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Hegemony, Ideology & Oppositional Consciousness: Undocumented Youth and the Personal-Political Struggle for Educational Justice

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Social movement practitioners have grappled for years with the role that ideology and consciousness play in bringing about social change. This article asks how lived experiences of institutional exclusion shape the political consciousness of undocumented Latino students. Through my ethnographic study of undocumented youth activists working on a mainstream legislative campaign, I posit that not only is oppositional consciousness a spectrum, as previous theorists have claimed, but it is also, in a Gramscian sense, forged out of the dialectic between ideas that are both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. It is not the case that counter-hegemonic ideas win over, even temporarily, leading to oppositional consciousness. Rather, oppositional consciousness is forged through the constant negotiation between the two. This article draws on 18 months of fieldwork and is a critical inquiry into the possibilities and limitations of ideas and ideology in building social change.

> "Only a crisis, actual or perceived, produces real change. And when the crisis occurs, the change depends on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to keep the ideas ready until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable."
>
> Milton Friedman
> (quoted in Klein 2008)

Introduction

Miguel nearly died crossing the border. He was 4, too tired to walk anymore, and stacked on the shoulders of the reluctant coyote[1]. When the coyote stumbled in the dark, Miguel tumbled to the hard earth below, smashing his head against a jagged rock. His mother scooped him up, held him close, and began checking his head to assess the damage. He remembers thinking *this is how you check a melon at the market*. His mind wandered to the mercado in their pueblito, and in that moment, with a throbbing head, in his mother's arms, all he wanted was to go home.

Miguel still thinks about home, though his memories have faded. He can't get a clear picture of the mercado anymore, or even his grandmother's face. Fifteen years have passed, and he is not sure if he will ever get there. His life is here now, and because he doesn't have his papers[2], going home means taking the risk that he would not be able to return to the life he has built for himself here. So he makes himself content with what he has, tries to ignore the nagging reality that his future is uncertain, and keeps hoping that something, somehow might change. Undocumented[3] young people grow up amid a fierce anti-immigrant discourse that casts them as

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[1] A coyote is a person who is paid to escort immigrants without legal clearance to cross the border.
[2] "Not having papers" is a colloquial phrase, indicating that one does not have legal clearance to reside in the United States.
[3] I use the term "undocumented" throughout this paper to indicate people who do not have legal clearance to reside in the United States. I do this because using the popularly-accepted term "illegal immigrant" unnecessarily criminalizes people who migrated as a result of complex political, personal, and economic factors.

intruders, undeserving, and inferior. Undocumented youth are relegated to the shadows by a hostile society, continually navigating the space between profound institutional exclusion and the supposed promise of the American Dream. Undocumented young people, like all subordinated people, are inundated with the idea that inequality is inevitable and that the division between the "haves" and the "have-nots" is fundamentally unchangeable.

The process of coming to challenge dominant societal norms and beliefs is both personal and political, and is a fundamental component of social movements. Little is known about how and why this happens, but what we do know is that somehow, despite the prevalence of these hegemonic ideas, some subordinated people develop an oppositional consciousness. Oppositional consciousness is, drawing from Jane Mansbridge's (2001) seminal work on the issue, "an empowered mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to act to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination…Although consciousness is, by definition, internal to an individual's mind, the kind of consciousness that we describe is inextricably derived from the social world" (5). The question of how subordinated people develop an oppositional consciousness is fundamentally a question of the relation between lived experiences of oppression and the empowered realization that things do not have to be this way; that change is indeed possible.

The problem of ideology, stated by Stuart Hall (1996), is "to given an account, within a materialist theory, of how social ideas arise" (26). He says, "We need to understand what their role is in a particular social formation, so as to inform the struggle to change society and open the road towards a…transformation of society" (26). This article attempts to make a small contribution to Hall's question by drawing on findings from a larger research project, which looks at hegemony, consciousness and political activism among undocumented Latino youth in

California. This broader project follows a group of undocumented Latino youth involved in the campaign to pass the DREAM Act[4] and asks how both the discourse and practice of immigration policy shape the political identity and activist engagement of undocumented Latino youth. This article takes a small part of the data collected to focus in on one aspect of this experience – the development of political identity and political consciousness among undocumented students. The central question explored in this article is: How does the lived experience of institutional exclusion shape the political consciousness of undocumented Latino students?

Much of the theoretical work on oppositional consciousness is based on the idea that there are hegemonic (reactionary) ideas and counter-hegemonic (progressive) ideas and that oppositional consciousness is forged when the progressive, counter-hegemonic ideas win in the struggle between the two. We see roots of this argument in the Marx-Engels-Lenin lineage which posits that through false consciousness, the working class is duped into working against its own materialist interest (Eagleton 1991, Lenin 1969). Recent innovations on this idea, such as Jane Mansbidge's (2001) work, have argued that not only is the idea of false consciousness far too simple, but that oppositional consciousness is not "one point on a binary" but rather a historically-contingent spectrum. However, despite its many merits, the concept of oppositional consciousness still rests on the foundational notion that hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideas are in struggle with one another, and that oppositional consciousness results when the counter-hegemonic ideas win.

My research, while seeing itself within the Marxist tradition and building on Jane Mansbridge's work, takes a different step in understanding oppositional consciousness and its development. My central argument is that not only is oppositional consciousness a spectrum, as

[4] The DREAM Act is a proposed piece of federal legislation that would enable undocumented young people who entered the U.S. before the age of 16 to apply for federal financial aid. The legislation also includes a path to citizenship after two years of college or military service.

previous theorists have claimed, but it is also, in a Gramscian sense, forged out of the dialectic between ideas that are both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. It is not the case that counter-hegemonic ideas win over, even temporarily, thereby leading to oppositional consciousness. Rather, oppositional consciousness is forged through the constant tension between the two.

My study is heavily influenced by Antonio Gramsci's (1995) work on hegemony, which he defines as the exercise of "moral, political, and intellectual leadership" in a society. Gramsci conceptualizes this exercise of power beyond the traditional notion of the state as the singular institution that rules through force, an idea we find in Lenin (2004). Gramsci contends that the state does not rule through force alone, but cultivates consent through "a multitude of other so-called private initiatives and activities [that function] to the same end—initiatives and activities which form the apparatus of the political and cultural hegemony of the ruling classes" (258). Hegemony, therefore, is a process by which "educative pressure [is] applied to single individuals so as to obtain their consent and their collaboration, turning necessity and coercion into 'freedom'" (242).

Gramsci gives us theoretical tools to understand how consent is forged in his characterization of hegemony as never stable and ever-changing; however, theorists and social change practitioners have found it difficult to apply this theory to the actual work of consciousness building. Gramsci's analysis was located at the societal level, and his work challenges us to understand how we can understand hegemony in relation to power and governance on a societal level. Thus, drawing on Grasmci's notion that hegemony is not something that needs to be conquered in order to establish counter-hegemony, I argue the tension between the two is in itself generative of counter-hegemonic ideas and practices.

Traditional social change movement literature has under-theorized consciousness, relegating it to little more than a "resource" that can be "mobilized" in the service of a social movement (McCarthy and Zald 2001). Newer work within this trend has identified the important work of "frames" and (in)formal conceptual categories which shape social movement participation and outcomes (Snow and Benford 2000). Though this is helpful, there is still considerable work to be done on the question of how oppositional ideas arise, take hold, and contribute to the building of political consciousness and social movements. In this article, I argue that oppositional consciousness is not born when counter-hegemonic ideas and practices win out over hegemonic ideas and practices. There is never a total replacement, and it is actually the practice and process of continually wrestling between the two that I argue is generative of oppositional consciousness. Just as hegemony is ever-changing and reconstituting itself (Williams 1978), so too is oppositional consciousness. If we understand oppositional consciousness in this way, we can see how wrestling with the ongoing tension between hegemony and counter-hegemony does not indicate a partially-formed consciousness or a "contradictory" consciousness, as other theorists have implied. Rather, this is actually a critical part of the ongoing process of the development of oppositional consciousness.

I support this argument by looking at evidence from 18 months of fieldwork with undocumented student activists. Specifically, I examine two contexts in which these students actively wrestle with this tension in a way that is generative of oppositional consciousness and, by relation, political engagement.[5] The first context I examine is the management of fear and shame, and the second is the navigation of the dominant and pervasive societal discourse around "illegal immigration." By examining how undocumented youth navigate these two contexts, I

[5] The relationship between political consciousness and political activism is a rich topic that cannot be fully explored in this paper because of space. I draw from Mansbridge's (2001) assertion that though the two are not causally related, they are connected to each other.

demonstrate how they negotiate these tensions in a way that is generative of oppositional consciousness. I also show how being in a state of perpetual outsiderness, reflected in these two contexts, allows undocumented young people a removed and more critical location from which to contest societally-accepted truths, which is the basis of oppositional consciousness. This analysis is significant because it innovates and builds upon existing frameworks (Gramsci 1995, Mansbridge 2001) for understanding counter-hegemonic consciousness in a way that does not attempt to work out the tension between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideas. Rather, findings from this study identify that tension as part of a generative process. This insight aids our understanding of the limits and possibilities of ideas and ideology in the building of social movements.

I begin by laying the broader context for this study with a discussion of California's undocumented youth and their struggle for educational justice. This is followed by a description of the methodology of the study and my role as a researcher. In the two subsequent sections, I present data from my 18-months of fieldwork which support the argument described above. I first examine the fear and shame that undocumented youth experience, and then I examine their navigation of the dominant societal discourse around "illegal immigration." I then synthesize these arguments, and draw on more ethnographic data to develop the idea of outsiderness as generative of oppositional consciousness. Finally, I briefly conclude with a discussion of the relevance of these findings for social movement theory.

California's Undocumented Youth and the Struggle for Educational Justice

Critical to this exploration is an understanding of immigration as both discourse and practice (Chavez 2001), two mutually constitutive processes that characterize contemporary racial politics in California. Chavez (2008) asks, "How did Mexican immigration…come to be perceived as a national security threat in popular discourse? Such ideas do not develop in a vacuum. They emerge from a history of ideas, laws, narratives, myths, and knowledge production" (22). Understanding immigration policy as both discourse and practice acknowledges that immigration is both material and ideological, and it also underscores the methodological and analytical imperative of recognizing this interconnection. The discourse and practice of immigration not only influence each other; at moments, it is difficult to tell where one starts and the other ends. I contend that there is much to be gained from an approach that acknowledges the messy interconnection between immigration as discourse and practice.

Chavez is not the first theorist to make this claim, and I am not the first researcher to incorporate this analysis into my work. However, much of the existing work on immigration focuses on how ideology and discourse shapes policy in order to demonstrate that discourse and conceptual frames can in fact become materially constituted and codified (Carbado and Harris 2006). Much less attention has been spent on understanding the ways that policy, which is shaped by and through discourse, in turn shapes the way that people think about themselves and the world they live in. This analysis gives us a way to think about ideas in a materialist way; ideas are not everything, nor are they what "moves" history, but they must be understood as a concrete force that plays a role in shaping the way subordinated people understand themselves and the possibility of change.

There are an estimated 12 million undocumented people living in the U.S. (Ludden 2007), and 1.8 million are children under the age of 18 (Gonzales 2008). Being "undocumented" means that these young people are living in the United States without legal authorization to do so. Some crossed the border without documentation at some point in their childhood, others immigrated legally and then overstayed their visas. Some of them are in the process of "fixing their papers" and others have no legal basis upon which to argue for citizenship or permanent residency. Many theorists have documented the challenges facing undocumented people, including abuses in the workplace, inability to work legally, an absence of legal protection, constant fear of deportation and family separation (Orner 2008, Chavez 1997). There are many difficulties that accompany the reality of living without authorization in the United States, especially in a time of increased legislative and grassroots attacks against immigrants. Within the realm of education, undocumented youth also face unique barriers and challenges, which have been well-documented in recent years (Diaz-Strong and Meiners 2007, Dozier 2001, Mehta and Ali 2003).

Although these studies are undeniably important in terms of documenting challenges specific to undocumented students, much of this body of work casts undocumented youth as politically immobilized. For example, Daysi Diaz-Strong and Erica Meiners (2007) write, "[Undocumented students] cannot author a letter to the local paper complaining about negative media coverage surrounding 'illegals' and 'aliens,' violence perpetrated by border police, or unjust and unfair treatment by the Department of Homeland Security. Nor can they make changes through the ballot box or through personal advocacy, yet their lives—and the labor and work of their families—support the economy of the nation" (2). This is not only a serious

mischaracterization, it obscures the profound ways undocumented young people are changing the political landscape and challenging dominant notions of illegality, exclusion, and belonging.

Educational justice has always been a site of struggle for undocumented immigrants in California. It is estimated that 60,000 undocumented students graduate from high school every year (Gonzales 2008). In 1982, in the landmark case *Plyler v Doe*, the United States Supreme Court asserted that undocumented children are "persons" under the 14th Amendment of the Constitution and cannot be denied access to public elementary and secondary education on the basis of their legal status (Olivas 1984). In 2002, California passed a piece of landmark legislation, Assembly Bill 540, which allows undocumented students who attended high school in California the right to pay in-state tuition at state-run California universities and community colleges. Though this legislation made higher education more attainable, the reality that undocumented students are ineligible for any form of state or federal financial aid locates them in a tenuous place in relation to pursuing higher education. Araceli[6], an undocumented high school senior recalls the emotion that accompanied the process of receiving college acceptance letters, the culmination of so many years of hard work, "It's like, you get that acceptance letter, and you really wanna feel happy, you know. This is everything you worked for. But you can't. Because its like, okay, I'm in, but there is no way I can go." Moreover, the reality that upon graduation they remain legally unemployable renders the college path an even less "reasonable" choice for these students. Undocumented students who graduate from some of the country's highest-ranked universities find themselves with a future in gardening, construction, or cleaning hotel rooms.

[6] Names of all participants, organizations, and schools in this study have been changed to protect the identity of the young people.

Undocumented young people in California grow up amid a dominant discourse that casts them as intruders, as undeserving, and as inferior. This pervasive societal discourse clearly shapes individual young people, who develop their personal, political, and academic identities within this frame. I posit that with the passage of Assembly Bill AB540, a new political subject was born – the AB540 student. This identity, I argue, was forged on a particular nexus of academic achievement and social justice involvement and therefore, to examine the academic outcomes of undocumented students, we must also examine their political involvement.

The campaign to pass the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act is the newest phase of this struggle and is very much an outgrowth of the previous struggles. The DREAM Act is a piece of pending federal legislation that would allow undocumented young people access to federal financial aid and a path to legalization. In order to qualify for the DREAM Act, an undocumented young person must have lived in the United States since age 15 or younger, be between the ages of 12 and 30 when the legislation passes, have graduated from high school and completed two years of college or military service, and have a "good moral character" (Govtrack.us 2009). The bill has appeared before Congress on several occasions, first appearing in an earlier form in 2001, and was most recently brought to the floor of the U.S. Senate in October 2007 as a cloture vote. The DREAM Act failed to pass, lacking 8 votes. The bill died on the Senate floor in Spring 2008, and is slated to be reintroduced sometime in Summer 2009.

The campaign to pass the DREAM Act led by undocumented youth is an apt site to ask the question of how lived exclusion shapes political consciousness, for several reasons. First, as a piece of legislation that only aims to naturalize college students or young people in the military who have a "good moral character," the DREAM Act is intertwined with one of the hegemonic

components of immigration discourse, which draws a line between "deserving" and "undeserving" immigrants. Additionally, the campaign to pass the DREAM Act is both mainstream in its demands and tactics, and also radical because of the risks associated with "outing" oneself as undocumented. In a climate in which immigration raids are on the rise, undocumented youth engaging in a highly-visible legislative battle is significant and risky. In 2007, a nationally-recognized undocumented activist[7] was recently deported, and Tom Tancredo publicly called on authorities to arrest AB540 students who spoke at a DREAM Act Rally (Bernuth 2007). My central research question asks how lived experiences of sustained institutional exclusion shape the political identity and the political consciousness of undocumented Latino students. This study allows us to see how the young people engaged in this campaign confront, contest, and comply with dominant notions of racism and immigration, and how they construct political identity and oppositional consciousness within this context and through this process.

Research Methodology, Positionality and Decentering Ethnography

Research Methodology

My methodology blends formal and informal interviews with participant observation in three interconnected spheres. I conducted 50 life-history interviews with undocumented Latino youth activists aged 16-28 involved in the DREAM Act campaign in Northern California. These interviews allowed me to map their political trajectories and their theories about race, racism, and inequality. I also conducted ongoing participant observation during the 2007-2008 school

[7] Elvira Arellano is an internationally-recognized immigration rights advocate who lived in the United States undocumented, with her U.S. citizen son. Arellano is the president of La Familia Latina Unida, an organization that advocates for immigrant family reunification. Arellano was arrested, detained, and deported in 2007 after seeking sanctuary in a Chicago church for one year.

year at a Northern California college-based support group for undocumented students, UPSRG[8], which is active in the statewide DREAM Act campaign. Lastly, I monitored the statewide campaign to pass the federal DREAM Act by collecting and analyzing media coverage produced by formal and informal media sources and by conducting interviews and participant observation with members of a statewide DREAM Act student coalition. Participants were contacted through their participation in the DREAM Act campaign and/or UPSRG, and I also used the snowball sampling method to reach others. Studying undocumented Latino youth in each of these spheres has allowed me to examine how these youth theorize race and racism, how they encounter and contest dominant conceptions of "illegal" immigration, and how they come to see themselves as political participants in a context that excludes them. I intentionally chose a blend of methodologies in order to capture the multi-faceted, complex realities of these young people's lives, understanding that only conducting formal interviews or only observing youth in 'activist spaces' would yield incomplete data.

The life-history interviews served to provide a space for these young activists to tell the stories of their lives in a guided, yet open-ended manner. Questions focused not just on their lives as activists, but also on their childhoods and family histories, their border-crossing stories, their schooling experiences, and their path to activism. Drawing on Kathleen Blee's (1993) ethnographic project on women in the white supremacy movement as an example, I used interviews not only to record facts about the lives of these young people, but also to provide a space for each interviewee to reflect, theorize, and analyze their experiences. I also conducted less formal interviews with members of the campus-based student group and members of the

[8] An alias.

statewide network, which served to collect both their reflections on the campaign at different moments and their thoughts about racism, immigration, and social justice more broadly.

I conducted participant observation with UPSRG and the statewide coalition. Participant observation with UPSRG involved attending twice-weekly group meetings, frequent informal gatherings, and group-sponsored DREAM Act activities including rallies, protests, forums, lobbying visits, and coalition meetings. Participant observation with the statewide coalition involved being in regular contact with coalition staff and members through regular conference calls, emails, and regional meetings. All members of the coalition also convened twice per year for a statewide retreat, which I also attended. At all of these gatherings, I took detailed field notes, spoke with participants, and when appropriate and when invited, participated in the discussion. I will discuss this at greater length in a subsequent section in which I examine my positionality as a researcher. I regularly wrote memos throughout periods of participant observation, and used this as a way of integrating regular analysis and personal reflection into my practice as a researcher.

Lastly, I reviewed formal and informal media sources as a way to monitor the statewide movement to pass the DREAM Act. This included tracking the dialogue about the movement and the bill in major California newspapers like the Los Angeles Times and the San Francisco Chronicle, and it also included analyzing informal media produced by the undocumented youth activists themselves, including blog postings, fliers, public reflections, and participation in electronic communities. This media tracking was done throughout the data collection period of this research, however it was not a central component of the methodology. I have used the media analysis to enrich the data collected in interviews and participant observation, not as an independent component.

Positionality and "Decentering" Ethnography

This project grew out of my own political, personal and intellectual trajectory. I am a second generation Chicana – my mother was born in Tijuana, Mexico and my father in San Diego. I grew up a few short miles from the US-Mexico border during a specific historical moment – the 80s and 90s – which has profoundly shaped me. As a child, I remember seeing the nightly news give a daily tally of the number of people who died crossing the border in the hot summer months, their bodies found in the desert. I remember my father being rudely questioned by the border patrol as we returned home from Tijuana after attending a quincinera. I remember when the construction began on the newer, "better," more lethal border fence. Bearing witness to the differential treatment and the violence enacted on people who were seeking a better life compelled me to get engaged in community organizing for immigrant rights at age 15, when Prop 187[9] was on the ballot in California. I was 26 at the start of this research, having spent more than 10 years in the immigrant rights struggle.

I am both an insider and an outsider to the subjects of this study. As a first generation Chicana college student who grew up on the border, I share many life experiences with the subjects in this study. On many occasions I blended into the group and would have been completely unnoticed to anyone who did not know I was conducting research. This is in part due to what I look like and in part due to the choices I made about how to conduct myself in those spaces. I made attempts to genuinely engage in the work of the groups and not just sit on the side jotting down notes – I lugged protest signs from the BART to Nancy Pelosi's office with the students, cleaned up the bagels on the breakfast table at the statewide retreat, attended birthday parties and helped proofread scholarship essays. At the same time, I am very much an outsider,

[9] Prop 187 was a California ballot measure passed in 1994 that sought to deny undocumented immigrants access to basic social services including emergency room care and public schools. Proposition 187 was later struck down as unconstitutional by California's Supreme Court.

marked not only by my privilege as a university researcher but also by my citizenship privilege. Thus, I did not share many of the "traditional" challenges faced by outsiders in the ethnographic process, however a degree of "insiderness" does bring complications.

My "insiderness" allowed me easy entry into the sites of my study but also opened up other challenges that I needed to stay attuned to. This was especially true at the UPSRG site because it was the location of my deepest ethnographic work and I developed personal relationships with the young people at this site. As someone who fit in easily with the group, I had to be diligent in reminding the students that I was conducting research and not just a political ally. As someone with more years of experience in campaign work and grassroots organizing (and many opinions about these things) I had to be cognizant of not directing the group's work with my suggestions, which were often solicited. As someone who cares deeply about this issue and these students, and therefore is far from 'neutral,' I had to work hard at remaining critical in my reflections, asking the hard questions, and ensuring that I was not glossing over anything that might portray things negatively. Though no methodology is without its flaws, I believe that by frequently reflecting on my positionality in my field notes and by being in regular communication with colleagues and members of my dissertation committee, I have been able to minimize the risks inherent to my identity and positionality.

In the early stages of this study, a number of questions arose for me as a researcher that required me to step outside of the confines of traditional ethnography and think creatively about new ways to conduct this research. Studying consciousness proved difficult from the start of the project because it is difficult to "observe" what is, at essence, a mental process. Traditional research methods instruct me to define "markers" and to assess consciousness through these markers. I was uncomfortable with this approach on two levels. First, it seems to undermine the

"deep, rich data" that ethnographic research seeks to collect and serves to virtually "quantify" what is fundamentally a process that is better analyzed through qualitative analysis. Second, it strikes me as perpetuating problematic dynamics by assuming that because I am a researcher, I have the authority to judge and measure political consciousness of undocumented youth when the very dynamic I was trying to give space to entails an inquiry into how undocumented young people perceive their own racialized, immigrant experience.

I felt it was my responsibility as an aspiring public intellectual and as an "insider-outsider" researcher to wrestle seriously with these questions and to build in methodological decisions that deal in a principled way with these difficulties. These practices are part of what I call "decentered ethnography" which aims to disrupt the traditional roles of the "researcher as analyzer" and the "research subjects as the analyzed."

There were three specific methodological elements that I integrated into the project in order to aid in this "decentering." The first element was to extend beyond interviews and participant observation to include an analysis of informal media produced by the undocumented young activists such as blog posts, campaign materials, and spoken word pieces. By including the creative work of these research subjects as part of my data collection, I seek to position their work as legitimate "dispatches" from the frontlines of the immigration debate. The second element was to include reflexive interviewing – asking research subjects to reflect on their own interviews, a few months after being interviewed, and theorize their own analysis. The third element was incorporating what I term "analytical inquiry." I designed interviews that included questions designed to get at who my participants are and the details of their lives, as well as questions about what they believe, what they think about a particular issue or event, and how they understand their own lives and experiences. I often brought pertinent newspaper articles

and asked for their opinions. I posed questions such as "If you were the researcher here, how would you make sense of this?" Additionally, I paid special attention to moments in which the young people themselves built analysis into their own work, whether in the form of a political education session or a campaign debrief evaluation.

Integrating these "decentering" methodological elements, though not a "solution" for the power dynamics inherent in ethnography, has allowed me to make a space for the analysis, theorization, and understanding of the research subjects themselves. Additionally, this methodology has enabled me to study consciousness in a grounded way that does not require me to reduce it to a checklist of "consciousness markers" or quantitative data.

Building Community out of Fear and Shame

Fear is a simple reality of daily life for undocumented youth. At different moments, the fear can be more or less consuming, but it never disappears completely. Ixchel, a 3rd year university student, reflects on how she took cues from her parents about feeling fearful. "I felt the most scared when I was around my parents because they were scared so I felt that energy from them. We didn't go out a lot. We stayed home a lot because they felt safe in the house they worked in. And I remember I would cry because I wanted to go out with my cousins and stuff. But they were like 'no mija, let's just stay home, let's just hang out with the family.'" Undocumented youth actively manage this fear, develop ways to cope with it and live with it. The most fundamental fear that undocumented youth manage is the fear of being "discovered," a fear that is grounded in both the embarrassment that accompanies the stigma of being undocumented as well as the possible consequences of exposure – deportation. Carmen, an

outspoken advocate for the rights of undocumented students in higher education, describes the sense of embarrassment she had as a child:

> I came to the U.S. when I was about five years old. I think I first found out that I was undocumented in the fifth grade – it was during the [Proposition] 187 stuff and I remember being in the cafeteria with a friend and her saying, "Oh, did you know that they are going to come and get all the illegals out of the school?" And I'm like, "Oh yeah," you know. And I just remember at that moment, just kinda pausing and thinking, "Wow. Like… I'm going to be so embarrassed. They are going to take me, they are going to call me, and everyone is going to see me being taken to the office and everyone is going to know."

The fear of deportation – perhaps the most fundamental in the litany of fears – also raises anxiety about family separation, about the fate of younger siblings in mixed-status families[10], and in some cases, a return to difficult economic, personal, or familial dynamics that caused the migration in the first place.

Undocumented youth also struggle with the constant anxiety that accompanies the reality of life in any low-income immigrant family, though these struggles are even more pronounced in families in which some or all of the family members are undocumented. Undocumented youth struggle with the stress of their families' precarious economic status, which many theorists describe as particularly intense both because of the low-wage jobs their parents frequently occupy as well as the insecurity of these jobs (Milkman 2006). Liliana, a 4th-year college student, describes how her family survives on the work of her aging parents, who drive around the large metropolitan city they live in, collecting cardboard scraps to turn into the recycling yard for cash:

> My dad is the one who drives and my mom is the one up in the truck. They do it all, they go to work usually three or four in the morning and come back around nine, ten. The goal was to get the truck full, to get

[10] Many undocumented young people live in "mixed-status" families, which means that the immediate family unit is comprised of both undocumented and documented people. Though this difference often falls along the axis of age (younger siblings were born in the United States and therefore have citizenship), circular migration patterns often make this mix more complicated.

> tons of cardboard. You have to get tons and go to the recycling center where they accept cardboard and then exchange it for money that way. They get about fifty dollars for the whole truck. And then on the side, they get the glass and the cans. Usually they're collecting it in dumpsters so they're always dirty, they can't help it. And I hate it, because my mom is the one that gets in there. She jumps in there, she's really good at it though… she jumps in there, she can get cut, they've cut themselves before and they're still going. She's the one going around the trash and grabbing the glass, whatever they can get that's useful to get money out of.

When Liliana speaks of her parents' work, it is with a mix of frustration and admiration, she is both proud of how hard they work and angry that it is their only option. Liliana avoids answering when college classmates ask her what her parents do for a living. She struggles with not wanting to be ashamed by revealing how they make their living, but she also knows that middle-class students will have no context within which to understand her reality. It is widely documented by immigration scholars that economic stress and all of the fears it brings, is shared by the children in immigrant families (Portes and Zhou 2005), and the subjects of this study are no different.

Being undocumented, and the accompanying stress that this brings, can exacerbate the tensions and difficult dynamics that exist in these students' families. For example, the stress of her family's precarious employment also exacerbates the tensions that exist in her parents' marriage, which Liliana describes as abusive. Financial instability contributing to strained family relationships is a reoccurring theme in these interviews. Carmen shares, "In my family, it was like almost this resentment that was between us. So that resentment was always really alive in my family – very alive. And so that also highlighted for me, it was like, other than this, my parents get along really well, you know, so why does this have to exist?" The young people in this study carry not just the stress of being undocumented, but also the fear and shame that come with their precarious situation.

Undocumented youth also frequently speak about fear of the future, which is particularly heightened at moments of life transition such as high school graduation, college graduation, and milestone birthdays. When I congratulate Carolina on the completion of her third year in college, she doesn't share my enthusiasm. Her impending graduation does not make her excited, it makes her worried:

> I'm scared sometimes, you don't know what it's going to be like, maybe I should stop. And [at the] same time, I'm like, "What if it doesn't change, and what if I can't get a good job?" I know that I can help the community, just start something, but how am I going to be able to survive? And I'm going to be like wasting so much money on this. But I think that fear is like, it's kind of a fear that all of us have, "What if I can't handle the future? Find a job?" That kinda thing.

Thus, rites of passage that are generally moments of joy and accomplishment for young people are frequently anxiety-producing for young people with precarious legal status. They struggle with the fact that a college degree does not actually do anything to allow them to secure legal employment. These moments of transition highlight the uncertainty of their lives and raise questions that are, at some level, impossible to answer. What is so consuming about this anxiety is both its constant presence as well as the feeling that there is no way to rectify the situation that causes the fear.

These young people, like all people under stress, have different strategies for dealing with this stress. Some, like Liliana, describe periods of their lives in which they were scared to leave the house: "Because I'm not as brave as some other people, they go on the airplane, they go wherever they need to. I'm just like, 'I'm sorry – I think about these things too much.' I try to be spontaneous and do it, but I can't." Others feel that living in a predominantly immigrant community affords them a sort of protection because everyone is undocumented so they do not stand out. Learning not to be immobilized by the fear is not a linear process in which ones goes from more fearful to less fearful, because different things make that fear more heightened at

certain times and less debilitating at others. Although individuals develop specific ways to cope with the uncertainty of their status – from constantly worrying to finding safety in numbers – the broader political context can disrupt these strategies.

A year into my fieldwork, news of ICE raids in their Northern California City had the UPSRG members on edge. Emergency meetings were called, "know your rights" pamphlets were hastily mass-produced, and the students came together to share their concerns, to voice their worry, and to offer support to one another. Marcela, a new student and one of the less-active UPSRG members, commented that she was remembering her mom coming home from work at the sweatshop after there had been a raid, and how scared she was: "I thought that at the university, we would be protected somehow, you know, as students. But I guess nothing changes the fact that we're still just illegal, and they don't care if we are trying to get an education." It is here, in the management of fear, that shame is a relevant consideration.

Undocumented young people are not immune to the stigma that is associated with being an "illegal" immigrant. The shame associated with this label is something that all of these young people deal with, some more profoundly than others. The experience of hearing anti-immigrant sentiments and remaining silently ashamed is nearly universal among the participants of this study. Carolina reflects on these moments, and explains,

> I'm not that open. Because…well, I don't really feel comfortable telling people I'm undocumented because some people, um…they are against undocumented immigrants. And I just feel like…I'm quiet but I observe a lot of things. I don't want to put myself in that situation where I would have to deal with that – where people are not really trying to understand. I don't think they would be really nice. Or like, I don't want them to say mean things to me, so I don't tell them. And the other thing is like I don't know how they're going to react. I feel that it's just a risk I don't want to take.

The shame can, at times, be overwhelming. In response to a question about her process of coming to political consciousness, Carmen states, "I would say, the first of anything – it's the

shame. It's the shame. It's the shame. You aren't scared, its not even fear yet – it's just the shame. You are just like, 'I'm not going to talk about it. I'm not as valuable as anybody else.' And then integrated with that, is the fear. Depending on the political context, your fear goes up and down. But again, still, the dominating thing is the shame." Some undocumented youth, like MariLuz, are clear to draw the line between fear and shame: "It's also a little bit shameful. But it's not like I'm ashamed of who I am but at the way it's looked at in society. I know that I'm gonna get that look of like [rolling her eyes]. 'Oh. You're undocumented? So how did you get here?'" In MariLuz's case, fear is a healthy skepticism about the intentions of others, and she wanted to be clear that being guarded about her status is not a result of being ashamed, it is a result of her being careful. Though some young people can draw this line, it is not difficult to see how shame and fear can become closely related. Elena, a community college student, states, "For the longest time I never told anybody. It was always so hush-hush. Even my best friends – nobody knew. So it's this secret you have, and you go from having a secret to being a secret. You just feel bad, like you are nothing." The weight of carrying around the secret of one's status often translates into feeling ashamed, which is compounded by the societal stigma associated with being undocumented.

Being overcome with fear, constant anxiety, and shame often results in undocumented young people becoming isolated and staying inside of themselves. It is easy to not reach out, to not connect to others in the same situation, which in turn reproduces the isolation. However, every student in this study speaks of having to break through this isolation at a certain point, often before they were ready to do so. This moment, for college-bound youth, often occurs when they begin to prepare to apply to college. Adriana, a college graduate, attributes her making it to college and through college, to her willingness to be honest about her status and seek support:

> The career counselor at our school knew about it and that's how I was able to get some of the scholarships. For me, it was really, it's a good thing that I did that cause a lot of people are willing to help. And if they didn't know about it, then they wouldn't. You're kind of telling your situation to…in a way, I guess it would make it seem like you're telling me your sad story, putting yourself in a vulnerable position, and maybe they need to know that. But it's only for your benefit in a way…But if you don't look for help, nobody comes to help you.

Naturally, a temporary, pragmatic decision to break this silence and reach out for support does not erode the fear or the shame – it temporarily de-prioritizes it. However, my research shows that this temporary break often brings undocumented students in community with other undocumented students, and that this community-building unintentionally and inadvertently brings the students into a process of dealing with their fear and shame. Liliana, who arrived at her large college campus not sure if she would be the only undocumented student, describes building community with another undocumented student: "I started talking to him and we started thinking about forming a support group. At that point it was just the two of us…I didn't know any other undocumented student. And at that point, we had no idea who else was there, how we were going to do it. And at that point, I didn't want people to know about my situation yet. I don't want to be that open." Fear of "coming out" as undocumented is tempered at a basic level by collectivity and recognizing that there are others in a similar circumstance. Kristina, a third year community college student, describes how sharing an identity as undocumented students transcends some of the differences that exist: "You know some people have harder stories because they had tougher times coming over here, but you know at the end it just makes us all a family. We are all united because of that one thing – we are undocumented. And all we want to do is go to school."

Traditional sociological theory on political engagement posits that overcoming fear and shame are a necessary precursor to political engagement. In what he calls "cognitive liberation,"

Doug McAdam (1985) argues that people need to name and recognize "social conditions" as harmful and stop acquiescing to them before they can start organizing against them. In other words, if people have not gone through this cognitive process, they cannot become politically engaged. According to McAdam, political engagement, which begins with a shift in political consciousness, is a linear, forward-moving process. What I have found, however, is that students frequently engage with other undocumented students out of necessity, which then propels them into political activism. This activism in turn helps them deal with fear and shame. When part of a collective group – even in objectively more fear-inducing circumstances (such as a direct confrontation with police or security personnel during a direct action) – undocumented youth feel a sense of righteousness about who they are and what they stand for, which comes about through this collectivity and erodes both the fear and shame associated with being undocumented. Theorists and social change practitioners generally think that political involvement comes at a late stage of consciousness, after feelings of shame and fear have been overcome, and that people will not engage in political action unless they have first dealt with these feelings. My research demonstrates that people engage early on, before they have overcome fear and shame, in order to help deal with these feelings. Being an active member of a political group and engaging in political work is attractive to these youth not despite their vulnerability, fear, and shame, but because of it.

The social context of undocumented students' lives requires that they reach out for support. In doing this, they build community with other undocumented students, which has the impact of beginning to erode the shame and fear that they have learned to live with. However, the erosion of fear and shame requires that their causes be confronted, and it is in this confrontation that the young people in my study are enabled to engage in two meaningful

processes. First, they develop a social analysis of their shame and realize how it is socially constructed. Second, they begin to confront the real fear of being deported that their status makes them vulnerable to, and they begin to think about the system that instills this fear. There is nothing linear about this process. Rather, the process involves an active tension that is worked out over time.

What we learn from this process is, first, the pragmatic necessity to reach out can be the catalyst for a much deeper and wider process of engagement if supportive networks and communities exist to nurture this process. Second, we learn that overcoming fear and shame in order to engage in activism is not causal. A person does not have to deal with fear before he or she can engage politically. Often, activism through collective community is the entry point and the erosion of fear and shame follows.

The tension that plays out in this context is the tension between what is perceived to be "deserved" fear and shame as a result of their status, which turns undocumented youth inwards and isolates them. This is in active tension with their own assertion that they deserve to be able to continue their education, and that their status should not determine which rights are withheld from them. The undocumented youth in this study work out this tension by building connections and relationships with other undocumented youth, which enables them to collectivize their own personal subjugation and frequently leads to a form of collective action that seeks to change power dynamics on a broader level.

A Constant Struggle:
Dominant Public Discourse and Internal Meaning Making

One of the central goals at the top of the anti-immigrant agenda over the past 20 years has been to control the public discourse around immigration and to create a narrative that comes to be the 'common sense' way that people understand immigration. When these common sense ideas take hold, the terrain shifts, and the result is no longer two competing stories on the same question. Instead, the dominant narrative becomes situated as the universal truth that all other conceptions of reality must be measured against. Devon Carbado and Cheryl Harris (2006) offer a compelling example of this in their description of the ways in which racial frames actually shaped the rescue effort in the wake of Hurricane Katrina: "What are the material consequences? . . . And how if at all, did it injure black New Orleanians in the wake of Hurricane Katrina? The answer relates to two interconnected frames – the frame of law and order and the frame of black criminality. Working together, these frames rendered black New Orleanians dangerous, protectable, and unreachable" (97). Narrative, though a discursive, ideological component, can become materially situated and thus a force to contend with. This was Gramsci's interjection into traditional Marxism – that we must understand the ways ideas can become materially situated, and develop a materialist idea of the role of ideology in the building of a revolutionary movement. In other words, ideas and ideology play a role in the balance of forces as active participants – not simply as the background or "superstructure."

The narrative produced by anti-immigrant forces over the past 20 years has been analyzed by many scholars, and I do not seek to address every nuance of this conversation in the space below. Instead, I will briefly discuss three critical ideological cornerstones of this narrative, because they all interact with and influence the personal and political identity formation of undocumented youth. The first cornerstone is the connection between illegality and

criminality, or more simply stated, the idea that committing an "illegal" act makes one a criminal, in an ethical sense. Clearly, this is a common sense conception that stretches far beyond just immigration discourse, and because it has been so woven into the broader societal discourse some readers may have a difficult time understanding why this connection is fabricated rather than authentic. However, one of the nation's most revered leaders, Martin Luther King Jr., is famous for popularizing the idea that good people have a moral responsibility to break unjust laws. Thus, in the contemporary popular imaginary, the young people dressed in their Sunday best who sat-in at Woolworth counters in the deep South do not carry the ethical stigma of being "criminals." Similarly, I argue, the young people who live in this country without documents because of hostile and desperate conditions in their home countries, in many cases caused by the United States, should not automatically earn the title of criminal. There is a more humanitarian way to view these individuals, as economic or political refugees, for example – a view that is found in the legal framework of immigration policy. However, anti-immigrant activists have been very successful at equating "illegal" with "criminal," therefore casting all undocumented people as criminals, despite the fact that many of them are well-respected, hard-working community members, professionals, or honor-roll students.

The second cornerstone of the anti-immigrant narrative is the idea of theft and the scarcity of resources. The idea that there is simply not enough (of everything) to go around and that immigrants are taking more than their fare share underlies much of the popular conversation about immigrants in this country. "They're taking our jobs," "they are bleeding the system dry," and "they take advantage of the services" are three of the most common refrains of this popular discourse. What underlies these sentiments is the belief that immigrants are not deserving of

equal rights and equal protection, that they have malicious intent to take advantage of something that does not belong to them, and that there is simply not enough to go around.

The third cornerstone is the danger of an alien culture. Though this harkens back to an earlier time in anti-immigrant discourse, there has been a resurgence of this kind of argument in the last 10 years. Victor David Hanson's widely read 2002 book, ***Mexifornia***, argues that the "immigrant invasion" of California is leading to the destruction of the state, in all aspects. Five years later, Hanson (2007) returns to his thesis, in order to argue that things are significantly worse than even he had predicted:

> During the heyday of multiculturalism and political correctness in the 1980s, the response of us, the hosts, to this novel challenge was not to insist upon the traditional assimilation of the newcomer but rather to accommodate the illegal alien with official Spanish-language documents, bilingual education, and ethnic boosterism in our media, politics, and education. These responses only encouraged more illegals to come, on the guarantee that their material life could be better and yet their culture unchanged in the United States. We now see the results (2).

The fear of an alien culture, and the "unwillingness" of these new immigrants to assimilate is the crux of Hanson's argument. Samuel Huntington, author of *Clash of Civilizations,* makes a similar argument in his 2001 article, "Migration Flows Are the Central Issue of Our Time":

> The current wave of immigration to the United States is an endless stream, much of it illegal…In the first waves of immigration there were two categories: the "converts," who wanted to be assimilated and went over completely to the American way of life, leaving their language and native habits behind, and the "sojourners," who worked in America for, say, 15 years and went back home to Sicily and lived well. Now immigrants are neither converts nor sojourners. They go back and forth between California and Mexico, maintaining dual identities and encouraging family members to join them (1).

Assertions about the threat of immigrant culture and new immigrants' unwillingness to assimilate are not only found in academic and literary circles. When Cruz Bustamante ran for Lieutenant Governor of California in 2003, the opposition's attacks painted him as the member

of an "extremist Chicano student group" whose main transgression is a refusal to assimilate (Leo 2003). These examples illustrate the cultural angle of anti-immigrant discourse. Revitalized and revamped from earlier discourses about immigrants' inferior culture, they point to what is at its core the same argument. Essentially, this cornerstone posits that immigrants are dangerous, both individually and as a group, because they refuse to abandon their cultural roots and embrace white American culture, politics, beliefs and ideals.

Undocumented immigrant youth grow up not only exposed to this discourse but as individuals directly implicated within it. Little research has been done, however, to examine the ways that growing up saturated by this discourse shapes these young people, let alone how it shapes and impacts political outcomes, political identity, and political engagement. Miguel, a high school senior, believes the impact of this cannot be understated.

> It really has an impact on you when you're constantly discouraged by teachers, by the system. They have all these ideas about undocumented students. It's like if you're Mexican, and if you're an immigrant, they would straight up tell you, "Don't take AP English – too much reading, too much writing," things like that. And it's the whole experience of that, it can have a really negative impact.

Although most of the young people in this study talk about experiencing a disconnection when they heard anti-immigrant comments such as those described above while growing up, we should not assume that their reaction was a simple rejection of these ideas. The characterization of undocumented people as lazy and criminal falls squarely in opposition to how these young people see their parents and themselves, and when discussing their repeated exposure to these ideas, they did demonstrate a natural hesitancy and resistance to them. However, on repeated occasions, I saw many of these young people accommodate to these ideas, stereotypes, and values, by incorporating them into their own vision, framing and immigrant-rights dialogue – usually in relation to their rights as "students." In a statewide meeting of students organizing

around the DREAM Act, Irma shares her frustration about the way that the rights of undocumented students are dismissed in the mainstream media, casting all undocumented youth as law-breakers and trouble-makers: "We are not out there breaking the law, making trouble, we are not 'those' kinds of kids. We are just trying to get an education!" Some of this acceptance of a dominant frame of the anti-immigrant narrative can be attributed to political strategy – the students are appealing to common values and a popular line of argument as a way to garner public support. However, in arguing that their identities as students should afford them a certain set of rights, they inadvertently and uncomfortably fall into the creation of a false dichotomy between "undeserving" and "deserving" immigrants.

It is critical to note that this contradiction is not lost on the youth activists. They talk about it, they agonize over it, they rethink it and rework it. Yet, in the current climate, it is clear to them that comprehensive immigration reform that deals justly with all immigrants is unlikely to pass. In fact, the CIR bills died in Congress during the course of my fieldwork, further providing evidence for this concern. At the same meeting Irma spoke out at, just a short time later the facilitator, Carmen, an undocumented youth activist herself, makes a critical point: "Look, sometimes when people talk about this, when they get on the news and stuff, they say, 'I shouldn't be held responsible for the decisions my parents made when I was a baby.' But we don't say that. We don't say that. We don't criminalize our parents, we don't take the blame and put it on them. That's not something we are willing to do to pass the DREAM Act." Thus, these young people walk a fine line, trying not to perpetuate the false dichotomy but at the same time arguing for their own rights on the basis of their identity as immigrant students. The result is a hybridized, popular line of argument that appeals to the sentiments behind the dichotomy

between deserving and undeserving immigrants, while actively taking steps to undermine that dichotomy. It is a complicated walk, and the results are not always easy to analyze.

I posit that this complicated scenario speaks to the broader process that undocumented young people constantly negotiate within their lives. This is best characterized as complete inundation by the anti-immigrant discourse and an ideological rejection of it. At the same time, the fact that the discourse is "common sense" means that it creeps into their consciousness in ways that are not totally self-evident and that the students are not completely reflexive about. Some social movement theorists and grassroots practitioners would write off this complexity as evidence of students selling out and appealing to a popular line of argument at the expense of their ideals, which is a testament to the power of hegemonic ideas. However, extended ethnography and in-depth conversations which included their own self-analysis leads me to a different conclusion.

Undocumented Latino youth are shaped by public anti-immigrant discourse, but not in a simple or causal way; they do not believe it but neither do they outright reject it. Instead, I have observed a constant process of negotiation that entails a back and forth acceptance and rejection of these dominant ideas. It is through this active negotiation, and having to continually work through this tension, that undocumented young people are constantly engaged in a profoundly personal-political process of theorizing exclusion, race, inequality, oppression, and exploitation. The dual existence of these "ideas" – hegemonic and counter-hegemonic – cause these young people to constantly engage in a process of theorization and meaning-making that calls these things into tension with one another. Theorist Raymond Williams (1978) argues that hegemony "does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by

pressures not all its own" (112). Consistent with Williams' conception of hegemony as dynamic, I argue that consciousness is also dynamic and ever-changing. One of the key ways that this tension is worked out is through the personal-political practice of *testimonios*.

Simply stated, testimonios are a practice of "documenting silenced histories." This concept has been written about within the theory production of marginalized communities, such as feminist theorists. Luz de Alba Acevedo (2001) writes, "Testimonio [offers] an artistic form and methodology to create politicized understandings of identity and community" (3). Creating and sharing testimonio is a practice of reflecting on one's own life, and connecting one's personal experience to a broader social and political context. Though the UPSRG students did not use this term when describing their work, I believe it captures the conceptual frame that guides their personal-political work. In fact, a campus-based organization at UC Santa Cruz of AB540 students and their allies explicitly identify the role of testimonio in the building of their organization, S.I.N.: "We emphasize the role of testimony within S.I.N. and the importance of S.I.N. as a zone of safety that enables the development of a critical consciousness and political identity as AB540 students" (S.I.N. Collective 2007).

Despite the many informal conversations and planning sessions that went into the creation of UPSRG, founding members fondly recall the true start of the group as an evening gathering in which they all shared their "stories." Adriana, who was among the first generation of undocumented students to enroll in a California university after the passage of AB540, explains, "What happened in that first meeting is that people became so close because everyone shared their experiences, their stories. People were there, and each of them went around the room, and talked like 20 minutes, about their experiences, from the very beginning. And we all had similar experiences, we all crossed the border, we're all young, we all go to the same

college. We all share this same commonality. And that was really powerful. That was the first time I had ever talked like that, with other AB540 students." These testimonios include border-crossing stories but also their broader (im)migration stories – their families' lives in the United States, the challenges they have faced, their road to college, and their path into activism/advocacy on behalf of undocumented people. When new students join the group, they are encouraged to share their testimony. When UPSRG is planning an event – an educational event, a lobbying visit, a rally, or a protest – testimonios always figure prominently into the agenda.

There is a sense, both implicit and explicit, that the students' stories have the power to change public opinion. Miguel, one of the group's leaders, asserts, "I really think it's something that [UPSRG] can do – one way we can make a difference. Stressing the idea, changing the story, altering the conception of what it means to be undocumented. Hearing our stories, you know, it has the power to change the way people understand this issue." Testimonios can be either formal or informal, some UPSRG students have them written down and some just speak freely, and despite many shared experiences, the testimonios of individual young people stand distinct from one another. However, one common feature they all share is that testimonios are spoken. Some are spoken to just one other person, shared between friends over the kitchen table of a messy college apartment, some are shared before a crowd of thousands at a rally or congressional hearing. The shared feature of the stories being spoken is central to their role as instruments of both healing and transformation; testimonios are for those who hear them but they are also for the person sharing testimony. The process of developing and sharing one's testimonio is reflective and inward-looking yet also broad and outward-looking. It is a process that requires the students to connect the deeply personal occurrences of their lives to the very

broad practices, policies, and politics of immigration. It is a process that requires these young people to make sense of these broader practices and policies by assessing the impact they have had on their own lives, and to understand their own lives in light of these practices and policies. Testimonio provides a space in which to ask why, and to envision and imagine how things can be different. Additionally, because the UPSRG students utilize testimonios as one of their central political strategies to raise consciousness and fight for the rights of undocumented students, they construct a political practice that even the newest members can participate in because it is something they can all do – share their own story. This blurs the line between UPSRG as a space for support and UPSRG as a space for activism.[11]

Thus, testimonios as a central component of undocumented young people coming together is significant in terms of the development of oppositional consciousness for three key reasons. First, the creation of a personal-political counter-narrative is an illuminating experience that brings these undocumented youth into direct confrontation with the popular imaginary about immigration and positions them in opposition to that imaginary. Second, it is an empowering experience, in the truest sense of the word, because it gives these young people power over their own stories and positions them as active participants in the immigration discourse, not just as the subjects of it. Third, it is a collective experience because in sharing testimonio they come to see themselves as connected to the stories of other undocumented young people, and in this connection arises a sort of collective identity as undocumented students which fuels activist work. Testimonios are one way in which the undocumented students of UPSRG negotiate the tension between the dominant societal discourse about immigration and their own lived

[11] I develop this claim in much greater detail in another piece of writing.

experiences as undocumented. This negotiation, as I have demonstrated above, can be generative of oppositional consciousness and engagement in activism.

Outsiderness and Critical Consciousness

A consistent theme that arises as these young people reflect on their lives is a persistent feeling of "outsiderness" as a result of being undocumented. This is true for every student in the study, even those who are highly engaged in extra-curricular activities, leadership activities, and church communities, and who have close friends. The feeling of being on the outside is universal. Ixchel reflects on her childhood, recalling, "I did feel different all the time. I was just different. Like I said, that fear. I always felt that there was something about me that was different but I couldn't share it with anybody because it was something my parents told me not to share – being Mexicana, born over there, not having papers." This feeling of being different even impacted young people who had parents who consciously worked to make sure that their kids could have a "normal life." Elizabeth, the oldest child in her family and the only one born in Mexico, shares,

> [My parents] actually put me through Catholic private school for two years. I even took chess classes! Like, what kind of undocumented child is taking chess classes, you know? But I think it was, it was my parents' hope to give me more than what they had….And even though I had that all, I remember them, like 2, 3am, cleaning restaurants, and I knew everyone else's parents weren't doing that, everyone else's parents where home by that time.

Undocumented young people struggle with this reality, and recall even relatively stable and happy times in their childhoods marked by this looming feeling that things were not quite right.

This "outsiderness" often takes on more explicit forms. For example, at times this "difference" manifests as an explicit exclusion. Many young people shared stories of being excited about participating in an academic enrichment program or going on a school trip, only to

find out that they were ineligible to participate because of their status. Raquel explains, "I've had opportunities where I could get a good job or whatever but then they are like 'Ok, I'm sorry you can't qualify.' But for me that has been the hardest - being rejected." Typical rites of passage for teenagers take on a stressful, hurtful tone as these young people have to make up excuses for why they were delaying getting their drivers licenses, why they were not applying for certain scholarships, or why they couldn't go out to celebrate a friend's birthday at a club because they didn't have a valid ID. Thus, the pain of exclusion takes on the added element of being forced to lie to conceal the reasons for the exclusion.

Another form of outsiderness is the inability to trust completely and fully reveal oneself to one's friends. Undocumented youth often reflect that not only is it difficult to carry the weight of the secret around on a daily basis, but that having such a big secret impacts their ability to form meaningful relationships with other people. MariLuz, a high school junior, constantly wrestles with this reality: "You don't know who you can trust. You never know. There's always that fear that someone is gonna tell on you. And that's a big risk. …It's really fucked up because you can't really get to know another person. Because friendships and stuff, they're never gonna be deep because you don't know my status. You don't know the most important thing about me." It is widely documented that peer relationships are one of the most critical and foundational aspects of early adulthood. Navigating these relationships for undocumented children can be a painful and isolating process.

Outsiderness, for some undocumented youth, becomes a part of their self-conception. Nicolas, an outspoken activist and visible leader in the undocumented youth movement, shares a poignant story from a youth leadership camp he participated in as a member of his school's student government:

> One of the things that I was so scared of was that we were going to go meet the border patrol and have question and answer session. And this was so devastating to me, because I hadn't told anybody. And I was like, "God, what if they ask?" And … I was the only Mexican kid. See that's the thing. I've learned to be uncomfortable. Everything in my life has stressed me out, that's how I look at it. I'm the only person, I'm the only guy that stands out in everything I do. So the border patrol dude let us climb the border, sit on top of it. And the whole time that I was there, I was like, *man, I'm climbing the border going to Mexico*. And on the other side I saw thousands of people….I climbed the border. I put my head over and I was like, man, how many kids get to do this? And then afterwards, we rode in the jeep all along the border, and he talked to us the whole time, and he was like, "Yeah, I catch them coming over" and he… showed us all his tricks. How he looks at the tracks, how he can track people. And then, he was running off all this stuff to us, he was like, "You guys came on a good day, today we're racing our ATVs." And I was thinking, *man, if only they knew*. You know, and that's how I feel everyday. If only people knew.

Nicolas' story exemplifies how this outsiderness becomes ingrained as a part of his identity – a part of the way he sees himself. At the same time, though it is central to his personal and political identity, his outsiderness is something that in many contexts, he cannot or will not share.

Operating in a constant context of otherness and extra-legality allows undocumented students to assume a removed and more critical location from which to contest societally-accepted truths about the inevitability of inequality. Constantly situated "on the outside looking in" as Carmen says, gives these young people a naturally-arising skepticism about ideas, notions, and assumptions that are taken to be "common sense." This happens on multiple levels, from the daily and mundane ideas they call into question such as the importance of prom, to the deeper ideas that make up the dominant discourses within which they grow up. For some, like MariLuz, who immigrated as older children and therefore have memories of life in their home countries, this critical analysis arises out of being exposed to a different "common sense":

> I think part of it, I'm not sure how much of a part of it, but I think it's pretty significant, is the fact that they've been fed this whole lie for their whole lives. But not me, you know, because I didn't grow up here. I mean, in a lot of ways I feel like I had two childhoods. Weird I guess. But there's all these lies, you know, about how Mexicans are lazy and

> stupid, how all of us are just gonna get pregnant and drop out of school. Yeah, that's a big one. And my friends, my friends who grew up here, you know they fall into what's expected of them. Because they're being like fed all this bullshit about people. About themselves.

MariLuz attributes her analysis around racialized expectations of Latino youth to her outsiderness. She is not only clear in her analysis and critique, she is also clear on what it means for her own life and her decision not to fulfill these expectations as a young, working class, immigrant Latina.

For others, living outside of the law by necessity naturally opens up a critique of the law. When speaking with Nicolas about his participation in a civil disobedience action, I asked him if he was worried about risking arrest, since the consequences are potentially much worse for him than for activists who are citizens. He dismissed the question, saying, "Everything we do is illegal! Living our lives is illegal. Every morning, I wake up in my bed, and that's illegal. Living my life, trying to be a good person, a member of the community, trying to get my degree – its illegal. I mean, at a certain point, you just gotta say, whatever." Undocumented youth constantly negotiate the disconnect between the societal narrative they hear about "illegal" immigration which casts their parents, and themselves, as law-breaking criminals trying to steal resources. Time and time again, these young people speak of the pain of that dominant image, and juxtapose it with how they see their parents. The persistence of these ideas frustrates Miguel: "We're not coming here, my parents didn't come here to take the jobs of a CEO or a professor at UCLA. We came here for a better life. I just wanna get my degree, have a good career with it, and give back to my family, to my community." The tension between these two narratives – their parents and themselves as lawbreakers vs. good citizens – is something that these young people confront on a daily basis and this clash understandably often leads to an interrogation of why misinformed images of immigrants appear with such great prevalence.

Naturally, political engagement is not the only response of undocumented youth to isolation and "outsiderness." There are many who respond to the daily exclusion they face as a result of their status by disengaging further – from school, from their families, from their communities. However, understanding how outsiderness can serve as a catalyst for oppositional consciousness among undocumented youth activists is important for two reasons. First, the pervasive experience of being "othered" impels undocumented young people to create community and collective identity with other undocumented youth. The deeply personal impacts of perpetual outsiderness not only shape collective political engagement but also, as my research demonstrates, often propel a reflective, analytical process that causes these young people to question the exclusion they face. As Elizabeth shares, "You always feel like you have this secret in a way, and that does make you different than other people. It makes you see things differently." This is a profoundly personal-political process, one of those moments where the lines between the two are virtually indistinguishable. These young people turn to theorizing out of the pain of exclusion, and it is this same pain that allows them to be able to "see" injustice in a critical way. As feminist theorist bell hooks (1994) explains, when describing her own personal journey of political analysis, "I came to theory because I was hurting – the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing" (59).

Second, it is significant because these are not simply the kids who turned their exclusion into involvement. Had I spoken with these young people at a different moment in their lives, many of them would have fallen squarely into the "disengaged" category. Indeed many of the students in this study described times when, feeling hopeless about their situation and future

prospects, they stopped putting in effort at school or joined the informal street economy. Different forces, at different moments, pushed them into activism. This pushes us to complicate the way we think about political engagement among youth, and it reminds us that political engagement is not a linear process that has a one-way door. Rather, for these young people, political engagement is a process that happens over time, is not linear, and is sometimes married with periods of what appears by traditional measures to look like "disengagement."

Conclusion

This paper began with the central question, How do experiences of exclusion shape the political identity and political consciousness of undocumented young people? I have argued that in order to answer this question we must reconsider the way we think about "oppositional/counter-hegemonic consciousness." Specifically, we must acknowledge the complex interchange of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideas as a generative site for oppositional consciousness and engagement in activism.

My research shows that there are three key ways that experiences of exclusion shape both the political consciousness and engagement of undocumented young people. First, the fear and shame caused by one's undocumented status can serve as a catalyst for political engagement, if a supportive community is in place to encourage this. This is an innovation on earlier thinking on this topic, which holds that fear and shame must be dealt with first in order for someone to seek out political engagement. The youth in this study demonstrate that feelings of fear and shame can act as a catalyst for forging community with other undocumented youth, which can then lead to collective political actions that enable them to overcome their fear and shame. Second, sharing testimonios about experiences of exclusion plays a critical role in the development of

oppositional consciousness by involving these young people in the process of creating a public-private counter-narrative. The telling of one's story is inherently internal and external, crafted through introspection and reflection and simultaneously transformative in the process of speaking this story aloud. I have observed that engaging in this process allows the undocumented young people of this study to theorize their own experiences within the broader context of anti-immigrant policies, practices, and discourse. Lastly, the experience of outsiderness offers a more critical location from which to question ideas that are taken to be true by mainstream society, such as the flat relationship between illegality and immigration. With outsiderness comes the pain of exclusion, but as the lives, stories, and political work of these young people demonstrate, outsiderness can also inspire the development of critical thinking more broadly, and critical consciousness more specifically.

Together, these insights into the role of exclusion in shaping political consciousness and activism are significant because they challenge traditional ways of thinking about how and why people engage in political work on an individual level and how that process takes place in relation to other factors such as shame, fear, and the development of a political self-identity. In contrast to conventional theories about the formation of oppositional consciousness, these findings show that oppositional consciousness is not solely a reaction to and an overcoming of hegemonic ideas. Instead, for the youth in this study, it is experienced as a state of tension and an outcome of a generative process that entails a constant negotiation between hegemonic and non-hegemonic ideas. Understanding the dialectic between the hegemonic and the counter-hegemonic allows us to move away from a totalizing view of liberatory consciousness and make space for a non-linear, more nuanced way to understand the development of oppositional consciousness and political engagement. This invites us to rethink notions of what political

engagement "looks" like, in a way that does not make it a non-functional concept by arguing that everything is resistance. Rather, this illuminates the assertion that political engagement and political consciousness is not a state of arrival nor a final point on a spectrum, but a body of thoughts, experiences and actions that are negotiated over and over again.

This finding holds implications for how we theorize the role that ideas play in building social movements. In future work, I will change the scope of my analysis and explain how what happens to oppositional consciousness on an individual level shapes what happens on an organizational level, and ultimately on a movement building level. What is clear is that undocumented young people in California are profoundly changing the political landscape through their struggle for educational justice. This struggle is deeply personal and transformative on an individual level and also has the potential to change the course of history in the state. These young people are demanding a resolution to the contradiction that has shaped their lives – the reliance of the United States on their presence and its simultaneous refusal to recognize them as human beings deserving of fundamental civil rights. Their insistence on being heard despite profound institutional exclusion demonstrates that their voices will not be silenced.

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