

“I’m a great member of society... So why am I being punished?”: Negotiating Visibility, Agency and Narratives of Undocumented Immigrants in the United States¹

Sebastian Glen

Historically, the United States has held conflicting views on the roles immigrants assume in society. In particular, those who are undocumented continuously negotiate and adjust their levels of “visibility” in society for a variety of reasons, including attaining social and political justice, self-preservation, and countering negative societal perceptions, as a result of dominant and singular narratives that characterize them. This essay analyzes testimonials written by undocumented immigrants, including youth, in an effort to show the relationship between high visibility and achieving the goals listed above. Undocumented youth are highlighted in this paper to illustrate how they define themselves as undocumented and work towards diversifying identities, imagery and meaning of their role in society.

Like many high school graduates, Luz Elena Hernandez’s first priority was finding a well-paying job. According to all the applications available online, she was qualified and ready to work. However, her lack of a Social Security Number barred her from completing each application. Frustrated with herself, her undocumented status and the “never ending fear” of the future, she decided to sign up for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program, which gave her temporary legal status along with a two-year work permit.²

1 “Lucia,” in *We are Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream*, ed. William Pérez (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2009), 91.

2 Luz Elena Hernandez, “Piecemeal Immigration Reform Leaves Student Better Off For Now,” *Youth Radio*, March 27, 2014, <https://youthradio.org/news/article/piecemeal-immigration-reform-leaves-student-better-off-for-now/Off For Now>,” Youth Radio, March 27, 2014, <https://youthradio.org/news/article/piecemeal-immigration-reform-leaves-student-better-off-for-now/>.

For undocumented youth, the decision to sign up for Deferred Action is more complex than simply filling out a form. While Luz was able to obtain a Social Security Number and a well-paying job, she and many other undocumented youth are aware of the fact that by signing up to a government program, they make themselves “visible” to possible deportation in the future. As Luz describes, “now, thanks to me, my family’s best kept secret is in the immigration database. I decided to put myself out there in order to get a better life. I just really hope it’s all worth it.”³ As many undocumented immigrants living in the United States experience, the degree of “visibility” directly influences a number of factors including exploitation, abuse, political action, and even conceptions of citizenship and identity.

Becoming visible can manifest itself in a number of written forms, such as in testimonial literature, edited books, or in self-published accounts. In addition, becoming visible can be a political statement, as is the case with the DREAMers (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors), a group primarily composed of undocumented youth and their allies who lobby for pathways to citizenship. Finally, Luz demonstrates in her own testimony that becoming visible is deciding to potentially risk consequences for not just herself, but for her whole family, in an effort to achieve a higher quality of life.

As varied as the interpretations of becoming visible are, so too, are the reasons behind the act. While justifications for exposing oneself differ from person to person, there is a single framework that links them together: an undocumented immigrant often chooses to become visible because they “have no way to tell you what they have experienced, or why, or who they are, or what they think.”⁴ Therefore, when undocumented immigrants decide to become visible, they force us to rethink and reevaluate dominant narratives of who they are and their roles in society. In this respect, narratives of undocumented immigrants show differences between native-born citizens as well as differences between other immigrant groups. This essay contributes to the reevaluation of dominant narratives by allowing undocumented voices to speak for themselves.

3 Ibid.

4 Luis A. Urrea, “Forward: All Stories are Refugees from Dangerous Lands,” in *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives*, ed. Peter Orner (San Francisco, CA: McSweeney’s Books, 2008), 1.

The Two Narratives of Mexican Immigrants and the United States-Mexico Relationship

The twentieth century marked a significant period in which the United States struggled to define the role of Mexican immigrants in American society. By doing so, the creation of two competing narratives emerged, as Lisa Flores argues. The first narrative is that of the “narrative of need” which describes the public perception of Mexican immigrant labor as controllable, predictable, cheap and reliable. However, the narrative of need also implies that Mexican immigrants were “poor, uneducated and without ambition.”⁵ As shown below, the first narrative is strongly rooted in historical events as well as migratory patterns of Mexican laborers.

The end of the Mexican-American War in 1848 signaled the beginning of several migratory cycles of Mexican laborers to the United States. For the next fifty years, tens of thousands of Mexican migrant workers traveled to the American Southwest, contributing their labor and knowledge in mining operations and agriculture.⁶ From 1900 to 1910, responding to the continued demand for labor resulting from the effects of the Chinese Exclusion Laws, 48,900 Mexican migrant workers were permitted entry.⁷ When the United States entered World War I in 1917, the absence of American laborers necessitated the creation of the first guest worker program by the Department of Labor, which lasted until 1921.⁸ For many Mexican nationals, this represented an opportunity for obtaining socioeconomic advancement: a universal concern for immigrants, but particularly for those traveling north to the United States.⁹

Migratory trends from Mexico, mostly due to immigration policies such as the Guest Worker Program of 1917, reflected the dominant discourse in the United States Congress that Mexican labor was cheap, reliable, and necessary for building the infrastructure of the American Southwest. However, in the broader context,

5 Lisa A. Flores, “Constructing Rhetorical Borders: Peons, Illegal Aliens, and Competing Narratives of Immigration,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 20 no. 4 (2003): 370.

6 Ediberto Román, *Those Damned Immigrants: America's Hysteria over Undocumented Immigration* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 116.

7 Gilberto Cardenas, “United States Immigration Policy Toward Mexico: An Historical Perspective,” *Chicano Law Review* 2 (1975): 68.

8 Román, *Those Damned Immigrants*, 117.

9 Cardenas, “United States Immigration Policy Toward Mexico,” 68.

public opinion regarding ‘undesirable’ immigrants like those from Asia and parts of Europe remained and influenced other immigration laws as well. In 1917, Congress passed a law requiring literacy tests for immigrants sixteen years or older in addition to the implementation of a head tax. Furthermore, it restricted immigration from India and other parts of Asia that were not already included in the Chinese Exclusion Act.¹⁰

Despite these restrictive components, Mexican immigrants were exempted because of the United States’ government general unwillingness to slow Mexican labor trends. When the Quota Act of 1924 was implemented, which reduced immigration from many parts of Europe and Africa, countries in the western hemisphere like Mexico were once again exempted. The Department of Agriculture continued to emphasize the important role Mexican laborers played in America’s economy, whereas the State Department argued that closing off countries south of the border would adversely affect relationships with Latin American countries.¹¹

Nonetheless, anti-Mexican sentiment existed in the United States government. In 1928, Congressman John Box of Texas expressed his concerns regarding Mexican immigration:

*The admission of a large and increasing number of Mexican peons to engage in all kinds of work is at a variance with the American purpose to protect the wages of its working people and maintain their standard of living. Mexican labor is not free; it is not well paid; its standard of living is low. The yearly admission of several scores of thousands from just across the Mexican border tends constantly to lower the wages and conditions of men and women of America who labor with their hands in industry, in transportation and in agriculture.*¹²

The opinions of John Box were shared by many, particularly those from labor unions, who were not only disturbed by the alleged negative effects of Mexican

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 69.

¹² Congressman John Box, “1928 Speech to House of Representatives,” http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=594.

immigrants in the America's job market but also their racial and economic characteristics. Yet even before 1928 when John Box gave his speech, this type of rhetoric existed and resulted in government-sponsored labor reports that attempted to address the concerns of unions and alleged "racists."¹³ Victor S. Clark, an economist and historian, wrote the first labor report in 1908 concerning Mexican immigrants' societal role in the United States, comparing them to blacks in the South who "were not permanent, did not acquire land or did not establish themselves in little cabin homesteads, but remained nomadic outside of American civilization."¹⁴ As Gilberto Cardenas describes, the report written by Clark in 1908 and subsequent reports in 1911 attempted to reassure unions and alleged racists that Mexican immigrants were brought in for the sole purpose of developing the infrastructure in the American Southwest and were neither considered eligible nor able to permanently reside in the United States.¹⁵

John Box and others who were opposed to Mexican immigration helped popularize what Flores describes as "the Mexican problem" or the second narrative concerning Mexican immigrants living in the United States. This narrative, strongly rooted during the events of Great Depression and directly after World War II, describes public perception of Mexican immigrants not only as threats to wage earnings and job availability but also as carriers of deadly diseases, violent criminals and threats to American society in general.¹⁶ In his 1928 speech, Congressman Box highlighted the risks associated with converging with Mexican immigrants: "Mexican peons are illiterate and ignorant. Because of their unsanitary habits and living conditions and their vices they are especially subject to smallpox, venereal diseases, tuberculosis, and other dangerous contagions."¹⁷

Though anti-Mexican sentiment existed, it was unable to completely convince the United States' government to cancel guest worker programs or make Mexican laborers eligible for literacy tests and head taxes. Nonetheless, the years 1924 and 1929 marked two milestones for United States immigration policy in a broader

13 Cardenas, "United States Immigration Policy Toward Mexico," 70.

14 Ibid., 71.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 74.

17 Box, "1928 Speech"

context with the creation of the Border Patrol and making unlawful entry into the country a misdemeanor and unlawful reentry a felony, respectively.¹⁸ While these policies affected all immigrants, they impacted Mexicans uniquely for the reasons regarding their prior exemptions from anti-immigrant stipulations as well as their geographical relationship alongside the southern border of the United States. These new government stances, along with increasing anti-immigrant rhetoric, ultimately resulted in the mass deportations of many people of Mexican descent living in the United States during the Great Depression of the 1930s. As jobs became scarce and public pressure on legislative leaders grew, Mexicans living in the United States were blamed for the nation's economic downturn and many were deported, either forcibly or by acts of intimidation and persuasion. The label given to this historical episode, popularly known as the "Mexican repatriation," is debunked by historians who argue that around 60% of Mexicans deported from the United States were actually citizens.¹⁹

When the United States entered World War II, politics regarding Mexican immigration shifted once again in response to a demand for labor in agriculture. A treaty signed in 1942 by Mexico and the United States resulted in the creation of the Bracero Program, which allowed Mexican laborers to stay and work in the United States legally for nine months each year.²⁰ The program lasted until 1964 and served as the main pathway for Mexicans to enter the United States legally.²¹ Although the Bracero Program was largely successful in providing labor to the agricultural sector, it was not without problems. One condition of the treaty was that Mexican workers would be granted "contractual and civil rights protections," but many workers reported otherwise to the Mexican government upon their return.²² These complaints included inadequate accommodations, insufficient wages, safety hazards, and physical and emotional abuse.²³

18 Roman, *Those Damned Immigrants*, 118.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 119.

21 Cardenas, "United States Immigration Policy Toward Mexico," 76.

22 Ibid., 75.

23 Roman, *Those Damned Immigrants*, 119.

As the demand for agricultural jobs slowed following World War II, along with the general increase in fear of foreigners, the Border Patrol initiated Operation Wetback in 1954.²⁴ It was designed to deport any known undocumented Mexican person living in the United States. Similar to the 1930s “Mexican repatriation” episode, Operation Wetback deported anyone belonging to the appropriate racial group; United States citizens of Mexican descent as well as other Hispanic citizens were deported if they failed to show proof of residency upon questioning by authorities.²⁵For the remainder of the century, the Border Patrol became a powerful symbol of anti-immigrant sentiment.

The period of time between the end of the Mexican-American War and the end of World War II can be described as trends in migratory labor and levels of xenophobia. Initially, when additional labor was required to construct social and economic infrastructure in the American Southwest, government policies greatly favored the participation of Mexican laborers. In addition, guest worker programs were created during moments of labor deficit. However, during economic slumps, levels of anti-Mexican sentiment increased and led to the enforcement of controversial immigration laws. The driving forces behind both phenomena were the two competing narratives described by Flores.

Largely absent from the ever-changing government immigration policies during the twentieth century are the testimonies of undocumented immigrants living in the United States. In recent decades, numerous efforts were undertaken in order to not only catalog experiences of undocumented immigrants, but also to make their personal histories available to the general public. This was accomplished by the work of numerous interviews as well as by the willingness of the interviewees to become visible. As a note, almost all the names presented below have been changed by interviewers and editors to protect immigrant identities who risk possible arrest, detention, and deportation.

24 Ibid., 120.

25 Ibid.

Negotiating Visibility as an Undocumented Immigrant

While many of these narratives illustrate human rights abuses because of their visibility in society, Peter Orner, an immigration lawyer and novelist, observes that “it is not that undocumented people do not have human rights; it is that exercising these rights in the real world is another matter entirely.”²⁶ By demanding their rights, or by simply speaking out against injustices in the workplace, undocumented immigrants increase their levels of visibility and the risk of abuse and exposure. Insisting upon one’s rights as an undocumented immigrant is therefore difficult in that it not only makes one particularly vulnerable to abuse from authorities but it can also create rifts between other undocumented immigrants in the same space.

Although the United States-Mexico border has historically been imagined as a gateway for Mexican migrants, it is actually used by many other nationalities in the western hemisphere. Diana, an undocumented immigrant from Peru who, at the time of her interviews, was living in Mississippi, decided to emigrate because of the economic slowdown in the garment industry. Her son, who had already left Peru for the United States several years earlier, provided a useful social network for Diana to take advantage of upon her arrival. Through the acquaintances she made, she was able to secure a job for herself and create a foundation to live on.²⁷

In 2006, after having survived Hurricane Katrina, Diana was picked up by authorities from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) along with several of her coworkers. In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, many Hispanic laborers, documented and undocumented, were brought to the affected areas in order to help in reconstruction, which often included clearing roadways and picking up debris. When the demand for their labor diminished, ICE operations in the area dramatically increased as Diana noted: “We’d heard they were doing dragnets all over the place, especially in the part of the Gulf Coast where we were.”²⁸ However, unlike the experiences from her coworkers, the experience of her arrest and detention reflected her level of preparedness.

26 Peter Orner, “Introduction: Permanent Anxiety,” in *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives*, 10.

27 “Diana,” in *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives*, 20.

28 *Ibid.*, 25.

The social networks of undocumented immigrants living in the United States serve multiple purposes, including providing training and advice on what to do when one is arrested. Before her arrest, Diana attended meetings provided by a pro-immigrant rights group in which they role-played scenarios interacting with police and immigration authorities.²⁹ As she describes, one of the most important strategies for undocumented immigrants is to immediately request a lawyer, a phone call and withhold any personal information, particularly referring to a country of origin.³⁰ In the entire group that was arrested, she was the only one who refused to cooperate with ICE authorities, which resulted in unintended backlash from not just her captors but from her coworkers as well.

Under pressure from both parties, Diana insisted on her rights and refused to tell the authorities her place of origin. As she recalls,

They detained me for a long time, repeating themselves, trying to get me to tell them what they wanted. They were really big men, muscular. They all spoke Spanish. One of them had a nasty face. He grabbed me and shook me and yelled, "Tell me the truth!" He was getting red in the face. But I kept telling them that I had a right to a lawyer and a phone call.³¹

Fearing further harassment from ICE, her coworkers insisted that Diana tell them everything they asked for. Finally, after her coworkers turned over all information, including her country of origin, the group was transferred to jail for being undocumented. As Diana notes, "if my coworkers had done what I did, if they had insisted on their rights, none of us would have wound up going to jail."³² For the next few months, Diana was transferred to multiple jails across the South, often sharing spaces with male inmates and violent criminals. While Diana's story fits both narratives described by Lisa Flores, it also illustrates the connection between visibility, human rights, and its relationship relative to other undocumented immigrants. Diana's deci-

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 26.

31 Ibid., 27.

32 Ibid.

sion to insist on her rights alienated herself from the rest of her coworkers, which created an exploitable rift and ultimately resulted in her imprisonment.

Undocumented immigrants can become visible in more subtle ways than insisting on ones' human rights. Cultural differences can make some groups more visible than others, which once again creates exploitable rifts in certain spaces. Abel, an indigenous Maya from Quiche, Guatemala, considers himself a man without borders for two reasons: his indigenous background and his undocumented status in the United States. The orchestrated violence by the regime of General Romeo Lucas Garcia, who was president of Guatemala from 1978 to 1982, resulted in the emigration of many Maya to neighboring countries, where they then faced further difficulties because of their inability to speak fluent Spanish. Abel, who speaks K'iche' as his native language, only learned Spanish after arriving in the United States.³³

Abel's perception of what life would be like in the United States was comparable to others in similar situations, often ending in the same realization: "my illusion, my dream, was to come here because everything would be total peace and calm in the United States...I later found that this was all a sham."³⁴ Because he was neither able to speak Spanish nor English, as well as his unique cultural background, the pool of available jobs offered to him were both limited and relatively more dangerous than undocumented immigrants who are able to obtain employment as domestic workers or restaurant laborers. When Abel arrived in New Bedford, Massachusetts, he found employment in a fish house, on the condition "that I did everything they wanted."³⁵

Abel was asked by his employers to convince other Guatemalans in the area to join him at the fish house, but the changing demographics of the fish house resulted in additional conflicts in the work place:

I mostly just spoke K'iche' with all the other indigenous Guatemalans working there. The other Hispanics didn't like it that we spoke our own language.

33 "Abel," in *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives*, 120.

34 *Ibid.*, 121.

35 *Ibid.*, 122.

*When we greeted each other, they thought we were making fun of them secretly. They would say, "Don't use that fucking language here." The other Hispanics working there were Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and some Salvadorans.*³⁶

The divisions among ethnic groups at the fish house produced a social hierarchy whose labor was easily exploitable and sometimes fatal. A friend of Abel's was tasked with cleaning out a machine used to grind up and process fish parts. None of the employees at the fish house knew how it operated, but they did know that the task required them to climb into the machine where temperatures reached 180 degrees. Abel described the experience as like "being inside an oven" and his friend, who was responsible for cleaning it, died inside.³⁷

After the death of his friend, Abel returned home in 1996, but he was forced into the Guatemalan government army to fight his own people who were described as "guerrillas" and "terrorists."³⁸ Unwilling to fight against his own people, Abel escaped the army and made his way back to New Bedford. While crossing through Mexico, he was picked up by Mexican immigration authorities who stole his belongings, tortured him and sent him back to Guatemala. Abel's story is significant because not only does it illustrate how a heightened level of visibility can expose oneself to abuse, but also because his visibility stemmed from language and cultural differences. In other words, his K'iche' background contrasts sharply with our conceptions of what an undocumented immigrant is supposed to look and sound like.

The Narratives of DREAMers: Hope and Contradictions

Undocumented immigrant youth approach the act of negotiating visibility differently than their older counterparts for a variety of reasons. For example, many were brought into the country illegally without their knowledge. This means that often they grow up without knowing of their undocumented status. In addition, they are guaranteed a public education through the twelfth grade, according to the Supreme Court ruling of *Plyer v. Doe*, in which the court ruled it was unconstitu-

³⁶ Ibid., 123.

³⁷ Ibid., 124.

³⁸ Ibid., 126.

tional to withhold access to a free public education, kindergarten through twelfth grade, for undocumented children.³⁹

Having access to a free public education influences undocumented immigrant youth in significant ways that contrast with the lives of undocumented immigrant adults. The average eight-hour school day exposes undocumented immigrant youth to broader social and cultural networks than their parents. These networks affect the diversity of people immigrant youth associate with as well as the transmission of values, beliefs and principles. In this respect, many undocumented immigrant youths who arrive in the United States as infants often associate themselves more with American culture than the culture from their country of origin, of which they have little to no memory of.

Those who immigrate during their teenage years are often more aware of the social and political ramifications of entering the country illegally, including their jeopardized status as a consequence as well as the impassioned political debates that surround the topic of undocumented immigration. These factors sometimes appear in the testimonies of undocumented immigrant youth and influence the construction of their identities, creating conflicting narratives that are interesting to explore. Therefore, it cannot be argued that all undocumented immigrant youths identify as Americans; some prefer a hyphenated identity, such as Mexican-American, while others claim complete ownership over their countries of origin.

In the case of the DREAMers, this negotiation transformed into a full-fledged protest, resulting in congressional bill drafted in 2001 titled the DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors), which ultimately failed to pass the Senate in 2010.⁴⁰ While the DREAM Act did not obtain the necessary votes, immigrant youth supporters of the movement, many of them undocumented, continue to self-identify as DREAMers and work towards pathways to citizenship.

The restrictions from participating in American society become most apparent to undocumented immigrant youth after they graduate high school. Because of

39 Hinda Seif, “Unapologetic and Unafraid”: Immigrant Youth Come Out from the Shadows,” *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* no. 134 (2011): 63.

40 Walter Nicholls, *The DREAMers: How the Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 150.

their inability to apply for federal university loans, ineligibility for in-state tuition and meager job offerings that are often low-paying, undocumented immigrant youth describe graduating high school as hitting the “brick wall”:

*The brick wall that never crumbles, the brick wall that we hit every time we believe a door has been opened for us. The uncertainty of a successful future. The exhaustion of always maintaining hope and being let down. The exhaustion of maintaining the thought of things turning out well in the end. The feeling of detachment from the rest. The idea of knowing that everyone around us is headed for success while we are stuck in the middle of everything, always moving backwards, never moving forward.*⁴¹

This popular sentiment became a catalyst for political activism among undocumented teens in recent decades who have been particularly successful in garnering media attention for a number of reasons: their relatively higher levels of education compared to their parents, their proficiency in speaking English, and their focus on achieving college degrees.⁴² These qualities created a niche group in the immigrant rights debate and eventually proposed the DREAM Act, which was designed to give undocumented youth “of good moral character,” who have lived in the United States for at least five years and have graduated high school, a six-year resident status in which they could be eligible for permanent status if they completed two years of college or a military service.⁴³

The issues relating to this niche group were first presented to Congress in 2000 by immigrant rights groups such as the National Immigration Law Center and the Center for Community Change.⁴⁴ These organizations helped legitimize the DREAMers as a political group on a national level. While there had been several efforts before 2000 to grant in-state tuition and access to federal loans for undocumented youth at the state-level, these movements differed largely from the

41 “Andrea,” in *Papers: Stories by Undocumented Youth*, eds. Jose Manuel, Cesar Pineda, Anne Galisky and Rebecca Shine (Portland, OR: Graham Street Productions, 2012), 21.

42 Seif, “‘Unapologetic and Unafraid,’” 67.

43 Ibid.

44 Nicholls, *The DREAMers*, 48.

DREAMer movement because they were entirely managed by state legislatures and professional immigrant rights groups, both of which ignored opportunities for undocumented youth involvement in meaningful ways. In addition, prior movements lacked a key component to any social cause: a strong and relatable message that pandered directly to a hostile, anti-immigrant, political atmosphere.⁴⁵

For the DREAMer movement to gain legitimacy as a political group, professional immigration rights groups created a message that could be easily reproduced during interviews, on protest signs and in newspaper editorials. The message was interpreted as a summary of all undocumented immigrant youths' experiences in the United States: they were educated, they were assimilated and they were innocent. In other words, the message was designed to erase negative stereotypes of immigrants as unmotivated, stupid and culturally incompatible with American values, beliefs and customs. In addition, the message emphasized that these youth were not to blame for their "illegality," but rather, they were simply brought along with their parents and had no choice.⁴⁶

Leaders of the DREAMer movement were tasked with training undocumented youth in how to express these themes effectively. For example, in the early 2000s, protesters were advised against showing any non-American symbols or signs during gatherings or media interviews. Mexican flags were banned at such events and American flags were encouraged. The Statue of Liberty became a prominent symbol during protests because of its connotations of freedom, self-determination and work ethic. The use of these American symbols and signs, rather than national flags or modes of dress from different countries of which immigrants emigrated from, was intended to show that undocumented immigrant youth "belong" in the country.⁴⁷

In order to combat stereotypes of undocumented immigrants as unmotivated and criminals, DREAMer leaders focused on the high levels of achievements, grades, and awards of exceptional undocumented students to show that they could be positive contributors to American society. In other words, granting citizenship to

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 49.

47 Ibid., 51.

these youth would not only improve their lives but also the lives of all Americans. The personal narratives that were circulated highlighted youth succeeding in high school and college despite the obstacles they encountered as being undocumented. These narratives were selected as examples of deserving immigrants because they were “easy to read, emotional and convincing.”⁴⁸

Lastly, in order to humanize undocumented immigrant youth, DREAMer leaders portrayed them as innocents who should not be held responsible for the decision made by their parents. This theme became the most effective and most controversial of the DREAMer movement. Illegality has always undermined undocumented immigrant rights and their acknowledgement as human beings.⁴⁹ Therefore, shifting the blame from undocumented youth to their parents was considered necessary for the advancement of the group’s cause, which favored promoting a pathway to citizenship for a niche group rather than for all undocumented immigrants.

Over the years, many DREAMers became dissatisfied with their leaders and its message of the “deserving” immigrant. They also felt the movement overall became too simplified in its effort to summarize all undocumented youth’s experiences under one framework. There were too many stories that were being ignored, mainly those belonging to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) and non-Hispanic youth.⁵⁰ These dissident DREAMers established new community groups, many of them in virtual spaces like Facebook and Twitter, in order to reconstruct and redefine what undocumented immigrant youth looked like and what they stood for.

In 2010, this change in strategy resulted in the creation of a new message: undocumented youth dismissed the requirement for complete assimilation as grounds for public approval, they became angry about feeling ashamed for being undocumented, and they would not apologize for their parents’ decisions.⁵¹ Coming out became a key element of the new message, in which undocumented youth from all backgrounds, regardless of educational achievement, testified publically to news

48 Ibid., 52.

49 Ibid., 53.

50 Ibid., 118.

51 Ibid., 121.

media outlets, on college campuses, and on Facebook and Twitter. Ju, an undocumented youth from South Korea, decided to come out in 2011 despite the social stigma he faced from his community in San Francisco: “Being an Asian undocumented student, it was extremely challenging to ‘come out’ because there aren’t many support systems within our own community. Instead, there’s a lot of cultural stigma and social discrimination against undocumented immigrants. They tend to look down upon undocumented immigrants and treat us like inferior beings.”⁵² Ultimately, Ju decided to come out after researching support networks on his college campus of UC Berkley, as well as articles written by Tam Tran, a prominent Vietnamese-American student advocate for immigrant rights at UCLA. Her untimely death in 2011 was a significant motivator for Ju, who has decided to help undocumented Asian immigrant youth find support networks on Californian college campuses after he graduates.⁵³

The new message incorporates a wider arrange of undocumented immigrants who are willing to publically support other DREAMers across the nation. While the first message focused on a single narrative, the second message is framed around intersectional characters, as was the case in the example of Ju.⁵⁴ The term “coming out” was borrowed from the LGBTQ community, which shares many similarities with the current DREAMer movement. Salvador, a gay undocumented youth, explains how his initial anxieties with coming out to his family as a gay man as well as to the public as an undocumented immigrant were similar:

*There are similarities between coming out as undocumented and coming out as being gay. You fear that people will reject you and that your friends might look at you weird or feel like you lied to them. You don’t know how they’re going to react. When I came out as undocumented to my friends, I felt like I didn’t have to hide anymore and they respected me.*⁵⁵

52 “Ju,” in *Papers: Stories by Undocumented Youth*, 59.

53 *Ibid.*, 60.

54 Nicholls, *The DREAMers*, 125.

55 “Salvador,” in *Papers: Stories by Undocumented Youth*, 70.

In both situations, coming out is a way of asserting one's existence and rights as a human being.⁵⁶ In addition, it has certain psychological effects as described by Jose Vargas, an undocumented immigrant from the Philippines: "Maintaining a deception for so long distorts your sense of self. You start wondering who you've become, and why."⁵⁷ Ultimately, coming out as an undocumented immigrant is defined as achieving the highest level of visibility along with the respective advantages and disadvantages.

The DREAMer movement has shown that while many undocumented immigrant youth make efforts to highlight their "Americanized" selves and hope to seek legitimacy, others adopt a compound identity, such as Mexican-American or Hispanic-American. Alex Stepick and Carol Dutton Stepick argue that the creation of a hyphenated self is the reaction to "immigrant youth's confrontations with prejudice and discrimination."⁵⁸ They observe that for some undocumented immigrants living in the United States, assimilation into mainstream culture has transformed into "segmented assimilation," in which immigrants assimilate into multiple cultures.⁵⁹ In this respect, immigrant youth can take on a variety of different identities.⁶⁰

Lorena, an undocumented youth living in Fresno, California, left her home country of Mexico for the United States with her brother and mother to escape their abusive father. Although she was only six years old at the time of her migration, she continues to identify strongly with her hometown of Puebla, in large part due to her grandmother whom they had to leave behind. Lorena was able to enroll in college with the assistance from California's State Law AB 540, which makes undocumented students eligible for in-state tuition if they have graduated high school.⁶¹ As a college freshman, Lorena was given the opportunity to join an internship helping farmworkers in North Carolina. Her work entailed supporting labor unions such as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee,

56 Nicholls, *The DREAMers*, 121.

57 Jose Vargas, "My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant," Op-Ed., *The New York Times Magazine*, June 22, 2011.

58 Alex Sepick and Carol Dutton Stepick, "Becoming American, Constructing Ethnicity: Immigrant Youth and Civic Engagement," *Applied Developmental Science* 6 no. 4 (2002): 248.

59 *Ibid.*, 249.

60 *Ibid.*, 254.

61 "Lorena" in *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives*, 190.

whose workers were mostly foreigners from Central America. While working at the internship, she engaged in a number of hands-on jobs including informing guest workers of their rights, teaching them to read, and suggesting strategies to reduce risk while working. Her civic engagement with Latino guest workers, many of them Mexican, helped her retain cultural connections with her country of origin.⁶²

At the time of her interview, Lorena was in her seventh year of school as an undergraduate, mainly because often she could only afford one class each semester. But she was thankful for the people who have given her opportunities to succeed in the United States despite her undocumented status, such as her school adviser who helped secure her internship as well as her two employers who, despite being aware of her status, continued to employ her because of her work ethic. However, her uncertain place in American society strains her ability to retain a hyphenated self as “Mexican-American.” “It’s really hard to keep my identity of being Mexican. I’m very proud of being Mexican, but being Mexican now is almost taboo...I really don’t know what to call myself now...I love both countries.”⁶³

Lastly, there are undocumented immigrant youth who approach identity and visibility in an entirely different fashion, one that arguably competes with the positive connotations put forth by DREAMer activists. Alejandra, who arrived in the United States at thirteen years old, has vivid memories of her migration through the Sonoran Desert. Led by coyotes, or smugglers, she recounts how she was unaware that she, her brother, and their mother were being led into the United States illegally. Her migration experience at least partly defines her identity: “Unlike many DREAMers, I had always felt like a criminal. I was old enough to know that jumping the fence was not legal, my entry was not sanitized with a passport or a temporary visa. Still, I could do little about it. I cannot blame my parents either...”⁶⁴

Alejandra struggles between two narratives and conceptions of self: the politically charged and proud DREAMer and the “illegal” immigrant. Although she arrived safely and proceeded through high school at the top of her class, eventually graduating college with a degree in economics, Alejandra’s memories while

62 Ibid., 191.

63 Ibid., 199.

64 “Alejandra” in *Papers: Stories by Undocumented Youth*, 9.

crossing the border of coyotes, guns, drugs, and the Border Patrol strongly affected her. As William Pérez argues, “for immigrant children, the migration experience fundamentally reshapes their lives as familiar patterns and ways of relating to other people dramatically change.”⁶⁵

Lucia, an undocumented youth from Mexico who had just graduated high school at the time of her interview but found out that because of her status she was unable to qualify for federal university loans, was more direct in pointing out who was responsible for her current predicament:

*I wasn't asked to be brought here. I didn't choose to come here. I didn't ask for my situation. I feel like it's a punishment. I did everything I was told to do. I stayed out of trouble. I stayed out of gangs. I didn't get pregnant at sixteen. I'm a great member of society. I know more of civic duty than most naturalized or U.S.-born citizens. I know more about politics than most U.S. citizens. So why am I being punished?*⁶⁶

The deliberate use of these sources is not intended to show divisions in messages and ideologies among undocumented immigrant youth for political reasons, but rather to supplement the immigrant rights discussion by allowing a more diverse selection of voices to be heard. As Alejandra explains, she does not consider herself a DREAMer; therefore, her own narrative cannot be ignored. Likewise, Lucia indirectly blames her parents, a controversial stance according to some DREAMer activists but one that should nonetheless be highlighted. Countering dominant narratives of immigrants is crucial for giving all immigrants agency, respect, and a voice.

Conclusion

Although the DREAM Act failed to pass the Senate in 2010, the DREAMer movement continues to promote pathways to citizenship for undocumented immigrant youth. With the introduction of intersectional narratives as part of the message, the movement is arguably more inclusive as well as less focused than it was in the

⁶⁵ William Pérez, *Americans by Heart: Undocumented Latino Students and the Promise of Higher Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012), 9.

⁶⁶ “Lucia,” 91.

early 2000s. As Nicholls observes, the two messages “cannot coexist within the same movement because one negates the other.”⁶⁷ While the first message presents an accessible and effective method of highlighting educational achievement, assimilation, and innocence, it simultaneously splits undocumented immigrant youth in two categories: the “deserving” and the “undeserving.” In addition, by emphasizing the illegality of undocumented youth as a product of their parents’ decision, immigrant rights and reform debates continue to be segmented.

The second message has provided new opportunities for youth leadership and participation within the DREAMer movement, specifically from those who were formally excluded in the early 2000s, such as the LGBTQ and non-Hispanic communities. Coming out, a product of the second message, has encouraged undocumented youth from all backgrounds to be more politically engaged in the national discussion of immigrant rights. However, critics of the second message argue that the intersectionality of youth voices has weakened the message, does not pander to anti-immigrant historical rhetoric, and is actually more likely to encourage nationalistic attitudes from independent voters.⁶⁸

Historically, the United States has held conflicting views on the roles immigrants assume in society. Narratives of “deserving” and “undeserving,” “the hard worker” and “the criminal,” represents a top-down approach in analyzing degrees of immigrant participation. Certain events, such as the Great Depression of the 1930s and both World Wars, have largely influenced our understanding of previous migratory trends and public discourse that surrounded it. However, in recent decades, the experiences of undocumented immigrants have begun to change public perceptions and conceptions of what undocumented immigrants look like as well as their roles in society as a result of their own decisions to become visible. This trend manifests itself in a number of forms, due to a variety of reasons, with the same result: immigrants telling us who they are, what they have experienced, and what they think.

67 Nicholls, *The DREAMers*, 132.

68 *Ibid.*, 131.