

# Critical Dialogue

**Engage and Evade: How Latino Immigrant Families Manage Surveillance in Everyday Life.** By Asad L. Asad.  
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In *Engage and Evade: How Latino Immigrant Families Manage Surveillance in Everyday Life*, Asad L. Asad makes a thought-provoking scholarly intervention that challenges what scholars and researchers know about surveillance as it relates to undocumented immigrants. His central claim is that undocumented immigrants both evade and engage with institutions of surveillance. This argument challenges the popular understanding that undocumented immigrants, as people worried about punishment, always live in fear and are always hiding from any institution or actor with the potential to detain and deport them. Using interviews with Latino immigrant families with children in Dallas County, Texas; quantitative analyses of the American Time Use Survey; and ethnographic fieldwork in the Dallas immigration court, the book shows that surveillance for undocumented immigrants can both be a mechanism of societal exclusion while also offering them hope for their eventual societal inclusion (5).

The introduction lays out the theoretical foundation of the book. This chapter is rich with relevant literature and makes a compelling case that undocumented immigrants might be distinct from others subjected to regular state control—Asad uses the example of those with criminal records—in their selective engagement with surveilling institutions. He divides surveilling institutions into two categories: the regulatory (e.g., immigration, police, and tax agencies) and the service-oriented that provide public goods, such as hospitals, schools, and public assistance. Asad makes use of the scholarship on surveillance and punishment to understand when undocumented immigrants evade surveilling institutions but also argues that this understanding is incomplete. He uses the concept of role alignment, which is akin to political psychology and social psychology's role identity theory and helps explain how individuals

construct a sense of self through enactment of their social roles. Because undocumented immigrants have different, even if, at times, interrelated social roles, they must make decisions based on which role is the most salient to them at any time. In other words, their evasion and engagement with state institutions are both situational and driven by the social role that often supersedes all others in a given moment. For example, Asad notes that Alma is not just an undocumented immigrant but also a parent, a worker, a daughter, and a partner. Given the circumstances, Alma will make decisions based on her most salient identity at the time. This contextualist contribution is important to how we understand the hard decisions that undocumented immigrants must make, day in and day out, about their relationship to the state.

Chapter 1 focuses on the push and pull factors—what Asad calls material, social, and psychological deprivation—that influence immigrants' decision to migrate, some with authorization but most without. This chapter makes clear that migrating is not an easy decision and that migrants are experiencing such destitution that they often risk their lives for the hope of a better life across the southern border. The form of the deprivation also influences the mode of migration. Although most of Asad's interviewees crossed the Mexico-US border without authorization, a few had enough resources to cross with tourist visas or on a family member's visa.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine undocumented immigrants' selective engagement with regulatory institutions and with service-oriented institutions, respectively. Chapter 2 shows that undocumented immigrants selectively engage by avoiding negative interactions with police and by amplifying positive interactions with employment and tax agencies. For example, many interviewees made it a point to follow traffic signs and laws and to behave "morally" so as to avoid the attention of the police. In turn, almost all the adult interviewees applied for an ITIN number to pay taxes and contribute to the economy. Asad's findings, therefore, fend off stereotypes that undocumented immigrants are a drain to the economy and that they do not pay taxes. Chapter 3 hones in on how parenthood influences undocumented immigrants'

selective engagement with state agencies. Ultimately, this chapter argues that parents whose children are US citizens contend with a tension between being undocumented and selective about their engagement, on the one hand, and being seen as “good” parents by the same surveilling institutions, on the other. This tension drives many parents to apply for and accept public assistance such as food stamps to establish a record of their good parenting, even as they engage with institutional actors that have the potential to punish them. In this chapter, Asad argues that although legal status is a “master status,” parenthood can sometimes trump legal status if the parents wish to convey that they care about their child’s welfare.

Chapter 4 concludes the substantive chapters by laying out how undocumented immigrants use the records (or lack thereof) they have accumulated—through public assistance, volunteering at their child’s school, traffic tickets, and criminal records—to attempt to regularize their status. Here, Asad demonstrates that the immigrants’ ideas of morality often do not matter to the immigration judges who are deciding whether they get to stay in the United States or will be deported. He shows that formal records matter more in affirmative petitions, when undocumented immigrants submit a petition to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) voluntarily because they believe they are eligible for legalization. But such records are often irrelevant and perceived as unreliable in defensive petitions, where the onus is on the undocumented immigrants to meet the burden of proof of “exceptional and extremely unusual hardship” (136) in immigration court because the Department of Homeland Security has initiated removal proceedings against them.

One of the biggest contributions of *Engage and Evade* is its use of interviews to describe and break down the ways that undocumented immigrants are affected by federal, state, and local immigration laws, policies, and rules on the ground. The elusive nature of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, among other pieces of legislation, become clearer as Asad showcases what they mean for the everyday lives of real people. Immigration scholars will find the book especially useful.

I have a few critical observations, but they by no means take away from the book’s scholarly contributions to the fields of sociology, legal studies, political science, and Latino studies. First, the ideas of evasion and engagement are often described as opposites of one another. However, throughout, I wondered whether “selective engagement” was the more accurate term for what undocumented immigrants are doing. Rather than wholesale evasion, these individuals are being selective as to when they engage, to what degree, and how. In reality, true evasion is almost unfeasible because many

immigrants, as Asad argues, have different roles that necessitate interactions with others outside their homes—and with the state.

Second, there is a certain flatness to how the author talks about Latinidad. Throughout, the ethnic identity “Latino” was not defined, nor was it complicated. In other words, because we live intersectional lives, there are undocumented immigrants who are Black/Afro-Latino whose “master status” might not be their legal status but rather the fact that they are perceived as Black and therefore subjected to anti-Black racism. Such an omission might have occurred because the sample of the interviewees is largely made up of immigrants from Mexico or who are from a Mexican background (with the exception of five individuals from Central America) who do not typically identify as Black or are not perceived as phenotypically Black. But this kind of attention to intersectionality was lacking throughout the book; the author often made too many generalizations about the undocumented population. Similarly, undocumented queer individuals might also contend with surveilling institutions in distinct ways, but the book pays little attention to the difference their gender identity might make. I would have liked the endnotes to provide more nuance on the myriad ways in which being undocumented might differ among those we call “Latinos.” An intersectional approach would also contend with the particular burdens shouldered by Black bodies or queer bodies who are also undocumented.

Finally, as a reader, I was left rather uneasy with the ideas that some interviewees held about what it means to be “good” and “moral” people. At times, their definitions of “moral” and “deserving” were undergirded by white supremacist understandings of morality. For example, Ricardo, one of the interviewees, states, “For those who come here to drink, steal, to harm others? Why should they be given the opportunity to be here? Throw them back” (66). What is sad is that, at the end of the day, it does not matter how “good” you are and how well you followed the laws because immigration laws and policies have defined morality in racially distorted ways. Immigration laws do not exist to diversify the country. On the contrary, they were created to define morality as belonging to white, male, citizen, property-owning bodies. In fact, meeting the “good moral character” clause of immigration law is subjective, almost never has anything to do with individuals’ good deeds, and has more to do with social control: controlling who gets allowed in and who gets excluded. The illusion that one can follow all the rules and be rewarded is the kind of ideology that hurts other communities, especially communities of color, because many immigrants believe themselves to be “better” and more “moral” than others. In fact, in the United States, just being Black is enough of a reason to get murdered by

police. The lack of critical attention to the ideas about morality that some undocumented immigrants held feels like a missed opportunity.

Notwithstanding these critical observations, this book makes an important contribution to the fields of sociology, legal studies, political science, and Latino and ethnic studies, and I highly recommend it for political science courses both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The wide-ranging methodologies deployed will surely inspire graduate students; Asad provides an exceptional example of how to incorporate in-depth interviews within a book in ways that maintain the dignity and integrity of the participants. The book is accessible, well structured, and theoretically rich.

### Response to Yalidy Matos's Review of *Engage and Evade: How Latino Immigrant Families Manage Surveillance in Everyday Life*

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— Asad L. Asad 

I appreciate Dr. Yalidy Matos's review of *Engage and Evade*. One of the synergies between our books is our shared interest in how ordinary people make sense of their place in society—and in the consequences that various attitudes and behaviors can play in reproducing inequality. Still, we study this dynamic differently: Matos by foregrounding white Americans' expressed opinions on immigration politics, and me by foregrounding how undocumented Latino immigrants with young children perceive and respond to the institutional forms of surveillance they endure every day (with an eye toward the impact such action has on their membership). Some of these differences are reflected in Matos's comments on *Engage and Evade*.

First, Matos asks whether using the phrase “selective engagement”—rather than mobilizing “engagement” and “evasion” as contrasting terms—better describes undocumented immigrants' interactions with institutions that surveil them. I heartily agree and strived to develop my theoretical framework to make this same point about existing research. As I noted, undocumented immigrants exhibit a “*selective engagement* with the institutions that surveil [them], sometimes interacting with them and sometimes avoiding them depending on the type of institutional surveillance encountered and the social roles and responsibilities most salient in an encounter” (20; emphasis in original). This is why, in describing how undocumented immigrants make a life in the United States, I conceptualize engagement and evasion as “two sides of the same coin.”

Second, Matos encourages greater consideration of the complexity of Latinidad. In particular, she asks

whether a more intersectional analysis of undocumented Latino immigrants' race, sexuality, or both would have altered the book's interpretations and conclusions. Unfortunately, such heterogeneity was not present among my interview respondents. They used “Latino” as both their ethnic and racial category; no one in the study identified as Black or Afro-Latino or Indigenous. No one I interviewed identified as queer either; in part, this reflected the conditions under which study recruitment took place. As outlined in the book's methodological appendix, the study recruited interviewees based on the presence of children between the ages of three and eight in the household. Recruitment began in 2013, two years before the Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act and expanded the immigration system's consideration of “family” to encompass non-heteronormative families. I cannot say for sure, but I speculate that undocumented Latino immigrants who are Black or members of a sexual minority with young children would experience the dynamics I outline even more acutely—especially with respect to street-level bureaucrats' racialized, classed, and fundamentally heteronormative perceptions of undocumented immigrants' morality and caregiving. Future work would certainly benefit from exploring these intracategorical comparisons based on undocumented Latino immigrants' race, sexuality, or both.

Finally, Matos questions whether the book would have benefited from greater problematization of undocumented immigrants' perceptions of morality. I regularly describe in the book my own discomfort about some of my respondents' moral claims, including when discussing Ricardo, a respondent whom Matos mentions. As I saw it, Ricardo's moral criticisms “reproduced some of the same stereotypes that politicians, immigration officials, and the media use to justify greater restrictions on [undocumented immigrants'] lives” (78). And in the conclusions to chapters 2 and 3, I show how my respondents' perceptions of morality emerged *in and through interaction* with street-level bureaucrats, who regulate undocumented immigrants' access to material and symbolic resources. Undocumented immigrants' perceptions of morality in the study, therefore, reflect their beliefs about these bureaucrats' expectations of immigrants. Ultimately, as elaborated in chapter 4 and in the book's standalone conclusion, undocumented immigrants' efforts to meet these perceived expectations rarely shield them from deportation or facilitate their legalization.

Overall, whether from the perspective of relatively empowered white Americans (as in Matos's book) or relatively disempowered undocumented Latino immigrants (as in *Engage and Evade*), I take away from this dialogue the importance of attending to how ordinary