

Paradox of Performing Exceptionalism: Complicating the Deserving/ Underserving Binary of Undocumented Youth Attending Elite Institutions

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Abstract

This article examines the problematic labels of “deserving” and “undeserving” within a broader context of undocumented immigration. Specifically, we interrogate the categorization of “deservingness” that imposes distinctions between “good” versus “bad” immigrants. We demonstrate these categories are assumed and subverted by undocumented youth in order to challenge disempowerment and racism experienced at both an interpersonal and institutional level. Our findings reveal how narratives of hard work and perseverance mitigate stigma to help youth reframe narratives of “undeservingness” at a micro-level of analysis. By contrast, racialization shapes individuals’ experiences and motivations for activism at the macro-level. This study highlights narrative strategies used by youth to frame their accounts of inclusion and exclusion. It also contributes to the scholarship of undocumented youth in higher education through its examination of the experiences of Latin@ undocumented students in northeastern elite private institutions.

Introduction

The terrain has shifted both legislatively and culturally since the DREAM Act was first introduced.¹ But the story of undocumented youth does not end with the defeat of the DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act by the U.S. Senate in 2007 or the implementation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. It continues—vigorously. In the face of a hostile climate of nativism that has drawn on damaging, if not negative, discourses surrounding undocumented immigration, a contingent of Latin@ undocumented youth have used activism to regain control over their images and representations.²

In this article, we examine the relationship between “deserving” and “undeserving” migrants by focusing on the narratives of undocumented youth making sense of experiences fraught with complexity. Our analysis integrates research about undocumented youth in a geographical location for which there is relatively little research. Scholarly attention has documented the experiences of DREAM-eligible youth in several states with successful enactment of in-state tuition bills granting undocumented youth the possibility to attend college, showing how these experiences play out differently in educational systems across the country. These states include: California (Abrego, 2008; Gonzales, 2011; Seif, 2004), Illinois (Diaz-Strong & Meiners, 2007), Texas (Jauregui, Slate, & Brown, 2008), New York (Muñoz, 2009), North Carolina (Lopez, 2010), Washington (Stevenson, 2004), and the general Midwest (Morales, Herrera, & Murry, 2009). However, with the exception of Jefferies’ (2014) ethnography of undocumented immigrant youths’ navigation of high school enrollment in the state of Massachusetts, little scholarly attention has been paid to northeast regions, where Latino youth populations are also present. The U.S. Census indicates that approximately 206,000 undocumented immigrants live in New England, and about 121,000 are under age 35, and thus would have been potentially eligible for DREAM Act benefits (Aaron, 2010). Also, while few students who have disclosed their immigration status are enrolled at elite schools, the annually held Ivy League Immigrants’ Rights Coalition Summit shows a changing trend and growing politicized student body with awareness of such issues.

This study expands such scholarship by reflecting on the marginalized voices of undocumented student activists in elite private institutions in the northeast. It also contributes to a broadened scholarship on migration

¹ First introduced in 2001, and modified numerous times, the latest version of the DREAM Act (H.R. 6497, 2010; S. 3992, 2010) stipulates that candidates who completed two years of college or served two years in the U.S. military; have lived in the United States for at least five years; were between the ages of 12 and 29 at the time of bill enactment; possessed no criminal record; and demonstrated good moral character, would then be eligible to apply for conditional legal residency after a 10-year waiting period.

through a consideration of youth struggling against forces of exclusion and creating new possibilities for inclusion through narratives around their engagement of macro and micro-levels. By featuring what we term, the “paradox of performing exceptionalism,” we bring light to the complicated tension that these students experience—that is, despite the “entitlement” of their elite education youth continue to be racialized as undocumented students of color. We suggest it is as important to point to the sense of disillusionment with the educational system, as it is to discuss the limitations faced by Ivy League students despite their efforts to assimilate. While assimilation is often thought of as a method for stripping off one’s cultural roots, student narratives featured in our study suggest students use assimilation strategies to overcome exclusion, by becoming “Americanized,” within a broader structure that disempowers them. Given their undocumented status, students may seek assimilation as a means to an end. In the cases we discuss, “passing” as “American,” allows students to partake in privileges that are part of the elite private educational experience. Students we interviewed described a freedom they experienced being part of the exclusivity of elite higher education, and the removed pressure they felt from having to deal with anti-immigrant onslaughts on a daily basis because of the institutional/geographic setting. At the same time, despite the privileges of their elite environment and their relative assimilation, the undocumented students in this study remained closely linked to their family, took pride in their cultural background and effectively navigated particular challenges.

The following critical analysis draws from first-person accounts of undocumented youth to highlight the ways that undocumented youth overcome the limitations of categorization that subject them as “undeserving” by reframing their narratives around inclusion and ultimately, ways in which they are “deserving.” We begin by reviewing the scholarship on undocumented youth in the educational context. Next, we demonstrate our method of analysis. Next, we discuss the emerging themes derived from students’ engagement in personal and political advocacy. We then examine students’ strategies for overcoming racialized narratives that strive to limit their rights as citizens. We conclude with a discussion on the implications of a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of undocumented Latin@ students in the United States.

Undocumented Youth: Exclusion, Inclusion, and Belonging

The question of whether or not to provide undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship is hotly debated in the public, many opposing it based on nativist thoughts that to do so would harm the cultural fabric. Nativism, produced by political and economic efficiencies and structured by law and legal discourses about citizenship, is part of the larger discourse that demonizes undocumented immigrants (Chávez, 2008). The dichotomy of “illegality” versus “legality” fostered by terminology of *illegal alien* has garnered significant attention by law and humanities scholars alike, which note the prominence of this legal description that emphasizes foreignness (Ngai, 2004). The category has been shown to be a powerful rationalization tool to justify harsh treatment and restrictive immigration policy (Johnson, 2004; Nevins, 2002). There is extensive research and accounts of the way in which illegality is socially constructed to systematically exclude groups of people deemed undesirable and “undeserving” (Chávez, 2007; Chomsky, 2014; Johnson, 2004; Marciniak, 2013; Ngai, 2004).

Latin@ Undocumented Youth in (Elite) Universities

To understand the undocumented student population, it is necessary to look at the social and political factors that impact them. It is equally important to examine the ways in which undocumented students resist exclusionary discourses and structures, by reframing their own narratives and navigating the challenges and benefits of their experience. The educational experiences of undocumented youth begin with knowledge that undocumented youth require specialized informational resources as a result of the institutional barriers created by their legal status. Latin@ undocumented students are especially vulnerable to the challenges of attending higher education, including: financial, academic, emotional, and career challenges faced in pursuit of their higher education goals (Contreras, 2009; Covarrubias & Lara, 2013; Hernandez et al., 2010; Rodríguez, 2011; Torres, 2014). For example, being “pushed-out” speaks to the challenges students face in the K-12 educational process, but in the matter of undocumented youth in the East Coast, Jefferies (2014) notes the circumstances that either delay or keep youth from enrolling in East Coast high schools all together (e.g., deportation and de facto economic policies that places them in low-wage manual labor create their “illegal” condition). Among other

things, these experiences present formidable challenges if and when they attend higher education.

Of those that *do* go on to higher education, the ethnographic studies of undocumented Latin@ youth consistently show how undocumented youths' precarious legal status translates into additional risk factors and sources of stress. Specifically, growing literature on Mexican undocumented youth highlights the remarkable resilience and admirable determination of Latin@ undocumented youth as they face barriers in the educational process at different levels (Enriquez, 2011; Wilson, Ek, & Douglas, 2014). While both documented and undocumented immigrant Latin@ youth face similar educational and psychological risks, we know that the transition into predominately White, highly selective institutions, is different for Latin@ students (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Gonzales, Suarez-Orozco & Dedios-Sanguineti, 2013; Lopez, 2013). The work of Pérez and colleagues (2009) features the variability among undocumented students, as depending on "risk exposure"—the environmental factors that impact academic, psychological, and social functioning in the Latino adolescent population. Resilient students are said to have higher levels of environmental protective factors; however, little research centers on understanding the educational experiences of undocumented students effectively navigating the high adversity situation of attending Ivy League or elite institutions (Zepeda-Millán, 2014).

Latin@ Undocumented Youth

Considerable media, research, and policy debates about this issue—despite the small size of undocumented college student population— can be attributed in part to the advocacy efforts towards to the federal DREAM Act. Despite the diversity of experiences among undocumented youth, there are those that have responded to nativism by engaging in activism. More research has been conducted on immigrant youth involvement in activism and community building as the movement has gained interdisciplinary attention in the last several years (Abrego, 2008, 2011; Gonzales, 2011; Olivas, 2012; Pérez Huber, Lopez, Malagon, Velez, & Solorzane, 2008; Seif, 2010). In the matter of how immigrant youth confront and resist inequities, studies have specifically explored cultural and sociopolitical contexts affecting Latin@ immigrant youth. For example, the inherent hazards of activism, given the legal restrictions encountered by these youths, mark DREAM Act-related organizing efforts as remarkable acts of resistance. Negrón-Gonzales (2013) focuses on this population and features the helpful concept of *oppositional consciousness*, or the ability to confront the political system forged through the constant navigation of "illegality."

However, the traditionally binary discourse of immigrants means those undocumented students are often both extolled as fitting into liberal conceptions of the "good" immigrant and as perpetuating a discourse of "exceptionalism." The greater visibility of youth who have spoken out about their status has left them open to critique about their advocacy activities. A consequence of greater visibility and vocality means that the media has covered the undocumented immigrant youth movement with greater frequency, often framing DREAMers' activism as acts of deviancy (Vélez, Pérez Huber, Benavides Lopez, de la Luz, & Solórzano, 2008). The civil life of Latin@ immigrant youth, then, is another point of differentiation between DREAMers and the rest of the immigration-rights movement (Pérez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2010; Seif, 2010). Undocumented college students who connected around access for educational opportunities used the disidentifying strategy of distancing themselves from other immigrants (Anguiano & Chávez, 2011). However, advocacy for the DREAM Act, as a stand-alone approach, was critiqued as coming at the possible cost to the larger pro-immigrant campaign. When the DREAMers positioned themselves as unique, they were painted as disrupting the image of a unified and collective immigrant-rights coalition (Anguiano, 2015). Their strategy, critics argue, resulted in a negative depiction and critique of undocumented immigrant youth.

Methodology

This project is based on interview methodology. While we know much about the experiences of undocumented students in public institutions, few researchers have focused on the experiences of students in private institutions. While Latino youth share experiences with students in public education, many New England private colleges are located in isolated communities peppered through Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Maine,

New Hampshire, and Vermont. Geographic isolation is compounded by cultural distance from communities of color and anti-immigrant sentiment. Our research emerged as an effort to raise awareness on our own campus regarding Latin@ migration and to advocate for undocumented youth.

It is difficult to know the exact number of undocumented youth enrolled at private institutions, like the one described in this article. Since most higher education systems or institutions do not collect or publish their undocumented student enrollment figures, and because unless students come forth and expose themselves as undocumented, their status remains invisible in these institutions. Consequently, our study is based on interviews among students who came forth and self-identified as undocumented.² We began by soliciting the participation of students with whom we were acquainted. They in turn invited other students whom they knew. The anonymity of undocumented youth on campus at the administrative level contributed to our small sample size. We conducted seven interviews with students who self-described as Latin@s (with home countries mainly from Mexico, but included Peru and Colombia) and whose grade standing ranged from freshmen to graduating seniors at the time of the interview. Of our interviewees, two were female and five were male. At the time of our interviews, only two had successfully been granted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status by the government. All interviews were conducted in English by the authors. Interviews were open ended, semi-structured and lasted approximately one hour each. We recorded all of our interview sessions and transcribed. The following Table I provides a detailed listing of research participants by category (demographic information withheld).

Table I. Breakdown of Research Participants by Category

Identifier	Gender	Age	Student Status	Ethnicity
D	Female	19	Freshman; DACAmented	Colombian
C	Male	19	Sophomore; Undocumented	Mexican
B	Male	20	Sophomore; DACAmented	Mexican
A	Male	20	Senior; Undocumented	Mexican
E	Male	22	Senior; DACAmented	Mexican
P	Male	22	Senior; DACAmented	Peruvian
Z	Female	22	Senior; DACAmented	Mexican

Our interview method and data analysis permitted us to focus on the vernacular voices of undocumented youth within one such elite institution. Transcriptions were analyzed using the qualitative software *Dedoose*, which provides an organized platform for managing, shaping, and making sense of data. It has been proven useful for expediting data coding, sorting, and analysis. Working collaboratively, both authors coded each interview independently and then collectively determined the final codes used in this analysis.

Results

The categorization applied to immigrants as “deserving” and “undeserving” is fraught with tension. The resulting themes that emerged showed a dichotomy that emphasizes both macro (structural) and micro (interpersonal) levels of analysis. In the following section we show how undocumented youth negotiate between “deserving” and “undeserving” categorizations. At the micro level individual narratives focus on interpersonal relations with family and members of their ethnic community while macro levels stress their interactions with

² Institutional Review Board application was completed and university permission was granted as a mean to ensure proper protocol and anonymity; we use a letter as pseudonyms to protect the student identities.

university institutional and/or national culture. Ultimately, hard work and perseverance mitigate stigma and help immigrants reframe narratives of “undeserving” towards those of “deserving” at a micro-level of analysis, while at the macro level, racialization shapes individuals’ experiences and motivations for activism.

Micro Interpersonal Narratives: “I just feel incredibly lucky”

Based on the interviews and themes derived from coding our data we have more insight into the micro narratives of hard work. Specifically, perseverance mitigates stigma and work to reframe narratives of “undeserving” to ones that emphasize “deservingness.” The students we spoke with described several factors that shaped the manner in which they navigate the interpersonal elements that challenges the experienced dichotomy of privilege against oppression. These respondents described the paradox of the performance of exceptionalism with elements that we coupled into the following themes: *narratives of perseverance and hard work*, *family responsibility*, and *fortune and privilege*.

Narratives of perseverance and hard work. The problem remains frustratingly persistent: an elite education remains the privilege of very few. Or in blunt terms, “Rich kids graduate; poor and working-class kids don’t” (Tough, 2014). Gonzales (2011) has made it clear that structural barriers further complicate postsecondary matriculation of undocumented students (either in-state tuition is not available or minimized by federal laws barring students from receiving financial aid). One of our participating students, E, put it best: “For first generation students, for students of poorer socio-economic backgrounds, and for undocumented students, at the end of the day, the decision [to attend an elite institution] is a lot harder just because you want to help your community. But on the other hand, you know your family’s bank account, your own bank account, so, that’s a different thing.” Meaning, these institutions come at a prohibitive cost to their family’s financial possibilities. But certain institutions, in the hopes of diversifying its student body and giving low-income, high-achieving undocumented students a chance at a private or public elite education, do support accepted applicants financially. Add the long-held assumption of success, meant to come from attending an elite institution, and we see why Latin@ undocumented youth would matriculate at a predominantly white institution.

Acceptance into an elite school illustrates their “deserving” status, as many of the students shared the narratives of high persistence that it took to meet the high levels of rigor demanded by the admission requirements. Students spoke of the challenging obstacles, motivation, and discipline it took to achieve the necessary elements that made them competitive students, including GPA and SAT scores. One student tells of putting quotes on his desk and literally marking capital letters in the word “persevere.”

After the students *do* persevere and are admitted, what is seldom touched upon—likely because of the small numbers of undocumented students in elite higher education institutions—is the crucial question of what happens once on campus. Education scholars have looked beyond the financial expenses of higher education and into the added challenges students of color face in comparison to the dominant student population. In the course of our interviews, the respondents reported feelings of guilt, alienation, and at times sinking self-confidence. Overwhelmingly, participants experienced recurring instances of feeling “undeserving,” akin to the question of, “Do I really belong here?” While such concern may be characteristic of what many low-income or first generation students of color experience, in the case of these undocumented youth, it was expressed within a bittersweet acknowledgement of the privilege of “being here.” At the same time, they conveyed a sense that no matter how challenging it was, or how disappointing the difficulty of the situation can be, somehow their efforts could be worthwhile. Along with other Latin@ student populations who exhibit high academic achievement by relying on effective coping strategies, the story of student success does not provide us with the entire story of what is happening on campus. What is important from these narratives is *how* they navigate the tensions that are inherent in the process of attending higher education.

Family Responsibility. This refusal to fail, as a goal, is noted by one student, E, who shows such tenacity, “I’m going to succeed, I’m going to prove all of you wrong.” However, a majority of students considered the privilege of attending an elite institution and succeeding part and parcel with *repaying their families*. In reflecting about his high school days, one young man, describes himself as a “jerk” who really did not put much effort into

his school work and falls short of deserving rewards associated with completing this rite of passage when he reflects on his parents own sacrifice.

C: Parents gave up everything, everything. Their parents. Their brothers and sisters. Their whole family. Their country. Everything they love just to come here and give you a shot; not even a guarantee, just a chance. And it'd be a real slap in the face to your parents to blow that.

To be sure, our participants valued the sacrifice of their parents/family as a crucial motivating factor. As one of the students shared:

D: By seeing the sacrifice of my parents, and that being a motivational factor and just that there's a reason why we're struggling in the United States...I think, to a bigger extent, I've talked to a couple of people about this, just this sense of responsibility for your family and that they've invested so much effort and money into you, in a way, for me to be here and then, like, how am I going to repay that? As in, you are the one with the opportunity to help the entire family move forward.

Similarly, another student commented:

A: One of the reasons why I've always pushed myself so hard and tried to be the best that I can be is because I always think about the sacrifices my parents made to have my brother and I to be here. I think about the idea that my parents continue to do so much for my brother and I and it's almost like I owe it to them, that as somebody who does have the opportunities that my parents do not and did not have, that I must take advantage of these.

Fortune and Privilege. The students also reported the strength to understand themselves vis-à-vis others, and being unlike the majority of the population who take their citizenship and privilege for granted. Undocumented students like the young man described below must fight to belong.

P: I think that one of the things that it has given me is a lot of perspective, because I think that a lot of kids that grow up privileged don't appreciate all the doors that are in front of them. For me and my family, most of the doors that we've wanted to walk through we've had to struggle and climb and claw to get there, and then struggle even more to bust it open, because we weren't getting any help to bust it open. Growing up in the way that I have, it may still be more opportunities than most – and I think that this is something that someone who grew up privileged wouldn't say – despite all the hardship, I still have a roof over my head, all the food I would want to eat, and a lot of family, and that already puts me better off than 97% than the rest of the world...But yeah, even just the fact that I have that chance it's one of the things that I'm appreciative of. It's tougher for me than it is for others, but I still have it way better than most. I just feel incredibly lucky.

That articulated tension and unease, along with the many reasons why they are “deserving,” is a question posed in juxtaposition to the question of, “And why not others?” For example, students acknowledged privilege as something that had to be paid forward:

D: I'm going to repay that by doing really well in school, getting here, coming out with a degree, and then doing something else...I think that, seeing how privileged I am to be here in the first place, has motivated me to get the tools, get the knowledge to slowly but surely help... to empower others to overcome the barriers that I faced, in a way. So there's this sense of giving back, to the immigrant community; there is this sense of empowering them, too, to be where I'm

at just because when I look at myself, when I look at my experience, I ask, why me and why not him, or her?

This respondent, like many other Latin@ students felt, responsibility to give back and were acutely aware of the capriciousness of the way socioeconomic issues are a factor.

B: We have to fight for the rest of the kids because it's not fair that I get it just because I'm a good student. What about kids who aren't 7.0 GPA's because they have 3 jobs and they have to raise their families? And I was fortunate enough that my parents told me that I didn't have to work because they wanted me to focus on my school/studies, but I know that not every immigrant family is as lucky.

The hard work, perseverance, and resilience they express is buttressed against a sense of fortune/gratitude that features a community-centered perspective. The sense that others from their *communities* and other undocumented youth were not able to attend these types of schools is featured in their interpersonal reflection. Such testimonials points to the sense of responsibility towards their family, community, and just as importantly, to their counterparts:

A: And my uniqueness I feel that, as I mentioned earlier, I've been very fortunate throughout a string of circumstances that one may call fate of coincidence or just random (unclear) to be where I am today. It is a select few students, especially immigrant students, who can even attend college, or who even think attending college is a possibility. I'm one of the few who does have that opportunity, and more importantly to attend such an elite place.

Seeing this opportunity to be part of the "Ivory Tower," only afforded to such a small minority, exacerbates the sense of obligation. Take for example, D's comment:

D: So there's this sense of giving back, to the immigrant community; there is this sense of empowering them, too, to be where I'm at just because when I look at myself, when I look at my experience, I ask, why me and why not him, or her? And when I look at my middle school class, my high school class there are a lot of immigrant youth, you can say 1.5 generation, but they didn't make it out of high school, and so, that experience, their experience, in contrast to my experience, has motivated me to try and empower others to not face that same fate.

As D notes, a Colombian migrant, her community-centered approach did not reflect the desire for direct reciprocity, but to put resources afforded to her to good use by persisting in others educational endeavors and empowering others along the way. When Enriquez (2011) looked at educational paths of undocumented Latin@ college students who pursued higher education he found success came from espousing a more collectivist framework of empowerment. That study, like others, defines reciprocity as an element in undocumented students that strategically functions to give them continued commitment to give back to the community and create social change. For instance, that same student, D, goes on to describe the way that impacts her academic decisions.

D: And so, there's that divide between doing something that's going to be lucrative, that's going to give you a lot of money to help your family move forward, and then there's doing something to help your community move forward.

This response highlights the ways economic stability largely intertwined with the sacrifice of their families, but also with the feeling of responsibility for making it on behalf of all other undocumented youth. Next, we feature the macro systems levels experienced by our participants.

Macro Structural Narratives: "They are aware we are here but they don't acknowledge us"

These "deserving"/"undeserving" themes point to undocumented youth experiences existing against

the backdrop of politically legislated and socio-cultural power structures. Identifying the rhetoric of illegality as connected to the production of racism, and the inescapable truth that no matter the level of sophistication of student strategies, structural and institutionalized forces are still present. The students we spoke with described elements around the larger standing issues of the paradox of exceptionalism that we discuss. We coupled their responses into the following themes: *institutional hardships*, *questioning the 'American Dream'* and around *activism*.

Institutional hardships. Universities place great value in international learning, and elite institutions take even more pride in the networking advantages that come from offered internships and research opportunities. The tradeoff expressed here lies in the dichotomy between students' sense of privilege and entitlement versus the overwhelming disadvantages from their status as a "non-citizen student." This was a prevalent theme that was expressed by a number of students as being deprived of important parts of the college experience. A student who had just graduated from the university reflected on what that meant and noted:

P: I couldn't really get any meaningful internship opportunities, which kinda sucks because that's supposed to be a substantial part of your undergraduate education. Likewise with study abroad... There is nothing I can do.

P recounts the paradox of education and the limited job opportunities with undocumented status. Such everyday burdens included: devalued perspectives, inability for study abroad, denied travel and internship opportunities, professors expressing hostile things about immigrants, to a general questioned presence of undocumented youth on campus. This is just scratching the surface on the range of combinations that might create inequity or dissuade students from one major or another.

Undocumented students like the ones interviewed in this study, often feel marginalized by their experiences in higher education in spite of their graduation from one of the most selective elite schools in the nation. For students like the young man described below, graduation is a bittersweet moment. While they celebrate their accomplishments, it reminds them of the limitations this country's policies have set in place. That same student, P, lamented, "I'm going to graduate soon. I have not been able to gain any meaningful internship experiences, and that for me foreshadowed a struggle in finding employment." The state's stringent immigration policies thus limit his social and economic mobility. It is not surprising that despite the privilege of being educated in this country, he cannot fully embrace it.

Questioning the American Dream. Another important feature of these undocumented Latin@s were their attitude toward the meritocracy of the "American Dream." An engineering major who was set to graduate at the time of the interview remarked about the educational process in this way:

E: It's not really true, sadly; it's a lie [the American dream]. The whole idea of, if you really want it you can get it, it's a lie. And that's something that I came to learn when I was here.

By highlighting the existence of racism through the double standards the undocumented community faces, our participants allowed us to see ways career opportunities are biased. Another student who had just graduated and was moving towards her post-bachelorette stage noted:

Z: So for a really long time I saw the United States as an enemy, just because it wasn't doing everything that it could for my brothers and my family. They gave us high school education, sometimes even a college education, and when we're actually ready to put our knowledge to use, they don't allow us to.

The majority of interviewees in this study, including those who were undocumented and DACAmented expressed ambivalence towards the U.S., not considering themselves as "Americans." Several dialogues focused on whiteness as an organizing structure of the U.S. that limits migrants, based on inherent inequity and forms of

racialization. For example, one student spoke about the way the U.S. limits options for success.

P: So my connection to the United States, obviously, is a lot stronger because all of my friends are here, I was educated here, I was socialized here. American society is the only one that I know. American government is the only one I'm familiar with, and so I'm just acclimated as an American. I don't really know very much about Peruvian life. I have some big snapshots of memories. But even with all the connections that I feel that I have to the U.S., it's also difficult for me to feel a sense of nationalism for the U.S., where as I do feel a sense of nationalism for Peru. I think part of that is some level of disdain from my part for what I thought was, you know, a setup that seems to not want you to succeed.

The expressed discontent was often not attributed to a hostile campus racial climate, but to a recognized knowledge of racial inequity. In thinking of the perceived attitudes towards her by alumni, Z noted, "I know when speaking to alumni, the very old, traditional ones, of course they don't know my story. But as far as they see, I'm just a Latina girl. And that is what puts them off. I've been looked at weird so many times." The undocumented youth living in a homogenous campus experienced racialized encounters, even if very differently, these circumstances all shaped their experiences.

Activism. To deal with this contradiction, the students shared in some level activist efforts noting that the goal was seeking greater understanding on campus. The narratives forefront a view that they were not necessarily seeking visibility, but more open dialogue about what it means to be an undocumented student at an elite school and the fact that attending such institution does not "protect you." For example:

D: There's the idea that if you're at Harvard no one really can touch you; you have that Harvard name with you; that's all I really can say to that, to be honest. [Attending elite schools] just gives you a sense of security that you don't really have. Like I mentioned, the fear, there's the fear of what happens after, when I only have the title, not being at this school.

Students like D brought up examples and comparisons in efforts to reconcile and highlight the problem with the belief that by attending the best known and regarded Ivy-league institutions you are protected. The skeptical view of upward mobility featured the larger "undeserving" messages of the national discourse, and the fact they are not protected from discrimination, deportation or using their educational achievement. Meaning, undocumented youth here who are at institutions with high resources are still being schooled under deeply anti-migrant conditions.

Conclusion

In this study we have shown indicators of the way in which Latin@ students in elite higher institutions problematize conventional notions of "deserving" and "undeserving." Through this narrative analysis of student encounters at both micro-personal and macro-institutional levels, we argue that their higher education experiences—and efforts to respond to inclusion and exclusion—are utilized as mechanisms to navigate their paradoxical undocumented status. The narratives ultimately show the ways that youth create spaces and narratives of belonging and inclusion as they mitigate hegemonic ideas about "underserving" immigrants.

What is significant in our results is the way in which these comments both confirm and differ from the Latin@ undocumented youth in other studies. In Contreras' (2009) study, Latin@ undocumented students were shown to counter the stigma of status by being "determined, hard-working, engaged, and optimistic despite the additional layer of fear and anxiety they experience due to their legal status" (Contreras, 2009, p. 628). In their perspective, Latin@ undocumented students were optimistic and believed that they could achieve success, and assist their families financially. The students we interviewed were less so. Especially when it came to whether an elite education would improve their standing—many reflected on their experiences during college and learned they were not seen as their white counterparts. Moreover, they questioned the criminalizing logic, migration process and possibility of the "American Dream". This study, thus, prompts us to consider

how young people brought into the country as children are still effectively barred from official recognition as belonging to the nation-state—in addition to a host of other political, occupational, social, and health related services and privileges. Rightfully so, the interviews illustrated that students were critical of and cautiously optimistic about what happens after graduation. King and Punti (2012) have also examined how race and legal status are reflected in youths' developing sense of self, society, and schooling. Notably, they uncovered the varied ways undocumented Latin@ youth discursively manage their immigration status and the way students relied on self-protection strategies and sense that “investing in education will likely not lead to direct benefits on the labor market” (King & Punti, 2012, p. 246). The findings in this study point to how youth experienced their immigration status— not as an administrative or bureaucratic obstacle—but as enmeshed with their racial identity. It was such intertwined understanding of their racialized identity that made youth keenly aware that their undocumented legal status puts many of these opportunities out of reach. While most echoed the refrain that education was important, participants simultaneously struggled to make sense of the disempowerment and racism experienced at both an interpersonal and institutional level.

Finally, despite the “entitlement” of their elite education, these material attempts to dismantle nativist exclusion show that youth continue to be racialized as undocumented students of color. They were not shielded by their education, and so, as conscious educators to Latin@ student populations it is important to continue to find ways to support undocumented youth who are left feeling unable to respond to perceived discrimination.

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