**‘Felons are also our family’: citizenship and solidarity in the undocumented youth movement in the United States**

**Abstract**

The undocumented youth movement began in the US in the mid-2000s. Drawing on from qualitative research with undocumented young organisers in California, this article explores how relationships between undocumented youth, the wider undocumented population, *and* legal citizens have been understood in narratives of citizenship in the movement over time. It is argued that, paradoxically, the movement’s retreat from prioritising a pathway to legal citizenship for the most ‘eligible’, made visible historic and contemporary ties to the US and its peoples that are obscured in hegemonic narratives of contemporary citizenship. In becoming more inclusive of the wider undocumented population, positions of solidarity with marginalised US citizens have also emerged. In the context of attacks on racialised and other marginalised social groups during Trump’s presidency, such solidarity is even more vital.

**Keywords**

Undocumented, young, immigrant, citizenship, United States

**Introduction**

There are approximately 2.2 million undocumented[[1]](#endnote-1) children and young people in the US who arrived there as minors (Terriquez 2015). Since the 1982 Plyer vs Doe Supreme Court ruling barring their exclusion from public schools, they have had the right to attend school alongside US citizen peers (Abrego 2011). However, on reaching adulthood, they find themselves ‘awakening to a nightmare’ (Gonzales and Chavez 2012, 262) since, although they grew up in the US, legally they remain unauthorized ‘non-citizens’; they are *of* yet *outside of* the nation-state.

In 2001, immigrant rights organisations began campaigning for the federal Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act to provide a pathway to citizenship for many undocumented youth (Nicholls 2013). This campaign continued throughout the 2000s, leading to the emergence of the undocumented youth movement. Despite repeated attempts, the act did not pass into legislation (Negrón-Gonzales 2013). However, in 2012 President Obama signed an administrative order, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), giving eligible undocumented youth a two-year renewable stay of deportation and a social security number, enabling them to work legally. The dominant narrative, mobilised in the Dream Act and DACA campaigns, presented these young people - the ‘Dreamers’ - as innocent, assimilated, the brightest and best, and, thus, ‘deserving’ of citizenship (Nicholls 2013). The narrative was criticised, including by some young organisers at the time, for excluding and stigmatising other undocumented people who cannot enact conditionalities inherent in this citizenship framing (Unzueta Carrasco and Seif 2014). Consequently, as young organisers asserted greater autonomy over the campaign messaging, tactics and goals, these became more inclusive (Schwiertz 2016). Instead of prioritising a pathway to citizenship for a select group, they have brought to the forefront of their messaging a wider spectrum of concerns affecting the day-to-day lives and welfare of the wider undocumented community.

This article reviews key events in the movement, drawing on findings from two qualitative studies with undocumented young organisers in California to examine how political opportunities, challenges, and critiques, influenced the development of the movement’s campaign messaging and tactics from the early 2000s to the present day under the Trump administration. I explore how ‘citizenship’ has been narrated by young organisers within this process, focusing on relationships between undocumented young people and other marginalised (undocumented and citizen) populations in the US.

The movement’s journey in messaging and tactics highlights limitations of a binary conceptualisation of ‘citizenship’ and ‘non-citizenship’ as legal statuses. I consider how US citizens, and their relationships to undocumented people, are understood in the movement’s narratives of citizenship. As the movement’s messaging took greater account of the heterogeneity of the undocumented population, I argue this has also facilitated increased consideration and recognition of heterogeneous experiences of US citizens. As young organisers retreated from using the Dreamer narrative (through which they articulated an affinity with the ‘deserving’ neoliberal citizen) potential points of solidarity have emerged with US citizens who are also marginalised within this exclusionary citizenship framework. Paradoxically, retreating from prioritising attaining legal citizenship, and extending campaign actions beyond the formal political process, led to greater visibility of claims to historic and contemporary ties to the US and its peoples which have been obscured in hegemonic narratives of contemporary citizenship; this included connecting histories of resistance. In the context of threats to racialised and other marginalised social groups during Trump’s presidency, such solidarities are vital.

The article begins by reviewing the nature of citizenship and its exclusions. After outlining the research studies, I chart the rise of the Dreamers before examining critiques of the Dreamer narrative and changes that ensued as a result. I then explore emerging solidarities between undocumented youth, and other undocumented populations and marginalised citizens into the Trump era.

**Citizenship and its exclusions**

I begin by discussing ‘what is called citizenship’ (Isin 2009, 368), how migrants and legal citizens have been included and excluded from citizenship, and how migrant rights campaigns have protested exclusions.

As Isin (2009, 373) explains, ‘citizenship is about conduct across social groups all of which constitute a body politic and so governs ‘subjects’ and ‘abjects’ as well as ‘citizens’’. Nation-states confer legal citizenship on members as recognition of their belonging and contribution to the nation-state (Isin and Turner 2007). However, this does not always overlap with other dimensions of citizenship (statuses and practices), such as rights, political activity, and a sense of belonging (Bloemraad 2015). Anderson (2013, 2) argues, that, ‘modern states portray themselves […] as a *community of value,* composed of people who share common ideals and (exemplary) patterns of behaviour’. Although some rights and entitlements are tied to legal citizenship, neoliberal governance in the racial state means some migrants *and* legal citizens, are excluded from this ‘community of value’. Citizenship rights have been rolled back, hollowed out and made conditional through the enforcement of immigration controls and neoliberal governance (Anderson, 2013).

In response to challenges wrought by globalisation and neoliberal policies, governments have increased immigration enforcement to demonstrate state sovereignty and placate aggrieved citizens (Anderson 2013). In the US, the Mexican ‘illegal’ is *the* paradigmatic undesirable migrant. ‘Illegals’ stand accused of taking US jobs, while simultaneously being a drain on welfare (Chavez 2008). Since the 1990s, immigration controls and border enforcement have heightened, leading to a rapid increase in the number of immigrants detained and deported (Golash-Boza 2012).

Meanwhile, neoliberal governance has profoundly altered the nature of citizenship, transforming it from a rights-based model of citizenship to an active and productive model (Makinen 2016). Consequently, economic, social and civil rights associated with citizenship in the post Second World War era have been eroded (Isin and Turner 2007). Citizens must meet demanding and exclusionary criteria to be recognised as productive citizens who earn their citizenship entitlements (Makinen 2016). This is under increased levels of policing, guarding the divide between ‘deserving’ productive citizens and ‘undeserving’ ‘failed citizens’ (Anderson 2013). This transformation of citizenship hits hard at already marginalised populations. Through a process of responsibilisation, attention rests on individual choices rather than structural causes; the aim being to produce citizens who make the ‘right choices’. In the racial state, neoliberalism further oppresses some racialised populations since focus on individual responsibility and choice denies the role of structural racism (Goldberg 2009). In a ‘post-racial’ US, where a Black man became President, failure to succeed is presented as a personal failure to make good choices. Although gradually included into formal citizenship in the twentieth century, some marginalised citizens are not fully included in the community of value, and histories of subjugation have not been fully addressed. This was evidenced in 2016 as the first Black President was succeeded by the Ku Klux Klan endorsed 45th President, who ascended to power through a campaign grounded in racist and sexist rhetoric.

Just as some legal citizens face exclusions from citizenship, some *non*-citizens can enact required conditionalities so that some ‘rights and entitlements once associated with citizens are becoming dispersed among populations which can include noncitizens’ (Ong 2005, 697). Therefore, in examining citizenship’s inclusions and exclusions, we must look beyond a binary model of legal ‘citizenship’ and ‘non-citizenship’ to recognise complexity, flux, heterogeneity and hierarchy within each condition, including common experiences bridging across formal boundaries of legal citizenship. Rather than a rigid system of bounded legal and policy categories, Landolt and Goldring (2016, 854) draw on the Deleuzian metaphor of assemblage to conceptualize non-citizenship ‘as a dynamic multi-scalar assemblage that brings together disparate elements – social actors, relations of power, regulations, discursive frames, bureaucracies, sectors, etc. – in patterned and changing ways’. It is relational and dynamic as non-citizens negotiate and navigate systems that confer formal citizenship, or substantive rights. In this process, non-citizens strive to meet material and discursive conditions that enable access to these rights. Assemblage is also helpful for understanding heterogeneous social positions of legal citizens who must also demonstrate they deserve rights and entitlements. This makes visible complex relationships to communities of value, shared experiences, and potential opportunities for solidarity, across legal boundaries of citizenship.

Migrants and allies, have protested exclusions faced by migrants (McNevin 2011; Tyler and Marciniak 2013). Demands are often based on seeking recognition for existing practices of belonging. In doing so, movements draw on more expansive narratives of legality, citizenship and belonging, claiming rights and entitlements based on membership of groups and institutions such as schools, religious congregations, trade unions, or residency in locales (Abrego 2011; Patler and Gonzales 2015). However, claims are still usually contained within an overarching narrative of the ‘deserving’ innocent migrant who ‘contributes’, feels a sense of belonging, is morally upstanding; and does not harm others (Sirriyeh 2018; Yukich 2013). Negrón-Gonzales et al (2015, 8) explain, ‘deservingness’ is ‘a method of discipline that is based in a politics of respectability. Deservingness sets the rubric against which society determines the worthiness of immigrants to access basic human rights; it is a process with roots in decades past, part of an ongoing effort to further re-entrench borders both literal and figurative’. These ‘good’ immigrants, unlike ‘bad’ immigrants or ‘failed citizens’, are part of the ‘community of value’ (Anderson 2013), and thus deserve citizenship. There is a paradox in migrant protest; people protest border controls and exclusionary citizenship, yet the right to have rights is inextricably bound up with citizenship (Tyler and Marciniak 2013). Therefore, to gain material changes, protests often include demands for rights bound up in the nation-state framework of citizenship (Tyler and Marciniak 2013).

‘Acts of citizenship’ (Isin 2008) provides a useful framework for exploring dynamic processes of migrant protest and claims-making, looking beyond static, formal and legal notions of citizenship to examine how citizenship is mediated between lived experiences and formal entitlements. It focuses on moments when, regardless of status, people constitute themselves as citizens. Citizenship is a process in flux in which subjects constitute themselves as political subjects by becoming ‘claimants of rights and responsibilities, under surprising conditions’ (Isin 2008, 17). Acts of citizenship are performances that disturb and question existing scripts, creating a scene, bringing into being new actors, and transforming citizenship (Isin 2009).

Borders produce divisions and exclusions, but are also catalysts for relations of solidarity between migrants and citizens, or ‘bordering solidarities’ (Rygiel 2011,1).  However, literature on solidarity primarily centres on how migrants and citizens come together to support *migrant* rights(Rygiel 2011). The implicit assumption is that solidarity is between relatively privileged citizens and marginalised migrants. Less attention is given to relationships of solidarity between migrants and marginalised citizens. I suggest that, in this respect, there are useful examples of solidarities expressed in the undocumented youth movement’s messaging and actions around race, particularly in recent campaigns critiquing criminalisation and the immigration industrial complex.

**The studies**

This article draws on findings from two studies conducted in 2015 and 2017 in California. California has the largest undocumented populations in the US and is a key locale for organising in the undocumented youth movement (Nicholls 2013). In 2015, I conducted qualitative interviews with four undocumented young organisers and three allies in Los Angeles. We discussed the history of the movement, the roles of their organisations and their own work within this, and how emotions were engaged in campaign messaging. This was part of a wider study about emotions in immigration policy discourse in the US, UK, and Australia, exploring how emotions are engaged with both in efforts to justify, and resist, restrictionist immigration and asylum policy (Sirriyeh 2018). This research also served as a pilot for the 2017 study. In 2017, I spent two months in Los Angeles and Orange County, and two months in the Bay Area, studying undocumented young people’s pathways through activism in the undocumented youth movement in California. This project explored how their engagement in political activism shaped and was shaped by their understandings and experiences of ‘citizenship’. I conducted biographical narrative interviews with 24 undocumented young organisers, and one citizen ally and one undocumented parent who campaigned alongside young people. They told the story of how they became involved in the undocumented youth movement and their pathways through the movement. Los Angeles and the Bay Area have strong histories of activism and, specifically, migrant activism. Orange County is a more politically conservative region and can be a more challenging environment for activists. The young organisers were 18-30-years-old and were born in Argentina, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand. Some began organising prior to DACA, and others became involved more recently. Seven were from college-based organisations and 17 were from community-based organisations. Two others were members of both. Some community-based organisers had previously been in college organisations. I accessed participants through their organisations. Interviews lasted 1.5 - 2.5 hours, were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed through narrative analysis.

I also engaged in 44 hours of participant observation in Los Angeles and Orange County. During this period, I was a member of a community-based undocumented youth organisation. Members knew I was a researcher and invited me to join as a guest member. I participated in rallies, meetings, training events, lobbying events, workshops and conferences. This enabled me to gain direct insights into the day-to-day work of the organisers, the debates taking place in the movement, and how their messaging was put forward in different contexts.

I was a child migrant and my father was a refugee. However, I do not reside in the US, am a citizen of the country I reside in, and am not the same ethnicity as any research participants. Therefore, while we had points of connection, I was not an insider researcher. Fieldwork began two months after Trump’s inauguration. While I was in Southern California, no decision was announced on DACA. By the time I visited the Bay Area, it had just been announced (5th September) DACA was to be rescinded, and a nationwide campaign for the passage of a ‘clean’ Dream Act was in full force (Gambino 2017).

**American Dreamers**

Membership in the nation-state as a ‘community of value’ (Anderson 2013) is dependent on demonstrating deservingness. This is commonly acknowledged as based on economic or social contributions or being considered ‘vulnerable’, and not constituting a threat to others. The undocumented youth movement developed out of the Dream Act campaign, beginning in 2001 (Nicholls 2013). The campaign messaging centred on the ‘Dreamer’ narrative, which positioned undocumented youth as part of the community of value. Through mobilising this narrative, undocumented youth –the Dreamers – constituted themselves as political subjects by claiming rights (Isin 2009). Here I examine how various factors including material, social and cultural resources; political contexts; and discursive frames intersected in ways that facilitated some young people to exert their agency and meet material and discursive conditions of citizenship, enabling them to negotiate and claim rights (Landolt and Goldring 2016). The Dreamer narrative did not fundamentally transform central tenants of citizenship in the US, reflecting the paradox of migrant protest discussed earlier (Tyler and Marciniak 2013), but it did question the existing script by articulating a more expansive notion of the ‘good’ citizen to incorporate some young people despite their legal status.

The undocumented population is heterogeneous and ‘illegality’ is experienced differently according to people’s social position (Abrego 2011). This is in how people are treated by social institutions and responded to in public discourse, and in the development of their own legal consciousness (how they interpret and make sense of laws) and claims-making behaviour (Abrego 2011). There was a sense among the public that not all undocumented people constituted a threat, and some were ‘assimilated’ and contributed to the US (Patler and Gonzales 2015). Increased immigration enforcement since the 1990s also meant that enforcement agencies faced resource pressures and were directed to focus on the most egregious cases (Patler and Gonzales 2015). Therefore, despite immigration restrictions, ‘niche openings’ (Nicholls 2013, 10) appeared for undocumented immigrants who could present themselves as nonthreatening, assimilated, and contributing to the US. As Ingram and Schneider (2005, 219) observe, such ‘constructions of deservedness are undergirded and rationalized by well-accepted narratives, or story lines, in which various groups are portrayed as playing more or less positive roles in contributing to a national well-being’. They are also based on ‘racialized perceptions of who aligns with an “American” identity, culture, and values’ and what an ‘American’ identity is (Perez-Huber 215, 29).

Someundocumented youth had resources enabling them to assert their social worth and enact conditionalities linked to ‘deservingness’ within this hegemonic discourse of US citizenship. While undesired immigrants are deemed to be strangers, burdens and threats, having the right to attend public schools enabled undocumented youth to identify through the socially valued category of ‘student’. It also meant they were socialised and included within a key US social and cultural institution. Thus, they were often indistinguishable from documented peers and less likely to be negatively portrayed in the media (Abrego 2011). Abrego (2011) found that undocumented people who arrived in the US as adults, ‘were more likely to take some responsibility for the legal consequences of exclusion and humiliation based on their undocumented status’ because they acknowledged their decision to migrate. In contrast, some young people did not consider themselves responsible for their unauthorised status because they had not decided to migrate and felt a sense of unfairness at being excluded in the society they grew up in (Abrego 2011). Abrego (2011:350) concludes that their legal consciousness was shaped ‘by a sense of stigma from recognizing that there are rights and privileges that are unavailable to them due to their status’. Mateo[[2]](#endnote-2), a young Bay Area organiser, told me his motivation for entry into organising was that, ‘I didn’t want to be treated differently because of being undocumented’. As Negrón-Gonzales (2014:260) suggests, the contradiction between their legal identity as undocumented immigrants and their subjective identities as US raised youth was a catalyst for their entry into political organising.

Support for the Dream Act was garnered by countering anti-immigrant discourses through leveraging the youthful and ‘all American’ qualities of undocumented youth. To be eligible for citizenship under the Dream Act, applicants had to have arrived in the US before the age of 16, resided there for five years, and graduated from a US high school. They had to demonstrate ‘good moral character’, have no criminal record, and serve in the US military or attend college for two years (Nicholls 2013). In the early years of the movement these young people were presented as the epitome of the ‘American Dream’. Students fitting this profile were recruited by immigrant rights organisations as faces of the campaign; their testimonies were presented to the media and used to lobby politicians (Nicholls 2013). They were the brightest and best who would contribute to the nation. They were innocent, assimilated, and *felt* American (Patler and Gonzales 2015). Patty (Orange County) observed that, Dreamers were presented as innocent when referred to as, ‘oh poor you, you are a child you had no agency to say no I’m staying here’. Organisers recollected how these sentiments were also reflected in Dreamers’ testimonies when describing themselves as ‘Americans’ and saying they were ‘brought here’. These young people were high achievers pursuing the American Dream. Although a persuasive messaging tactic, focussing on ‘exceptional’ individuals who ‘make it’ despite hardships, implicitly furthers the argument that others are held back by individual failings rather than systemic oppression (Alexander 2010). The Dreamers worked hard, were morally upstanding and so achieved educational success and legitimacy and deserved a chance. This narrative resolved the paradox of their immigrant-youth identity by foregrounding their youthfulness, while cleansing them of undesired and stigmatised immigrant and racialised characteristics.

Organisers explained how academically successful youth unable to progress in their educational and career ambitions had been invested in Dream Act and DACA campaigns. Lucy (Los Angeles) said ‘I was naively optimistic with the whole American Dream thing, if you work hard you will succeed’. Amy (Bay Area) reflected that, the Dreamer identity was ‘empowering for some folks, especially for black and brown folks where your humanity is very much dependent on being seen as a human, right, and then being called a Dreamer was really the only way at that time’. As Jose (Los Angeles), explained, ‘these undocumented folks couldn’t get a job, they couldn’t drive so what were they doing? Fighting for their rights’. Facing barriers, they felt compelled to ‘come out’ to access support, bringing ‘undocumented students in community with other undocumented students’ and creating an entry point into activism (Negrón-Gonzales 2013: 1288).

Organisers referred to material and institutional assistance that supported them in this fight, including mentorship and training from major immigrant rights organisations, and support from influential politicians and the education sector who invested in the Dream Act campaign. Although the Dreamer narrative was strategically successful, exclusionary aspects troubled young organisers. They identified their own interests as tied also to the welfare and interests of their wider undocumented families and communities. As Set (Los Angeles) said, ‘if something happens to your family what good does your going to school do for you’. Even as conditions improved for Dreamers, organisers spoke of their anxiety about the welfare of their undocumented families. A range of factors converged to position these young people as citizens in waiting, but neither this nor even full legal citizenship in practice enabled them to feel like citizens when their families were unable to meet these conditionalities and remained at risk, and their right to family life was compromised. Thus, while many young people had publicly identified as Dreamers, this was intended as a strategic step within their wider efforts to support their families and secure legalisation for them also. As the movement became more youth-led and autonomous from 2010 onwards, young organisers assumed greater control over the development and framing of their campaigns, and their strategies and messaging shifted.

**Undocumented, unafraid**

In December 2010, the Dream Act bill failed again. Following their disagreements with some immigrant rights organisations, young organisers took a more central and directive role, assuming control over and shifting the movement’s messaging and tactics (Dominguez Zamorano et al 2010). While their embeddedness in US social institutions and their social and cultural integration was key to the claim that Dreamers deserved citizenship, these resources were now mobilised to present a more expansive understanding of citizenship.

Drawing on Hall’s theory of re-articulation, Negrón-Gonzales (2014: 265) argues that in negotiating illegality, undocumented youth rearticulated their exclusion as inclusion. This was realised by creating and sharing testimonio (a practice of documenting silenced and marginalised stories) and through mobilising the idea of ‘citizen change’ (the ability of citizens to affect social change) (Negrón-Gonzales 2014).

In 2010, the Immigrant Youth Justice League (IYJL) in Chicago initiated, what has since become a nation-wide practice of ‘Coming Out of the Shadows’. Drawing inspiration from LGBTQ practices, histories and cultures of activism, young people gave public testimonies in which they declared they were ‘undocumented and unafraid’ (Unzuetta Carasco and Seif 2014). In doing so they protested the criminalisation of undocumented people, contesting the notion that being undocumented prohibits someone from being considered deserving. Instead of cleansing themselves from the stigma of ‘illegality’ by emphasising their own lack of complicity in migration, they focused on decoupling the undocumented status itself from shame, guilt and criminality by explaining why parents migrated, using moral narratives about hard work and family responsibility to appeal to audience emotions. Hence, undocumented people were not criminals, but deserving would-be citizens.

The frustrations young people felt with the formal political process after repeated failures to pass the Dream Act, prompted them into direct action. They drew inspiration from earlier waves of activism in US history, particularly the Civil Rights movement which they studied in school (Negrón-Gonzales 2014; Unzueta Carrasco and Seif 2014). Negrón-Gonzales (2014, 268) observes that their school education included engagement with the notion of citizen change; this was ‘the idea that despite the seemingly impervious power of the government, ordinary citizens have the power to bring about change’, as they did during the Civil Rights struggles. This shaped the political pathways of undocumented youth.

At a time when occupation of physical space and bodily protest was in the ascendance, their mode of protest also bore similarities to actions in other millennial activist movements (Milkman 2017). In 2011, two organisers I interviewed were among a group of youth who took part in the first undocumented youth civil disobedience in California, protesting co-operation between local law enforcement and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in San Bernardino. That same year, two young organisers from Los Angeles, travelled to an immigration detention centre in Alabama where they turned themselves in, testing Obama’s professed policy of not detaining and deporting ‘low priority’ undocumented immigrants.

Organisers recalled how, also in 2011, the youth organisation, Dream Team Los Angles (DTLA), identified administrative relief as a potential way forward following the failure of the Dream Act 2010. In 2012, DTLA launched ‘The Right to Dream’ campaign, which the national undocumented youth organisation, United We Dream, expanded into a nationwide campaign, leading to the introduction of DACA (Khan 2012). During the DACA campaign, youth engaged in hunger strikes, and staged sit-ins in Senators’ offices, and in Obama’s presidential re-election campaign offices. They organised awareness raising expeditions across the US, such as the Dream Freedom Ride (Los Angeles to Washington DC) and the Undocubus tour across southern states (inspired by the Freedom Riders of 1961, some of whom they met on route) (Wong et al 2012). Aligning themselves with Civil Rights era protesters (an established part of the US national story) and wearing graduation caps and gowns during protests, reinforced the idea that these were misrecognised deserving people protesting unjust laws.

Acts of citizenship are performances that disturb routine and institutionalised actions, questioning existing scripts of citizenship (Isin 2009). Dreamers came into being as political actors by demonstrating their existing practices of citizenship and seeking to expand the boundaries of citizenship by gaining recognition for these practices. However, their campaign messaging still largely claimed their inclusion within the existing script of deserving neoliberal citizenship. Yet, as they expanded their actions beyond the formal political process and their campaign narrative became more inclusionary, their agenda become transformative, facilitating alliances with other undocumented people and marginalised citizens, as explored in the following section. As ‘activist citizens’ they engaged in developing a new script of citizenship, particularly, as will be argued, once the site of their struggle shifted from legalisation for some, to contesting the criminalisation of the wider community.

In initiating direct actions, youth asserted their right to political presence in the public sphere. In questioning which ‘America’ they claimed membership of and under what terms, they presented a different narrative of US citizenship and history. This was not the celebratory ‘nation of immigrants’ where hardworking immigrants could achieve the American Dream. Instead, the US was narrated as a site of struggle and suffering. Through storytelling and direct actions drawing on histories of resistance by oppressed peoples in the US, undocumented youth narrated themselves into the chronology of this alternative US story of protest and struggle against injustice. In doing so they widened the constituency they addressed, looking beyond the white neoliberal subject and identifying common ground with marginalised citizens. When framed through comparisons to the Civil Rights era, this was a celebratory reading of a story of struggle with a victorious conclusion. However, this narrative altered in recent years, particularly through a shift in emphasis to an anti-criminalisation agenda.

**‘DACAmented’ youth and solidarity**

By 2017, approximately 800,000 undocumented young people had acquired DACA (Gambino 2017). Although not a pathway to citizenship, recipients have a stay of deportation and a social security number. Some organisers used the term ‘DACAmented’ to acknowledge the differences between their lives, rights and entitlements and those of other undocumented people. Through access to DACA, young people built careers, bought homes and supported their families. In this sense, although DACA is a precarious and temporary status, in practice their ability to progress in their education and careers and live their day-to-day lives became more like citizen peers. This was particularly so in California which, since the 2000s, has enacted some of the most progressive legislation in the US in relation to the welfare of immigrants (Schwiertz 2016). In 2001, California passed Assembly Bill 540, allowing undocumented students attending a California high school for three or more years, to pay in-state tuition (rather than higher out-of-state or international) fees at publicly funded colleges and universities (Abrego 2006). In 2011, the California Dream Act passed, allowing ‘AB540 students’ to apply for state-funded student financial aid and non-state funded college scholarships (Gonzales and Chavez 2012).

***Shedding the ‘Dreamer’ narrative***

Several organisers described DACA as a ‘bandaid’ that diminished the sense of urgency because young people could work legally, and, thus, diffused the movement when people left to pursue work and education opportunities they had previously been blocked from. Those who remained, recognised an urgent need to prioritise the defence of undocumented people against detention and deportation and campaign against criminalisation and immigration enforcement (Schweirtz 2016).

Research participants described a process of internal reflection within the movement leading to the greater foregrounding of people who were marginalised in the Dreamer messaging. Even DACAmented youth, who fitted the Dreamer narrative at face value, had been unhappy when aspects of their own experiences that did not conform to this narrative were marginalised or silenced. For example, the narrative emphasised young people’s US identity and attachments, yet, as Edna (Los Angeles), said, ‘I came at 12 so I don't identify with the whole “Oh I don't know my home country”’. Others who came to the US as young teenagers spoke of their memories and attachment to their countries of origin and challenges settling into life in the US. Gabriela (Bay Area) described being isolated at school when she arrived from Guatemala where she was bullied for being Indigenous and not being able to speak English or Spanish.

Meanwhile, the Dreamer narrative was also deemed problematic because, as Patty observed, if young people were ‘brought’ to the US, this implied their parents brought them ‘in a criminal act, so in other words we were criminalising our parents in the process of being a Dreamer’. Undocumented (often working-class) parents had not had the advantage of completing their education in the US and often experienced exploitative working conditions and pay. While young people could appeal to their prospective future, older generations were judged on their past. This was something young people growing up with their parents always knew, but they now ensured this was incorporated into campaign messaging and not compromised by the strategic objectives of fighting for young people’s rights.

Even among their own generation, Dreamers were exceptional. Many undocumented people do not attend college. Thirty per cent of undocumented young people live below the poverty line (Nicholls 2013). Their undocumented status, combined with limited financial resources and socio-cultural barriers arising from living in low-income households and neighbourhoods meant that, like citizen peers in these neighbourhoods, many did not reach college. Jonathan Perez, a co-founder of the Immigrant Youth Coalition explained,

We don’t like the fact that we’re being pushed into higher education in order to be human. Cos, I didn’t graduate from college and neither did a lot of people. A lot of people who are in the process came to the reality that it’s impossible because citizens struggle taking loans.

While Dreamers had necessary discursive and material resources, and political support to enact the conditionalities attached to substantive rights (Landolt and Goldring 2016), others did not. Eva, who worked with undocumented youth, observed that early Dreamer organisations were usually college-based where students had more resources and institutional support for campaign work. The youth movement had emphasised the education and welfare of students (the main demographic of the movement), yet these were not necessarily the most pressing concerns for other undocumented youth or the wider undocumented community. Amy (Bay Area) explained how following the introduction of DACA, Californian organisations affiliated to United We Dream, withdrew from its network because they perceived some of its recommendations as,

very elitist and the youth weren't comfortable in proceeding with these narratives […] A lot of the California organizations, the youth organizations, wanted to focus on anti-criminalization efforts, so stopping deportations, like, targeting detention centres, as our key efforts.

Dreamers drew on the narrative of the American Dream. However, for many immigrants and citizens, this dream has not happened. The Dreamer qualities highlighted – their values, respectability and hard work – are attributes of the neoliberal subject which are ‘indexed to whiteness’ (Cisneros 2015, 360). Structural racism impedes the ability of some racialised populations to acquire these attributes, while the denial of this under racial neoliberalism means they are condemned as failed citizens (Goldberg 2009). Cacho (2012, 17) argues that, ‘ascribing readily recognizable social value always requires the devaluation of an/other, and that other is almost always poor, racialized, criminalized, segregated, legally vulnerable, and unprotected’. Injury is felt in misrecognition; being wrongly accused of belonging to a devalued category is responded to with outrage. The revaluation of the undocumented identity had been done by detaching this from the devalued identity of the ‘criminal’. As Adrian (Bay Area) found from his personal experiences during the Dream Act and DACA campaigns, ‘there was such a stigma with people…Until now, there's still a stigma of, like, people with, I guess we can call criminal records of, like, coming out of the shadows and sharing their stories’. Young organisers explained how this reinforced exclusions. For example, Edna said,

[We are] criminalising others because we are saying I'm not a criminal, I'm a student. That is also very anti-black language because if we are not the criminals then who is the criminal?

Undocumented people captured in the criminal justice system, are stigmatized and devalued. President Obama (2014) claimed his administration deported ‘felons not families’. Yet, the fate of the most stigmatised undocumented populations was often also intimately connected with the lives and well-being of relatively more privileged DACAmented youth. The separation of the ‘deserving’ from the ‘undeserving’ did not map on to the complexity of the lived experiences of DACAmented youth. As Edna observed, ‘felons are also our families’.

The criminal justice system is a means through which non-citizens *and* citizens are disciplined, classed as unproductive and expelled from the citizenry. Criminalisation affects abilities to enact other conditionalities needed to be accepted as deserving citizens, by restricting access to employment and political engagement (Alexander 2010). Black undocumented people are disproportionally affected by immigration enforcement because the institutionally racist criminal justice system, ‘has become a funnel into the immigration detention and deportation system’ (Morgan-Trostle et al 2016, 16) due to a ‘confluence of immigration and criminal law into parallel systems’ as the US Government has turned to regulating migration through crime (Dingeman and Rumbault 2010, 124). Allied to concerns about racial profiling and criminalisation of people of colour (including citizens), there was growing recognition that citizenship did not guarantee rights, equality or protection from harm in the US. It became apparent to organisers, such as Edna, that even while legalisation provided access to certain rights, ‘papers are not going to solve a lot of the oppression, a lot of the violence, exclusion and criminalisation because as people of colour we will never be accepted by this racist, homophobic, KKK country’.

Everyone I interviewed remarked that resistance to criminalisation and immigration enforcement had become a key site of struggle for the movement and (until the Trump presidency at least) was prioritised over efforts to secure legalisation for undocumented youth and others (Schwiertz 2016). In doing so, undocumented youth were ‘not claiming rights on the ground of belonging to the dominant social order but rather in reference to its discriminatory effects’ (Schwiertz 2016, 622); they prioritised greater inclusion in the struggle. Lily, an Indigenous woman from Los Angeles and born in Mexico, spoke of pressures she faced as a working-class, woman of colour asserting her right to citizenship, and the damage this inflicted on her self-esteem and well-being. She was no longer invested in pursuing a pathway to citizenship, explaining, ‘I don’t need a residency or citizenship to validate me as a human being, to validate all the work that I have done in my community’. Lily campaigned against the detention of undocumented people, but also for US citizens and immigrants caught up in the criminal justice system. She described how she connected different strands of her community work in her predominantly Black and Latino neighbourhood, through a narrative of resistance to the systemic race and class oppression which excluded both undocumented people and US legal citizens from citizenship rights and entitlements in practice. She explained how at community college she met US citizens:

who were in the same circumstances I was economically, community wise, education wise, they were all having struggles of their own. It was broader than just immigration. It’s a systematic thing. When you see that, that’s when I started embracing things and being an advocate for everyone […] I was able to understand the history of systematic racism and oppression.

In the Bay Area, Nancy’s campaign work also coalesced around her neighbourhood in East Oakland and the similar issues faced there as in Lily’s neighbourhood. Her school which served a working-class, predominantly Latino population, had been chronically underfunded affecting all children there, whether undocumented or not.

There has been recognition in the undocumented youth movement that undocumented people are racialized in different ways and subject to different degrees of visibility, surveillance and oppression in the criminal justice system. Most people I interviewed highlighted the greater visibility and growing recognition of experiences of Black undocumented immigrants, particularly from 2016 onwards, although they observed their experiences were still marginalised. The UndocuBlack Network formed and held their first national meeting in 2016. There has been increased recognition among undocumented and Black activist organisations of Black undocumented people’s struggles, and of overlapping priorities that undocumented and Black organisations have in resisting criminalisation. As Edna said, ‘with the criminalising of our black and brown bodies [we are] recognising that we need to be playing a more intentional role with our black brothers and sisters’.  This led to dialogue with [Black Lives Matter](http://blacklivesmatter.com/) and solidarity alliances, such as Freedom Side and Justice LA, between organisers from Latino, Black and other racialised populations. In 2016, Jonathan Perez said, the Californian undocumented organisation, Immigrant Youth Coalition (IYC), held retreats about anti-blackness so organisers could ‘have that conversation before we explicitly do more outreach in Black communities’. This outreach included supporting the UndocuBlack Network to convene in Los Angeles that year. Jonathan explained how IYC examined frameworks they were using, explaining, for example, that,

people were saying, ‘they were unjustly detained’. No. Detention itself is unjust so it’s an oxymoron. What you are choosing to say is that this particular person should not, but others should, and we know who that means. It’s black people. This country has made that very clear.

In September 2017 undocumented youth joined Black activists as part of the coalition, Justice LA, to block the street outside the Los Angeles County Hall of Administration with 100 beds, protesting the city’s planned jail expansion. In the Bay Area, Gabriela’s undocumented youth organisation in Oakland had co-organised a rally and vigil in her local neighbourhood with local Black and Latino youth organisations to protest gang injunctions and police brutality.

Walking through Santa Ana (Orange County) during a rally supporting immigrant transwomen detained in the city, a youth organiser told me about the impact of gentrification on Latino youth (citizens and noncitizens) and their criminalisation in, and exclusion from, the city’s downtown and his undocumented youth organisation’s efforts to resist this. In Los Angeles, undocumented young organisers from the predominantly Latino working-class neighbourhood of Boyle Heights were involved in the undocumented-led anti-gentrification campaign, Defend Boyle Heights. Jonathan, explained how gentrification, criminalisation, and immigration enforcement are interconnected,

it might as well be the landlord kicking them out, as border control or ICE. It has the same effect, contributing tactics to gentrification is policing, displacement in terms of housing, criminalising homeless people, criminalising street vending, it’s all connected.

Departure from the Dreamer narrative shifted the affective dimension of the struggle. Organisers expressed anger and outrage at the exploitation of people’s incarcerated bodies and labour for profit in the intertwined prison and immigration industrial complexes, the multiple forms of displacement experienced. This was identified as a continuation of interventions, power abuse and exploitation which pushed people to migrate to the US, and exploitative labour conditions they experienced there. Latin Americans and Filipinos pointed to histories of US intervention in their countries of origin, linking this to their migration to the US. As Patty said;

No one wants to come to live in another country the way that we do. It’s a more complex issue especially with US intervention in Latin America […] It’s not an accident that we have these groups of folks coming.

***Resistance under the Trump administration***

Since Trump’s election, young organisers have conducted anti-deportation campaigns and hosted Know Your Rights workshops for their communities. I travelled with organisers from Southern California to the annual Immigrants Day lobbying event at the state Capitol, where they campaigned for state legislation to end contracting with private detention facilities; against collaboration between local law enforcement and ICE, and for further funding for deportation defence.

Alliances of resistance have continued as marginalised populations face a hostile environment under the Trump presidency. For example, young organisers had attended protests at LAX when Trump’s ‘Muslim Ban’ was introduced in January 2017 and a NoBanNoWall demonstration in San Francisco. Building on recognition that Black undocumented immigrants and US citizens both suffer through being disproportionately targeted and drawn into the criminal justice system, organisers have called for the expansion of Sanctuary Cities (beyond immigration) to create spaces of sanctuary from racist policing and the criminalisation of Black US citizens (Mijente 2017).

However, the Dreamer narrative has not disappeared. Since Trump’s election, it has seen a resurgence among politicians and the media, but also among some young people in efforts to protect DACA. As threats to DACA loomed, young people used social media to highlight their educational and economic achievements through DACA, and what they, but also the US economy and society, stood to lose if DACA ends. In July 2017, the legislature introduced new Dream Act bills, garnering support from some immigrant rights organisations and undocumented youth (Gamboa 2017). However, there was concern about threats posed to solidarity with others. Californian undocumented youth network, California Immigrant Youth Justice Alliance (CIYJA) (2017), stated that supporting the Dream Act (prior to its re-branding as a ‘Clean Dream Act’) showed,

a lack of solidarity with those who continue to be scapegoated, “criminals.” We see the flaws of the immigration system as part of larger structure that is rooted in racism, patriarchy and profit, one that can only be reformed through collective community action and not by scapegoating the most vulnerable.

On 5th September 2017, it was announced that DACA will be rescinded. This prompted youth-led protests and civil disobedience. The power of the DREAMer narrative is evident in young people’s statements and in media coverage, but this time round young organisers also emphasise messages of solidarity. This is visible in the ongoing campaign by undocumented youth for a ‘*Clean* Dream Act’, a path to legalisation for undocumented youth without concessions on increased border and immigration enforcement measures (Gambino 2017).While many immigrant rights advocates welcome this development, we at CIYJA see this as a huge step back for immigrant justice in California and the entire country, especially under a Republican-controlled Congress and White House. Like most legislation attempts to patch up our exploitative immigration and justice system, it comes with heavy enforcement and tough-on-“crime” amendments that would only worsen as it makes its way to the president’s desk and further isolate people that have been victims of state violence.

We have come a long way in steering away from narratives that criminalize community members and create division since the days of the DREAM Act. Immigrant communities moved away from relying on legislative solutions and invested in building a movement that focuses on anti-enforcement, bridging the needs of immigrants and other oppressed people. Supporting the DREAM Act during a Trump administration not only normalizes Trump, but it sends a clear message about the lack of solidarity with those who continue to be scapegoated, “criminals.” We see the flaws of the immigration system as part of larger structure that is rooted in racism, patriarchy and profit, one that can only be reformed through collective community action and not by scapegoating the most vulnerable.

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**Conclusion**

This article has drawn on an ‘acts of citizenship’ framework to explore how undocumented youth constituted themselves as political subjects in claiming rights and entitlements. The undocumented youth movement has had significant success in expanding the rights and entitlements of many young people in the US. Initially this was done by invoking dominant neoliberal US citizenship values in campaign messaging, and expanding this script to recognise Dreamers’ citizenship practices.

As Landolt and Goldring (2016) argue, citizenship and non-citizenship are fluid and dynamic statuses produced through an assemblage of different elements such as resources, political contexts, policies and discursive frames. People can negotiate and navigate their positions to varying degrees depending on the resources available to them. The assemblage of various material, discursive and social resources discussed throughout this paper enabled Dreamers to meet the conditionalities for inclusion so that in a hierarchy of deservingness they were distinguished from other undocumented populations and presented as model would-be US citizens. However, although DACA significantly improved opportunities for ‘DACAmented’ youth, it is a temporary status, does not provide a pathway to citizenship and is under threat. Meanwhile, the conditionalities for DACA eligibility combined with its temporary status meant that recipients were always under pressure to maintain eligibility, while still fearing for the welfare of their undocumented families who had less protection.

Debates about citizenship revolve around terms of inclusion, relational processes, and affective dimensions of citizenship. The Dreamer narrative, emphasising earned contribution, belonging and even love for the US, drew on this affective dimension as campaigners sought to engage target audiences. The Dreamer was aligned with the figure of the deserving neoliberal citizen who contributes. Even when young people later embraced their undocumented identity in ‘coming out’ testimonies, being undocumented was reframed and allied to the attributes of being hard working and morally righteous. It was cleansed and distanced from this stigma of associations with criminality.

Since then, the undocumented youth movement has shifted away from prioritising a pathway to formal citizenship for those with the necessary resources to enact the conditionalities needed. It has re-focused on those most affected by immigration enforcement, criminalisation, and lack of access to substantive rights, who are least able to meet the conditionalities of dominant narratives of citizenship. Young people spoke about hardships that drove their parents’ migrations, the difficult circumstances under which they laboured in the US, and suffering caused by immigration enforcement. Through this, they linked their protests to the chronology of historical and contemporary injustices suffered by other marginalised populations in the US, and their resistance. In doing so, the affective dimension of their relationship to the US shifted to emphasise feelings of suffering and outrage and the blurring of formal citizenship and non-citizenship social positions within this shared affective landscape.

In this process, the stories undocumented young people told about their identity and relationship with the territory and peoples living there became a counter-narrative of ‘earned’ citizenship in the US nation-state. This narrative revealed longstanding claims that undocumented people and marginalised citizens can make about their relationships to this territory, and to each other, through enforced contributions and suffering ‘for’ the nation. Hegemonic narratives of US citizenship have obscured and de-historicised how the nation-state was made, rendering invisible *existing* ties and roles that excluded migrants and ‘failed citizens’ (Anderson 2013) hold. These have reinforced neoliberal rhetoric that nation-states are made through the willing contributions of productive citizens who have positive affective ties to the nation and, thus, earned their citizenship. While rejecting this hegemonic narrative of citizenship and shifting away from demands for formal citizenship, the undocumented youth movement’s messaging and actions have nevertheless asserted their ties and belonging in this nation-state by turning the rhetoric of ‘earned’ citizenship on its head. In focussing on substantive rights rather than access to formal citizenship, commonalities between undocumented immigrants and marginalised citizens are revealed. This highlights how their biographies are linked historically and in the present, and how the undocumented youth movement can be narrated into a US story of impelled contribution, suffering, dissent and resistance; a story of disavowed citizenship.

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1. People who migrated to the US, but lack documentation authorising their presence there. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. First names, full names, and pseudonyms are used. These various naming strategies are used to credit the intellectual work and acknowledge the voice of organisers, but protect anonymity where needed (Schwiertz 2016; Unzueta Carrasco and Seif 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)