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Covering (il)Legible Bodies: A CDA of News Discourse about Undocuqueer Life in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT
News narratives about immigration shape not only constructions of immigrants but of nation states. Through a critical content analysis informed by intersectionality and queer of color critique, this study explores how the news coverage of undocumented LGBTQ immigrants and the Undocuqueer Movement render distorted and incomplete constructions of these immigrants, their struggles and activism. Furthermore, the analysis shows how selective (mis)representations and erasures in the coverage contribute to the constitution of a homonationalist reimagination of the United States. Additionally, the paper makes the case for the incorporation of transnational sensibilities to enhance intersectional approaches to reporting.

KEYWORDS:
Undocuqueer, news discourse, queer migration, immigrants, LGBTQ, intersectionality, CDA
Unauthorized immigration is a topic of hot contention in the United States with the perception of porous borders bolstering anxieties about the integrity of its national security and cultural identity. For decades, these anxieties have sparked debates and policies that tend to constrict definitions of national belonging and citizenship (Kanstroom 2007; Anderson, Gibney, and Paoletti 2011). Despite public opinion on undocumented immigration being complex, ambivalent, and sometimes contradictory (Benson and Wood 2015), a dominant white and heteronormative conception of the United States structures the symbolic and material rejection or incorporation of foreign bodies into the nation (Ngai 2004).

Mainstream news media play a significant role in shaping perceptions of nation and national belonging. As undocumented immigrants are simultaneously undercovered (Santa Ana 2013) and overrepresented as criminal, and economic and social threats (Santa Ana 2002; Chávez 2008; Kim et al. 2011), news discourses tend to construct them as unworthy of protection and inclusion into American life. Immigration coverage is far from homogenous, though, with different news genres (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2015), geographic arrangements (Branton and Dunaway 2009), and coverage targets (Patler and Gonzalez 2015) rendering variable readings of the legitimacy of the plights of undocumented immigrants.

Just as news coverage, the politics of the immigration movement are diverse, specially in recent decades when they underwent profound changes. Since the late 2000s, undocumented LGBTQ activists have led the movement, allowing for the incorporation of intersectional and coalitional organizing (Seif 2014). The label Undocuqueer emerged as a hybrid political identity for those – mostly Latinx youth – dwelling at the intersection of racialized, gendered, sexualized, and xenophobic discrimination (Seif 2016; Cisneros 2018). This movement has resisted narratives of respectability and acculturation that undergird sectors of the immigrant and LGBTQ movements, offering “new paradigms of belonging” that challenge homonationalism and oppressive dichotomies of the “worthy” and “unworthy” immigrant (Seif 2016, 23).

Through alternative media, art, and advocacy, Undocuqueer activists have shaped distinct identities and politics (Nicholls 2013; Seif 2014, 2016; Cisneros and Bracho 2019; Cabas-Mijares and Grant 2020). However, scholars have found that queer migrants still constitute “impossible subjects” with “unrepresentable histories that exceed existing categories” in mainstream culture (Luibhéid 2008, 171). Cisneros and Gutierrez (2018) specify that punitive immigration policy and law enforcement in the U.S. render undocumented LGBTQ lives illegible.

To identify how news media contributes to or disrupts this illegibility, I examine the coverage of national, regional, and local newspapers in key states in the U.S. about the plight and identities of undocumented LGBTQ immigrants and Undocuqueer activists. I make a distinction between undocumented LGBTQ people and Undocuqueers because the latter is associated with a specific political identity in the context of the immigration movement which not all undocumented LGBTQ immigrants necessarily – or explicitly – identify with (Cisneros 2018). By searching for coverage about both undocumented LGBTQ people and the influential Undocuqueer Movement, I investigate patterns of news media representation that shape the illegibility of not only undocuqueer activists but the broader undocumented LGBTQ community.
Here, I argue that mis- and underrepresentation of these identities cast doubt on the suffering that undocumented LGBTQ people experience in the U.S. and the capacity for collective action of the Undocuqueer Movement. Furthermore, the analyzed articles help uphold homonationalist imaginations of the United States. These news narratives, then, potentially contribute to the compounded precariousness of undocumented LGBTQ life in the U.S. at the same time as they offer a misleading construction of the U.S. as a progressive haven for LGBTQ immigrants.

Becoming Undocuqueer: A Background of the Movement

The undocumented youth movement gained a national profile in the United States in the early 2000s, when politicians, NGOs, and activists advocated for the rights of undocumented students (Wong et al. 2012). At the time, the movement was mostly focused on passing the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, or DREAM Act, a federal law that would provide legal status to undocumented youth attending college or serving in the military. Activists foregrounded the stories of commendable undocumented youth, identified as Dreamers, making the argument that their work ethic, excellent academic performance, and cultural affinities to the U.S. made them worthy of American citizenship (Nicholls 2013).

In 2010, the majority in both houses of Congress supported the DREAM Act. However, the legislation was struck down by a Republican filibuster in the Senate. Dreamers kept the pressure on and persuaded President Obama to sign the executive order Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, DACA, which provides temporary protection from deportation to undocumented youth who came to the United States as children (Schwiertz 2016).

Around the late 2000s, however, a significant portion of undocumented activists were growing wary of the Dreamer narrative as it reinforced a discriminatory dichotomy: that there are “good” and “bad” immigrants. Dreamers constructed themselves as deserving of citizenship by symbolically distancing themselves from undocumented youth who could not fit the narrow legal mold established in the DREAM Act (Nicholls 2013; Gonzales 2014). Activists would put undocumented students who attended reputable universities and had extraordinary accomplishments at the center of their campaigns while sidelining activists who did not fit the narrative (Nicholls 2013). Scholars have noted that these decisions might have been strategic as campaigns highlighting undocumented students were more likely to receive news coverage than those focusing on non-students (Nicholls 2013; Patler and Gonzalez 2015). The strategy worked to popularize and legitimize the plight of Dreamers; however, it separated them from the larger undocumented community (Anguiano 2011).

To engage in more inclusive organizing, many undocumented activists started problematizing – and even disavowing – the Dreamer identity. Undocumented youth with criminal records, from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and who identified as LGBTQ joined in acts of civil disobedience and many of them took important leadership roles (Schwiertz 2016). For Schwiertz (2016), this shift introduced new ambitions to the movement which now targeted the hegemonic anti-migration U.S. regime and discarded respectability and assimilation politics. Obtaining citizenship was no longer the one goal; decriminalizing and destigmatizing non-citizenship was. The Undocuqueer Movement emerged as part of this shift.
The identity Undocuqueer is a hybrid political formation that challenged normative notions of queer and undocumented life in the United States (Chávez 2013; Cisneros 2018). As mainstream LGBTQ and immigration movements tended to treat issues of gender, sexuality, immigration, and nation-building as singular and unrelated, undocumented LGBTQ activists created the term Undocuqueer to enable intersectional identifications and advocacy. These activists have turned to alternative and social media to articulate the complexities of Undocuqueer life (Seif 2016; Cabas-Mijares and Grant 2020). Furthermore, recurrent national and regional events, like Coming Out of the Shadows Week; organizations, like Queer Undocumented Immigrant Project (QUIP); and media campaigns, such as Undocuqueer Project, have helped constitute Undocuqueer as a site for transnational, intersectional, and coalitional politics (Chávez 2013; Seif 2014).

The “Illegibility” of Undocuqueer

Despite the relevance of the Undocuqueer Movement in the redefinition of the immigration movement in the U.S., there is scarce research about these activists’ lives and media practices (Cisneros 2018). Furthermore, there are no studies assessing the representation of Undocuqueer identities and plights in news media. Scholars have suggested that the relative invisibility of the Undocuqueer Movement might be the result of a systemic lack of intersectional understandings and practices among media practitioners and researchers (Luibhéid 2008; Cisneros and Gutierrez 2018). When addressing immigration, hegemonic ideologies allow for the construction of immigrants as cisgender and heterosexual; and, when addressing LGBTQ issues, hegemonic ideologies construct LGBTQ bodies as white and already citizens (Manalansan 2006; Luibhéid 2008). The racialized queer migrant body, therefore, is rendered illegible by dominant discourses of national belonging and sexual politics (Cisneros and Gutierrez 2018).

Such illegibility is (re)produced not only through discourse but through the deployment of state violence, which further vilify and criminalize LGBTQ immigrants. For example, LGBTQ immigrants were banned from entering the U.S. up until 1990, HIV-positive individuals were denied entry up until 2010, and non-heterosexual binational spouses were until recently not eligible for family reunification (Chávez 2013). In the context of immigration, then, LGBTQ identities are particularly vulnerable. Meanwhile, media portrayals of LGBTQ people largely ignore immigrants, highlighting the lives of white, cisgender, young, urban, affluent, and well-educated gay males (McInroy and Craig 2015). This way, mediated LGBTQ identities become embodiments of a depoliticized middle-class and consumerist culture. Furthermore, this portrayal contributes to a reimagination of the U.S. as a homonationalist state that upholds LGBTQ rights and can, thus, claim superiority over other racialized and “backwards” cultures (Puar 2007). As undocumented LGBTQ identities, struggle, and activism disrupt these constructions, it is relevant to explore how American news media build narratives about undocumented LGBTQ people and, thus, about the U.S. itself. This study, then, posits the following research questions:

RQ1: How do U.S. news media articulate undocumented LGBTQ and Undocuqueer identities?

RQ2: How does the coverage of these identities shape discursive constructions of the United States as a nation?
Theoretical Framework

Research in the fields of journalism and media studies has shown that news coverage in the U.S. consistently construct immigrants as social problems and threats to the health, culture, and security of the national body (Santa Ana 2002; Chávez 2008). Scholars have mapped how anti-immigrant discourses are constituted and normalized in multiple nations, especially Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia (Reisigl and Wodak 2001; KhosraviNik 2009, 2010). Across these studies, researchers have found that media representations of immigrants incorporate linguistic and visual narratives that connect foreigners to notions of difference, deviance, and threat. Xenophobic and racist ideology is, then, routinely reproduced in immigration coverage.

These vilifying and criminalizing discourses shape not only the public’s attitudes toward immigrants but normative understandings of citizenship and national belonging (Patler and Gonzalez 2015). Furthermore, scholars have found clear connections between these perceptions and the crafting, support, and enforcement of punitive policies. The narrower the conceptions of citizenship and legality, the stronger the support for restrictive immigration laws (Ngai 2004; Kanstroom 2007). News coverage of immigration, then, has significant impact on the lives and livelihoods of immigrants in the United States.

Immigration coverage, however, is not homogenous as political, geographical, and media-specific factors shape depictions of immigrants (D’Haenens and De Lange 2001; Van Gorp 2005; Steimel 2010; Benson 2013). Scholars have found that conservative news outlets tend to construct negative narratives of immigrants (Branton and Dunaway 2009; de Zuniga, Correa, and Valenzuela 2012). Other studies have found that pro-immigration activists are quoted more often than anti-immigration activists, giving rise to humanitarian victim framings of immigrants; however, this relative imbalance in the sourcing does not preclude the disappearance of dominant threat frames about immigration (Benson 2013).

Sympathetic coverage of immigrants has been connected to the focus of the reporting. Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud (2015) argue that human-interest stories tend to add complexity to immigration analysis and foreground immigrant voices. Usually, such coverage focuses on the lives of exemplary immigrants and emphasize the immigrant’s long-time community involvement and their perceived cultural affinities with the U.S. Reports on immigrant children and students also tend to be sympathetic as these individuals can be constructed as innocent and worthy of citizenship (Reich and Mendoza 2008; Juravich and Williams 2011). Patler and Gonzalez (2015) noted that the tone of immigration coverage is also influenced by the stage of the policy-making process that is being covered. Coverage during the implementation stage of immigration policy (i.e., deportations) tends to draw attention to the disruptive and violent nature of immigration policy and, thus, news narratives foreground humanitarian claims and anti-deportation campaigns (Patler and Gonzalez 2015). Taken together, these studies point to historically consistent patterns of representation of immigration in news which construct immigrants as either worthy or unworthy of rights and citizenship. This binary categorization is deeply informed by politics of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Therefore, to identify and interrogate how journalists articulate the social positioning of undocumented LGBTQ immigrants
in the United States, it is helpful to incorporate an intersectionality and queer of color critique lens to the analysis.

Intersectionality and Queer of Color Critique

Intersectionality is concerned with the power relations that construct categories of difference as legitimate bases for exclusion and discrimination, on the one hand, and inclusion and privilege, on the other (Yuval-Davis 2011; Crenshaw 2017). The analytical targets for intersectionality are, then, the complex entanglements among social structures, institutions, and categories of difference as well as the social practices that these entanglements engender (Gouma and Dorer 2019). Therefore, any intersectional analysis poses a great challenge for researchers as it involves multiple levels of analysis that must be embedded in the appropriate context (Winker and Degele 2011; Christensen and Qvotrup Jensen 2012).

Anthias (1998) suggested that intersectional analysis works on four levels: the level of discrimination, concerned with how the human experience is structured; the actor’s level, which deals with inter-subjective praxis; the institutional level, which addresses institutional hierarchy-producing regimes; and the level of representation, concerned with discourse, language, and symbols. Winker and Degele (2011) proposed a similar multi-level analysis that distinguishes between identity and interpersonal subjectivation, social structures, and symbolic representations. As this study focuses on news media discourses, it operates at the level of symbolic representations while being informed by existing intersectional analyses of the undocumented LGBTQ experience at the levels of interpersonal subjectivation (i.e., Cisneros and Gutierrez 2018) and social structures (i.e., Luibhéid 2008; Seif 2014).

Specifically, I use intersectionality as both a theoretical and methodological guide to center “social groups at neglected points of intersection” (McCall 2005, 1774). McCall (2005) defines this epistemological interest as an intra-categorical approach to intersectionality research, which enables the study of difference within traditionally constructed groups. This approach brings into focus the embodied experiences of undocumented LGBTQ youth as distinct from the embodied experiences of cisgender and heterosexual immigrants, and members of the LGBTQ community with legal status in the U.S. This study, therefore, recognizes that existing narratives about immigrants and LGBTQ people do not capture the complexity of the undocumented LGBTQ experience, which calls for a critical evaluation of the discourses – including news discourses – that (re)produce these categories in the first place.

To further contextualize these discourses, a queer of color critique incorporates a transnational, postcolonial, and geopolitical sensibility to the analysis (Lugones 2007; Valles-Morales and LeMaster 2015). In Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique, Ferguson (2004, 149) defines queer of color criticism as an interrogation “of social formations at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular attention in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices.” Thus, a queer of color critique contemplates the role of intersectional identities and social hierarchies in ideological and material processes of nation-building. As the figure of the racialized immigrant forces debates and anxieties about national identity and belonging in the United States (Santa Ana 2002; Chávez 2013), a queer of color criticism lens allows for the proper contextualization of news discourses about undocumented LGBTQ immigrants.
In this framework, the concept of homonationalism becomes particularly helpful to situate these news discourses. Puar (2013, 337) argues that homonationalism is “a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism and sexuality.” As Western nations depart from heteronationalist identifications – where the heteronormative nuclear family was the cornerstone of national identity (Luibhéid 2002; Nagel 2003) –, they grant some legal and cultural rights to certain non-heterosexual individuals to claim national superiority and progressiveness at the international stage. Therefore, discourse and procedures – like sexual orientation-based asylum – involving the gender and sexual politics of immigration have the potential to reinforce distinctions between “First World” and “Third World” countries (Llewellyn 2017).

Methodology
As identities are to a large extent constructed discursively and embedded in power relations, I use critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how American news media articulate undocumented LGBTQ identities as well as a notion of the U.S. as a nation vis-à-vis those identities. CDA allows to make connections between language and social processes and structures (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). CDA has been an effective theoretical and methodological tool to identify the underlying ideologies reproduced in public discourse and to situate those ideologies in their proper socio-political and historical context. As discourse is simultaneously “socially constitutive and socially shaped” (KhosraviNik 2010, 3), it contains the semiotic elements through which ideologies become encoded in language and disseminated to the population (van Dijk 1987).

Centering discourse as an object of study, then, allows researchers to reveal the mechanisms that enable beliefs and “knowings” to cycle through society and influence individual and collective action (Jäger 2001). Furthermore, CDA provides the tools to critique problematic social practices as reproduced in discourse (Zotzmann and O’Regan 2016). As indicated in the previous section, this study is informed by intersectionality (Crenshaw 2017) and queer of color critique (Ferguson 2004; Tompkins 2015) to deploy a situated assessment of the narratives that could be contributing to the theorized reproduction of undocumented LGBTQ illegibility and homonationalism in U.S. news media.

Data Corpus of the Study
To build the data corpus for this study, I searched the ProQuest and NewsBank databases for hard and soft news articles (Tuchman 1972) about undocumented LGBTQ people and the Undocuqueer Movement. I used combinations of “LGBT,” “LGBTQ,” “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” “transgender,” “queer,” “undocumented,” “illegal immigrant,” and “undocuqueer” as keywords and searched for articles published between 1 January 2010 and 31 December 2019, a timeframe that starts around the time the Undocuqueer Movement emerged (Schwiertz 2016). I collected articles published by newspapers of all sizes in the states with the higher undocumented immigrant populations, namely California, Florida, Texas, and New York. The state of Illinois (the sixth with the higher undocumented population) is also included because the Undocuqueer Movement has a relevant presence in the Chicago area (Cisneros 2018).

I chose articles about undocumented LGBTQ immigrants – whether they are identified as Undocuqueer or not – or issues that explicitly involved them. Articles about immigrants in general or about LGBTQ
people who are not undocumented were excluded. Additionally, commentary, editorials, letters to the
editors, and obituaries were also excluded to focus the analysis entirely on news narratives. In total, 34
articles from 19 newspapers were analyzed through a first round of initial coding to identify analytical
leads in the data (Glasser 2005; Charmaz 2014) and a second round of axial coding to detect dominant
codes and find connections among categories and subcategories (Boeije 2010; Charmaz 2014).

Findings
The first thing to note is the scarcity of articles about undocumented LGBTQ immigrants at the local,
regional, and national level. Having only 34 articles address issues and/or occurrences that involve this
community in a span of almost ten years suggests that the grievances and contributions of those
dwelling this intersection of oppression are either disregarded or invisible to news professionals even
in states with large immigrant populations. Therefore, the lives, struggles, and gifts of undocumented
LGBTQ people – and what they expose about the U.S. – are falling through the cracks of public
consciousness.

Still, the analyzed articles exhibit patterns of representation and erasure that communicate how news
media constructs undocumented LGBTQ identities and grievances as well as Undocuqueer politics.
These patterns signal, first, a distinction between existing constructions of heterosexual
undocumented immigrants and undocumented LGBTQ immigrants. These different narratives,
however, do not necessarily grant a more nuanced portrayal of undocumented LGBTQ people. Second,
these patterns suggest the erasure of Undocuqueer collective action, despite its impact in the
immigration movement. Finally, the analyzed articles, while complicating traditional vilifying narratives
of unauthorized immigration, elevated (white) American communities as drivers for the full
incorporation of undocumented LGBTQ immigrants to the national body, which ushered
homonationalist sensibilities to the news coverage.

Undocumented LGBTQ Binaries: The Emboldened and the Helpless
Studies on immigration coverage have found that undocumented immigrants are consistently depicted
through binaries that define them as either extraordinary or dangerous. Extraordinary immigrants –
usually young English-speaking valedictorians – are constructed as beacons of American values and,
thus, worthy of citizenship. Dangerous immigrants are constructed as criminal or so poor that they put
a strain on the welfare system. Per these constructions, these immigrants should not be granted legal
status. The coverage of undocumented LGBTQ people showed a similar tendency to build dichotomies.
However, as vulnerabilities connected to gender and sexual identities intersect with unauthorized
migration, the news narratives constituted a different binary system: one that defines undocumented
LGBTQ people as (questionably) “emboldened” or as “helpless victims.”

News narratives constructing the emboldened undocumented LGBTQ individual rely on some of the
same tropes employed to constitute the “worthy immigrant.” That is, the focus is set on a particularly
gifted person – either a student, an artist, a celebrity, or an activist – who has gotten notoriety despite
being undocumented and LGBTQ. These individuals are usually the center of a human-interest story
that track how they came to embody the “American Dream.” Homonationalist sensibilities exude from
these tropes, as the U.S. is depicted as a land of unique opportunity for undocumented LGBTQ
immigrants.
Some of these success stories are about Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and founder of the NGO Define American, Jose Antonio Vargas, who in a 2011 essay for the *New York Times* disclosed that he was undocumented. Vargas has continued to advocate for immigrant rights through his reporting since then and earned prestige as a LGBTQ voice in the movement. In 2019, a new school in the Mountain View Whisman School District in California was named after Vargas. The *LA Times* quoted the district Board of Trustees President Tamara Wilson’s praise of the journalist: “My thought was, let’s name it after a successful student, somebody kids can relate to as a success story, and just show that the foundation of our schools are our children” (Wigglesworth 2019). Stories like this follow the “deserving immigrant” narrative, which enables the symbolic appropriation of accomplished undocumented LGBTQ people.

Undocumented LGBTQ success, however, is mostly presented as a journey of becoming not worthy but emboldened. Unlike stories that construct immigrant youth as deserving by rendering them innocent (Patler and Gonzalez 2015), narratives of remarkable undocumented LGBTQ people present them as unapologetically proud. The narrative, then, is not of redemption but of audacity, which is open to both positive and negative readings. In an article about Undocuqueer artist and activist Julio Salgado, Zonkel (2012) briefly describes how Salgado’s involvement with other “unabashed advocates” has created a “new type of activist” who is “unashamed and unafraid” about their immigration status and sexuality.” While the article borrows the “unashamed and unafraid” language of the Undocuqueer Movement, the frequent references to “unapologetic” activists incorporate some ambiguity regarding their righteousness.

Other stories highlighting admirable undocumented LGBTQ youth deny them innocence by upholding the criminalization and bashing of unauthorized migration. A *Chicago Tribune* article about Jose Antonio Vargas reports on his need to apologize to former employers and readers for “misleading them” about his immigration status. Furthermore, Vargas is quoted saying that “a mix of humiliation and liberation” resulted from the disclosure (“Pulitzer winner: I’m an illegal immigrant” 2011). The criminalizing narrative appears again in the otherwise inspiring *LA Times* profile of Emilio Vicente, an undocumented gay student who ran for student body president at the University of North Carolina. After describing Vicente’s accomplishments as a student and leader, he is immediately labeled a “confessed lawbreaker” who lives “in the U.S. illegally, even though he speaks and thinks in English and considers himself as thoroughly American as his U.S.-born classmates” (Zucchino 2014). The secrecy that underlies undocumented survival is cast as shameful and illegitimate contributing to the illegibility of undocumented LGBTQ life in the United States (Cisneros and Gutierrez 2018). Furthermore, colonizing, and racist ideologies come through as speaking English is hailed in this and other articles (i.e., Ruiz 2011) as a marker of Americanness and a requisite for national belonging.

At the other end of the binary, undocumented LGBTQ people are constructed as helpless victims of xeno-, homo-, and transphobic systems. Vulnerability here is mostly constructed as being driven by the non-binary and non-heterosexual identities of undocumented LGBTQ people. Although it is true that undocumented LGTBQ immigrants experience more intense oppression due to the specific identity intersections they embody, the foregrounding of LGBTQ-connected risk affords these individuals a more sympathetic yet more disempowering framing in news articles.
Newspapers reported on undocumented LGBTQ people disproportionately facing housing insecurity and employment discrimination (Sanchez and Lam 2018), marriage inequality (Shore 2013), immigration bans (Avila and Walker 2012), family ostracization (Szalai 2018), and healthcare discrimination (Castillo 2017). Articles also focused on the danger that LGBTQ people experience in their encounters with immigration enforcement and the prison industrial complex. Reports about transgender immigrants being put in solitary confinement for their “protection” (Shore 2013), groped by immigration enforcement staff and sexually assaulted by other detainees in private immigration facilities (Carcamo 2015) were salient. In all these cases, undocumented LGBTQ people were portrayed as lacking agency and/or resources to defend themselves. Their fates always seemed to depend on advocacy groups, lawyers working pro bono, and supportive religious groups.

Even in the helpless victim node of the binary that define most undocumented LGBTQ individuals in the coverage, adjudication of innocence and worthiness was elusive. In an article referencing the history of discriminatory policies against these immigrants, the director of the Long Beach Immigrant Rights Coalition Kris Zentgraf is quoted saying: “I’ve seen cases ... with lesbians who have applied for asylum where they’ve gone into courts and the judge has looked at them and said, ‘I don’t believe you’re going to experience persecution ... you don’t look like a lesbian’” (Avila and Walker 2012).

Even when persecution based on gender and sexuality is presented as credible in news articles, a shadow of doubt is cast over the experiences of undocumented LGBTQ in the United States. The lede of an LA Times article reads: “They consider themselves doubly marginalized” (Carcamo 2015). This sets the article on an otherizing narrative that roots the marginalization of undocumented LGBTQ individuals on their personal perception instead of material reality. In the following paragraph, Carcamo (2015) concedes that “many suffered persecution in their home countries because of sexual identity” to then note that they “allege humiliation and mistreatment at [American] immigration detention centers.” Here, a homonationalist sensibility intervenes to, in one move, discredit denunciations of anti-LGBTQ state violence in the U.S. and to push the idea that the country is a safe(r) environment for undocumented LGBTQ people.

Undocuqueer Erasures: Individualized Empowerment and Diluted Collectivity
The news coverage of individuals who explicitly adopt the Undocuqueer political identity differed significantly from the coverage of undocumented LGBTQ people. First, only smaller local outlets gave a platform to Undocuqueer activists and events. Furthermore, the term “undocuqueer” never appeared in the coverage by large regional and national newspapers, such as LA Times, the Chicago Tribune, or the New York Times. Second, news narratives involving Undocuqueers relied heavily on their voices to frame issues and the movement. Therefore, these articles emphasized intersectional perspectives to advocacy and the empowerment activists draw from their political involvement.

Most of the articles covering Undocuqueer individuals were explanatory pieces that differentiated Undocuqueer activism from the mainstream immigration movement. The articles referenced the struggle of undocumented LGBTQ youth to resist dominant narratives about Dreamers. In a profile of Lulu Martínez, an undocumented queer woman, she reflected on her involvement with the Dream Nine, a group of undocumented youth who turned themselves to border patrol to petition humanitarian parole: They “wore caps and gowns ‘as a strategy to come off as more sympathetic with
the general public. Now we realize that it added to the narrative of good versus bad immigrant, but at the time it was necessary” (Serrato 2018).

In an article featuring Undocuqueer activist Tania Unzueta, she said that “She felt her ‘queerness was off message’ and a possible distraction at a time when an immigration overhaul seemed plausible and immigrant rights activists were hoping for Republican support” (Carcamo 2015). Another Undocuqueer organizer from California, noted the lack of intersectional coalitions in the movement: “In some groups, these youth can be gay but not undocumented... in other groups, they might be accepted as undocumented but not as gay” (Zonkel 2012). These anecdotes point to the pressure to adopt a heteronationalist narrative to make successful rights claims in a country that once exclusively placed the heterosexual nuclear family at the core of its national self-conception (Luibhéid 2002). The reference to the Republican Party, whose rhetoric centers – heteronormative – family values (Duggan 1994), serves to justify or explain the “editing out” of non-cisgender and non-heterosexual advocates. The illegibility of Undocuqueer, then, starts with a single-issue and assimilationist approach to immigration activism.

Once the DREAM Act failed, some articles noted that LGBTQ activists set out to “push the political line.” Fewer news articles, however, followed up with reporting about specific actions, strategies, and impact of the Undocuqueer Movement. A couple of articles covered Undocuqueer events in California (Avila and Walker 2012; Sanchez and Lam 2018), and others reported on theater plays or art exhibits that displayed the work of Undocuqueer artists (Reid 2014; Burke 2015; Manrique 2018). Most of these stories quoted Undocuqueer people emphasizing the sense of empowerment they get from openly expressing all aspects of their identities and incorporating intersectional thinking to their activism. So apart from symbolic and consciousness raising work, there is little to no record of the contributions by the Undocuqueer Movement. One article quotes Jose Antonio Vargas in his surprise: “This is one of the most underreported stories in the immigration reform movement... The undocumented youth movement is led by queer people” (Shore 2013). This way, the coverage dilutes Undocuqueer politics and collective action.

Contested Belongings: Undocumented LGTBQs in the Homonationalist Body

The last theme that emerged in my analysis revolves around the notion of national belonging. Specifically, I identified the agents and renderings that, according to the coverage, grant or deny the legitimate – yet, not legal – incorporation of undocumented LGBTQ individuals to the U.S.

In the articles, the relationship of undocumented LGBTQ people to immigration laws and policies, and immigration enforcement, determined if they were written as deserving of protection and, thus, citizenship. As human-interest stories and reports of the disproportionate vulnerability of undocumented LGBTQ immigrants in the face of immigration enforcement were salient, the punitive actions of the state, such as the threat of deportation or incarceration, mostly seemed excessive and unfair. Even though many reporters made sure to qualify undocumented LGBTQ subjects as lawbreakers, the focus on the inspirational stories of individual immigrants or their horrid experiences of persecution at home and in the U.S. called into question the fairness of strict immigration enforcement. The United States, in the end, was constructed as a place to find relief.
This resonates with Patler and Gonzalez’s (2015), who noted that reporting which covered immigration enforcement tended to support the plight of immigrants by highlighting the states’ violent disruption of families and American communities. Furthermore, it supports Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud’s (2015) argument about the ability of human-interest stories to build empathy for undocumented immigrants. The bottom line of many articles could be summarized with this quote by one of Emilio Vicente’s (the gay student leader from UNC) mentors: “Undocumented young people ... are as genuinely American as any other kid” (Zucchino 2014). Therefore, the news narratives conceded, undocumented LGBTQ youth deserve the protection of the American state.

Now, as gender and sexual discrimination intersected with struggles with legal status, some of the analyzed coverage did engage in critiques against immigration policy-making – something that Patler and Gonzalez (2015) noted wanting in their analysis of immigration news. For example, in their analysis of Obama’s DACA, Carcamo and Linthicum (2014) noted that, by providing protection to parents of U.S.-born children, the policy excluded members of the LGBTQ community. The reporters let community advocates articulate grievances:

“The idea of someone being deserving, especially if they have children, we think is preposterous,” said Hairo Cortes, an organizer with Orange County Immigrant Youth United. “What about the LGBT undocumented community? ... Most don’t have children. Are we going to penalize them for that?”

The most relevant path to belonging, however, was within the purview of communities – particularly communities whose members have legal status. While laws construct LGBTQ immigrants as being “out of place” and “unlawful,” community engagement, recognition, and care constitute a sense of belonging that is elevated as more legitimate than legal status. For example, after agreeing to give his namesake to a public school in California, Jose Antonio Vargas was quoted saying, “I’m a product of this community, and to this community, an openly gay, openly undocumented Filipino belongs. That’s a statement in itself” (Wigglesworth 2019). Community acceptance, then, is rendered as significant as citizenship.

Yet, precarity still underlies belonging because immigration enforcement can effectively break community ties. Many stories, therefore, establish the importance of obtaining legal status to either continue the growth and success of inspiring undocumented LGBTQ youth or protect them from bodily harm. Emilio Vicente’s story elaborates on his accomplishments and plans for grad school and national organizing but closes stating his main priority – his “biggest dream,” as the reporter puts it —: citizenship. Other articles highlight some communities’ standoffs with immigration enforcement as a testament of community power in matters of national belonging. For instance, in 2017, the First Unitarian Universalist Church in Austin provided refuge to a gay woman victim of gang violence in Guatemala and made ICE overturn her deportation order (Aguilar 2017).

Apart from providing some cover against immigration enforcement, local communities are given more importance as a support system for undocumented LGBTQ youth who might face backlash from their own families due to their gender or sexual identification. In an Undocuqueer conference in California, a gay Latino teenager said:

“At least as an undocumented person, you have your family that’s also in the same situation,” Campos said. “But when you inject the sexual orientation or the gender identity piece, that means that you
could actually potentially lose the most basic support you have which is the people in your family who love you” (Sanchez and Lam 2018).

In their study, Cisneros and Gutierrez (2018) noted the struggles of undocumented queer and trans Latinx youth as their immigration status made them more reliant on unsupportive family networks for economic survival. Many participants described remaining in the closet for fear of being expelled from their households. Per the analyzed coverage, issues with family acceptance pervade Latin American and Southeast Asian immigrant communities. Jose Antonio Vargas had to leave his grandparents’ home at 16 after coming out as gay, and in an interview about his autobiography Dear America he “admits that he felt much closer to what he calls his ‘white family,’” a network of mentors and benefactors who supported him materially and professionally (Szalai 2018). Local communities, then, are constructed as the main protectors of undocumented LGBTQ youth and the ones who can both enable and legitimize these youth’s aspiration to full social membership in the U.S. Meanwhile, racialized immigrant families – and their countries of origin – are often presented as intolerant and even hostile toward LGBTQ individuals. This structuration of belonging, then, upholds a homonationalist imagination of the United States.

Discussion
In this analysis, I investigated how news coverage in key American states articulate the identities of undocumented LGBTQ immigrants and how that coverage simultaneously constitutes a vision of what the U.S. represents as a nation. Specifically, I set out to find whether news discourse contributed to the illegibility of undocumented LGBTQ life and to a homonationalist reimagining of the U.S. The coverage revealed patterns of representation and erasure that suggest a reductionist and distorting construction of undocumented LGBTQ immigrants and the Undocuqueer Movement. Furthermore, as undocumented LGBTQ identities were presented in mostly disempowering ways, the U.S. – embodied in white LGBTQ-friendly communities of citizens – was constituted as a land of opportunity for LGBTQ migrants.

News articles involving undocumented LGBTQ immigrants mostly centered the life stories of individuals. Whether the stories highlighted a remarkable immigrant or the brutality someone had experienced in their home country or in the U.S., the narratives constrained the scope of undocumented LGBTQ agency and action. Furthermore, undocumented LGBTQ bodies were only afforded a legitimate – not legal – sense of belonging when they enabled homonationalist reimaginings of the United States. The more undocumented LGBTQ immigrants were shown embracing apolitical individualism, finding refuge in white communities, learning or knowing only English, admitting guilt for their lack of legal status, and seeking protection from racialized, regressive, and hostile home countries or families, the more were they portrayed as people worthy of protection, recognition, citizenship, and coverage.

As Undocuqueer politics are antithetical to most of these positionings, the existence and gains of this influential movement were rendered virtually invisible. This way, the revolutionary transformations to oppressive paradigms of belonging that Undocuqueers have enacted and proposed to American society through their activism remain unexplored by mainstream media. Furthermore, Undocuqueer disruptions and disavowals of both hetero- and homonationalist constructions of the U.S. also stay
siloed from news discourse. This study suggests, then, that news discourse do construct undocumented LGBTQ and Undocuqueer people as illegible by criminalizing their means of survival and mishandling the articulation of their politics. And, as these bodies are rendered illegible, their experiences are put to the service of the discursive formation of a homonationalist America.

Conclusion

It is estimated that almost 290,000 undocumented LGBTQ immigrants currently live in the United States (Goldberg and Conron 2021). As they dwell at the intersection of racialized, gendered, queer- and transphobic, and xenophobic oppression, their lives are disproportionately precarious. Many artists and activists have turned to media activism to define the undocumented LGBTQ experience beyond stereotypes and articulate politics that resist respectability and cultural assimilation as bases for belonging (Dahms 2015; Cabas-Mijares and Grant 2020). Undocuqueer activists have influenced national immigration policy, confronted immigration enforcement, and defined new paradigms of belonging with the potential to enable more humane treatment for all immigrants (Seif 2016). However, as this study suggests, mainstream news media have failed to give authentic voice to undocumented LGBTQ immigrants and to reflect the prowess of the Undocuqueer Movement.

The analyzed coverage seems to follow a pattern that Gitlin (1980) identified in The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left: while commercial media “invoke the need for reform,” they still disparage “the movements that radically oppose the system that needs reforming” (4). Even though, many reporters managed to incorporate intersectional analyses of the compounded struggles of undocumented LGBTQ people, they still criminalized unauthorized immigration and belittled Undocuqueer activism. Furthermore, intersectional critique did not prevent journalists from leaving unquestioned anti-LGBTQ violence in the U.S. and the geopolitical implications of their coverage.

As this study relied on newspaper content produced in key states in the U.S., future research is needed to expand the scope of the search and analysis to the national level as well as to other media platforms, such as news magazines, broadcast and online news. This would not only enlarge the data corpus but enable analyses that consider how factors, such as proximity to the border, shape news narratives about undocumented LGBTQ immigrants. Furthermore, investigating similar coverage by Spanish language outlets would yield insights about their construction of the gender and sexual politics of immigration and help scholars identify the impact of these constructions on the illegibility of undocumented LGBTQ life in the U.S. Finally, this CDA can help set up quantitative content analyses to further assess the news coverage of queer migration. Given the continued racialized, heterosexist, and xenophobic hostility against immigrants in the U.S., interrogating the role of journalism in their symbolic and material discrimination becomes an ethical obligation of our field.

Disclosure Statement

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