

## Alien Orientations and Disruptions in William Alexander's *Ambassador* (2014)

By María J. Durán

Aliens, far-away planets, and intergalactic time travel are prominent elements in the science fiction genre. Manifesting in various forms and in an abundance of imagined futuristic and speculative, the alien in particular has often been constructed as the “Other”—that which poses a threat to the self and therefore needs to be conquered or eradicated. Such a construction rests on understanding difference through binary opposition and reinforces relations of power. Indeed, the first major portrayal of an alien—H.G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1898)—distinguished the alien as a monstrous deadly enemy. The allegorical significance of the alien in relation to alterity has been a fertile line of inquiry among science fiction scholars. Carl Malmgren explains that “[t]he encounter with the alien inevitably broaches the question of the Self and Other...by comparing human and alien entities” (54), and he traces specific alien encounter constellations (e.g., other as enemy, other as self, other as other). Marleen S. Barr and Jenny Wolmark both examine otherness in alien encounters through the lens of feminist criticism by which they challenge fixed understandings of gender in society. In addition, Adam Roberts limns the alien figure as the emblem of the Other along racial lines so that Blackness becomes an object of interrogation. Together, these interlocutors, among others, showcase the wide treatment of otherness via the alien in science fiction, illuminating its xenophobic shortcomings while also investing it with new meaning to undermine the self/Other dichotomy.

When located in the context of Latinx Studies, and particularly Latinx representation, the metaphoric function of the alien in science fiction engages questions about otherness in relation to (un)documented immigrant subjects. In his study of various Latinx portrayals in mainstream cinema, Charles Ramírez Berg affirms that science fiction films provide “a cinematic arena for the unconscious reflection on the immigrant ‘question’” (154). Understanding the alien in science fiction films as “a polysemic image of the un-American Other,” he specifically identifies the alien as a Hispanic<sup>i</sup> immigrant, which distorts the representation of Latinx from ethnic stereotype to nonhuman, outer space entity (156). This distortion is what artist José Torres-Tama prominently presents in his sci-fi Latinx noir performance solo show, *Aliens, Immigrants & Other Evildoers*, as he figures alien immigrants as extraterrestrials. While Ramírez Berg only hints at the alarming social implications of distorted representation, Torres-Tama’s *Aliens* actually chronicles incidences of hate crimes against Latinx immigrants and their mistreatment in U.S. society. Accordingly, the reproduction of Latinx immigrant as alien Other does not exist in a vacuum; it both mirrors and informs dominant ideologies about Latinx immigrants as well as the materialization of xenophobia, nativism, and dehumanization. Thus, it is important to spotlight narratives that deploy the allegorical site of the alien to imbue it with alternative meanings for Latinx immigrants.

Examining William Alexander’s *Ambassador* (2014), in this article I leverage the slippage between “alien immigrant” and “Alien Other” while exploring how the young male protagonist, Gabe, negotiates orientations to different a/Alien<sup>ii</sup> problems. My analysis primarily focuses on Gabe’s experiences as a son of undocumented Latinx immigrant parents and as an 11-year-old boy who lacks the adequate language to make meaning of immigration as a larger political and social issue. I examine the contexts under which Gabe gains the knowledge to name and react to immigration issues alongside historical constructions of illegality and criminality, as they have

become attached to Latinx immigrant bodies in particular. I give secondary attention to Gabe's experiences as Earth's ambassador, a role he has recently assumed that allows him to interact with Aliens of other galaxies and that introduces him to a fundamentally different set of social relations. The new social relations of which Gabe becomes an active participant critically challenge and subvert the aforementioned slippage between "alien immigrant" and "Alien Other." My main contention is that the narrative works to dismantle this slippage by ultimately re-imagining the Latinx immigrant as agent, native, and resilient; it resists the Alien as Other construction. I deliberately partition the narrative's intersecting plotlines (on Earth and in outer space) in this article to prioritize the visibility of Latinx youth in mixed-status families or who are undocumented immigrants. As I will later discuss, *Ambassador's* engagement with the topic of immigration creates the potential for readers and critics to reproduce the very slippage the book contests, because there is an implicit desire to relegate children's experiences of immigration to the background or to make them invisible. Thus, this article is equally concerned with examining the allegorical significance of the alien in the narrative as it is with making Latinx youth and their immigration plights visible.

*Ambassador* tells the story of Gabriel "Gabe" Sandro Fuentes and his extraordinary adventures following the arrival of a purple space Alien whose purpose it is to assist ambassadors of different worlds. The Envoy carefully selects Gabe from Minneapolis as Earth's ambassador, citing Gabe's ability to settle disputes, consideration of how personal choices affect others, and respectful treatment of other species "despite differences in perception and cognition" (Alexander 32) as outstanding assets which make him suitable to represent Terran life. Earth is in desperate need of a new ambassador, because there are strange ships in the galaxy that potentially pose a threat. Thus, Gabe must discover who (or what) is the source of the threat and stop them from starting conflict with Earth or, worse, annihilating human life. This task requires Gabe to travel to an Embassy, where he diplomatically engages with Alien ambassadors from other planets. These Alien ambassadors are surprisingly all children. At the same time, Gabe confronts a serious and unexpected problem that literally tears his Mexican American family apart: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrests both his parents, and his father has been given deportation orders. Gabe's mother disappears from the narrative, presumably held in a detention center, while his older sister, Lupe, goes into hiding for also being undocumented. Hoping to resolve two different problems that are both unfamiliar and distressing, the young ambassador protagonist navigates back and forth between two "worlds."

Using the Envoy as a mouthpiece, *Ambassador* directly addresses why children are selected to represent their kind. The Alien explains to Gabe how children "have not yet fixed the boundaries of their social worlds. They haven't drawn a circle around those worth talking to" (Alexander 31). The Envoy later emphasizes that it is important for ambassadors to be young or, neotenous:

"What does neotenous mean?" Gabe asked.

"Species who keep childish traits in adulthood are neotenous," the Envoy said. "Curiosity, the ability to learn new things and form new social connections—these are neotenous traits. Some humans are like this. Others become grumpy, solitary, and inflexible as they get older" (Alexander 36).

The Envoy articulates these explanations in a simple manner for Gabe's benefit, but a more careful reading suggests that, when placed inside a social sphere, the concept of neoteny has larger implications for human interactions. Indeed, it emphasizes how various processes of human

socialization begin to establish boundaries that include/exclude certain individuals based on their race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and other intersecting identities. It also acknowledges the presence of implicit biases, which can significantly shape human interaction without conscious knowledge. Certainly, neotenous traits facilitate more favorable attitudes toward human difference, whereby difference (especially along racial and ethnic lines) is not preconceived as something threatening, compromising, or “Other.” In this way, the requirement for ambassadors to be neotenous markedly demonstrates a concern for rigid social boundaries that engender inflexibility and unproductive tenacity, ambassadors’ inability to be effective intergalactic diplomats without possessing neotenous traits.

The selection of neotenous ambassadors sets the stage for respectful and cooperative diplomatic relations, and Gabe’s Alien encounters are further facilitated through a kind of simulation at the Embassy—the place where all ambassadors gather to acquire information about each other’s galaxies, create diplomatic relationships, and resolve conflict. When he first arrives at the Embassy through a process of “entanglement,”<sup>iii</sup> he sees children everywhere: “They all seemed human-shaped and Gabe-size, with hair and skin colors just a few shades different from what he was used to. This was disappointing. He had expected some green skin and tentacles” (Alexander 66). Here, Gabe’s thoughts draw on familiar stereotypical representations of the Alien, and he expresses disappointment for the way the appearances of other ambassadors do not match his preconceived notions about what Aliens should look like. However, Gabe learns he is able to see the ambassadors’ true form out of the corner of his eye or whenever he does not look directly at them. When he does this, he sees one that resembles a “crab with the head of a camel” and another “like a lump of dandelion seeds” (Alexander 67). The visual diversity of Alien ambassadors is thus something the Embassy attempts to obscure through “translation.” In doing so, it deters preconceived notions and judgements about the ambassadors based on their visual appearance; this helps to facilitate a culture of inclusion. Gabe’s many interactions with the Envoy and the ambassadors at the Embassy are not within the scope of this article, but future studies of *Ambassador* would do well to spotlight Gabe’s intergalactic diplomatic relations. I now turn to the immigration-related story as it unfolds on Earth to highlight Gabe’s encounters with U.S. immigration law enforcement and negative framings of alien immigrant as “Other.”

### **Immigrants: Another Kind of “alien” Problem**

Upon returning from his first visit to the Embassy, Gabe learns that his parents have been taken to an ICE detention center. His mother informs him about the situation over a telephone call, but the specific details she decides to share with her son are not revealed in the narrative. This narrative silence suggests that it is a difficult and painful subject about which to talk with children. It also signals the silence around immigration status for the Fuentes family, presumably as a means to protect Gabe and his younger siblings from the harsh realities of U.S. immigration policies. Though Gabe knows his parents are from Guadalajara, Mexico, the topic of immigration had remained lurking in the background of ordinary family conversations and interactions—both because of his naiveté and his family’s imperative to shelter him from knowledge that triggers stress, fear, and anxiety. During a family meal, for instance, Gabe’s mother praised him for being “the only who knows how to keep [his] head down” (Alexander 24), obviously referring to the need to avoid any attention that would implicate law enforcement. Lupe followed her mother’s comment with, “Even though he is the only one who doesn’t *need* to” (Alexander 24). Here, the

oldest sister hints at the family's shared knowledge that Gabe is safe from ICE and therefore exempt from behaving in a quiet way to avoid getting noticed.

An outstanding example of how the Fuentes family maintains silence around immigration status is through the organization of "emergency plans." Gabe explains the range of scenarios for which his father prepared the family:

Dad had emergency plans for fire, flood, tornado, and the sudden disappearance of family members. He had *several* plans for sudden disappearances. He went through them all, point by point, and quizzed his eldest children on each...After that Dad proceeded to the silly plans, though he still went through them with the utmost seriousness...He had plans for wailing ghosts, ghosts wearing veils, and ghosts wandering back and forth near ponds, lakes, or the river... (Alexander 54-55).

Gabe observes the number of plans for sudden disappearances and presumably finds it strange, but this peculiarity gets undercut by the other series of plans in response to bizarre scenarios involving ghosts. As a result, Gabe likely interprets his family's emergency plans as simply hypothetical. Of course, the range of scenarios, in all, function to conceal a possible terrible sequence of events involving ICE or other law enforcement that do, in fact, lead to a family member's disappearance. Rather than explicitly addressing the potential for apprehension and deportation, Gabe's father attempts to protect his son from the anxiety of having to mentally prepare for this awful and yet conceivable scenario.

The inclusion of the eccentric scenarios is a means through which Gabe's father ostensibly seeks to temper the gravity of having emergency plans. As Gabe notes, however, he still treats their execution with a level of seriousness to ensure all family members know exactly what to do to reach safety. If Gabe's father quizzes his children on so many plans, it is because he is preparing them for anything that could severely disrupt the family unit. Gabe considers how the family lacked any "alien-related plans" (Alexander 55), soon thereafter becoming Earth's ambassador. While Gabe here specifically refers to plans related to outer space Aliens, the irony is he does not realize just how many of the rehearsed emergency plans are precisely "alien-related." Unfortunately, the emergency plan for "sudden disappearances" is what Gabe must execute upon learning about his parents' arrest. The once-hypothetical encounter with ICE causes a family rupture and leads Gabe to discover those grave "alien-related" immigration matters from which his family had tried to shelter him. Alas, a mixed-status family means not everyone is safe from ICE.<sup>iv</sup>

When Gabe visits his father at the detention center, the image of a man in an orange jumpsuit and handcuffs with a "*this sucks* expression" (Alexander 81) supplants that which Gabe intimately knows: the portrait of a beloved husband, father, and chef. The orange-colored attire conspicuously brands Gabe's father as none of those things but rather as a lawbreaker, prison inmate, and *illegal alien* who must return to his native country. The explanation his father provides for the arrest (failing to come to a complete traffic stop) brings into focus Gabe's disbelief, as he intellectually grapples with how something as ostensibly trivial as a stop sign can ultimately upend his "normal" life. It is this unwelcome entanglement with ICE that causes a forced physical disconnect from his father, who faces immediate deportation orders for crossing the U.S.-Mexico border illegally a second time. Gabe attempts to hold onto a trace of optimism: "Every restaurant in the city will rise up in protest and demand your return," he tells his dad (Alexander 83), holding fast to the idea that community action will absolutely change the outcome of this situation. This,

unfortunately, does not occur. To make matters worse, Gabe will soon learn about Lupe's own undocumented status and how this status has become an emblem for the word "alien."

### Unpacking Ideas of Illegality in "illegal alien"

When Gabe arrives at his friend Frankie's house for safety,<sup>v</sup> he continues to learn about more "alien-related" issues that re-configure his understanding of Lupe's experiences at school as an undocumented immigrant. Lupe informs him his parents "never wanted to worry [his] poor, innocent little brain" (Alexander 97) by discussing immigration status. As Gabe processes this information, he realizes he had known Lupe was not born in the U.S. Nevertheless, he had never interpreted this fact as a detriment; it was actually quite the opposite because Gabe felt Lupe "had a more concrete connection to family history than he did" (Alexander 98). That his sister was born in Mexico was something Gabe praised and not something yet tainted by inflammatory discourse and media about immigrants. Society's xenophobia and racism, on the other hand, are familiar to Lupe, who gives her brother a glimpse of how she is treated as an undocumented immigrant:

"Last year I met with Mr. Paul Arpaio, the career counselor at school," she told him. She said the name with exaggerated, sarcastic formality and antirespect [sic]. "That's it. That's the only thing that happened. I was working on my college applications. He told me not to bother. He told me that he controlled all the transcript files, that no college would ever see mine. He told me to start walking south" (Alexander 102).

Outraged, Gabe notes how the counselor is not supposed to keep Lupe *out* of college, to which Lupe responds, "Yeah, well, he's helping *citizens* get in by making sure *aliens* with perfect grades can't" (Alexander 102; original emphases). Given his lack of knowledge about how immigration status affects one's pursuit of higher education, the stark contrast between "citizens" and "aliens" is lost on Gabe. Yet, he grasps how the counselor's treatment of Lupe is unfair and wrong. Gabe likely starts to discern the animosity the career counselor harbors towards his sister for not being a citizen, which causes him to feel "the spark-bright beginnings of rage building in him" (Alexander 102). Indeed, rage is Gabe's emotional response to the knowledge that his sister has been denied the opportunity to attend college because she is an "alien." The recall of the incident with the school's counselor, then, brings into focus the ways that "aliens" are treated as Other and stand in opposition to citizens. What is more, Lupe tells Gabe, "*I'm illegal, you idiot*" (Alexander 102); this is an assertion of identity that highlights how individuals, like Mr. Arpaio, myopically "see" or "read" Lupe as an unlawful and illegitimate nonperson. While the narrative is ambiguous about how Gabe specifically interprets it, what remains clear is the narrative's direct engagement with the problematic treatment of alien immigrants as "illegals."

The counselor's instructions for Lupe to "start walking south" and Lupe's "*I'm illegal*" remark together invoke larger narratives about a constructed alien identity connected with issues of nativism, criminalization, and dehumanization. Scholars like Nicholas De Genova, Leo R. Chavez, and Edwin Ackerman have studied the construction of illegality with a U.S. context, linking this category to anti-immigrant sentiment as well as to immigration law and enforcement.<sup>vi</sup> Further, historian Mae M. Ngai shows how restrictive immigration policy "stimulated the production of *illegal aliens* and introduced that problem into the internal spaces of the nation" (70; emphasis mine).<sup>vii</sup> This new category of persons, abstractly defined, is "something of a specter, a

body stripped of individual personage, whose very presence is troubling, wrong” (Ngai 77). Relatedly, Lisa Marie Cacho notes how “illegal alien” points to an “ineligibility to personhood” and what it means to “embody a criminalized status,” which emphasizes how “the words themselves convey a status of rightlessness justified by un-American origins and presumed criminal culpability” (44).<sup>viii</sup> In sum, “illegal alien” refers to a person without legal recognition and without rights, whose illegal status due to unlawful entry and residence in the nation becomes collapsed with criminality and dehumanization. The “illegal alien” is also a racialized political subject<sup>ix</sup> whose perceived differences diminish social worth, relative to native citizens, and make integration into the nation impossible. Above all, this identity can best be understood as a legally and socially constructed condition whose place in public discourse continues to abet nativism and xenophobia in the U.S.

While the complex historical backdrop of illegality and its sticky relationship to alien immigrants may not be appreciated by a younger readership, the narrative’s juxtaposition of its cosmic and terrestrial milieus sharpens the latter’s fundamentally different construction of alien identity. *Ambassador* focalizes Lupe’s conversation with her career counselor to show how undocumented status “becomes written upon the bodies of the migrants themselves because illegality is both produced and experienced” (Chavez 28). Indeed, Lupe’s immigration status is something the career counselor willfully foists on her, and then uses to draw boundaries around her access to higher education. Following a narrative of exclusion, he attempts to keep her “out” of college. Perhaps what is most notable, however, is the way Lupe herself seems to have internalized “illegal alien” as an identity. Because of her counselor’s discriminating conduct, she neglects her schoolwork and ostensibly surrenders the idea of a college education. In addition to feeling marginalized, Lupe might feel fear and shame. Consequently, the way the negative connotations of “illegal” and “alien” can affix themselves (voluntarily or involuntarily) to undocumented persons is dangerous. Illegality and alien-ness have marked the bodies of particular Fuentes family members. Though Gabe was born in the U.S., he is sadly not exempt from experiences of illegality because it significantly shapes how he and his family must walk around in the world.

As a whole, the term alien literally re-organizes Gabe’s understanding of two worlds. On the one hand, he unexpectedly discovers the existence of non-human life and the ability to travel light years away to communicate with outer space entities. His diplomatic endeavors illuminate his understanding of Alien to mean extraterrestrial, unfamiliar, and thus strange in nature. Though the other entities he encounters are fundamentally different from him, their Alien-ness does not intrinsically evidence a hostile nature (even for the book’s enigmatic character, Omegan of the Outlast) and does not get constructed vis-a-vis dehumanization and criminality. On the other hand, the term alien materializes in stark contrast on Earth. Gabe learns quickly that it is specifically reserved for immigrant noncitizens like his family members and whose bodies are stripped of personage. These “aliens” do not belong in U.S. society, and *illegal* aliens must be seen “out” of the country on account of their supposed lawlessness and non-personhood.

The compartmentalization of two widely different understandings for the term alien, which also have diverging implications, is a necessary task for Gabe. He must hold two vying denotations if he is to walk in two spaces (Earth and outer space) and operate under a diverse set of social relations. This is a confusing and difficult task for a young boy like Gabe, whose young mind is only beginning to recognize how alien identity is embedded in a system of power out of his control. While his role as ambassador grants him a position of power, as a son of undocumented immigrants, he finds himself with little agency to help his family. The biggest irony of the book is

he successfully keeps billions of people on Earth safe from intergalactic conflict, but he is not able to protect his father from deportation or his family from future problems with law enforcement. While intergalactic diplomacy is, relatively speaking, a larger concern than immigration problems on Earth, the narrative seems to suggest that there is much more at stake with the latter for Gabe and his family.

### **Beyond Politics: (De)Humanizing Immigrants in Public Discourse**

Reviews for *Ambassador* are quick to comment on Alexander's layered usage and meaning of alien. It is worth noting that reviewers mostly interpret what Alexander has called his "careful narrative diplomacy" (Maguire) in treating two different sets of "alien" problems in a positive light. Kirkus interestingly classifies "alien assassins" and "galactic mass extinctions" as Gabe's "small problems" [original emphasis], suggesting that the problems Gabe faces on Earth with his family are bigger, more complex, and even more terrifying. The review highlights how "devastatingly serious" the immigration plotline is, but nonetheless communicates the desire for its absence or that this sequence of events inhibits the book's adventurous story (Kirkus). For reviewer Amy Nolan, the illegal alien immigrant plot line negatively supersedes Gabe's intergalactic adventure. Critiquing the book for its apparent didactic tone, she also states, "[t]here is no doubt where Alexander's sympathies lie" (Nolan). This statement draws a clear political divide and disparages the author's presumed political affiliation, marking him as an immigrant-advocate.<sup>x</sup>

Furthermore, the closing sentence of her review reveals her almost-certain disdain for the book's engagement with immigration: "the political commentary dilutes a promising tale of adventure," Nolan writes. To reduce issues like mixed-status families, undocumented immigration, as well as forced family separation, and its subsequent trauma to "political commentary" indicates a failure to understand how U.S. political debate over immigration is not divorced from the real-life experiences of immigrants. Her remark signals a one-dimensional comprehension of immigration, wherein it has become overemphasized as a political and/or economic issue, rather than a human issue with serious social consequences. Alexander begins to explore these consequences, reminding audiences that unjust immigration laws cause loss, fragmentation, and trauma, even for children. These real repercussions do indeed interrupt or *disrupt* Gabe's intergalactic mission, and to suggest that they dilute it would dismiss Gabe's very real traumatic encounters with the U.S. immigration system; by extension, it also dismisses the experiences of all children who might identify with Gabe.

The aforementioned book review's failure to validate the experiences of those whose lives are considerably shaped by immigration status reveals an implicit desire to displace *Ambassador's* explicit query of the alien immigrant as Other. Consequently, it indicates a desire to ignore the narrative's treatment of cultural fear and anxiety aimed at Latinx and other ethnic immigrants. If science fiction (unconsciously) mirrors societal problems, then Nolan's comments dismiss how the narrative precisely functions as a canvas upon which to contest negative constructions of Latinx immigrants and to humanize the experiences of a child who is separated from his family. *Ambassador* is an important addition to Latinx YA literature, especially in light of former President Donald Trump's "zero tolerance" policy, which allowed the government to prosecute adults and separate thousands of children from their parents for unauthorized border-crossing, including asylum-seekers. A recent report from the Department of Justice Office of Inspector General noted that the goal of prosecution "came at the expense of careful and appropriate consideration of the

impact that...family separation would have on children” (“U.S. Department of Justice”). Trump’s zero tolerance policy created a humanitarian crisis wherein children became the primary victims of a cruel policy predicated on criminalizing “illegals,” “aliens,” and “illegal aliens.”

Most recently, the Biden administration has tried to distance itself from the former President’s ruthless xenophobia by using “more inclusive language” that fosters a positive stance toward immigration. In a memo first reported by *Axios*, Tracy Renaud, acting head of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), directed officials to replace the word “alien” with “noncitizen” in internal documents, outreach efforts, and other modes of communication, to include communication with the general public (Kight). Other suggestions include using “undocumented noncitizen” instead of “illegal alien,” which also demonstrates the new administration’s attempt to erase the prominent usage of “illegal aliens” for criminalizing and dehumanizing means. According to *Forbes*, President Biden has also advocated for the same revised language-use in federal immigration laws (Durkee). While what is more pressing is actual immigration reform, the current administration’s revisionist strategy for language use concerning immigrants is a good first step toward a larger shift in our public discourse about immigration. This could create opportunities to slowly begin extricating dominant constructions of “illegality” from undocumented status. Nevertheless, the psychological and emotional harm the language of immigration has inflicted on millions of Latinx and ethnic immigrants cannot be overstated.

### **Forced Family Separation and Trauma as Implosion**

Though Gabe’s family has taken measures to prepare for various scenarios, there is no “emergency plan” in place that can, in truth, adequately mentally and emotionally prepare Gabe for the plight of forced family separation. What is more, Gabe quickly begins to worry about problems that should mainly concern adults. For instance, he learns about the literal costs associated with his father’s deportation: “we’re going to rack up some mighty big phone bills between now and then. Maybe you can mow a few lawns this summer, earn extra cash to buy some long-distance phone-time?” his father suggests (Alexander 82). Space and time are dimensions Gabe had previously traversed without much difficulty as ambassador with no formal training, and yet, these will prove to be considerable obstacles on Earth. His father will be physically far away, and there is no indication of how much time will pass before he will be able to see him. Indeed, the incident of family separation upends Gabe’s life precisely at the moment in which he has only just accepted the role of Earth’s ambassador. This juxtaposition creates a moment of paradox for Gabe, as he considers the significant agency he possesses as an intergalactic representative and the lack thereof as a son to undocumented parents: *I’m the ambassador of this entire world, Gabe thought. All of it. But nobody here knows that. I can talk to aliens thousands of light-years away, but we’ll need to scramble for cash so I can keep talking to Dad by phone*” (84). Gabe’s tenure as Earth’s ambassador, sadly, does not allow him to easily reach his father, and certainly not represent his father or negotiate with ICE on his behalf as might be expected for serving as a diplomat. Instead, Gabe is forced to come to terms with the fact that future entanglements will only secure communication with non-human aliens, while communication with his father will place an economic burden on his already-distressed family.

Following the revelation of his family’s mixed-status and the news of his dad’s deportation, it is clear that Gabe is beset by intense emotions that feel simply unmanageable: “On the way home Gabe began to unfreeze and unclench. He tried not to. He wasn’t sure what would happen if he let himself feel the way he actually felt” (Alexander 84). As much as Gabe attempts to stifle emotions

from a traumatic event, however, these emotions come at full force. Interestingly, they do not take the form of sorrow-filled cries and lament. Nevertheless, Gabe's feelings do begin to symbolically take form around him, manifesting in material ways and signaling the trauma of forced family separation. When Gabe returns to his family's empty house, he learns from the Envoy that there is a volatile black hole in the family's drying machine. Despite the Envoy's attempts, the black hole cannot be stabilized. Thus, the vortex puts any life inside the house in peril, and Gabe must quickly evacuate the collapsing structure. Gabe safely reaches the backyard with the Envoy and his pets, but the home's structure does not withstand the black hole's power. As the house collapses, Gabe can "feel the impact through his feet and legs more than he heard it happen" (Alexander 91). He is the only witness to the destruction of a structure that was once a home for a lively Mexican American family. Meanwhile, the rest of the world is ignorant to the fact that Gabe's home is utterly gone.

The house's destruction comes to represent several instances of collapse in Gabe's life at the moment: the shattering of the family unit, the breakdown of a safe space, and the physical loss of a home full of memories. Still, Gabe manages to grab the cane sword and vajra hammer his father gifted to him and his sister, trying desperately to hold onto his father. He laments, "Dad's spice rack is gone" (Alexander 92), which suggests that he feels he was not able to salvage enough of his father. Though Gabe does not outwardly express his emotions, the concern for preserving the tangible items that connect him to his father is one way for him to cope with his father's absence. The Envoy sympathetically replies, "I'm very sorry for the loss" (Alexander 92). There is no indication that the Envoy truly understands the magnitude of Gabe's loss in these moments. For all intents and purposes, the Envoy is communicating he is sorry for the loss of a beloved spice collection. Nevertheless, there is an acknowledgement of loss that is pithy but important here, because Gabe has lost so much in a short amount of time. The losses Gabe suffers are much to bear, but he cannot adequately grieve or cope because there is no time and space in which to do so. Indeed, the Envoy pulls him back into his responsibilities as ambassador as he informs Gabe that the implosion was actually an assassination attempt on Gabe's life by some Alien entity in the galaxy. Gabe must then quickly channel any energies toward fulfilling his urgent responsibilities as ambassador, which places him in a distressing position of needing to momentarily cast his family's plight aside for the sake of protecting Earth and its inhabitants. "To protect his family needed to be very far away," Gabe reasons (Alexander 160). In this way, the narrative celebrates Gabe's resiliency, though it also indirectly questions whether immigrant children who experience traumatic immigration-related events have the adequate spaces to process and cope with their trauma.

### **Re-Examining and Subverting the a/Alien as Other**

The last two main sections of *Ambassador* chronicle Gabe's search for the culprit of his attempted murder, which includes multiple trips back to the Embassy to gather information, another incident that is meant to annihilate him, and a trip to the moon. Gabe finally determines his adversary is not the Omegan of the Outlast, as he had previously assumed, but the Kaen—a nomadic fleet of different species that is illicitly mining ice in the asteroid belt.<sup>xi</sup> He promptly meets with the Kaen's ambassador at the Embassy in efforts to diplomatically stop their advances. The Kaen ambassador, however, is quick to exculpate her kind:

“You threatened us,” Kaen repeated. “You mentioned that you had already noticed our ships among the asteroids. Immediately after that you sent a signal to the Outlast ambassador.”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t...Oh. You mean the airplane? That was an accident. I didn’t mean to hit Omegan in the head with a leaf-paper airplane” (Alexander 213).

Here, Gabe realizes his leaf-paper airplane, which accidentally hit Omegan in the head during one of his previous visits to the Embassy, had been misconstrued as a “signal” of collusion with the Outlast force. When coupled with his repeated attempts to speak with Omegan, this information illuminates why it is “no wonder she [Kaen] sent black holes and huge mining bugs after [him]” (213). Here, the narrative conveys Gabe’s and the Kaen ambassador’s mutual imagined construction of the self-versus-Other binary, as they both incorrectly regard one another as the Alien threat that will bring about their demise. The “Alien Other as threat” and “Alien as invaders” scripts, however, do not materialize. Instead, these scripts are forsaken for alternative social relations centered on communication, trust, and mutual aid, once both parties understand that the main problem has been misinterpreted signals. Gabe aims to restore the Kaen’s trust by offering “emergency hospitality”; he allows them to remain in the asteroid belt and extends access to ice. The Kaen ambassador accepts and, in turn, sends mining ships to the moon in search of Gabe.

Accordingly, the subversion of negative connotations about the Alien figure (especially as imminent threat) is made possible through the book’s integration of science fiction. To clarify, *Ambassador* has been regarded as a work of science fiction, but it does not actually aspire to immerse its characters in a completely new social order that offers radical new ways of being, as might be expected of the genre. The structures that organize human life and systems of power on Earth are not at all reimagined, and only Gabe has access to two diverse “worlds.” In this vein, *Ambassador* adopts science fiction as what writer and critic Joanna Russ has called “a mode rather than a form” (243). The book helps readers to “recognize and rethink the status quo by depicting an alternative world” (Ramírez 185-186). *Ambassador*’s “alternative world” is one in which youth are invaluable diplomats who are responsible for maintaining amicable relationships and peace across the galaxies; this world also holds the possibility for Aliens to engage in conflict resolution, guided by a purpose to understand difference and clarify misconstrued intentions or agendas. Mutual respect and agreement are highly valued, and the desire to establish power hierarchies is not portrayed as something favorable. Ultimately, the intergalactic space of which Gabe is now a part demonstrates how difference is something to be appreciated. As a result, the science fiction mode of *Ambassador* provides a cogent critique of American society’s inability to re-imagine immigrant subjects beyond constructions of criminality and illegality as well as the inability to extend to them human dignity.

What occurs at the end of *Ambassador* is perhaps the most compelling revelation yet, offering a final opportunity to unpack and comment on the constructed layers of the a/Alien through science fiction. As the Kaen arrive on the moon, Gabe draws some insightful connections:

*The Kaen are a mix of different species, Gabe remembered. Different civilizations, different kinds of ships. That one kind of looks like a flying Mayan artifact, like another Christmas present for Mom to make her homesick. She would hate it. She loathes the idea that aliens visited us thousands of years ago, that they get credit for building our pyramids* (Alexander 219-220).

The resemblance between Alien spaceships and Mayan artifacts Gabe identifies is odd, at first glance, but actually foreshadows what Gabe will learn about the Kaen. What is important to note in Gabe's sequence of thoughts is how his mother "loathes" narratives that undermine the intelligence of indigenous Mexican peoples, or how modern society is incapable of rightfully crediting them for engineering and erecting such grandiose structures. This shows how society has "Othered" foreign indigenous civilizations and particularly Mexican ones, as an added insult. Later, Gabe also notices how the suit helmet of one of the Kaen approaching him curiously looks like a saltshaker from home, earlier described as shaped like an "Olmec statue head with a great big helmet" (Alexander 22). This resemblance leads Gabe to further consider how "[i]t looked like the Olmec had carved this helmet in ancient Mexico" (Alexander 221). The idea that the Kaen and the Olmec, one of the first major civilizations in Mesoamerica, could somehow be connected to each other utterly puts Gabe in a mental state of disbelief. Yet, he starts to seriously contemplate the idea when he sees the Kaen ambassador's appearance without any of the "translation" the Embassy would have required for such an interaction. Recognizing her "broad nose, high cheekbones, skin a shade or two darker than [his] own, Gabe's last words reverberate with incredulity and amazement alike: "You're human, he said. "How can you be human?" (Alexander 222). Ironically, Gabe literally *humanizes* the Kaen ambassador.

Readers might interpret this information in a myriad of ways, including entertaining the aforementioned fantastic theories about non-human entities from outer space visiting Mesoamerican civilizations. Taking direction from the book's focused attention on a/Alien, however, what unravels here is a staunch rejection of the many ways in which Latinx immigrants, particularly Mexican Americans and Chicanxs, have been constructed as "Others" in U.S. modern culture. If the Kaen ambassador's lineage can be traced back to the Olmec, then it establishes the Kaen (or, at least some of them, since they are of different species) as one of Earth's first *native* populations. This negates their constructed Alien-ness in the book, and consequently challenges the displacement of anxiety about the "Other" onto Latinx bodies as well as the social and political mechanisms through which they are made to be different, permanent outsiders, inhuman, and criminal. Furthermore, the Kaen ambassador is an important source of epistemic information that re-interprets historical narratives about the demise of early indigenous communities in Mexico, such as the Olmec. Rather than being relegated as victims of colonial violence in the Americas, the Kaen are resilient nomadic survivors who exist and re-define themselves outside of oppressive historical narratives. The implications for Gabe are significant, for the Kaen are part of his ancestral lineage and thus forge new paths for historical knowledge and identity construction. Accordingly, the book's last deployment of Alien identity strips the term of its accumulated negative connotations and repudiates its imposition on undocumented and documented Latinx immigrants, some of whom are, in fact, native to American land and have been systemically estranged from it.

## Conclusion

Published before one of the country's most vitriolic immigration policies and before the tenure of a presidential administration characterized by its anti-immigrant stance, *Ambassador* tells a story about a Mexican American boy who encounters different orientations to the term a/Alien as he becomes an intergalactic representative for Earth. Taking the term as its central narrative cue, *Ambassador* does not refrain from treating the delicate story of a mixed-status Latinx family

who suffers from forced separation. The cruelties of minors' encounters with ICE are many, and they are, undoubtedly, difficult to express. Nonetheless, these encounters are very real and must not elude representation. If they are not located in the corpus of YA literature, then it is another means by which (un)documented children and their families are deliberately kept "out" of an American imaginary and are not seen as integral members of society.<sup>xii</sup> Arrests and deportations of undocumented immigrants circulating in the media problematically reproduce criminality, and rarely does the media tell the stories of those who are left behind or depict the experiences that follow family fragmentation.

Bringing together the fields of YA literature, science fiction, and U.S. narratives of immigration, *Ambassador* coincides with the call for increased Latinx representation in YA literature. Making Latinx visible in this corpus will slowly begin to change its contours and to facilitate an exploration of Latinx youth as wholesome, complex characters who theorize about the world. The need to diversify the identities and experiences in YA literature is also necessary for continuing to disrupt homogenous understandings of Latinx as a category. It might be fitting, then, to think about YA literature as "literature for youth" with the purpose of showing a "broader range of scholars the literary and cultural merits of these works as Latinx literature" (115), as Marilisa Jiménez García proposes. Reading YA literature as Latinx literature certainly elucidates how the former generatively engages with multidisciplinary fields and actively participates in discourses about Latinx immigration directly involving children. *Ambassador* importantly urges us to create space for the experiences of children from mixed-status families as well as undocumented youth, who are already marginalized or made to feel invisible in their communities.<sup>xiii</sup> For youth who have little or no knowledge about issues of immigration, Gabe's story provides a glimpse into the kind of harm immigration laws and policies can inflict on families. This glimpse could very well produce more sympathetic attitudes and behaviors towards immigrants among youth who are not yet fully interpellated subjects; it could also be the origin for youth to challenge and change existing discourses. Above all, the book reminds readers of all ages that language matters, because immigrants are not born "aliens"; they are made.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> This is the signifier Ramírez Berg uses.

<sup>ii</sup> I use this signifier to denote alien (lower case) as equivalent to immigrant and Alien (upper case) as equivalent to outer-space entity.

<sup>iii</sup> The Envoy builds a device that helps Gabe travel across space whenever he is asleep. His physical self remains on Earth, while his "entangled" self can be sent just about anywhere.

<sup>iv</sup> While *Ambassador* casts a mixed-status family to focus on immigration matters, it is worth noting that the racialization of immigrants facilitates a suspicion about U.S.-born Latinx's citizenship so that even citizens are marked as "alien-citizens" or "perpetual foreigners despite their birthright" (Chavez 7). In this way, both documented and undocumented persons are marked as "aliens."

<sup>v</sup> It is worth mentioning that Frankie's house is a historical and multicultural "safe house." Lupe explains to Gabe that it used to be a stop for the Underground Railroad and that "Frankie's family used it again to help refugees from El Salvador and Honduras" (Alexander 99). Thus, Frankie's house functions as a sanctuary space for Lupe and alien Others.

<sup>vi</sup> See specifically, Nicholas De Genova's "The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant 'Illegality'"; Leo R. Chavez's *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* (2008); and Edwin Ackerman's "'What Part of Illegal' Don't You Understand? Bureaucracy and Civil Society in the Shaping of Illegality." Ackerman's article is especially useful in its consideration of how specific terms (e.g., illegals, illegal alien, illegal immigrant, alien, undesirable alien, wetback, and others) provide insights about the gradual shift in discursive formation that placed legal and illegal aliens in opposition to one another.

<sup>vii</sup> In "The Strange Career of the Illegal Alien: Immigration Restriction and Deportation Policy in the United States, 1921-1965," Mae M. Ngai shows how the numerical restrictions on immigration imposed by the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924 drastically changed the meanings of national inclusion and exclusion.

<sup>viii</sup> Cacho also explains that "'illegal alien' is not a legal term and to *be* undocumented is not a crime" (44; emphasis mine)

<sup>ix</sup> In *The Latino Threat*, Leo R. Chavez explains how Europeans, Canadians, and Mexicans experienced deportation policies in different ways. As Anglo immigrants were excluded from the "illegal alien" category, Mexicans became associated with illegal alien status in the 20th century and legally racialized because of their national origin. Incidentally, it is worth mentioning that "Mexicans are still the prototypical 'illegal aliens'" (Chavez 27).

<sup>x</sup> Incidentally, in an author interview published online, William Alexander identifies as a second-generation Caribbean immigrant, and he comments, "it felt right, fitting and obvious to make this [*Ambassador*] an immigration story. I also couldn't resist punning on the word 'alien'" (Maguire).

<sup>xi</sup> The Kaen mine ice for their livelihood, though the reason why goes unexplained in the book. This is, perhaps, a nod to the Minecraft video game.

<sup>xii</sup> Research has shown that reading and discussing multicultural texts around immigration issues allows children to articulate and negotiate their understanding about the topic. In her case study with Latinx children of immigrants in a Georgia elementary school, Eliza G. Braden explains how students "were able to make connections to the texts and see themselves in similar situations (478). Her main findings are worth quoting at length: "Children actively relied both on the texts and their personal stories to make sense of immigration, which underscores how the literature afforded participants a means to develop greater awareness of the diversity and complexity in families' decisions to immigrate to the U.S. Additionally, the literature offered students space to deconstruct the notions held by others on the ways immigrants arrive to the U.S. and to recognize the knowledge young children have about these topics" (478). Notably, Braden's study also shows that children can "problematize policies and practices around immigration" (474), if they are presented with texts in which they see themselves reflected. Texts that foreground immigrant children make meaning of immigration as a larger social issue and of their own lived experiences (Braden 465).

<sup>xiii</sup> In their study of 13 children's picture books (published 2010-2016) that depict Latinx immigration, Sanjuana C. Rodriguez and Eliza Gabrielle Braden found that the separation of undocumented parents from citizen children was missing. "Children, both young and adolescent, need opportunities to see and critique reflections of *all aspects* of immigration in children's literature," they argue (57; emphasis mine).