

MOVEMENT STORYTELLING AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE DREAMER NARRATIVE

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Like many in this symposium, my comments address the tension reflected in the Dreamer paradigm, between the expectations of mainstream audiences, and the complex lived experience of those most affected by immigration restrictions. As Professors Abrego and Negrón-Gonzalez demonstrate in their recent anthology, *We Are Not Dreamers*, undocumented scholars have begun to address this tension for themselves, in a space in which they play two roles: those who live as undocumented in this country, and those who, increasingly, theorize about it. My own work concerns the adjacent domain of social movement activity, in which undocumented immigrants also play two roles: they serve as both storytellers and as strategists. My comments will explore how undocumented people, as activists, have navigated the difficult tensions created by the Dreamer narrative—as Professor Joel Sati so aptly put it, “the little box we have to shoehorn ourselves into, to be free.”¹

One way that undocumented storytellers have navigated this tension, in the domain of movement activity, is by shifting, expanding, or transposing the Dreamer narrative, so that it retains some elements that make it persuasive to the mainstream, but it becomes more encompassing in its scope and more challenging in relation to dominant norms or expectations. I witnessed these patterns in my empirical research with undocumented activists in Phoenix, Arizona,² but I’ve seen these same patterns of transformation in nationwide campaigns. In what follows, I highlight several narrative strategies through which undocumented activists have undertaken this subtle form of transformation, or perhaps, of subversion.

The Dreamer paradigm, as we have discussed it in this symposium, can be an element of doctrine (as in *Plyler v. Doe*³), a concept, an image; but is also embodied in public-facing narratives and particularized stories about undocumented existence that are used in political campaigns. I’ll begin with a typical, early Dreamer narrative, the kind of story that was offered by undocumented young people testifying before Congress in support of early iterations of the DREAM Act. In his book, *The Dreamers*,⁴ Walter Nicholls has argued that the story that undocumented youth tell

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1. Joel Sati, Feb. 3, 2023 (comments on the first panel of “A Dream Deferred, Never to Come, or Misbegotten? Assessing the Dreamer Paradigm in 2023: A Symposium in Memoriam, Michael A. Olivas”).

2. My comments draw on a book I recently published from that research, *See generally*, KATHRYN ABRAMS, *OPEN HAND, CLOSED FIST: PRACTICES OF UNDOCUMENTED ORGANIZING in a HOSTILE STATE* (2022).

3. 457 U.S. 202 (1982).

4. WALTER NICHOLLS, *THE DREAMERS: HOW THE UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH MOVEMENT TRANSFORMED THE IMMIGRANT RIGHTS* 50–55 (2013).
DEBATE (2013).

about themselves has three elements: accomplishment, assimilation and innocence. It is the story of someone brought to this country as a child before they could have had a say in the decision to migrate without authorization. This person has deployed will, intelligence, and tenacity to achieve greatly, usually within the U.S. educational system. In the process, they have become functionally American: in language, culture, commitment—every way but “the papers.” This narrative by Ola Kaso—offered during a brief effort to re-animate the DREAM Act after its 2010 defeat—is a good example:

[I was brought here when] I was five years old, but I remember it like it was yesterday. Apprehensively, I teetered into the perplexing classroom. Students spoke in a language completely foreign to me . . . I stood there frozen still and silent like a statue . . . I’ve come a long way since that day 13 years ago. I’ve become proficient in the English language and I’ve excelled in my studies . . . I have taken every advanced placement course my high school has offered and I’ve earned a 4.4 GPA doing so . . . I have completely immersed myself within the American culture of which I so strongly desire to become a citizen. I am currently enrolled in the University of Michigan . . . where this fall I will be majoring in Brain, Behavioral and Cognitive Science with a concentration in pre-med. I ultimately aspire to become a surgical oncologist . . . I wish to remain in this country to help American citizens.⁵

Kaso’s narrative has all of the elements identified by Nicholls: she arrives in the U.S. at five years old (too young to have been part of the decision to migrate); she takes all AP courses and has a 4.4 GPA (the accomplishment), is culturally American (the assimilation), enrolls at an excellent university, and wants to become an oncologist to help Americans. If those are the compelling features of the narrative, its drawbacks are almost as clear. First, its claims of innocence implicate those who *were* in a position to make the migration decision, namely the Dreamers’ parents. Second, it applies to only a small swath of the undocumented community. Not only does it exclude adults, whose American path lies more often in underpaid and exploited labor, but it may also erase those who have not attained the pinnacle of education achievement. The narrative finally imagines that the proper path for any immigrant is to become some kind of homogeneous American; it erases any ties to a language, culture, or indigenous tradition that might have shaped them or their family prior to their arrival.

There are two other features, less often noted, that I also see in the traditional Dreamer narrative. One is the narrative’s individualism. The Dreamer appears to have succeeded solely on the basis of their own talent and will, without any scaffolding by family, mentors, or community. A second is its posture of hopeful petition. Kaso’s narrative suggests a naïve trust that, guided by the information she and others like her provide, the Congress will do the right thing and grant them a path to citizenship.

My argument is that undocumented activists—those who shape and tell stories as part of their role in a larger movement—have navigated a path between the continued appeal and the painful, if unintended, consequences of the Dreamer

5. *Dev., Relief and Education for Minors (DREAM) Act: Hearing on S.952 Before the S. Judiciary Subcomm. on Immigr., Refugees and Border Sec.*, 112th Cong. 72–77 (2011) (statement of Ola Kaso).

narrative. They have done so by reshaping it, so that its distinguishing elements have been, alternately, contested in their significance, or extended in their reach for other members of the community.

One of the earliest changes to the narrative was to revise the meaning of being a student. Here the narrative treatment of the educational domain changes, from characterizing it as a site of accomplishment to referencing it as a symbol of (unfulfilled) aspiration. In describing this unfulfilled aspiration, the stance of the storyteller toward the state also changes, from one of cheerful trust, to one of critique, impatience, or even accusation. These changes were sometimes also paired with a blunt refusal of assimilation. This happened as early as 2010–11, when Dreamers first began to come out as “undocumented and unafraid”—a more defiant public posture. Here is a narrative by Georgina Perez from the 2011 National Coming Out Week, that pointedly reflects these changes:

I am undocumented and unafraid . . . I will no longer wait for someone to save me . . . while I am being denied the access to higher education. I am tired of politicians always using us as scapegoats, always criminalizing us, in order for them to win a seat . . . I am not going to apologize for speaking my native language. I am a proud Georgian and a proud Mexicana.⁶

Several things are notable in this short statement. Perez refers not to her exceptional educational achievement, but to the denial of education she has suffered at the hands of the state, a circumstance she shares with many Dreamers who are denied access to state university systems, in-state tuition, or public scholarships. Also clear is her impatience with state-level denials and federal failures to act (“I will no longer wait . . .”), and her frustration with the demonization of immigrants for political advantage (“I am tired of politicians always using us as scapegoats . . .”). Finally, her narrative pushes back on the idea that assimilation is the ultimate goal for immigrants, insisting that she can remain bilingual and bicultural (“I am a proud Georgian and a proud Mexicana”).

The next shift, which I saw vividly in my work in Arizona, was to challenge the individualism of the traditional Dreamer narrative. I saw this strategy employed in the voter registration campaigns in Maricopa County from 2012 to 2014. Undocumented canvassers protesting the state’s denial of in-state tuition described themselves not as individual achievers, but as people threatened by the state’s anti-immigrant legislation, yet fortified in their resistance by a network of family, community, and prospective allies. Here is a description by a young voter engagement canvasser, of the doorstep narrative that he used to appeal to prospective voters:

[Being undocumented] didn’t actually affect me until I graduated . . . [then] my parents told me that “I don’t think we can afford your education” . . . that kind of broke me inside. But the worst part was having to see my mom and dad . . . see them cry because they couldn’t provide for us, and they couldn’t find a solution.

I’m so glad I found [this organization] because otherwise . . . I would not have been able to go out there and share my experience and

6. The Dream is Coming 2011, *Georgina Perez*, *Georgia Dreamers*, YouTube (Apr. 5, 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTeh1m0qiEU>.

motivate people. I want [you] to vote . . . [because] a lot of people are suffering. And it's really through your vote that you're going to be able to help these hard-working families . . .⁷

Here the denial of access to education is described as a barrier not only to the aspirations of the youth, but to those of his parents, who migrated in large part to make his upward mobility possible. Moreover, his striving for change is not simply an individual effort: it is a project he shares with his organization—which made possible his outward-facing activism—and with the prospective voters he seeks to enlist in the effort.

A third strategy more directly challenged the distinction between Dreamers and their parents by creating a youth narrative that encompassed parents as well. In the course of my research, I saw two versions of this strategy. The first, mobilized during the 2013 campaign for Comprehensive Immigration Reform, ascribed to parents—who left behind everything they knew to seek a better life—the same boldness, vision, persistence, and will that were regarded as the assets of undocumented youth. This effort to encompass parents in the youth narrative was captured by viral photo of a thirty-ish-old man with a small child on his shoulders, encircled by an American flag and bearing the caption, “Our parents were the original Dreamers.”⁸ The second, more contentious narrative, was mobilized during the Not1More Deportation campaign. This narrative suggests that the image of the Dreamer, American in every way but the papers, is itself misleading; the progress of Dreamers toward full membership can be undone at any moment, because they remain vulnerable to the detention or deportation of their parents. This narrative was offered most famously by Arizona Dreamer Erika Andiola when she posted a video reporting ICE’s seizure of her mother. Filming herself in the throes of shock and grief, she said: “I need everyone to stop pretending that we’re living normal lives because we’re not. *This could happen to any of us, at any time.*”⁹

A final example involves the total transposition of the Dreamer narrative and its application to an immigrant who is well outside the original group. This narrative reflects the advocacy of Freedom for Immigrants (FFI), a nationwide organization committed to the abolition of immigrant detention. My undergraduate students work with FFI each year, as part of an effort to understand the immigrant rights movement through first-hand experience with movement organizations. Last fall, FFI was advocating for the release on bail of Leonel, an undocumented man in his forties who had lived in the U.S. for decades, served five years in prison, and had been transferred, on his release, to ICE custody. In arguing that Leo should be eligible for bail, FFI transposed each of the elements of the original Dreamer narrative into a different register to serve a different kind of community member. Instead of academic accomplishment, FFI emphasized Leo’s labor over a decade in an auto shop and his enthusiasm and expertise for working with cars. Instead of assimilation, FFI emphasized his integration in the community. He had a supportive family, was a member of a church, and had a boss who valued him so greatly that he not only saved

7. KATHRYN ABRAMS, OPEN HAND, CLOSED FIST: PRACTICES OF UNDOCUMENTED ORGANIZING IN A HOSTILE STATE 84 (2022).

8. See United We Dream, Facebook (Mar. 3, 2013), <https://www.facebook.com/UnitedWeDream/photos/a.131112820283215/483891088338718/?type=3>. (Photo by Dave La Fontaine for New Mexico Dreamers in Action (NMDIA)).

9. DreamActivistdotOrg, *Arizona Activist Erika Andiola’s Home Was Raided; Her Mother and Brother Taken!*, YouTube (Jan. 11, 2013), www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMPWhn8HEJk.

his job, but lovingly maintained his car, so he could return to both when he got out of prison.¹⁰ In the place of innocence, FFI emphasized humanity. No human being—even one convicted of a crime—should be held in a cage, when he could thrive in so many ways, if returned to his community.

It is well worth discussing whether the Dreamer narrative should be retired altogether, and with it the tendency of many social movements to accommodate the assumptions of their mainstream audiences. But even as we in academia debate this larger issue, activists are using, shifting, and reinterpreting the Dreamer narrative, to make it more inclusive in its reach, and more radical in its claims. The adaptations I've witnessed demonstrate the many resources provided by an evocative story, and the exceptional resourcefulness of this movement.

10. My students and I heard this characterization of Leo at a retrospective event celebrating his release from detention, sponsored by Yuba Liberation Coalition, a partner of Freedom for Immigrants. “Libres y Cafetando,” Sept. 21, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=534539205343136&set=a.399850608811997>.