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(Re) Framing Legal Vulnerability: Identity, Abjection, and Resistance among DACAmented Immigrants in the Era of Trumpism

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the narratives published in the New York Times by and about undocumented and DACAmented immigrants to explore how the abjective status of undocumented migration has shifted to the question of criminality. Using the stories shared by young undocumented immigrants publicly in the New York Times, after the election of Donald Trump, as well as the narratives used by politicians (like Trump), we analyze their narratives to explore what their stories reveal about belonging, identity, abjectivity, and resistance. We argue that abjectivity and illegality has been effectively dislocated by young immigrants, who have successfully challenged the construction of unauthorized migration as an abject status. Politicians, thus, have successfully shifted abjectivity from a question of illegality to a question of criminality, recasting young immigrants as “American dreamers,” while maintaining the abject subject as an illegal and criminal subject.

KEYWORDS

undocumented immigrants; belonging; abjectivity; illegality; borders; criminality

Introduction

As a candidate for the presidency of the United States, Donald Trump made his nationalist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Mexican stance very clear. He promoted building a higher wall on the U.S. Mexican border, and promised to deport those unauthorized to be in the United States—this included ending the executive memorandum issued during President Obama’s administration, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which protected some immigrants who had arrived before the age of 16 from deportation by providing them with a temporary legal status. On September 5, 2017, President Trump fulfilled his promise and rescinded the DACA program.

Given this political context of explicit anti-immigrant sentiment and anti-Mexican prejudice, we ask, what does it mean to live as an undocumented immigrant in the United States in these politically tumultuous and uncertain times? What does it mean to navigate between the narratives of citizenship and deservedness, and illegality and abjectivity? How do immigrants articulate belonging and respond to xenophobia?

This article explores the narratives published in the New York Times by and about undocumented immigrants after the election of President Trump, but before the end of DACA, to explore how the abjective status of undocumented migration has shifted from the issue of illegality to the question of criminality. Using these stories shared by young undocumented immigrants publicly in the New York Times, after the election of Donald Trump, as well as the narratives used by politicians (like Trump), we analyze their narratives to explore what their stories reveal about belonging, identity, abjectivity, and resistance. We argue that abjectivity and illegality have been effectively dislocated by young immigrants who have successfully challenged the construction of illegality as an abject status. Thus, politicians have successfully shifted abjectivity from a question of illegality to a question of criminality, while ignoring the racialized consequences of immigration enforcement. This shift reinforces the mainstream narrative of young immigrants as “American dreamers,” while maintaining the abject immigrant as an illegal and criminal subject. Yet, we show young immigrants continue to challenge illegality and abjectivity by talking about their family’s role in their own achievements.

Scholars have previously explored the stigma associated with illegality, explicitly theorizing illegality as an abject status (see Gonzales & Chavez, 2012). Gonzalez and Chavez’ research was based on the in-depth interviews they conducted from 2003 to 2008 with young immigrants. On June 15, 2012, President Obama announced a new policy by the Department of Homeland Security. This memorandum, known as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) guidance, outlined how, in the exercise of prosecutorial discretion, the DHS would “deferred the removal of certain undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children, have obeyed the law, and stayed in school or enlisted in the military” (White House, 2021), effectively shielding young immigrants (mostly 1.5 generation) from deportation (see Figure 1: Timeline of DACA). Our work builds on the work by Gonzales and Chavez (2012), and expands their contribution by exploring how abjectivity and illegality have changed post-DACA and in the context of the election of Donald Trump. Thus, in the context of all of these political changes brought about by the election of Trump, we ask, how do young immigrants frame their position, identity, and legal status after the Trump election? And how does illegality intersect with criminalization in the U.S.?

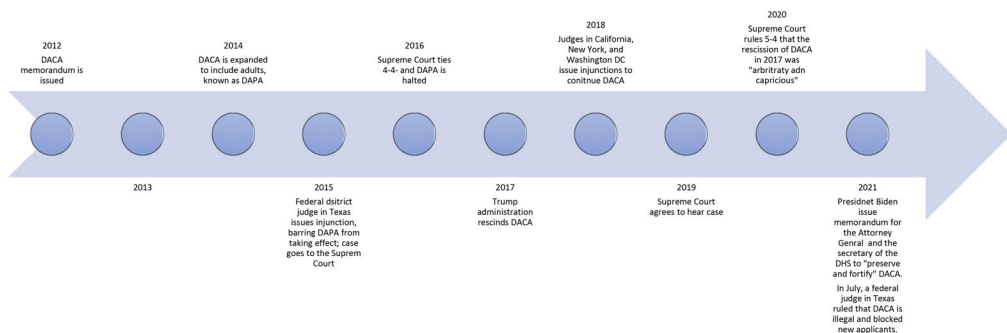


Figure 1. Deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA) timeline, 2012–2021. Sources: Federis (2020); White House (2021); ASU (2021); and DHS (2021).

Theorizing illegality, abjectivity, identity, belonging, and resistance

The abject subject is a subject that is degraded in society. According to Judith Butler, the construction of the abject subject is necessarily a social process by which the categories of insider and outsider are established. She argues that in fact, “What constitutes through division the ‘inner’ [insider] and ‘outer’ [outsider] world of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control” (Butler, 1990, p. 182). Moreover, in Butler’s account, power is a key element of defining the abject subject, as she further explains, “identities [are] founded on the instituting of the ‘Other’ or a set of Others through exclusion and domination” (Butler, 1990, p.182). Thus, an abject subject is an “othered” subject that is used as a comparison vis-à-vis the self—both for the purposes of comparison and contrast. In other words, to construct an abject subject is to construct borders that define the self (“us”) and the other (“them”).

An example of bodies deemed abject are undocumented immigrants, whose bodies have been historically portrayed as invaders and threats to the nation-state (Chavez, 2008), but also defined as “aliens” to further define the “citizen” (Ngai, 2005). Moreover, the “alien” has historically been created and racialized through state intervention. Race and racism influence the construction of legal categories and thus who is allowed to migrate. White supremacy is deeply embedded in the legal system and also influences migration patterns (Golash-Boza et al., 2019). For example, Ngai (2005), argued that Mexican immigrants became defined as the quintessential “illegal alien” through the unavailability of legal permits to come legally to the U.S. after the 1924 Immigration Act. Through this process, the U.S.-Mexico border also became the ultimate terrain to defend the nation-state boundaries. Today, equating undocumented immigrants and Mexicans subjects is not rare (García, 2017)—as exemplified by the language used by Donald Trump—even though only 25% of the foreign-born living in the U.S. were born in Mexico (Pew, 2018).

In the U.S.-imaginary, to be Mexican in the U.S., regardless of legal status, is to be an immigrant and an outsider. Ngai also argued that U.S.-born Latino and Asians in the U.S. are often also considered “alien citizens,” due to their framing as perpetual outsider status (Ngai, 2005). In fact, there are documented cases of American citizens of Mexican descent that are detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) based solely on their phenotype. Thus, to be Mexican and to be undocumented in the U.S. often means to be viewed as an abject subject. For undocumented immigrants, being considered abject subjects means that the core of their identity in the U.S. is their unauthorized presence as “illegal.” Therefore, it is not surprising that scholars have found that unauthorized status shapes immigrants’ “modes of being-in-the-world” (Willen, 2007). This unauthorized status often materializes in concrete ways, such as sleep deprivation, nightmares, and fear (Willen, 2007, p. 27).

Unauthorized immigrants in the United States, however, have not been just passive subjects. They have actively worked on challenging these narratives and to demand more rights. In 2006, the largest mobilization that had taken place up to that point in the United States revolved around demanding more rights for undocumented immigrants (Voss & Bloemraad, 2011). While scholars have shown that immigrants and their allies tend to rely on specific narratives to frame their demands for more rights (Bloemraad et al., 2016), others have also shown that young immigrants tend to also challenge

notions of belonging and illegality due to their political consciousness (Negrón-Gonzales, 2013). In fact, the immigrant rights movement led by youth has been particularly notorious for its intersectional mobilization and politics of inclusivity (Terriquez, 2015).

DACA changed, albeit temporarily, the context of unauthorized status in the U.S. for approximately 800,000 youth who applied for this temporary status. DACA had immediate benefits, as it contributed to the economic and social incorporation of those who applied (Gonzales & Terriquez, 2013). Yet, even among those who benefited, the process was stratified, benefiting mostly those with higher levels of education and access to greater family and community resources (Gonzales et al., 2014), which highlights the diversity and fragmentation even within this group of immigrants.

Previous studies of illegality and abjectivity, however, have explored these issues in a particular context—before the enactment of DACA or the rise of Trump to the presidency. We seek to advance their theorizing and highlight the contextual and historical specificity of how abject illegality is shaped by particular political moments. Therefore, we seek to show how abject illegality changed (or not) with the political DREAMer movement, by the enactment of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), under President Trump's administration, the temporary end of DACA, and in the context of explicitly hostile anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican climate in the U.S. with the rise of Trumpism.

Materials and methods: DACAdmented voices in the New York Times

Given the hostile, anti-immigrant climate, that intensified with the election of President Trump, we decided to use the testimonials offered in the New York Times (NYT) by DACA recipients who answered, voluntarily, the NYT call:

The Times Editorial Board has called on the Trump administration to preserve Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a program that temporarily shields some young immigrants from deportation and allows them to work legally.

We're featuring stories from young immigrants who were spared from deportation and permitted to work during the Obama administration.¹

From January 14 to February 14, 2017, we downloaded all the testimonials posted, publicly, on the NYT website. We downloaded and coded a total of 116 stories using HyperResearch, a software program used to analyze the data. We coded some demographic characteristics such as: place of residence, gender, and last name (as a proxy for Latinx). Two-thirds of the young immigrants who shared their testimonial lived in five states: 19.8% in Texas, 18.1% in California, 16.4% in New York, 7.8% in Florida, and 5.2% in Illinois. About half were men and half were women, and about two-thirds of the sample had Latino-sounding last names.

We used inductive coding by reading all the statements published and coding themes as these emerged; 88 codes emerged. Then, we grouped these codes into general themes. Five themes emerged and all codes were re-grouped into these five themes. Codes were applied to paragraphs, a total of 1,411 codes were applied to the data. From a low 6 codes applied to a story to a high of 20, an average of 12.1 codes were applied per story. For the purposes of this article, we will only consider 22 codes

for the analysis. The five general themes that emerged were: (1) *general issues around undocumented status* (the four codes in this theme include: (a) migrating as a child, (b) learning about undocumented status, (c) parental sacrifices, and (d) living in undocumented communities); (2) *negative consequences of legal status* (there were 4 codes in this theme, including (a) the limitations of growing up undocumented, (b) the fears of deportability, (c) mental health issues, and (d) feelings of exclusion); (3) *DACA-related issues* (there were five codes in this section: (a) DACA, (b) opening opportunities at school, (c) end of DACA, (d) mobilizing/activism, (d) and opening opportunities at work); and the fourth theme is (4) *U.S. as a home* (there were four codes under this theme: (a) identification of home, (b) identifying as American, (c) identifying with the American Dream, and (d) addressing the benefits they provide to U.S. society). Finally, another theme was (5) demographic identifiers that were coded (such as (a) last name, (b) gender, (c) occupation, (d) state of residency, and (e) picture posed with the story) (see [Table 1](#) for a summary of the themes and codes).

Rather than using in-depth interviews (as Gonzales and Chavez did), we are using narratives published in the New York Times for two reasons. First, rather than focus on the individual experiences of these young immigrants and the personal narratives they articulate, we focus on the narratives that get articulated at a national scale through the New York Times—not only from the point of view of young immigrants but also by politicians. We argue that these narratives in many ways become hegemonic because they resonate with larger audiences and are in many ways edited for consumption in the mainstream. Second, because these narratives are exposed to a wide audience they are also amplified, solidifying their resonance. Finally, these narratives are testimonios used by young immigrants that are framing their own stories and experiences for a larger public, and can be read as a “critical reflection of their lived experiences”

Table 1. Summary of data themes, codes, and references.

Themes (number of codes)	Codes (number of references*)
General Issues Around Undocumented Status (4)	Migration story (66) Learning about status (17) Parental sacrifices (42) Undocumented community (11)
Negative consequences of legal status (14)	Limitations while growing up (46) Deportability (37) Mental Health (32) Exclusion (33)
DACA-related issues (13)	DACA (165) Opening of opportunities at school (128) End of DACA (54) Mobilizing/Activism (41) Opening of opportunities at work (39)
U.S. as home (12)	Home (44) American (35) American Dream (25) Benefits to US society (18)
Other codes (5)	Last name (106) Gender (105) Occupation (97) State (95) Picture (80)

Note. *References are the number of paragraphs classified with a code.

(Huante-Tzintzun, 2020); therefore, we take these testimonios as active constructions of knowledge by a group that is largely marginalized in the United States—young undocumented immigrants—and has the potential to “help transcend pain toward a space for healing and societal transformation” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 368).

Using these frames, articulated in the New York Times, we also highlight how illegality is framed differently by differently-located actors; therefore, by focusing on the narratives amplified by the New York Times, and by comparing and contrasting these hegemonic narratives with alternatives, we hope to also highlight the way in which abjectivity and illegality are also actively challenged by young immigrants. Therefore, we highlight how the stories of these young immigrants also show their resilience in organizing and ensuring their stories show how they are more than “illegals”; they are functioning members of a society that denies their existence. Thus, while these are not the only narratives available, these alternatives do not get the same media attention.

We also decided to use narratives published in the New York Times because of its reach, reputation, and politics. In terms of reach, the NYT is the third largest publication in the U.S., with approximately 374 thousand average weekday print circulation copies (Watson, 2021). In terms of its reputation and politics, the NYT is considered a reliable mainstream media, with 130 Pulitzer Prizes, more than any other media (Ad Fontes Media, 2021). In addition, the NYT is only slightly left-leaning, with a skew score of bias of $-.811$, from a range of -42 (most skewed to the left) to 42 (most skewed to the right) (Ad Fontes Media, 2021). In terms of reliability, on a scale of 0–62, from lowest reliability (0) to highest reliability (62), the NYT has a score of 44.72 (scores above 32 are considered really good reliable sources) (Ad Fontes Media, 2021). In addition, the NYT invited DREAMers to submit their stories for publication, to our knowledge, no other publication offered the same invitation. Finally, other scholars have consistently relied on data analysis from the NYT to analyze social movements events in the U.S. (Johnson et al., 2016).

We ultimately show how narratives of illegality and abjectivity articulated by differently-located subjects do not have equal exposure to the mainstream; effectively reproducing the narrative that maintains the abject immigrant as an illegal and criminal subject. In the end, we argue, mainstream narratives, focused on the intersection of illegality and criminality tend to be presented as racially neutral—even though race and criminality have been historically tied in the U.S. (Alexander, 2020).

Results and discussion: producing and contesting abjectivity

Politicians are shifting the abject status of undocumented immigrants from a question of legality (illegality) to a question of criminality. Recasting and maintaining the abject subject as both an illegal and criminal subject. While this process has been taking place for a long time, according to Hernandez since the 1950s (Hernandez, 2010, p. 170), the process of criminalization today has become more explicitly racialized and has resulted in more legal consequences.²

In the context of criminalizing undocumented immigrants in general, and Mexicans in particular, as Donald Trump announced his candidacy for the Republican Party nomination for the presidency of the U.S., he made a clear association between Mexican immigrants and criminals:

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people (Donald Trump, presidential announcement speech, June 16, 2015).³

While Trump denied that the comments were racist, he continued to insist on linking immigration and criminal conduct. He repeated:

I can never apologize for the truth. I don't mind apologizing for things. But I can't apologize for the truth. I said tremendous crime is coming across. Everybody knows that's true. And it's happening all the time. So, why, when I mention, all of a sudden I'm a racist. I'm not a racist. I don't have a racist bone in my body (Trump, interview on Fox News' "Media Buzz," July 5, 2015).²

As his campaign progressed, he defended his views by linking immigration to crime, and he also promised to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico—thus linking crime to immigrants from Mexico-- and presenting the border as the solution.

Because of people that should've never been allowed to come over the border, crime is going through the roof (Trump, at campaign rally in California—Thursday, April 28, 2016).²

After Trump won the presidency of the United States, he continued to focus on the link between undocumented immigrants and criminals, and maintained his promises to increase deportations,

What we are going to do is get the people that are criminal and have criminal records, gang members, drug dealers.... We're getting them out of our country (Trump, to CBS in Nov. 2016).

This discourse about criminals was often repeated without critical evaluation by those in President Trump's administration. For example, in raids that removed close to 700 immigrants from the U.S., the DHS reported that 75% were "criminal aliens." In other words, most immigrants removed from the U.S. are already labeled as "criminals," even when their "crime" is unauthorized entry or reentry.⁴

It is in this politically explicit hostile climate, under the Trump administration, that we ask, what does it mean to belong to an abject group—undocumented immigrants—and be the explicit targets of racialized hostile rhetoric, draconian laws, and enforcement raids?

In the rest of the article, we show three ways in which young DACAmented immigrants framed their legal status in the context of the Trump administration. First, we argue that DACAmented immigrants effectively challenged their construction as abject and illegal subjects, positioning themselves as insiders and as belonging to the social fabric of the U.S. Second, we show the effects of legal vulnerability as many expressed fear about the potential end of the DACA program, and show how these DACAmented immigrants acknowledged the importance and necessity of legal status to fully belong to U.S. society. Finally, we show how these DACAmented immigrants, rather than take a stance as abject, outsider, and passive subjects, positioned themselves as activists, agents, and resilient subjects willing to fight for their legal rights in the United States.

I: Framing home and belonging as a way to challenge illegality

Scholars have documented the way young immigrants become acculturated and socialized in the U.S. context (Gonzalez, 2011), and we also found that immigrants relied on framing themselves as “Undocumented Americans.” By doing this, they set themselves within the frame of belonging and challenge narratives of exclusion in the U.S. This framing of belonging challenges their status as an abject status, as they explicitly articulate why they are not outsiders—insisting they belong to the social fabric of the United States culturally, economically, and socially.

Fernando, for example, explains how he is culturally American much like his other peers.

I grew up like any other American kid would, I got myself immersed very quickly, learned English, learned about our country’s history and values, learned how important it was to be a good citizen, I played sports, again, I grew up like any other American kid would (Fernando).

For Fernando, there are no differences between himself and others in the U.S.—he is not an outsider. He has been socialized as an American and thus considers himself one, regardless of his legal status. Fernando, just like many other young immigrants who lack legal status are “de facto” but not “de jure” Americans (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). Likewise, Dennis explains how his home is in the U.S., where he plans to spend the rest of his life.

I love every moment of it [living here] and I can say that New York is probably where I would want to spend the rest of my life. I can... No, I want to say that I am a true New Yorker and American. Yet I am not, and it is because I am undocumented (Dennis).

Dennis challenges his abject status as an undocumented immigrant while acknowledging that this legal status is an impediment to his full integration to the social fabric nationally and locally. In addition to their cultural and social ties to the country, immigrants also highlight their economic contribution to U.S. society.

I’m a tax payer, entrepreneur, an Undocumented American. I have lived here for 17 years and this is my home, this is the country I love (Ari).

Ari combines economic, social, and cultural arguments to highlight his multiple ties to the U.S. and the multiple ways he contributes as well—challenging the abjective status of the outsider.

In summarizing the way in which activists have framed the rights of undocumented immigrants in the U.S., Bloemraad et al. argued that three frameworks have dominated the discourse in the U.S.: human rights, economic contributions, and family unity (Bloemraad et al., 2016). We found that among the DACAmented immigrants who responded to the NYT call, none used the framing of human rights and family unity, and the most common framing was about emphasizing their contributions to U.S. society, including economic contributions. For the most part, we found that DACAmented immigrants framed their belonging in terms of cultural and social ties to the U.S., which made them insiders culturally and socially but not legally in the U.S.

These immigrants challenged notions of citizenship based solely on legalistic terms (Bloemraad et al., 2016). These DACAmented immigrants argued that they are U.S.-Americans, yet they are not allowed to belong fully because they are undocumented. In this context, DACA provided a legal opportunity to belong more fully, even though they still faced limitations. For example, Daniel explained,

I grew up trying to be the epitome of a model citizen, without having the benefits of an American citizen. Right after my high school graduation, President Obama passed DACA, which changed my life when I was accepted for deferred action (Daniel).

Daniel explains how he tried to be a model citizen, akin to what other scholars have found, that the children of immigrants try to be model citizens by “staying out of trouble” (Bloemraad et al., 2016). But as Daniel hints, his actions were never enough, only with legal status (i.e., DACA), he felt like his life changed.

Many DACAmented immigrants also highlighted how the program allowed them to contribute even more to society in economic terms. Jamie, for example, explains:

The Dreamers are already contributing to this amazing country. We are more than Americans, we are Americans by heart not by paper. We are part of the economy that will mold us to become professionals and contribute even more with passion and sacrifice! (Jamie)

Thus, they acknowledged the importance of DACA and the difference this policy has made in their life in the U.S., by providing them with the permits to participate more fully in U.S. society.

Fortunately, DACA became active the year I graduated from high school. Through DACA I have been able to continue fulfilling my American Dream and paying for my education through the work permit provided. I am now preparing to transfer to a California State University while also working, starting a business and being actively involved in my community (Monica).

Undoubtedly, DACA had an important and immediate effect on the lives of these young immigrants. Research on the effects of DACA has shown that the DACA program has provided young immigrants with greater access to family and community resources (Negrón-Gonzales, 2013), increased the likelihood of working and attending school, has decreased the likelihood of being unemployed (Negrón-Gonzales, 2013), and reduced the likelihood of living in poverty (Amuedo-Dorantes & Antman, 2016). DACA did in fact contribute to the economic and social integration of the young adults who benefited from this temporary status (Gonzales et al., 2014). Yet, in the context of a Trump presidency and increased anti-immigrant hostility, these DACA recipients experienced intensified legal vulnerability as they were in fear of losing these protections that had facilitated an easier integration to the country they call home.

In sum, these young immigrants framed themselves as insiders, as Americans; thereby challenging notions of belonging and citizenship that rely purely on legal terms. Yet, they also acknowledge that legal permits (such as DACA) are key in opening doors and in allowing them to participate in U.S. society more fully. These framings of belonging effectively show the dislodgement of illegality and abjectivity. That is, while past research found that unauthorized immigrants who had arrived to the U.S.

as children felt a deep sense of “stigma” based on their “illegal” and “abject” status (Abrego, 2011, Gonzales & Chavez, 2012), we found that DACAmented immigrants in the post DACA period do not feel a sense of stigma, shame, or sense of “abjectivity.” They rightly claim belonging to the national fabric of the U.S., while also acknowledging that legal status remains a major barrier to their membership in the U.S. We also found that in the context of the election of Trump and the potential end of DACA, these young immigrants were forced to again turn their focus on their legal barriers to belonging.

II: Trump, fear, and legal vulnerability

The Trump administration, by explicitly deploying anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican/Latinx narratives, has threatened the hopes, dreams, and futures of DACAmented youth with the threat of the end of DACA. In fact, in 2017, President Trump rescinded the policy, but the Supreme Court ruled in 2020 that the ending of DACA was “arbitrary and capricious.” While the new Biden administration issued a memorandum for the Attorney General and the Secretary of the DHS to preserve and fortify DACA, a federal judge in Texas effectively nullified this memorandum by ruling that DACA is illegal and by blocking new applicants (ASU, 2021, DHS, 2021). [See Figure 1]. Before DACA was rescinded, many explicitly stated their fears of losing their already tenuous legal status. For example, Ciriac stated,

The current anti-immigrant rhetoric has produced fear in my community because the promises President Elected Donald Trump made during his campaign can now be materialized into action. His plan to remove the DACA program would mean that I would not be able to work as a college access mentor at my local high school in Salt Lake City. I work with a broad range of students, most of which will be the first in their families to attend college. Removing DACA would mean I would not be able to empower and help the students I have worked with all year find the resources they need to be successful in college (Ciriac).

Their fear of an uncertain future became daunting and paralyzing for many. Kevin explained such fears,

I want to take this opportunity and humbly ask our President-elect Donald J. Trump to give us, Dreamers, a chance. We are your people and you are now our president, I want you to succeed and I want our nation to succeed. Do not send us back into an abysmal depth of uncertainty, but rather acknowledge us and see us for who we are: a community of determined Americans who love and stand by our home (Kevin Calderon).

Nevertheless, many DACAmented youth also expressed the hope that politicians would see beyond the veil of “illegality,” and realize their humanity and acknowledge their contributions to American society.

Now all we can do is hope that Trump and the Republicans will see that those of us under DACA are good, hard-working people, pray they work to fix immigration, and not deport us to countries we don’t even know” (Pedro).

In sum, the youth expressed the importance of legal status in being able to be full members of society and feared what ultimately occurred, the end of the program. But

in anticipation of the end of the program, immigrant youth also presented their vision for the future. Unlike Trump, who used racially explicit language, these young immigrants did not address the role race played in their experiences of illegality; instead, they focused on making claims to the more inclusive terms of “American.” In the next section, we show how they framed a past, present, and future in the context of the Trump administration.

III: Activism, unafraid, and here to stay to frame agency and resiliency

The testimonials of the young immigrants also show the resilience undocumented immigrants poses in organizing and ensuring their stories show they are not abject; they consistently framed themselves as functioning members of a society that denies their existence. They, in fact, expressed very critical stance that provide powerful challenges to mainstream discussions of migration, (il)legality, and deservedness.

Youth questioned their deservedness to belong based solely on their ability to contribute through their labor. Ciriac, for example, expressed how she refuses to be defined only in terms of her contributions to this country as a worker:

Removing DACA would mean I would not be able to empower and help the students I have worked with all year find the resources they need to be successful in college. Regardless of the work that I do, I am not defined by a job. My freedom to live in this country should not be defined solely by my labor. I am human, and I too deserve the opportunity to live without the threat of deportation looming over me. (Ciriac).

Ciriac highlighted the fact that as a human being, she deserved the right to live wherever she chooses; and reiterates that regardless of U.S. policy, she is not going anywhere. Again, highlighting that she belongs in this society.

Youth also expressed their agency and willingness to fight for what they want and deserve—both as grassroots organizers and formally in state legislations. Mariana, for example, expressed her drive to continue to fight for the rights of immigrants after experiencing difficulty accessing higher education.

A week before classes started I was told that my tuition costs would triple and that my only financial aid would be pulled—all because of my immigration status. Tears filled my eyes thinking that college was a dream that I may never be able to make a reality, but instead of packing my bags, I fought back for my right to higher education. Fighting for tuition equity for undocumented students across Florida sparked my passion for social justice and taught me that together we are unstoppable. Since then I have utilized my voice to speak for immigrant rights and human rights, as well as started programs that provide visibility to undocumented students at my university (Mariana Castro).

Youth also expressed the willingness and ability to work toward creating a change both through activism (informal politics) but also through institutional means (formal politics). For example, Juan Escalante revealed how he worked with the state legislature toward enacting laws to benefit other youth like him.

In 2013, DACA allowed me to re-enroll at Florida State University and pursue a Master's degree in Public Administration. By 2014, I was in the middle of working a job in Tallahassee, Florida, studying for my master classes, and advocating at the Florida

Legislature for a bill that would allow undocumented students to obtain in-state tuition at state colleges and universities. In a rare display of bipartisanship, the bill passed and was signed into law by Florida's Republican Governor, Rick Scott (Juan).

Juan reveals the way in which these young immigrants have worked tirelessly locally, regionally, and nationally, to change policies that have affected their ability to attend college in the past, thus influencing and shaping policy but doing so without the legal right to vote.

In many ways, DACA has shown these immigrants what it is like to have some legal rights in the U.S., and that has provided opportunities that have allowed these youth to reach their potential in terms of accessing educational goals and job opportunities; as a result, many of these youth were no longer fearful.

Gloria E. Anzaldúa a poet and activist wrote, "Though we tremble before uncertain futures; may we meet illness, death and adversity with strength; may we dance in the face of our fears." My name is Ciriac and I am undocumented and unafraid.

Paradoxically, there was always both a danger in applying for DACA as well as the potential of the new benefits. By applying for DACA and coming out of the shadows, young immigrants have experienced a sense of empowerment—they have been empowered by the sense that they can take control over immigration policy in the U.S.—as agents of social change.

The loss of DACA could mean that I could lose my job and career. But this time it will be different, I am not the man from 8 years ago. I am not afraid. This time I will fight for what I love and keep working with my students no matter what happens (Denis).

In sum, these young immigrants highlight the fact that they themselves have worked tirelessly to get DACA, they continue to work to expand the rights of immigrants in the U.S., and that they question framings of deservedness based solely on their performance as students or workers in the U.S. They assert time and again that they belong because this is their home, and they also frame themselves as agents of social change.

IV: Challenging illegality and abjectivity

While mainstream narratives have amplified the narrative of the DREAMer, by connecting illegality and criminality, the youth explicitly dislocated and challenged the connection between unauthorized immigration status and abjectivity—that is, they challenged the notion that because they were undocumented, it meant that they were outsiders or despicable. But unlike the mainstream narrative, they challenged the constructions of the "criminal" as the legitimate target of the law by highlighting the sacrifices their parents made to bring them to the U.S., and to give them many opportunities in the U.S.

For example, Kenia explained how her parents' sacrifices motivated her,

We came to this country with nothing but the clothes on our backs. My parents had to sacrifice so much for us that I became obsessed with the idea of giving them a college degree as a form of gratitude (Kenia).

Claudia also shared,

Growing up in a family of six kids on a gardener's salary of \$10,000, my ultimate dream was to go college and one day help my family out of poverty. I longed to see the day when my father did not have to mow lawns or sell trinkets at flea markets to make ends meet. Motivated by my parents and the struggles we faced, at a young age I made school my priority and worked hard to make my family proud (Claudia).

While 42 DACAmented immigrants discussed their parents' sacrifices in the U.S., only a hand-full drew explicit boundaries about not being a "criminal." Thus, some did draw moral boundaries that separated them as deserving immigrants, but it was a small minority.

Drawing boundaries between the law-abiding and the criminal was easy for those who felt it was unfair they were being targeted. For example, Libbing explained:

People want to rip that [DACA] away from me. And it's not fair. I am not a criminal. I am not a drug dealer. I'm a good person who is simply trying to get an education (Libbing).

Using a similar language of Trump, regarding criminals and drug dealers, Libbing drew boundaries between herself and the "other," the criminal. While Trump's language was racially explicit about linking criminals and Mexican immigrants, Libbing, in defending her right to DACA, focuses on just the criminal as the legitimate target of law enforcement. By emphasizing her pursuit for education, Libbing distances herself from the mainstream narrative of the criminal immigrant. Others underscore their community roles and embrace of deep American ideals to show that they are deserving of inclusiveness.

I am no criminal, I am a leader in my community and I pursue my American Dream. Many share my story and the best way it can be explained is through a poem I wrote, titled, *I Walk in the Shadows* (Eduardo).

Some youth used the term "dreamer" to explicitly set themselves apart as good immigrants and plead with politicians to reach a solution that could protect them.

I implore that he works with Congress to reach a bipartisan solution to the situation of dreamers and other non-criminal productive undocumented immigrants who love this country (Ricardo).

Ricardo highlights his love for the United States and urges for a solution for immigrants like him. In a way, DACA gave young immigrants a chance to further distance themselves from the "criminal alien" and become the epitome of the good immigrant.

I understood that I could continue to be "safe" in the shadows but live as a criminal or expose myself and live as a law-abiding individual. Even though I feel like I have an expiration date I am much happier thanks to DACA (Brisa).

Few explicitly blamed their parents for their legal status and setting themselves apart from the group of law-breaking immigrants to which their own parents belong.

I have been in prison for a crime someone else committed. My parents brought me to this country when I was 9. I grew up undocumented (Ilknur).

Few also talked about working in the U.S. to reduce crime:

I implore President-elect Donald Trump to keep DACA. I am not a threat; I love this country as much as he does. I want to fight crime as much as he does (Ricardo).

I am a Criminal Justice Major...I dream of becoming an FBI agent and help this beautiful country (Jamie Diaz).

Nevertheless, most DACAmented youth focused and framed themselves not in opposition to “Criminals” or their parents, but as members of U.S. society who saw the U.S. as their only home. Many used the hashtag “Here To Stay” to emphasize the extent to which their presence in the U.S. was inevitable.

In sum, these DACAmented youth challenged that their unauthorized status (or even they had temporary legal status as DACAmented) makes them outsiders, and instead explicitly argued for why they belong in the U.S., how they contribute to U.S. society, and why they deserve the opportunity to remain in the U.S. and gain legal status. While a very small minority also relied on mainstream narratives that vilify the “criminal alien” as the legitimate target of immigration enforcement, the vast majority focused on their lives and communities in the U.S. to argue that this is their one and only home.

Conclusion

This article shows that abjectivity and illegality have been effectively dislocated by young immigrants successfully, challenging the construction of illegality as an abject status. Yet, it also hints to why they have been much less successful in challenging the broader narrative about the necessity of policing the border—this is in part because most youth still frame migration in terms of worthiness (that is, they frame themselves as worthy of being allowed to be in the U.S.) rather than as a human right to live where they want to. Hence, immigration policy (such as DACA) remains framed as an issue of citizenship rights rather than human rights.

In the context of DACA, a program designed to benefit a particular group of immigrants in terms of age regardless of national origin, it is no surprise that 79.5% of those protected under this program are of Mexican descent (Pew, 2018). Although recent trends of migration point to other groups of migrants surpassing the rate of migration from Latin America, Mexicans (and Latinos) are targeted for immigration enforcement at disproportionately higher rates than other groups (Golash-Boza et al., 2019), and thus tend to feel more vulnerable to deportation. The anti-immigrant sentiment that characterized the Trump presidency is hence an anti-Mexican attack by a president who launched his campaign by calling them criminals. This anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican rhetoric that characterized the Trump presidency has reactivated fear in immigrant communities experiencing progress through DACA. In the context of the uncertainty around the termination of the DACA program, there was a greater sense of legal vulnerability since they could lose their already tenuous status.

According to the Pew Research Center, most U.S.-Americans agree with these youth, as 72% of the U.S. population believes that “undocumented immigrants in the U.S., who meet certain requirements should have a way to stay legally” (Pew, 2018). Yet, the U.S. government continues to view and define undocumented status as an abject

status that merits persecution, incarceration, and removal from the U.S. Hence, the consequences of abject illegality will continue to matter as long as the U.S. government insists on criminalizing unauthorized presence in the U.S.

Notes

1. Available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/storywall/american-dreamers>.
2. For example, today, prosecutions of entry and re-entry are at an all-time high (TRAC, 2016), making the “crime” of entry and re-entry carry concrete consequences—such as imprisonment and legal impediments to adjust one’s legal status. This has resulted in people being unable to adjust their status, and living in perpetual illegality (Sarabia, 2012).
3. Lee (2015).
4. Kopan (2017).

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