

Undocumented to Hyperdocumented: A Jornada of Protection, Papers, and PhD Status

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In this personal essay, Aurora Chang describes her experience of hyperdocumentation—the effort to accrue awards, accolades, and eventually academic degrees to compensate for her undocumented status. In spite of her visible successes and naturalization, Chang still confronts the rage and intolerance of American “common-sense” beliefs about immigration. Her narrative questions the pursuit of documentation as a means to legitimacy and acceptance in American society.

I clearly remember myself as a young, brown, Guatemalan girl, going with my family on our routine trips to the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS)¹ office. It was a ritual for the six of us to grab a number, sit on chained-to-the-floor plastic chairs, stand in line for the next available window, and have a “Next, may I help you?” government worker assist us. On the surface, it appeared as if we were part of a discrete and mundane series of tasks in the precise ritual of obtaining our sacrosanct green cards. Yet, the thought of acquiring *papeles* was anything but mundane: acquiring papers was synonymous with achieving the American Dream.

In many ways, the process was religious. We followed the INS doctrine and performed processional rites—all culminating in a repentant return to an imagined place of social acceptance and redemption from illegal immigration. We hoped that, after following certain commandments (such as passing the citizenship test, following federal immigration rules, and waiting), the pearly gates of the United States would open wide for us prodigal children. In preparation for our INS visits, our parents would force us into our Sunday best—thin white socks with lace trim and white patent-leather Mary Janes for the girls and blue suits and shiny, tight black shoes for the boys. And none of us was exempt from Dippity-do, the revered hair gel that came in a vat from

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the Mexican *tienda* and that was saved for special occasions such as these. The rigid seating, the special papers to fill out and read, the solemn entrance into the building through an officiated person (usually a security guard), the absolute understanding that we were to be on our most cordial behavior, and the unspoken acknowledgment among all present that we worshiped the same god, American citizenship—these were our practices. The ceremonious actions were penance for the sins we committed for being illegal as well as a show of reverence for the country we so longed to become permanent citizens of.

American “common sense” (Apple, 1993) tells us that being undocumented is a euphemism for being illegal, illegitimate, inhuman. I grew up with a deeply ingrained reverence for the value of papeles—almost a sixth sense, or *facultad*,

the capacity to see in the surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant “sensing,” a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/ hide. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 60)

My *facultad* originated in my intense desire to protect my family from the perils of undocumented status via a green card and then naturalization papers and became a growing concomitant urgency to acquire and produce as much documentation as possible in academic settings, with the similar hope of indemnity.

Here, I hope to tell my counter-story and to detail the direct connection between not having papeles in a U.S. federal immigration context and the acquisition of inordinate amounts of papeles in a socioacademic context. Utilizing Apple’s (1993) notion of *common sense* and Solórzano and Yosso’s (2002) notion of *counter-storytelling*, I will chronicle the pivotal rite-of-passage experiences that took me from undocumented—an alien (noncitizen) who entered the United States without government authorization—to hyperdocumented: a person who produces exceeding amounts of documents, texts, and papers. Apple (1993) argues that

the conventional approach to understanding how ideology operates assumes by and large that the ideology is “inscribed in” people simply because they are in a particular class position. The power of dominant ideas is either a given in which dominance is guaranteed, or the differences in “inscribed” class cultures and ideologies will generate significant class conflict. In either case, ideology is seen as something that somehow makes its effects felt on people in the economy, in politics, in culture and education, and in the home, without too much effort. It is simply *there*. The common sense of people becomes common-sense “naturally” as they go about their daily lives, lives that are prestructured by their class position. (p. 15)

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as

a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the master narrative of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform. (p. 32)

This article's counter-stories problematize the notion of a central source of knowledge and being by providing a context to challenge "majoritarian stories," the kind of stories that, for example "remind us that people who may not have the legal documents to 'belong' in the United States may be identified by their skin color, hair texture, eye shape, accent, and/or surname" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 29).

I employ these definitions of common sense and counter-storytelling to highlight the realities of a specific group of marginalized people by presenting alternatives beyond mainstream narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and demonstrating that they are not alone in their experiences. My use of a critical race methodology provides a space to engage alternative, real accounts that are counter to deficit-based stories of undocumented people. I hope to follow in the spirit of Anzaldúa's (1987) vision, where "we are articulating new positions in the 'in-between'" (pp. xxv-xxvi) that cross boundaries and integrate elements of narrative and theory, intersecting social identities as a seamless feature of text development. These counter-stories, then, become sources of strength, not weakness. Indeed, they are tools of survival and liberation (Delgado, 1989).

My counter-story challenges the commonsense, or perceived wisdom, that undocumented immigrants are uneducated, powerless, and ignorant. It also opens a window onto the day-to-day realities of living with undocumented status and the ways in which these experiences can be leveraged in an agentic fashion. Undocumented immigrants are not alone in resisting the "standard formulae" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 29), which promote a view of a culturally deficient, legally defiant, and educationally disadvantaged group. They can arguably position themselves to acquire documents that call into question these standard stereotypical representations imposed on them by American common sense. By building a portfolio of documents to literally and figuratively demonstrate my worthiness and nonthreatening disposition as a legal, legitimate human being, I show how I actively build my case to prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, the intactness of my humanity, intelligence, and resilience.

The seeming necessity and yearning for this recognition begs the questions, *Why, after gaining citizenship, do I continue to appeal for legitimacy, imagined or real?* and, *Has hyperdocumentation paid off for me personally, professionally, and for my family?* I argue that hyperdocumentation is one of the few ways to achieve a tangible, if not superficial, legitimacy as an undocumented immigrant within a national climate of fear and suspicion. However, I also question the worth and accompanying cost of hyperdocumentation and ask if it is perhaps an obsessive coping mechanism and potentially futile.

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. This obsession began when, as a young child, I emigrated from Guatemala to the United States. My first memories of the importance of documentation came in the form of one of my childhood roles—translator. It was my job to accompany my mother to all of her activities (doctor's appointments, teacher conferences, grocery store, dentist, pediatrician, emergency room). Forms were second nature to me by the time I was seven years old. I knew the routine all too well and began to develop a nuanced skill for translating not only words but emotions and inferences. My handwriting improved with each "last name, first name, address" box I filled out. My writing speed increased, and I was always eager to get to the part where all my mom had to do was sign her name. These acts made me feel powerful and inculcated in me a sense of ownership of my family's "official" dealings. In a sense, I officiated all of the mundane, yet necessary, rites for everyday survival. Without me, I thought, how would those papers ever get filled out?

At the INS, I was similarly charged with pulling the numbered ticket from the magical red wheel that granted status by way of your proper place in line. I held that ticket for dear life; its presentation was required to verify the order of things. While the INS forms were available in Spanish, my parents still relied on me to confirm the accuracy of the information. Often I felt the remnants of the anxiety-produced stomachache that I had the nights before our INS visits, which found me in the bathroom either vomiting or with diarrhea. I debated in my mind whether or not to wake up my mother in the middle of those nights to let her know of my dis-ease, but I would most often err on the side of allowing her more sleep. She, too, suffered physical ailments prior to our visits, mainly migraine headaches that she treated by tying a bandana tightly across her head and taking what remained of her recent prescription of Tylenol or Valium. This scenario repeated itself as our attempts at citizenship continued to be postponed with each visit. It was always a letdown, like the piercing of a balloon—all of the air we held inside us quickly dissipated, and we fell flat, ruptured, until the next inflation of dreams.

While my family resided in this space of dreams, we simultaneously lived in what Rosaldo (1998) calls a "racial nightmare of the imagination" (p. 86) in the space of American common sense. In many ways, "the undocumented speak with a measure of irony. They simultaneously accede to and resist their cultural homogenization. Even as they move toward co-optation, they prove unassimilable" (Rosaldo, 1998, p. 84). In the rites of passage toward hyperdocumentation, there exists both a strong push toward wanting to be a part of American culture and a pull against losing one's native culture.

If a social hierarchy's top and bottom appear to be zones of "zero degree" culture, so too is the zone of immigration, or the site where individuals move between two national spaces. Ideally, that is, from the dominant society's point of view, immigrants are stripped of their former cultures, enabling them to become American

citizens, transparent, just like you and me, "people without culture." In ethnographic terms, so-called acculturation is probably better described as deculturation, or the production of postcultural citizens. (Rosaldo, 1998, p. 81)

How does one acculturate without deculturating—or, *can* one acculturate without deculturating? How does the accumulation of documents drive one toward acculturation or deculturation? Rosaldo (1998) states that "the complex case of the undocumented suggests the need for a notion of the border conceived as a zone between stable places" (p. 85). And yet, at either end of the spectrum, whether those locations are stable becomes questionable. As Villenas (1996) explains in reference to her position as the colonizer/colonized Chicana ethnographer, "My space is a fluid space of crossing borders and, as such, a contradictory one of collusion and oppositionality, complicity and subversion" (p. 729). Similarly, my attempt to acquire documents both isolated me from my native cultural norms and practices and caused me to keep them hidden by requiring me to put forward an aura of diminutive racelessness, which further facilitated my cultivation of American citizenship. I did not engage in an intentional tug of war; it was simply an insidiously acquired common sense, one that was fostered and developed in the daily practice of schooling.

This common sense was fed by the cultural artifacts of schooling—the golden star stickers for a "job well done" on a homework assignment, a certificate of perfect attendance awarded at the end-of-year assembly, a place in the statewide spelling bee, testing into the gifted and talented program, an invitation to be the emcee at the school Christmas pageant, and a reverence for the straight-A report card. Every gesture—visual and behavioral—at school indicated high admiration for individual intelligence. The message was "Do good in school, do good in life." In this way, American common sense permeated the structures of school, dictating a strong sense of meritocracy that told me that, "naturally," if I just studied hard enough, earned straight A's, and worked diligently, I would achieve the American Dream.

Yet, below the surface of this common sense, I had an intuitive perception—a physical feeling—that there was something more to this mythology. I sensed an urgency to achieve academically that would never abate. In fact, this compelling need to succeed scholastically would serve as my quick and always-ready defense mechanism against those who might question my American worthiness.

Rites of Passage

There is a story that we often tell in my family. In the center of my small childhood home of Richmond, California, stands a narrow hallway closet. Although the closet was meant to hold linens, with a family of eight, my parents chose to use it as a storage place for anything but what it was intended for. To me, it was a shrine, which I crammed with the achievement awards, report cards, dioramas, essays, and projects that I enthusiastically brought home from school. As

adults, my older sister and I attempted to clean out that very closet and were tickled to find our elementary school diaries, secretly scribed with our deepest thoughts. The front flap of my sister's diary was decorated with a plethora of smiley faces. Mine was filled with uninterrupted rows of perfectly aligned A+s. From an early age, I understood that documenting my academic achievement was prized. What I produced in school, and how teachers perceived and assessed my abilities, was the most powerful weapon I had against the odds that my family faced. In the life spaces between INS visits and daily errands, my facultad manifested itself in school, my haven.

Two events represent my urgent mission to hyperdocument in that they illustrate the gravity I placed on procuring officially documented accolades. In the sixth grade, I entered my first writing contest. The charge of the competition was to address the following topic: "Why we should honor our flag." Later, in the tenth grade, I was nominated and competed for Girls' State. Both rites of passage illustrate my counter-story to the commonsense notions of illegal immigration.

Mrs. Garrigan, my sixth-grade teacher, introduced the essay contest with an announcement that ended, ". . . and whoever wins this will receive a \$50 savings bond." Easy enough, I thought to myself. I can write about why we should honor our flag even though the U.S. flag wasn't really my flag or something I could lay claim to. True to form, I jumped on the opportunity to receive another academic accolade, to acquire yet another document: a savings bond. I holed up at the El Sobrante Public Library in my usual corner spot, underneath Teen Fiction and next to the Reference section. I looked up all the materials I could possibly find on the American flag and created a barracks of books around me, notepad and pen in hand. What better way to manifest my entitlement to American citizenship than by winning a writing contest that addressed my patriotism? My entry was entitled "Why We Should Honor Our Flag, by Aurora Chang." I was selected as a finalist for the essay competition.

In retrospect, it seems wholly ironic that I felt so enthusiastic about this overt flag-waving act, and yet I was only imitating what I saw at home. My father—a true Republican's dream, a Latino immigrant with ultraconservative values—was the most loyal un-American American. Tears would well in his eyes at the sound of the American national anthem. Every Memorial Day and Fourth of July, he would fly the American flag, proudly hoisted on the side of our home for everyone to see. When we were kids, he took us on a family vacation to Reno, where we saw a show called "The Wild, Wild West," which, as all the advertisements suggested, had a patriotic theme. Everything was in red, white, and blue—including the blue, sequined thongs and red sparkly tassels the female performers wore. While my mother was furious with my father for exposing us kids to this adult show, my father was unfazed, his eyes again tearing up to "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing . . ." Little did he know that I, too, became emotional at the thought of achieving Americanness.

Then, when I was in tenth grade, in my ongoing quest to become the all-American girl, and completely in line with my academically competitive nature, I applied to a prestigious leadership program called Girls' State. Described as "a nonpartisan program that teaches young women responsible citizenship and love for God and Country,"² Girls' State accepted only the cream of the crop, and, where I attended high school, the chosen girl held great prestige. The selection process consisted of a written application accompanied by a series of rigorous interviews requiring all sorts of knowledge of social capital: what to wear during a face-to-face interview, how to present oneself during these specific interactions, the post-interview courtesies, and all of the ways to exude a non-threatening yet confident, non-arrogant yet intelligent, non-masculine yet self-actualized, non-defiant yet curious, non-obnoxious yet witty, non-righteous yet principled demeanor. I had the privilege of acquiring some of these intangible skills throughout my academic schooling and socialization. At the end of the process, I received news that I had been chosen as the Girls' State representative from my school. My family and I celebrated over the weekend with *tamales*, *frijoles negros*, and *platanos fritos*.

But this celebration proved premature when, the following Monday, my principal called me into his office to regretfully inform me that because I was a noncitizen, I did not qualify for participation in Girls' State. I was denied the opportunity to exercise "responsible citizenship and love for God and Country" even though I had seemingly met all the requirements to effectively do so. My immigration status was the mortal sin that would not be forgiven. No matter the penance—be it a few more hours absorbing pages at the library, writing one more stellar essay, obtaining another certificate of merit, or receiving another impeccable report card—my lack of real papeles seemed to represent the ultimate evil. I dreamed of the moment when I could achieve, academically or otherwise, without the fear of having it all pulled out from under me. *When would I be saved?*

Redemption came on our day of naturalization. President Ronald Reagan's 1986 sweeping Immigration Reform and Control Act made any immigrant who had entered the country before 1982 eligible for amnesty—a word not usually associated with the father of modern conservatism. The law granted amnesty to nearly three million undocumented immigrants. My family and I were direct beneficiaries of amnesty. After being sworn in and officially naturalized, I ordered my first-ever lobster at A Sabella's, an Italian restaurant in San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf. I had never seen my father so happy. I was quite certain that we had reached a milestone, and I naively concluded that any suffering associated with undocumented status had come to an absolute end. With naturalization papers in my hands, I was one with the American people. I was an American citizen.

And so it was time for me to finally relinquish my intense preoccupation with proving my academic merit. I would attend college and breeze through the luxurious realities of intellectual life. After all, what could be more indul-

gent than a circadian existence of learning, reading, and writing? But I quickly learned that although I was officially naturalized, the victory of this redemptive ceremony was short-lived. While naturalization legally endowed me with rights that were once not mine, I still lived within the same skin and female body, expressed myself with the same ethnic facial features, communicated with the same linguistic proclivities, and carried myself with the same protective (some would say defensive) facultad that my prior experiences had honed. In other words, despite my newfound *de jure* immigration status, I still faced the *de facto* actualities of being a once-undocumented, nonnative-speaking, brown woman. I was documented, but I was still unprotected from the consequential effects of intolerance. Now, more than ever, 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.

Twenty years later and, seemingly, wiser, and with a cadre of degrees from the University of California, Berkeley, Stanford, and the University of Texas at Austin, I felt that these documents were significant moments in my academic trajectory. With each academic degree, I hoped to have added yet another layer of protection against racism, sexism, xenophobia. And on completing my dissertation, I once again felt as if I had reached a certain life milestone. As I walked across the stage to be hooded for my doctoral degree, I was literally fitted out in academic armor—a gown of velvet and wool, an ornate cap, and a series of embellishments. I wondered what it would be like to don my regalia on a daily basis—perhaps then my appearance would accurately represent who I thought myself to be. (I harkened back to this notion when I was recently asked to participate, as an immigration “expert” in a campus-wide diversity effort.) But in reality, this latest rite of passage demonstrated otherwise.

A PhD a Doctor Does Not Make

One hundred and twenty people were packed together into an auditorium at Valley View Tech College, located in a small, Midwest town that was once the headquarters for the KKK. The audience was gathered for “America Unites on Immigration,” a panel discussion and one of the many events during the school’s Diversity Week—an attempt to bring awareness to and encourage dialogue on issues not commonly spoken about in public settings. I was one of four panelists invited to share my knowledge about and experiences with immigration. I decided to tell my counter-story as a once-undocumented immigrant. Nothing could have prepared me for what followed. Brad Johnson³ (personal communication, November 4, 2010), the event moderator, had given me a mild warning prior to the event in his e-mail reminder.

I suspect that the conversation will eventually lead to the subject of undocumented immigration in the U.S. today. This will be a great opportunity for the panel to address many issues from legality and ethics to economics. Helping the audience see modern immigration in an historical context is also one of my desired outcomes of the evening. Most importantly, while there may be emotions in the room that evening, we have the opportunity to model civil discourse and show that people can listen to each other, and learn something in the process.

Before the panel began, I engaged in my normal routine. I went from table to table to introduce myself and make small talk. This was not something I enjoyed, but it is a skill my professional, academic, and home training had fostered within me. The goal of this exercise was always to take the temperature of the audience, and, in situations where I was visibly the other (brown, female, highly educated), it allowed me to present myself in a less-threatening fashion. "I'm one of you./I just got off of a long day at work./I have a family waiting at home./The weather sure is cold outside!/What do you do here?/Are you a native of Wisconsin?" I was not able to make it very far. With so many people in the room, I made strategic choices: the lone Asian woman, one of the three African Americans in the audience, the older white man in military garb, all of those in suits (who I presumed to be administrators of the college), and a handful of middle-aged white folks (who made up about 85 percent of the audience). My strategy involved a careful balance of making those who might feel uncomfortable more at ease and identifying potential allies of color in a sea of white. Of course, these choices were in no way fail-proof, and, in fact, they were completely based on my own stereotypes. However, it was a strategy that seemed to have worked well for me in the past; it made me feel more in control of my audience.

My fellow panelists arrived: a white female professor of history, a Filipina professor of anthropology, and a white male professor of economics. Brad's introduction of me focused on my credentials, highlighting my academic pedigree and long list of professional and academic accomplishments and setting what I thought was the proper tone. But as the evening progressed, I noticed an obvious pattern: audience members addressed the two white professors as Dr. — and never addressed my Filipina colleague or me using our titles. In fact, not once were we even addressed by our names; audience members simply pointed at us or referred to the color of our apparel: "The one with the blue shirt./The one with the scarf." The common critique from the audience members was that my fellow colleague of color and I gave very "emotional" accounts devoid of facts, while our white counterparts were "factual."

Interestingly, all of us panelists agreed that we provided equal amounts of statistical information, historical references, and present-day examples. Yet our information was colored by race and gender. Reflecting on a similar experience, Villenas (1996) described a seminar that she attended, echoing what I felt at that event:

I was reminded again of Ellsworth's (1989) critique of critical pedagogy. She argues that the dialogue emphasized in critical pedagogy assumes that we could all engage in dialogue equally as if the dialogue were not raced, gendered, and classed persons with vested interests and different experiences. The seminar participants (including myself) failed to see how, in the process of discussing people of color, we silenced and marginalized the very voices of those who were supposed to have been the subjects and authors of their experiences—the voices of fellow Chicana and African American classmates. (p. 718)

Although I would not go so far as to describe this environment as one based on critical pedagogical principles, it was nonetheless an attempt (at least by the facilitator/organizer) to put together an event that would engage this type of equal dialogue. I thought that my PhD would protect me from the rage over immigration palpable among the audience members. I believed my documents would be my invisible force field. I reflected on the fact that not only did my Filipina colleague and I have more prestigious degrees than our fellow panelists, we were also younger and arguably more accomplished. It was a hyperdocumentation shock moment: I wanted to empty out my folders full of accolades, certificates, report cards, degrees, and drafts of CVs to prove my worthiness. What did I have to do to prove my authority? I had the ultimate degree—what was left?

With every word I uttered that evening revealing my story about being undocumented, I felt the level of danger increase. This is no exaggeration; I literally felt the blood rush out of my face and the little hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. As I spoke, a large white man, of about three hundred pounds and fifty years, repeatedly attempted to rise from his chair and made arm gestures that indicated he wanted to refute my story. The moderator did his best to discreetly keep him in his chair. I was further distracted by a thirty-something white man who crossed his arms, huffed, and fidgeted throughout my presentation. When I suggested to the audience that I, as an undocumented immigrant, probably possessed more knowledge about U.S. history than any person in that room, he stood up, audibly scooted his chair underneath the table, and stomped out. My facultad kicked in. I was caught between survival mode (an instinct to flee) and resistance mode (an urge to say more).

My talk lasted only five minutes, but each second seemed to trigger a volatile emotion within the audience. I knew I would finish, but I was unsure of my emotional and mental condition on leaving the event. When it did finally end, my Filipina colleague and I rushed out to my car—shaken, but not surprised—and quickly locked our doors. I wondered how often had I experienced something similar to this and how much more could I bear. No document could have shielded me.

Later that week, I received an e-mail message from the event organizer.

I just wanted to take a moment to send a personal note to express my gratitude for your participation on the panel Tuesday. I have spoken to several instructors here and they all reported that many students were charged from the event. Many reported that their students continued the conversation into the next day. Two instructors also told me that they had also learned several new things on the subject. Also, thank you for sharing your personal story. You being there and claiming your history gave everyone a face to relate to a story, preventing them from detaching from the human component present in every story of immigration. I am looking forward to attending the event on the DREAM Act next Friday. Susan, my wife, and I are registered and will be attending. I also may be bringing some of my students as well. Again, thank you for all that you did to make the event on Tuesday a success. (Brad Johnson, personal communication, November 11, 2010)

I understood that my contribution to the panel was valuable, but at what expense? The fact that I was asked to tell my story for the benefit of others' learning (and/or pleasure in repudiating) was a double-edged sword. The telling of my counter-story was at once freeing, in that a space was provided to share my experiences, and exploitive, in that such a space was unsafe. In the e-mail exchanges with Brad Johnson, I sensed his sincerity. Indeed, he valued my personal story and complimented me by noting that instructors and students alike continued to discuss my talk days after the event. At the same time, I could not sleep that night and had a series of anxiety attacks in the days that followed. It took me weeks to stop the daily recounting to friends, family, colleagues, and students about the traumatic side effects of having my life on display and up for discussion. Was my choice to share my story worth the personal pain? Will I do it again? Certainly, hiding out and staying silent would appear safer than revealing my story and yet, it is precisely my willingness to be vulnerable that garners strength within me. As it turns out, my refuge from danger no longer lies in concealing but rather in revealing my narrative.

I am left contemplating the mad scramble and furious quest for the terminal educational document. Has documentation deluded me into thinking that I have somehow escaped the mundane when actually I have positioned myself, and been positioned, to till the fields of academia without appropriate compensation, respite, or acknowledgment? This positioning poignantly parallels my path to citizenship, when I fought hard to repay my debt of illegality with the hope and expectation that I could breathe more easily and gain acceptance as an American. In the effort to challenge my position as an undocumented immigrant, I, in fact, comply with the very ideas that are arguably the source of discriminatory teachings, practices, and institutions. I contradict myself. I hoard documents so as to hide my undocumented status and, in the process, highlight the significance of documentation itself. Through hyperdocumentation, I employ my facultad to confront the rage and intolerance of American commonsense beliefs about immigration.

Uncommon Sense—Facultad

Growing up, the everyday cues that I received regarding my immigration status were deeply embedded in the commonsense, xenophobic notions of what it means to be legal in the United States. The ideology surrounding immigration status is powerful, far reaching, and insidious.

American common sense communicates that there are some who are legal and others who are illegal. This demarcation emphasizes a duality that easily equates legality with goodness and civility and illegality with evil and deviance. Continually operating out of this oppressive notion of common sense is not an easy space to escape. Daily, we ingest texts and images that profess the meaning of American citizenship and what deviates from it. As Rosaldo (1998) notes, "Images of 'illegal aliens' have been manufactured for the consumption of North American readers who at once see themselves as culturally transparent and feel threatened by the differences of class and culture" (p. 81). The image of young, brown men swimming across the Rio Grande with plastic garbage bags on their backs, newspaper articles claiming that illegal immigrants drain the economy, photos of thick concrete walls erected on artificial borders—these are among the manufactured consumer commodities that help define American common sense regarding immigration. While it is perhaps easier to believe that only non-recent immigrants blindly embrace this notion, it is also just as true, if not truer, that recent immigrants incorporate these powerful visuals into their own being.

Common sense reflects and is shaped by how we understand our social world. I argue that, for an undocumented person, hyperdocumentation operates as a survival mechanism that responds to what has become an American common sense. Hyperdocumentation generates a semivisible force field—however imagined and to whatever extent credible—that protects one from undocumented status. Hyperdocumentation can be used in an agentic way as a tool of resistance. In other words, the resilience and ability to respond to situations that appear threatening are grounded on the instant perception (facultad) of danger. The fear of getting caught without papers, the fear of my teacher thinking I am less than capable because of my immigration status, the fear of being deported, the fear of believing that what I hear about immigrants is true, the fear of writing the wrong tax identification number in place of a Social Security number, the fear that even with official legal status I will always look illegal, the fear of never feeling legitimate—these are all fears that have to be responded to in a moment with a wit that keeps you simultaneously guarded, afloat, and approachable. As an undocumented immigrant, I have learned to adopt a certain politeness, deference, and caution. And there are certain pivotal experiences in my life that establish milestones where this facultad is employed in a clearly illustrative way. The way I employed my facultad was by acquiring as many papeles or documents as possible as a means to create a sanctuary from and an armor against the peril of undocumented status.

I thought documentation would protect me from American commonsense notions of illegal immigration status. Yet, as my facultad has strengthened and become increasingly precise, I have gained a particularly strong understanding that security and self-preservation are not as straightforward as the necessary paperwork. Survival and success require much more than acquiring text on paper. When attempting to prove my American worthiness, I now know that there is a certain nuance to reading others that requires a specifically tailored response to each situation and context—an intangible, immediate sensing resulting from a refined mastery of facultad. At some times, interactions call for the slightest mention of a prestigious degree; at others, a subtle reference to a scholarly source or a humorous account of a tale involving a certain level of literary proficiency is needed. Such responses are not planned; rather, they are unconscious mediators between the lingering urgency to compensate for my lack of documentation and the obsessive need to hyperdocument. In my attempt to both relieve the anxiety and satisfy the compulsion of never being a truly “legitimate” American, I tell myself that my arsenal of documents is complete. My case for worthiness is valid and the paper trail exhaustive—that is, until the next time my merit is challenged.

Notes

1. INS (Immigration and Naturalization Services) ceased to exist on March 1, 2003 (1933–2003). Since then, its primary functions are now housed in what is known as the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) as part of the Department of Homeland Security.
2. American Legion Auxiliary, <http://www.boysandgirlsstate.org/girls.html>.
3. The name is a pseudonym and permission was provided to use the e-mail.

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