

Article

The Influence of the Trump Era on Sustaining Whiteness through Imperialist Reclamation on College Campuses: How Undocumented Students Experience the Normalization of Racist Nativism

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Abstract: On 5 September 2017, the Trump administration decided to rescind the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy, impacting over 800,000 recipients, and more colleges and universities witnessed a heightened sense of emboldened racism in college environments. This paper draws from focus groups with undocumented college students on how the Trump era influenced campus climate. We found that imperialist reclamation of whiteness acts targeting undocumented students was commonplace on college campuses, ultimately impacting students' behavior and academic engagement in and outside the classroom.

Keywords: undocumented students; campus climate; focus groups



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1. Introduction

Shortly after the Trump administration occupied the White House, the Southern Poverty Law Center [1] surveyed 10,000 K–12 educators; 90% of the respondents reported that the presidential election had a negative impact on school climate, and four in five reported an increase in anxiety among immigrant, Muslim, LGBT, and African American students. The Southern Poverty Law Center dubbed the resulting climate the “Trump Effect,” which has been used to frame high school climates [2,3] and the decline in international student college enrollment [4]. This study examines how the 2016 election results have influenced college campuses in the state of Colorado for undocumented and DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) students. Specifically, we seek to understand how undocumented college students make meaning of the broader social and political climate in the United States (U.S.), in relation to campus climates within the higher education context.

The historical legacy of anti-immigration sentiments has a long-standing presence in the United States (U.S.). While other presidents of the U.S. have contributed to the anti-immigration climate (i.e., President Obama set the record for deporting 2 million people), the Trump era brought about a new level of blatancy in his anti-immigration rhetoric (i.e., Mexico is sending rapists and criminals to the U.S.) [5]. During his presidency, asylum seekers (mostly women) were separated from their children and treated as “invaders” as they fled violence [6]. Even though it is not a crime to seek asylum in the U.S., the Trump administration militarized the border in his attempt to keep the “undesirables” out of the U.S. This act is rooted in a common practice in U.S. history, white supremacy [7], which has not improved under the Biden administration. Given Trump’s blatant anti-immigration rhetoric and the rescission of DACA, we believe it is imperative to understand how the concepts of whiteness [8] and imperialistic reclamations are prevalent on college campuses, which results in racist nativism for undocumented college students in Colorado. Whiteness is an ideological understanding or a worldview that functions to uphold white dominance

and the racial status quo [9,10]. Whiteness is also a societal force or action that can come in the form of imperialistic reclamation. *Imperialistic reclamation* states that whites will aggressively seek to reclaim interests and property that they feel “belong” to them that were attained by people of color during previous periods of interest convergence [11]. It is important to note that the concept of whiteness is distinct from white as a racial identity, yet they are intimately related [10,12].

Research on undocumented students suggests that these students encounter substantial barriers in their pursuit of higher education due to systems of oppression and microaggressions [13–15], which further normalize racist nativism. Racist nativism examines the intersection between race and immigration status and its impact on the lives of Latinx communities in the United States [16]. Pérez Huber et al. [17] define racist nativism as:

The assigning of values to real or imagined differences, in order to justify the superiority of the native, who is to be perceived white, over that of the non-native, who is perceived to be People and Immigrants of Color, and thereby defend the right of whites, or the natives, to dominance (p. 43).

Racist nativism names racism as the culprit of subordination experienced by undocumented Latinx people [18]. We use racist nativism to examine how the immigration discourse along with the construction of whiteness is used to highlight the ways in which immigration status is racialized.

While previous research examines undocumented students’ college experiences and barriers, there are few studies [13,19] that capture shifts in campus climate under the Trump era and its impact on undocumented students. We also posit that while Trump no longer occupies the presidency, his anti-immigration and hate rhetoric continues to gain traction and shape the experiences of historically racialized college students. As such, we hope to reconceptualize how anti-immigration events, rhetoric, and action incite hostile climates of fear and gravely impact undocumented student experiences in college. These climates are racially charged and act as sites for reclamation of higher education rights designated as white property only.

2. Purpose

Since Colorado has already prioritized in-state tuition for eligible undocumented students through the ASSET bill as well as offering state aid, the state has demonstrated a commitment to empowering traditionally marginalized students to pursue higher education at a more affordable cost. Our research seeks to understand how the rescission of DACA and the impacts of the 2016 elections are influencing undocumented student experiences in the state of Colorado. The purpose of this research is to conduct a multiple case study examination of a public, private, and community college in the state of Colorado to illuminate the localized impact of the Trump Effect, contextualized by state and institutional policies. The research question guiding this study is: in what ways have the anti-immigration rhetoric from 2016 election outcomes and the rescindment of DACA influenced undocumented students’ experiences on college campus? We use Cheryl Harris’s [8] whiteness as property to interrogate how imperialistic reclamation [11] sustains whiteness.

3. Campus Environments for Undocumented College Students

The model of Suarez-Orozco et al. [15] of “undocufriendly” campus climates provides an ecological approach [20] to frame the challenges undocumented students encounter. The “undocufriendly” model considers challenges and assets for undocumented students at the student, campus, and state and national levels. Suárez-Orozco et al. [15] describe the macrosystems as the national sociopolitical context, which is interrelated to campus climate. The deportation machine, anti-immigration rhetoric, national discourse about DACA or the DREAM Act and state policies that govern college access to undocumented and DACA students all play an integral role in shaping campus climates. Given our focus on how the Trump Effect influences campus climates, the model of Suárez-Orozco et al. [15]

provides concrete examples of the assets and challenges students experience within the microsystems of their daily experience. Challenges for undocumented students at the student level, for instance, include time constraints as a student, separation from family, and often first-generation status. Campus-level challenges can include financing education, microaggressions, and a lack of resources. Our study examines how the macrolevel systems (Trump Effect) influences the microsystems (campus climate). In their survey of over 900 self-identified undocumented students, Suárez-Orozco et al. found that more than two-thirds of students had experienced discrimination based on their legal status within the previous month. Students at private colleges were more likely to publicly endorse undocumented students (33%) compared with students at community colleges (24%) and public colleges (22%). Students at private colleges also reported the highest levels of peer support.

Undocumented students on college campuses encounter both microaggressions, defined as “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color” [21] (p. 60), and racist nativism, defined as “the assigning of values to real or imagined differences, in order to justify the superiority of the native, who is to be perceived white” (17) (p. 43). Previous research on undocumented students suggests that these students encounter substantial barriers in their pursuit of higher education due to systems of oppression and microaggressions [15,22–25]. In addition to unfriendly racial climates, scholars also found invisibility of support from institutional agents and limited social opportunities. However, undocumented students were able to find pockets of support with identity-based organizations. However, mental wellness for undocumented students is a heightened priority for higher education. One study [26] using data from the Healthy Mind Study during the 2018–2019 academic year found that undocumented students fared worse on well-being than other students. While prior research has provided stories of resistance through individual interviews and survey data, there is a gap in the knowledge on how undocumented students are making sense and navigating their campus climate during such politically turbulent times through focus groups.

Campus Climate

Campus climate studies have overwhelmingly found that positive student outcomes are associated with positive college environments and cultures [21,27,28]. The seminal work of Hurtado and colleagues [29] identified four interconnected dimensions of campus climate, which often result from the behaviors and actions of colleges and universities. These include: (1) an institution’s historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion of various racial/ethnic groups, (2) compositional diversity in terms of the campus’s representation of diverse groups of students, (3) the psychological climate consisting of perceptions and attitudes between and among groups, and (4) the behavioral climate characterized by intergroup relations on campus. Campus climate for students of color often reveals that cross-racial interactions have the highest impact on individuals becoming open to diversity issues [30,31], yet most research suggests that institutions are ill-equipped and/or do not make diversity and inclusion a priority. Harper and Hurtado [32] found that students of all races discussed institutional negligence in providing adequate opportunities to engage in cross-racial interactions with students from different backgrounds. Students of color often perceive campus climate to be more racist and less affirming than their white peers [33] and expressed concerns about having physical spaces where they had any sense of ownership because of pervasive whiteness in physical spaces, curriculum, and cocurricular activities [32]. Scholars also found that racially hostile climates often occur when institutions lack commitment to effectively address equity. This comes as no surprise when the topic of race is often avoided in any institutional policies, which creates unsupportive learning environments [28,32,34].

Extensive literature suggests that students of color experience higher levels of discrimination on campus based on their race compared with their white counterparts [27,32,33]. Latinx students in particular shared these sentiments and perceived racial microaggress-

sions or discrimination as the culprit for (re)producing unhealthy campus environments for students of color [21]. It is also imperative to point out the limitations of climate studies. Scholars [35] contend that climate studies often work to reify whiteness by not nuancing race and power in how individuals make meaning of their racialized experiences. These authors invite educators to consider:

What is the appropriateness of the climate heuristic for advancing racial justice when it offers no theory of race or power to accomplish this purpose? And when, in fact, it generally reifies a particular portrait of the relationship between individuals and environments that actually obscures the way human beings co-construct and experience the world through racialized bodies (p. 7)?

Our usage of whiteness as property and imperialistic reclamation offers a theoretical perspective that centers race as we attempt to nuance the racialization experiences of undocumented students.

4. Conceptual Frameworks

In order to understand how undocumented college students experienced their campus climates during the Trump era, we use whiteness as property and imperialistic reclamation to examine the ways in which whiteness is sustained on college campuses. We also discuss how articulations of racist nativism [18] drive imperialistic reclamation of white property rights on college campuses.

4.1. Whiteness as Property

Harris [8] introduced whiteness as property as a concept to illuminate how racial hierarchy is rooted in the historical period of slavery and conquest. Whiteness as property provides a framework for how we examine the sociopolitical landscape within the immigration system in the U.S. Harris explains that since the inception of the U.S., race and property are coupled together in order to justify and sustain a system that foundationally supports and benefits whiteness through the occupation of land and rights. Simply put, the legacy of land seizure from Indigenous peoples and the selling and owning of black bodies was part of the construction and enforcement of the racial hierarchy that continues to exist in the U.S. today. The justification to exclude and deny rights to racial others appears in laws and policies aimed at protecting whiteness while simultaneously denying or excluding racial others. This perpetuates inequities in land, wealth, social status, and political rights in which who possess and control the transference of power is determined by whiteness. For immigrants, the restriction of rights, mobility, and who is deemed desirable enough for legal status continually falls along the alignment of whiteness. Harris invites us to consider how whiteness and the construction of race, property, and personhood are defined and legally sustained for the purposes of upholding white economic domination through four tenets: (1) rights of disposition, (2) rights to use and enjoyment, (3) reputation and status property, and (4) the absolute right to exclude. We expand on each of these individual tenets using Ladson-Billings and Tate's [36] application of Harris's tenets to the educational landscape.

Rights of disposition. Harris [8] unpacks inalienability as a marker of how property is transferred, acknowledged, or regulated. Meaning, your proximity to whiteness affords you more privilege. Ladson-Billings and Tate [36] further highlight that the privileges of being white can be conferred when students conform, behave, and act to what is deemed as "white norms" (p. 59). For undocumented students, this is produced by the "good immigrant" versus "bad immigrant" rhetoric that is pervasive in U.S. society. Immigrants who are high achieving, offer economic benefit, or uphold notions of American white identity are deemed more "desirable" than immigrants [37] who are perceived to be taking away the nation's resources or disrupting the white national identity by not mastering the English language or practicing their country-of-origin customs or rituals.

Rights to use and enjoyment. This tenet describes how white individuals can enact their will to access resources and navigate the world with a sense of entitlement. In the same

vein, these virtues are upheld both individually and structurally by hoarding power and resources in order to maintain control [8]. Ladson-Billings and Tate [36] describe this tenet by describing how minoritized schools in urban areas face institutionalized distribution of low resources, overcrowded schools, and the curriculum being not culturally congruent with its students. The current income structures in the U.S. require that all individuals pay into the state and federal tax system, including undocumented immigrants. However, they are unable to access many of the benefits, including federal financial aid to help subsidize the cost of higher education.

Reputation and status property. One's public (constructed) identity is entangled with how one maintains his or her racial hierarchal status. Harris [8] discusses the legal protection that is afforded to the maintenance of whiteness by enforcing racial stratification. Ladson-Billings and Tate [36] point to terms such as "bilingual education" or "urban schooling" as having a cultural marker as being "less than" or lacking prestige or worth.

The term "immigrant" is often synonymous with "illegal", which strips these individuals of their humanity and dignity. Equally important is to note WHO is aiding in the construction of one's public identity. For instance, elected officials have publicly used words such as "invaders" and "criminals" [38] to describe immigrants in the U.S., which has a massive impact on how undocumented college students are perceived on college campuses.

The absolute right to exclude. The practice of exclusion is how whiteness is upheld by legally and systemically dictating who is legitimately and inherently qualified to claim themselves a white [8]). Ladson-Billings and Tate [36] point to the denial of schooling and later the establishment of separate but equal schooling as ways to exclude the influence of Black people, which resulted in white flight and a push for public funding to go towards private schools. They also describe the perception that black students come to college "in the role of intruders—who have been granted special permission to be there" (p. 60). Similarly, for immigrants, permission to exist in the U.S. has also aligned with whiteness. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned Chinese immigrants from obtaining employment, housing, or services, was the first time the U.S. legally solidified exclusion based on ethnic alignment. During the Great Depression, the U.S. government used Mexican immigrants and U.S.-born Mexicans as scapegoats for the economic woes of the United States and rounded them up on trains and shipped them back to Mexico. Within the higher education context, we see restrictionist admission policies in states, such as Georgia, specifically ban undocumented immigrant students from applying to five selective institutions in Georgia as a way to protect whiteness and the prestige of their colleges and universities. Cheryl Harris's [8] whiteness as property serves as a tool to understand how colleges and universities are rooted in white supremacy, and it allows us to examine the ways in which the system of higher education is situated within a broader sociopolitical context, one that wants to maintain the interests of whiteness.

4.2. Imperialistic Reclamation

Critical race theorist Derek Bell coined the term interest convergence, which means any structural resources dedicated to the progress of communities of color must also inherently benefit white communities. Thompson Dorsey and Venzant Chambers [11] expand on Bell's [39] work by developing a model of convergence, interest divergence, and reclamation (C-D-R) to articulate how whiteness as property is operationalized within the educational system. Scholars [7,11,40] use C-D-R to document the historical periods of diversification of higher education by describing *convergence* as a period where efforts are made to expand access to liberties through laws and policies to people of color but with the caveat that these efforts also need to expand liberties for white people. *White redemption* [41,42] is often the motivator for the increased benefits to people of color. Dorsey and Venzant (2014) view these diversity advancements as temporary or conditional "gifts", which can be revoked if they pose a threat to whiteness. When these benefits cease to benefit white people, we witness a *divergence*, a backlash, where whites seek to reclaim

what belonged to them during the convergence period. This is the imperialistic reclamation period. Imperialistic reclamation can be described as the emboldened nature in which whites seek to reclaim interests and property that they feel “belong” to them that were attained by people of color during previous periods of interest convergence [11]. The C-D-R cycle has been recently used to examine immigration policies such as the DREAM Act and DACA ([7]). According to this author, imperialistic reclamation is an ideological position that the Trump administration evoked under

“... his “zero-tolerance” policies. These actions include separating children from their families at the U.S.–Mexico border, cutting refugee resettlement and asylum, revoking Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for many countries, non-discretionary decisions for deportation, and heightened militarization of the border” (p. 34).

These actions are also an articulation of racist nativism; who belongs and who upholds normative traits of the “American” identity is all connected to the construction of whiteness [18]. Little research on undocumented students has considered imperialistic reclamation’s role in maintaining white supremacy under the Trump era. Therefore, our paper contributes to the literature by bridging racist nativism to acts of imperialistic reclamation.

5. Context of Study

On 5 October 2022, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals published a decision on the *Texas v. United States DACA* case. The Court of Appeals agrees with the original judgment on the case that DACA is unlawful but renewals for existing DACA recipients will remain open. In Colorado, it is estimated that 14,520 active DACA recipients lived in Colorado as of March 2020, while DACA has been granted to 18,555 people in total since 2012.

In 2013, Colorado passed the Advancing Students for a Stronger Economy Tomorrow (ASSET) bill. The ASSET bill is a state law that allows eligible undocumented students to pay in-state tuition rates at institutions of higher education. While this legislation demonstrates a relatively recent act in the interest of undocumented students’ rights at the state level, the outcome of the presidential election has produced nationwide concern about the mental health and safety of undocumented students [43]. Given the agenda of Trump and his administration, it is imperative to understand if and how campus climates and the educational trajectories of undocumented students have been influenced by the Trump Effect in Colorado, a state that recently enacted in-state tuition for undocumented students.

6. Methodology

As part of a large multi-institutional case study, we conducted individual interviews with faculty (N = 25), staff (N = 25), and student (N = 60) follow-up focus groups (N = 21) with students from public, private, and community college contexts (Table 1). We also conducted a discourse analysis of public texts around institutional responses to the election results and the Trump Effect on minoritized populations on campus. This paper only highlights the focus group data. Students who participate in the focus groups may benefit by experiencing empowerment and/or enacting social change [44]. While participation in focus groups can also pose the risk of loss of confidentiality or psychological stress from discussing stressful experiences, we believe that the possible benefit of feeling empowered by the experience is a potential benefit that can be weighed with these risks. We generated semi-structured interview questions for the focus groups based on themes generated from previously conducted individual interviews with undocumented students [19], including encountering campus administrators lacking competency for working with undocumented students, feeling invisible on campus, stress from hiding citizenship status, and separation from campus community due to legal status. We conducted 3 student focus groups (5–8 different participants per focus group) that nuanced the 2 emergent themes (institutional support and anxiety and stress) and the current political environment (elections and rescinding of DACA).

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Participant Demographics				
Pseudonym	Institution	Sex	Country of Origin	Immigration Status
Zlatan	Public/4-year	Male	Mexico	DACA
Mia	Public/4-year	Female	Mexico	DACA
Eunice	Public/4-year	Female	Mexico	DACA
Scarlet	Public/4-year	Female	Mexico	DACA
Hannah	Public/4-year	Female	Mexico	DACA
Joseph	Public/4-year	Male	Mexico	DACA
Sam	Public/2-year	Male	Mexico	DACA
Emy	Public/4-year	Female	Mexico	DACA
Brad	Public/2-year	Male	Mexico	DACA
Alex A.	Public/2-year	Male	Mexico	DACA
Rosa	Public/2-year	Female	Mexico	DACA
Reynaldo	Public/4-year	Male	Mexico	DACA
Ana	Public/2-year	Female	Mexico	DACA
Laura	Private/4-year	Female	Mexico	DACA
Brandon	Public/4-year	Male	Mexico	DACA
Camillia	Public/2-year	Female	Mexico	DACA
Antonio	Public/2-year	Male	Mexico	DACA
Marisella	Public/2-year	Female	Mexico	DACA
Alex B	Public/2-year	Male	Mexico	DACA
Barak	Public/2-year	Male	Mexico	DACA
Carlos	Public/4-year	Male	Mexico	DACA

We reviewed transcripts and field notes of the focus group using Charmaz’s [45] and Saldana’s [46] approaches to qualitative coding for social justice research. Using whiteness as property and imperialistic reclamation as our analytical lens, we developed an inductive coding scheme. We coded the data individually and then came together to compare data and codes to determine which codes were most consistent. We grouped them together based on patterns towards focused codes. Themes were determined by examining the focused codes along with using our analytical lens by asking ourselves, “How is whiteness of property and imperialistic reclamation embedded in the codes?” Both authors were part of the focus group process. We situated our findings with an *imperialistic reclamation* lens to demonstrate how heightened racially charged encounters against undocumented college students were experienced after 2016 elections. We found these attempts as enactments of whiteness through power structures as an effort to reclaim rights, privileges, and property rooted in whiteness. One limitation of this study is we only had one student from a private institution. While community colleges and 4-year institutions all acknowledged the rescinding of DACA and had mechanisms of support, these acts did not absolve the campus climate from articulations of racist nativism.

7. Findings

Based on focus group data, imperialistic reclamation of whiteness and heightened pressure to perform white academic norms emerged as the most common themes across participants. Our findings suggest a historical legacy at institutions of maintaining the status quo of dominant and traditional forms of power, specifically related to race and culture. We utilize whiteness as property [8] and imperialistic reclamation [11] to explore the

nuanced effects the 2016 elections have had on campus climates and how Trump's decision to rescind DACA has impacted DACA recipients' college completion and educational trajectories and to better understand how national political discourse and anti-immigration rhetoric has shaped undocumented students' experiences on college campuses.

7.1. Imperialistic Reclamation of Place, Space, and Spirit

After the 2016 elections and particularly after the rescission of DACA, participants experienced imperialistic reclamation of place and space on and off campus. They reported very hostile and unwelcoming environments. Under this theme, we detail how heightened xenophobia and racism in symbolic and interpersonal forms are used as mechanisms of imperialistic reclamation to sustain white supremacy.

Symbolic. Participants expressed a perverse visibility of racist symbolism, including Trump's racist rhetoric and paraphernalia. Racist symbolism infiltrated both educational and community spaces. For example, while one participant who had attended the community college in the suburban city was recounting her experiences with a hostile community climate, Camilla stated,

Yeah, just hearing him talk, I'm getting all the anxiety, because I know exactly what he's talking about, because I do go to that [suburb]. I know what the climate is like. It's very Confederate. They're very Confederate families, and they're not shy about putting their Confederate flags on their trucks or other American flags, and it's like, yeah, just hearing him brings back anxiety, because even in my campus, there would be people that would put sometimes one or two flags in the back of their truck to show this is America. We're for pro-Trump, and it just gives me flashbacks.

Camilla described very racially hostile experiences that left her feeling uneasy and anxious about their safety on campus and in the suburban community. Camilla and other participants later expressed how seeing confederate flags made her feel like she was in a both hostile and aggressive climate. She stated, "It's just those flags that they proudly have, they wave, on their trucks or anything with the Confederate logo or just the American flag, made it very clear that it was kind of their territory." In this example, Camilla describes how Trump supporters who proudly wave the confederate flag perceive themselves as natives who need to maintain power and dominance over their "their territory."

Participants also pointed to the red "Make America Great Again" hat as another marker of racism and xenophobia. The presence of these hats evoked strong emotions for undocumented students, and one participant noted that these hats added to the hostile climate in his classes as he stated,

But after the election, I was talking in my classes, just because in my major, it's predominantly white, and so in my classes I would see a lot of people wearing the Make America Great Again hats, so it just created that... It wasn't said, but it just created a conflict throughout my classes.

The symbolic expressions of racism and xenophobia are acts of violence that are unsaid or unspoken but have the same impact on undocumented students as verbal expressions. For instance, Laura, who works at a *panaderia* (Mexican bakery) and witnessed a customer with a "Make America Great Again" hat, had a visceral reaction to this event. "I got so mad, like I was shaking." Most of the participants viewed the hat and the "build the wall" rhetoric as an expression of hate against Latinx and undocumented individuals, and Laura went on to state, "They treat us like we're their others, so they come to us almost like they're going to the zoo or something." Interestingly, her usage of "their other" signifies that Latinx people are connected to Harris's [8] reputations and status tenet by using these symbols and rhetoric to enforce racial stratification. Place and space are entrenched in white supremacy, where the "Make American Great Again" paraphilia serves as a tool to uphold white norms. The demographic shift in the United States warrants walls and cages to contain or confine individuals who are perceived to erode the "American" identity.

Interpersonal. Participants shared similar experiences encountering varying degrees of racist and hostile people in and outside of the classroom. Oftentimes, participants shared that such encounters were received from not only acquaintances but also those they once considered friends. When Trump was elected, Carlos attempted to explain his emotional distress to his friend, but the conversation turned laborious because they used the I-word. Carlos had to spend time explaining why the I-word was offensive. Carlos also detailed how his resident assistant (RA) was open and honest about his support for Trump. Carlos went on to describe that this RA told his residents “that if you’re undocumented, don’t talk to me about it. I can’t help you.”

Antonio shared an experience when the topic of immigration and DACA came up during a time he visited a friend’s political science class at a 4-year institution he was considering transferring to, which was situated outside of the city. He stated,

They got really, really personal. A lot of the kids there, the students, I mean, started saying their opinion about [DACA], and it was really, really bad. I mean, I don’t know if you know, but [suburb outside of city] is known for racial tensions. And the teacher was literally agreeing with them. And I mean, I don’t know how. I just started saying things about it too. And it got really personal in there, really personal . . . The one I do remember really clearly is this kid, this student, sorry, that said... He said, “Trump is everything that we want. It’s just that we can’t say it directly.” But he was meaning racially. We don’t want you Mexicans here. Literally, that’s what he was saying, that he represents what they want, but they’re sugarcoating everything. That’s what he was literally saying, and I could tell that everybody was agreeing. Mostly they were agreeing with him, and it was a bad day. I literally felt like everybody in that whole county was like that. Even driving back, I felt like all these people are just feeling that way about us.

Carlos’ and Antonio’ experiences point to Harris’s [8] right-to-exclude tenet. The sole purpose of a resident assistant is to provide support to those who occupy a common housing space. In many cases, a resident assistant receives reduced or free room and board to fulfill their job duties. In this case, an RA felt entitled and emboldened to explicitly exclude undocumented students, in which they identify legal status as a disqualifier marker of services and support. In Antonio’s situation, his peer’s comment may not have seemed explicit to others, but Antonio made it clear that he understood the intent to mean, “We don’t want you Mexicans here.” Equally important to note is the role of the professor facilitating the class discussion. The lack of interrogation from the professor of the students’ statements further constructs the classroom climate.

Racist rhetoric like this is a common example of racist nativism [17], which positions white students as natives who have power over those who are foreigners, non-natives, simply visiting a land that they do not belong to or feel welcome—undocumented students. While hostile occurrences and climates that bolster pro-Trump rhetoric can often be overlooked by college administrators as freedom of speech, participant experiences demonstrate how these narratives become normalized by the white majority, thereby making it acceptable to treat undocumented and, specifically, Mexican immigrants as foreigners to the United States. Not only is this normalizing white dominance, but also it reinforces very dangerous stereotypes and myths that undocumented people are criminals and steal jobs from North Americans. Marissa indicates,

I’m a business manager for a community. And the guy that is responsible for cleaning, he knows about DACA, because I was always upfront with it there, and for some reason, now he dislikes me, because he thinks it’s not fair that, because I’m undocumented and I’m in that position, especially because I haven’t graduated from a business degree, he hates me for that... I ignore him, but he doesn’t like it, because I’m an immigrant, because DACA’s not a legal status . . . And he feels hateful, because I’m in that position. And he feels like maybe him or maybe... an American that’s a citizen should have that job.

In this case, the person harboring ill feelings against this student stems from the idea that the rights to use and enjoy should only be reserved to U.S. citizens. Even though DACA grants individuals the authorization to work, the disruption of the racial hierarchy warrants the display of ill feelings. When immigrants take up space, individuals who want to uphold white norms fuel the rights to disposition tenet [8] by harboring negative connotations about immigrants.

Emotionality. Imperialistic reclamation of spirit describes the emotionality expended on navigating the sociopolitical climate for immigrants. The rescinding of DACA is an example of how undocumented college students have to abide by the mercy of the U.S. government. Many of the students expressed how exposed and vulnerable they felt without the “protection” of DACA. Camilla described how the rescission of DACA forced her and her fellow DACA peers to change:

And it makes us have this different worldview, like we had before, like oh, now I have to go into survival mode again. It was before. I can live, and when you have this “protecting” you, you’re not worried. You’re not worried about if someone’s gonna call ICE, or immigration, or anything, or even the police, because you have this thing to prove, hey this is a law. And I have this, and you can’t take me out. But when you have someone like Trump in the administration, when anything goes, and he removes these policies, it’s like we’re vulnerable. It’s like they stripped us of all of the only thing that protected us, so we have to see people for who they are now really, because they’re proud to show that... And I’m gonna say it... that they’re racist, that they don’t want us here. They’re proud to come out and be like, yeah, this is who I’ve been all this time, but I couldn’t, because everything has to be politically correct.

Hostile occurrences and climates that bolster pro-Trump rhetoric have a direct impact on DACA students’ overall well-being [15]. All participants shared how such rhetoric and the rescission of DACA exacerbate stress, anxiety, and fear within them to the point that they become severely depressed and/or withdrawn. A few participants shared how their behaviors have changed by being more reserved and seeming to censor their language so that they do not come across as confrontational. Others initially wanted to isolate themselves or surround themselves with other undocumented or DACA peers. For Joseph, college was the furthest from his priorities as he described,

The next day [after DACA was rescinded], I also didn’t get out of bed. When I did, I actually just went to my other friends who were also undocumented. So, we were just there, and then we just contemplated life the whole time. And didn’t even think about going to school at that point because it was tough personally. I felt like it [college] was pointless.

The influence of the rescinding of DACA resulted in undocumented students having to expend emotionality regarding their future. Joseph exemplifies feelings of defeat but not by their own doing, but by the immigration system. Imperialistic reclamation [11] is an emotional process for those who are impacted. In all the focus groups, family was a central topic in the discussions. For some students, their siblings were impacted by the rescinding of DACA, and other students mentioned how their anxiety focused on their parents. Sam made an interesting observation about how the notion of family is used by asking a rhetorical question:

So, it’s very frustrating to see that. It’s very frustrating to try to find something in the short term. And so, it’s very frustrating to me to feel that they’re going to be feeling that. DACA recipients are going to be in that position, and so something needs to be changed, and for a while, I was actually blaming myself, saying, ‘Are we really extremely stubborn into holding on to this dream?’ I mean, this is a table full of such incredibly talented people. I have a question. Why don’t we just go back to where we came from and really build that dream that we’re trying to do here, but we’re being stopped and closed, slammed doors into our face

every single day? But just recently, I realized that we're here because of family. Family is the only thing that's connecting us to this dream. And for Hispanics, for Latinos, family is 100% the world. We're stubborn for this country because we grew up in this country. We're stubborn for this country because our family's in this country. We don't see anything else because we're blinded by the love of our family and the comfort of our family, and they take advantage of that. The system, everybody's taking advantage of that weakness that we have as individuals, and it doesn't let us grow.

Harris's [8] tenet, the absolute right to exclude, illuminates who legitimately belongs and who can be ousted at any point in time. DACA serves as a way for undocumented college students to feel a sense of stability and belonging but was not meant as a permanent solution. The imperialistic reclamation of whiteness is felt in each of the students' experiences demonstrated by their mental, emotional, and behavioral status. In addition, the act of rescinding DACA is a prime example of imperialistic reclamation making it clear to undocumented students that their rights to use and enjoyment of a work permit, among every other subsequent social privilege, is rooted in the right to exclude, which is reserved as privileges for citizens and those who uphold white dominance. These hostile climates and the rescission of DACA also have a great impact on the students' college trajectories.

7.2. Heightened Pressure and Anxiety Related to Performance of Whiteness

Heightened pressure and anxiety to perform whiteness was commonplace for participants as they reflected on how the rescission of DACA impacted their academics and mental and emotional states thereafter. Some students explained how this decision greatly affected either their course load or major, timeline to graduation, transfer plans, and/or their grades. Alex shared,

There was a lot of anxiety . . . We got hit in a blind side, and we just didn't know what to do. I remember my mom calling me. There's a lot of raids in Georgia. And she was telling me how scared she was, and that kind of just fueled my fear even more, being over here, not being there with my mom, not being able to help her. All of my grades... I was taking three courses during that time, and they all dropped to Cs, and I try to keep my grades up. And I'm usually really good at that. And right then, it was really, really difficult . . . It still hits you that the reality, at that moment, was instead of it getting better, it was just getting worse. And if it's getting worse in these aspects, it puts you into a very pessimistic mentality . . . but it did impact my grades. It did affect my studies. It affected everything.

In Alex's case, it became evident how liminal legality directly impacted his ability to maintain his high grades due the uncertainty of his and his family's futures. He described how the racially hostile climate impacted his mentality. Similarly, Antonio described a sharp drop in his grades due to the politically turbulent climate. He shared, "All of this is going on, and it is affecting my grades badly, because sometimes I can literally do everything, but then, it's just really discouraging to know that if I graduate, it's not even worth anything." Students began to question whether their hard work in their academics will reap any value in the overall scheme of the current political climate. Students expressed the pressure and the anxiety of performing well in academics. Zlatan stated,

Maybe I'm most worried about is... I'm a junior. I'm pretty close to graduated. More than halfway through college, and I've always wanted to be a lawyer, and now I don't know if I'm even able to be able to practice law, and I know I can research and find out, but I don't want to do that. So, it doesn't make me change my dream. So, I'm just like still focusing as if nothing had happened with the rescinding of DACA so I can be my best self and continue putting my effort as if I will be able to accomplish the goal that I want.

Additionally, participants shared the pressures of living up to the "dreamer identity" as an additional factor that impacted their grades. The liminal status and hostile climates

compounded by pressures to excel academically overwhelmed them—sometimes to the point of paralysis. Harris's [8] rights to disposition point to how undocumented college students must exceed the expectations of others. In one focus group, participants illuminated the rights to disposition through the topic of being a "super dreamer." Alex began the conversation.

I want to say something on that. Me, I do wanna agree with Marisella in terms of how there's just expectation, and I think that's something that's very... It's diminishing our communities that don't have the qualities of being a superhero, because that's what they're trying to make out of us, being a superhero, invincible individuals, that I think that's just an expectation that's false. Not everybody, one community, is going to be 100% superhero community, and that's what they expect from us. We are bound to make mistakes. I spoke to this one woman on a fellowship for [Immigration Group]. She's a white woman, and she said, "These people are getting deported for having DUIs. I've had a DUI. These people are getting deported for committing crimes that I committed when I was a teenager." We all make mistakes. And none of us are perfect or superheroes or super powerful saints... Nobody's Mother Teresa. And it does affect even those that are in a leadership position, because then they must exceed other superheroes. And it's this battle with... I don't think it's society. It's just a battle with yourself. Is it too much? Am I doing enough? I'm not doing enough. And you just question yourself on how much more you need to do. I, personally, was initially not involved in advocacy or these leadership roles, and this political climate pushed me towards it, but I was more of an artist. I prefer drawing.

Barack and Camila both agreed, and Camila added,

Same. Well, I think, what I've seen on social media is, there are DACAmented students that were never good at school. They ever got the good grades, but they don't feel like they are worthy of being even part of the movement, because you see all these DACA students that are going above and beyond, who are going for doctorates, who have these science and math/science degrees. And I think there's this community of DACA students that is not being seen. School was never their forte. However, they fall under that DACA students or DACAmented category, but they don't even wanna come out and say it, because they don't feel worthy. And I know that's set me back sometimes from going out to rally or speaking out, because you just don't feel like you're up to par with these high activists who are these people who are at rallies, that do more and part of the [Immigration Group] or something like that or people that go all the way to DC. It's like, we have to stop with that narrative, and it's really hurting everyone as a whole, because you have other gifts besides being a good student or having good grades. Yeah.

Marisella chimed in,

Yeah, just to add to what Camilla said, it's true once a "Dreamer", if they happen to get into some trouble, then suddenly, oh, it's, wow, you're a "Dreamer". You shouldn't be acting like that, and it's like what Alex said. Why can't we make mistakes and be pardoned for it? Why is it, if we make a mistake, suddenly, oh, that's why they shouldn't let you guys stay, or that's why they shouldn't grant this for you guys, because it's just trouble waiting to happen. And I don't think that's a good thing. It is cool and awesome to know that some "Dreamers" are going above and beyond and achieving all these great things. But like she said, a lot of them are not, and it's not fair that they don't feel comfortable with making a mistake or just not even being in school, because we are on this, oh, DACA students, they're this and that. And they're good people, and they're really smart and stuff. And it just needs to be brought down to reality and what it is.

The heightened racist nativist rhetoric against “Dreamers” and racially charged political climate have transformed an already-unattainable “Dreamer” identity to an unrealistic “superhero” one. Requiring undocumented students to be superheroes in order to be fully accepted and participate in our colleges is one form of the rights of disposition tenet. Participant experiences demonstrate how detrimental such an unrealistic expectation can have on students’ academic progress, self-confidence, and even their lives. Participants’ explanation of “usually being good at” doing well in classes and those expressing fear of not living up to the “dreamer” identity indicates their critical awareness that they must maintain an image of the “good” immigrant in order to remain desirable and worthy of access to higher education. The notions of “good” and “worthiness” are both rooted in whiteness.

The 2016 elections and the rescission of DACA had a major impact on undocumented students’ transfer plans and time completion. Antonio shared that after how he was having second thoughts about transferring to the 4-year institution that he had visited. When we inquired about transferring to a more welcoming 4-year institution, he stated,

I have to wait. I’m still gonna continue here, but I still have to wait to see what happens. If they do pass a law or even continue renewing, I’ll probably still think about it and most likely will transfer, but as of right now, I don’t have a solid decision. I can’t say right now, because I’m still waiting for that answer.

Again, current national and state policies have positioned him in a legally liminal state that has impacted his ability to further matriculate.

8. Discussion and Implications

The Colorado context is implicated in this notion as undocumented students in this study witness a heightened sense of white supremacy in their communities; they navigate their legal status with an increase in fear, anxiety, and depression to the point where they feel scared to leave their house. For some, the paralyzing anxiety they experienced prior to obtaining DACA status is like the severe anxiety they are encountering currently. When we consider the undocufriendly campus ecology framework of Suárez-Orozco et al. [15], colleges and universities may acknowledge the macrosystem or the sociopolitical context but may not understand how the national discourse about DACA and anti-immigration sentiments may impact academic performance, mental health, and educational aspirations for undocumented college students. Further, Hurtado and colleagues’ [29] work invites us to examine an institution’s historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion of various racial/ethnic groups but without much integration of the U.S. historical legacy of exclusion through the lens of whiteness and imperialistic reclamation. Harris’s [8] tenets of whiteness as property and Ladson-Billings and Tate’s [36] application of these tenets are useful tools to unpack how imperialistic reclamation [11] and racist nativism [17] manifest into psychological and physical warfare on immigrant bodies. This study highlights how race and legal status are intersecting markers of anti-immigration rhetoric, which further magnifies and reifies historical trauma through symbolic and interpersonal forms of imperialistic reclamation of space, place, and spirit. While cross-racial interactions do benefit campus climates in positive ways [30], this study illuminates how peers can be culprits of whiteness. Cross-racial interactions should consider white supremacy and imperialistic reclamation within the context of higher education. We also caution campus leaders and administrations that engaging in discussions around race and racism requires substantive training, and it should not solely fall on the shoulders of people of color.

This paper also extends racist nativism by centering whiteness and property and by detailing how imperialistic reclamation is an articulation of racist nativism on college campuses. Recently, scholars [35] claim that campus climate assessments without any understanding of how students make meaning of their racialized experience will not reap substantive shifts in cultivating welcoming campuses. Despite Colorado having an in-state tuition policy for undocumented college students, campuses continue to be hotbeds where whiteness is performed and upheld in classrooms and in the surrounding

community with peer and coworkers. Universities have an obligation to address acts of imperialistic reclamation within the context of hate speech. This study has implications for all college campuses as it exemplifies how undocumented and DACA college students feel anxiety and heightened pressure to academically perform under a sociopolitical context that demoralizes their mere existence. White nationalist groups will continue to influence college environments, and college leaders must develop policies and practices to adequately address its growing presence.

These findings also illuminate emotional labor of experiencing trauma relived in this reclamation era, but also as part of an intergenerational trauma [47–49] of anti-immigration policies and laws. Psychological and political warfare against immigrant bodies has become normalized in more concrete ways given that President Trump leads efforts in demonizing immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants. The rescission of DACA exemplifies the flippantness that the Trump administration took regarding immigrant lives. The disposability of this population as political pawns to advance Trump's political agenda demonstrates the lack of regard for personhood, and the usage of fear as a form of control over immigrant bodies operates as a form of property of whiteness [8,36] and imperialistic reclamation [11]. We ascertain that the 2016 elections were more about whose humanity is valued and how power and whiteness shape and normalize hate under the auspice of national security.

Higher educational actors need to acknowledge, and more importantly rectify, that attacks on the most vulnerable populations influence the liberation and educational aspirations of all racially minoritized groups. Particular attention should be placed on sustaining the mental wellness of undocumented college students [26]. We urge institutional actors to unpack free speech (verbal and symbolic) as it relates to anti-immigration rhetoric and deconstruct how language and symbolism are racialized and can have detrimental impacts on minoritized populations and on creating culturally affirming learning environments [28,32,34]. We also question and critique higher education's diversity, equity, and inclusion rhetoric when inaction on anti-immigration rhetoric reproduces white supremacy. For these reasons, we urge institutional actors to revisit their commitments to inclusive excellence with goals, actions, and steps in place aimed at dismantling the protection of whiteness and white supremacy. In the same vein, colleges and universities should play an active role in federal policy by advocating for comprehensive immigration reform, which includes a pathway to citizenship for DACA recipients and their families. Finally, we urge states such as Colorado to consider passing state versions of the DACA program in order to provide a work permit to undocumented immigrants who were unable to apply for DACA as new applicants.

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