TEDTalk – PRERNA LAL

I don't like boxes.

I'm a native of the Fiji Islands, but not a native Pacific Islander.

I'm ethnically South Asian, but I’ve never been to Asia

I'm female-bodied but I'm not female.

My grandparents, parents, sibling and niece have legal status in this country, but I’m neither a U.S. citizen or legal resident. I’m undocumented.

I don't have any sort of legal status, though I do have legal right to work here.

I don't fit into any conventional boxes, but I’m supposed to be a "model minority" -- make the best of opportunities given to me, strive for the American dream, conform to American society's norms about being quiet, apolitical, submissive and successful. Due to my actual lived experiences, I have decided that we need to reframe what it means to be a model minority in the United States.

I want to give you some context. We talk about immigration policy quite a bit in this country – who to keep out, who to let in. **But we don’t talk about the elephant in the room: race.** Our immigration policy is a regulation of race – it has always been a regulation of race, starting with the genocide of Native Americans to forced migration of Africans to this country for chattel slavery to the 1790 INA that gave citizenship to exclusively white men to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and to the Supreme Court decisions that limited citizenship to white men to the present way in which quota systems uphold and justify a enforcement-only deportation regime. Today, immigration is a way to uphold a certain racial order with the use of seemingly benign laws. Take for example “Terry stops” – police can pull over anyone based on “reasonable suspicion” and race can be a part of the “suspicion.” Often, cops may find people driving without a license, arrest and jail them even though it is a minor traffic infraction. Within 48 hours, due to federal immigration polices like “Secure Communities,” the person is transferred to the custody of ICE and “processed” for removal from the country. Over a million people get deported like this every year – separated from the families and their homes forever. And it all starts with one “benign” traffic stop.

So that is at least the racial backdrop we are up against in this country. That is the reality that I am confronted it as a 14 year old – when my father dragged me to this country, to the so-called land of freedom and opportunity from the islands of Fiji – so that we could all have a better future than our past. And there are more complications to the picture: I am queer. I am a gender-queer. And I am undocumented. The odds are stacked against me to even come close to attaining a mythical American dream. There is no way I should survive. But I am standing here in front of you, only because I’m a model minority.

**The standard narrative of a model minority** – someone who works hard and succeeds in school, at work and does not complain about racial oppression, sexism or heterosexism. Someone who abides by the law. It is an idea vested in and propelled by the white privilege that wants everyone to believe that racism is not the norm, that it is not the default. It is a way for those with white privilege to say to other minorities that “these Asian people can do it so you have no excuse.” It is a narrative that is, essentially, fiction.

**I’ll give you a counter-narrative of what it is like to be a model minority – rooted in actual lived experience**. When I was brought here and put in some random American high school where kids made fun of my accent, made fun of how I would dress. I lived in a tiny hotel room with my parents and older sibling, before moving to a mobile home park, where again, I didn’t really have my own room. I was expected to just rise above the conditions around me and go on to some prestigious college, become a doctor, engineer, or lawyer.

I graduated high school in 2002. But I was undocumented. I didn’t have the paperwork necessary to even get into college in the United States 10 years ago, let alone know where to go, what to do and who to talk to.

And just like in every story, **there is a hero in this story.** It is my mother, who made sure I didn’t just sit at home, and registered me at a community college. “No excuses,” she said then. She didn’t have the resources to ever go to college and graduate but she has made sure that I could do everything that she could not.

I did my best. I went to community college, I transferred to a state school, and I even finished a graduate degree, with her help. **But at the age of 24, I had an existential crisis.**

**Get in line -** You see, as immigrants, we are always told to get in line, even though for the vast majority of people there is no line. I was lucky, or I thought I was lucky, in the sense that my grandmother is a U.S. citizen. She sponsored my parents when I was a teenager young, but family sponsorship through your relatives takes a long time. Think of it as being given a number and told to wait in a long line towards the visa counter. I got in line when I was 15. I came to the front of the visa counter when I was 24. I gave the officer my “ticker” and I was told, “sorry you are too old, you need to go back to the end of another line.” My parents were given their green cards, and I was essentially told to pack my bags and leave the country, all over again.

**Defining the moment of crisis -** I had an undergrad degree and a graduate degree but I cleaned warehouses, industrial sites, and office buildings for a living. I could not drive so I even as I was able-bodied, I felt very constrained. I couldn’t really prove my identity – all I had was a passport with a really old photo of me so I didn’t even look like my only ID. I couldn’t leave the country because I would be banned from re-entering again for 10 years, if I ever stepped out – and that means I can neither go to Canada nor to Mexico even though people keep telling me to go back to Mexico. And I was the only undocumented person in my family, so I had no one to talk to about anything.

**My only option seemed to be the federal DREAM Act.** The federal DREAM Act is this conservative legislation that would allow some people who are educated here to get a pathway to citizenship. It is the least you can do as a country. I think the "Dreamer" narrative is a model minority, model-immigrant narrative -- It is the classic quintessential come to the U.S. for "better opportunities" and live up to the American dream shoved down our throats. And this sort of assimilationist rhetoric is being elevated to a platform to show all other minorities that "this is how you should be as an immigrant" and "this is what a good immigrant looks like." Of course, despite the critique, that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t pass the bill.

But how do you pass a bill?

**“If you build it, they will come.”** There was no real national organization of undocumented youth at the time, back in 2007. But thankfully, we had online chat rooms. And so one day, in 2007, I went online, and found some new friends, some new undocumented friends. And we decided to build a movement from the ground up, **first through using social media to connect with other undocumented youth** and second, **through sharing our stories**. I’m talking about taking the risk of being “undocumented and unafraid” before it became a slogan and got splashed on the covers of magazines. People often ask me why I came out and declared my status – my only answer is that I know from experience that staying in the closet doesn’t solve your problems.

So when we built a list-serve of our 100,000 undocumented youth, everyone wanted a piece of it. So I was pitched to countlessly – by the multi-million dollar campaigns for immigration reform, by funders, by lawyers, by academics. For a while, I tried working within the system. But damn, I’m a queer undocumented female-bodied person of color. To get any sort of funding or support, I was told over and over that I had to conform to the ideas and institutions in place, even though they were not working (and even though they made no sense to me). I was told: You can’t talk about U.S. imperialism. You can’t write about people who are not valedictorians and star athletes. You can’t build your own mobile action network. You can’t stop deportations (even though we did, and now everyone who said we couldn’t gets foundation money to do so). You can’t have gay people as part of immigration reform. And you certainly cannot have the DREAM Act as a standalone bill that goes first because the strategy is “comprehensive immigration reform.”

And that's when I realized I am being asked to abide by the system. That’s the only way I could climb the ladder of success in the non-profit industrial complex. I'm asked to be the kind of "model minority" that people are used to - the one who abides by the law, the one who fits in with the racist, white superstructure, the one who does not see their interests aligned with the interest of other black/brown people, and the one who does not talk back but submits to silence.

**And I decided since I was being honest about being queer and undocumented, I had to be consistent in my ideology**. So every time I was told I could not do something, I made sure we did precisely that. We held the first civil disobedience action by undocumented youth in McCain’s office in Arizona, even as our so-called allies screamed at us. We occupied political offices, even as we were branded petulant and divisive. We infiltrated a detention center in Broward to demonstrate that the Obama Administration was lying about only deporting violent criminals, and dozens of detainees were released. And we called for Obama to end the deportation of all undocumented youth as we occupied his OFA offices in battleground states. The President’s new initiative to not deport undocumented youth, followed on the heels of that occupation. It did not come from writing letters, lobbying and backdoor meetings – it came from a cultural transformation undergoing this country, it came from being “undocumented and unafraid” and posing a threat to his re-election.

I went a step further. In 2010, I applied for a green card, telling USCIS that they should either grant my green card or place me in deportation proceedings, because the current state of being in limbo was simply not good enough. Just my luck - **they placed me in deportation proceedings.** Now I’m up against the U.S. government in an adversarial system – you’ve the government as a prosecutor against me, and you have a judge, who is also part of the government. My goal is to defeat the U.S. government and win a green card, and at this point, **I’m 45 days away from making that a reality. I’m 5 months from graduating from law school, and 11 months from becoming a lawyer at a really great firm downtown.**

So that is the real story of a real model minority. What is the model minority in this counter-narrative?

A model minority is subversive - America puts us in a little container so take advantage of it. Build power in our communities; spend money in our own communities; spend resources in teaching our own how to tackle the racist, hetero-patriarchy; your presence must destabilize and make people uncomfortable. If they tell you that you are stealing jobs, make sure to steal a better job; heck, steal a U.S. citizen to marry while you are at it.

A model minority is loud - Do not be silent. Silence kills. Question authority. Do not let anything tell you that you should not be angry about injustice. Protest, take to the streets, shut down streets, occupy buildings, take over the switchboards.

A model minority is not afraid to be her authentic self It is important to take the stigma out of whatever it is that society stigmatizes and own your space. I think being our authentic selves and telling authentic stories is the best weapon against a system that suppresses and denies our truths.

A model minority is honest- name things. name white supremacy when you see it - (Israel/Palestine) is about racism, seeing Muslims with suspicion is racist. call out sexism when you see it - when your coworker is promoted over you even though you are evenly or more qualified. call out heterosexism - when your parents are alright with gay people, but not alright with their own children being gay. those are just some basic examples. the more you see it, the better you will get at naming it and stomping it out.

A model minority is political- Being political doesn't just mean voting, tracking legislation, lobbying and writing letters. Being political means making active decisions --who you are dating is a political decision – it is not just happenstance that you end up with a person of the same race. Political change comes from using our lived experiences to foster a cultural transformation -- a transformation of how American society views undocumented people, how it views queer people, how it views people of color, and of course, how it views a queer, undocumented, person of color, standing here, and embodying what I call a model minority.

**Yes, there are consequences.** Consequences like no one will ever dare to walk all over you or walk over someone who looks like you without knowing that they are going to be in real deep shit. Consequences, such as you will be deeply loved and ferociously hated, but that beats being a nice, boring person that no one has anything to say about, any day. Consequences like being uninvited from a lot of spaces, but lets face it, you don’t want to be in a space like that – you want to redefine your space to be more inclusive. Consequences like you will be part of the model minority that becomes a majority.

**I’m ready to face the consequences of what it is to be my true, authentic self in the U.S. I have made a choice. And I’ll give everyone a choice** – a choice between fantasy and reality. You get to choose a fantasy, which is embodied by american culture, commodification, simplified binary oppositions (black/white, legal/illegal, gay/straight, male/female) soundbites, mass consumption, or choosing reality, a reality that is grounded in lived experiences of what a model minority should really look like -- someone who is subversive, loud, authentic, honest and political, and to sum it up: **simply badass.**

**Which box will you choose - will you choose fantasy? Or will you choose reality?**