

Democracy's College

Episode 17: Undocumented Students' Identity and Hyperdocumentation

Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occr.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Angel Velez from OCCRL talks with Dra. Aurora Chang, assistant professor at Loyola University Chicago, about undocumented students' identity and hyperdocumentation.

Angel Velez: It is a pleasure to have you here, and I would love for you to introduce yourself and maybe tell us a little bit about who you are, what your current role is, and basically what guides your research interests.

Dra. Aurora Chang: I am a once undocumented immigrant from Guatemala who has been in public schools pretty much all of my life in Richmond, California. I had the opportunity to attend some really prestigious institutions, and that leads to what I study, which is undocumented students and their paths of schooling, but more specifically the idea of hyperdocumentation, which is the idea that it's a strategy that I've used to sort of compensate for my sense of unworthiness or undocumented status, and by that I mean by documenting, by getting awards, getting certificates, writing essays, getting degrees. My interest has always come from my own personal struggle and my family's struggles as immigrants in this country, and I feel really strongly about making the personal academic and making the personal public, because I think it is a way for us to really heal and also a way for us to connect to others.

Angel Velez: This is interesting because you say you went to public schools, but then you went to elite institutions right? What was that process like? I mean, you went from being undocumented to going to all of these institutions. When did that process happen? Who helped you on the way? I think that is important.

Dra. Aurora Chang: I think there was always an expectation in my household. I come from a family of eight, so my parents and my five siblings. There was almost an unspoken rule that we had to get the best education possible and that we were going to have to finance it on our own. Since I was very young, I knew that, so I was always pushing myself, and my parents were always emphasizing that if you do good at school, you are going to do good in life. So that was always a push. Then in public schools, I was in the upper tracks. So, as we know, there is so much tracking that goes on in schools. I was usually one of a few students of color in my AP classes and so forth. So, that's where the path started. Then I was basically guided by people before me, students that I knew, informal mentors, that kind of thing. I think it's really interesting because getting into those advanced courses is sort of part of the hidden curriculum of school. There's no straightforward path. You have to know somebody. They say it's open to everyone, but it really isn't.

Angel Velez: Do they hand pick people sometimes as well?

Dra. Aurora Chang: Definitely, I think too, in the schools that I went to it was clear there was the average track, the college-going track, then there was the above and beyond track. They didn't have names, but there were groups that ever from the sixth grade were traveling together, because it was a

process that it was almost impossible to insert yourself half-way. You know if you all of a sudden blossomed as a freshman, but you didn't take the right courses, you were pretty much doomed. So, I found that looking back now. At the time, it seemed like everyday life, but looking back, the navigational skills that it takes to go through that route and find yourself in places where you will have the opportunities to get higher education is actually quite complicated. I think that one of my big passions is about making college-level work and curriculum available to everyone. Not everyone has to go to college, but everyone should have the choice to do that or the tools to do that.

Angel Velez: You talk about that you were one of the few persons of color in those spaces. Those experiences, do you think that they led to better navigation in college or navigating white spaces, if you will? I don't know if there is any correlation.

Dra. Aurora Chang: Absolutely. What I have come to understand is that I have been groomed from an early age in how to navigate white spaces. If you're academically successful in this country, and you're a person of color, and you've gone to public school, for the most part you will have to traveled in white spaces and successfully done that. That takes some nuanced intelligence. So, I think that somewhat prepared me for college. However, I went to such an under-resourced school that at my high school I was a straight-A student, doing really well. Then when I got to Berkley for undergrad I realized that the A I got from De Anza High School was not the A from Exeter or from wherever you went. I was going to class with people who had won global competitions in writing, in everything that you can think of. And so, actually the first paper that I got back as an undergrad my freshman year, I took Western Civilization, I remember because it was a horrible choice and a very difficult class. I got my first D that I had ever gotten in my life, and the comment on the side of it was "What high school did you go to?" That is what my graduate assistant that was teaching the class at that time put. So that transition really cemented my understanding of inequality, and that wow, this is going to be a very steep learning curve for me.

Angel Velez: Right, and I know that maybe those spaces you were being tracked in you didn't see a lot of reflections of self. When you went to college you majored in English. And now that you do Chicana Feminisms and you do some of this work, how did that transition from being in these white spaces to say, I want to research undocumented students, I want to research Latinos, I want to research underrepresented communities in college.

Dra. Aurora Chang: You know what I think is interesting is what happened to me, and I think this may resonate with some other folks out there, is that the more entrenched I got into white spaces, the more entrenched I got into my own cultural spaces. I would find people that were like me. So, it wasn't that much of a transition from studying issues about my community. Because when I went to Berkeley, I instantly figured out who my Latino colleagues and students were. We'd all hang out together. There was a spot on campus where all of the Chicano students were. And the same thing when I went to graduate school, I had my group of students of color that I hung out with. Although, you know, you start kind of opening up. It's kind of like when you think about identity development and all of the things that you go through. At first I was like, I am going really be with and hang out with people from my different backgrounds. As I continued to be in education I realized that, okay, there are white allies that I can work with, and there's a way to more broadly reach other folks. Studying about undocumented folks really came from my own experience of being undocumented myself. But it's funny, I didn't really even think about that experience too much until I started my professional career.

Angel Velez: Because that was not your focus right, while you were doing your Ph.D. Is that correct?

Dra. Aurora Chang: It was not. It was not. I was focusing on multi-racial identity at the time, which is also part of my identity. But I'm still trying to figure this out. As I look back, I wonder if I've just been

avoiding thinking about being undocumented for a very long time. I haven't come to a resolution as to why it took me so long, but I think part of it too was the inspiration that I got from Dreamers. You know, as the Dream Act began to be introduced, that identity sort of returned to me in this way that was very powerful. I think it was at the intersection of this Dreamer activism and my own sense that I really believed that the personal should be academic. It was something that I had been saying a lot in teaching teacher candidates.

Angel Velez: What do you mean by that?

Dra. Aurora Chang: So, what I mean by that, is that we need to, and by we I mean folks from marginalized communities, need to not only tell our stories but we need to write our stories. And not just write our stories, but we need to make them publically available to people. So, many people write their stories, but in private ways, in journals, in a paper, or a poem. But who gets access to those stories?

Angel Velez: The testimonials, right?

Dra. Aurora Chang: Exactly. What I've seen happen is when I put my story out there, that which I thought was my greatest struggle, pain, and source of isolation is actually my greatest point of connection with other people. And so I think the other side to this is that much of what is published, especially in academia, is whitestream, and we need to really change the direction of the river and have our histories, our stories, our testimonials, out there. Because for much of the time in American history we either haven't been allowed to do that. I mean really it wasn't until very recently that some southern states even allowed literacy, like hundreds of years ago, but that's not a long time. So what happens, for example, when we ask students to use references on their papers of only published works? We're already incredibly limiting the pool of what they can draw from. I think one of the ways you can really resist that is by writing your own story and making it – connecting it to larger issues, larger policy issues, larger social issues. But if we don't put ourselves into academia, we will just be re-perpetuating all of the same knowledge. For me, making the personal academic is about producing knowledge and the power of producing knowledge that emanates from our own communities.

Angel Velez: We love to tell our narratives, right? Our histories are really critical. I want to go back to your book because you talk about hyperdocumentation. I am pretty interested in digging into more about that. I know that you mentioned it briefly. How do students get there? How do students get out of this idea of hyperdocumentation, or whether there is any possibility that they could ever get out? I know that you got out, right, out of that hyperdocumentation, or do you see yourself as out of it?

Dra. Aurora Chang: No, I don't see myself, I see myself as still in it. In other words, I think I still hyperdocument. I still have and deal with imposter syndrome. I still deal with feeling unworthy. As I was talking with you last night, I still go to a talk and I'm still questioned about my authority on a subject. So, just when I think I'm done with hyperdocumenting, something happens. Then I'm like, "I need to produce more, I need to write more books, I need to . . ." For me, I see it in some ways as an addiction. As we know with different types of addiction, that it's never about logic. The addict knows that their behaviors will always lead to the same result. But they're not functioning from a place of logic. They are functioning from almost a biological place of feeling that it is an instinct. It's something that eases the anxiety. For me, hyperdocumentation give me a physical high. Like I feel like, when I publish something, when I give a talk, when I write something, I feel like there is something soothing and empowering about it. So I continue to go back to that strategy, whether or not it's a successful strategy or not. Hyperdocumentation did not lead me to citizenship. What led me to citizenship was policy, the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act by Ronald Reagan, when he granted millions of undocumented people that met certain guidelines amnesty. So it was by political will and luck that I got that. So what I

find interesting is that students now hyperdocument, even though they know it's not going to lead to citizenship. It doesn't matter how good a student you are.

Angel Velez: If policy doesn't change. I see.

Dra. Aurora Chang: And so that's what's interesting to me about hyperdocumentation, is that. And why I relate to these students so much, is because even though you know it's not going to be the recipe towards citizenship, there's still something about it that gives you critical hope. There's still something about it that eases in some ways that anxiety over the limbo of your future. I think that's what has been particularly revelatory to me, is that how these students in the midst of, especially in our current political climate, how in the midst of that almost hopelessness they still find this way of believing or having faith in themselves through hyperdocumentation. It's so powerful, isn't it? In some ways their very actions of just trying give everyone else hope. Because it's this undying human spirit, that you can see that all evidence points to not making it, not getting citizenship, yet you still act as if, with the belief, with the faith that it could. I was giving a talk the other day, and we were talking about the same topic. I was telling them how for me it was luck. You can call it luck, you can call it being at the right place at the right time. One of my colleagues called it a miracle. She was saying, you know we need another miracle. If that's how you got citizenship we can't dismiss that as luck and say, oh well. I thought, that really challenged me. I thought, she's right, we don't need to do just Dreamers need a path. What about the other 11 million people that produce our food, that contribute to our intellectual capital, to our economic capital, to the cultural fabric of this country? That is a whole other point. What is very disturbing, I think, is that even the folks that perform cultural citizenship in this country that are undocumented and do it well, not even they are acceptable. That's what's scary to me. Even if you are hyperdocumented and perfect in all accounts, or close to it . . .

Angel Velez: You are still undesirable.

Dra. Aurora Chang: Absolutely.

Angel Velez: Or deplorable, as some people might say. And how does this message, when you go to colleges and universities and give presentations, have you seen a shift in the way that they perceive your message? When you talk about not only undocumented students, but about students of color, about agency, do you see, or is it just different everywhere you go?

Dra. Aurora Chang: I think, as you know, people attend talks and things like this for different reasons. Some people attend them because they're supportive of what you're writing. Some people are there to let you know that what you're writing isn't acceptable or that they're not going to tolerate it. So I have had a very mixed bag. Generally, when you go to university campuses and such I have a very receptive crowd, but I've also spoken in non-academic settings, and I think one of the things that really seems to trigger people is when I tell them my own story about being undocumented and now being a professor. One of the stories I always tell is that in order to become a citizen in this country you have to take a citizenship test. So, one of the things I sometimes tell audiences is that I challenge them to the citizenship test. I bet you I will do much better and that you won't be able to pass it. Things like that, people don't like that. Not everyone, but a lot of people, those kinds of messages, especially for folks that, you know, no one has earned citizenship. If you live here and are a citizen, you didn't earn it. You have a circumstantial situation, and yet people act as if they have earned it. And so, that's why I bring up the citizenship test. You are not required to do that. It's something that you are born with.

Angel Velez: Especially through the naturalization process. You have to go through these different stages.

Dra. Aurora Chang: Right. With different rights. One of the things that I see too is that I don't think much has changed in terms of pre-Trump and post-Trump. I think what's changed is that people have felt emboldened by the current administration's ignorance, and that is the example that we have right now. That is the top elected official in this country. When someone can, in that kind of powerful situation, behave and have the kind of vulgar and irresponsible approaches to the way he speaks and the way he treats people, people that had already felt that way are just not quiet about it anymore. They feel like, not only can I say something, but the leader of this country is modeling behavior for me. So when I go to talks and stuff like that, there are people who are going to be vocal about what they think. I think there are people who let it percolate and brew inside of them. I don't know what happens after I teach a class or give a talk and what the ripple effect for better or worse might be. I think that every campus, every organization, every place that I go to is different, and I have learned the hard way that I need to do my research before I go somewhere. You are fulfilling, I think, a need when you go and speak to a campus. You can, by figuring out, why are people there and what can I give them that might meet the need for information or inspiration or motivation or whatever that may be.

Angel Velez: This conversation has been very enlightening and very honest. I really appreciate you and your research and everything that guides you and what you believe. We need more of this work, and we need more people to speak on these issues that are critical for millions of people. Thank you for being with us today.

Dra. Aurora Chang: Thank you so much.

For more information about undocumented students' identity and hyperdocumentation we recommend that you visit Dra. Chang's webpages. For more podcasts, links to today's recommended resources, or to share your comments and suggestions, visit occrll.illinois.edu/democracy or send them via Twitter @occrll. Tune in next month when Fredrick Douglass Dixon from OCCRL talks with Dr. Mara Lazda, professor of history, and Dr. Lisa Amowitz, professor of art and music, about The Bronx Community College's Democracy Project. Background music for this podcast is provided by DubLab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students.