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TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANT REASON

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A lot was made about immigrant resilience and "heroism" at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] At that time, I published an OpEd in the *San Francisco Chronicle* criticizing that narrative, one that suggested that immigrant laborers risked their lives working in spite of a global health crisis out of a sense of social duty or supererogation (Sánchez 2020). My reasons for criticizing that narrative were simple, but grounded on an intimate (i.e., first-person) understanding of immigrant life: immigrant laborers continue to labor through a global pandemic not because of any sense of heroism, supererogation, or felt obligation to society at large, but because they believe that there is no other choice. In the immigrant laborer's horizon of possible moves, *not working* is not one of them.

If we ask immigrants, especially "unauthorized" or "undocumented" immigrants, why they would choose work over their own safety or the safety of their families, a straightforward answer is that not working is not a viable option. It is not a viable option for a number of reasons, not least of which among them the understanding that if they don't work, they don't eat.[2] History has shown that immigrant viability depends on work–"work" in the sense of being a real, lived experience, one of transition and transcendence, but also of staying busy, of fulfilling the demands of nourishment, and of enjoyment.[3, 4] This is the

[1] The news media and, even immigrant advocacy groups, began celebrating immigrant heroism early in the Pandemic. While the content of the reports called for reforms, protections, and the like, the headlines celebrated an unselfishness that needed to be recognized and appreciated. See, for instance, Eladio Bobadilla (2020) and Rondell Treviño (2020).

[2] It is well known, especially among the immigrant community, that undocumented workers are not eligible for unemployment benefits. See Rebecca Smith (2020).

[3] For an overview of this history, as well as an excellent account of immigrant life, see Leo R. Chavez (2013).

[4] I loosely appropriate Emmanuel Levinas' notion of "labor" here. Levinas (1991) considers labor as an existential necessity, one requires for my future encounter with the other. However, labor is also what "nourishes" and "fulfils." He writes in *Totality and Infinity*, "[t]he life that I earn is not a bare existence; it is a life of labor and nourishments; these are the contents that do no preoccupy it only, but which 'occupy' it, which 'entertain' it, of which it is enjoyment . . . . We live from our labor which ensures our subsistence, but we also live from our labor because it fills (delights or saddens) life" (111-12).

sense I find inherent to the undocumented immigrant experience and, furthermore, to what I call here, "undocumented immigrant reason."

In what follows, I offer a phenomenological description of undocumented immigrant reason, provisionally understood as a sort of historical reason grounded on undocumented immigrant life. That is, the categories of undocumented immigrant reason are resources for undocumented immigrant existence and are inscribed in the historical memory of immigration (they are shared and communal), accessed by immigrants in stories, anecdotes, and interpersonal trauma. Abstracting from personal experience, testimony, popular culture, and elsewhere, I propose a fragmentary list of these categories of undocumented immigrant reason, a list that includes journeying, crossing/*nepantla*, uncertainty/*zozobra*, nostalgia, and return. These categories, which structure undocumented immigrant reason, are reflected in beliefs and attitudes about migration, belonging, the contingency of life, the centrality of memory, and the meaning of death. Moreover, because undocumented immigrant reason is a type of intersubjective, or shared, and historical rationality, it always highlights and puts into relief the practical and conceptual minefields that could affect that life at any moment. Thus, undocumented immigrant reason makes room for sudden adaptations to policy and enforcement, for changes in how undocumented immigrants are perceived by the media, society, and the state. In this way, undocumented immigrant reason is commonsensical and ultimately grounded on experienced, and shared, feelings, emotions, and communal memories. Finally, undocumented immigrant reason is tied to place and origins, which represent always the possibility of return, and welcome, but also to memories of leaving, of crossing, of reaching, and of returning. This return, which may be an impossible return (for instance, made impossible by death), is the end-goal, the great desire; at the heart of immigrant resiliency is thus a fear immobility, of a remaining still, or intransient. Seen in this light, immigrants worked through the pandemic not because they were heroes, but because the possibility of not working is not part of undocumented immigrant reason. Ultimately, constitutive of immigrant rationality are beliefs and ways of being that lend meaning to immigrant life, including those beliefs and ways of being that place immigrants in closer proximity to fundamental human truths.

Here, however, a clarification: by "undocumented immigrant" I refer to either (1) "undocumented immigrants," or those who are residing in a country without legal permission or documentation, problematically called "illegal" (Sánchez 2014); (2) to those who are *thought to be, seen as, or treated as though* they are residing in a country without legal permission, documentation, or right, even though they may very well have such legal right, what Amy Reed-Sandoval (2020) calls "socially undocumented immigrants";[5] or (3) those who live *a certain kind of life*, one that reflects the "undocumented immigrant experience," what elsewhere I have called a "post-immigrant identity" (Sánchez 2011b. The first may be persons who, in fact, live outside the bounds of the laws of the state, the second may be persons who simply look as though they do, and the third may be persons who, by blood

[5] According to Reed-Sandoval (2020), the socially undocumented immigrant horizon belongs to socially undocumented persons, or persons who are: (a) "presumed to be undocumented on the mere basis of their appearance," (b) "subjected to . . . 'demeaning immigration-related constraints' or 'illegalizing forces' (that is, they are 'socially illegalized')" (4, 61).

or circumstance, live the immigrant experience even though they may be neither "illegal" nor "socially undocumented." In what follows, my focus will be on the first group, whose lived experience is phenomenologically distinct from the other two if only in the way that immigration enforcement, policy, and public opinion interrupts, and threatens, daily life. Thus, when I talk about a phenomenological account of "immigrant reason," I refer to a kind of reason belonging to "undocumented" immigrants, a reason that points to a shared, historical, experience that grounds itself on stories, anecdotes, and collective memory.

I. THE UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

An Anecdote

I began working in the cauliflower fields at the age of 12. Although I was born in the United States (in Anaheim, California), and thus a US citizen, my parents were not, nor my cousins, nor the more than a dozen people who worked (and lived) with us and near us. Our day would begin early, hours before the sun rose and the fog dissipated. A lookout would be stationed a few miles away whose sole responsibility was watching out for immigration enforcement patrols (i.e., *la migra*); if one was spotted, he or she would sound an alarm and we would all run into the thicket—everyone, including me, a US citizen. We would hide for hours until the "threat" had passed. We knew that *la migra* knew we were hiding, after all, cars were lined up next to the field and lunch bags were scattered on the ground, signs of a quick getaway. It was common knowledge that they simply loved to torment us, and would hang around for hours waiting for one of us to walk out of the shrubbery and surrender. No one surrendered—this was simply not an option. In hiding, I recall *feeling* like I was doing something horribly wrong, like we are all complicit in the crime of "blanching"[6] cauliflower for $2 an hour.

Although that was many years ago, that feeling of guilt and criminality eventually mutated into an imposter syndrome that flares up at philosophy conferences or at bookstores when I see my own books staring back at me. However, for the undocumented, that feeling of criminality and guilt is an everyday reality, made worse by ever-mutating anti-immigrant narratives that praise immigrant heroism one moment and blame immigrants for all manner of social ills the next.[7]

[6] This is the process of tying the cauliflower leaves around the developing curd to keep sunlight from spoiling it.

[7] Thus, immigrants were praised for working through the pandemic and then blamed for spreading COVID-19. See Joel Rose 2021.

The Value of Work

The previous anecdote is meant to serve as a point of departure into a reflection of the immigrant experience, one that is shared, familiar, and phenomenologically grounded; a reflection that stands apart from objectifying narratives about undocumented immigrants. It also reveals one of the existential categories belonging to the immigrant experience mentioned above, what I will refer to as "uncertainty" or "*zozobra*."

"Heroism" is not an existential category of the immigrant experience. What some have called the heroism of the immigrant experience points to the pro-version of the anti-immigrant narrative, one where the immigrant has a specific social role. In the time of global pandemic, it tells a story of a community who, faced with the option between fulfilling their obligation to society (viz., to work) or sheltering in place (viz., not to work), chose the former, and did so valiantly and in the face of death. But this is a simplistic and limiting narrative. Immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants, chose the former not because of loyalty to society, but because the other option is also death. Not to work means that one does not eat, or pay rent, or survive; but it also signifies standing still, remaining stagnant, or risk being stuck where one is without escape (this observation points to another of the affective existential categories I mention below, "journeying"). Immigrants who labored during the early months of the pandemic did it not out of obligation to their role, but out of obligation to their own existence and the belief—internal to undocumented immigrant rationality itself—that to not work is death.

Immigrants labor despite a shared understanding that their work is "unauthorized," or worse, "illegal." That they were called "heroes" by an ever-changing narrative did little to change their actual circumstance—they were still vulnerable, unprotected, under constant threat. The narrative eventually changed again, this time to place blame on them for a sudden surge of the Virus.[8]

My emphasis on working is not mean to suggest that undocumented immigrants don't do other things, like raise families or contribute to society in many other ways. My point is simply that these other contributions are also grounded on insecurity and fear. Thus, undocumented immigrants may, and often do, plant roots in their community, but this is done with caution, since the possibility to uproot is always left open. The always present threat of being discovered, harassed, arrested, or deported, makes it so that life is lived always already in anticipation of fleeing. To live in such a way is to live exposed, bare, and vulnerable to violence and oppression from all sides, but also in a state of perpetual oscillation, movement, and unsettledness.[9]

[8] See, for instance, Daniel Politi (2021).

[9] Indeed, as José Jorge Mendoza (2017) puts it, "[u]ndocumented immigrants, because of their susceptibility to automatic deportation, are some of the most vulnerable people in society. Their precarious situation leaves them virtually unprotected against various forms of exploitation, oppression, and discrimination by both public (e.g., tax collectors and police) and private (e.g., private employers and landlords) entities" (104).

In spite of immigrant vulnerability, and the exploitation this invites, undocumented immigrants persist in doing those things demanded by their way of life. Although undocumented immigrants exist in the margins of society, seeking always to stay out of sight, avoiding the entrapments of enforcement, they exist nonetheless. However, the experience of constant vigilance and fear becomes a communal and generational inheritance, and is experienced by others who may or may not have a reason to experience it (Sánchez 2011a).[10] Immigrants will face challenges, not only against their persons, through immigration enforcement strategies, but also against their very being, through interruptions directed at their basic human right to journey, to flourish, and to, eventually, return on their own accord to their places of origin (Mendieta 2017).[11] These challenges are exacerbated by contradictory anti-immigrant narratives, which emphasize the stigmatization of immigrants as intruders in the community in which they find themselves yet simultaneously obligated to serve it; a narrative that says that immigrants can be considered both criminals and heroes. Immigrants themselves do not resist or speak to these conflicting narratives. In fact, as their actions during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown, they simply continue to do what they must do in order to claim a place in a world that continually denies it.

II. CATEGORIES OF IMMIGRANT RATIONALITY

An Autobiographical Reduction

The specific case of my father underscores certain phenomena applicable to the undocumented immigrant experience in a general sense. My father's case begins with the (very ceremonious) burial of his *ombligo*—the dried out strand of umbilical cord left over on a baby's navel after birth, and which usually falls out after a couple of weeks. In my father's case, once the *ombligo* fell off—*ombligo* also refers to that part that *does not fall off*, and the difference is understood in context—my grandmother buried it under a tree in the hills outside Acuitzeramo, Michoacán, Mexico. The reasons as to why this was done are unclear, but my father tells this story often, so it became, for me, part of his immigrant identity. Every time he tells it, nostalgia and longing are clearly evident in his words; he longs to return, he says, to that tree, to find his *ombligo* and see where *he* is buried. It is, as if, the *ombligo* never fell out and he is still attached to it, and it stretches a thousand miles across a border and into the heart of California. He is tethered to it and, in his mind, the

[10] As Mendoza (2017) writes: "[s]ome citizens (e.g., Latino/as, Middle Eastern Americans, and Asian-Americans) are more likely than other citizens (e.g., white Americans) to have their day-to-day lives disrupted by internal immigration enforcement" (106).

[11] Eduardo Mendieta (2017) sums up this "right of mobility": "the fundamental right of mobility, inchoate in the right to life, demands that no rule of law absolutely preclude either exit or entry: no wall without doors, no boundary without gaps, no borders without gates, no sovereign subject without the possibility of some coming in and some leaving" (84).

purpose of all his struggles is *to return* to that tree, to unearth his *ombligo*, and be one with himself again. His departure, his separation, was never meant to be permanent; the goal of his immigrant life has always been to return to his origin.

How does this story help us understand the immigrant experience in general? Consider Amy Reed-Sandoval's (2020) book on immigrant ethics, *Socially Undocumented*. The "socially undocumented" are those persons who are treated as if they were legally undocumented by virtue of their appearance—of how they are "read" (4, 61). Society, in a sense, *un-documents* them, stripping them of their "authorized" or "legal" status in the way they are treated. Reed-Sandoval goes on to suggest that essential to immigrant life is struggle, which is a struggle for work and survival (130, 134).

In order to highlight undocumented immigrant struggle, Reed-Sandoval appeals to Mexican regional music, specifically a song by the renowned norteño group, *Los Tigres del Norte*, "El Mojado Acaudalado." I'll quote it here because, according to Reed-Sandoval, it helps in understanding what she calls "the socially undocumented immigrant horizon," i.e., that interpretive framework that defines the undocumented immigrant experience in the US. *Los Tigres* sing:

> I'm not happy where I am.
> Goodbye, goodbye Colorado
> Nevada and Oregon
> The "wetback" is saying goodbye to you
> The "wetback" who was covered in sweat
> In the fields of Arizona
> And the factories of New York. (Reed-Sandoval 2020, 138)

According to Reed-Sandoval, this stanza captures the struggle of the (socially) undocumented. Here, "the narrator clearly perceives the double bind in which he [is] positioned. US society reaped the benefits of his labor . . . while systematically denigrating him on the basis of performing it." But this is also "a *response* to the double bind in question" (emphasis in the original) which consists in "*choosing* to return to Mexico" (emphasis added) even though he doesn't have to. It is a choice grounded in rebellion, since, Reed-Sandoval asks, "why would [he] choose to remain in a place where he is degraded on the basis of his hard work?" Thus, rather than remain and continue to suffer degradation, the narrator chooses to leave because where he is going "he expects to be respected by others for his industriousness in the United states." We could say that the immigrant is *pushed out* of the US by systemic oppression and *pulled toward* Mexico by the promise of respect. Reed-Sandoval concludes that this journey out of and toward exemplifies, "quite literally, an *escape from* the double bind in question" (138; emphasis added). I read this stanza quite differently.

Categories of Immigrant Reason

In both my father's story and in "El Mojado Acaudalado," that which is thought to be emblematic of immigrant life—i.e., struggle and suffering—is not clearly evident. What is explicit, rather, is a longing, a nostalgia to return to an origin, an aspect of the immigrant experience missing from any objectifying account of the undocumented immigrant experience. There is, in both the song and my father's story, a sense that whatever struggle there has been or there is (viz., the double bind), is only part of a journey. But most importantly, in both accounts, the sense of impermanence is palpable, a sense unaccounted for when the undocumented immigrant experience is limited to a struggle against social injustice, obstacles, and oppressions. The undocumented immigrant experience is structured also by longing, journeying, and nostalgia. Moreover, the anxiety of being in one place, of standing still, can be gathered from my father's constant references to his native land and in the song's narrator many stops (Arizona, New York, Colorado, Oregon) leading ultimately to a decision to return *home*.

These are but two instances of the immigrant experience, but they can be found elsewhere, namely, in the shared repository of immigrant life, in the historical memory of immigration. Together with what has already been said about immigrant resiliency before enforcement, attitudes toward work in times of pandemic, and, yes, the *struggle* of immigrant life, the historical, communal, and shared memory reveals valuable phenomenological insights. Extracting from that memory and those experiences, I propose, in preliminary fashion, certain existential-phenomenological categories constituting both the undocumented immigrant lived experience and, what I've referred to as undocumented immigrant reason (this list is not exhaustive and can certainly be amended): journeying, crossing/*nepantla*, impermanence/*zozobra*, nostalgia, and return.

Journeying

Undocumented immigrant reason understands the world from the perspective of constant and perpetual movement, travel, and journeying. It is said that mobility is essential to human existence.[12] A mobility that is determined by the geographies of immigration we call "journeying." It is a journey that has an origin, a traversal of space, multiple destinations, and a point of *return*—a return to the origin. Thus, my father's journey away from his place of birth was not only a "transport" to a "point in space" which he imagined "beforehand," but also a movement *away* from a point in space which he intimately knew and to which he imagined he would return. The journey, in his case, was necessary for his own survival; it made the struggle bearable.

[12] See Mendieta (2017). Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1974) writes: "[m]otility, then, is, and, as it were, a handmaid of consciousness, transporting the body to that point in space of which we have formed a representation beforehand" (161; emphasis in the original).

Moreover, he understood that his journey will not be completed until he returns (even if his journey back is in death).

Crossing/Nepantla

The world is seen through the category of *journeying* as motion, and thus, it is seen in its transiency. For undocumented immigrant reason, this journeying also involves a "crossing" that is inevitable and never-ending. One is always crossing, re-crossing, and crossing again; boundaries appear, are overcome, and reappear again. The undocumented immigrant is always in the process of arriving and departing. Mexican philosophy and Chicanx Feminism call this "*nepantla*" (Anzaldúa 1987; Mora 1993; Uranga 2021). The socially undocumented recognize this and accept it as a state of being, even if implicitly. Thus, challenges and struggles, like that presented by the double bind are endured, and so is the suffering that anti-immigrant sentiment attaches to it. Being *nepantla* means that the crossing is never done. The experience of crossing influences thought in many ways, certainly in the trauma and fear of knowing it as a limit and, since it was crossed, a transgression. Socially undocumented immigrants, like myself, internalize this crossing in our own lives. Becoming a philosopher, for instance, means that I've crossed to a realm unimagined by my father, and, thus, that I've transgressed some limit. Deportation is not an alien thought for my father who crossed the political dividing line, nor is it for me, who crossed some imagined threshold beyond which no other person *we* knew had gone. At the same time, however, crossing also means transcendence or going beyond imposed limits: it means opening up new spaces of possibilities, new challenges, and the chance for new triumphs. Immigrant parents whose children attend and graduate college certainly recognize that something they were not expected to cross has been crossed, and that the *new journey* on which their children embark is a better-equipped continuation of their own. This is a struggle that goes beyond the struggle to survive: it is a struggle to exist, transcend, and flourish.

Uncertainty/Zozobra

Undocumented immigrant reason filters experience through the categories of journeying and crossing. These are categories of motion, they are unstable, and fluid. This fluidity defines immigrant knowledge, which means that the so-called truths of immigrant reason are contingent, or they are never settled; undocumented immigrant reason assumes nothing as certain, and trust extends only to what has already been lived and the facts *on the ground*. If there is confidence, it is in accidentality, in the view that things may not be what they seem or that they may change at any moment—e.g., that immigration laws will change without warning, that anti-immigrant sentiment will be better or worse with the flip of some cultural switch, etc. In this way, undocumented immigrant reason is never secure; it travels from certainty to uncertainty, from yes to no, never settling in a

stable epistemological foundation. Borrowing from a concept in Mexican philosophy, we can call this category "*zozobra*" (Uranga 2021). In other words, the uncertainty in which undocumented immigrants exist is represented in undocumented immigrant reason as the permanent breakdown of affective certainty. As such, the world is seen through the category of "*zozobra*," as offering incompatible and risky life choices—i.e., Reed-Sandoval's "double bind"—none of which are advantageous, but all of which are necessary. That the disadvantageous choices feel "necessary," however, further exacerbates the uncertainty and the mistrust, since the soul feels wounded and torn by the mere confrontation.

Undocumented persons living in the US have a proximal relation to *zozobra*. Their plight is filled with risks and everyday life is one of survival and overcoming. One the one hand, there is the risk of being found out, of being exposed, and becoming vulnerable to violence, exclusion, or deportation. An objectifying immigrant discourse makes it so that being undocumented means that one is always outside the space of law, thus outside the space of protection and fully in the realm of nastiness, violence, and death. Everyday activities become opportunities to be discovered and dehumanized. Hiding is also not the answer, since there is the risk associated with being anonymous, nameless, fully underground. Anonymity leaves immigrants vulnerable to exploitation in labor and wages, human trafficking, violence, and so on. To be an undocumented immigrant in the US is thus to embody *zozobra*: there is an indeterminacy and uncertainty in *being* a human being itself. As we saw above, the *zozobra* that defines immigrant life in the US is extended to others who are not undocumented immigrants.

Nostalgia

My father's story about his buried *ombligo* is a story of nostalgia. He longs to return to his roots, to the origin of his tether. This longing for return is inherent to undocumented immigrant reason. The reality of the immigrant world—constituted by *zozobra*, anti-immigrant narratives, double binds, and so on— is tolerated because the nostalgia for the origin is greater than the suffering of the present. The world is seen through this longing: *I will do the hard, dirty, risky jobs that no one else will do because one day I will be done and I will go back home, even if I don't know when that will be*. For some, the return is indefinitely postponed (they may die far from home); the impossibility of return, however, does not keep the nostalgia from affecting the experience of the world. *Nepantla* and *zozobra* refer to an unsettledness, and so as long as these constitute me, I will long for the origin. My immigrant father dreams through his nostalgia—when awake and when asleep. He recognizes that his struggle has never been merely for the sake of overcoming a double bind, an oppression, but for the sake of his own liberation in an end beyond *my* imagination. I recall asking him once why he bought a home in the US if his goal has always been to one day return to Michoacán. *We have to have a place to stay,* he said, as if buying a home in the U.S. was purely an expediency. In this sense, my father's mortgage is not literal ("mortgage" means a death pledge), since the commitment to stay in one place is not a commitment till death, but until it's time to return . . . again.

Return

There's a thinking-through-the-return that constitutes undocumented immigrant reason. It serves as an expectation of a coming-back, which is grounded on nostalgia, memory and expectancy. The return home is planned and always on the foreground. It structures undocumented immigrant reason by coloring the present with plans for the future; it displaces the primacy of the double bind by looking beyond it, to a doubling-back to the origin. This is evident in the immigrant's confrontation with the possibility of his own death and the practice of "postmortem repatriation," in which the bodies of deceased migrants are sent back to Mexico to be buried in their hometowns (Felix 2011). I say this is a category of undocumented immigrant reason because, of course, while immigrants expect to die, undocumented immigrant reason assumes that death may come while in the process of journeying, of going from one place to another; in other words, of dying *away from home*. Nevertheless, there is an expectation of a return, even in death. Thus, for instance, time and time again one hears about immigrants who've died in the United States being "repatriated" to be buried, honoring, even in death, a desire rooted in nostalgia and an existential need to return. Jorge Negrete's anthem of Mexican nomadic life famously expresses this desire:

> Mexico lindo y querido
> Si muero lejos de ti
> Que digan que estoy dormido
> Y que me traigan aqui//
> Que me entierren en la sierra
> Al pie de los magueyales
> Y que me cubra esta tierra
> Que es cuna de hombres cabales.
>
> Mexico beautiful and beloved
> If I die away from you
> Let them say that I'm asleep
> And bring me here//
> To bury me in the mountains
> At the foot of the magueyales
> And let this earth cover me
> Which is the cradle of upright men.[13]
> –Jorge Negrete, "México Lindo y Querido"

The narrator here implores "Mexico" itself to advocate for his return. If he happens to die in a foreign land, he asks that his body be returned so as to be buried in Mexican soil, in his land, in its history, in the "cradle of upright men." The nostalgia in these stanzas

[13] Translation is my own.

is familiar; death cannot stop the journey from reaching its completion, which is a return to origins, to the earth, to where all *ombligos* are buried. The imploration to Mexico itself assumes a previous agreement, namely, that the journey would conclude until the return, one that not even death can prevent. Of course, in the everyday life of undocumented immigrants, the hope of return is the only hope. Immigrants who are documented, or who have *a* right to be in the country, may have no such plans for return—or any such hope, since they may only look as if they hail from Michoacán, while tracing their origins to the place in which they stand. Those who only look as if they are immigrant without being so may be those who, unlike their parents, have no connection to a similar origin—they don't have an option for repatriation. This is something that is worth considering from a phenomenological perspective; for instance, do these phenomenological categories structure *my* post-immigrant experience as they do the experience of my undocumented immigrant parents? I will leave this for another time.

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