

The Struggles of Identity, Education, and Agency  
in the Lives of Undocumented Students

Aurora Chang

The Struggles of  
Identity, Education,  
and Agency in the Lives  
of Undocumented  
Students

The Burden of Hyperdocumentation

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*I dedicate this book to my first teachers, mi mama, Peppina Liano, y mi  
papa, Jorge Arturo Chang.*

## PREFACE

This book is a personal and academic pursuit. It weaves together two distinct and powerfully related sources of knowledge: (1) my journey/transition from a once undocumented immigrant from Guatemala to a hyperdocumented academic and (2) years of ongoing national research on the identity, education, and agency of undocumented college students. In interlacing both my personal experiences with findings from my empirical qualitative research, I explore practical and theoretical pedagogical, curricular, and policy-related discussions around issues that impact undocumented immigrants while providing compelling rich narrative vignettes (both personal and from my study participants). Collectively, these findings support my overall argument that undocumented students can cultivate an empowering self-identity by performing the role of infallible cultural citizen.

In many ways, all people from marginalized groups can relate to the idea of hyperdocumentation as it has been a historical practice—this notion of having to “show our papers” in various iterations to prove our identity but more so to prove our human worthiness. The idea of “showing one’s papers” has a chilling history, taking us back to places and times we never want to repeat: Nazi roundups, the racial sorting of apartheid South Africa, and the practices of the Soviet empire. Requiring papers—like those that might be required for admission to vote—echoes the poll taxes and literacy tests in the Jim Crow South, as well as recent voting requirements, used to keep black voters from exercising their freedom. Targeting the so-called undocumented is hardly a new phenomenon.

In the United States, the groups of people targeted as such are simply a moving target at the whim of political inclinations.

This book is a combination of previously published journal articles and new material that follow a somewhat unconventional approach to academic writing. In all my writing endeavors, I have always worked to weave narrative and experiential knowledge into academic conventions—this has not been easy but I hope it will make the reading of this book more engaging and accessible. The truth is that academic writing, as it is currently understood and taught, will never be for the masses, but my small wish is that this work inches a bit closer to that end. There is no greater form of flattery than when a high school student will write to me and share how much they could relate to something I wrote. That tells me that, to some degree, my writing is relevant, readable, and authentic. If you have ever worked with high school students, you know that they call things as they see them.

This book was written for those students, teachers, and scholars who: (1) identify as, study, want to learn about, and/or work with undocumented people; (2) have been trained to take the “I” out of their writing for fear that it would be deemed biased, subjective, lacking in rigor, political, narcissistic, unacceptable, or worthless; (3) understand the revolutionary power in centering experiential knowledge as official knowledge; (4) need models as to how to write themselves and people from marginalized populations and their counterstories into academia; and (5) would like advice as to how to work with undocumented students.

This book was written for every undocumented person who has ever been unable to find the language to express their realities. It was written to honor my parents and their journey of immigration that continues today. It was written for my siblings who each, in their own way, has narrated the story of their lives built on the sacrifices, intellects, and bodies of those before us. It was written for every teacher who saw the potential in this little brown girl and for every person who expected the opposite. Finally, it was written for that same five-year-old immigrant girl with big dreams and often debilitating anxiety. I hold that five-year-old tightly, mightily, and with every assurance that I am with her.

This book is divided into seven chapters.

In the first chapter, I discuss how my positionality impacts my epistemology, specifically through my rationale for pursuing a profession as an academic. I begin the book from this angle because why I chose academia directly relates to the notion that I introduce and emphasize so strongly in

this book—*hyperdocumentation*. I discuss my love of educational spaces and how they served as safe havens for me and how I nurtured and honed particular academic skills, such as writing, to inhabit privileged worlds that I would otherwise lack access to. I entertain the idea of being an activist scholar that works within and without academia to participate in nonviolent resistance, manifested in daily acts of disobedience.

In the second chapter, “Undocumented to Hyperdocumented: A Jornada of Papers, Protection, and PhD Status,” I situate my own positionality as a once undocumented Guatemalan immigrant. I describe my experience of hyperdocumentation—the effort to accrue awards, accolades, and eventually academic degrees to compensate for my undocumented status. In spite of my visible successes and naturalization, I discuss how I still confront the rage and intolerance of American “commonsense” beliefs about immigration. My narrative questions the pursuit of documentation as a means to legitimacy and acceptance in American society. This introduction lays the foundation for my argument and outlines the chapters to follow.

In the third chapter, “Privileged and Undocumented: Toward a Borderland Love Ethic,” I further explore my positionality, moving from the personal to the academic as I discuss the tensions of what it means to be a “deserving” native researcher. In this way, I present my conceptual framework from which my writing stems and offer a theoretical situatedness as researcher. I begin by experimenting with the meaning of a *borderland love ethic* as a theoretical framework that centers on nurturing our strength to love in spaces of contention, tolerance of ambiguity as a revolutionary virtue, and humbly beginning anew again and again. Drawing from an extended interview with a participant of a larger study about undocumented students, I describe our positionalities with respect to privilege and undocumented status as the central foci. I use my own dilemma of understanding and reconciling my position as a once undocumented immigrant to a now hyperdocumented (Chang 2011) native researcher, studying undocumented people, to work through the possibility of a borderland love ethic. Relying primarily on the theoretical works of Anzaldúa (1987), Darder (2003), and hooks (2000), I ask, how we, as scholars, enact love in our research amidst our seemingly contradictory positions of oppression and privilege. I contend that one possibility is by employing a borderland love ethic that embraces ambiguity, rejects binary positions, and humbly acknowledges our constant state of arriving, both as researchers and participants.

In the fourth chapter, “Figured Worlds and American Dreams: An Exploration of Agency and Identity Among Undocumented Students,” I begin reporting on one of my studies of undocumented students with a focus on identity, education, and agency. The lives of undocumented students are at the mercy of the political ups and downs that impact their daily realities. No matter the agentic acts these students take to reach their goals or steps they take to simply survive, there is a limit to what they can achieve in the context of the law. While the unpredictable journey of the DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act, which sought a conditional pathway to citizenship, raised students’ hopes since its inception in 2001, xenophobic messages about undocumented immigrants stealing American jobs, committing crimes, and otherwise abusing the US system of government continue to proliferate. These symbolically violent messages depict undocumented people as uneducated and deficient—as takers of what is not theirs, bringing with them problems rather than contributions.

As a result, undocumented students find themselves on continuously shifting ground, calibrating each decision they make in accordance with or as a strategic reaction to the existing political climate. Specifically, some undocumented students find themselves in an ongoing internal battle to fashion an identity that counters the pervasive stereotypes of undocumented people through a process of hyperdocumentation (Chang 2011), while simultaneously bearing the weight of fierce anti-immigrant sentiment. In this chapter, I ask the following questions: How do undocumented students navigate educational spaces? In what ways do their legal statuses impact the production of their identities? How do they exert agency within the parameters of their undocumented status? In answering these questions, I explore the ways in which some undocumented students *figure*—or take agency in shaping meaning of—their worlds, find identity in their education, and leverage community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005) as a source of critical hope and resilience in their quest to achieve the ever-nebulous American Dream.

In the fifth chapter, “Doing Good and Doing Damage: Educators’ Impact on Undocumented Latinx Students’ Lives,” I explore educators’ particularly poignant role in impacting undocumented students’ lives. I draw from the perspectives of undocumented students to examine how educators impact undocumented Latinx lives for better or for worse. I focus on undocumented Latinx students’ perceptions of educators’ everyday interactions with them and use Valenzuela’s (1999) notions of

educación and authentic caring to analyze how students make meaning of them. I stress the significance of interactions that do good and others that do damage and suggest that educators can powerfully influence the lives of undocumented youth through small, even momentary interactions.

Studying the impact of educators' actions and omissions from the vantage point of undocumented students is critical to informing current practices, behaviors, and interventions. This chapter attempts to begin a conversation around the role of educators in undocumented students' lives by asking: How do undocumented students perceive their everyday interactions with educators? Of these interactions, which ones do students identify as "doing good" and "doing damage"? In this chapter, I argue that individual educators have the power to "do good" or "do damage" in the lives of undocumented youth. I analyze, discuss, and present implications about the impact of educators on undocumented students, noting that the actions and omissions of individual educators can have lasting effects on their lives.

This chapter reveals "children who have been raised to dream, yet are cut off from the very mechanisms that allow them to achieve their dreams" (Gonzales 2009, p. 6); their dreams are tempered and even squashed by limited educational opportunities, low academic expectations, fear of deportation, inability to acquire employment, and mental health challenges associated with the stress of being undocumented. In the midst of such adversity, undocumented students pointed to human mechanisms that can serve as gateways or gatekeepers for the futures of undocumented students; those human mechanisms are educators.

In the sixth chapter, I offer my thoughts around academy agency and the burden of perfectionism that undocumented students face. I solidify my argument that some undocumented students can cultivate an empowering self-identity by performing the role of infallible cultural citizen. Drawing from the borderland love ethic framework, I conclude by reconnecting my own personal experiences as once undocumented to now hyperdocumented immigrant to those of the participants, drawing conclusions and posing questions for the reader to ponder.

In the seventh chapter, I get practical, providing advice for those who work with undocumented students. Drawing on conversations with undocumented students, I present three major pieces of advice as directly shared with me: (1) You don't need to know a lot to help me; (2) Don't tell me everything is going to be alright; and (3) Walk the path alongside me. I suggest that while we must keep the larger political arena on the

forefront, engage tirelessly in our fight to battle draconian immigration policies, we must also stay present on the now, mindfully focusing on the everyday impact we can have on undocumented students' lives through our interactions with them. Rather than fall into a pit of despair by succumbing to the grandiosity of global politics where we often feel powerless, we can look at our own contexts and find ways to enact agency within our locus of control. Finally, I encourage readers to write themselves into academia by defining what that means and explaining how I wrote myself into academia throughout this process.

Chicago, IL USA

Aurora Chang

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Finally, let me thank every participant I have ever interviewed in this research. My work rests on your experiences which you so generously shared with me.

*[slam papers to floor]*

I have a Bachelor's from Berkeley  
a Master's from Stanford and  
a PhD from the University of Texas at Austin

*[bend down to floor to shuffle through papers]*

I've written at least 10,000 pages in my lifetime  
and will probably reach a million before I'm dead.

*[sort through and pass out different papers to people in audience]*

I have file cabinets full of papers:  
certificates of achievement, perfect attendance awards, straight A report cards, French student of the year, Mathletes winner, Academic Decathlon Finalist, #1 Doubles Tennis Champ, Excellent Citizenship award, applications, forms, personal statements, reference letters, Alumni Scholarship (full ride), Mellon Fellow (full ride), Asian American Award for Leadership, Hispanic Faculty/Staff Association Member of the Year, University Fellowship \$50,000

*[find CV, reveal it and put it on like a shawl around body]*

My CV is 20 pages long

I wear professorial clothes and talk academic talk.

I've done everything I'm supposed to do, right?

But

*[stand tall and let the CV shawl fall to the floor, quietly talking aloud]*

Yesterday, today, and tomorrow

when I again get confused for a food service worker, hotel staff, or maid—  
it's like I

**NEVER**

**EARNED**

**ANYTHING.**

*[hands extended to audience]*

Don't get me wrong—my father worked coat check at a San Francisco hotel,  
my mom sold tamales from our house, I bussed tables to get through school.  
It's just that people have no problem assuming that we do THOSE honest  
jobs that everyone else WON'T do.

I've just never had someone **accidentally assume** I'm a professor, a doctor,  
an author.

You get me?

*[Hands in prayer pleading]*

**Understand** that brown skin, prominent nose, black hair, and Mayan  
features

TRUMP

21 years of schooling, a prestigious job, and authored articles, chapters, and  
books.

I thought my days of fearing everything

as an undocumented “illegal” immigrant from Guatemala were over.

I deluded myself

*[collect papers from audience]*

thinking that I had hyperdocumented my way out of racism, sexism, hetero-  
normativity, classism, ableism, ageism, and xenophobia.

*[tone gets powerful, holding papers close to chest, on heart]*

I'm a writer

I'm a scholar

And a professor at Loyola University

but you wouldn't know that.

Would you?

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