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Original Article

# Disrupting the dream: Undocumented youth reframe citizenship and deportability through anti-deportation activism

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**Abstract** This essay analyzes how undocumented 1.5 generation activists respond to, disrupt and challenge state definitions of citizenship and belonging. The authors look at the work of the Immigrant Youth Justice League (IYJL), an immigrant rights group led by undocumented organizers in Chicago, with a focus on how they frame responses to federal deportation policies and deportations. This activism takes place in the context of a movement led by undocumented 1.5 generation youth whose tactics have included first-person testimony and civil disobedience. This is significant because they place the undocumented body at the forefront of the national dialog on immigration. Through interviews with members of the organization, analysis of first-hand documents and one author's experience as an IYJL co-founder, we find that young undocumented activists increasingly fight for people who do not fit the nation-state's parameters for accessing citizenship or relief from deportation. The state regulates access to citizenship, rights and deportation based on moral and hegemonic frameworks, systematic prejudices and socio-economic conditions. When young undocumented activists challenge these frames, they disrupt the power of the nation-state to make these determinations, and expand the debate about and boundaries of citizenship.

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## Tania's First Campaign

1 The “I” and “we” in this piece refers to the first author, Tania Unzueta Carrasco, and her network of undocumented 1.5 generation immigrants and immigrant rights organizers. The second author of this piece is Hinda Seif, a US-born scholar who conducted research on and observed the organizing activities of 1.5 generation activists from greater Chicago from 2010 through 2013, with a focus on IYJL. Seif has assisted with writing this piece, with a focus on history and theory.

The first campaign attempting to establish the right of an undocumented person to live in the United States that I was involved with was my own.<sup>1</sup> Although I did not know it at the time, in my justification to remain in this country, I was reproducing the nation-state standards that define whether a person is a “good” and “deserving” member.

I have lived in the United States since I was 10 years old and became undocumented after our family’s tourist visa expired. When I graduated high school, I traveled to Mexico to attempt to get an international student visa in order to attend and fund college. When I went to the US Embassy, I was informed that I did not qualify because I had been living in the United States with undocumented status, and, furthermore, that my parents owed thousands of dollars in taxes for my pre-college public education. The embassy staff took away my Mexican passport and informed me that I could not go back to the United States.

From Chicago, my parents began to organize a campaign so I could return to the United States. They put a binder together with all of my diplomas, test scores, newspaper articles and other accomplishments that could be used to justify my right to return. They also reached out to advocates and elected officials, and were able to find support at the office of Illinois Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL). Senator Durbin was about to introduce a version of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minor’s (DREAM) Act, which would have provided a conditional process towards citizenship for people who arrived in the United States before the age of 15, like me. This link between my story and the Senator’s bill resulted in my return home through a humanitarian parole obtained with the Senator’s help.

When I finally came back to Chicago, I started talking about my story at press conferences and community events. My testimonies would often end with, “there must be something wrong in this country if thousands of intelligent, good, talented, young people graduate from high school every year without the chance to go to college simply because of a 9-digit number.” I emphasized the characteristics of my life that matched those deemed “good” by the nation-state – strong test scores, civic engagement, “talent” and hard work. Criteria such as these have become increasingly narrow and harder to achieve for working-class immigrants while these dichotomous categorizations are reproduced and contested by immigrant communities, undocumented people and advocates, each with their unique relationship to the nation-state, and to each other.

This article explores how one group of 1.5 generation undocumented organizers in Chicago, the Immigrant Youth Justice League (IYJL), has responded to normative rules of citizenship, specifically through our advocacy against the deportation of individuals who do not fit in hegemonic models. After discussing the conceptual landscape of various states of belonging and exclusion ranging



from deportability through citizenship, we examine where the undocumented 1.5 generation, persons born abroad yet largely raised and schooled in the United States, fits into this framework legally and socially. My co-author and I look at the transformation of IYJL's organizing tactics after the failure of the DREAM Act in 2010. These moved away from a dependency on specific federal legislation and towards stopping deportations and fighting for the right of immigrants to be present in the United States. This emerging activism more directly includes those who do not conform to the classed, gendered and racialized "model citizen" that I used in my own campaign and that has dominated the history of US immigration policy, including DREAM Act and immigration reform efforts. I argue that since 2010 undocumented youth activists have increasingly led our own movement, developed our own tactics and messages, and fought for people and rights that may not be considered strategic and that often are not supported by mainstream immigration advocates. By having difficult moral and strategic conversations about who truly should have the right to remain in the United States when we select and pursue specific anti-deportation campaigns, immigrant youth activists are creatively and purposefully pushing at the boundaries of US citizenship and belonging to include more working class and poor immigrants of color.

I base my writing and theories on my own experience and observation as an organizer and participant in the group between 2009 and 2012. In this capacity, I have attended over 70 IYJL meetings, helped organize several civil disobedience actions (and participated in three), been active in state and national strategy conversations, and coordinated several anti-deportation campaigns. In 2010, I was a speaker at the first National Coming Out of the Shadows rally in Chicago, and I have helped strategize local and national messaging. I also conducted group and individual interviews with nine IYJL organizers between December 2010 and March 2012 as part of my research for my masters degree at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The name of the organization is real; the names of the organizers have been changed due to Internal Review Board guidelines.<sup>2</sup>

My work is also informed by my experience as a member of the undocumented 1.5 generation and a queer woman of color. I have an interest in advancing immigrant rights legislation that is inclusive and just, that will include my family and me. Rather than attempting to remove myself from the text, I embrace my perspective and experience as an integral part of my analysis. In addition, I see writing as a political act. Just as I have come out as queer and undocumented in my organizing, my presence as an undocumented scholar in academic spaces is a form of coming out of the shadows and occupying public space. By theorizing the experience of undocumented 1.5 generation immigrants and creating academic knowledge, I take space in venues dominated by individuals who are recognized as legitimate by the nation-state, in this case the United States.

2 I have been part of several conversations among undocumented academics and organizers about being used as subjects of theory, without getting credit for their ideas when their names are not included. Although I was



unable to include their real identities due to Internal Review Board Guidelines, I would like to acknowledge the intellectual contribution of Reyna Wences, Rigo Padilla, Ileri Unzueta Carrasco, Lulu Martinez, Cindy Agustin and Alaa Mukahhal to this manuscript, as well as those who did not want their names published.

## “Impossible Subjects”

“Citizen,” “citizenship rights,” “illegal alien,” “deportation” and “deportability” are only a few of the terms used to signify the being and condition of those who are deemed either insiders or outsiders of the sovereign nation-state. Although these ideas and processes may appear to be stable, they have changed over time in ways that reflect social, political, and economic debates and struggles. These processes are generally understood as “administrative,” yet they have been classed, racialized and gendered, with deep personal and social implications (Peutz and De Genova, 2010). Whether the undocumented are rights-bearing beings or are denied rights tells us much about the status of citizenship and rights in the United States.

Historian Ngai (2004) has named undocumented immigrants the “impossible subjects” of the United States, pointing to a number of ways that the conditions of immigrants, and especially those constructed as “illegal,” shed light on paradoxes of law and the social order. First, the undocumented are welcome but not welcome. As Ngai (2004) writes, they are “woven into the economic fabric of the nation,” but only as “labor that is cheap and disposable” (2). Second, Bosniak (2006) points to the “ambiguity” of the undocumented immigrant within the US legal system, where there is a “tension between the rights tradition and the plenary power doctrine” (López, 2006). The undocumented cannot be employed lawfully and are vulnerable to exploitation in the underground labor market; they are unable to vote in most state elections and to run for most government offices. Yet they have access to some public education and are protected under certain laws (Abrego, 2008; Gonzales, 2008; Abrego, 2011; Seif, 2011). The undocumented have many rights at the same time that they are always deportable.

The current neoliberal order also creates a third paradox, one that “allows goods but not people to cross borders” (Coutin, 2011, 298). Although immigrant advocates and restrictionists use terminology differently and have distinct ideas about what to do about the “illegal immigration problem,” most would agree that related categories and procedures have not kept up with changes in international economic and migration patterns (*ibid.*). Neoliberalism and globalization have “radically destabilized” national economies by promoting foreign investment, eliminating trade barriers, outsourcing jobs, and disrupting traditional patterns of economic activity and work (Peutz and De Genova, 2010, 7). This, combined with demand for low-wage immigrants in the United States and other receiving states, has created large-scale cross-border migration. Yet the “global deportation regime” (De Genova and Peutz, 2010) legally cements individuals to their country of birth, despite the enormous economic inequalities and complex relationships between nation-states.

As the human impacts of global economic restructuring intensify, citizens of the United States and other Western countries express their economic anxieties through an obsession with borders and their protection (Peutz and De Genova, 2010, 7). Barriers to the legal cross-border migration of workers and their children are exacerbated by the climate of “securitization” (Coutin, 2011) after



the US response to the September 11, 2001 attacks, and the “unprecedented convergence of criminal and immigration law,” or “cimmigration” (ibid., 290). Distinctions between citizen, legal resident and undocumented immigrant are becoming increasingly salient, with even legal residents receiving fewer services and being more easily deported. As the daily demands for proof of citizenship multiply, those implicated in border control expand to employers, local law enforcement officers, driver’s license clerks, social workers, educators, health-care providers, public transit workers and landlords (ibid., 295).

### **Race, Gender, Class and Citizenship**

The ideal of the “good citizen” has long been permeated with assumptions based on race, gender and class. The history of US citizenship and its attendant rights is one of struggles for inclusion of those beyond White property-owning males (Mendieta, 1999). Under the Naturalization Act of 1790, only free White immigrants were eligible to become US citizens. Although the overt denial of citizenship rights by race became suspect after the Civil War and the passage of the 14th Amendment, immigration law has often served as a proxy for race in the engineering of a “good citizenry.” In the early twentieth century, US immigration policy was increasingly entangled with eugenics, the ideology that character deficiencies were rooted in race and gender, thereby producing persons who were “socially undesirable” (Ngai, 2004). In addition to perceived labor competition, such ideas motivated the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924, which barred most legal migration from Asia to the United States for decades (ibid.).

The construction and hardening of the category “illegal alien” is the flipside of racialized, gendered and class-bound ideas of the “good citizen.” In the long history of soft borders and informal crossings between Mexico and the United States for purposes of labor and trade, until the 1920s, immigration inspectors largely ignored Mexicans coming to the Southwest to work in agriculture and mining and to build the railroads (ibid., 64). With the creation of the Border Patrol, the promulgation of class-based visa criteria, the ending of the gendered Bracero guest-worker program, and the imposition of numerical restrictions on Mexican and other Western Hemisphere migration, by 1976, most migration from Mexico to the United States had been transformed into “illegal.” As part of the construction of Mexican immigrants as a disposable and foreign labor force that was used when needed and otherwise discarded, people from Mexico and their children have been subject to cycles of stringent immigration enforcement and deportations. The brown, perceived-to-be-Mexican, working-class body is the symbol and target of laws and public sentiment against “illegal” migrants, a stigma that spills over to US citizens of Latin American ancestry. The classification of “illegal” means that immigrants are denied many



rights, but the major one that sets the undocumented apart is the right to exist in the United States.

## Deportation and the Politics of Discretion

Just as there is a long history of race, gender and class bias in defining “good citizenship,” deportation is a way to “remove noncitizens deemed ‘undesirable’” (Kanstrom, 2010, 297). Although individual deportations were historically performed in “arbitrary and harsh ways” (Ngai, 2004, 76), certain patterns emerged during the twentieth century based on race, class and gender norms. People who lost jobs, unmarried mothers and those convicted of minor criminal offenses were targeted. When critiques of the emerging deportation policy surfaced during the 1920s and 1930s, there was little unease about separating Mexican families. Most concern was generated by and about ethnic European Americans. While Mexicans continued to be deported from the West merely for crossing the border without authorization, some European immigrants in the East, even those who were convicted of various crimes, received executive pardons to prevent family separation (81). In an important and early form of discretionary relief, many European immigrants had their deportations suspended and were able to go to Canada and reenter legally in what was called a “preexamination program” (84). Between 1941 and the late 1950s, only 8 per cent of suspended deportations assisted Mexican immigrants, 73 per cent served German or Italian immigrants (88). “The racism of the policy was profound, for it denied [...] that deportation could cause hardship for the families of non-Europeans” (87).

Although most undocumented immigrants were and are not deported, and some are able to get relief, the deportation regime remains effective. De Genova (2002) argues that we must examine “deportability,” or “the possibility of being removed from the space of the nation-state” (348) and its impact on the lives, opportunities and psyches of the undocumented, as well its broader social impacts. The state of deportability, of always being vulnerable to being separated from one’s job, family and daily life, and the fear, hopelessness and vulnerability that this produces, has been highly successful in disciplining and subjugating many undocumented people. Once immigrants who do not belong are labeled as criminals and threats to public safety, their mistreatment, detention and deportation is seen as justified and necessary.

Deportability is embodied in specific policies, laws and regulations that define whether a person is removable or admissible into the country. Peutz and De Genova (2010) call these policies and their implementations “legalized discriminations” that enforce ideas of exclusion based on class, race, gender or other norms (10). For example, under the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), it became harder to stop deportations, including those of lawful residents, when a misdemeanor or felony with a 1-year



sentence became an aggravated felony under immigration law (Morawetz, 2000). Before IIRIRA, an undocumented immigrant could argue that deportation would cause hardship to themselves; after IIRIRA, an immigrant must argue that their removal would cause “extreme hardship” to a qualifying US citizen relative. Shifts like this made it especially harder for immigrants with criminal records, LGBTQ immigrants and others with no recognized US citizen family members to stop their deportations. Laws and policies such as the IIRIRA and the preceding Immigration and Nationality Act and the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 create specific groups of people who may get conditional relief from deportation that are constantly being re-defined and re-structured.

IYJL’s anti-deportation activism also takes place in the context of shifting deportation and “prosecutorial discretion” policies and enforcement measures affecting categories of who is deemed deportable and who is not. As described by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the agency that handles removals in the United States, agents must exercise “discretion” in their enforcement activities to shift their resources from immigrants who are “low priority” to those who are “high priority” for detention and deportation (Morton, 2011). Although the US government has used prosecutorial discretion at least since the 1960s, in 2000 the federal government began establishing guidelines. In June 2010, John Morton, who was director of ICE, issued an important clarification of the federal government’s prosecutorial discretion policies in the form of a memorandum. The “Morton Memo,” along with accompanying clarifications published since, outlines a series of factors to be taken into consideration in order to categorize immigrants by priority for deportation. Those in “low priority” categories include people with no criminal history, those who arrived as children, people with no past immigration prosecutions, those who have not been stopped at the border, immigrants with relatives serving in the armed forces and immigrants with a college education. The three “high priority” categories are “criminal aliens, recent border crossers and egregious immigration law violators,” the latter referring to those who have previously been ordered deported (Napolitano, 2011).

Immigrants who fall under the “repeat and egregious immigration law violators and immigration fugitives” category, about a quarter of those deported in 2012 (Department of Homeland Security, 2012), have been a focus for both immigration enforcement agents and advocates fighting deportation. Their cases are often compelling because many are part of the 45 per cent deported with no criminal record, yet they are deemed a deportation priority based on past encounters with immigration authorities. On their website, ICE clarifies that “prioritization of these individuals also enhances border security and promotes the integrity of the immigration enforcement system” (*ibid.*). This illustrates what Peutz and De Genova (2010) argue: that “deportation is not only a technique by which governments exert their sovereign power over bodies, space, and ‘the nation’; it has become a mechanism by which governments measure and signal their own effectiveness” (11). The “integrity” of the enforcement system is considered



necessary to maintain the power of the nation-state and the sovereignty of its borders. It is their threat to this system that marks these border crossers as deportable, undesirable and criminal.

Under a recent form of prosecutorial discretion, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a young person may be eligible for 2 years of relief from deportation if they are under the age of 32, arrived in the United States before 15, can prove presence in the United States for 5 years or longer, have completed high school and have no “significant” misdemeanors (or no more than three misdemeanors of any kind) or felonies. This type of prosecutorial discretion targets members of the undocumented 1.5 generation who live in socio-economic conditions sufficient to attain education, remain outside of the prison-industrial complex and can pay the substantial application fees. Although this benefit, known in some undocumented youth circles as becoming “DACAmended,” has been welcomed by many immigrant communities, it further bolsters the categorization of immigrants as “worthy” or “unworthy.” Its implementation justifies harsh national and local practices that dehumanize undocumented immigrants, especially those categorized as “bad.” These positive exceptions are built into the system “not by accident, [but] to relieve some of the tensions between law enforcement and humanitarian concerns” (Castañeda, 2010, 260). They enable those in power to argue that strategic deportations are consistent with both national security and humanitarian concerns, including family values. Prosecutorial discretion, including DACA, continues to separate those undocumented immigrants who are deemed “deserving” from those who are not as a means to justify detention and deportation.

### **Activism and Strategy of the 1.5 Generation**

For much of the 10 years that I have participated in and observed the immigrant rights movement, advocates have highlighted the aspects of an immigrant’s life that fit US norms to argue for citizenship rights and against deportations. By showing that immigrants make positive contributions to the country, these tactics seek to shift negative public perceptions and depictions of these individuals and their communities. The logic is that the closer people are to the characteristics described, defined and constructed as “worthy” by the nation-state, the more likely it is that they will be admissible for legal status or considered for relief from deportation. When I sought reentry to the United States, my own constructed testimony strategically dovetailed with these characteristics as a form of survival within the system. Thus, even as immigrant rights advocates challenge the state to change its laws to incorporate the undocumented, they often do so by reinforcing the nation-state’s hegemonic and normative definitions of citizenship, and its sovereign right to exclude people who fall outside of these categories (Coutin, 2000).



Even among advocates, those who do not fit these characteristics have often been viewed as negative embodiments of immigrants, and therefore detrimental to the movement (Baker-Cristales, 2009; Pallares, 2010).

These normative articulations and performances continue to be a key strategy among advocates; however, there are segments of undocumented immigrants who have found ways to disrupt and challenge these definitions, most notably the undocumented 1.5 generation. These immigrants, born abroad yet raised and educated in the United States, have been central to shifting activist strategy and challenging citizenship and deportation norms. In part, this is because the socio-political positioning of young undocumented immigrants is at points distinct from their parents, or those who migrated to the United States as adults. The 1.5 generation lives and organizes by navigating a complex relationship with the nation-state, which places us as both as criminal and legitimate subjects (Coutin, 2002; Abrego, 2008). We organize under increasing surveillance and structural contradiction. Limited access to higher education, increased militarization and enforcement at the border and the failure to enact policies that address the needs of the undocumented have created a population of disenfranchised and relatively static young people (Coutin, 2005; Abrego, 2011). Over the years, education policies created a special social and legal relationship between undocumented youth and the government. The Supreme Court's *Plyler v. Doe* decision has meant that undocumented young people have access to public K-12 education, affecting directly undocumented youths' distinctive experiences of illegality and deportability, as well as our aspirations and expectations (Gonzales and Chavez, 2012). When young people speak English at school and learn about US citizenship and civil rights history alongside citizen classmates, we are recognized members of our schools and communities. Yet, like other undocumented people, we cannot be employed lawfully (with the exception of those who qualify for DACA), are vulnerable to exploitation in the underground labor market, are unable to vote or run for most government offices, and have limited access to higher education (Abrego, 2008; Gonzales, 2008; Abrego, 2011; Seif, 2011). Even if some undocumented young people have obtained 2 years of relief from deportation and work authorization through DACA, all live in a constant state of potential deportability. DACA recipients can fall out of status and once again become deportable.

The specificities of how 1.5 generation activists experience belonging and deportation have a direct effect on our citizenship definitions and activism. For example, according to Abrego (2011, 362–363), those who migrated as children experience illegality as “stigma” and may become “indignant” when they are treated as “illegal.” This differs from those who emigrated as adults, who experience their deportability with fear and shame (ibid.). These differences in experiencing deportability and citizenship manifest in the ways that some undocumented 1.5 generation immigrants, including those in IYJL, have chosen to organize. For example, in 2009, when a Chicago student and activist was charged with a misdemeanor involving drinking, he no longer fit all of the characteristics necessary



to be deemed a “good citizen” or a “good immigrant.” Yet, those of us involved in his campaign were fueled by the need to keep a friend and fellow organizer home. His situation was also material proof of how vulnerable we all were, as undocumented youth of color living in working-class communities, to stepping out of the “good immigrant” paradigm and into deportation proceedings. In response, Rigo Padilla, Reyna Wences, myself and a few other undocumented students formed IYJL, an organization meant to be led by the undocumented, to fight against our friend’s deportation and to work against the deportation of other people of our choosing.

That same year, undocumented organizers began to advocate for young individuals in deportation proceedings with no form of relief in other parts of the country. Many of these anti-deportation campaigns were coordinated by the undocumented-led, online organization DreamActivist.org. Although we were working independently in Chicago, the strategies IYJL and other national activists used were similar. These included making public statements, circulating on-line petitions seeking support from elected officials and organizing rallies to pressure the Department of Homeland Security to exercise discretion and stop pursuing individual deportations. As in my own case, advocates emphasized the individuals’ characteristics that fit most closely to those desired by the nation-state. In the case of our first anti-deportation campaign, we highlighted the subject’s academic excellence, leadership in Latino student organizations and young arrival to the United States. We drew a connection to the DREAM Act by arguing that since he would qualify, he should not be in removal proceedings. This was the reasoning used in other anti-deportation mobilizations for youth around the country at the time in campaigns that became known as “Education Not Deportation” cases. Therefore, as we were beginning to challenge the label of “criminality” as a qualifier for deportability, we were doing so by emphasizing other hegemonic characteristics.

Between 2010 and 2012, key political changes affected undocumented-led organizing: the dramatic failure of the DREAM Act, the implementation of DACA and the release of new prosecutorial discretion guidelines. After the December 2010 failure of the US Senate to pass the DREAM Act, I began to see a drastic shift in 1.5 generation organizing strategy. Rey, a co-organizer, described the moment as “a big reality check.” He explained that before this vote, he was “following the steps of how laws get passed [...] and when the DREAM Act didn’t pass, we got angrier. I got angrier” (Rey, interview by author, 2012). For a segment of undocumented organizers, this legislative failure freed us to more publically challenge the nation-state and its definitions of citizenship and deportability. According to another organizer, Laura, “we felt like there would be no bill on the table for at least 2–4 years and that our people would continue getting deported. We could be more open with how complex our lives really are. And we now knew we could not trust the Democrats or the Republicans, so we had to challenge them too” (Laura, interview by author, 2012).



Another early shift was related to the criminalization of immigrant adults, especially the parents of DREAM Act-eligible youth. During the legislative campaign for this bill, politicians and advocates argued for the rights of students by placing blame of unlawful presence on our parents. For example, in a May 2011 Senate press release, Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ) was quoted as saying, “We should not punish children for their parent’s past decisions. The students who would be helped by the DREAM Act did not make the decision to enter this country in an undocumented fashion” (Office of Senator Dick Durbin, 2011). Young undocumented immigrants in IYJL began to ask whether this meant that their parents deserve punishment. “Now I’m really angry about what politicians did to frame how my parents are seen. I’m really angry that we are seen as criminals .... And so I think that the next step is that we are heading in another direction,” explained one organizer (Erika, interview by author, 21 December 2010). After the DREAM Act failure, we publicly expressed discontent with these framings, refused to be divided from our parents and broadened our challenge of who was being defined as worthy, culpable or deportable.

Our organizing began to focus on deportations, asking for a stop to removals of DREAM Act-eligible young people through administrative action by the President. The announcement of DACA on 16 June 2012 and its later implementation was an unprecedented reflection of the power of organizing by undocumented youth, who creatively used tactics including coming out rallies and civil disobedience, to fight against deportations and mobilize communities. However, it has also meant that those who become “DACAdmented” become part of an institutionalized mid-level immigrant class, temporarily not deportable, yet having no access to full citizenship. This new status has also highlighted the different treatment and levels of privilege among the undocumented, leading to discussions among undocumented organizers about our responsibilities to the rest of the undocumented population. Undocumented organizers are moving away from justifying access to rights by measuring worthiness according to the nation-state’s norms and towards articulating rights based on the needs of the undocumented immigrant, their ties to the community and family, and their mental health. There is an increasing awareness that as advocates and communities emphasize the right of some to remain within, they also define who gets left out, marginalized, criminalized and deported. It is in this context that challenges by IYJL and other undocumented 1.5 generation activists around the country can shift definitions of citizenship and deportability.

## Reciprocal Activist Communities

Undocumented youth have been able to develop distinct strategies and forms of activism as we have organized our own national and local networks. “The



undocumented youth movement is almost like a bubble unto itself. I sometimes can't relate to the entire immigrant movement," explained one IYJL organizer (Ahlam, interview by author, March 2012). Others describe feeling part of an "undocumented community" that shares reciprocal relationships with members who are connected through similar experiences of migration, "illegality" and deportability. Many young immigrant activists first joined the decision-making table for immigrant rights strategy and messaging through our involvement in these youth-led networks. This community has created spaces for 1.5 generation activists to take ownership of political strategy, representation and defense of immigrants. This includes networking and creating alternative political messages to the "good immigrant" promoted by citizen advocates, as well as taking part in national organizing efforts.

This understanding of community is central to the way undocumented youth organize, who we perceive being accountable to, and for whom we mobilize. For example, one organizer who lived through his own deportation proceedings states,

Even when it's someone you don't know and they get arrested and put in deportation, I have to be on it. I send a message to someone that knows them asking how to help. I say, this is basically my brother, this is part of my community. And it's the same when someone [undocumented] commits suicide, for me it is someone that was close to me, someone that understood me, someone that was almost, in a way, related to me. So I think we are part of a community. (Francisco, interview by author, 2010)

This sense of responsibility guides activists as we consider what role to assume in immigrant rights and anti-deportation advocacy. Rey, for example, decided to "come out of the shadows" and speak about his undocumented status in 2009 during our first deportation defense campaign, because he wanted people to see the link between the two of them. "I needed people to see that this could happen to me. If they cared about me, they needed to care about him" (Rey, interview by author, 18 December 2010). Other organizers have also said that the details of the case often do not matter because what they feel first is a connection with the experience of living undocumented in the United States. Undocumented organizers argue that citizens or legal residents cannot truly relate to this experience because they do not live under the threat of deportability. Carla, another activist, says that she relies more on those who are undocumented because a citizen can "go home, and forget about this. And go to Mexico for vacation. And my other undocumented friend will be here for real" (Carla, interview by author, 19 December 2010).

This cohesiveness and reciprocal responsibility guides activists as we consider what risks to take in our organizing. It is, in part, the knowledge that we have a community that supports us if we were to be placed in removal proceedings that allows us to risk deportation as part of a strategy to challenge the nation-state. Erika explains that she made the decision to "come out" and participate in a civil



disobedience action after she saw IYJL's leadership in the successful 2009 anti-deportation campaign. "We have a really big support system in Chicago. If I was stuck in a really bad situation, I trust that whoever did that for my friend would do it for me" (Erika, interview by author, 2010). This network extends nationally, as exemplified by Erika's decision to move to Georgia in 2011 to support the creation of a local undocumented-led advocacy group in the state, the Georgia Undocumented Youth Alliance. In addition, many of these youth-led organizations are connected through formal and informal national networks.

The sense of community among undocumented 1.5 generation activists has also helped buttress hegemonic categories, particularly the middle-class frames of morality, higher education, meritocracy and individual success (Jefferies, 2009). Stories presented during the first year of "coming out of the shadows" rallies in 2010 were crafted to reflect these normative characteristics. In an interview 2 days before the failure of the DREAM Act in 2010, activist Rey told me that when he "put [his] press face on," he tried not to talk about his family and emphasized his individual character as a good student with professional aspirations:

It's not their fault, but here I am in front of the cameras and people begging them to let us live. [You] focus on all the things that you want to believe you have to be, because they are telling you that they are not going to recognize you otherwise because of your immigration status. I'm describing the America they want to be too.

(Rey, interview by author, 16 December 2011)

These performances of upwardly mobile citizenship were part of a political campaign to pass the DREAM Act. Because of our sense of community and collective responsibility, many undocumented activists chose to stick to hegemonic messaging as participants in a collective strategy to access rights. Erika described why she remained on message despite her frustration with having to justify her contributions to the country:

This isn't a movement for myself – this is for my friends. If I say I just want to live here, then that may affect their chances, or all of our chances of being here ... because anti-immigrants, anti-DREAM [Act] people would say that we only want to feed off the government ... I think messaging is really important. I wouldn't want to hurt the chances of my friends, or later, the chances of my parents being here and having their status legalized.

(Erika, interview by author, 21 December 2010)

Erika feels accountable to other undocumented people, including her parents, and sees her adherence to normative definitions of citizenship as strategic. Yet when youth organizers make decisions about strategy, including adhering to normative messaging, we are not focused primarily on the nation-state or US citizens. Rather, young undocumented activists concentrate on people who we consider part of an undocumented movement or community. As the following



section explores, deportation organizing faces a similar incongruence, where those who are in deportation may not fit the hegemonic characteristics, but the messaging of their campaign against their removal does.

While the nation-state is a powerful force in framing citizenship and deportability, activists can respond to and contest it. Some anti-deportation campaigns have succeeded that do not fit all the “low priority” criteria. Young undocumented activists have become intense students of the legal frameworks of citizenship and deportation as a form of survival, and in turn apply this knowledge to our organizing. We rearticulate citizenship and deportability in response to the nation-state, but also in the context of a social movement for immigrant rights (Abrego, 2008; Baker-Cristales, 2009). Often, activism is simultaneously a challenge to and affirmation of hegemonic categories of citizenship (Coutin, 2000). While some citizen advocates may be less sensitive to those excluded by standards of “good citizenship,” 1.5 generation activists may strategically acquiesce to these limited frames with discomfort. This is because, as working-class youth of color, we can potentially be deemed “unworthy” immigrants and because of a sense of collective responsibility to our undocumented families and communities.

### **Beyond the “Good Student”: The Chicago Anti-Deportation Campaigns**

Since IYJL was born from a fight against a local deportation, members have continued to work on individual cases, often in collaboration with national or local organizations and networks. Initially, most of IYJL’s work against deportations focused on DREAM Act-eligible young people. However, particularly after the failure of this bill, IYJL members began to take on more complicated cases. IYJL’s participation in each campaign included connecting those in deportation proceedings to legal services, strategizing private and public communications with immigration enforcement, urging elected officials to support the cases, and organizing petitions and phone calls to increase public pressure. While the dozens of anti-deportation campaigns conducted by IYJL are dwarfed by the more than 400,000 deportations that take place annually (Department of Homeland Security, 2012), details of campaign strategy and decision making demonstrate important challenges to normative citizenship constructions, including the ways they are racialized, classed and gendered. Our discussions suggest what the right to remain in the United States might look like from an undocumented, 1.5 generation perspective.

In considering whether to take on specific cases, members of IYJL must weigh the amount of work the campaign would take, available resources, and other moral and personal considerations. Between 2010 and 2013, IYJL members have moved towards a more open and inclusive stance on deportation cases as our



attitudes have shifted and we have mobilized more resources. IYJL has challenged its own members to take on harder cases. This includes cases of immigrants who arrived to the United States as adults and are not part of the young undocumented student narrative. Issues of criminality are major considerations. Deportation cases that IYJL has been approached about include charges of Driving Under the Influence (DUI), identity theft, domestic violence, gang involvement, leaving the scene of a car accident and sexual assault. For example, Rey explains that he had a change of heart as he learned more, from activism and college, about the systems of oppression involved in criminalization and immigration enforcement. “For a while, I did agree when people would say that gang members should be deported. And then I learned that gang members don’t pop out of nowhere. Something makes them” (Rey, interview by author, 14 March 2012). As Rey’s own involvement in deportation work has increased, he has also heard the stories behind the criminal charges. “It’s not so simple. What do you say to a woman whose husband is getting deported because she reported him for domestic violence? Can’t tell her it’s her fault [for reporting the violence]” (14 March 2012). Meeting other undocumented people who have been criminalized also made an impact, and he decided that each situation should be evaluated individually. A year later Rey’s stance is even more open, and he does not believe that deportation should be a punishment for a crime.

Deportation work is not only about understanding the complexities of criminalization. Francisco explains, “I think there are cases we could never work on because they would never be released. Murder cases, homicide cases.” He calls these “literally impossible” due to restrictions under immigration policies. But in the end he goes back to the personal, pointing out that it can be hard to differentiate between strategy and one’s personal, ethical boundaries. “Recently, I drew the line on a sexual assault case [...] I just felt personally and strategically it was not wise. But mostly it was personal. It’s tricky, because I’m not necessarily saying I endorse or support this removal. But by default, I guess I am” (Francisco, interview by author, 4 April 2012). Another IYJL member thinks about the criminality issue differently:

Undocumented immigration is a civil offense. Murder is a criminal offense. For immigration offenses, you go to immigration court where you need to find yourself an attorney. For criminal offenses, you go to criminal court where you are guaranteed an attorney. The fact that the media and the system has been successful at making us connect the two is ridiculous [...]. What does their [immigration] status have to do with it anyway?

(Ahlam, interview by author, 19 March 2012)

Others are more hesitant, such as Martin who takes a deep breath after being asked if he would participate in an anti-deportation campaign for someone who has been accused of murder. He responds, “I want to say yes. But I don’t know if I can do it. I think I’ve been brainwashed to think who is good and bad. I don’t



know that I could” (Martin, interview by author, 12 February 2012). Sol says that in the past she has also taken into account the family members’ perspective. She tells the story of how a friend told her that her father was in removal proceedings, but that she was glad to see him go. “I guess I was putting my friend over him” (Sol, interview by author, 14 March 2012). Although these organizers might hesitate to engage in an anti-deportation case of someone convicted of a violent offense, the discussions we are having about the connection between deportation and criminality are significant. As Francisco describes it, “The past couple of years we have been trying to expand the narrative of who is a ‘DREAMer,’ who deserves to stay, and being very intentional about cases of individuals that have a misdemeanor, two misdemeanors, a felony conviction.” He explains that there has been success in getting ICE to agree to stop or delay deportations of people who have two or fewer misdemeanors or past immigration law violations, but not those who have felony convictions or both. “But we are hoping that we will push and break that boundary,” he explains (Francisco, interview by author, 4 April 2012).

Public support for cases that do not fit the standard categories of relief has proved essential. Particularly in cases that depend on the federal government’s discretion, a person is more likely to be granted some sort of relief if there is an organized, public outcry against their deportation. As the cases become more challenging, there is a constant contradiction between pushing the narrative to be more inclusive, and generating the necessary public attention and sympathy to stop a deportation. Paradoxically, although the details of the case – for example, the person’s immigration and criminal history – may challenge normative characteristics of “good citizenship,” the public messaging of the campaign often adheres to these standards. As advocates, organizers still have to operate within a legal and social framework. For Sandra, who works on cases with IYJL, this is rooted in her sense of responsibility to undocumented immigrants. “Although we’re pushing, we don’t get to choose what ICE and the government pay attention to. They want to hear that this person is a good father, has good moral character. It’s in their rules and guidelines. And so my priority is not to make a political point, but to stop this person’s deportation. We push the narrative when they get to stay with their family” (Sandra, interview by author, 23 August 2012).

Significantly, there have been a few cases where IYJL and its activist network have diverged from this strategy of highlighting normative characteristics. The expectation that undocumented immigrants will excel in school and have no law enforcement records is an unrealistic achievement for many working class and poor youth of color, let alone members of our immigrant families and communities. In 2012, the national campaign for a young immigrant with more than one DUI charge, no high school diploma and no US citizen relatives emphasized that the person needed mental health treatment and community, not deportation (Dream Activist, 2012). In other cases, activists have pointed to life-threatening



consequences that could result from deportation or medical needs that cannot be addressed outside of the United States. In this way, organizers are attempting to shift the burden of responsibility from the immigrant to the US nation-state. However, Sandra explains that this strategy is not often used, and only when there is no other recourse. “People have complicated histories, and sometimes all we have is to try to explain how the conditions of their lives have led them to where they are. It doesn’t always work, but we do what we can” (Sandra, interview by author, 23 August 2012). The aforementioned campaign that argued for mental health needs resulted in deportation, demonstrating the difficulty of changing citizenship ideologies and deportation regimes.

## Owning Deportation and Disrupting Citizenship

Young undocumented immigrants are finding power in telling the stories of people in deportation proceedings and exposing the workings of the nation-state through our public anti-deportation campaigns. According to my sister, an undocumented activist and writer, “The people being deported who are called ‘criminals’ are our parents, our neighbors, our local storeowners, and our classmates. We see them disappear every day. ICE does this in silence, and we are challenging them to do it publicly” (Unzueta Carrasco, 2010). By telling our own stories and supporting immigrants in deportation proceedings to tell theirs, we contest hegemonic citizenship definitions and perform strategies to claim citizenship rights and the right to remain in the United States. These messages of resistance are specific to the contemporary legal and socio-political context of members of the undocumented 1.5 generation, and they will continue to change with shifting policies. Yet activists are developing an alternative vision of who has the right to remain in the United States and to claim access to citizenship.

This dialog is taking place in the constant tension between appealing to the public for sympathy, and creating a community and movement that is inclusive of the diversity of immigration experiences. Immigrant communities and their advocates have a role to play in defining citizenship and deportation. We have a responsibility to analyze our own contributions to a culture of exclusion based on worthiness defined by the nation-state, one that increasingly rejects large portions of communities of color, working class and poor people, youth, and the undocumented. As immigrants and their advocates decide which deportation campaigns to publicize or which immigrants deserve access to legal status, we run the risk of strengthening the good/bad immigrant dichotomy that exists in social attitude and law, and the power of the deportation regime. Foucault (1975) writes, “A penal system must be conceived as a mechanism intended to administer illegalities differentially, not to eliminate them all” (89). As long as some are given



clemency, continued deportations can be justified. While 1.5 generation activists may have influenced these systems and the definitions of citizenship that underlie them, most undocumented immigrants are still excluded. The challenge for immigrant rights advocates will be to make these definitions flexible and just so that the largest number of the undocumented are able to claim the right to live in the United States and access citizenship rights.

The knowledge that as undocumented people we can fight deportations has also fueled creative, impactful and effective forms of activism. For many of the undocumented people who have participated in telling our stories publicly or in civil disobedience acts, knowing that there is a way to fight if we are placed in removal proceedings is key. When I participated in a 2010 civil disobedience action in Tucson, Arizona, the goal was to be placed in deportation – although not to be deported. One former IYJL organizer explains, “there is no greater way to break your own fear than to get arrested. The one thing you’re most afraid of, but on your own terms” (Ahlam, interview by author, 3 May 2012). Participating in civil disobedience, like fighting individual deportations, is not just about changing immigration law and deportation policies, it is about owning the risk of deportation with the knowledge that we can challenge deportability. Perhaps this is the most powerful challenge to the power of the nation-state to control its populations through fear and the threat of criminalization and expulsion.

The tactics and political work of the undocumented 1.5 generation continues to evolve. Since 2013 our work on deportation cases has become stronger and more complex. IYJL and other undocumented youth-led organizations in Illinois have put together a group called Organized Communities Against Deportation, that specifically focuses on deportation cases of all immigrants, including many with a criminal history. Significantly, many of the undocumented youth who have been working against deportations, including members of IYJL, have entered the dialog about immigration reform in 2013 by using grassroots strategies to stop deportations rather than asking for a path to citizenship. Although many express a desire for US citizenship, we do not accept the terms being proposed by the state and its agents. In a statement titled “Declaration of Independence from Comprehensive Immigration Reform,” IYJL writes that the immigration bill passed by the Senate in 2013 is dividing undocumented youth from parents, so-called skilled workers from other laborers, and people with criminal history from those without one. “We need to rise beyond these divisive tactics and affirm our perspective of what reform and human rights looks like through our actions. Let’s work to create the world we want to live in” (Immigrant Youth Justice League, 2013). In this way, through our work against deportations, through using our bodies and through inserting ourselves in the political dialog, undocumented young people are redefining what constitutes good citizenship to include those of us who have limited access to education, work in the underground economy, are queer or are caught in the prison-industrial complex. We are also disrupting citizenship paradigms by calling into question citizenship, as recognized by the



state, as the determining factor for whether a person has a right to live, work and participate in the nation-state.

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