2011-2020. Joanna Perez is drawing on interviews and participant observation in two studies focused on activism among undocumented immigrant young adults; the first is based on data collected in Chicago and Los Angeles from 2009-2015, and the second from 2016-2020 in Los Angeles. Leisy Abrego is drawing on interviews and participant observation in two studies in 2001-2003 and 2013-2017 throughout the Los Angeles metropolitan area.²

Rather than comparing the data that spans from 2001-2020 across different sites, most of our analysis focuses on the common patterns across time and place. Together, we analyze the narratives and experiences of 25 Central American immigrants from Guatemala (12, including

² For more details about the methods and data in these studies, see Abrego LJ (2006) 'I Can't Go to College Because I Don't Have Papers': Incorporation Patterns of Latino Undocumented Youth. *Latino Studies* 4(3): 212-231, Abrego LJ (2008) Legitimacy, Social Identity, and the Mobilization of Law: The Effects of Assembly Bill 540 on Undocumented Students in California. *Law & Social Inquiry* 33(3): 709-734, Abrego LJ (2018) Renewed Optimism and Spatial Mobility: Legal Consciousness of Latino Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Recipients and Their Families in Los Angeles. *Ethnicities* 18(2): 192-207.

one person who identifies as half Mexican), El Salvador (10), and Honduras (3). The majority were children or youth upon arriving to the U.S. At the time of the interview, 11 identified as male and 14 as female. However, given that gender is a social construct and gender identity is fluid, we recognize that the way participants self-identify may have changed over the years. At the time of the interview, two people identified as Indigenous (Maya) and as Black or Afro-Central American. Because race is a social construct and public discourse about race is shifting in parts of Central America (Cuéllar, 2018), it is also possible that participants have changed the way they self-identify racially since the interview.

Latinx Identity in the Context of Racialized Illegality³

Race and racialization shape options available to immigrants as they navigate contexts of reception in the United States (Sampaio, 2015). Immigrants are racialized along a hierarchy that determines their standing in relation to the national community. Latinxs, regardless of immigration status, are perceived as foreigners (Rocco, 2004). Scholars refer to homogenized and stereotypical images of the “illegal” “Mexican,” “Hispanic,” or “Latino” as forms of racialized illegality that simultaneously harm immigrants and non-immigrants who appear “Mexican” or “Hispanic” and widen ethno-racial divides among US Latinxs (Gómez Cervantes, 2021; Herrera, 2016). In this political context, undocumented youth spaces offer the opportunity for members to develop affective bonds and positive forms of collective identification. Their shared legal status makes possible new lines of solidarity and coalition-building. Given the impact of illegality in everyday life, some scholars argue that legal status acts as a “master status” that trumps all other social identities (Gonzales and Ruszcyk, 2021). Yet, undocumented youth are not only defined by their legal status, but also by the intersection of their cultural, sexual, ethno-racial, class, and gender identities, among others.

While legal status lies at the center of undocumented student organizations, these spaces also incorporate various cultural practices meant to affirm their members’ cultural,

³ We use the term Latinx as a gender neutral and nonbinary alternative to Latino. Latinxs is a plural term. Latinxs include a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse group of people living in the United States who trace their ancestry to predominantly Spanish-speaking regions of Latin America and the Caribbean.

ethnic, and linguistic identities. To create a sense of group membership, undocumented youth organizations and groups provide cultural affirmation and belonging to “offset” the exclusionary experiences in the broader society through a cultural politic that includes the use of the Spanish language, cultural reference points, and food sharing (Patler, 2018). In these instances, the predominance of Mexican immigrants within immigrants’ rights organizations can lead to what scholar Karina Alma (Oliva Alvarado, 2013) refers to as “contextual dominance,” a reflection of the demographic reality and ample representation of Mexican culture, entertainment, and news in Spanish-language mass media (Dávila, 2000; Rodríguez, 1997). Thus, Mexican American culture can be experienced as hegemonic within a Latinx context even as it is simultaneously marginalized in the context of broader US hegemony (Oliva Alvarado 2013: 383).⁴

Such a focus on cultural norms can have negative effects on non-Latinx students, or those perceived as non-Latinx. Cho (2017), for example, argues that Asian immigrants experience “invisible illegality” wherein race operates to simultaneously shield Asian undocumented young adults from and expose them to the precarious nature of their immigration status. Yet, their invisibility amongst undocumented immigrants can also lead to exclusion from a collective identity that for many, rests on shared race-based narratives of being Latinx (Buenavista, 2018). Undocumented Black immigrants suffer anti-Black racism within Latinx spaces (Meitzenheimer, 2020).⁵ Indigenous immigrants from Latin America also face multiple layers of exclusion (Blackwell et al., 2017). In this landscape, undocumented Central Americans aim to build bonds of trust and solidarity with other undocumented youth often by negotiating, adapting, and sometimes blurring their identities. How does racialized illegality create a shared context of

⁴ Within each regional or national group such as “Mexican” or “Central American” there are broad and significant differences in language, culture, ethnicity, and experiences of racialization especially for Indigenous and Black immigrants.

⁵ Cárdenas Cárdenas ME (2018) *Constituting Central American-Americans: Transnational Identities and the Politics of Dislocation*. Rutgers University Press. points out that being read as “Latina” has been racially coded as “brown;” grounded in a logic of mestizaje, which minimizes or disavows the presence of Blackness. Thus, many Afro-Central Americans are read as “African American” in the U.S. nation-state context.

inclusion for Latinxs? And, what is the cost of inclusion for undocumented Central Americans? To address these questions, we examine how Central Americans are racialized in the United States.

Compounded Foreignness

Migration is shaped by a process whereby immigrants first learn, ignore, resist, or accept socially constructed categories and popular conventions of race (Rodriguez 2000: 18). For Black, Indigenous, and/or mestizx Central Americans, racialization processes include identifying, rejecting, resisting, ignoring, or accepting the “Hispanic/Latino” category with which they were unfamiliar in their home countries (López Oro, 2020), even as they negotiate complex experiences of belonging and exclusion across multiple national contexts (Dyrness and Sepúlveda, 2020). This process is further marred by ambiguities for Central Americans because they are a relatively misunderstood population in the United States (Abrego and Cárcamo, 2021) and when they express dominant phenotypic and physical characteristics associated with Latinxs, they are often mistaken for Mexican.⁶

Besides the social construction of race, immigration status complicates identity formation further. Central Americans are the target of immigration policies that inflict psychological, emotional, symbolic and physical harm—a process Menjívar and Abrego (2012) refer to as “legal violence.” Prolonged illegality, moreover, leads Central Americans to experience both legal and social invisibility (Coutin, 2000) or a sense of “permanent impermanence” in which their belonging to the nation is always in question (Bailey et al., 2002).

As our findings will demonstrate, the intersection of illegality and cultural difference results in what we refer to as “*compounded foreignness*” in which Central Americans feel foreign in relation to dominant US culture and dominant forms of Latinx culture. To confront this sense of compounded foreignness, undocumented Central Americans use modes of identity blurring or masking that we call “*racial cover*” to protect themselves from a complex process of othering based not only on their legal status but also their

⁶ Horacio Roque Ramirez Roque Ramírez HN (2009) In Transnational Distance: Translocal Gay Immigrant Salvadoran Lives in Los Angeles. *Diálogo* 12(1): 6-12. refers to Salvadorans as non-Mexican “Latino minority” who at times pass within the context of an “overwhelming mexicanidad.”

cultural identities. Yet, even when racial covering acts as a shield from compounded foreignness, it can also have the dual effect of *covering up* Central Americans' cultural identities which results in feelings of invisibility. And in some cases, Central Americans engage in acts of *uncovering*—that is, finding ways to uncover not only their own ethnic and cultural histories, but also to publicly claim their Central American identity.

Central Americans Navigating Compounded Foreignness

Our findings reveal that racialized illegality impacts how undocumented Central American youth make sense of their ethnic, racial, and national identity. We contextualize how they navigate this process across institutional spaces, including college campuses, community organizations, and respective neighborhoods.

First-generation Central American Undocumented Students

In the realm of higher education, Central American undocumented immigrants face many of the same challenges as other undocumented youth. Often the first in their families to attend college, they are unable to rely on family members to navigate the educational system. Attending poorly-resourced high schools results in limited institutional support. As is true for many undocumented immigrant students, structural inequality, family demands, and the lack of job security post-college graduation prevent them from having the means and motivation to pursue a higher education (Abrego and Gonzales, 2010). Despite these challenges, some youth manage to beat the odds and enroll in college-bound courses where they are prepared academically for college. In our studies and very much in line with the experiences of Latinx diaspora in multiple locations (Dyrness and Sepúlveda, 2020), to succeed, Central American undocumented youth found spaces of validation and affirmation, where they built community with other undocumented college students. Undocumented, first-gen, or Latinx clubs and organizations allow students to acclimate, navigate, and thrive in college by providing critical peer to peer support, valuable resources and services, and the space to make sense of their experiences and intersecting identities.

Whether or not they benefited from DACA, AB540, or the California Dream Act, many of our respondents still felt a sense of otherness and invisibility on college campuses. Barriers include financial burdens, hostile social and political climate, the cumulative stress from increased responsibilities to contribute to their families, decreased options to participate as full members of society, and daily anxiety resulting from the ever-present fear of deportation (see also Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales, 2020). Unsurprisingly, this takes a toll on youths' mental and emotional health (Gonzales et al., 2013; Suárez-Orozco and Yoshikawa, 2013; Teranishi et al., 2015). Peer-support groups on campus, therefore, are critical for students' academic success and emotional well-being.⁷

Despite efforts to build solidarity, study participants pointed to a lack of intersection between Central American student and immigrant rights organizing. Often, group activities in undocumented student organizations focus centrally on legal status, not on racial, cultural, or ethnic identity. This makes sense given how prominent legal status is in structuring their lives.⁸ These practices, in turn, produce

⁷ In California, organizations like IDEAS at UCLA and the California Dream Network are sites of both student-led advocacy as well as peer support that offer undocumented students a safe, validating, and affirming space Duran Resendiz C (2021) *Understanding the Institutionalization of Undocumented Student Support in Higher Education Using a Neoliberal Multiculturalism Framework*. University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles..

⁸ Interestingly, because they recognize exploitative, stigmatized work and low-income status as characteristics of racialized illegality, Central American undocumented immigrants also sometimes suggest that undocumented status is a master status which is the notion that an individual's legal status is the most salient in an undocumented immigrants' life Gonzales RG (2011) Learning to Be Illegal: Undocumented Youth and Shifting Legal Contexts in the Transition to Adulthood. *American Sociological Review* 76(4): 602-619.. Indeed, a prominent line of thinking is that immigration status operates as a "master status" that trumps all other social characteristics in its effect on individuals' lives. While Gleeson and Gonzales Gleeson S and Gonzales RG (2012) When Do Papers Matter? An Institutional Analysis of Undocumented Life in the United States. *International Migration* 50(4): 1-19. acknowledge that "undocumented immigrants face multiple levels of inequality, including that which arises from their racial and class status," they argue that "due to the severe restrictions the condition of illegality places on individuals, it proves to be a master status" (3). In many ways, thinking of undocumented status as a "master" status, focuses analytical

a great deal of co-identification, solidarity, and mutual trust amongst members (Enriquez, 2017; Gonzales and Burciaga, 2018; Valdez and Golash-Boza, 2020). Guatemalan college student Gabriela, describes how their shared legal status creates a powerful bond between her and the rest of the student organization members:

We support each other unconditionally. Like, if someone has a crisis whether financial or with their families... they don't have to explain. It's like we all know what each of us is going through, and we will do whatever it takes to help the other person. There's also a trust that's built in already before you even get to know someone really well. That's only something I feel with other undocumented people. It's like, yeah, I *know* what you're going through. So, it's regardless of where you're from... Mexico or Guate or Argentina... it doesn't matter. In that instance, we are all the same. With my undocumented friends, we are just all low income first gen, so we bond over that.

As Gabriela illustrates, involvement in undocumented student organizations is premised on the idea of community and unity, particularly around a material reality of need. In the face of many financial limitations and burdens that contextualize undocumented immigrants' daily lives, undocumented student organizations are committed to forms of mutual aid and reciprocity that allow members to sustain one another.

Undocumented youth relate to one another and build bonds despite national, ethnic, and cultural differences. For example, Sara, from El Salvador, opted to join an undocumented student organization on her college campus, rather than seek out a more Central American-specific group. The reasons she gave are telling:

I feel like I am very different from any other Salvadorans because I am not extremely nationalist. I don't have that much pride in my country and obviously that is for personal reasons. I grew up there and I didn't have the best childhood. I usually – I guess my way of coping with it is not being so much a part of it, so I feel like most of my friends most of the

attention on the deep impact of illegality on the lives of young adults, which we believe is paramount. Yet, in thinking about how undocumented youth form their identities and sense of belonging, we find it more useful to use an intersectional framework that considers legal status, race, ethnicity, culture, region, and other forms of identity and difference in relation to each other.

people in the movement are actually Mexican... there's a group on campus just made of Salvadorans that do stuff. And I've been invited before but again you know, it goes back to my own personal struggles and, I don't know, I refrain from it.

Sara alludes to a difficult, perhaps traumatic experience growing up in El Salvador, resulting in her lack of wanting or needing to identify with her nationality, as it appears that even the idea of the place triggers painful memories for her. She also thinks of Salvadoran students as nationalistic, which may be attributed to the fact that many of those students are U.S.-born citizens, have been able to travel to their parents' country of origin, and replenish their sense of transnational and bicultural identities (Cárcamo, 2013).

In the context of a dearth of resources or learning opportunities about Central Americans, groups like USEU (Unión Salvadoreña de Estudiantes Universitarios) which were established on college campuses in California in the 2000's organized electoral delegations and cultural exchange programs for US-born first-gen students of Salvadoran origin (Coutin, 2016). These experiences, as captured in the documentary, *Children of the Diaspora* (Cárcamo, 2013), were transformative for these young people's identities (Hernández, 2017), helping them expand their notions of belonging across borders in meaningful ways (Dyrness and Sepúlveda, 2020). Yet Central American undocumented students like Sara, are excluded from these types of binational activities that prioritize country of origin issues and concerns. While these issues are certainly important, for students like Sara, their livelihood depends first on impacting immigration policy at home. Despite their best intentions, some culturally specific ethnic organizations have shown an inability to incorporate undocumented Central Americans. In fact, many of our interviewees describe the challenges of not being able to relate to the few Central Americans on their college campuses because those students did not have to worry about legal status. Hence, like Sara, undocumented Central Americans are more likely to relate to their Mexican peers due to shared experiences of illegality.

Despite a sense of solidarity amongst undocumented youth, some students also experience marginalization. LGBTQIA undocumented immigrants have contested the notion of a unified collective identity by emphasizing intersectionality within undocumented student organizing

(Terriquez, 2015).⁹ This has resulted in more intentionality about including diverse identities, including Black, Indigenous, and API communities - groups that have largely been invisible within these organizing spaces (Escudero, 2020). Central American undocumented students have also begun to question some of the hegemonic cultural formations that have shaped undocumented immigrant spaces. Thus, while the undocumented youth movement touts a vision that supports intersectionality, our interviewees emphasized the hegemony of certain cultural norms within these spaces.

Racial Cover

In many U.S. cities that are home to Central Americans, there is broad recognition and adoption of Mexican culture as a norm, especially in Spanish-language television and radio, as well as in institutional, public, and associational spaces. For most migrants in the Los Angeles area, for example, arriving to the United States involves a process of Mexicanization to adapt to their new home. As Edwin recalled, the day he arrived from Guatemala, his father took him to iconic places for working class immigrants that included particularly “Placita Olvera,” a tourist destination that also represents the settler-colonial founding of the city of Los Angeles by Mexicans.¹⁰ For Edwin and several other Central American undocumented youth, coming to the United States also requires them to learn their place within its racial, cultural, and linguistic hierarchies. The demographics and “contextual dominance” of Mexicans in Los Angeles can make Central Americans understand themselves as minorities (within a minority) in most institutional spaces (Oliva Alvarado 2013).

While Latinxs are racialized as outsiders at the national level, Central Americans must negotiate their belonging at the micro level daily in their neighborhoods and cities and within American racial constructs. For instance,

⁹ As articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw Crenshaw K (1991) Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity, and Violence Against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1241-1300., an intersectional approach understands that people’s identities are rooted in interlocking systems of oppression, such as racism and patriarchy, where marginalization is produced at the intersection of multiple structural inequalities.

¹⁰ See Estrada Estrada WD (2009) *The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

when interviewee Evelyn from Guatemala was asked about what she remembers about first arriving in Los Angeles, she responded,

What I remember most is that in our apartment complex, besides my Tía, everyone else was either Mexican, Black, or White. So it was weird because I went from being around people like me to being in a classroom where even though there were others that spoke Spanish, their accent was different, like in a way that I hadn't heard before. It was not until later that I realized that it was different because most of my classmates were also from Mexico, except for one other Central American, una salvadoreña. So it was hard, you know, like not only did I have to learn the English language, but I also had to figure out how to fit in. So I found ways, like I started to like learn more about the Mexican culture, like you know, the food, music, things like that. The cool thing was that at some point, I didn't feel that much different.

Part of the process of establishing belonging in their new home after migration is to learn to fit into Mexican culture. By being able to enjoy the food, recognize the music, and generally be well-versed in Mexican culture, Central Americans can avoid feeling "much different." What Evelyn presents as a "cool" option requires her to adapt both to Mexican culture and national culture most often defined by Anglo-Saxon values and language.

While Evelyn describes the process of adapting in positive terms, in another part of the interview she also notes how she needed to search for forms of cultural affirmation in other aspects of daily life. She explains how church served as a particularly important site for her identity development. Like the experiences captured in the work of Ek (2009), Evelyn carefully and intentionally navigated daily life and valued the limited spaces where her nationality was not excluded or ignored:

...one thing I remember was that there was a lot of churches in my neighborhood and my parents happen to have come across a Christian church where most of the people who went there were Central American, especially from Guate. Eventually this church became our second home, like for real, we were there all weekend and various times during the week. Thinking back, part of my first impressions of the U.S. was that I had to learn how to blend with the rest so like at school and in my neighborhood, I was used to

blending in with Mexicans, but at home and my church it was where I didn't have to really change much, you know.

Negotiating legal status with nationality involves various creative paths as available in their neighborhood, schools, families, and other social institutions (Guzman Garcia, 2016). For Evelyn, participation in a mostly Central American church congregation gave her at least one institutional space where she "didn't have to really change" to be accepted. Everywhere outside of her intimate family and church spaces, she felt a need to "blend" in, effectively learning to code-switch based on national culture.

The negotiation process is not always as straightforward or acceptable to people as Evelyn's narrative suggests. Such practices of "blending in" and code-switching teach undocumented Central Americans to enact and negotiate different identities in different spaces, including those reserved only for undocumented immigrants. Employing this set of skills can feel difficult at times. Having ample access to Mexican popular culture stands in stark contrast with the little or no access to their own national culture. Jocelyn, from Honduras, grew up in a Mexican immigrant neighborhood in Southern California. She captures clearly how difficult it is to access information about Honduran culture or history in the midst of what she perceives as widespread celebration of Mexican popular culture in her neighborhood and school.

...a lot of the things that I did [while growing up] were Mexican culture, traditions... because that's all I knew, all my friends are from Mexico. I don't have a lot of Central American friends. So, a lot of it is that. I had a lot of U.S. citizen friends, so I felt American, I had a lot of Mexican friends, so I did a lot of Mexican things... their food, a lot of that, the shows that they watch. I know that things, when I see them I can say that they're Mexican, but when I see something that is from Honduras I can't say if it's from Honduras because I don't know. ...

Jocelyn's school celebrated Mexican-themed holidays and gave her the opportunity to dance Mexican folklórico. While growing up, the ubiquitous exposure to both U.S. mainstream and Mexican culture established in her mind that Mexican and "American" culture were equal. Having Mexican friends allowed her to become familiar with the dominant Mexican culture, and simultaneously, without any exposure to Honduran culture outside of her family, she felt entirely

unfamiliar with what it meant to be Honduran. In effect, Honduran culture was a notable void in her cultural repertoire.

In 2017, when Abrego conducted the interview, this experience put Jocelyn in a difficult space regarding her ethnic and cultural identity.

I know I was born in Honduras but that's about it. I don't know a lot more about it so when I say I'm from Honduras, I'm Central American, I'm hondureña, I was born there. That's about it. I love Honduras, from what I remember, but I don't remember much so I also feel like I'm a fake hondureña...

Jocelyn's reflections articulate the challenges of identity-development when groups simply do not have access to knowledge about their homelands. To be born in a place is not enough to allow a person to know it, to recognize its culture, much less to feel identified by it. This is remarkably different from the undocumented Mexican immigrant youth we came across in our various studies.

Due to sheer demographics, members of undocumented organizations are predominantly Mexican Spanish speakers. Even on the East Coast, where undocumented immigrants hail from various places in South America, the hegemony of the Spanish language is uncontested. Many then assume that the undocumented immigrant experience is homogeneous. The geographic proximity of Mexico along with the continuous immigration from Mexico over the last century has replenished Mexican cultural forms within the U.S. and its various Southwestern cities (Jiménez, 2010), allowing our respondents' Mexican counterparts to connect with their national culture. In our interviews, this felt especially true prior to the passage of DACA in 2012. Before international travel became an option through the mechanism of Advance Parole under DACA (Mena Robles and Gomberg-Muñoz, 2016),¹¹ the undocumented youth movement strategically deemphasized immigrants' countries of origin. The DREAMer narrative called for a centering of "Americanness," of unquestioning allegiance and belonging exclusively to the United States (Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales, 2020; Perez, 2018; Nicholls, 2013). To claim a DREAMer status, youth not only had to be good neoliberal subjects (Pallares, 2014), but they also had

¹¹ Advance Parole refers to lawful re-entry into the United States after a pre-approved trip. For those enrolled in DACA, travel abroad was permitted for educational, humanitarian, or business travel.

to denounce any sense of belonging or allegiance to their countries of birth. A certain segment of undocumented youth, especially those involved with nonprofits, faithfully upheld this narrative.

When DACA opened opportunities to travel internationally, many reconnected with their country of origin in important ways. In our experiences in community spaces, it appeared that Mexican DACA recipients had many more opportunities to travel to Mexico than Central Americans did to travel to their birth countries. These were powerful trips that allowed DACA recipients to rethink their sense of belonging and reignite a passion for their Mexican culture (Cervantes, 2015; Monroy, 2015).¹² This appreciation of their national culture, granted by the new option to travel to Mexico, is an opportunity that our Central American respondents did not have. For example, Gabriela, who migrated from Guatemala, noted that when the refugee rights group on her college campus organized a trip to San Diego to support refugee families at the border, she noticed a marked difference in experience:

A lot of my friends tell me how they feel getting close to the “border”- like there’s this emotional feeling of seeing Mexico. But, I don’t feel absolutely anything. I don’t know anything of Mexico- I don’t feel any sense of attachment. My country is another border away, you know?” And, I guess I identify with that *tres veces mojado* thing that song about Salvadorans and how they have to cross multiple borders- I crossed two, you know?

This lack of a legible Central American identity within the U.S. is articulated as a sense of compounded foreignness which encompasses a sense of being foreign not only in relation to the national culture, but also to dominant U.S. Latinx cultures.¹³

Within this context, undocumented Central Americans will use their racialization as Mexican as a form of *racial cover*- as a protective shield from this compounded foreignness. This was the case for Xiomara, who is Salvadoran. In 2001, she explained that as an adolescent, to

¹² See Revista Brújula Ciudadana, Agosto 2015, Encuentro de Jóvenes sin Fronteras. “35 Dreamers viajan a Mexico por medio del programa California-Mexico Dreamers Study Abroad,” August 29, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmqbdlubEw> (Accessed August 30, 2020)

¹³ Interestingly, Gabriela is able to feel a sense of representation in the cultural production of Mexican artists, Los Tigres del Norte.

avoid being questioned about her legal status, she opted to tell people she was Mexican when people asked about her ethnic background.

I was just like, oh, fuck it, I'll just say I'm half Mexican. It's easy. It's easier to say that and nobody says anything. Or nobody asks questions or... Like, 'what are you?' or of course everyone asks, 'so where are you from? You know, like, what are you?, whatever.' 'Oh, I'm half Mexican and Salvadorean.' ... and I was born here. Yeah. So always a wall, always not being who I am, never being myself or giving myself to people truly.... I just didn't want people knowing my business, knowing that I wasn't gonna go to college, probably 'cause I was illegal.

For Xiomara, claiming to be Mexican was a way to avoid conversations about legality. As she describes it, given all the access she had to Mexican culture and being surrounded by Mexican people, it can be “easier” to claim to be Mexican because it leads to fewer questions about her background—both about her legal status and her nationality. In Los Angeles, while she was growing up, Mexican was the default nationality presumed of all Latinxs. The claiming of Mexican nationality is possible because Mexican culture is accessible, legible, institutionalized, and represented in ways that make it “normal,” acceptable, and at times, something to be celebrated. None of these things are true for Central American identities. Identifying herself as Central American may have equated to illegal or illegitimate in her context. Indeed, there is a long history of excluding the majority of Central Americans from any meaningful legalization or immigration reform, such that Central American is commonly equated to refugee, “illegal,” or temporary (Menjívar, 2006).

Much of the invisibility of Central American culture is due to institutional erasure. Yet, at other times, invisibility and lack of knowledge about one's national culture is perpetuated by silences within families. As a form of survival, many parents choose not to discuss their own histories and cultural knowledge, to spare their children from intergenerational trauma (Abrego, 2017). It is unlikely, therefore, that a Mexican undocumented immigrant would similarly try to avoid the conversation about papers by claiming a Central American nationality. In fact, among our interviewees, Mexican undocumented youth who try to evade questions about their status have claimed simply to have been born in the U.S. to Mexican immigrant parents.

Importantly, Central Americans and Mexicans also live in close proximity to one another, become friends, lovers, and partners in ways that can inform the identity development and the empowerment strategies of undocumented youth. Such was the case for Cathy who grew up in the state of Colorado. Though she is the biological daughter of two Guatemalan parents, her stepfather is Mexican. Through his influence, and likely also because of Mexican contextual dominance, Cathy has picked up a Mexican accent when she speaks Spanish, making it less likely that people will recognize her as Guatemalan.

In fact, nobody even thinks I'm from Guatemala. Everybody thinks I'm from Mexico... And my stepdad, he's Mexican, he's from Acapulco. So, I have his accent. Even my mom, she doesn't use 'vos.' She doesn't use it with me at least. She dropped it with me. With my aunt they'll talk like that, she'll get her accent back and she's like oh 'vos.'

Cathy references the *voseo*, which is a colloquial expression common to many Central Americans (and one that is distinct from Mexican use of "tú"). Without her mother's linguistic affirmation of a Guatemalan-specific identity, Cathy had nowhere to learn what it meant to be Guatemalan. This also suggests that parents may also participate in acts of racial covering, where they are protecting their children from questions about their legality or belonging. By adopting a Mexican accent, Cathy can fit in when she needs to. Yet, in other moments, Cathy also moves between racial cover and racial distancing to shield her from anti-Mexican racism:

I've gotten people try to make jokes about it, like 'beaners' or something, but I'm like I'm cool, I'm not Mexican so that doesn't apply to me, you know what I mean? I never really let it get to me. My friends always joke like I crossed two borders. In a sense, I do like that I'm from Guatemala because everybody's from Mexico. I'm not trying to say anything mean about that but everybody that you talk to is Mexican... So when I say I'm from Guatemala, to me it's neat, it's who I am. I don't really get offended too much just because I know that I don't come out as a Guatemalan. So I really can't expect you to know where I'm from if I don't really represent it.

Getting picked on both for being Latina (presumed to be Mexican) by others, but also made fun of for being Guatemalan by Mexicans, Cathy does her best to use these

categories to her advantage, as if able to choose in different instances how she wants to be perceived. Claiming her Guatemalan identity shields her from rampant anti-Mexican racism. None of her options, however, include the opportunity to meaningfully define for herself what it means to be Guatemalan and undocumented.

Racial uncovering and intersectional exclusions

In some instances our interviewees found ways to uncover their ethnic and national identities to find connection with others. At times, it happens by encountering other Central Americans in organizing spaces unexpectedly. These moments of revealing one's identity are typically referred to as forms of "coming out." We avoid this language as it refers to a legacy of public self-identification of LGBTQ people in the context of the criminalization of sexual identities and practices. However, *uncovering* captures the sense of revealing one's identity to someone else, as well as finding something that was lost. This was the case for many of our participants. For example, in Chicago, where Perez conducted many of her interviews, the Guatemalan community is numerous but invisible compared to the dominant Mexican and Puerto Rican communities. At an organizing meeting, Perez introduced herself as being from Guatemala. In a follow up interview with one of the organizers, she found that while some are Central American, they do not claim this publicly. Rosa, for example is binational, born to Mexican and Guatemalan parents. Yet, she reflected on how very few times she met others like her. She says,

I was born in Mexico so when people ask me my ethnicity, I mainly say Mexican cause you know, before meeting you, like I never really knew anyone who was Guatemalan. I mean like in Chicago, there aren't that many of us, like what I mean is that there is not like an established community or anything, it's like there are Central Americans in Chicago, but everyone is spread out. So like even though my dad is Guatemalan, even he kind of blends in. So like when we were doing introductions at the meeting (undocumented student organization) and you mentioned that you were Guatemalan, I was like, wow! That's so cool (laughs). Honestly, it was the first time I heard someone say it, which is crazy because like I am involved with a bunch of community organizations but I have never heard anyone claim Guatemala.

Rosa never acknowledged her Guatemalan origin, because it was not ever made salient within community organizing, indicating that identity is intersubjective and is as much about self-identification as it is about being recognized by others. However, once she met someone who revealed or uncovered her Guatemalan nationality, she was able to reveal part of her own.

The invisibility of Central Americans within undocumented spaces is significant beyond identity issues. In the last few years, Central Americans have been more salient in the news as thousands of refugees arrive at the border. Yet, many of the community programs and services for undocumented youth are based on a particular demographic profile: that of the “Dreamer” who arrived before the age of 5, attended schools in the US, and are of Mexican origin (Terriquez 2015). More recent arrivals, especially from Central America defy these presumptions about age of entry, migration journey, family, and other socio-economic characteristics. Yet, organizations do not always have the resources and capacity to reflect these different experiences in their programming. Gabriela, who grew up in Los Angeles, volunteered for an undocumented mentorship program in a rural part of San Bernardino County in Southern California. The 10-week program was organized around several workshops that included various resources for undocumented high schoolers. Yet, none of the programming spoke to the experiences of recently arrived Central American asylum seekers or migrants- many who did not qualify for DACA. Gabriela recalls the day she revealed she was Guatemalan:

When I introduced myself, I mentioned that I was from Guatemala City, and I remember many of the students looked surprised. Then after the meeting, about five or six of the students came up to me excitedly and said that they too, were from Guatemala. One was from El Salvador. They were so excited and interested in my story. But I remember the program coordinator was surprised at that. Even though she worked so closely with the youth she did not know their national origin. I was happy to connect with them; I felt very identified- like, I was them at one point, but their experiences of migration were very different from the norm, even from mine who has DACA and has lived in the US almost my whole life.

In this space, uncovering her nationality was affirming and allows her to take pride in a collective identity of Central

American. Yet, Gabriela's story also reveals the gaps in immigrant rights advocacy as the demographics of migration change (Abrego, 2017).

The need for cultural belonging led Gabriela to seek out a Central American student organization on her college campus, which is a relatively new organization. For her, the undocumented student and Central American student organizations serve different purposes. Specifically, she shares how the Central American student organization enables a kind of racial uncovering:

I do search out Central Americans—and that's why I went to the Central American Student Association—I feel different about my work with that group. It's not like I have to do a lot of work for them; it's more just connecting with others like me. Where we can talk and use vos, and not have to explain, you know?

Gabriela rejoices in the space where Central American voseo goes unquestioned. She describes the group as a space of mutual identification and recognition.

Engaging with other Central Americans has a deep impact on the lives of our participants. For Waleska, who was born in Honduras, it was the most important part of her sense of belonging on campus. In her interview in 2020 she says,

Even though we were poor in Honduras, thinking about Honduras brings me a lot of happiness. Like I can visually picture all the good times I spent with my family, friends, and like the neighborhood you know. So like even though I am undocumented, I am a proud Hondureña. Every opportunity that I get, I always claim my catracha identity, it is really important to me... Like even before I got involved with the immigrant student group on campus, I had already found my Central American friends you know, like I needed to experience a sense of home. So like it was natural for me to voice my Central American identity and the need to problematize who we think represents the undocumented community.

Students like Waleska express how Central American groups on campus provide “cultural” identity and connection with intimate friend groups. Yet, it is noticeable that Waleska claims her pride in her national origin, “even though” she is undocumented. The caveat “even though” might signal that the undocumented identity is not easily reconcilable with her cultural/ethnic identity. It may also reflect how much effort undocumented groups make in emphasizing legal status for

the purposes of building a collective identity, while de-emphasizing cultural or ethnic differences. Nonetheless, it is significant in that these respondents either seek out spaces to connect with others outside of undocumented student or youth organizations- not only to *uncover* but *discover* their common heritage and culture.

Conclusion

In sum, these insights provide context to understand how undocumented Central Americans navigate the racialized context of reception in the U.S. It adds to our understanding about the impact that legal status may have on Central Americans' sense of belonging and ethnic identification. While undocumented status leaves immigrants vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, shared experiences of racialized illegality can lead to solidarity amongst undocumented immigrant youth across racial, ethnic, and national lines. We demonstrate that racialized illegality homogenizes Latinxs under the stereotype and racial inscription of the "illegal" and Mexican. In this context, undocumented Central Americans are sometimes able to strategically use these presumptions as "*racial cover*"- that is, a way to divert attention *away* from their illegality in relation to the state, as well as social and cultural foreignness from Latinidad. Gleaned from our interviews, our respondents develop various strategies of belonging. At times, some choose to pass as Mexican by adopting Mexican cultural norms and colloquial speech, while others take pride in their cultural difference as Central Americans. In other instances, they seek spaces and people who share their cultural identity. Often, a single person uses multiple strategies in different spaces and at different stages of their lives. Importantly, while racial cover may work as a strategy for navigating these different forms of marginalization, racial cover can also *cover up* and make invisible Central American identities and needs within these organizations. Consequently, undocumented Central Americans choose to uncover their identities at opportune times or search out other forms of cultural affirmation in contexts like church, school, and peer networks. Together, these experiences reveal a level of agency and nuance needed to deepen our understanding of undocumented immigrants, Central Americans, and belonging in the United States.

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