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## Resisting a Political Ontology of Threat by Embracing Stories of Survivance Through Storytelling, Conversation, and Joy: An Intimate Insight Into the Lives of Undocumented Students

Julia F. Mendes

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

RESISTING A POLITICAL ONTOLOGY OF THREAT BY EMBRACING STORIES OF  
SURVIVANCE THROUGH STORYTELLING, CONVERSATION, AND JOY:  
AN INTIMATE INSIGHT INTO THE LIVES OF UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY

JÚLIA F. MENDES

CHICAGO, IL

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Dedicated to my sweet Mel.

Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.

-Dr. Seuss

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## ABSTRACT

After enduring the hostile Trump administration, undocumented students faced the transition into the Biden administration in 2021 with both hope and uncertainty. Online searches show hundreds of articles announcing various policy changes, and even more opinion pieces on who is and is not worthy of legal status and citizenship in the United States. Tangled in these policies and very much affected by this discourse are the undocumented students themselves, whose stories are often generalized to fit certain narratives to appease public opinion or political tensions. The increased diversity of research in education and a greater push for a social justice focus has meant that fortunately, much more comprehensive research exists on undocumented students now than in previous years. However, there is still much to learn about the lived experiences of undocumented students to better be able to support and help them thrive in higher education. Furthermore, we must allow for undocumented students to lead the research that is about them. Using tenets of Undocumented Critical Theory, this dissertation presents stories of survivance through storytelling, conversation, and artwork. Findings show how participants resist a political ontology of threat through stories of survivance and acts of joy. Through anecdotal evidence, narrative inquiry and ethnographic observations, the findings reveal the intricate complexities of life for undocumented students and showcase the stories they want to share as co-researchers. Being aware of the dynamics of their lived experiences is the key to create educational spaces where undocumented students are welcome, understood, and can finally thrive.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Introduction to the Research Problem**

In 2015, a report by the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) estimated that there were about 250,000 undocumented students currently enrolled in higher education (Teranishi et al., 2015). Five years later, a new report conducted by the New American Economy and the President's Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration reported that this number has grown to over 450,000 undocumented students enrolled in 2020 (Feldblum et al., 2020). This is a striking (and rapidly increasing) number of students that need support, assistance, and policy reform. Notably this statistic does not include undocumented students who have dropped out, are taking a break from school, or had already graduated at the time.

The issues facing undocumented students are of utmost importance to research in the field of education because the treatment and experiences of these students showcase some of the greatest social, cultural, and educational injustices in the United States. For example, many undocumented students are dismissed by their high school and college counselors, who do not have the information about resources available to undocumented students. Some states limit access to higher education by charging undocumented students' out-of-state tuition even though they live in-state, and other universities ban undocumented students from attending altogether. Undocumented students are barred from many scholarships and programs such as study abroad (Teranishi et al., 2015).



If institutions of higher education are to promote missions of social justice, equality, and equity, then these institutions cannot ignore the injustices faced by the undocumented.

Undocumented immigrants have been historically stripped of basic human and civil rights, as undocumented students attempt to gain an education to contribute to the very country that violates them. Undocumented students give back to their institutions and communities; they are known to be the most involved in activism, community, and academics when compared to other student populations (Corrunker, 2012; Enriquez, 2011; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012; Teranishi et al., 2015).

The tumultuous political climate of changing administrations and anti-immigrant rhetoric in recent years has brought attention to higher education professionals of the importance of studying undocumented students and a greater demand for change in legislation and institutional policy (Teranishi et al., 2015; Valdivia, 2020). I believe it is important to investigate how undocumented students are navigating recent political, social, and global events throughout the years. Without the contributions of undocumented students, the field of education would not thrive in its richness of knowledge, culture, and diversity, because it would be lacking in priceless stories and insight into this specific student population.

The past two decades have been extraordinarily turbulent for undocumented immigrants, but especially for undocumented students who are navigating constant policy changes while *also* navigating higher education. They have watched various pieces of legislation be introduced and failed, endured xenophobic election campaigns, watched hostile rhetoric plague their campuses, and for some, coped with the deportation of family members (Teranishi et al., 2015). The end of the Trump Administration finally arrived, but this does not mean that the struggles for undocumented students are over, because they will continue to face unstable status conditions

and changing policies. This is where research on undocumented students in higher education—specifically research that chronicles their educational journeys over time—is critical and valuable. This dissertation continues this work by addressing the new challenges and experiences undocumented students have faced in the past few years—such as the 2020 presidential elections and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic—and engages in an unconventional, decolonizing approach to methodology. This dissertation is uniquely relevant as the findings of this work are happening *now*, and findings are presented in a way chosen and led by participants. My research uniquely tells the stories of participants through storytelling, conversation, and visual data, and has created community building among participants. According to research innovators Tuck and Yang (2014), research must be meaningful and useful to the individual studied and their communities, and that is exactly the purpose of this dissertation.

### **Research Context and Background**

I started my research journey as an undergraduate at Illinois State University (ISU) in 2015. I became interested in studying undocumented immigrants from my own experiences as an undocumented student myself. Frustrated by the many misconceptions surrounding the undocumented, I wanted research to include our authentic stories and showcase our real lived experiences. For my senior thesis, I asked undocumented students how they experienced a newfound hostile political climate brought upon by the Trump campaign and subsequent election. I interviewed six participants, two of which (Kay and Stephanie) took part in this dissertation as well. My thesis, *Deferred but Not Forgotten: The Experiences of DACA College Students Amidst a New and Tense Political Climate*, was completed in 2017. The title *Deferred but Not Forgotten* honors undocumented students and reminds them that their stories and experiences will not, and should not, be forgotten. Some of the key themes from this research

included the difficult process of transitioning from high school to college, the undocumented college experience, and the dynamics of campus culture within an increasingly hostile political climate.

After completing this thesis, I started a master's program in sociology at Loyola University Chicago in 2017. I immediately began research for my master's thesis. I reinterviewed my original six participants from my undergraduate study and brought on 14 new participants, for a total of 20. I had planned on continuing my undergraduate thesis from ISU within the themes of responding to the political climate as Trump had recently been inaugurated and DACA rescinded for the first time. I encountered new and unexpected findings while working on this project, however, as would also be the case with this dissertation. My master's thesis did discuss themes regarding the political climate, with a special focus on the mental health implications of such an unstable political environment. The unexpected findings I uncovered were that most undocumented youth had been through significant traumatic experiences in their lives, prior to any tumultuous political climate. These experiences of trauma included (but were not limited to) physically crossing the border, witnessing murder, being a victim of street violence, domestic abuse, and sexual assault.

I realized then that first, undocumented youth had already endured much trauma prior to the 2016 elections and focusing solely on the effects of the elections would not do justice to their stories. Second, I challenged the notion of resiliency. We applaud the undocumented for their resiliency, so much so that this becomes engrained in their identities. In doing so, we ignore the traumas they have faced and allow the mental and physical consequences of their trauma ignored and/or untreated. This project, *Resiliency, Bajo Que Costo? How Young Undocumented Mexicans Navigate Trauma and Survival* was completed in December 2018. It calls for an

acknowledgement, understanding, and empathy towards experiences of trauma and survival endured by the undocumented, while abandoning the glorification of resiliency. Because for someone to be exceptionally resilient, they must have endured significant hardship first, and we cannot expect undocumented youth to constantly endure at the expense of their wellbeing.

### **Conceptual Framework and Research Methodology**

When I started the work for this dissertation in 2021, I wanted to continue examining the political climate and its effects on the lives of undocumented youth, as there were many social and political events since my last study, such as the 2020 elections, the transition into the Biden administration, and the COVID-19 pandemic. I recruited three participants from my previous thesis and one new person. I have aimed for my research to align with UndocuCrit, or Undocumented Critical Theory, a recent framework that is actively collecting counter-stories of undocumented immigrants by undocumented scholars seeking to, “better understand the nuanced and liminal experiences that characterize undocumented communities in the United States” (Aguilar, 2019, p. 152).

Building upon my previous research, I continued interviews about the political climate utilizing “political ontology of threat” as a conceptual framework for helping to name and to examine the consequences and implications of xenophobic policies and attitudes in this country. An ontology of threat represents what people may perceive or experience as a threat to themselves or those they care about. A political ontology of threat manifests as the manipulation of a population to believe there is a real threat (even when there is not) as a justification for various policies and political attitudes (Massumi, 2010). For example, the Trump campaign created a political ontology of threat when claiming undocumented immigrants were criminals, even when they were not, and many of his supporters believed him. In this dissertation I use a

political ontology of threat to examine the real and perceived threats around undocumented students, and how their lives are consequently affected.

Research about undocumented youth and young adults has largely emphasized trauma, mental health struggles, and the many limitations of undocumented status. However, little to no research has documented their survivance narratives. Survivance is a “semantic combination of the words survival and resistance” (Vizenor, 2008, p. xv). Traditionally a concept used to understand indigenous experiences, and especially the experiences of indigenous children in education, survivance resists colonialist frameworks to tell authentic stories of survival, resistance, joy, and hope, despite the hardships (Stanton, 2019).

Researching survivance narratives is important because it counters framing undocumented youth as tragedy and within a deficit framework. Stories of survivance for the undocumented means acknowledging the trauma while allowing participants to tell their own stories of survival and joy. It is important to create these spaces to build community and start the healing process. Alternatively, this research documents the strength, resistance, and joy in the everyday narratives of undocumented students as counter to the specific political ontology of threat constructed around undocumented immigrants. The following research question guided my inquiry:

1. What is the nature of survivance in the lives of undocumented young adults who have lived under an era of political ontology of threat and its continued aftereffects?

The Literature Review in Chapter Two builds upon my previous work with undocumented students by giving a breakdown of political and social changes over the years, using a framework of the political ontology of threat.

The dissertation then transitions into storytelling, conversation, and visual data presented as findings in Chapters Four through Six. Different than my previous research style where I conducted semi-structured interviews (which gives the researcher control of the direction of the findings), this time I allowed for my participants to lead the work. If our goal as researchers in higher education is to address gaps in recent work (such as the lack of stories of survivance for undocumented students), then we should encourage unexpected findings that take our work in a new direction. This dissertation, like the stories and creations my participants share, is a piece of resistance. We resist traditional modes of research and academic expectations that seek to limit our work.

### **Overview of Chapters**

In the next chapter, as I mentioned above, I will provide an extensive literature review on undocumented students, and the policies that have affected them over the years framed within a political ontology of threat. In Chapter Three, I will discuss my methods and my decision to pursue narrative inquiry and portraiture methodology in this dissertation. Chapters Four, Five, and Six describe the survivance narratives of my participants, including some of my own. In Chapter Four, I introduce my participants, and tell their stories as they acquired DACA, pursued a higher education, and obtained careers. In Chapter Five, I discuss complicated family dynamics and queer identities as well as explore romantic relationships and the complexities of dating, finding a partner, and getting married while undocumented. Chapter Six provides an array of visual data, including art and photography, to portray the moments of joy in the lives of participants. Finally, in Chapter Seven, I revisit the research questions and discuss the unique community building this project provided participants.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Storytelling in Higher Education**

The concept of storytelling and stories is copiously used in this dissertation. Before moving forward with the literature review, it is important to take a moment to understand that storytelling has been used in research and in higher education over the years, and how its use now is valuable in conveying research findings.

Defining storytelling is difficult because it is a concept often assumed to be self-explanatory. Alterio and McDrury (2003) explain it as such:

Storytelling is a uniquely human experience that enables us to convey, through the language of words, aspects of ourselves and others, and the worlds, real or imagined, that we inhabit (p. 31).

They go on to explain how stories are embedded in our lives:

Stories enable us to come to know these worlds and our place in them given that we are all, to some degree, constituted by stories: stories about ourselves, our families, friends, colleagues, our communities, our cultures, our place in history (p. 31).

Storytelling in higher education research, though it may seem novel, became popular in the 1990s when researchers and educators began to value it as an effective learning tool that enhances students' experiences in the classroom, their understanding of material, and their retainment of information (Alterio & McDrury, 2003; Clandin & Connolly, 1998; Pendlebury, 1995; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Thus, storytelling is very much strategic; how words and phrases are chosen, used, and arranged affect how (and if) the reader's attention is engaged (Alterio & McDrury, 2003). This makes it imperative in conveying the importance of issues such

as those of undocumented students, because stories must be strategically told to send a message and inspire sociopolitical action. Stories have an incredible power and the “ability to translate knowledge, experience, and intuition into words and images that appeal to the intended audience” (Alterio & McDrury, 2003, p. 11). In this case, our intended audience are educators and institutional leaders that can evoke political and social change that benefit undocumented students and their communities.

### **The Political Ontology of Threat**

Many immigrant experiences, and how policy and political figures have responded to different groups of immigrants, can be framed using the political ontology of threat. An ontology of threat represents what people perceive as a threat to themselves or those they care about whether that threat is real or not. A political ontology of threat then examines the effect of policy as a tool of manipulation to make people believe there is a threat, and justifies any actions or attitudes thereafter based on that perception of threat (Massuni, 2010).

This ontology has been used to analyze politicians’ justifications for wars, border security, airport policies, and the like. The justification comes from a “menace potential” (p. 53) and the idea is that through certain policies we can avoid a perceived danger. This perceived danger comes from the threat itself, but the threat is only what *might* happen, and in most instances the threat is unfounded in fact (Massuni, 2010). However, though the danger may not be real, threat exists as fear, and that fear is indeed, real. We can argue that a “menace potential” is what justifies policies against immigrant groups, even if these immigrant groups pose no danger at all.

An example Massuni (2010) gives of how a political ontology of threat manifests in very real circumstances is an airport evacuation based on an anthrax scare. A suitcase leaked white



powder and it was assumed to be anthrax. That powder turned out to be simple baking flour. Nonetheless, the threat felt real, and actions were taken (an evacuation) in response to the threat. Threat is also ongoing—in that the airport tightened security following this event to prevent future scares, again, even though there was no real danger at all.

People respond to an ontology of threat because “the affective reality of threat is contagious” (Massuni, 2010, p. 58). When it comes to undocumented immigrants, attitudes are contagious, too. Trump built a campaign based on fear and threat of criminal unauthorized immigrants. These fears and attitudes spread and are still believed by many people in this country today. Despite having no evidence to back these claims, their consequences were very real for the immigrants who bear the brunt of racism and xenophobia.

The political ontology of threat has not been used in literature to analyze the experiences of undocumented immigrants, or undocumented students specifically, which is a crucial gap I fill in this dissertation. I will use the political ontology of threat to understand the experiences of undocumented students as many of their life events occurred in response to policy and general attitudes from the public about immigrants, which varied based on location. This literature review and subsequent findings contribute to the research on undocumented immigrants uniquely by applying the political ontology of threat to the experiences of undocumented students. Notably, these experiences will not always center on politics, but we can draw connections from their experiences to a political climate based on an ontology of threat. These experiences will also include resistance to the political ontology of threat—taking on acts of joy to challenge the existing narrative (Gurr, 2019; Marsh & Śliwa, 2021).

To better understand undocumented students in higher education, I have organized the following sections as three focus areas in chronological order. The purpose of this organization is

to understand how the context of the immigrant experience has evolved over time, using an understanding of the political ontology of threat to frame how the experiences of undocumented students have unfolded in response. Because policies are constantly changing, and because I am studying a specific population (current and recently graduated undocumented college students), providing a literature review in chronological order is the most coherent way to present information, and to prevent any confusion or misunderstandings of what events took place when. Furthermore, the review's end in the current time aligns with my research question and purpose of studying undocumented student's responses to the current sociopolitical events and how they choose to represent their own narratives through stories of survivance.

The following section in this review will provide an overview context for contemporary immigration policy. Then, I present three focus areas. The first will emphasize experiences of growing up undocumented in between the 2000s and 2012, prior to the implementation of DACA, specifically regarding educational opportunities. The second focus area is what I refer to as Progress and DACA, from 2012 to 2017. I investigate how DACA changed the lives of its recipients and how undocumented students experienced higher education during this era. Finally, the third focus area will explore the period of uncertainty and anxiety (when Trump took office), from 2017 to 2021. The political ontology of threat is especially significant in this section. I explore how undocumented students navigated higher education while coping with a racist and anti-immigrant administration, and how the constant feeling of uncertainty and anxiety impacted their personal, academic, and professional journeys, and how they now choose to cope with their situations.

## Understanding the Background of Immigration Policy

Immigration policy has been a divisive controversy in the United States since the 1800s (Schwab, 2018), and it is imperative to understand the history behind these policies and attitudes before analyzing the current policies and issues facing undocumented students. The Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 was the first (and only) federal legislation to prohibit a specific ethnic group from immigrating to the United States, and was only repealed in 1943 (Wu, 2013). Until the 1920s, most immigrants came to the United States by boat, from Europe and Asia. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, entering the United States without authorization was not a crime. In 1929 Senate Bill 5094, horrifically named the *Undesirable Aliens Act*, was passed to restrict crossings at the United States-Mexico border and established arriving without documents a criminal activity, especially for brown immigrants, resulting in the stigmatization of undocumented immigrants (Little, 2019; O'Brien, 2018). Even in 1986, when President Reagan passed a sweeping immigration bill known as the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (providing amnesty for thousands of undocumented immigrants, the President made sure to note he was only passing this bill in exchange for more security at the Mexican border and greater penalties to employers who hired undocumented workers (NPR, 2010).

### The “Dreamers”

In 2001, a bipartisan piece of legislation titled, The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, commonly known as the DREAM Act, was introduced in the United States Congress. This bill sought to give a pathway to legal residency and citizenship for the undocumented children of unauthorized immigrants who demonstrated “good moral character” (Corruner, 2012, p. 145). It took a full decade for voting to finally start on the bill. It passed the House of Representatives in 2010 but failed in the Senate because of a mere *five* votes.

Nevertheless, this legislation remains historic in how it influenced the country's views on the children of undocumented immigrants, brought into the country by no choice of their own.

Due to the development of the DREAM Act and the activism it spurred (Corrunker, 2012), the 2000s was a unique and difficult time for undocumented children to grow up. As they reached adolescence and realized their futures were jeopardized by their immigration status, many undocumented youths and their allies began to fight for justice and push for new legislation (Corrunker, 2012). While Congress was still unwilling to enact a permanent solution, in 2012 President Barack Obama announced through an executive order a new program called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Under DACA, recipients are protected from deportation, receive work permits, and a social security number that is valid only for employment. To qualify, recipients must have arrived in the United States before their sixteenth birthday and have been continuously living in the US since 2007. They must have been under the age of 31 on June 15, 2012, and hold no criminal record. Furthermore, DACA is specifically reserved for current high school or college students and honorably discharged veterans who hold at least a GED (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2015).

Being an executive order, DACA comes with many limitations. It does not grant any pathway to legal residency or citizenship and can be revoked at any time. Since 2012, approximately 800,000 people applied for and received DACA status. As of 2020, there were 643,560 active DACA recipients (USCIS, 2020). We can speculate the decrease from total recipients to current active recipients may include people who adjusted their status and received legal residency, those who lost their DACA status and were unable to renew it, and those who may have left the United States altogether.

The instability of DACA became painfully prominent during the Trump campaign and subsequent election. On September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the rescinding of DACA. This led to much panic, frustration, and anger in the undocumented community as DACA recipients scrambled to figure out what they would do once their benefits expired. In January of 2018, federal courts blocked the rescinding of DACA and allowed for current recipients to continue renewing their status (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2018). In December of 2020, DACA was fully restored to its original guidelines, until July 2021 when a Texas judge ruled the program unlawful, ordering the Department of Homeland Security to cease accepting new applications, but still allowing current recipients to renew their status (Monyak & Simon, 2021). As of the writing of this document, the Biden administration claims it will once again fully restore (and fortify) the program but has not yet acted on that promise (Monyak, 2021).

### **Growing Up Undocumented (2000s-2012)**

#### **Journey to a New Land**

The stories of undocumented immigrants often start during the decision to move away from their homeland to the United States. Undocumented children who travel with their parents, however, do not have a say in this decision. For the recent generations of undocumented students who will be examined in this review—who mostly arrived and grew up in the United States sometime in the 2000s—their stories start during the journey to this new land. To these children, the United States was portrayed as a land of opportunity, freedom, and a promise of a better life (Mendes, 2018). Before arriving, however, a lot of undocumented children must experience horrendous and traumatic experiences crossing the border (Abrego, 2011; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Hernandez et al., 2011; Mendes, 2018). Many travelers report sexual assault,

robbery, battery, and even murder (Abrego, 2011; Mendes, 2018). One of Abrego's (2011) research participants recalled being packed in a trailer truck for 16 hours with 87 other migrants. In my own research, a participant recalled running barefoot through a river at the age of nine; another witnessed a man being shot in front of her at the age of seven (Mendes, 2018). These experiences were not only traumatic for the adults who made the decision to cross the border, but perhaps even more so for the children they brought with them. These children would grow up traumatized (Mendes, 2018) and undocumented—and become the “dreamers” we often hear about in the mainstream media today.

### **Implications of Undocumented Status**

Even for those who did not cross the border on foot, the arrival in the United States was usually marked by a mix of fear, anxiety, and the feeling of not belonging (Abrego, 2011; Contreras, 2009; Mendes & Chang, 2019). Traveling to the United States had become much more difficult after the September 11 attacks; immigrants who arrived in the United States during this time encountered an environment of “heightened xenophobia and nativism” (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, p. 23, 2010). Utilizing a political ontology of threat, the events of 9/11 have been constantly used to justify strict immigration policies and hostile attitudes towards immigrants, even though the immigrant groups who are affected by these policies and attitudes were not the ones to cause the events of 9/11 or the subsequent perceptions of threat and fear (Massuni, 2010). Massuni (2010) further explains that the “attacks of 9/11 inaugurated a new world-historical era, used to reinvoke potential threat for use in legitimating policy” (p. 60).

This threat was felt by the undocumented, too. As a result, undocumented parents instilled fear into their children, emphasizing the need to be secretive about their immigration status to avoid discrimination or even violence from those against the undocumented (Abrego,

2011; Contreras, 2009; Gonzales, 2011). Children who knew of their family's undocumented status carried this heavy burden from an early age, keeping a "secret" for the adults around them, fearful that if anyone found out, they would lose their families to deportation (Abrego, 2011; Mendes, 2018; Teranishi et al., 2015).

Whether or not they knew or understood that they were undocumented, life for children growing up undocumented was extremely harsh. Undocumented families are usually in financially stringent circumstances, meaning most undocumented children will experience food and housing insecurity (Mendes, 2018) and, in the 2000s, lacked access to healthcare (Gonzales & Chavez, 2012). Undocumented children also grow up quickly; they take on adult responsibilities such as translating for their parents, caring for younger siblings, household chores, and speaking to authority figures, among other tasks (Chang, 2011; Mendes, 2018). The previous two paragraphs provide examples of the real-life consequences caused by the perpetuation of a political ontology of threat about undocumented immigrants.

Consequently, school becomes an escape from home (Gonzales, 2011). Undocumented children usually look forward to school because it allows them to have a break from their adult-like lives at home (Chang, 2011; Gonzales, 2011). Later, I will discuss how using school as an escape leads to an obsession with academics and overachievement and hyperdocumentation (Chang, 2011). For now, it is important to note that undocumented children's access to public K-12 education is due to *Plyer v. Doe* from 1982 (Abrego, 2011; Corruner, 2012). This allows undocumented children to have the same access to school and its resources as their peers, further allowing them to take advantage of this "escape" and enjoy their initial pursuits in education.

### **(Undocumented) Identity Formation**

The identity development of undocumented children during this time is especially complicated because they grow up in a country (the United States) where they do not feel a sense of belonging due to their immigration status, “feeling unwelcome in the society where [they] have lived most of their lives” (Abrego, 2011, pp. 349-350). Furthermore, they were *born* in a different country that they do not feel strongly connected to because they did not spend many years there (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Mendes, 2018) and are unable to ever visit their home country or they would be barred from returning to the U.S., another policy consequence of an ontology of threat (Hernandez et al., 2011; Massuni, 2010). Some undocumented children do develop feelings of belonging in the United States despite the social stigma (Abrego, 2011; Contreras, 2009), but this is ultimately undermined by their lack of legal documentation (Hernandez et al., 2011). The lack of belonging and stigmatization are direct consequences of the political ontology of threat being perpetuated.

Some children do grow up with the undocumented identity already instilled in them, but for others, they end up having the shock of their lives when they find out they are undocumented. This usually happens in the teenage years, when they attempt to apply for a job or an internship, get a driver’s license, and start considering college applications (Abrego, 2011; Corrunker, 2012; Gonzales, 2011; Mendes, 2018). This is when undocumented teens will find out that they have no social security number, or that the one they had was fake (Gonzales, 2011; Mendes, 2018). If they were too young to remember crossing the border, they may have been told that they migrated by airplane. Those who did remember the border crossing were told that was just a part of the process (Mendes, 2018). While most undocumented children and teens already understand that there is a stigma around their nationality and ethnicity, finding out about their undocumented



status years after growing up in the United States is a complete shock. They must grapple with this new complex identity, and the implications of their undocumented status.

As undocumented children become undocumented teens, they begin to understand the full implications of undocumented status, and the social stigma and legal repercussions that follow. A notable distinction of this generation compared to their parents' is that they do not take responsibility for their immigration status, because they were too young and unable to be a part of that decision-making process (Abrego, 2011; Contreras, 2009). Undocumented young people in the mid 2000s and early 2010s began engaging in activism, advocating for their rights and seeking visibility (Abrego, 2011; Corrunker, 2012). Some of this activism also takes the form of acts of joy and laughter, as a demonstration that a political administration cannot take their happiness away (Gurr, 2019; Marsh & Śliwa, 2021).

### **Higher Education and Undocumented Student Achievement**

When undocumented students reach high school and begin to consider college, they face an array of new obstacles. For most, money is the biggest barrier, as not only do undocumented students already come from financially limited households (Enriquez, 2011; Mendes, 2018; Teranishi et al., 2015), but they are also ineligible for any type of federal government aid such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (Contreras, 2009; Enriquez, 2011; Gonzales, 2011; Teranishi et al., 2015). Most states also ban aid to undocumented students, although that varies with places such as California who passed state versions of the DREAM Act (Contreras, 2009). It is difficult to imagine a justification for barring undocumented students from higher education, but the attitudes and lingering fear and perceived threat of immigrants (Massuni, 2010) carries into policies targeting prospective college students, too.

When undocumented students then try to find resources to be able to apply for college, they are often met with unknowledgeable and unhelpful (and sometimes prejudiced) high school counselors, teachers, and advisors (Chang, 2016; Gonzales, 2011; Mendes, 2018). This was especially the case prior to the introduction of DACA, when most undocumented students did not make it to college at all due to legal, financial, and social barriers (Teranishi et al., 2015). During the 2000s and most of the 2010s, high school counselors did not know how to help their undocumented students. Some students were brushed off, others were told false information such as to apply for the FAFSA anyway, only to find out they would never receive that aid. Most counselors and teachers also did not have the access to the resources themselves to know what scholarships undocumented students were eligible for, or what schools and states were the most undocumented friendly (Mendes, 2018). Understandably, this made it even more difficult for undocumented students to confide in their teachers and counselors in the first place (Abrego, 2011). As a result, most undocumented students will start off at community colleges (Hernandez, 2011; Mendes, 2018), “the only affordable route” (Hernandez, 2011, p. 505).

A lack of information and support leaves undocumented students to figure things out on their own (Enriquez, 2011; Mendes, 2018), and unfortunately this could mean feeling isolated and alone on their campuses (Contreras, 2009). In addition to studying, they are searching for their own scholarships, doing research on state policies, and finding peers who are going through a similar process, “piecing” together various resources (Enriquez, 2011). According to Chang (2016), this sort of resource-piecing referenced by Enriquez (2011) is unique to undocumented immigrants. Being undocumented results in a set of “knowledge, skills and intuition” known as “undocumented intelligence” (Chang, 2016, p. 1164). Undocumented students must maximize their undocumented intelligence to survive in American society (Mendes, 2018), and especially

to reach higher education. Undocumented intelligence manifests in stories of survivance as the undocumented take their hardships (Stanton, 2019) and transform them into a form of intelligence and skillset.

As I mentioned earlier, school is an escape for undocumented children. Once they reach college, however, academics take on a new dimension. Not only does studying provide an escape, but undocumented students are known to be stellar students (Chang, 2011; Contreras, 2009), accruing significantly higher GPAs than their documented peers (Teranishi et al., 2015). They use their achievement to distinguish themselves (Abrego, 2011), to cope with the weight of their situation (Enriquez, 2011), and to compensate for undocumented status (Chang, 2011). They will often accrue awards, high grades, credentials, and the like in an attempt to prove themselves worthy of being in the United States—compensating for their lack of legal documents with academic ones. Chang (2011) coins this phenomenon “hyperdocumentation.” She writes:

I understood that hyperdocumentation was critical to my survival, legal or not. I continued to accumulate my documents in the form of degrees, theses, awards, and the like in order to further build my case. I wanted people to know that I was qualified and deserving of my place in this country. In my mind, such documents would deem my qualifications—and me—unimpeachable (p. 515).

This excerpt provides a powerful demonstration of survivance through the dedication, work ethic, and sacrifice undocumented students give to the United States. They are not only seeking to benefit themselves; their work and perseverance benefits their communities and the country as well. However, such resilience and hard work comes at a cost to mental health (Mendes, 2018). Chang (2011) adds that there is an “urgency” (p. 509) to hyperdocument as much as possible, and as fast as possible, and this often leaves undocumented students burnt out and *still* unsupported and rejected in this country.

In the next section I will discuss how the implementation of DACA changed the lives of undocumented students and gave them newfound opportunities in education. Despite a new feeling of freedom, as the 1984 song by Los Tigres Del Norte states, “*aunque la jaula sea de oro, no deja de ser prisión.*”

### **Progress and DACA (2012-2017)**

#### **DACA and its Benefits**

The day that President Obama announced his executive order, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) changed the lives of many undocumented immigrants—and undocumented students especially (Mendes, 2018). As previously mentioned, DACA awards its recipients with work authorizations, social security numbers (valid for employment only), and temporary protection from deportation (USCIS, 2015). Massuni (2010) claims that threat is never eliminated but only *deferred*, and this is the case for DACA recipients; the threat of deportation for them has only been deferred (as in “deferred action”).

Albeit temporary and only an executive order, with the potential of being removed at any time, DACA has been the “largest immigration policy in 25 years” (Pope, 2016, p. 98). DACA recipients, who were previously completely undocumented, were now able to acquire jobs, driver’s licenses, bank accounts, and credit cards (Gonzales et al., 2020; Pope, 2016; Teranishi et al., 2015). This gave undocumented students much-needed relief, especially in the form of (temporary) deportation protection and the ability to work and earn money (Hsin & Ortega, 2018; Teranishi et al., 2015). DACA provided them with greater financial stability, with more access to jobs and internships (Hsin & Ortega, 2018; Muñoz, 2013; Teranishi et al., 2015). Research shows DACA increases labor force participation and decreases unemployment rates (Pope, 2016). Finally having government-recognized (and legitimate) forms of identification also

gives undocumented students better access to housing and transportation (Teranishi et al., 2015), even decreasing that fear of being carded at a bar or movie theater (Mendes, 2018). DACA recipients, with a social security number, finally could apply to colleges and (some) scholarships (although still ineligible for FAFSA) (Chang et al., 2017). As a result of these benefits, DACA had an undeniable positive impact on the mental health of its recipients, reducing much tension, depression, and anxiety (Hsin & Ortega, 2018; Teranishi et al., 2015).

### **DACA Criteria**

It is important to note, however, that DACA is not *easy* to apply or qualify for. Applicants have to meet a strict set of criteria, such as being under the age of 30 in 2012, having arrived in the United States before the age of 16, having lived in the US for five years *consecutively* without attempting to leave and re-enter, and of course, having no criminal record, (USCIS, 2015), because any criminal record would be seen as a real threat to the country (Massuni, 2010). This means many were excluded from the policy simply for being too old, as DACA was clearly targeted for recent children of immigrants, those I mentioned in the previous section that mostly arrived and grew up in the United States during the 2000s. We should also consider how unfair the criteria may be given that during the time of entry DACA recipients were children and unable to control if their families left and attempted re-entry, or at what age they came into the country in the first place.

Although DACA provides financial opportunities for those who qualify (Hsin & Ortega, 2018; Gonzales et al., 2020; Pope, 2016; Teranishi et al., 2015), it is a financially difficult process to go through itself. The application fees are approximately \$500, and this is a fee that is repaid at each renewal. The work permits are valid for two years at a time, but applicants are encouraged to renew and pay the fees 3-6 months before the expiration date (USCIS, 2021).

## Limitations and Consequences

Despite its benefits, DACA ultimately gave its recipients a false sense of security (Mendes, 2018). DACA is temporary, and as I will discuss in the next section, it is susceptible to being modified or eliminated completely by the current President. As an executive order, it gives no real pathway to legal residency or citizenship (Teranishi et al., 2015), meaning that DACA recipients are still undocumented (Mendes, 2018). Because of the anticipation for comprehensive immigration reform, there were a lot of misconceptions about DACA and what its recipients could do in the initial stages of the program (Chang et al., 2017; Teranishi et al., 2015). Many people in the general population assumed that DACA recipients were receiving money from the government and free healthcare, but these were all false allegations (Chang et al., 2017), another consequence of a political ontology of threat (Massuni, 2010).

The reality is that DACA recipients, still undocumented, are *still* ineligible for any government programs, including financial aid from colleges and universities and government-subsidized healthcare, such as the Affordable Care Act (Flores, 2016; Muñoz, 2013; Raymon-Flesch et al., 2014; Romo et al., 2019). Undocumented students under DACA are still under a tremendous amount of stress when it comes to financing their higher education (Teranishi et al., 2015). Undocumented students will find jobs while in school to pay for their out-of-pocket expenses (Chang et al., 2017). And though they are now eligible to work, this has the adverse effect on creating a culture of glorified resiliency (Mendes, 2018), normalizing the fact that undocumented students must work an unreasonable number of hours while still attempting to obtain college degrees (Raymon-Flesch et al., 2014). Consequently then, being stressed, depressed, exhausted, and deflated also becomes the norm for this population (Chang et al., 2017; Raymon-Flesch et al., 2014).

Undocumented students most often rely on private schools and private scholarships, since they do not have access to publicly funded ones (Flores, 2016). Unfortunately, there is only a limited amount of private aid available, and it is unsustainable to expect the undocumented to rely solely on the private sector (Flores, 2016). Community college still ends up being the cheaper option, even for high-achieving students (Flores, 2016; Mendes, 2018). While DACA should have been intended to encourage increased pursuits in higher education, it instead motivates many students to work more hours and reduce their course load or drop out of college altogether: "...the precarious and temporary nature of DACA creates barriers to educational investments" (Hsin & Ortega, 2018, p. 1487). However, the dropout rates for undocumented students are *still* significantly lower than their documented peers, as their academic achievement rates and hyperdocumentation persist even in the most trying times (Chang, 2011; Hsin & Ortega, 2018).

Undocumented students at this point will often hit a wall because "even receiving DACA offered limited relief because of its temporary nature and the continued struggles of undocumented family members" (Raymon-Flesch et al., 2014, p. 326). They experience high levels of anxiety worrying about family members who may get deported and the precarious nature of their own status (Raymon-Flesch et al., 2014; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015; Teranishi et al., 2015). They are still fearful of revealing their own status, even with DACA (Muñoz, 2013).

This intense stress and culture of resiliency and overworking creates increasing mental health concerns (Mendes, 2018; Raymon-Flesch et al., 2014). Undocumented students already face "profound barriers to health care access" (Raymon-Flesch et al., 2014, p. 323), and as previously mentioned, DACA did not provide greater access to affordable healthcare.

Undocumented families tend to avoid the healthcare system altogether because of the cost and

their lack of documents, and distrust medical providers due to discriminatory and condescending treatment (Raymon-Flesch et al., 2014). These discrepancies are amplified when it comes to mental health. Mental health is the greatest unmet health need of undocumented students and their families (Mendes, 2018; Raymon-Flesch et al., 2014), who start suffering from physical symptoms, such as unhealthy eating, in addition to mental ones. They carry untreated depression, anxiety, trauma, substance abuse, and stress (Raymon-Flesch et al., 2014) while still being expected to perform exceptionally at their jobs and in school.

The issues and consequences described in this subsection are only magnified for those who do not qualify for DACA. Without that social security number, they are still unable to work, leading to multiple financial barriers, which in turn lead to missed opportunities in careers and academics (Muñoz, 2013). Not having a social security number makes it nearly impossible to apply for stable housing, scholarships, internships, and college (Romo et al., 2019). Without DACA, there is no protection from deportation (Teranishi et al., 2015), and no guarantee of a future in the United States.

### **Still Overachieving and Hyperdocumenting**

Undocumented students continue to demonstrate patterns of overachievement, academic resilience, and hyperdocumentation in college (Chang, 2011; Romo et al., 2019; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015), and DACA status only appears to encourage this phenomenon. Even with DACA, undocumented students still pursue measures of “deservingness” (Corrunker, 2012), a “determination of populations who are worthy of staying in the country despite their legal status (p. 164). Chang (2011), in the era before DACA, shared her own story and reflected a similar sentiment in hyperdocumenting:



Perhaps my appeal for legitimacy is embodied in a belief that I need even more documentation to prove that I am indeed what I say I am or have earned what I say I have earned (p. 511).

As the above passage illustrates, undocumented students have always been—and are continuously—fighting to show that they are deserving and worthy of being in the United States (Corruner, 2012; Torres & Wicks-Asburn, 2014). Torres & Wicks-Asburn (2014) add that undocumented students use higher education to legitimize their presence in the country, and further seek to overachieve to legitimize their place in higher education itself. As a result, they are “trapped between states of belonging and exclusion” (p. 195).

By increasing access to educational opportunities (Teranishi et al., 2015), DACA allowed undocumented students to pursue their long-awaited dreams of a higher education (Romo et al., 2019). Obtaining a college degree is an important accomplishment because it gives these students a “sense of empowerment and control” (Enriquez, 2014, p. 163) and of strength and confidence (Muñoz, 2013). It also contributes to those feelings of “worthiness” (Flores, 2016) discussed throughout this review, giving an illusion that a degree might validate their unauthorized status (Muñoz, 2013).

Importantly, the empowerment undocumented students feel with their achievements in higher education contributes to their own self-worth. Prior to DACA, undocumented children and teens wished to appear more “American” and to be accepted in American society (Corruner, 2012). As they transitioned into adulthood and experienced DACA however, they increasingly engaged in activism and exhibited resistance to their oppression in American culture (Chang et al., 2017; Corruner, 2012). Therefore, their college degrees gained new meanings; they could leverage their cultural wealth to give back to their communities and set an example for siblings, cousins, and other relatives and friends (Chang et al., 2017; Romo et al., 2019).

## **Campus Climate**

As college students, undocumented students will unfortunately encounter hostile and unfriendly campuses, including hostility and racism from other students (Shelton, 2019; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015) and discriminatory behavior and comments from faculty and staff (Mendes, 2018). These hostile and toxic behaviors stem from the political ontology of threat generating an “underlying dominant culture of ignorance, or lack of awareness, regarding the realities of being undocumented in America” (Chang et al., 2017, p. 197), and of a false perception of threat (Massuni, 2010). Meanwhile, the lived realities under this constructed this political ontology of threat includes undocumented students struggling financially and attempting to make ends meet (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). Over 70% of undocumented undergraduates will work off-campus jobs while attending college full-time (Teranishi et al., 2015). This means undocumented students do not have the “luxury” of failing classes, because they cannot take the financial hit of re-taking courses (Chang et al., 2017). Thus, much research shows that a crucial component of undocumented success is peer support and safe campus spaces (Mendes, 2018; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). Safe spaces help colleges be more undocumented-friendly (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015) and providing access to counseling and appropriate guidance also eases the burden of untreated mental health issues (Mendes, 2018; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015).

Having support on campus and personal connections further encourage students to be more involved in campus organizations (Enriquez, 2014), helping undocumented students feel a greater sense of belonging and community and addressing some of the blocked social opportunities they experience on campus (Shelton, 2019). Campus organizations can serve as safe spaces, increasing visibility for marginalized groups and encouraging allies to be involved

as well, which all contribute to healthier, kinder, and supportive environments (Enriquez, 2014; Shelton, 2019).

### **Losing Progress**

The hope DACA gave some undocumented students crumbled during the 2016 Presidential campaign, with Donald Trump threatening to end the program if elected. The mental health issues that had only begun to simmer down during the hope of the DACA Era flared unbearably for some, with the newfound fear of losing their DACA status, their scholarships, their jobs, and their entire ways of living as they knew it (Mendes, 2018; Raymon-Flesch et al., 2014). Many undocumented students reported that during the campaign, they were stressed, depressed, and anxious like never before, and had trouble focusing and concentrating on their tasks (Mendes, 2018). When Trump won the 2016 election, these problems only intensified. Now, the anxiety of DACA recipients was crippling; they reported waking up in the middle of the night, unable to sleep, unable to function during the day as they wondered not if, but *when* they would lose their status (Mendes, 2018). These are powerful examples of the real consequences of a political ontology of threat (Massuni, 2010), this time with the threat being targeted at DACA recipients themselves.

During this time of uncertainty, themes of resiliency in DACA recipients emerge once again (Mendes, 2018; Romo et al., 2019; Teranishi et al., 2015; Torres & Wicks-Asburn, 2014). However, this resiliency can be detrimental to mental health, as it promotes overworking and overachieving even when it is harmful to one's wellbeing (Mendes, 2018). Torres and Wicks-Asburn (2014) described the urge to *superarse* regardless of the obstacles and hardships one faces, and Romo et al. (2019) observed a keen determination to succeed during thing intense period of stress. Undocumented students struggled to cope with the stressors in their lives, not

knowing what to do or who to turn to for support (Muñoz, 2013). Many turned to unhealthy coping mechanisms such as hyperdocumenting and overachieving, abandoning self-care and healthy boundaries (Mendes, 2018). They attempted to plan around the political climate and make decisions accordingly, such as obtaining more degrees or taking more hours to work and save money (Chang et al., 2017; Mendes, 2018), anticipating a foreboding move (Massuni, 2010) from the new administration.

### **Uncertainty and Anxiety (2017-2021)**

#### **Policy Changes and Court Battles**

On September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017, then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that DACA would be rescinded. No new applications would be allowed and after a few months, renewals would not be allowed either. Although this announcement was anticipated, it was still a traumatic event for DACA recipients and their families. It was one of those events that made people remember exactly where they were when they heard the announcement (Mendes, 2018). One of my participants (2018), Clara, recalled her experience:

I just couldn't stop crying. I felt like all the hard work we did prior to DACA was for nothing. They lied to us. They gave us a peace of mind for a second but that was it. Because they knew they were gonna take it away (p. 42).

The relief that DACA once provided was shattered and replaced by a roller coaster of different policies and court battles (Martinez Hoy, 2019; Valdivia, 2019). In January 2018, federal courts blocked part of Trump's order and allowed current DACA recipients to renew their status, but new applications were still not accepted (USCIS, 2015). Multiple court battles followed, some attempting to block DACA, and others attempting to reinstate it again. Finally, in December 2020, after more court appeals and the election of President Biden, DACA was fully reinstated, allowing for new applications (USCIS, 2021). At the time of this review, DACA

remains in place for both current and new beneficiaries. It is important to note that these court battles were once again products of a political ontology of threat (Massuni, 2010), one specifically invoked by the Trump administration, as a claim that there was a threat to the country in letting DACA recipients keep their benefits.

### **The Mental Health Issues Only Increase**

This constant back-and-forth with court battles and appeals and the instability for the future of DACA causes a lot of stress, anxiety, and trauma to undocumented students (Andrade, 2019 & 2021; Martinez Hoy, 2019; Mendes, 2018; Nájera, 2020; Patrón, 2021; Schwab, 2018; Suarez-Orozco, 2020; Valdivia, 2019). Undocumented students reported feelings of fright, shock, and terror during the *entire* Trump era, which lasted a total of four years (Andrade, 2019 & 2021). They lived in a constant state of fear and uncertainty (Patrón, 2021; Schwab, 2018). As Massuni (2010) states, “threat is from the future; it is what might come next... we can never be done with it (p. 53). The disturbing and frequent headlines and news about raids, another manipulation tactic to maintain threat (Massuni, 2010), also kept undocumented immigrants on edge (Valdivia, 2020), with one undocumented woman claiming, “this country is going to kill me of a heart attack... because I’m constantly on fight-or-flight mode” (p. 127). Having such experiences in a short amount of time would already leave anyone damaged, but these young people experienced this nightmare for *years*, and the mental health consequences were, and are to this day, significantly concerning *and* irreversible (Mendes, 2018).

The rescinding of DACA put its recipients in a state of trepidation due to the risk of deportation (Suarez-Orozco, 2020). Additionally, they were increasingly concerned that their family members would be deported and/or separated (Patrón, 2021; Suarez-Orozco, 2020; Valdivia, 2020). As discussed in the first section, undocumented youth take on major

responsibilities with their families. They are caregivers for sick relatives and younger siblings (Mendes, 2018; Mendes & Chang, 2019) and legal brokers for their parents (Delgado, 2020). Because the undocumented experience for most is collective, rather than individual, family responsibilities become heavy burdens that undocumented students feel they must carry, on top of all the stressors and hardships they already experience otherwise (Mendes & Chang, 2019).

It is extremely difficult for undocumented students to find healthy coping mechanisms in the first place, but during the Trump administration those issues only heightened (Andrade, 2021). They continued to hyperdocument (Chang, 2011) in the hopes their credentials might give them some sort of saving grace and protection. In doing so, they cope through being as busy as possible, to ignore the negative news media plastered all over the internet (Mendes, 2018). More concerning, some undocumented students also turned to substance abuse, overeating, and giving up on their studies (Andrade, 2019). This is unsurprising, however, given how inaccessible mental health resources such as therapy and psychiatry are (Mendes & Chang, 2019). Much of the undocumented population expresses a dire need and desire for therapy and medication (Valdivia, 2020), but accessing this help creates an entirely new hurdle. Consequently, the mental health issues of undocumented students continue to go untreated. For example, their anxiety levels are four to seven times higher than that of the general population (Suarez-Orozco, 2020). This clearly demonstrates a gap in mental health services and accessibility, and a need for community-building among undocumented immigrants.

### **Navigating Hostile Campuses**

Another stressor that intensified during this time were financial issues (Schwab, 2018; Suarez-Orozco, 2020). Already tight on money and lacking access to financial aid for college, the possibility of DACA's removal would mean undocumented students could lose their jobs,

fellowships, and assistantships at school (Mendes, 2018; Suarez-Orozco, 2020). On campus, spaces that were already hostile became even more so. In addition to experiencing social exclusion (Suarez-Orozco, 2020), undocumented students encountered avid and bold Trump supporters, unafraid to show who they were, a real consequence of Trump's ontology of threat (Massuni, 2010). This nativism also often intersects with sexism, racism, and homophobia (Patrón, 2021), making these spaces even more dangerous for undocumented students who hold other marginalized identities.

Resistance to this political era did bring forth various protests and activists against the presidency. Witnessing such protests, especially on their college campuses, made undocumented students feel more supported and seen during an otherwise terrifying era (Andrade, 2019). Involvement in protests and immigrants' rights organizations also gave them a greater sense of power and stronger sentiments of belonging (Andrade, 2019; Delgado, 2019). It is important to note that not all undocumented students feel safe participating in public protests due to the fear of discovery, arrest, and deportation. Participating in such visible acts can heighten feelings of anxiety and fear (Mendes & Chang, 2019; Patrón, 2021). Many engage in what is called "silent activism"; acts of activism that benefit undocumented communities but are not necessarily seen or recognized as traditional activism (Mendes & Chang, 2019). Additionally, Marsh and Śliwa (2021) argue that resistance does not have to be publicly visible or an explicit protest against authorities; it is just as validating for one to resist simply "for themselves" (p. 2). Acts of joy, laughter, and celebration (Gurr, 2019; Marsh & Śliwa, 2021), which I will address in my findings, can also be a form of resistance and "an assertion of freedom" (Marsh & Śliwa, 2021).

Student organizations, peer support, and designated safe spaces on campus are among the best practices to help undocumented students feel safe and supported on their campuses, and find

community (Delgado, 2020; Suarez-Orozco, 2020). Those who have peers that know and understand the implication of their undocumented status also report having more positive experiences on campus (Mendes, 2018). Additionally, as alluded to in the previous section, having a supportive mentor, advisor, professor, or “institutional agent” on campus will help the student feel cared for and buffer some anxiety effects from the overall political and campus climate (Andrade, 2021; Delgado, 2020; Suarez-Orozco, 2020). Unfortunately, the Trump administration disrupted and “unsettled” many existing safe spaces, and it takes work to rebuild those (Nájera, 2020). Moreover, higher education professionals have reported that it can be hard to stay on top of all the changing policies and their implications to best help their students and not divulge false information (Martinez Hoy, 2019).

Most importantly, however, is an educational institution’s whole commitment to their undocumented students, and not just the support of a handful of people within the university. While policies around sanctuary campuses have fluctuated, a university declaring itself as a sanctuary campus demonstrates their commitment to protecting their undocumented students (Green, 2019). The declaration of a sanctuary campus carries a symbolic significance (Santellano, 2019), and this is another factor that will help students feel supported before they can make personalized connections with faculty and peers. Essentially, colleges should carry the responsibility of making all their students feel safe and protect them without exception (Green, 2019; Santellano, 2019). More than declaring themselves as supporters and allies, universities should be actively working to call out xenophobic behaviors and prohibit such discrimination altogether (Santellano, 2019). This is how campuses can *actively* work against the horrid behaviors and attitudes evoked by the Trump presidency. Despite this era being *finally* over, the



effects remain, as does the question of how we can continue to support undocumented students and provide them true safe spaces and equitable opportunities in higher education.

### **Call to Action**

The journeys of the undocumented students of this generation have been trying, heartbreaking, anxiety-producing, and unpredictable. If simply hearing these stories makes us feel this way, as educators we have a duty to empathize and imagine what it must be like to live that journey—and take action.

In the past two decades, the undocumented stellar and high achieving students we know today did not have an easy start to their lives. Many physically crossed the border and witnessed unimaginable terrors. Growing up undocumented proved to be strenuous, in families that struggled to find adequate food, housing, and clothing. It is no wonder then, that many undocumented children turned to school as an escape and would learn to use academics to gain credibility and respect.

DACA was an incredible and life-changing policy for many who benefited. However, its limitations meant that undocumented children who were now teens and young adults continued to live in uncertainty. Their drive to succeed academically only grew, to the point where it became harmful for their own mental health. Unfortunately, this was their only way to survive.

The presidential elections of 2016 brought forth a new and intense period of fear, stress, and anxiety, which can be understood through the lens of a political ontology of threat (Massuni, 2010). Many of these fears came true when Trump took office in 2017 and made various changes to DACA, which were then contested in the courts. As of today, DACA is fully restored, but we cannot forget that it remains an instable and impermanent policy that does not provide the undocumented with a path to citizenship or legal residency.

As I come to the end of this review, I am left to consider what is next. This is, without a doubt, the start of yet a new era. What will this era with a new administration and new policies bring? Will we finally have a satisfying and ethical conclusion to the saga undocumented students and their families have been forced to live? Will they ever find justice in their stories, their dreams fulfilled, and a happy ending? Or will such reviews only continue to be written, time and time again, only adding to their struggles, only proposing more research but lacking in action and change? I end this review here because I have reached the present day, where current research is still being written and published.

From here, I will take the action I call for; this dissertation will continue to share these crucial stories and advocate relentlessly for undocumented students. However, these stories will not always be of heartbreak and trauma. The stories you will find in this dissertation, led by participants, will contain both heartbreak and joy, laughter and resistance (Gurr, 2019; Marsh & Śliwa, 2021). Trauma and pain is not the only way to tell the stories of the undocumented, or of any other population we study (Tuck & Yang, 2014). The purpose of this dissertation is to document these stories, in the most authentic way possible.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work draws upon Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the subsequent frameworks that emerged from it. CRT and storytelling are a valuable pair, as “CRT offers educators a language and theory to support the explicit dismantling of white supremacy in the institution of education” (Oliver, 2017, p. 211). Subsequent frameworks include Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), as it draws attention to American policies that are rooted in racism and white supremacy (Brayboy, 2005). Many aspects of TribalCrit can be applied to the xenophobic policies targeted at undocumented immigrants and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients. CRT

also led the way to Latino/a Critical Theory (LatCrit), which focuses on immigration, language, identity, culture, and skin color (Bernal, 2002).

LatCrit is specific to Latino experiences, undocumented or not, and does not touch upon undocumented immigrants of non-Latino origins. Thus, Undocumented Critical Theory (UndocuCrit) has recently emerged to fill the gaps other frameworks could not fill. It is a new school of thought that is still seeking scholars to contribute to it, and this is where my work comes in, as I could serve as a key contributor to this new and relevant field. UndocuCrit addresses experiences that stem from undocumented status specifically, not just ethnicity, nationality, or race (Aguilar, 2019). It challenges the current rhetoric around immigrants and “introduces the lens to better understand the nuanced and liminal experiences that characterize undocumented communities in the United States” (Aguilar, 2019, p. 152). Aguilar (2019) further explains:

This emerging framework highlights the resilience of undocumented communities by exposing the fear and oppression to which we are subjected, the varied and richness of our experiences, and the ways in which we navigate and succeed despite the obstacles encountered on a daily basis (p. 153).

UndocuCrit consists of four tenets (Aguilar, 2019). The first is that *fear is endemic among undocumented communities* (Aguilar, 2019). This fear affects undocumented immigrants physically and mentally, regardless of how public they are with their status. The fear extends to family members and closer friends due to the possibility of deportation. Furthermore, the restrictive policies enacted toward immigrant groups (similar to what TribalCrit discusses) are explicitly designed to instill fear and impose barriers in the daily lives of the undocumented.

The second tenet of UndocuCrit is that *different experiences of liminality translate into different experiences of reality* (Aguilar, 2019). Some undocumented immigrants may have white-passing privilege and speak without accents while others are immediately ostracized due to their

phenotypes. Some undocumented students were eligible for DACA, while others were not. Some DACA recipients used their status to study full time, while others had to increase their work hours and only study part time. The undocumented experience is not singular or generalizable; their life trajectories will vary. Therefore, any analysis that consists of “a binary of documented versus undocumented” (Aguilar, 2019, p. 155) will not be accurate.

The third tenet focuses on family and *parental sacrifices that become a form of capital* (Aguilar, 2019). Undocumented parents have faced incredible economic and legal restrictions, and any resources they can spare are priceless for their undocumented children. According to Aguilar (2019), “parental sacrificios” have been shown to motivate undocumented students to excel academically and engage more in their communities. However, parents’ undocumented status can also hinder access to opportunities (Mendes, 2018). Undocumented students may give their families a potential for social and economic improvement (Aguilar, 2019), but I counter that places an overwhelming pressure on undocumented youth to and there are consequences to carrying such a heavy burden (i.e. mental health impact).

Lastly, the fourth tenet of UndocuCrit is *acompañamiento*, the embodiment of mentorship, academic redemption, and community engagement (Aguilar, 2019). Community support and mentorship at their colleges are crucial resources for undocumented students. Meaningful mentorship is beyond academic and offers emotional and psychological benefits. These tools are the key for undocumented students’ freedom in their institutions and allow for them to take control of their own narrative. This is where my work will contribute to this new theoretical framework—my participants are able to lead the research and take control of their narratives—as that is the basis of UndocuCrit (Aguilar, 2019).

In addition to UndocuCrit, however, I also implement tenets of Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). Portraiture will work beautifully with UndocuCrit as it calls for recognizing the beauty and aesthetics in our research (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016) through “interpretive narratives,” “deep and compelling stories,” and in-depth interviews and observations. Storytelling is a framework and method used as well. Storytelling is a legitimate form of inquiry (and has been considered so since the 1980s) because it “involves cooperative activity, has a qualitative focus, and encompasses holistic perspectives” (Reason & Hawkings, 1988, p. 32). In addition to education, this method of inquiry is also widely used in the social sciences and in the biomedical field. Simply put, storytelling is a way of learning (Alterio & McDrury, 2003).

Amidst the trauma and hardship the undocumented face, using portraiture and storytelling reminds us to search for the “goodness” and beauty (Dixson, Chapman, & Hill, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016) in these stories as well as to cherish the moments of joy. Linked to Portraiture are the methods used by Marsh & Śliwa (2021) and Gurr (2019), who stress the importance of joy and laughter as a form of resistance, using stories of survivance (Vizenor, 2008). Likewise, Tuck and Yang (2018) reject the idea that researchers must always highlight experiences of pain in their participants. They even argue it is better to have no framework at all than a framework that leads researchers to encourage such narratives of pain (Tuck & Yang, 2018).

The next few chapters, especially those outlining my findings, will seem structurally and stylistically different from this one, and that is done deliberately. The intimate stories of the undocumented, told through animated conversations and visual interpretations, are not always straightforward and cohesive. But they are still valid, valuable, and worthy of being told.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

Following the guidance of UndocuCrit, this study focuses on stories that counter traditional or stereotypical narratives surrounding undocumented students (Aguilar, 2019). My previous work (Mendes, 2018; Mendes & Chang, 2019) collected stories from 20 undocumented young adults and outlined the findings by meta-themes and sub-themes. While this work did include in-depth textual evidence, the abundance of participants also limited how much anecdotal evidence I was able to convey. This has been the theme for most of the existing research outlined in Chapter Two; we have many themes and generalizations surrounding the lives of undocumented students due to the pressures in academia to produce data-driven research that may emphasize quantity over quality.

Notably, I am not making the case that quantitative research or qualitative research with many participants is unimportant or invalid. Rather, I believe that the work responding to current social and political events and their effect on education can and should be filled with rare and unfiltered stories that are led by the participants. Instead of fishing for data or invoking certain narratives (Tuck & Yang, 2018), the role of the researcher now should be to simply sit back and listen. I approached this work as a co-researcher (Chang, 2018; Torres-Olave et al., 2021), without preexisting expectations on what the data would produce, and was delighted in the outcome. I wanted to hear in-depth stories and gather ethnographic observations, as Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2016) method of Portraiture does, and this could only be fulfilled through honest and participant-led conversations. Such work is equally important as large databases and the thematic

research (that I too have produced) that currently exists. This was also an opportunity for me as a researcher to engage in methods I have not used before and to approach data collection and analysis differently.

### **Overview of Methods**

UndocuCrit “encourages the use of narratives, testimonios, counterstories, [and] storytelling” (Aguilar, 2019, p.157), and likewise Portraiture encourages the use of in-depth interviews and observations. An example of such methodology is Narrative Inquiry. Narrative Inquiry is a “person-centered approach” that allows the participant to guide the study by providing textual, oral, and/or visual data to convey their story (Chang, Mendes, & Salazar, 2019; Pinnegar & Danes, 2007; Trahar, 2009). I followed this approach through a small series of semi-structured questions to gain information on my participants’ backgrounds and to start a dialogue. From there, I allowed the participants to lead the conversations and choose topics they found important, telling their own stories unprompted by preconceived assumptions or stereotypes. Conversational interviews are ideal for higher education researchers wanting to convey their messages through storytelling (Oliver, 2017). With the addition of original artwork and photography, these methods are also an “arts-based narrative inquiry”, which is when the researcher adds art forms to traditional narrative inquiry (Oliver, 2017). Ohler (2008) further supports the use of art in education research, because it can powerfully bring a reader to the exact moment the artist or participant was in when they created the piece.

Notably, for 3 out of 4 participants, the conversation was not their first interview. Two participants had two prior individual interviews, in 2016 and 2018. Another participant had one interview in 2018. Only for the fourth participant was the conversation his first research interview

with me. To supplement his story, he provided a written biography providing me with background information I already had obtained from the other participants.

The conversations occurred in groups of two (with me as a third person), so participants were able to engage in conversations with one another. I had a total of four participants in two conversation groups. Each conversation group took part in a two-hour Zoom call and a group text conversation spanning about two weeks. In doing so, I engaged in digital storytelling, that is the method of storytelling using various forms of digital media (Wright & Ryan, 2010). Digital storytelling is now more prevalent given the restraints of a global pandemic, but it also makes research and artwork more widely available, across national and international populations. Digital stories are considered a “multimedia art form” (p. 291) by some higher education researchers (Wright & Ryan, 2010), and it was a creative way of engaging with my participants providing them with an opportunity to express themselves through their own form of art.

While engaging in their stories, I also shared my own experiences, and this encouraged participants to share even more. While not originally planned, this research now includes the stories of my participants along with my own, and at times these stories even intersect. This is due to the conversational method, and I found myself at times being interviewed by my participants, which was thrilling. Research on oneself has been stigmatized and discouraged, but I strongly believe that being transparent and authentic with my participants—as well as acknowledging how my own stories and biases influence my work—is what truly produces quality and honest work.

Prior to these conversations, I spent time building authentic relationships and trust with my participants. We planned visits and activities together as we talked about our lives and the implications of our undocumented status. Using the Portraiture frame also meant prioritizing these



relationships and fostering “authentic encounters” with participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016).

Such time spent together can be classified as ethnographic. Ethnographic work rejects the “traditional models” of qualitative work to highlight people’s lived experiences (Smith, 2005) and is useful in “identifying macro-level themes through micro-level research” (Chang, Salazar, & Mendes, 2019, p. 7). I engaged in this method by observing participants (and allowing them to observe me) and having conversations while we carried out daily tasks, ate meals, played with pets, and exercised together. Additionally, participants also sent me photos of their artwork, pets, hobbies, and achievements as another source of “data.” Overall, ethnographic methods allow for participants to be more authentic and relaxed as they are being interviewed, and it gives them control over what is shared and with the photos, what aspects of themselves they want to highlight or feature in my dissertation. It is also important for me to maintain strong relationships with the ultimate goal of building community, as community-building is crucial for the undocumented to feel safe and heard (Delgado, 2020).

My research questions fluctuated greatly during this process, due to these methods. I originally wrote questions based on the political climate. However, after spending time with my participants and conducting conversational interviews, we decided together that politics should not be the focus of our work. The research question we arrived at (also listed previously) is: What is the nature of survivance in the lives of undocumented young adults who have lived under an era of political ontology of threat and its continued aftereffects?

### **Sample**

Due to the in-depth and time-consuming methods I am pursued, I only had four participants (and myself as a fifth semi-participant). To fulfill the research goals I proposed—

which meant engaging in extremely in-depth qualitative methods—a small sample size was ideal to ensure quality of work and a timely completion of this dissertation.

I had a pool of 20 participants from my previous study (Mendes, 2018), all with whom I built a strong rapport. I started by contacting five of these participants, with a preference for those located near the Chicago area to facilitate in-person interviews. Due to a surge of COVID-19 cases, however, we had to move our group conversations online using Zoom. One participant contracted COVID and dropped out of the study, and another participant was in California, but since interviews ended up virtual her location was not an issue, other than not getting time to spend with her for ethnographic observations. Choosing participants I had previously interviewed saved time on recruitment, and a major benefit was that I already had background and knowledge on their stories. These participants also know that I take confidentiality and professionalism seriously, and our mutual trust had already been established prior to this study.

My four participants were Kay, Felipe, Isabel, and Stephanie (pseudonyms). They have a variety of experiences in higher education and the workforce. All four are DACA recipients, came to the United States as young children, and currently range in ages 25-32. Coincidentally, they were all born in Mexico. As for myself, I am 27 years old and born in Brazil.

### **Positionality**

My own story, lived experiences, and biases certainly affect this work, and I will not attempt to conceal that. I am an undocumented student myself, and for much of my life I believed I was alone in my experiences. I began conducting research on undocumented experiences as an undergraduate to fill this void in my own life. As I progressed to higher-level research, I discovered that many of my participants felt the same way I once did. In fact, many of them told

me they did not realized others had had similar experiences until they read my papers. While I no longer feel alone, I still strive to make sure that every undocumented student (and by extension, undocumented people in general) does not feel alone, unheard, or unimportant. In hosting conversations between participants instead of traditional interviews, I am able to build community among undocumented students and together we find support, love, and care for one another.

I believe my positionality is an asset to this work because I bring passion and true empathy to the work I do. That is why I reject traditional methods so strongly, why I reject the research culture of academia like Tuck and Yang (2018), and the motivation of academics to just publish. To me, the stories of my participants, of my *co-researchers*, are the most valuable data that exist. I believe it is my duty to use my privilege as an undocumented scholar to lift the voices of the undocumented people around me, because we are *all* important and valid, in both our similarities and our differences.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “LIFE AS AN UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT/IMMIGRANT”<sup>1</sup>

#### **Getting to Know My Participants**

##### **Kay, 29**

Out of all my participants/co-researchers, Kay is the one I have known the longest. We met through student organizations in 2013, and after running into each other at an immigrant-rights assembly at our community college in 2014, we did that dance familiar to us undocumented immigrants: “are you...” and looking at one another expectantly until one of us finally breaks and says “Yeah, I’m undocumented.” Kay was more than just an undocumented peer, however. She was the *first* undocumented peer I ever met. The first person close to my age, a student, someone I could relate to. Living in predominantly white towns, neither of us had been exposed to other undocumented folks other than our families and their friends. That night we chatted about our DACA applications, and how Kay had lost her job at a retail store because her renewal permit hadn’t arrived in time, as many DACA recipients have experienced over the years with changing policies (Gonzales et al., 2020; Suarez-Orozco, 2020). Once her permit did arrive, she was able to go back to work.

We smiled at each other and giggled about what it was like finally getting our drivers’ licenses in college, two adults talking like the teenagers we never got to be. It was hard, being undocumented. We grew up fast, always working, always hustling, staying up late to finish

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter title idea by Stephanie

homework and waking up early, sleep deprived, the next morning. Living constantly under that political ontology of threat discussed in Chapter Two, always waiting on a change in policy. Many of us operated as legal brokers for our parents, too (Delgado, 2020). But it was also delightful to finally smile and laugh with another undocumented young adult and release some of that pressure, that burden we carried, if only for a few minutes.

It was hard to maintain friends and a social life, with our crazy work schedules and academic pursuits. But every time Kay and I saw one another, even when in passing, we gave each other that knowing smile. It took a few years, when I had transferred to a four-year university and was working on my senior thesis, for me to realize that I could turn my passion advocating for the undocumented into actual research. Kay was the first person I contacted, my first-ever participant. Our first interview was over the phone, with Kay in her bedroom and me in a cramped library room I reserved; my first attempt at becoming a real academic researcher. Kay will always tell me how proud she is of me, and how important my work is in giving us a voice to share my stories. But I am the one who is proud of Kay. And I am the one who is grateful to *her*, for giving *me* an outlet to do this work in the first place. And for being the first one to give me all her trust and share her beautiful story.

It was Kay's idea to start spending time together before our interviews. In doing so, she gave me another outlet for my research: the ethnographic component (Smith, 2005). A couple of years after that first interview, Kay and I met in downtown Chicago before one of our interviews. Following her lead, we spent some time at the art museum (see Figures 1 and 2 below), then walked around downtown. During our walk we talked more about our undocumented lives, and our family conflicts. Kay took plenty of photos, as she enjoys photography. In the spirit of a true

Chicago trip, we got Portillo's, and later visited the Nutella Café for dessert. Spending this time together made it so by the time we started the interview, we both felt relaxed and comfortable with one another. We had never spent time like this together before, as our relationship at the community college was more in passing; two acquaintances who shared undocumented status. After this experience, we became close friends.

Figure 1. Photo by Kay: Art Museum in 2017.



Figure 2. Kay studying a painting.



In another outing a few months later, we visited the Garfield Conservatory. Kay had an absolute blast taking photographs, using me as her subject (see Figure 3). We visited downtown again and signed up for library cards at the Harold-Washington Library. By the end of this trip, as we said our goodbyes by the train station, I knew that Kay was not some vessel for me to complete my research. She was a peer, a friend, another undocumented person who knew my struggles and hardships and shared in my triumphs. From that moment on, I decided my participants had to get something out of my research, something useful (Tuck & Yang, 2018). I wanted to give them friendship and community, a chance to leave their busy lives and enjoy an outing in the city like Kay did. As a result of this relationship-building (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016), my interviews turned into storytelling and conversation. The results, as you will see, were wonderful, beautiful, and utterly captivating. Thank you, Kay, for getting me started on this track. We are still friends to this day, and no longer need the excuse of research to have a conversation or see one another.

Figure 3. Me as Kay's subject: Garfield Conservatory in 2018.

Figure 4. Finding joy through photography.



**Stephanie, 32**

I met Stephanie at a rally at our four-year university, circa 2016. This was during the intense political atmosphere surrounding Trump's election, we were all feeling the tension on our campus. I was only an attendee, but Stephanie got up in front of the entire room and shared her story. I was moved to tears. I admired Stephanie's sheer bravery, standing up in front of all these people (at a predominantly white campus during a time of hostility against immigrants), and sharing a part of herself that most of us (including myself at that time) kept hidden (Patrón, 2021; Schwab, 2018).

We only briefly met that day. I thanked her for sharing her story and being vulnerable. It was few months later, when I started working on my thesis, that a professor suggested I reach out to Stephanie to participate. I contacted a friend who knew Stephanie and asked her to pass my information along. Stephanie did not have an obligation to participate; she did not know me at all. To her, I was a stranger, an eager undergraduate wanting to do a study on undocumented students. But Stephanie reached out. She decided to trust me. Like Kay, our first interview was over the phone. It was not until I began my graduate studies that I began meeting participants in person to build deeper connections.

Stephanie and I met in person, for the second time after that brief encounter, in the fall of 2017. She came to my apartment in the city, and I made us a pizza. It was slightly awkward, as first encounters go, but we promised to keep in touch. Luckily, Stephanie and I had a mutual friend *and* a mutual mentor. We ended up seeing a lot of each other in the following months. We went to conferences, reunions, and dinners. By the end of that school year, we too had become friends.



The first time I had a chance to present my work, I invited Stephanie. The conference was at the University of Chicago (Figure 5). Stephanie had to make an hour-and-a-half drive, but she still came. She stayed with me for the entire conference, in fact. This led to a lot of discussions about graduate school and what it was like as an undocumented graduate student. In Stephanie, I had found a co-researcher willing and enthusiastic about having critical conversations.

Figure 5. Conferencing at the University of Chicago in 2018.



Stephanie also participated in a study with me about undocumented student activism (Mendes & Chang, 2019). This time, we had a craft night at my apartment and ordered Thai food (there were no more awkward nights). We traveled together to another conference, this time taking a mini-road trip together back to our four-year university. It felt much different than it had when we were both students, scared and shy. Now, we were turning into strong, independent, and confident women, pursuing graduate school as first-generation undocumented students.

Recently, Stephanie moved closer to the city. She introduced me to roller skating, and I introduced her to rock climbing. She was the only visitor at my house that my pandemic dog did not growl at. He even brought her his favorite toy. We talk about our workouts, our families, and our jobs. We talk about *life*. When the time comes, we sit down for yet another interview. But like Kay, Stephanie has become much more than just a participant. When I think of her, the first thing that comes to mind is how she has given me one of my most meaningful and dearest friendships.

### **Isabel, 28**

Isabel has been the only person I have not been able to meet in person, because she lives in California. Isabel and I met, virtually, in the spring of 2018 when she saw an advertisement for my research project on a Facebook group for undocumented students. This was when I was in a sociology department where recruiting a large number of participants was valued over small, in-depth samples. I was lucky with Isabel, however, because she was another person like Stephanie, who chose to trust me and the work I was doing.

Isabel and I had a lot in common when it came to our academic trajectories. We both started off in community colleges and transferred to four-year universities, then immediately pursued graduate school. At the time, Isabel was a graduate student in Texas, and we were both struggling to navigate our graduate departments while undocumented. Like many, we encountered both support and hostility on our college campuses (Shelton, 2019; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). We were battling our mental health as the Trump administration was in full-force, and many were losing their DACA status (Suarez-Orozco, 2020). While we were unable to meet in person, Isabel and I found comfort in one another. In addition to participating in my research,

we stayed in contact to discuss the dynamics of graduate school, ideas for publications in our fields, and coping mechanisms (Andrade, 2021) to help us get through the grueling first year of graduate school. We both appreciate art, books, and podcasts.

More recently, as I began this new wave of research, Isabel and I began talking regularly again. We both took up running, and she shared social media pages that helped us feel a sense of community with other Latina runners. Community, I cannot emphasize enough, is crucial (Delgado, 2020). As I will discuss in Chapter Six, Isabel's art has flourished into a small business, and I was thrilled to order some of her prints and a shirt she designed. We have plans to finally meet in person at the end of the summer. She is running a marathon in California and invited me and Stephanie (yes, community building among participants!) to join. Like her art, Isabel's running has blossomed impressively. I plan to run the 5K while she runs the marathon. I am so proud of Isabel and how she has turned her passions and hobbies into a thriving reality; I aspire to be like her someday.

### **Felipe, 25**

Felipe is the newest to this work, but that has not meant we were not able to build a close relationship with one another. Felipe and I met because our partners were coworkers. We knew each other for *two years* before realizing we were both DACA recipients. He was talking about applying for residency through his now-husband, and I began that "are you..." dance Kay and I had once done, but Felipe did not miss a beat. "I'm a DACA recipient," he said proudly. Teary eyed, I whispered "me, too." As our partners watched on in awe, Felipe and I hugged, laughed, cried, and shared stories. Laughter is a way we assert our own freedom and autonomy (Marsh & Śliwa, 2021). We were no longer acquaintances through our partners, no longer needed them to

facilitate our encounters or our relationship. We were now attached, bonded by our struggles, our stories, and our care for one another.

I told Felipe about my work, and he was eager to participate. An extrovert who loves to host, we had no trouble finding time and space to meet. One of my favorite visits to see Felipe was when he had just rescued two kittens. One of them, Giuseppe, was on the brink of death, and Felipe gently wrapped him and held him in his hands, with utmost respect for that creature's life. Unfortunately, Giuseppe passed a few days later. But Felipe still has the other one, named Jack (see Figures 6 and 7), who is now fully-grown, happy, and healthy, along with a fluffy dog named Beau and a puppy named Pepper. It was seeing Felipe's care for his animals that encouraged me to get my own dog. I always lived in a limited state, blaming my undocumented status, not pursuing activities I loved with the fear I would one day have to abandon this life. But Felipe, his animals, and his incredible talent for interior design showed me that our lives are deserving of being *lived*. We so often equate undocumented lives with misery and suffering, and seeing Felipe live his life to the fullest taught me it does not always need to be that way. We reject the notion that pain should be the center of our stories (Tuck & Yang, 2014b).

Figure 6. Holding a sleepy Jack in 2020.

Figure 7. Caring for Giuseppe in his last days.



Felipe loves to host social gatherings, and always includes me and my partner, and even our dog, Mango (see Figure 8). He is never shy about introducing us to his family and friends and encourages us to come out of our introverted shells. He embodies the type of social resistance highlighted in Gurr's (2019) work. Felipe and I also bond over documentaries on our quieter days. He joined me for a 5K on a freezing January day in Chicago. We regularly have conversations about our DACA applications and the immigrant experience, but most often, we seek each other out simply to spend time together. He is even helping me pick out a dress for my doctoral graduation. Not everything, especially the joyful moments in our lives (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016; Marsh & Śliwa), should be centered on undocumented status. Felipe has truly shown me what it means to *live*.

Figure 8. Felipe's photo of my dog, Mango.



## **Journeys Through DACA and Policy Changes**

### **DACA Status**

Kay, at the age of five, and Stephanie and Isabel at the age of nine, arrived in the United States by physically crossing the US-Mexico border, both describing physically and emotionally grueling conditions (Mendes, 2018). Kay and Stephanie ended up in Illinois, and Isabel in California. Kay has recently moved to Wisconsin, after spending some time in Wyoming. Felipe traveled by airplane when he was only two, so he does not remember the journey, but remembers growing up a few years in Ohio before moving with his family to Illinois. Having all arrived at such a young age and lived consistently in the United States since (and all being exceptional young adults), all four were qualifiers for DACA.

Stephanie and Kay applied for DACA immediately after its announcement in 2012. Isabel obtained hers in 2013. Because Felipe was younger, he decided to only apply after a few years in 2017, when he graduated high school. Kay recalls the rush of gathering all her documents to prove her presence in the United States all those years. I did that too, even sending in my cheesy awards from elementary school such as “Rising Star.”

Once we all received DACA, two main objectives became our focus: a driver’s license and a job, which aligns with much research on DACA recipients (Gonzales, 2020; Pope, 2016; Teranishi et al., 2015). Kay and I lived in small towns in Northern Illinois at the time, so driving was essential. “I finally got to get out and explore,” Kay said. Felipe was more excited about his job prospects: “Right away my desire was: I want money. A real legal job without using someone else’s name and credentials.” He was excited about that driver’s license, too, and talked about how prior to DACA, he had reoccurring dreams about driving. I found that interesting

because I experienced those types of reoccurring dreams, too! The dreams stopped once I had my license and could legally drive. Being an undocumented teenager was probably the hardest time for all of us, with that yearning to belong and fit in, so much so that even our sleep was affected. Receiving DACA gave us a notable decrease in stress (Hsin & Ortega, 2018). These experiences clearly demonstrate the real affective consequences of living under a political ontology of threat, too (Massumi, 2010).

In our earlier interviews, I focused a lot on DACA and how changing policies and DACA's instability as an executive order affected our lives (another nod to a political ontology of threat). Kay and Stephanie were interviewed first when Trump had just gotten elected, but Obama was still in office. They voiced fear and concerns over the uncertainty of their status. Isabel was interviewed when the Trump administration made plans to rescind DACA, and Kay and Stephanie were reinterviewed then too. These interviews were filled with a lot of sorrow, stress, anxiety, fear, and depression, as was common with many undocumented folks at this time (Patrón, 2021; Raymon-Flesch et al., 2014; Schwab, 2018). Nightmares they had about what a Trump presidency would mean were beginning to come true. After court battles allowed DACA to be reinstated and we all got to keep our statuses, we felt a collective sense of relief (Hsin & Ortega, 2018), though the trauma and anxiety from those times still linger.

Isabel and Kay temporarily lost their DACA status at one point when their renewal applications were delayed. Both lost their jobs. Isabel was working as a teaching assistant in graduate school, but later was able to receive a fellowship to make up for lost income until she re-obtained her DACA status. As previously discussed, losing DACA and subsequently losing jobs was not uncommon amidst changing policies (Suarez-Orozco, 2020). "It was stressful, you

know? I was freaking out about how I was going to pay for graduate school,” Isabel told us. Kay was working in an organization helping children who were victims of sexual abuse. The job was taking a mental toll on her, so when her DACA renewal was delayed and she lost that job, she tried to make the most of it by searching for a new job and trying to take care of her mental health. She has since reestablished her DACA status and found a job for a company she enjoys.

All four participants discussed how stressful, time-consuming, and financially draining it is to have to constantly renew their DACA and not know if there will be delays or policy changes, and living under a constant threat (Massumi, 2010) of losing their status. Felipe said this was especially the case when he was living paycheck to paycheck, like many others in his situation (Chang et al., 2017). Now, he is working with a pro-bono attorney to renew his permit, but there have once again been delays. “It’s a big concern to be off work and having to worry about finances. It’s really hard,” he stated. “We are relying on an institution to be able to *live*,” Isabel added.

### **Political Climate and the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In previous interviews, we discussed the implications of the political climate at length. The major theme was a clear detriment to mental health and the development and heightening of mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety, with many participants suffering from physical ailments as well (Mendes, 2018; Raymon-Flesch et al., 2014). This time around, however, there was a consensus of being *done* talking about politics, a demonstration of stories of survivance that resist the narrative of the oppressor (Stanton, 2019; Vizenor, 2008). There were feelings of optimism when Biden was elected, that maybe DACA recipients would *finally* have a path to citizenship, an attempt at rebuilding after the Trump presidency (Nájera, 2020). Those feelings



were quickly replaced by frustration and disappointment, though. Felipe stated, “every election there’s gonna be that one president that says they will do these things for us.” Kay responded, “yeah, if they do it, cool. But I’m not gonna get my hopes up for something that’s not gonna happen.” Stephanie had similar sentiments: “I was also hopeful for something to change...but I feel the same. Nothing has changed, my status remains the same. It comes to a point where you realize, it’s just politics and it sucks. It still sucks.” Kay and Felipe also discussed how Mexicans continue to be the scapegoats for those against immigration reform, when there are plenty of other races and ethnicities, including white people, that are undocumented, too.

Along with a stressful political climate also came the *unprecedented* (are you tired of that word yet?) COVID-19 pandemic. Isabel, after just recovering from losing her job due to her expired work permit, again lost her job when the pandemic hit. Others also voiced similar struggles with limited work hours. Stephanie and Kay both feel isolated in this ongoing pandemic. “I get into my head and I miss my people, I miss my community,” Stephanie said. She does not take the risk of attending social gatherings because she has an ill mother and does not want to risk spreading anything to her, prioritizing familia responsibilities (Chang, 2011; Delgado, 2020; Mendes & Chang, 2019). Stephanie did contract COVID recently, and her biggest concern remained her mother, not herself. She isolated and made a full recovery. She said: “I want to see friends and do things, but I can’t. I don’t know where they’ve been, and I don’t want to get COVID again.” Felipe and his husband also contracted COVID, twice. It is not an experience they want to repeat a third time.

The pandemic has magnified many people’s anxieties, especially for the undocumented who already have anxiety levels much higher than that of the general population (Suarez-Orozco,

2020). The pandemic also represents an ontology of threat (Massumi, 2010) because many people felt a real sense of fear and danger, and there were many misconceptions surrounding the virus. Despite many allegations of a hoax, many people faced the real effects of loss and grief, however. Kay was one of them. She lost a grandfather. “There was just a lot of loss,” she said, “I always knew someone that died. There was so much death, a lot of that heavy energy.” Kay is still working through her grief and trying to find joy during these dark times. “At least I really like working from home,” she said about her new job. It’s a positive that keeps her motivated.

### **Reaching Higher Education**

#### **Reflections on My Own Journey**

In the Literature Review (see Chapter Two) I explored at length the many hardships and obstacles undocumented students face in attempting to pursue higher education. I personally had ambitions to go off to a four-year university just like my peers in high school. I was devastated when I discovered that even with DACA status, I could not receive state or federally funded grants or loans, and that applying for FAFSA had been an utter waste of time. I enrolled at the local community college. My peers made fun of me. I was told “you’re not a real college student” and “you don’t even need to study; you’re just going to community college.” This angered me because these statements were completely false. My community college courses were more challenging and invigorating than the ones I later took at my four-year university. I met some of the best professors and mentors I would ever have and am still in contact with most of them today. As we know, mentorship is crucial for undocumented success (Andrade, 2021; Delgado, 2020), and a key tenet of Undocumented Critical Theory (Aguilar, 2019). And, if it weren’t for my community college, I would not be writing this dissertation today. It was my

community college professors who told me to take a research paper on undocumented immigrants and run with it. That first research paper is what ignited this entire field of study.

Community college is how I learned about my potential in academia, how I could pursue graduate school, and maybe, just maybe, get a PhD one day. I think back to that spring afternoon my senior year of high school, as I cried over a letter explaining my ineligibility for financial aid. I thought that would be one of the worst days of my life. Instead, it ended up being a blessing in disguise. Then, I wept over the things I could not do as an undocumented student. Today, I rejoice over what I *can* do. Again, I refuse to let pain be the center of my story (Tuck & Yang, 2014b).

### **Differing Paths for Undocumented Students**

As one of the tenets of UndocuCrit states, *different experiences of liminality translate into different experiences of reality* (Aguilar, 2019). This was the case for the differing paths in higher education participants experiences due to liminalities such as financial and family circumstances. Kay and Felipe had similar experiences in their pursuit of higher education, and it coincidentally happened that they were paired for a conversation. Stephanie and Isabel followed similar paths in education and were also coincidentally paired. This led to engaging conversations about what education means for each person and the costs and benefits to pursuing a college degree. After completing high school, Kay and Felipe went straight to work. Kay explained:

During those years I thought college wasn't an option for me. I wasn't educated about it. Then one of my friends started going to community college, and she would sneak me pamphlets, pamphlets about undocumented students...After that I got information and ended up signing up. That was a fun part of my life, college.

Kay truly enjoyed her community college, but after getting her associate degree, she was pulled back to working full-time, because a four-year university would be too expensive. This is not uncommon for undocumented students, to pursue work when academics become too expensive (Chang et al., 2017). Now that it has been years since she finished college, I asked Kay if she ever considers going back to complete a bachelor's degree. She answered: "I don't know, I get inspired sometimes, but no I don't think I will. I don't want to say completely no. But I think it's more no than yes at this point. But we will see."

After taking time to work, Felipe applied to a nearby four-year university, and received a sizeable scholarship. After his first year of college, however, his scholarship was not renewed, and he could not afford to stay there. This was devastating. "Money got in the way," Felipe said. "I used to love going to school. I was excited to be a first-generation student, and I bought a laptop and everything. I had all my supplies and I loved going to school." School was an espace for him, too (Gonzales, 2011). In addition to the disappointment of not being able to continue his studies, Felipe also expressed frustration at his peers who had all the opportunities and the eligibility for financial aid but took their privileges for granted: "They just blew it off." Chang et al. (2017) also speak to the "luxury" of failing classes that undocumented students do not have. I asked Felipe too if he considered going back to college. "What discourages me the most is finances," he answered. He explained that this is a discussion he has had with his husband and that instead of going back to finish a four-year degree, he might pursue a certification in interior design.

## **The Undocumented Graduate School Experience**

Last time I interviewed them, Stephanie was starting a master's program in Latino Studies and Isabel was finishing her master's degree in Higher Education. I asked them to fill me in how their experiences were throughout their program and any reflections they have now. Neither of them had great experiences in their graduate programs. Overall, they felt isolated, depressed, anxious, and extremely stressed out. They struggled to find supportive mentors, a critical component to navigate higher education and especially graduate school (Aguilar, 2019; Andrade, 2021; Delgado, 2020; Suarez-Orozco, 2020).

Stephanie had a particular professor who humiliated her publicly, adding to the negative encounters some undocumented students have with faculty members (Shelton, 2019; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). "She would call me out in front of the class as an example of what not to do in grad school," Stephanie recalled. "It took a toll on my self-esteem." Once a confident student, Stephanie said that by the end of her program she had lost her drive and motivation and suffered from imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome is a phenomenon that "occurs among high achievers who are unable to internalize and accept their success" (Weir, 2013). "It makes you feel like you don't belong there," Stephanie said of the graduate school culture.

Isabel echoed this experience, emphasizing it was especially bad her first year because she moved out of state for graduate school, and it was an overwhelming adjustment period. "My self-esteem was messed up too," she told Stephanie, "My mental health was crap." Finding peers and community (Delgado, 2020) was difficult, too. Stephanie left her program without any true peers or friendships. Isabel had one roommate who was undocumented, and that connection helped, but they were not compatible as roommates and have since lost touch.

Overall, their universities did not feel as welcoming as they had expected them to. A few years ago, both considered pursuing doctorate degrees. But their experiences in their graduate programs changed their minds. “I remember how much I struggled,” said Isabel, adding that she does not want to put herself through that level of stress again. “I agree with Isabel,” Stephanie said. “I would love to be a doctora, but I think back to those long days and how stressful it was. I don’t know if it’s worth the stress and the years and the loss of income.”

I shared with Isabel and Stephanie my own experiences as an undocumented graduate student. I started in a Sociology PhD program, but realized it was not a healthy environment. I stayed long enough to obtain my master’s in sociology, then transferred to the Higher Education PhD program. This is what I shared:

In the sociology department, there was absolutely no one that understood what it meant being undocumented. The sociology program, that was so stressful. I was more stressed there doing my master’s thesis than I am now, doing my dissertation. The dissertation is supposed to be more stressful than a thesis, right? But the lack of support in the sociology department made it much worse. I started applying to full-time jobs and I was going to quit the program. If it wasn’t for mentors telling me to apply for the higher education program, I wouldn’t be getting my PhD now. There’s no way I would have finished. I’m lucky I found amazing mentors, but I don’t ever tell anyone graduate school is worth it, because it depends on so many factors.

Our stories paint a picture of toxic graduate programs across different universities and departments, and the importance of finding true peers and mentors (Andrade, 2021; Delgado, 2020) As an undocumented scholar in higher education, I hope to change these cultures in favor of our students. We should not have to sacrifice our mental health, our well-being, and our sanity to obtain a graduate degree; I feel I have had to sacrifice these things just to write this dissertation. Graduate workers provide cheap, and sometimes free, labor to their universities and

departments, but are not provided with the basic support they need to survive or thrive. Adding undocumented status to that mix makes for an agonizing experience.

Figure 9. My first day of graduate school in 2017.



## Careers

All four participants now have successful full-time careers and have worked incredibly hard to achieve their professions. Kay works for a sports equipment manufacturing company, Stephanie is an early childhood social worker, Isabel is an academic advisor, and Felipe is a real estate agent.

Stephanie has been in her position for five years; this is something that has remained constant about her in every interview we have done. She works with families and does home

visits, bringing them activities to help promote bonding and development with their babies and young children. She loves what she does and does not envision leaving her job anytime soon. However, because she is so dedicated to her work and the community she serves, she is often expected to do more work for the same amount of pay, or to take on a major supervisor role for a minimal raise. These experiences have been “offensive” as she described them, but her love and passion for her community keeps her coming back. She puts aside the bureaucracy of administration to care for and serve those families.

Isabel works with mostly Latino students, and she can serve as an empathetic mentor to them. Like Stephanie she is drawn to her job to serve her community. Community serving is also addressed in Undocumented Critical Theory. However, she did point out that working for public universities means that her positions are often funded by limited grants, and she often has to apply for new positions or change jobs altogether. Felipe has always enjoyed jobs where he can be out working with people, as well. One of his favorite jobs was working for an airline company. However, when Trump was elected, some policies changed. Felipe explained:

Before you didn't need a passport and with our badges we could go into restricted areas and board passengers for international flights. But then they told me I couldn't do that anymore and there was nothing they could do. I had to quit that job and I was so upset. I was terrified they would ask for a green card to work one day. So I had to quit and that was a hard decision.

Despite the setback of losing a job he loved because of his undocumented status—another real consequence of a political ontology of threat—Felipe's drive to succeed and pursue joy (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016) allowed him to find other opportunities. He currently works as a real estate agent and absolutely loves his job. It suits his personality perfectly. He plans on



continuing with this line of work and moving up in the company and pursue interior design professionally as well.

### **Reflections**

Our trajectories in life have often been decided by policies led by a political ontology of threat due to our undocumented status, because of a decision made for us when our families brought us as children to a new country. DACA was a blessing for us, but it also served as a constant reminder of the instability and liminality of our immigration status. Changes in policy and administration have sent us on a roller coaster ride, and at times, we all felt that the grief and desperation during these times would consume us. In the end however, we chose to find joy and purpose in our endeavors. We went to college. We got jobs. We found areas in which we thrived. And most importantly, we found one another.

CHAPTER FIVE  
FAMILY, QUEERNESS, AND RELATIONSHIPS

**Families and Queerness**

Undocumented Critical Theory dedicates an entire tenet to parental and family relationships and how these relationships shape one's life experiences (Aguilar, 2019). Many undocumented students buckle under the stress of balancing their studies and work with their family's demands, such as caregiving duties, domestic chores, legal assistance, and emotional labor (Abrego, 2011; Chang, 2011; Mendes, 2018; Mendes & Chang, 2019; Muñoz, 2013; Teranishi et al., 2015;). Family members often do not understand the pressure their immigrant children face socially, culturally, and academically, as representatives of their nationalities and their families, and as first-generation students attempting to assimilate into American culture. A participant named Ella once told me how when she would break down and have spells of anxiety, her mother would scold and shame her instead of comforting or supporting her (Mendes, 2018). This was not a one-off occurrence. Many participants spoke of such environments in their own households over the years.

Stephanie and I once had a conversation about our responsibilities to our families and how that could hinder our ability to participate in immigrant activism. We both wanted to support our communities and participate in activism, but our families had explicitly (and aggressively) demanded that we never share our undocumented status with anyone (Mendes and Chang, 2019). This conversation continued during this study. Stephanie also feels bound to live within a short driving distance of her mom, who is ill. Her caregiving role in her own family has

been a major factor in any social, financial, academic, and professional decision she makes. Educationally, Felipe's family's attitude also affected him. His father did not support his decision to attend college, believing that Felipe should focus on working and making money instead: "My dad said college was a waste of time." These examples address both the familial tenet of UndocuCrit and the tenet regarding different experiences of liminality. Then, as Stephanie and I discussed, there is the intense pressure we all feel (especially as women) to get married to an American, so we could bring "honor" to the family and get our papers. I will discuss romantic relationships and their intersection with undocumented status in the next chapter.

This section is not just about families; it is about queerness, too. Because as Kay, Felipe, and I experienced, it is impossible to separate our family relationships from our queer identities.

### **"We're All Gay Here!"**

There was a moment in the conversation between me, Kay, and Felipe where the three of us realized we are all gay (again, this was not planned. Kay and Felipe happened to have similar availabilities). We laughed at the coincidence and rejoiced in the fact that we are all out now, no longer hiding our sexualities or significant others. In rejoicing we also engaged in a form of resistance, in refusing to let our hardships crush our happiness (Gurr, 2019; Marsh & Śliwa, 2021). For all three of us, our sexualities came with the consequences of our families' reactions and perceptions.

Felipe, the bright light that he is, refused to let anyone dim it. Knowing the consequences he may have faced, he walked into his parents' house one day and declared: "Mom, dad, this is my boyfriend." Things were awkward at first, but as Felipe told me, he refused to take any disrespect. When his grandmother told him he would go to hell, he shrugged it off, then

introduced her to his husband-to-be, Trey. Now, Felipe's family adore Trey and even bought their wedding rings. Felipe taught them that love prevails—as stories of survivance do—and never allowed anyone to disrespect his husband.

Kay's coming out was not as smooth. When she first came out to her parents, her mom did not accept it and started crying. They did not talk about it for the next eight years, and Kay felt she had to stay closeted. Then one day she met Jade. Jade is the love of Kay's life. After a few years together, Kay proposed. Kay brought Jade home to meet her parents and was crushed when her they refused to acknowledge her engagement or relationship altogether. "It was very hurtful," Kay whispered as tears began running down her face. I tried to keep my own tears back as I listened. "I grew up around racist and homophobic family members," Kay continued, "so it's been really difficult." Kay's especially hurt because she sees her family celebrating other people's marriages and engagements, while they continue to ignore her own. "They've just been ignoring the happiest time of my life. They're never going to be excited or happy for me, ever." Fortunately, Jade's family has been supportive and taken Kay in as one of their own. Kay says she does not know where she would be without Jade and her family's support. Importantly, Kay is also engaging in resistance (Marsh & Śliwa, 2021) by defying her family's wished and staying with Jade and resisting against homophobic family members and a heteronormative society overall.

### **It's Not Me, It's YOU**

Our parents do a lot for us, and many have sacrificed their own comforts for their children. The third tenet of UndocuCrit states that these sacrifices are a form of capital, and valuable for survival (Aguilar, 2019). Sometimes, though, the things families do harm us for the rest of our lives. Kay and I talked about this—that our families claim to want to protect us from

the outside world when the greatest pain and hurt we will ever experience has come from inside our own homes. My family rejected me when I first came out, too. Nothing that anyone may say to me will ever hurt as much as what my own family put me through. Kay put it best when she said, “they say we’re gonna live a tough life, and that people will hate us because of who we are. But the hate isn’t out there, it’s coming from them! Like it’s not me, it’s you!”

### **Relationships**

Undocumented immigrants navigating romantic relationships experience a “distinct phenomenon” (Pila, 2016, p. 138). The many participants I have interviewed over the years have always expressed that dating and forming romantic relationships while being undocumented has been a significant part of their lives. Isabel and Stephanie explicitly urged me to focus on this phenomenon, and in following the lead of my participants, I have done so. This chapter will draw from previous work (Mendes, 2018), including unused data, and the current conversations I have had with Kay, Felipe, Stephanie, and Isabel. The goal is to document undocumented students’ experiences navigating romantic relationships, and the challenges that arise when an undocumented person is involved with a documented partner. This chapter is important to include in this dissertation because participants’ relationships constitute a significant part of their lives and in authentically telling their stories of survivance, it is important to address the dynamics of undocumented relationships as well.

#### **Disclosing Undocumented Status to a Romantic Partner**

Disclosing undocumented status to a partner can create a major source of stress and anxiety (Pila, 2016). This is because the undocumented person first needs to figure out if they can trust their new romantic partner to disclose such personal information. Then, they often worry that they will be not taken seriously. There is a “fear that their partners would think that

their relationship [is] solely to gain access to a legal status and that there was no sincerity [their] romantic intentions” (Pila, 2016, p. 148).

Some people felt that telling their partners early in the relationship was beneficial. One previous participant, Alex (Mendes, 2018), said that in his current relationship he told his girlfriend right away so that they could better establish their future together. As he said: “Those are conversations you have to have... so the person knows about the risks and complications that can happen.” Stephanie, on the other hand, has been more hesitant with her relationships: “It’s so hard having that conversation and not knowing how the other person will feel about it. It’s disclosing something so personal and later things might not work out.”

This hesitation is not irrational. A young woman named Lupe encountered hostility and anger when she disclosed her status to her long-term boyfriend: “He would say things like, ‘you can’t even work so I’m picking where we’re eating,’” Lupe recalled. It was a difficult process for Lupe to leave this relationship given she had invested so much time in it, but eventually she realized the relationship was unsalvageable and her boyfriend’s attitude was not worth her staying. Another participant, Clara, also dealt with a hostile boyfriend who would threaten to call immigration on her and her family. Such abusive behavior may have been fueled under an environment of a political ontology of threat, too, and these boyfriends chose to believe misconceptions about undocumented immigrants instead of trusting and supporting their own girlfriends.

It has taken a lot of work and trust, but eventually most of these participants found healthy, long-term relationships. Kay, Felipe, Isabel, and Stephanie are all partnered now, in successful and supportive relationships. All their significant others are documented or U.S.-born citizens. Isabel’s boyfriend is a social worker from Guatemala. She said both his background and

profession have helped him be better understanding toward her situation: “He is super understanding and emotionally intelligent, and I felt comfortable sharing my status.” Felipe’s husband is from Mexico, and as Felipe said, “with him it was very straightforward, and he understood.”

Another important dynamic to explore is that when undocumented people disclose their status, especially to their romantic partner, they also take on the role of an educator, explaining policies and implications and the varying experiences they face. “I had to educate him,” Isabel says of her boyfriend, “because in his schooling he didn’t learn this stuff.” Stephanie said her boyfriend did not know anything about immigrant experiences as a white man, and she had a lot to teach him, too:

He asked a lot of questions which was good because he didn’t know anything about it. He asked a lot about how it works and about the possibility of fixing my status. Now he pays attention to things he didn’t use to before.

Kay had a lot to teach her girlfriend, too, who is now her fiancée:

She had no idea what we go through as immigrants, no idea. But she’s always been very supportive and making sure I have everything I need for my lawyer. When I had to quit my job, it was very stressful on her, too. And that was scary. To see someone, my partner, be scared and frightened and feel what I’ve felt for years, it was not a good feeling. She had to learn all of that really quick.

Stephanie’s and Kay’s experiences are examples that it is possible for people (even those who are white Americans) to resist a political ontology of threat. Both their partners were able to challenge their own stereotypes and misconceptions and learn from their undocumented significant others. Resistance is possible, and crucial, in dismantling belief systems under a political ontology of threat (Massumi, 2010).

Kay’s account also brings attention to the guilt some undocumented immigrants feel when they must put their partners through the stresses of their immigration status. I feel this way

myself, when my partner sees me in anguish as I scramble to renew DACA or as I lament over the inability to travel or to have certain jobs. “It makes you feel guilty when you are dating someone and you have to disclose all that,” Stephanie added, “I don’t want him to feel bad or that he has to be with me because of this.”

While they all have documented partners now, Stephanie and Isabel did point out that when they did date someone who was undocumented, the bond and authenticity of the relationship was priceless. “We would always have great conversations,” Stephanie said of her ex-boyfriend, “It was the most genuine relationship I ever had, because I didn’t have to hide anything. I could just be myself. It was the relationship I felt the most comfortable in, and safe.” Isabel agreed, reminiscing on her own ex-boyfriend and how hard it was to get over that relationship. “We just had so many similarities,” she recalled. Relationships without a preexisting ontology of threat (Massumi, 2010) and a mutual understanding of one another’s lived experiences can be significantly beneficial for all parties involved.

### **“I Need My Papers, Marry Me”**

In discussing relationships with documented partners, the question of marrying for papers inevitably comes up. I asked Felipe if the prospect of applying for residency through Trey made them get married faster. “Yeah, I was like, I need my papers now, marry me,” Felipe joked. But what he had to say next was touching:

We didn’t talk about that until after we were married. Being real with you guys, I always thought I had to get married to get papers. That’s the only way I thought I would be here without fear. But with Trey it was different because we were in love, we *are* in love. We just knew we wanted to be together.

Kay feels the same way about her fiancée: “That’s not something I think about, and my partner is the one telling me to call the lawyers and see our options. But that was the last thing on



my mind, to do it for that.” Kay and Felipe will both be applying for residency eventually through their spouses. Felipe is trying to save money, because he has had lawyers estimate the cost between \$10,000 and \$20,000 for the process.

**The Process.** Obtaining a Green Card through marriage is not a simple procedure. When an undocumented person marries a U.S.-citizen, they must file a form known as the I-130 Relative Petition. This is a petition specifically for a “non-citizen” residing in the U.S. who wishes to undergo an “adjustment of status” to legally reside in the United States. For someone who is in the United States under a student visa, work visa, or the like, they are essentially petitioning to adjust their status from that of a temporary resident to a permanent resident, based on a marriage to a U.S. citizen. The couple must stay married for at least three years for the “non-citizen” spouse to become eligible for citizenship (USCIS, 2019). When the spouse is *undocumented* however, the process is even more complicated, because there will be a thorough investigation to make sure the marriage is not fake, and the undocumented person is not taking advantage of the marriage for the papers. United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) state on their website, “If your fiancé is in the United States and entered unlawfully, in most cases he or she will not be able to adjust their status to that of a permanent resident while in the United States” (2019).

What this means is that the undocumented person will likely be told to leave the country and wait for the process to be complete from their country of origin, and then possibly face a temporary ban from the United States (from a few months to ten years) as punishment for entering/residing in the country “unlawfully.”

**The Pressure.** For Stephanie and Isabel, who have not yet decided to marry their partners, the pressure they feel from family is difficult. Stephanie expressed that “it’s always

‘when are you gonna find a white guy to get married. Now I am almost 32 and it’s ‘you need to get married and have kids and get your papers.’” In my own family, I was always told to find a (male) citizen to marry and obtain legal status. There is a lot of internalization that we experience as young women, that a man will have to save us and legalize us. For Isabel, she still struggles with these feelings: “the possibility of getting married, that’s my only way of getting papers right now.” At the same time, Isabel and Stephanie both expressed a desire to obtain their papers on their own, and to credit that achievement on only themselves and not a potential marriage.

### **Conclusions**

Undocumented status intersects with virtually every other identity, circumstance, and context in one’s life, and romantic relationships are no exception. Not much research exists on the dynamics of these relationships, and this chapter was an attempt to remedy part of that gap. Not every undocumented person wants to marry for papers; in fact, most of them do not. When they find someone they love, they must reconcile with the complications of their status and how they will affect their relationship. “You need to write a book about this,” Stephanie told me. “If not a book,” Isabel responded, “then at least make this a chapter in your dissertation.” And I sure did.

## CHAPTER SIX

### RESISTANCE THROUGH JOY AND SURVIVANCE

Following the guidance of Portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016), storytelling (Alterio & McDrury, 2003), the idea of laughter and joy as resistance (Marsh & Śliwa, 2021), and the power of resistance through stories of survivance (Stanton, 2019), my participants and I made a deliberate decision to dedicate a portion of this project to the activities, hobbies, and other things that bring us joy, and that make us unique as undocumented people. The hardships, struggles, and trauma faced by undocumented immigrants are many, our anxiety levels are high (Suarez-Orozco, 2020), and our coping mechanisms have not always been the healthiest (Andrade, 2021), but despite the hardships (Stanton, 2019) we still choose to resist with positive stories. It is essential for us to find ways to decompress, take care of our mind and body, and achieve a state of true happiness—one disconnected from politics, an ontology of threat (Massuni, 2010), or any other media rhetoric.

This chapter is the most unconventional one yet, filled with quotes and phrases and of visuals such as photographs and artwork left to be interpreted by the reader. My participants chose to provide this visual data because they feel it represents an important part of their lives.

#### **What Brings You Joy and Comfort?**

Kay: “I became like a dad. I have two dogs and two bunnies. I just want to cuddle them all day. I like cooking putting on a podcast, trying something new. And photography.” Kay’s simple pleasures highlight how even small actions of joy are important in resisting feelings of oppression (Marsh & Śliwa, 2021).

Figures 10, 11, 12, and 13. Kay's adorable pets.



Figures 14 and 15. Photography by Kay.



Felipe: "I get drunk (laughs). I like to go out to eat, to have people over, playing games. I also really like to watch documentaries. Spending time with my dog and my cat. I like to plan my

outfit for the week. Painting, cooking, and organizing. And interior design.” Felipe’s more social activities, especially drinking, are forms of resistance, too (Gurr, 2019). These actions demonstrate a powerful message that even through the struggles of being undocumented, we refuse to be brought down by a political administration. We have the right to have *fun* during both difficult and happy times.

Figure 16. Felipe’s style.



Figures 17 and 18. Felipe’s interior design.



## Coping Through Art and Movement

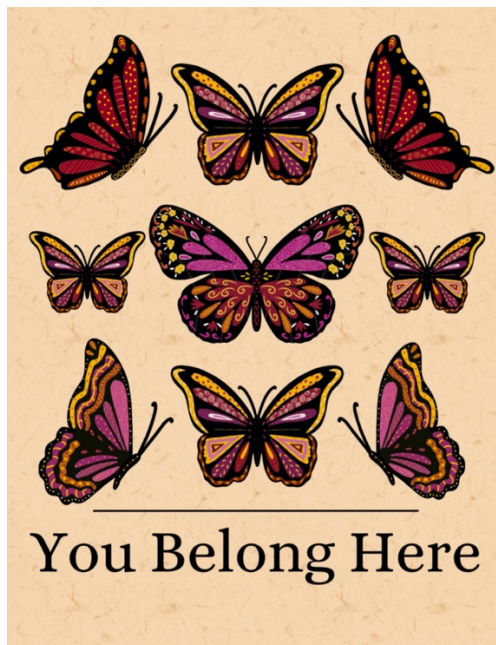
Our cherished hobbies can provide an outlet to destress and help our mental health. Furthermore, collective experiences of trauma create a strong bond of solidarity for undocumented youth who can then create creative coping strategies (Gurr, 2019). These bonds also show how narratives of survivance manifest (Stanton, 2019).

Isabel, Stephanie, and I, all cope through art and running. As I mentioned in Chapter Four, Isabel is training for a marathon. Stephanie refers to herself as an “avid runner.” Isabel explained that she likes a challenge, and it is important for her to have an inspiring goal to work towards. She said that prior to running, “my mental health wasn’t great... I needed to something with this energy.” Running proved to be a phenomenal remedy for her. Stephanie agreed: “It’s really important for my mental health. When I’m running, nothing matters, nothing exists. That’s how I manage my anxiety. If I have a tough day, that’s my self-care.”

Stephanie and I create a lot of art pieces as a form of self-care, too. Isabel took her art one step further: “I started putting my art out there. That’s when I opened my Etsy shop.” Isabel’s art is now also a profession and a source of income. She reflected, “when I was younger, I really liked art, but I never knew I could go into it. I thought you couldn’t make money off it.” The figures below showcase Isabel’s professional pieces as well as my and Stephanie’s personal creations that we use to cope. This art also showcases instances of survivance (Vizenor, 2008) that are not necessarily written, but are still healing. As Stephanie beautifully stated: “Art is healing.”



Figures 19 and 20. Isabel's creations.



Figures 21 and 22. Stephanie's collages.

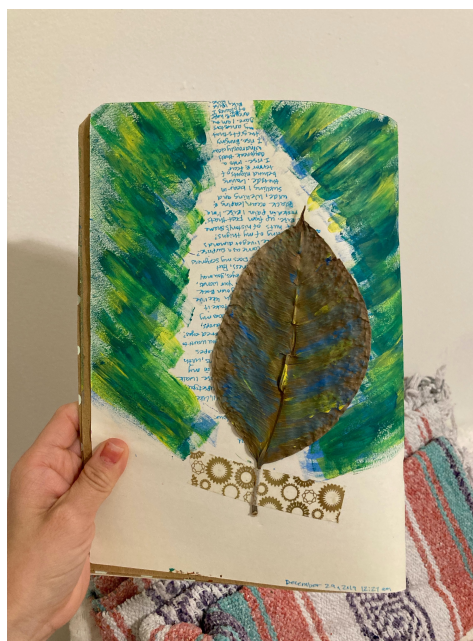
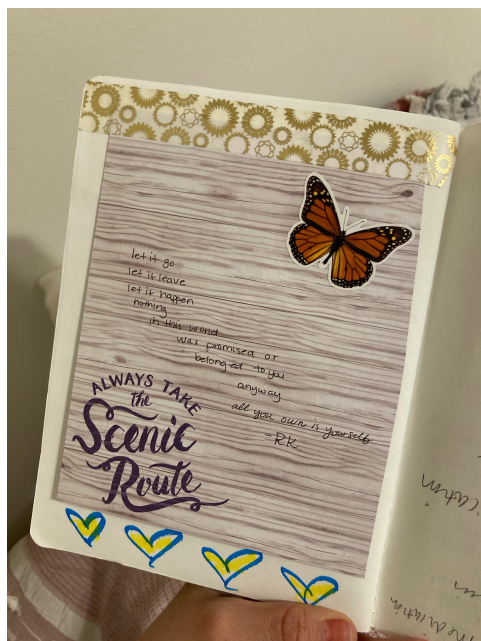




Figure 23. An unhealthy mother-daughter relationship

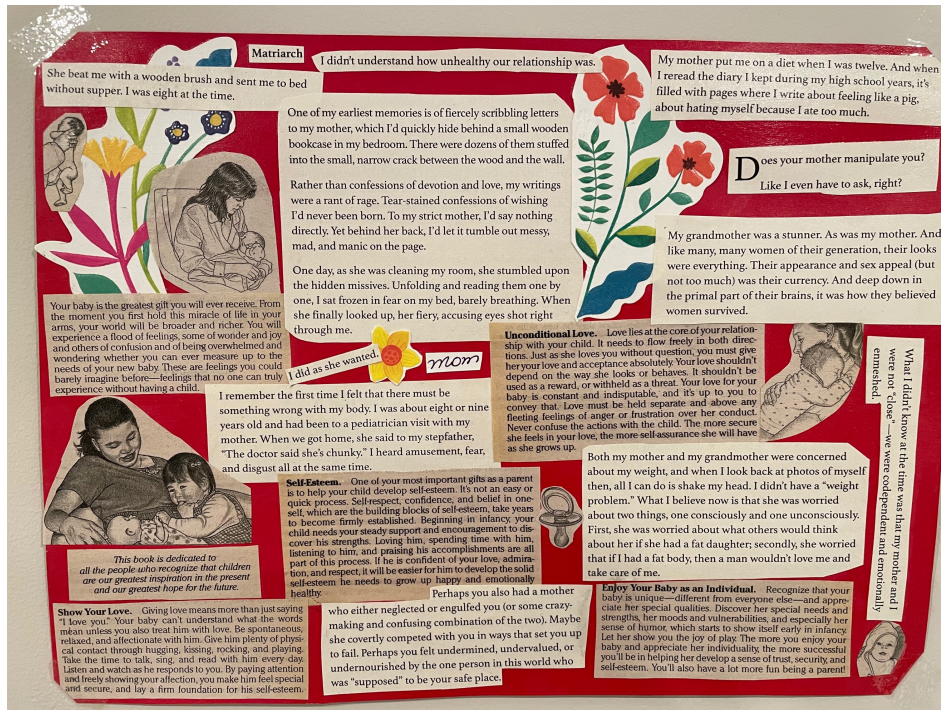


Figure 24. Comeback from a nightmare.





### **Happiness Matters, Too**

Through our invigorating conversations, my participants and I found that highlighting the things that bring us joy (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016) and our stories of survivance (Stanton, 2019; Vizenor, 2008), no matter how small, is just as important as telling our stories of hardship (Tucker & Yang, 2014b). We love our hobbies, whether it is art, running, design, or spending time with our pets. The artwork and photography featured in this chapter represent another form of data too; a form of research that is creative, visual, and inspiring. These photos encompass the most important aspects of our lives, no matter how simple: the things that bring us *joy*.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSION

This dissertation applies a framework of a political ontology of threat to undocumented student experiences, using Undocumented Critical Theory, storytelling, and narratives of survivance. It is filled with stories, conversations, and creative images. The research question posed in Chapter One was: What is the nature of survivance in the lives of undocumented young adults who have lived under an era of political ontology of threat and its continued aftereffects?

My participants know they are strong, resilient, and capable of overcoming difficult obstacles, especially under a political ontology of threat. They experienced first-hand how an ontology of threat such as that of the Trump administration can have dire consequences on their mental health and wellbeing. However, they also emphasize that resilience is not everything, that sometimes they need to sit in their emotions or take a break from work or put down some of the many weights they carry as undocumented students. They see themselves as individuals with unique stories or survivance, and as part of a collective community that supports and understands one another.

Undocumented students often enter higher education with dreams and hopes of opportunity, only to discover that some of their most difficult journeys will begin with higher education. Many will start their endeavors in higher education and realize they must cut those endeavors short due to financial constraints or other responsibilities. Others will push through hostile environments, such as the graduate school culture in some places, or a hostile college campus fueled by a political ontology of threat (Massumi, 2010) to be able to attain their

personal, academic, or professional goals. Fortunately, though they had to go through various journeys, obstacles, and hardships, all my participants are now in a place of happiness and stability with their academic and professional lives.

I deliberately chose to tell the stories of my participants and engage in methodology in an unconventional way. Some chapters are not always clearly connected to higher education, and some stories I tell may not, at first glance, seem related to higher education either. I use a loose framework, as encouraged by Tuck & Yang, (2014b), to avoid dictating what my participants should say. Again, that was deliberate. In organizing my findings this way, I highlight the complexities of the lived experiences of the students that sit in our classrooms every day. While they are attempting to be students, and to absorb the material in their lessons, they are also undergoing the struggles and the joys this dissertation tells of. As I experienced, it was extremely difficult completing assignments and exams when I was also dealing with family issues. A student may have trouble focusing during class when they are debating how to tell their significant other that they are undocumented. Another student may be trying to take extra classes while also working multiple jobs and starting their own business on the side. These are only a few examples. If we are to be supporting, understanding, and strive to be exceptional as educators, then we must learn our students' stories or survivance, including their challenges and their triumphs. Higher education does not exist in a vacuum; it is filled with students and educators of varying experiences and perspectives. To be a true successful educator, in my opinion, means making the extra effort to make sure the spaces we occupy will always be safe and welcoming spaces for all our students.

## Community

I stated that I did not want this research to be just for me, and that I wanted my participants to get something from it, too. Tuck and Yang (2014b) claim that research must be meaningful to participants and useful to them and their communities. That is why I decided to engage participants in conversations with one another. This way, they would not be just talking to me, but at the very least they would get to meet another undocumented peer, too, and build community (Delgado, 2020; Suarez-Orozco, 2020).

This worked out beautifully, and much better than I could have imagined. All my participants got along. Isabel runs a higher education advocacy group on social media, and has already connected Stephanie, Kay, and Felipe with the resources she offers. She also has a podcast and has asked me and Stephanie to be a part of it. Stephanie gave me and Isabel tips on how to tape our legs before running and instructions on how to take an ice bath afterwards. Stephanie and I are planning a trip to California to finally meet Isabel in person. Stephanie runs a book club and is inviting all of us to partake in it. Kay and Felipe are helping each other find lawyers and other resources as they apply for residency through their spouses. Felipe wants to start running with me and Stephanie. They are all connected now with each other through social media and phone numbers. And most importantly, they do not need me to facilitate their conversations anymore and are comfortable reaching out to one another whenever they want. Such community building also builds resistance (Gurr, 2019), and a collective sense of solidarity, support, and pride in one another.

## Revisiting Undocumented Critical Theory

This research contributes to UndocuCrit, providing research for the undocumented, by the undocumented. This new theoretical framework is relevant for this type of research as it is

continuously evolving and growing. I especially appreciate that Aguilar (2019) encourages “the engagement of varied undocumented communities” (p. 153), providing an accessible and inclusive theoretical framework for emerging undocumented researchers and challenging current oppressive narratives.

The first tenet of UndocuCrit claims fear is endemic to undocumented communities. This fear is amply addressed in current research all throughout Chapter Two. Aguilar’s (2019) tenet of fear is also linked to Massumi’s (2010) political ontology of threat, because Massumi’s concept of threat manifests as Aguilar’s concept of fear. A political ontology of threat follows UndocuCrit’s framework in that it states restrictive policies and rhetoric are designed to instill fear. Undocumented immigrants feel threatened by policies and anti-immigrant attitudes, and thus in turn they are fearful for their own safety and wellbeing, as well as the safety and wellbeing of those they care about.

The second tenet of UndocuCrit reminds us that different experiences of liminality will lead to different experiences of reality. An ontology of threat (Massumi, 2010) also touches upon experiences of reality. While there are themes in the stories of survivance shared throughout this dissertation and within existing research, undocumented immigrants encounter varying pathways along their journeys. A lack of finances leads someone like Kay to choose to work full-time while an academic advisor may lead someone like Isabel to an assistantship to pursue graduate school. Instead of perceiving Isabel as more studious as Kay as more financially driven, we must acknowledge that it was their experiences of liminality that led them down certain paths. Under different circumstances, Kay may have been the one to pursue graduate school and Isabel may have been the one to start working full-time out of community college. Their experiences do not

necessarily speak to their abilities or personalities, but rather are a result of the liminalities and limitations they happened to face.

The third tenet revolves around parental sacrifices, and how parent involvement in the lives of their undocumented children works as a form of capital, increasing opportunities and socioeconomic status for their children (Aguilar, 2019). Furthermore, Aguilar (2019) argues that family involvement in undocumented youth's lives increases the potential for that child providing social and economic improvements for their families in the future. I do not argue that parental involvement and support are unimportant; Felipe is an example of someone who now thrives having his family involved in his life. However, expecting an undocumented child to turn around and provide social and economic benefits for their families is unfair, and places an extremely heavy burden on these children as they grow into young adults. Stephanie spoke of this pressure when discussing her family's expectations for her to marry a white man to be able to provide for her and her family. This went against what Stephanie wanted to do, as she is enjoying an independent and fulfilling life. Kay's parental expectations would mean abandoning the love of her life and silencing her sexuality. We can acknowledge the sacrifices and benefits our families have given us while also addressing the trauma they have passed on through their expectations. Resistance is discussed in this dissertation frequently (Gurr, 2019; Marsh & Śliwa, 2021), and this resistance is sometime necessary against our own families, too.

Finally, the fourth tenet of UndocuCrit embodies the importance of mentorship, academic redemption, and community engagement, through the use of "narratives, counter stories, and storytelling." (p. 157). All participants used academics as a tool for liberation and independence. For Kay and Felipe, this meant a successful entry into their careers and for Isabel and Stephanie, it meant further developing their individual identities throughout graduate school. They all

thrived in having the freedom to share their counter stories and engage in storytelling with one another. Most importantly, though, is the aspect of community engagement. Participants truly have benefited from engaging with one another and their communities. Their stories of survivance are shared not just for research, but for community building as well, giving a direct benefit to those who participate in this kind of research (Tuck & Yang, 2014b).

### **Storytelling in Practice**

While storytelling in higher education research may be difficult to embrace for some practitioners and scholars, it provides truly “meaningful links between theory and practice” (Alterio & McDrury, 2003, p. 20) and “leads teachers to try new pedagogical practices” (Wright & Ryan, 2010, p. 295). In Chapter Two, I introduced the concept of storytelling as an effective learning tool in higher education. In addition to using storytelling as a method to in research about undocumented students, it can also be used as a learning tool in the classroom to teach students about this research and the role they can play in supporting their undocumented peers. Storytelling “enhances student learning” (Alterio & McDrury, 2003, p. 12) and is effective in helping students and educators connect with the material. In the field of higher education, it can better prepare future educators “for the rigors and uncertainties inherent in professional practice” (p. 12). An example is when a student chooses to disclose their undocumented status to a professor or staff member who then needs to be prepared on what to say to the student and how to help them and provide them with accurate and up-to-date information.

Storytelling provides lifelong learning (Alterio & McDrury, 2003), meaning that when told effectively, the stories of undocumented students will stay with the reader of the research paper, the student in a social justice class, or a professor attending a seminar, for the rest of their careers and/or personal lives. Stories provide a “reflective tool for practice” (Wright & Ryan,

2010, p. 295), and allow for students and educators to engage in reflective activities to learn about themselves and those around them (Alterio & McDrury, 2003), and how their lives may be connected to the lives of the undocumented communities around them. For educators, this helps them understand and empathize with the emotional reality of their students, and value that emotional reality as real knowledge (Alterio & McDrury, 2003), *especially* when those students are undocumented.

### **Final Thoughts**

My goal is for future research to continue in this way. That it should continue documenting stories of survivance of undocumented youth and allow them to lead the work that is about their own lives. Participants should be fulfilled after participating in a study (Tuck & Yang, 2014b) and walk away with connections and opportunities that will benefit them in the long run. We can still be serious researchers and abandon traditional methodology to branch out and serve those we claim to want to research. Their wellbeing and their happiness should be a priority over any finding. While my dissertation ends here, my work continues. The relationships I built will last. And most importantly, I am grateful to each participant—Kay, Stephanie, Isabel, and Felipe—for sharing their intimate stories and pushing this work forward.



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## VITA

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