

Capstone Research Seminar

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## Capstone Prospectus

### **Introduction**

This project examines “Know Your Rights” red information cards that have circulated within Latine and immigrant communities in the United States as material rhetorical texts produced under conditions of ongoing immigration enforcement and state violence. These wallet-sized cards provide brief instructions about constitutional rights to refer to during encounters with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), including the right to remain silent, the right to refuse consent to searches, and the right to speak with a lawyer. While often framed publicly as neutral legal resources, these cards circulate primarily through trusted community networks and are designed to be used in moments of fear, uncertainty, and surveillance. In this way, they function not only as informational tools but as communicative interventions that respond to, manage, and reshape fear.

This project approaches Know Your Rights red cards as a form of counter-media activism that challenges dominant state and media narratives about immigration enforcement. Rather than attempting to persuade a broad public or frame immigrants as deserving subjects, the cards assume the presence of state power and address those already positioned as vulnerable. They translate fear into preparedness and collective response, offering guidance without requiring visibility, sympathy, or moral sorting. In doing so, they reject the norms of mainstream news discourse, such as neutrality, balance, and human-interest framing, and instead prioritize usability, safety, and shared knowledge.

The central research questions guiding this project are: How do Know Your Rights red cards rhetorically respond to the fear produced by ICE and anti-immigrant state rhetoric? How do these materials use fear as a communicative strategy to create preparedness, a shared understanding, and collective response within immigrant communities? How do the material affordances (and constraints) and the embodied uses of the cards contribute to their effectiveness while also creating limitations? What does this example of counter-media activism surrounding ICE reveal about how marginalized communities use communication to challenge dominant media narratives and state authority? These questions matter because immigration enforcement is not experienced solely through policy or law but through affective conditions shaped by media discourse, surveillance, and everyday encounters with the state. Existing scholarship has examined how enforcement is normalized through rhetoric and infrastructure, how fear circulates within immigrant communities, and how media narratives shape public understanding of immigration. However, less attention has been paid to small-scale, material communication practices that circulate within communities as responses to enforcement. By focusing on Know Your Rights cards, this project redirects scholarly attention away from institutional media and toward everyday rhetorical practices that function within conditions of surveillance and threat.

### **Literature Review**

A notable amount of scholarship demonstrates that immigration enforcement in the United States operates through racialized surveillance, bureaucratic violence, and the normalization of precarity. Research on “cimmigration” shows how immigration enforcement increasingly relies on partnerships between ICE and local law enforcement, extending the reach of deportation into everyday spaces such as homes, workplaces, and courthouses (Arriaga 2023). These partnerships

produce forms of racialized social control that render Latine communities perpetually surveilled and vulnerable, even in the absence of direct enforcement actions.

Ethnographic and rhetorical analyses further illustrate how routine bureaucratic encounters with immigration institutions reproduce illegality and exclusion. Yarris shows how ICE field offices and immigration courts function as zones of illegality where surveillance, administrative monitoring, and the threat of deportation shape everyday interactions (Yarris 2021). Similarly, Sambor conceptualizes deportation infrastructure, particularly ICE air operations, as rhetorical borders that materialize anti-migrant discourse while obscuring the scope of state violence through informational gaps and strategic invisibility. Together, these studies reveal how enforcement is experienced as an ongoing condition rather than a discrete event (Sambor 2021).

State rhetoric also plays a critical role in producing fear and narrowing the boundaries of belonging. Lizama's analysis of Trump-era discourse demonstrates how security narratives and racialized fears were mobilized to portray Central American immigrants as existential threats, reinforcing exclusion through moral panic (Lizama 2023). At the community level, Marquez's study of rumored ICE raids shows how fear circulates through media and interpersonal communication, often producing internalized discourses of deservingness that divide communities into "good" and "bad" immigrants. This scholarship establishes fear as a central affective condition of immigration enforcement, one that shapes both public discourse and internal community dynamics (Marquez 2022).

Other scholars have also examined how media representations of immigration shape public understanding and define the boundaries of community. Research on local and national news coverage suggests that media often rely on framing strategies that humanize immigrants

through family, childhood, and community while simultaneously avoiding structural critiques of enforcement practices. Madrigal's longitudinal analysis of newspaper coverage shows that stories involving immigrant children tend to be more positive in tone and emphasize community, education, and religion, yet still operate within narrow frameworks of belonging (Madrigal 2023).

Hamann's analysis of print media responses to ICE raids in "flyover country" similarly demonstrates how local news may resist overtly dehumanizing language while still limiting full inclusion (Hamann 2012). Mathews' concept of the "community caretaker" role further illustrates how local newspapers often shield institutions, officials, and businesses during coverage of enforcement actions, effectively drawing lines around who counts as part of the community (Mathews 2021).

While these studies reveal moments of resistance within mainstream media, they also highlight its limitations. Media framing frequently depends on deservingness, innocence, or sympathy-building, leaving little room for communication that assumes state violence as routine and unavoidable. This gap can help explain why alternative forms of communication, circulating outside institutional media, become necessary for communities living under enforcement.

In contrast to mainstream media, scholarship on activist and counter-media emphasizes communication practices designed to operate under conditions of surveillance. Canella's analysis of video activism within Black Lives Matter highlights both the power and limits of counter-surveillance, showing how visibility can expose state violence while also reinforcing asymmetries between state and activist monitoring (Canella 2018). Similarly, Lee's concept of "digital infrapolitics" demonstrates how marginalized youth activists adopt under-the-radar tactics that prioritize safety, discretion, and community over public visibility (Lee 2024).

This work suggests that effective resistance under surveillance often involves refusal, of visibility, of spectacle, and of mass circulation. Know Your Rights red cards align with these insights by functioning as portable discreet texts that circulate through trusted networks rather than public platforms. Their material form allows them to remain accessible in moments when digital communication may feel unsafe or unavailable, positioning them as counter-media designed for survival rather than persuasion.

Rhetorical scholarship on narrative activism and point of view provides additional tools for analyzing how Know Your Rights cards function. Albarrán-Torres distinguishes between narrative activism rooted in lived experience and tokenistic storytelling that offers symbolic inclusion without political substance (Albarrán-Torres 2024). This distinction is particularly useful for understanding how Know Your Rights materials resist symbolic representation in favor of practical guidance grounded in shared vulnerability.

Bailey's research on camera point of view demonstrates how identification with state authority is shaped by perspective, with police-centered viewpoints exacerbating racial bias (Bailey et al. 2021). While this work focuses on video media, its insights about point of view and identification are relevant for analyzing how Know Your Rights cards disrupt alignment with ICE and law enforcement by centering the perspective of those at risk. Guajardo's analysis of prophetic resistance further shows how counter-rhetorical practices can challenge dominant media narratives by naming harm directly and rejecting neutrality (Guajardo 2024).

Together, these frameworks help situate Know Your Rights red cards as rhetorical texts that reassign authority, reject identification with the state, and speak from within in threatening conditions.

## **Methodology**

This project utilizes rhetorical criticism to analyze Know Your Rights red cards as material counter-media texts produced under conditions of immigration enforcement and surveillance. Rhetorical criticism allows for close attention to how meaning is constructed through language, design, and circulation, as well as how texts position audiences, construct authority, and respond to power.

The analysis will focus on a collection of widely circulated Know Your Rights red cards produced by immigrant advocacy organizations, examining their language, visual design, layout, tone, and material affordances. Particularly, close attention will be paid to its repetition, direct address, and the use of commands, as well as to how the cards construct points of view. This includes analyzing what the cards say and what they fail to include.

The theoretical framework for this analysis draws from scholarship on narrative activism, point of view and identification, deservingness, and counter-media under surveillance. These frameworks will guide an interpretation of how the cards translate fear into preparedness and collective care, how they redefine community and belonging, and how their material form enables both effectiveness and limitation. By combining rhetorical criticism with critical media and immigration scholarship, this methodology aims to contribute to conversations about how marginalized communities communicate under conditions of state violence.

By analyzing Know Your Rights red cards as rhetorical texts, this project seeks to illuminate how everyday communication practices function as survival strategies within systems of immigration enforcement. Rather than treating fear as a failure of communication, this research approaches fear as a condition that shapes rhetorical form, circulation, and meaning. In doing so, the project contributes to critical media and rhetorical studies by foregrounding material, under-the-radar communication as a site of political significance.

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I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who  
has not. /s/ Elizabeth Diaz