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Testimonio as Radical Story-Telling and Creative Resistance

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**Documenting the Undocumented:
Testimonios as a Humanizing Pedagogy**

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Abstract

This article delves deep into the story of “illegal” immigration, while humanizing the issue of those who experience it and its enduring consequences. In so doing, this study seeks to look beyond the broadly articulated claims about undocumented immigrants and shed light on what it really means to be unauthorized in America. This body of research challenges current immigration discourse through personal accounts, by exposing the areas of immigration where understanding is most needed. I use the methodological approach of *testimonio* to conduct, collect, and analyze four *testimonio* interviews of current undocumented immigrants living in the United States. Towards the endeavor, this article seeks to create a rich narrative of human survival and about the struggles and obstacles undocumented immigrants face within our broken immigration system.

Introduction

Migration is fundamentally the story of the human race from its origins to the present. Migration is an integral aspect of life on this planet. People move to survive. They move in search of food. They move away from danger and death. They move towards opportunities for life. Migration is tied to the human spirit, which seeks adventure, pursues dreams, and finds reasons to hope even in the most adverse circumstances. (Parker, 2011, p. 3)

For as long as we have known, people have migrated in the world. From one village to another, one city to another, one country to another. The United States of America was founded and settled by immigrants. This is a significant part of the demographic history, known as the land of opportunity where newcomers can, through hard work and determination, achieve better lives for themselves and their families. Numbers of foreigners throughout time have traveled to American shores to escape

famine, poverty, political and religious persecution, environmental degradation, and even war. The country itself has always been a beacon to people from across the globe seeking economic opportunities, safety, freedom, and a chance at the proverbial American Dream.

Up until this day, people continue to cross borders, despite the dangers. Over the years, traversing the U.S-Mexican border illegally has become increasingly dangerous and expensive. Migrants wanting to cross into the United States pay thousands of dollars and face kidnapping, rape, and sometimes even murder at the hands of violent drug cartels and ruthless human smugglers. Others are killed in accidents or die harsh deaths of heat exhaustion and dehydration in remote and perilous stretches of scorching, waterless desert (Sterling, 2010). Nevertheless, the cost of coming to the United States without documents is more often than not a very difficult and traumatic experience for immigrants attempting to cross the border.

Invisibility

Undocumented immigrants have no way to tell you what they have experienced, or why, or who they are, or what they think. They are by the very nature of their experience, invisible. Most of us pass them by—some of us might say a prayer for them, some of us wish they would return to their countries of origin. But nobody asks them what they think. Nobody stops and simply asks. (Orner, 2008, p. 5)

Despite their contributions, undocumented immigrants continue to live in the shadows of our society. Much of the public discourse around immigration reform either criminalizes or dehumanizes the undocumented population. Both the media and politicians repeatedly use derogatory terms such as “illegal” and “aliens” when describing those without proper documents. National and local immigration policy has only stigmatized and discriminated against migrants, further alienating them from the majority culture. Today’s debates over immigration simply revolve around economic and political aspects, while ignoring the human perspective. In his introduction to *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives*, editor Peter Orner (2008) writes, “We hear they are responsible for crime. We hear that they take our jobs, our benefits. We hear they refuse to speak English. But how often do we hear from them?”

(p.7). Journalist, David Bacon (2009) in *Illegal People* also echoes these concerns: “Those who live with Globalization’s consequences are not at the table, and their voices are generally excluded” (p. 14). Lacking from mainstream politics is the human face to the immigration debate, the voices, the stories, and the testimonies of those living “illegally” in the United States.

Immigration is not purely a political issue, but a humanitarian one. The reality on the ground is much more complicated than the simple contrast between legal and illegal that characterizes mainstream policy and discourse. Undocumented immigrants are human beings and integral parts of our society and economy. These men and women cannot be summed up by the jobs they perform, countries they come from or even immigration status. These immigrants are people; people with families, people with dreams, and people with desires. Their voices and testimonies need to be at the forefront of immigration reform discourse and policy. To present only the facts, is to miss those aspects of how migration policy actually affects the people it is intended to regulate. If we are to find our way to a solution on immigration, we must examine the social complexity of the problem and bring the voices of undocumented immigrants out of the shadows of invisibility, silence and shame.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study is grounded in one main theory: Critical Race Theory (CRT) with an emphasis on Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit); an overarching branch of Critical Race Theory that examines forms of subordination specifically related to the Latina/o community based on immigration status, language, and ethnicity (Huber, 2010). LatCrit theory, like critical race theory, emphasizes the multidimensionality of oppressions, while claiming that race is central in understanding how individuals experience societal structures and form identities accordingly (Fernandez, 2002). In this context, LatCrit allows for specific examination of the ways Latinas/os experience issues of immigration status, race, language, ethnicity, and culture. Thus, LatCrit enables researchers to better articulate the evolution and challenges of the undocumented, through a more focused analysis of the unique forms of oppression this community encounters.

In this study, CRT recognizes the experiential knowledge of People of Color, specifically Immigrants of Color, as legitimate, appropriate and critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination. Looking through a CRT lens means exploring some of the critical race methodological and pedagogical approaches that can help one understand the contemporary experiences of Latina/o undocumented immigrants in the United States.

CRT in immigration research unapologetically centers on challenging dominant ideologies and disrupting dominant perceptions, understandings, and knowledge about undocumented immigrants living in this country (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2012). For this field, CRT contributes to the centrality of the experiences of immigrants through personal counter-histories and narratives, as a tool for empowerment. These stories challenge the governing historical narratives and current political platforms of exclusion and continue to give a voice to those that have been silenced by white supremacy. Finally, Critical Race Theory serves as the unifying framework in this study because it places the oral histories, *cuentos*, and testimonies of immigrants in the contemporary and historical contexts, while exposing racism as a main thread in the fabric of American society.

Guided by a LatCrit framework, this study employs *testimonio* as the primary research methodology. A shared definition of *testimonio* is a revolutionary Latin American literary genre that has been used by individuals to tell a collective story and history of oppression through the narrative of one individual (Beverly, 2004). I account for the "other" voices that continue to be consistently excluded from mainstream discourses in our culture through *testimonio*. A *testimonio* can define a life story; yet, at the same time, it can explain the collective history and spiritual struggle of not only one, but of many. The principle of *testimonio* is the phrase: "*Tu eres mi otro yo*," "you are the other me," our struggle is collective, our voice is one. This form of methodology holds particular importance because it allows researchers to document and inscribe into existence narratives reflective of collective experiences, political injustices, and human struggles that are often ignored in dominant discourses.

“Testimonios”

The significance of this work lies within the compelling stories—the *testimonios*—of the shadowed lives in American society. From a macro and micro perspective of this work, I examine the experiences of undocumented immigrants as individuals trying to survive and settle into a society that, in many ways, rejects their essential humanity. I explore how the media and legal system both portray and affect this population, and utilize *testimonio* as a tool that challenges the morality of our current immigration discourse that continues to oppress these specific people. This article hopes to put a face to the immigration debate and bring awareness to the large-scale impact immigration reform has on individuals, while also providing an alternative perspective to policy makers and the general public, who might be misinformed about the issue or have conflicting views on immigration. Perhaps the opinions of policy makers and others cannot be changed, but counter-narratives to their views can and should be provided. More importantly, this article aims to move public conversation beyond the polarized frames associated with illegality, and position the voices, experiences, and stories of undocumented immigrants at the forefront of research and analysis.

Esperanza

Emmanuel Garcia

"The journey towards you, Lord, is life. To set off... is to die a little. To arrive is never to arrive until one is at rest with you. You, Lord, experienced migration. You brought it upon all men who know what it is to live who seek safe passage to the gates of heaven. You drove Abraham from his land, father of all believers. You shall remember the paths leading to you, the prophets and the apostles. You yourself became a migrant from heaven to earth." -- 'The Migrant's Prayer'

After my father died in 1999, I had to drop out of school and work for my family. I started working in Mexico City, cleaning taxis and recruiting passengers for the drivers. I was 15 years old at the time. I also started hanging out with the wrong people on the street. I began to buy drugs, do drugs, and even sell drugs. I was hustling and making that money. Before I delved in too deep, my mother suggested I leave Mexico and head to Phoenix, Arizona with my *tío* Jose. She worried and wanted a better life for me. I

think I wanted one too. My uncle Jose was headed to Phoenix to find work. He had three kids and a wife that he needed to provide for. During that time, Mexico didn't have many good jobs available, especially for those without an education. My uncle was a carpenter and had some experience in construction. He loved building and designing things. He once told me that if could have studied, he would have been an architect.

In the winter of 1999, my uncle and I boarded an Estrella Blanca bus in Mexico City to a town further north. We didn't have the money or time to apply for an American visa, so we planned to cross into Texas illegally and travel to Arizona. Before we left, my mother gave me a *librito of Santo Toribio Romo Oraciones del Migrante* (a small prayer book of the Saint for Immigrants); she said it would protect me and bring me back to her. Even now, I carry the little booklet with me, everywhere I go. Our journey to the United States took more than a week. We rode a bus, walked some many miles and hopped on a train for two days. Once at the border, we were smuggled across the line in a van and transported to a drop house in a taxi. The journey itself was horrible. I witnessed a lot of things that I never thought I'd see. I would hear woman and young girls scream at night to "stop," while the coyotes raped and abused them. I saw families and individuals give up mid-way because they couldn't go any further. I remember seeing a lot of things like snakes, scorpions and even human remains as we walked. And we walked for hours that felt like days. I had my feet full of blisters and lost some of my toenails from walking so much. There was a time that I think I started hallucinating. But we kept going...

Once over the border, we were dropped off at the *Rio Grande* in South Texas at night and we swam across. The water seemed freezing at the time. There was a group of about seven of us. When we got to the other side, a car that was painted like a taxi awaited us. We were driven to a house in Texas, where we slept for a few days. There were a lot of people at the house. I am talking like hundreds of people, a lot of women and children, but mostly men. We slept in a room like sardines. On the fifth day, we paid our dues and were on our way. From Texas, my tío and I took a bus to Phoenix that same day. We arrived three days later. I hated Phoenix. The city was hot, noisy, impersonal, and lonely. I started school (even though I didn't understand one word of English), then worked at a local Mexican restaurant bussing tables. When I didn't work,

I was often alone. My uncle worked late and I didn't have any friends. I yearned for my life in Mexico, especially on the holidays. In the United States, the holidays were sterile and lonely with no family celebrations or good home cooked food. Christmas in America was nothing like the festive celebrations in Mexico.

Three years later, I graduated high school and spoke enough English to get a job waiting tables. I wanted to be a computer technician, but the lack of papers kept me from going to college. My life changed, when I met a blue-eyed blonde named Tara. I met Tara while waiting on her and her friends one summer day. She was sixteen, the daughter of an unemployed truck driver and a stay-at-home mom. She lived in a trailer park with her grandmother and two other sisters. Her father was a drunk and her mother, unfortunately, a drug addict. We married six months after we met at the Arizona courthouse. We didn't have a party. We didn't have a cake. The only person who attended our wedding was my uncle Jose. It didn't matter to us. We were happy.

My marriage to Tara didn't change anything. I remained undocumented, of course. Since I entered the United States "illegally," my marriage didn't change my status, but I was fine with it. I had Tara and to me that was all I cared about.

Tara and I rented our own apartment in central Phoenix. She graduated high school and began working at Ross as a cashier. I took a series of low-paying jobs to provide for my wife. I sometimes used her social security to work or bought fake documents to land jobs. I assisted carpenters, painted houses, flipped burgers, and washed dishes to make ends meet. In 2005, I was hired as a painter with a crew that painted public funded projects. I painted hospitals, casinos, fire stations, multimillion dollar homes, restaurants and Phoenix's Sky Harbor airport. I made about \$2,000 a month. It was good money, I thought. That same year, I became a father to my first son Miguel. By then, we owned a condo and two cars. I really felt like I was living the American Dream. I had a job, a home, and a small family of my own.

In 2007, Tara gave birth to our second son Mark. She stopped working permanently and became a stay-at-home mom. With me personally, something started to change. I felt tired a lot of the times. I would call in sick at least once a week. My back ached and I felt nauseated most days. One morning, I couldn't even get out of bed, that Tara drove me to the emergency room. After a series of tests, I was diagnosed

with renal disease. I didn't know what the doctors were talking about when they mentioned kidneys. All I knew was that it seemed serious and I needed help. A social worker explained to me that it was necessary for me to receive emergency treatment if I wanted to live. I couldn't afford the treatment needed. The treatment for renal disease was about \$36,000 per year, not including doctor visits. State laws and my undocumented status, unfortunately, prevented me from receiving any financial assistance. Undocumented immigrants were banned from getting any public funded health services in the state of Arizona. I also had no insurance. For most of my time in the United States, I avoided the doctor and hospital at all costs. If it wasn't serious, I wouldn't go. But sadly, there was no avoiding this.

Later that year, my social worker called me and said that I was eligible for emergency medical service, regardless of my status. Apparently, the state of Arizona was forced to pay for my dialysis indefinitely under a disability law because it was a life-threatening emergency. The doctors told me that I could survive on the dialysis for about five years. But after just a few months, I needed a kidney transplant to stay alive. Of course, the state would not pay for a kidney transplant for an undocumented immigrant like me. Plus, transplants weren't considered life-saving emergencies under health regulations. It was then that I realized the gravity of my illness. I didn't have much time to live without a transplant. I had lost control of my life. Nothing seemed easy now. My wife was working two jobs to keep us afloat. My eyesight was failing and my weight dropped from 250 to 200 pounds. We lost the condo. We lost our cars. With less income and more medical expenses, our financial problems mounted. My American Dream had evaporated. No kidney transplant. No condo. No health insurance. No documents. And soon no money.

After just a year of dialysis, collection agencies called every day. Without me working, we weren't making the bills on time and couldn't afford to live in Phoenix anymore. I decided I was going to move back to Mexico to be with my mother. In Mexico, transplants and dialysis were free. My mother and sister were also willing to donate a kidney to me. Everything seemed more hopeful in Mexico City than in Phoenix. My family and I would take our \$4,000 in savings and move to Mexico. In April of 2009, I went to my last dialysis before leaving for the airport. I knew that if I didn't

have a dialysis before I left, I risked dying. I had a plan. We were going to go to Mexico, get a transplant, save money and come back to Phoenix. That was the plan.

Once in Mexico City, my plans began collapsing. I had no transplant donors. My mother, sister and wife were no match. Because I never worked in Mexico, I didn't qualify for funded medical assistance. I had to pay for my dialysis and medicines. And it was too much. Our savings had dwindled from \$4,000 to \$1,800 because of my medical costs. There were days that I wondered if I was going to make it. With the money we had left, we decided I'd go back to Phoenix to get the medical help I needed. I couldn't get a transplant, but I could still get dialysis. I felt like a fool. Why hadn't I just stayed in Phoenix in the first place? Now I had to go back and leave my family behind, to stay alive. I set out to cross the border through Nogales, Sonora. I called my *tío* Jose to make arrangements to be picked up. I did make it to Phoenix again.

A few months after I arrived, Chandler police and federal agents conducted a raid where I had started working, arresting all undocumented immigrants. At that time, I was working at a local car wash in Phoenix, cleaning cars. The raid terrified me. I was told that the people of Arizona wanted "illegal aliens" gone and I too would soon be deported...I was taken to a county jail at first, then transported here, to this detention center. It didn't take long for them to learn that I was ill. I passed out in a van, as they transported me to the detention facility. Since being detained, my treatments have dropped down to twice a week with little medication. I sleep a lot. I feel worse than before, but try to hang on. I want to see my family again, even if it's for the last time...

Mario/Marisol Guerra

La Vida Loca

Conocimiento Común

Yo sé
Tú sabes
Todos
Sabén
Y aún así
Nadie
Parece
saber

Common Knowledge

I know
you know
everybody
Knows
and yet
nobody
seems
to know

Dialéctica del Amor/Dialectics of Love

Francisco X. Alarcón

Nací en 1977 en Tehuacán, Puebla. My parents owned a *carnicería*, a meat market, which supported their three sons and two daughters. We lived comfortably in Mexico. We weren't rich, but we weren't poor either. I would say my family was working class. Our house had 3 bedrooms and one bathroom. We lived just a 10-minute drive from the main city. As a child, I attended a catholic private school, played *fútbol* and helped out with the family business.

Growing up, I knew that I felt different. I felt different in the sense that I wanted to wear dresses, play with dolls and spend time with my sisters instead of my brothers. I was also very close to my mother. In a sense, I really felt favored by her. She always confided in me and defended me against my father. My father and I, on the other hand didn't have much of a relationship. He called me lazy and sometimes would say that I was worthless. I felt as if my own father hated me because he knew. Although my parents never mentioned it, I think they knew, I think they knew that I was gay.

For years I kept my feelings to myself. I hated myself because I was attracted to boys, partly because I was catholic. At school I was told that being gay was a terrible sin and could mean in spending your afterlife burning in hell. At school, when other students would ask if I was gay or queer, I denied it. I tried to partake in "masculine" activities by playing sports and joking about girls. Sometimes I even told myself, "I will like girls someday." But deep down inside, I worried about myself.

I had my first sexual encounter with another man when I was 14 years old—with a 19 year-old neighbor. I never viewed this particular experience as child sex abuse, but rather a pleasurable awakening. I had crossed my first border into a forbidden world, which I would never leave. It was the high point of my human experience up to that point. *Era un joto*, I was gay. Still, though, I didn't tell anyone about my new-found sexuality for a long time.

When I turned fifteen, I dropped out of school to work at a blue-jean *maquiladora* (factory) in my hometown. I worked nine hours a day, six days a week sewing jeans that would be shipped out to the United States. I was paid about three to four hundred dollars a month. It wasn't much, but I was still living at home, so it worked. After work or on my days off, I would spend my nights in la plaza eyeing other gay men and sometimes even married men. I called them *mayates*.

By the time I was nineteen, I'd had several sexual experiences with other men: gay, straight, bisexual, and married. However, I felt empty. I still felt as if something were missing. I was bored, I yearned for something more. It was then that I crossed another border. At twenty, I began dressing up as woman. I'd take the bus to a nearby town, where my friend Alicia lived, and dress as a woman there. I became Marisol. With my long black hair, revealing dresses and platform heels, I worked part-time as a prostitute. I hung out in local bars and recruited my clients from there. A lot of my clients were married men or guys with girlfriends.

It wasn't easy being Marisol. I was taunted on the street with insults like: *maricon*, *pinche joto*, *puto joto*. Some of my transvestite friends were raped and beaten up. Being a homosexual or a transvestite was looked down upon in Mexico. People weren't very accepting. I managed to escape most of the violence, until one day I was almost stoned to death...

One night, I volunteered to work at a booth in a carnival dressed as a transvestite. A gang of boys began throwing stones at me and calling me names. I managed to get away. After that incident and because of my mother's health, I decided to go to the United States. My motivation was twofold. I needed money to help pay for my mother's medical bills and was tired of all the persecution I was experiencing for

being gay. I had heard that the United States accepted homosexuals. They were treated with dignity and respect... even transvestites.

In 1998, I decided to go to the United States. I had a friend in Phoenix, who said he would help me with lodging and work if I made it across. I am going to the United States, I told my mother. She must have sensed my reasons because she didn't ask me any questions, but simply gave me her blessing. I promised her that if I made it over, I would send money and return to Mexico to visit.

One day early in April of 1998, I traveled by bus from *Tehuacan* to *Agua Prieta*, a town in Sonora, where coyotes smuggled immigrants across the border. I was picked up in a ranch on the Mexican side of the border with 13 other immigrants. The ranch was a staging area for human smugglers. A couple hours later, I found myself on the other side of *la línea*. Arizona was dusty, full of cacti and rock, but more than anything hot. I was delivered to my friend (Gus), who waited in a car off highway 80 for \$1,200 American dollars. Gus paid the coyote and we drove to Phoenix that same night.

Early the next morning, I went straight to work. Gus already had a job awaiting me to pay off the debt that I had owed him for the coyote. I worked as a painter for about seven dollars an hour at the time. I was paid in cash because I had no legal papers or identity really, except my passport from Mexico. I earned twice as much in Phoenix than in Mexico. It amazed me how much I was able to make in just one month. For me, making two thousand a month was a lot of money. As soon as I paid off my debt, I was able to begin my life in Phoenix, Arizona.

I fell in love with Phoenix. It was a different world than that of Mexico. Compared to Mexico, Phoenix was new, big, and exciting. It was also culturally segregated. Latinos, Blacks and Whites lived side by side, but in different worlds. I didn't feel the need to learn English because most of my community was the undocumented Latino people. Everywhere I went people were hired without papers. Hundreds of establishments in Phoenix hired undocumented immigrants for work. It was never an issue finding a job or living in Arizona "*sin papeles*." All my close friends were undocumented. Personally, I no longer had to be the closeted gay prostitute. In America, I was able to announce that I was gay and no one seemed to care. I still dressed like a woman and went to bars, but this time I didn't have to sell myself for

money. I dressed up for the fun of it and because I liked being Marisol. Most of my encounters as Marisol were with migrant men, who were miles away from their wives and girlfriends. I, unfortunately, ended up falling in love with one.

I met Pancho one night at a bar in Phoenix. His real name was Francisco, but he went by Pancho. He was an undocumented immigrant (like myself) from southern Mexico and worked in construction. Pancho was a married man. He lived in Phoenix with his wife and three kids in a trailer park with two bedrooms. Sometimes he invited me to his house for dinner with his family. Pancho would tell his wife that I was a good friend from work. I don't think his wife (Yolanda) ever suspected of our affair. Over the years, I fell madly in love with Pancho. We saw each other as much as possible for over 5 years. He was tall, slender, handsome, dark hair, light hazel eyes, and dressed like a *vaquero*. He took me out and bought me gifts, both as Mario and Marisol. He told me that he loved me and promised that he would one day leave his wife for me. I believed him and promised to wait for him.

My life in Phoenix seemed to be a dream come true. I had a good job as a painter and an apartment that I shared with another friend. I was able to send money to Mexico to my family. I was able to be freely me with no shame and I was in love. It wasn't until 2007 that I received a phone call from Pancho. Pancho was picked up by the police and would soon be deported back to Mexico. He was asked for his legal papers by the cops and had none to show. His status was an "illegal alien." He was deported to Mexico within days. At first, Pancho would call me every day and say that he would come back to Phoenix. He promised that we would be together again, one day. After a few months, the phone calls stopped. Sometimes, I would bump into his wife, Yolanda and ask her about him. She herself was struggling to make ends meet working at a local Jack in the Box. She would say that Pancho was trying to come back, but that it was too expensive. That's the last I knew about him.

In 2008, I lost my job in Phoenix because of the Employer Sanctions Act against hiring undocumented immigrants in Arizona. I applied for different jobs on a daily basis. I was turned away from fast-food restaurants and construction companies. I had no proof of papers. The state of Arizona seemed to have turned against all undocumented immigrants. I could go nowhere without fearing deportation. I hated the so-called racist

Sheriff Arpaio's raids and attacks on immigrants. I felt trapped without a job. My savings began depleting because of my monthly share of rent and food. Like all other undocumented immigrants, I began living in the shadows. I didn't leave my house, except for food. I wanted to leave Arizona, but had no money to go anywhere. After 10 months, I moved in with another friend because I could no longer afford the rent for my apartment. There were days that I thought of prostituting myself again for money and returning to Mexico. I hoped for immigration reform instead.

In July of 2009, I received a phone call from Pancho. He was in Tijuana and wanted to see me. He was on his way to Texas, where he had heard that there was work for undocumented people. We could be together again he said. I was still in love with Pancho. I thought about moving to Texas, but then I changed my mind. I never thought that I would react the way I did. I decided to stay in Phoenix instead. Why should I be with someone who was never going to leave his wife? Or with someone who was ashamed of his sexuality? I deserved better. Maybe one day, I would meet a man who really loved me...

As I sit in this detention center now, August of 2014, I am grateful for all the opportunities and experiences that I've gone through. I feel so fortunate of having had the chance to come to the United States. It has been good to me. More good than bad I like to think. I won't get into the details of how I ended up here, but here I am. I've been here for almost one year and still now, I have no legal representation. I haven't been deported; I haven't stood in front of a judge to determine my fate, so here I am. *Aqui estoy, esperando*. Still hoping for immigration reform...

Conclusion

In Lak Ech

Tú Eres mi otro yo/You are my other me.

Si te hago daño a tí/If do harm to you,

Me hago daño a mí mismo/I do harm to myself;

Si te amo y respeto/If I love and respect you,

Me amo y respeto yo/I love and respect myself.

- Quote by Luis Valdez

The purpose of this study was to go beyond the myths and stereotypes and acknowledge the full humanity of undocumented immigrants. Much of my research efforts were to give a glimpse of the complexity of their stories, the richness of their narratives, and profoundness of their experiences. Like all people, they have dreams and sometimes even make mistakes. Their lives are much more than the potent images and broad claims circulating the media and popular discourse. When they are not being detained or deported, abused or dehumanized because of their status—they are (like you and me) working hard every day to provide and keep their families safe. Their story is a testimony of the unified struggle of what it means to be an illegal immigrant within this country. Undocumented immigration is not solely an issue tied to corrupt foreign governments and policies, but a humanitarian one. Until then, we cannot begin to understand the issue of unauthorized immigration, unless we begin listening to these “illegals” directly.

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