



The Liberal (Mis)Recognition of Illegalized Korean American Activists

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While Joe Biden made his closing remarks at the Democratic Debate on September 12, 2019, in Houston, several **protesters rushed the stage** shouting “**We are DACA recipients, our lives are at stake!**” Audiences watching live on ABC saw host George Stephanopoulos repeatedly apologizing to Biden. The cameras stayed focused on the candidate’s faces, failing to capture that two of the protesters got within several feet of the candidates before being wrangled off-stage.





National Korean American Services and Education Consortium (NAKASEC) protesters play *pungmul* outside the Houston debate arena that hosted the September 2019 Presidential Democratic Debate. [Glo H. Choi](#)

These protestors were [illegalized activists](#) (there are current debates in immigrant justice worlds about whether the term “illegalized” is preferable to “undocumented.” See [Sati 2017](#); [Rubio and Alvarez 2019](#)) with the [National Korean American Services and Education Consortium \(NAKASEC\)](#), the immigrant justice organization with which I have been doing ethnographic research for close to three years. Three of the protestors identify as Korean American and one as Mexican. The action emerged spontaneously, though it was certainly not out of character for NAKASEC. Brazen protest strategies and a critique that questions the desirability of looking to the state as the arbiter of rights, recognition, and humanity are making them an increasingly influential yet controversial player in immigrant justice circles.

The [Twitter fallout](#) from the debate was maddening if not predictable. [Reactions](#) circulated around three primary themes: Several news commentators, upon seeing a bunch of East Asian Americans rush the stage, assumed that they could be doing nothing other than shouting in support of Taiwanese American candidate Andrew Yang. One [ABC reporter tweeted](#) “#YangGang supporters tried to climb the stage yelling their puppet.” That a group of Korean Americans could be engaging in such disruptive activity for any reason other than declare some form of “racial” solidarity was simply beyond the public’s comprehension.

What the activist is calling to “shut down” is the notion that immigrants must always operate in the shadow of “already accrued debt.”

Infantilizing attempts to paint the protestors as unrealistic and unrehearsed in the appropriate modalities of electoral politics appeared on social media. One tweeter condescendingly said “If DACAs want to ensure Dopey Don will win, keep up the protests. Be patient my deserving ones until after the Dems are on a position to help.” This statement ignores the fact that even when the Obama administration was well-positioned in its first term to move on immigration reform, it failed to do so. Finally, there were several attempts to shame the protestors over the moment they chose to interrupt proceedings. Commentators critiqued their apparent weak telekinesis game in not knowing that Biden was about to speak about the tragic loss of his wife and daughter. A Trump administration official even [tweeted](#) in defense of Biden: “To be fair to Biden, he was about to talk about the tragic loss of his family in a car accident when those protestors broke out to interrupt

him. You had 140 minutes before this, protesters. Not a good look. Not a good look.”

Biden had refused to answer a question about whether he accepted responsibility for three million deportations carried out under the Obama administration. Minutes earlier, when confronted about a comment he made about reparations and “**not feeling responsible for what happened 300 years ago**,” he took us on a Moynihan-esque **verbal journey** in which the underlying message was that solving institutional racism means teaching Black mothers how to parent better.

This episode, and the fallout from it, speaks to a moment of collective confusion in which several liberal recognition schemes (**see Povinelli 2011**) and assumed shared goals of progressive politics are flown into flux. That the protestors were not only so-called Dreamers but East **Asian American** Dreamers caused a public misrecognition. After all, the East Asian “model minority” and the young, undocumented “Dreamer” are indispensable to contemporary US racial liberalism’s need to consistently re-legitimize itself. This indispensability positions NAKASEC activists to challenge recognition as a tool to maintain control over the parameters of resistance, difference, and justice. Their defiance threatens a dynamic in which their constructed exceptionalism is mobilized to criminalize and exclude Black, Latinx, and other counterparts.

It also calls for an end to constrained ways of thinking about immigrant liberation as confined to papers and protections within borders.

NAKASEC’s actions, both at the debate and beyond, do this work in several ways. In responding to Biden’s failure to accept his administration’s responsibility for three million deportations, they challenged the story that if we just get rid of Trump all will be well in the world. They showed that restoring order is not the desired outcome. Their disruption defied the perpetual performances of gratitude those of us from South Korean descent are supposed to show to our American “saviors” (**Nguyen 2012**). Finally, in chanting and wearing shirts that read not only “Defend DACA” but also “Citizenship4All” and “Abolish ICE,” they broke the terms of the contract that say that visions for immigrant liberation must be framed within politically “practical” legislative packages or within the bounds of obtaining papers (**Rubio 2019**). In targeting the Democrat forerunner and unapologetically embracing an “Abolish ICE” platform that will almost certainly isolate moderate voters, they refused the constraining notion that electoral political victories are the same thing as liberation. The social media reactions outlined above all contained tacit attempts to restore order to these broken contracts.

Another one of NAKASEC’s recent actions illustrates this point. NAKASEC activists staged a takeover at the closing session of a major immigrant rights and inclusion conference that each year brings

together diverse sectors of US immigrant justice movements. NAKASEC activists were frustrated with the conference's assimilationist tone and refusal to adopt an "Abolish ICE" stance. Flanked on both sides by other activists holding "Abolish ICE" signs, a NAKASEC activist grabbed the microphone and said, "On both sides of the aisle I hear much of patriotism, of nationalism. I am NOT a patriot. I don't have those kinds of allegiances. These are not just new American Dreams we're seeking. We're seeking a better world for us all. Not citizenship in the sense of just papers... not just health care or education for all Americans. But to live free. To live without tremor. To love. To connect... There are people, there are currently American citizens that do not participate fully in society as well. Native peoples who are conquered. Shut it down!"



NAKASEC protesters embrace after being released from police custody following their interruption of the September 12, 2019, Democratic Presidential Debate in Houston. Glo H. Choi

What the activist was calling to "shut down" is the notion that immigrants must always operate in the shadow of "already accrued debt" (Lowe, Yoneyama, and Espiritu 2017). One may be recognized in the United States as an immigrant, but the difference that being immigrant presents must be managed through a perpetual performance of indebtedness. It also calls for an end to

constrained ways of thinking about immigrant liberation as confined to papers and protections within borders. It challenges the primacy of citizenship as the ultimate goal, and thus also jeopardizes the disciplinary power that the arbitrary extending and withdrawing of legalization yields over immigrant lives. It destabilizes assumptions that liberal “gifts” (Simpson 2014) are all people want—assumptions, that have become so naturalized “that it has become difficult to write or imagine alternative knowledges, or to act on behalf of alternative projects or ways of being” (Lowe 2015, 175).

It is important to signal that liberal governmentality’s dependence on “subjects of recognition” (Povinelli 2011) to perform legitimating roles afford subjects a certain degree of power (Abarca and Coutin 2015). Given the United States’s reliance on both model minoritization and Dreamer narratives to uphold its increasingly fractured image as a beacon of racial liberalism, young East Asian American undocumented activists have the power to disrupt that image along several intersecting lines. Yet, that power is nuanced and involves making new social contracts as much as it does breaking others.

Racialization deeply mediates activist relationships to policing, creating diverse symbolic and physical stakes.

It is the racialized conditions that make NAKASEC’s activism so disruptive that are the very conditions of possibility for engaging in such risky kinds of activism. Many of the activists suggest that it is precisely because East Asian Americans are so often assumed to be docile that they can do things like rush the stage and chant and frantically wave their arms within feet of 10 presidential candidates. Racialization deeply mediates activist relationships to policing, creating diverse symbolic and physical stakes. NAKASEC recognizes this and derives from it a serious responsibility.

Arguably, this scenario represents one of the biggest refusals of recognition of them all. I can think of little more challenging to white supremacy and anti-Blackness than East Asian Americans acknowledging how we are positioned to benefit from the latter, and deploy that tempered privilege to destabilize the former.

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