

**The Making & Unmaking of Common Sense:  
Undocumented Latino Youth & Political Consciousness**

by

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Abstract

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This study is concerned with how marginalized people come to question and challenge societally-accepted injustice and inequality. It asks, how does the discourse and practice of immigration policy shape the political consciousness of undocumented Latino youth in California? To answer this question, this ethnographic study focuses on the experiences of individual activists and members of a college-campus based support group of undocumented students, who are active in the statewide campaign to pass the DREAM Act. The narrative around illegal immigration is widely taken to be common sense, yet little is known about how the identities of undocumented young people are produced in and through this process. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and common sense, I question how common sense is made and unmade among undocumented immigrant youth.

This study draws from ethnographic data collected at three sites over the course of 18-months. First, I conducted life-history interviews with 50 undocumented Latino youth activists across California. Second, I conducted participant-observation throughout the 2007-2008 school year at a Northern California college-based support/activist group of undocumented students. Third, I monitored the statewide campaign to pass the DREAM Act between February 2007 and

October 2008 through interviews, participant- observation with the statewide network, and formal and informal archival research.

The introductory chapter presents the political context surrounding undocumented immigrant youth in California, a literature review of the theoretical trends that seek to explain the experiences of undocumented youth, and a description of my study and methods. Chapter 2 focuses on the individual undocumented youth activist by examining his/her development of oppositional consciousness. I argue that oppositional consciousness is forged out of the dialectic between ideas that are both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. Chapter 3 focuses on the student group “UPSRG,” and looks at collective action, the development of collective political identity, and the tensions and possibilities that come from an organization that has an identity as a support group and an activist group. I argue that undocumented youth experience a unique kind of insider/outsiderness which shapes their political engagement and their personal-political trajectories. Chapter 4 focuses on the statewide campaign to pass the DREAM Act, and takes up questions involving resistance/ accommodation, constructions of citizenship, and the racial state. I argue that mainstream and seemingly “assimilationist” campaigns to access citizenship can play a significant role in shaping a structural, radical political analysis among marginalized people and that through these appeals for citizenship, undocumented youth are actively reconfiguring and renegotiating the institution of citizenship, the idea of belonging, and the role and responsibilities of the racial state. In my conclusion, Chapter 5, I ask how we can utilize the findings from this study to understand how other marginalized groups become engaged in counter-hegemonic social movements.

Social movement literature under-theorizes the role of everyday processes of meaning-making in patterns of political engagement, and literature on undocumented students focuses solely on educational barriers. This results in the near absence of theoretical tools to understand the multiple material and ideological processes that shape the political engagement of undocumented youth. My research addresses these gaps by connecting micro-processes and individual personal histories with macro-processes of displacement, discourse-production, and social movements in order to analyze the ways undocumented youth interact in a public process of political engagement and how they theorize that engagement. Understanding this process enables policy-makers, scholars, activist-intellectuals, and all people engaged in social change efforts to develop a more critical approach to the role ideas, discourses, and the development of consciousness play in the building of social movements.

## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the undocumented young people who invited me into their lives, who shared their stories with me, and who inspired me daily. Your voices are strong, your fight is righteous, and you will win.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my children, Amado Antonio and Mayari Ixchel, who serve as a constant reminder that a better world for all children is worth fighting for.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Out of the Shadows and Into the Streets**

“We know, of course, there's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard”.

(Arundhati Roy, 2004)

#### **Introduction**

Anadelia<sup>1</sup> has crossed many borders. When she was 13, after years of watching her mother's boyfriend beat her, Anadelia reached a tipping point. Unable to take anymore, she announced one day to her mother, “I'm leaving. We all need to go, but I am leaving even if you don't. And I am taking my sister. We will go alone if we have to.” This is how Anadelia, her mother, and her sister became immigrants.

If there was something all three of them knew, it was that leaving the boyfriend would have to mean leaving the country. When he discovered they had left, their lives would be in jeopardy and if they were in the country, he would find them. Living in the Southern Mexican state of Chiapas, their choices were to either cross the Southern Mexican border into Guatemala or cross the Northern Mexican border into the United States. Political instability in Guatemala made that option unviable, so they headed North.

Abandoned by their coyote without money or food in Tijuana, Anadelia and her family saw no other option but to cross the border on their own. They were caught three separate times and deported back to Tijuana, where they regrouped to try again. Anadelia recalls the pain of an empty belly, the disappointment of the failed attempts, and the guilt that if she had not given her mother an ultimatum they would not be in this situation. She shudders at the recollection of the firefighter who offered them a place to stay, only so he could proposition her mother for sex as payment for helping them to cross. The days stretched into a week, and she began to wonder if the fate she had chosen for her mother, her little sister, and herself was in fact worse than the abuse they lived under at home. Their fourth attempt was finally successful, and Anadelia and her family settled into their new life.

By the time I met her, nearly 8 years had passed, and her border-crossing story was a memory that belonged to the little girl she once was. Despite the difficulty of that crossing, it paled in comparison to the other borders and barriers Anadelia faced as she began her new life as

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<sup>1</sup> All names of organizations and individuals have been changed.

an undocumented immigrant<sup>2</sup> young woman in the United States. She crossed the border each day between her low-income neighborhood and the adjacent wealthy neighborhood where she babysat and cleaned houses to help support her family. She crossed the barrier between her and a college education, a goal her high school counselor said was impossible for her to achieve. She crossed the border between being an undocumented child and being an undocumented adult, forced to navigate the terrain of adulthood without valid identification, without the ability to work, and without a country to call home.

This study examines the ways in which undocumented Latino immigrant youth confront the multiple borders and barriers in their lives, and unearths how, when, and why they decide to make a new path for themselves as activists and change-makers. It is a story that does not begin when these young people cross the international border, but one that spans time, space, place, and country. Anadelia can hardly remember the little girl she was then, though the story of how she became an activist fighting for the rights of undocumented young people in California despite the profound risks involved illuminates that the roots of these life choices are seeded in the life she lived in her Chiapas pueblo. Though the context is radically different, there is a connection between Anadelia's refusal of her step-father's abuse as a child and refusing abuse as an undocumented immigrant in the United States.

Undocumented immigrants in California cross multiple borders. There is not only the border that requires a visa and legal clearance to cross it, there are borders which keep worlds apart, segregating people into separate hierarchies, blocking off access to certain places, ideas, resources, and rights. Urban geographer Mike Davis calls this the "third border"<sup>3</sup>. "The interface between affluent Anglo majorities and growing blue-collar Latino populations is regulated by what can only be typed a 'third border'. Whereas the second border nominally reinforces the international border, the third border polices daily intercourse between two ... communities"(Davis 2001: 71). This regulation and management of the interfacing of populations happens through legal maneuvers and discriminatory policies, yet importantly, also

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<sup>2</sup> I deliberately use the term "undocumented" rather than the popularly-accepted term "illegal immigrant" which unnecessarily criminalizes people who migrate as a result of complex political, personal, and economic factors.

An "undocumented immigrant" is someone who has immigrated to the United States and resides in the United States for an extended period of time without the legal clearance to do so. Some undocumented immigrants cross the border without documentation, others cross legally and overstay their visas. Undocumented immigrants are distinct from other non-citizen groups, like legal permanent residents, in that their citizenship status does not afford any sort of conditional citizenship or legal protection.

<sup>3</sup> The "second border", in Davis' work, is not discussed here, but refers to the secondary immigration checkpoints that exist in both a temporary and permanent basis in many cities.

through lived daily practices that often go unnoticed and entire bodies of thought that are taken to be common sense.

Many have elucidated the difficulties of the immigrant experience, and looking at California over the past 15 years offers a particular insight into the various dimensions of this reality. During this period, legal attacks, grassroots movements, and economic/social/political realities have coalesced in a way that has created a particularly hostile climate for immigrants in the state<sup>4</sup>. Because of geographical proximity and a shared southern border as well as a long-standing, complicated colonial relationship between the two countries, immigrants from Mexico have been the particular targets of this reality<sup>5</sup>. This is the particular context within which my study takes place, and situating the lives of undocumented Latino youth in California within this broader political, social, and economic context is a critical component of this story. One of the central components of this research is an interrogation into ideas, constructs, and “truths” that are taken to be common sense and understanding them as both socially created as well as socially upheld. Citizenship is one of these constructs. The idea that circumstances beyond one’s control, like where one is born, should determine one’s legal rights and protections within a certain context, is created. It is not a “natural” construction, nor even a necessarily logical one. Yet it is a construction so ingrained in the way we understand our society that it comes to be seen as natural and logical, thus rendering a different conceptualization difficult to articulate or imagine. In this particular political-economic moment, citizenship is an explicit designation used to differentiate rights between people, thereby creating and maintaining a social, political, and economic hierarchy<sup>6</sup>.

This study is examination of the ideological processes that shape the political identities of the people centrally implicated in this process – undocumented Latino youth - and how they themselves engage in a practice of questioning the societal ideas, constructs, and “truths” that are taken to be common sense. This study is an examination of how this common sense<sup>7</sup> is both

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to suggest that this is unprecedented or new, but rather to point to the conditions that characterize the particular historical moment that this study is a part of.

<sup>5</sup> That is of course not to say that other immigrants do not share similar hardships or conditions, nor that immigrants from Mexico (or Latin America more broadly) have it worse than other immigrants. It is simply to note that the broader context of the two countries as well as the size of the Latino immigrant population in California has created a very specific kind of immigration experience and immigrant community.

<sup>6</sup> This is not to suggest that this is a new practice. In other moments in history, other constructs were explicitly used in this way as well, including gender, race, and property ownership.

<sup>7</sup> Common sense, in the context of this paper, refers to the Gramscian conception of the term rather than the popular usage. Gramscian “common sense”, which will be explored at much greater length shortly, refers to the elements which comprise the practical, everyday conceptions and thinking of the masses of people. Gramsci’s argues that

made as well as “unmade” among undocumented Latino youth, giving rise to oppositional ideas that can come to be manifested in oppositional political activity. I contend we cannot talk about “undocumented” people without recognizing a broader process of “undocumentation”.

Relegation to this specific, racialized legal status is not accidental nor is it a phenomenon that takes place outside of the system. Rather, it is centrally intertwined with the functioning of the system; a direct creation of the system. An analysis of the political activism of undocumented people who live within a daily reality of “undocumentation” opens up an inquiry of state power, racial categories, and citizenship.

My research asks how both the discourse and practice of immigration policy shape the political identity and the political consciousness of undocumented Latino students. Studying the ideas and practices of undocumented young people allows us to ask how people who are implicated in this dominant societal narrative about immigration are shaped as a result of growing up amid and among this discourse. We know how this narrative shapes the public consciousness and how this in turn shapes immigration policy, but little research has been done to understand how the people who are directly impacted by immigration policy are shaped by this discourse. Undocumented Latino youth occupy a particular racialized, legal position which places them as the perpetual “other”, yet the fact that they migrate as children means that they grow up here, and are shaped by this upbringing. They are racialized as Latinos and at the same time, their legal status is not something that is easily “seen”. This, I argue, leads to a hybridized sense of self, shaped by profound outsidership and deeply rooted insidership. They are both deeply on the inside – shaped by societal discourses, racialized as U.S. born Latinos as legal citizens are – as well as deeply on the outside because of the ever-present fact of their legal status and its profound material implications for their lives.

Studying the development of political consciousness among undocumented Latino youth illuminates how their lived experiences as institutionally marginalized people comes into contact with their “insidership” in a way that produces, catalyzes, and encourages political activism. An important part of this story is the reality that undocumented immigrants are active participants, not just passive victims of exclusionary immigration policies in this country. Undocumented immigrants constitute a political force that is changing the society we live in, and this research aims to document and analyze this movement which has yet not been given its rightful place in California’s history.

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common sense is historically constructed, and contains contradictory elements. Gramsci’s use of common sense is connected to the popular usage of the term, but points to a more precise set of ideas and conceptions.

## **Unspoken Agreements and Seeming Contradictions: A Brief History of the U.S. & Mexico**

A key analytical starting point of this research is the idea that undocumented immigration is one aspect of a much broader context which includes a particular historical relationship between the United States and the Global South. The movement of people across an international border is not a phenomenon that can be understood absent of the political, social, and economic realities that cause that movement or the political, social, and economic consequences that are a result of it. The history of immigration in California is a long and complicated one, beginning with the annexation of one-third of Mexican territory through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War in 1848. The annexed land came to constitute large sections of the U.S. Southwest, a reality which provides a context for the relationship that took shape over the decades following the signing of the treaty. Though I do not attempt to offer a detailed historical account of immigration or the economic relationship between the United States and Mexico in only a few short paragraphs, it is impossible to understand the conditions and realities of undocumented Mexican immigrants who live in California today without understanding the longer economic and political trajectory they are a part of. The 100 years following the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo were characterized by heavy circular migration across the border; a border which existed in theory but did not actually stop the flow of people or money in any meaningful way, nor did it attempt to. A deep economic bond between the two nations was formed during this period of time, which manifested in several ways. Central to this economic relationship was the development of agreements which facilitated the movement of contractual labor across the border, from Mexico to the United States. Though this is an ongoing phenomenon that has existed since the border was constructed, there were periods in which the movement of laboring bodies across the U.S. Mexico border were both more regulated and more facilitated through governmental agencies, indicating a formally sanctioned process.

A key feature of this ongoing sending of migrant laboring bodies is that these periods of the U.S. welcoming migrant labor with open arms were coupled with periods of repression, criminalization, and a tightening of the border – characterizing a seemingly contradictory dynamic that has continued since. Periods of recruitment of immigrant labor are paired with periods of mass deportation, in what is known as “revolving-door immigration policies” (DeGenova and Ramos-Zayas 2003: 6). The Mexican Revolution provided one such impetus, as political unrest and a changing economy in Mexico propelled tens of thousands of Mexican laborers each year in search of jobs. These workers were welcomed during this period, as the United States needed low-wage workers to satisfy the World War I production boom. A short period later, as the Great Depression struck in 1929, an estimated 2 million Mexicans living in the United States were forcibly deported, accused of draining the already-compromised

economy. Scholars and survivors have documented the cruelty of these deportations, which targeted citizens and immigrants alike. Stories such as detaining and deporting mothers returning home from grocery shopping without any regard for their children waiting at home were commonplace. These policies and practices split families, left children orphaned, and disrupted entire communities. It is estimated that as high as one-half of those deported were actually U.S.-born and the deportation orders were principally based on racial profiling, not citizenship status.

A short time later, the dual dynamic of recruiting and then deporting immigrant laborers in the United States reoccurred with the inauguration of the Bracero Program in 1942. Fueled by the demand for laborers to help the World War II effort, the Bracero Program was a “guest worker” program which contracted workers from Mexico to come to the United States to work as temporary contractual laborers with limited rights as workers. The program was officially slated to end in 1947, though U.S. dependency on low-wage Mexican laborers had grown, and the Bracero Program effectively continued to function in the agricultural sphere until the mid 1960s. Midway through this period, in 1954, the United States Congress passed Operation Wetback, a forcible removal and deportation program enacted through violent confrontations, police sweeps, and random checkpoints particularly in Arizona and California. This seemingly contradictory unity of policies legislating work, migration, legality, and illegality characterizes the relationship between the United States and Mexican migration over the past several decades. “Due to the critical function of deportation in the maintenance of a ‘revolving door’ policy, the tenuous distinction between ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ migration has been deployed to stigmatize and regulate Mexican/migrant workers for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This reflects something of the special character of Mexican migration to the U.S.: it has provided U.S. capitalism with the only ‘foreign’ migrant labor reserve so sufficiently flexible and tractable that it can neither be fully replaced nor completely excluded under any circumstances” (DeGenova and Ramos-Zayas 2003: 6). Desire for and dependence on low-wage Mexican migrant labor coupled with criminalization and the creation of conditions that make living as a low-wage Mexican migrant in the United States extremely difficult has created the current situation regarding immigration in California. It is a state with a large immigrant population, comprised not entirely of but including many undocumented workers and their families, marked by a deep and developed grassroots and legislative hostility to their existence in the state.

U.S. foreign policy in the free-trade era has profoundly reconfigured the economies, political spheres, and societies of the nations of the Global South and the relationship with Mexico exemplifies this approach. The North American Free Trade Agreement institutionalized this arrangement, profoundly altering the economy of Mexico, building up the export manufacturing base and eroding small-scale agriculture, farming, and ranching. Thus, for the

past 50 years, that which appears to be a tenuous, contradictory relationship to immigrant labor actually reveals a powerful and largely unspoken agreement between business and government. As many theorists have noted, the United States creates the conditions for migration and then criminalized the consequences (Bacon 2009, Davis and Chacon 2006). Despite a dominant discourse perpetuated by mainstream media which suggests that the U.S. government has been unable to stop the torrential flow of undocumented immigrants despite its best efforts, the reality is that the government, through both allegiance to the business elite and also a clear reliance on low-income immigrant labor, has taken no real steps to curb the migration of undocumented Mexicans. This unspoken agreement also rests on the maintenance of certain conditions for the undocumented population of California (and other states as well, of course) which includes low wages, little legal protection, and exploitive conditions for these workers and their families. Thus, a critical aspect of undocumented immigration is fact that it is not accidental, not something that occurs “outside” of the system but rather is something that is critical to the functioning of the U.S. capitalist economy. Illegality is legislated, not accidental. As Oboler notes, “Beginning in the 1960s, precisely when Mexican migration began to rise dramatically, and to this day, persistent revisions in the law have effectively foreclosed the possibilities for the great majority of Mexican immigrants to acquire a recognized legal status. Tolerated illegality in the form of undocumented workers has been instrumental in maintaining a climate of rightslessness” (Oboler 2006: 15).

Though racism, xenophobia, and grassroots and legislative attacks on immigrants have run throughout these years, for the purposes of this analysis of undocumented immigrant youth in contemporary California, I will trace the particular evolution of this dynamic over the past 15 years, using California’s 1994 passage of Proposition 187 as an analytical starting point. When then-governor Pete Wilson proposed a ballot measure to block undocumented immigrants from accessing public services, a distinct moment in the California immigration debate began. Titled the “Save Our State Initiative”, this ballot measure aimed to deny undocumented immigrants from accessing public schools, public hospitals, and other essential public services. It also contained a provision to prosecute anyone found to be providing services to undocumented immigrants or for failure to report undocumented immigrants, possibly implicated teachers, health care professionals and members of the clergy. The campaign to pass Proposition 187 in California was carefully crafted on conservative rhetoric about the dangers undocumented immigrants posed to the citizen population and the future of California, both because of their use of scarce resources (including public schools, emergency rooms and jobs) as well as their refusal to assimilate (evidenced by their continued use of Spanish and concentration in ethnic enclaves). Despite an impressive grassroots effort by immigrant rights advocates which included vocal opposition from then-President Bill Clinton, Proposition 187 passed in the popular vote by a

56% margin. Though later struck down in the California Supreme Court as unconstitutional and therefore never implemented, the impacts of the campaign and its passing linger even today. Despite not meaningfully changing the practices and policies that govern the access undocumented people have to public social services, Proposition 187 played a significant role in the creation of a contemporary discourse about undocumented immigrants and undocumented immigration in the state, which has shaped not only public opinion and public perception, but also local, regional, and state politics in the following years<sup>8</sup>.

An additional aspect of this context is the post-9/11 reality of the immigrant experience.

In the aftermath of 9/11, there was both a discursive as well as material shift in the management of citizenship as an institution and immigrants as people. In the aftermath of Sept 11, the restrictionist camp found that their messaging about ‘illegality’ and ‘criminality’ of undocumented immigrants took on a new resonance. ...Undocumented immigrants now represented a threat to the ‘rule of law’ inside a nation that has just come under foreign attack by foreign outlaws. ...Their new language about immigration policy started popping up everywhere, from the pronouncements of immigrant-rights groups to the Democratic Party platform. Instead of promising an ‘earned path to citizenship’ as it had in the past, the party stated that undocumented immigrants will be required to ‘get right with the law’ (Barry 2009: 29-30).

The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was reborn as the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency during this period, and moved under the umbrella of the newly-created Department of Homeland Security. Thus, immigrants and immigration both literally and symbolically came to be seen as a national security issue. Immigrants came under suspicion as dangerous, foreign bodies - a conception that predominated legislative and popular thought and action. This too, came to define the treatment of immigrants on a daily level shaping their interactions with other residents of the country as well as their interactions with the state.

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<sup>8</sup> An additional consequence of the passage of Proposition 187, not particularly relevant to this discussion but worthy of notation nonetheless is that many undocumented people became fearful of accessing public services for fear of deportation. Therefore, despite the fact that they were not legislatively barred from accessing them, many immigrants loss access to social services as a result of this broader political climate.



### ***Sin Papeles: A Portrait of Undocumented America***

Undocumented immigrants in California struggle through multiple layers of difficulty in trying to build a life for themselves and their families. Being unable to legally work forces undocumented people into low-wage, unstable work that often comes with unsafe working conditions and vulnerability to exploitive practices of employers. Fear of discovery or deportation compels many undocumented workers to stay quiet about abuses in the workplace, which include sexual assault, withholding of wages without cause, and unsafe working conditions. Undocumented workers in California are largely concentrated in certain economic sectors, including seasonal farmwork, construction, service sector work in restaurants and the hotel industry, and childcare. Compensation is low and insecurity is high. Undocumented immigrants are also vulnerable to abuses outside of the workplace, and their status complicates the process of seeking help. For example, undocumented women survivors of domestic violence are often fearful about seeking help from the police, or even community agencies. Though undocumented immigrants are technically able to access certain public services, fear of deportation often keeps them from reaching out<sup>9</sup>. The psychological and emotional costs of living in constant fear are high, and the difficulties immigrants face as they adjust to a new way of life in a new place without the networks of established support they had in their home countries are magnified among immigrants who do not have legal authorization to reside in the United States. Thus, all that is difficult about the immigrant experience in contemporary California is amplified in nature when it comes to undocumented immigrants, who face a unique set of challenges and barriers as a result of their “illegal” status.

The particular plight of undocumented youth will be explored in much more full detail in the next chapter, though for context, it is helpful to give a brief portrait of what life is like for undocumented youth living in California. Of the estimated 12 million undocumented people living in the U.S. (Ludden 2007), 1.8 million are children under the age of 18 (Gonzales 2008). Many of the undocumented children living in California immigrated with their families when they were under the age of 3, and have little or no memories of their country of citizenship. Being “undocumented” means that these young people are living in the United States without legal authorization to do so. Some crossed the border without documentation at some point in their childhood, others immigrated legally and then overstayed their visas. Some of them are in the process of “fixing their papers” and others have no legal basis upon which to argue for

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<sup>9</sup> As noted earlier, this is rooted in the broader political climate.

citizenship or permanent residency. Others migrated later in their lives, during their pre-teen or teenage years, causing many of them to feel like they have lived two lives in their short existence. Most undocumented young people immigrate with their parents or extended family (like grandparents) though some come alone. Those who migrate alone are generally forced out of their home country by dire economic situations, and come to the United States to look for work in order to remit money to the families they have left behind. Once they arrive, undocumented young people face a conflicting set of issues and challenges. Like their documented immigrant peers, they face the challenges of integrating into a new life, learning a new language, and adjusting to new cultural norms both within their families and outside in the broader world. A unique characteristic of the experience of undocumented young people, which is a central theme of chapter 3 because I contend it fundamentally shapes their political consciousness, is that they experience such profound outsidership based on their lack of legal status, and at the same time, there are many ways in which their age allows them a certain kind of insidership that their parents cannot access. This insidership comes in the form of access to societal institutions like public schooling<sup>10</sup> as well as in less-quantifiable forms of social access and cultural capital such as speaking English without an accent, having shared cultural points of reference with non-immigrants as a result of growing up within the United States, and spending their formative childhood years within the context of the United States which offers at least a nominal level of comfort and belonging in a country that is ultimately not their own. Again, it is important to note that regardless of the relative “access” that undocumented immigrant young people face as a result of immigrating at a younger age, the challenges they face are massive in nature.

Undocumented immigrants are among California’s most vulnerable population. Living under the constant threat of deportation, working in low-wage dead-end jobs which often take a toll on their physical health and their mental well-being, and crowded into substandard and inhumane living conditions is not the life many people imagine when they conjure up an image of California. Yet this is the daily reality for thousands of people who make their lives and raise their families in this context, making the best with that they have and attempting to survive under hostile conditions. It is a difficult reality, and the exploitation of undocumented immigrants as a backbone of the political and economic life of California is difficult to deny. However, history had shown that experiences of oppression and exploitation alone does not make a social movement and there is not a simple, causal relationship between experiences of oppression and expressions of resistance. In the next section, I turn to the question of resistance, and ask the

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to suggest that they receive fair or equal treatment as their citizen peers.

questions that lay the groundwork for this study, examining how to understand the mobilization of this reprioritized and dispossessed population – a mobilization and movement that is changing the face of California.

### **Out of the Shadows & Into the Streets: Contemporary Immigrant Mobilization in California**

One would expect that heightened grassroots and legislative attacks on immigrants coupled with elevated risks for political participation would deter undocumented immigrants from engaging in social change efforts. However, the past few years have seen large and small-scale immigrant rights mobilizations, campaigns, and initiatives erupt across the nation. These mobilizations seek to challenge U.S. immigration policy, to rescript the dominant discourse about immigrants in this country, and to win real gains and fundamental rights for immigrants living in the United States. What explains the political participation of undocumented immigrants, who are among the most vulnerable and marginalized in U.S. society? What factors contribute to their development of oppositional consciousness, propelling them out of the shadows and into the public sphere? My research begins to answer these questions, by asking how the discourse and practice of immigration policy shapes the political consciousness and political engagement of undocumented Latino youth.

The last 15 years provides us with many examples of political mobilization of undocumented immigrants. The grassroots campaign against California's Proposition 187 in 1994, though lost its legislative battle, succeeded in mobilizing large sections of the citizen and non-citizen community in support of immigrant rights; a showing of support that many expected would be impossible given the vulnerability of the undocumented residents of the state. In 2001, undocumented young people from across the state were victorious in their several-year long struggle for in-state college tuition for undocumented high school students. This victory was the culmination of a long grassroots and legislative campaign, and served as a model and inspiration for undocumented young people in other states who launched similar campaigns.

Undocumented activists have also played a key role in campaigns, initiatives, and organizations that are not solely immigrant-related as well. The Mothers of East Los Angeles, a group of immigrant and non-immigrant women, gained national recognition when they successfully blocked the construction of a prison in their low-income community and again two years later when they blocked the placement of a hazardous waste incinerator proposed by the City government. These examples demonstrate the varied ways that immigrants are becoming a political force, both in relation to immigration-related issues as well as in broader social change efforts.

One key moment in the struggle over educational rights of undocumented students, briefly mentioned earlier, was the legislative fight to pass Assembly Bill 540 (AB540). AB540, signed into law in October 2001 and enacted in 2002, authorizes any student in California who meets certain criteria to pay in-state tuition at any California public university. Prior to the passage of AB540, undocumented students were categorized as out-of-state residents for tuition purposes, despite how long they had lived in California, on the basis that they could not legally claim residency in the state. In order for a student to qualify under AB540, s/he must have attended a California High School for 3 years or more, received a high school diploma or General Equivalency Degree, and be registered at a California university. The campaign to pass AB540 was launched by undocumented youth activists and their allies, and preceded the actual legislative win by several years.

The passage of AB540 was significant on multiple levels. First, it made a palpable difference in the plight of undocumented students seeking a university education by reducing the cost by roughly half. Despite the fact that the rising fees and tuition for California universities make university extremely difficult to afford for low-income Californians, it is difficult to deny that AB540 made higher education more accessible to the state's undocumented youth. Secondly, the passage of AB540 came on the heels of the passage of a similar law in Texas, House Bill 1403, which was signed into law earlier that same year. To undocumented young people and their allies, HB1403 and AB540 represented what they hoped was the dawn of a new era in the laws impacting the educational opportunities of undocumented young people in the United States. Third, AB540 catalyzed a generation of young undocumented youth activists, with no prior political experience but a wealth of enthusiasm and passion. The young people whose worked resulted in the passage of AB540 nearly 10 years ago are still active as leaders of the undocumented youth movement in the state today. The DREAM Act campaign, which is the site of this study, is in many ways a direct and indirect outgrowth of the movement to pass AB540.

Another one of the defining moments in immigrant political mobilizations in California occurred in March 2006, when a bill was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives that sought to re-write the nation's immigration laws. The Sensenbrenner Bill, House Resolution 4437 (HR4437), included provisions to make it a felony to live in the United States without documentation and promised to prosecute anyone who assisted undocumented people with up to 5 years in prison, including members of the clergy. The bill also sought to allocate funds for the construction of a massive fence at points along the Southwest border with the highest number of immigrant deaths, and to bar asylum-seekers and refugees convicted of minor criminal offenses from ever being granted citizenship.

The introduction of the bill in the House was met by mass demonstrations across the nation. On March 10, in a turnout no one anticipated, a half a million people shut down major thoroughfares in downtown Chicago (Chicago Sun Times 2006). The weeks that followed saw massive protests erupt in most major U.S. cities, and perhaps more impressively, in small cities that had never before seen a protest. The protests not only set numerical records, they far outstripped the institutional immigrants rights organizing apparatus in this country. Leaders of the movement were stunned to see this outpouring, much of which was facilitated by ordinary people without prior political experience, without political training, who were not involved in political organizations. Undocumented workers printed up hand-written fliers and knocked on their neighbors' doors, and Latino immigrants living in small Midwestern towns waved the flags of their home countries, proudly demanding recognition.

The sheer numbers were staggering; it is estimated that between 3.5 and 5 million people participated in these mobilizations (Fox 2007). However, it was not simply the numbers that were impressive but also the composition of the protests. Not only did a million people pour into the streets, the vast majority were Latino. The overwhelming presence of middle-class, White activists that has become a hallmark of contemporary political mobilization in the U.S. (Martinez 2000) was altered. Politically inexperienced Latinos - undocumented workers, Latino families, students, recent citizens, and the children of immigrants - joined together in an unprecedented show of solidarity. Student walkouts were held day after day in several cities across the nation, despite threats of punishment, expulsion, and criminal charges from school personnel and elected officials. Weeks of mobilizations culminated in a national day of protest on May 1, International Workers Day. Titled "*Un Dia Sin Inmigrantes*<sup>11</sup>", organizers called for a *paro nacional*, a consumer and worker boycott. The intention behind the *paro* was to make a visible display of the U.S. economy's reliance on immigrant participation. Several major U.S. corporations, including Cargill and Tyson, anticipating high worker absences, paid workers and shut down their facilities for the day (Morris 2006). The protests were the lead story on every major national news network that night, and were plastered across the front of every major newspaper the next morning. There was a palpable sense that something important was happening, something big, something that was altering the political landscape for U.S.-dwelling Latinos.

My research asks how both the discourse and practice of immigration policy shapes the political engagement and political consciousness of undocumented Latino youth. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and common sense (2000), I ask how common sense is made and unmade among undocumented youth growing up amid the contemporary

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<sup>11</sup> "A Day Without Immigrants"

immigration debate in California. Undocumented students actively negotiate the schism between the promises of the American dream and the experiences of being denied basic human rights in this country. Bringing Gramsci to bear on literature within ethnic studies and sociology about racial frames (Harris 2006) and “colorblind” politics in the post-Civil Rights era (Bonilla-Silva 2009) illuminates the ways in which hegemonic constructs of race and illegality shape the consciousness of marginalized people. Critical to this exploration is an understanding of immigration as both discourse and practice (Chavez 2001), two mutually constitutive processes which characterize contemporary racial politics in California. Understanding the development of oppositional consciousness (Mansbridge 2001) as an educative process allows us to understand activism as social learning. The under-theorization of process in the social movement framing literature and the “educational barrier” focus within the literature on undocumented students (Diaz-Strong and Meiners 2007, Dozier 2001, Mehta and Ali 2003, Villegas 2006) results in the virtual absence of any theoretical tools to understand the multiple material and ideological processes that shape the political engagement of undocumented youth. In the spirit of Paul Willis’ inquiry of how working class kids get working class jobs (1982) as a case study of hegemony, I look at the disruption of everyday practices to understand how politically, socially, economically marginalized youth “learn” resistance. I envision this study in the tradition of education ethnographies that examine how informal educational processes through lived daily experiences shape the way that young people understand the world they live in. My research focuses on the political engagement of undocumented Latino youth with a particular focus on the ideological dimensions of this engagement. I am interested in exploring the ways in which the life experiences of undocumented Latino youth, shaped by their racialized legal position, shapes the way that they think about possibilities for social change, and their place within that struggle.

### **Theorizing the Immigrant Youth Political Experience**

When the 2006 mass actions against HR4437 broke out across the country, it was impossible to ignore the participation of immigrant youth. As the nation watched high school students walk out despite threats of expulsion by school principals, middle school students pour into the streets with homemade signs, and toddlers adorned in white pushed in strollers through marches of thousands of people, the political capacity and political potential of a young generation of Latino immigrants could not be denied. Similarly to how these protests outstripped the political infrastructure within the immigrants rights movement, this mass action which mobilized thousands of immigrant young people across the nation also outstripped our knowledge of immigrant youth as political actors. Though there is a growing body of literature which examines the political activism within immigrant communities, very little specifically theorizes the experiences of the young people within these communities who, despite sharing

similarities with their parents, have a uniquely different experience as immigrants because of their age. There is a sizeable body of literature on immigrant youth, though this literature also offers little in terms of theorizing the political participation and the development of political consciousness of these young people. Immigrant youth literature is largely focused on questions of assimilation and acculturation, and often does not differentiate between the children of immigrants (1<sup>st</sup> generation in the United States) and young people who themselves have immigrated. This literature also largely obscures unique experiences of undocumented immigrant youth. In recent years, scholars have begun to focus on this particular subset of immigrants – undocumented youth – though this literature also has its limitations. Focused on questions of how to remove educational barriers for undocumented immigrant youth and consumed by an insistence on demonstrating how undocumented youth, despite legal status, are truly “American”, this body of literature does little for our understanding of how the marginalized legal position of these young people lends itself to a certain set of experiences that shape political engagement. Social movement literature offers some helpful concepts in thinking about the development of oppositional consciousness and political engagement among marginalized populations. However, the making of political identity among undocumented young people has yet to be explored, and the tools that currently exist do not quite fit the unique situation of this population. In the section that follows, I will attempt to lay out key conversations in each of these bodies of literature, which are connected to the central questions of this study. I aim to identify key components in the existing literature which are helpful in theorizing the undocumented youth political experience as well as highlighting the questions that remain to be answered.

In California, 25.5% of the population is under the age of 18, 26.2% of the population is “foreign born”, and 36.6% of the population is Latino (U.S. Census Bureau 2008); demographics which inspire concern among the older, white population of the state. Despite a reputation for being politically progressive, over the past 20 years, California has seen some of the fiercest grassroots and legislative attacks on immigrants in the nation. All along the way, however, immigrant youth and their families have resisted these attacks, and fought against the vilification of immigrants. Youth walked out of school to protest Proposition 187 in 1996, mobilized against Proposition 189<sup>12</sup> in 1998, fought for the passage of AB540 in 1992, and coordinated massive protests against HR4437 in 2006. That Latino immigrant youth have come to constitute a meaningful political force within the state is undeniable. Yet, little is known not just about this history, and even less is known about the ideological and identity-forming processes which

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<sup>12</sup> Proposition 189 was a California Proposition that sought to end bilingual education in the state.

enable undocumented young people to question and act against their own marginalization. Undocumented young people grow up inundated with popular dominant narratives about illegality, race, and differential rights that vilify immigrants and blame them for their own marginalization, yet many become forces working against this marginalization. My study humbly attempts to contribute to this understanding, and in this effort, attempts to illuminate the broader issues of the development of consciousness among marginalized populations in this contemporary political-economic moment.

### ***Immigrant Youth & Assimilation***

Numerous scholars, both conservative and progressive, have theorized the myriad ways in which contemporary immigration is fundamentally shaping United States society – socially, economically, and politically. These scholarly contributions take place within a broader popular conversation about immigration and belonging – a discourse in which immigrant children occupy a complicated place. The reality of the immigrant experience that shapes the daily lives of their parents is different for immigrant youth, who spend their formative years in the United States. Many theorists cite this as the “Americanization” of immigrant youth, though I argue this is an oversimplification, and it is more useful to think about this as a particular kind of immigrant experience. An immigrant experience, moreover, that is worth understanding and exploration.

The existing literature on immigrant youth is preoccupied with the questions of assimilation, incorporation and “success”. The central questions within this body of literature are how “well” immigrant children do in American society based on standard measures of success, the extent to which they are becoming Americanized, and to a somewhat lesser extent, what this means for the changing face of immigrant “America”. The question of immigrant assimilation has commanded the attention of sociologists for decades, dating back to the 1920s, when classic assimilation theory became the predominant way of understanding immigrant incorporation. This theory holds that assimilation is a continuum which immigrants follow in a straight line over time. In other words, the longer immigrants are in the new country, the more assimilated they become to the culture, norms, and values of their new country. This model suggests then, that the children of immigrants do better than their parents and that presumably, their children will do better than them (Warner and Srole 1945). Classic assimilation theory, has been criticized for being teleological, for assuming that “mainstream society” is fixed and clearly identifiable, and for promoting the idea that immigrants belong to an inferior culture and that success is achieved through assimilation into superior, mainstream, white American culture (Portes and Zhou 2005). More contemporary assimilation theory has attempted to correct these flaws and take a more critical look at how structural and cultural realities disrupt this “straight-line” continuum (Gans 1992) and also how the incorporation of immigrants is not simply a one-



way process but one that fundamentally reshifts and reshapes American society in an ongoing and dynamic way (Alba and Nee 2003). Many of these attempts have also made an effort at specifically theorizing the experience of the children of immigrants as a distinct group.

The “segmented assimilation” model, developed by Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou (2005) has come to be regarded as one of the leading theories of immigrant youth assimilation. Specifically concerned with the assimilation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, segmented assimilation theory holds that “varying modes of incorporation of the first generation endow the second generation with differing amounts of cultural and social capital in the form of ethnic jobs, networks, and values and expose it to differing opportunities. This in turn exerts differential pulls and pushes on the allegiances of the second generation” (Portes and Zhou 2005). They assert that assimilation is not a one-way continuum that immigrants move along with time. Rather, the children of immigrants are shaped by the experiences of their parents, and assimilation can be both “positive” or “negative”. Proponents of segmented assimilation theory are preoccupied with the “decline” of the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, and this theory seeks to explain how this happens. The segmented assimilation model argues that immigrant youth experience different structural barriers based on a variety of factors, and that these structural barriers impact their ability to assimilate. Recently, a group of the nation’s leading immigration scholars published the results of a longitudinal study of 2<sup>nd</sup> generation immigrants in New York, which has further refined and come to challenge the segmented assimilation theory by offering a more hopeful assessment of the promise of the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, arguing that these young people have a “second generation advantage” by being able to essentially straddle two worlds – both the culture of their home country represented by their parents as well as that which is beneficial from American culture. “Members of the second generation can sometimes negotiate among the different combinations of immigrant and native advantage and disadvantage to choose the best combination for themselves. In other words, we believe that the ability to select the best traits from their immigrant parents and their native peers yields *distinct second generation advantages*” (Kasinitz, Waters, Mollenkopf, and Holdaway 2009: 20).

The scholarship on immigrant children largely focuses on assimilation and integration. Much of this literature focuses on the children of immigrants, and not immigrant children themselves. That work which does focus on immigrant children fits into this assimilation frame, largely examining barriers to academic success faced by immigrant children. The assimilation-focus of this literature prioritizes a set of questions about the ways that immigrant children become “Americanized”, not the ways in which these young people are engaged in a project of shaping and impacting the society they live in. Political participation is almost non-existent in the literature on immigrant youth, though when it is discussed, it is included as a marker of acculturation and assimilation, based on the assumption that immigrants who engage in civic and

political participation demonstrate a level of integration into the host country. Thus, not only has little attention been paid to immigrant youth as political actors, when we have understood this potential, it has been a signifier of integration into American society. However, the story told through my research is a very different one – young people turning to political participation often out of experiences of exclusion, isolation, and targeting by U.S. society.

### ***Undocumented Youth – We are Good Kids, We are Americans***

The experience of undocumented youth has gained scholarly attention in recent years. Prior to this, the experiences of undocumented young people was not particularly separated out as unique and important from the experiences of immigrant youth in general. Particular attention has been paid to undocumented young people as students, and their unique experiences in schools – both k-12 as well as higher education. Some researchers have taken up the question of undocumented immigrant students in specific (Diaz-Strong and Meiners 2007) while others have had to consider the unique experiences of undocumented students because in studying the experiences of immigrant youth in general, undocumented youth have become an unignorable subpopulation. Particularly in California, any study of immigrant youth must take into account undocumented youth. By and large, the literature on undocumented youth is distinctly focused on educational barriers. Diaz-Strong and Meiners, in their longitudinal study of undocumented young people in Chicago, point to factors such as financial barriers, lack of mentorship, and “undereducation” as serving as detriments to the academic success of undocumented youth (2007).

In recent years, scholars and activists have contributed to a new and growing body of literature on undocumented young people, which seeks to document some of the important legal and grassroots battles undocumented young people have waged. Roberto Gonzales (2008) and Alejandra Rincon (2009) documented the important struggle of undocumented students in relation to educational justice. Rincon’s work on documenting the struggle for in-state tuition rights in Texas is particularly important as Texas was the first state in the United States to pass such legislation. Hinda Seif (2004) makes a similar contribution, using the legislative battle to pass Assembly Bill 540 as a case study to challenge traditional notions about the agency undocumented youth have as legislative advocates. After the 2006 protests against HR4437, a number of scholars from various disciplines including sociology and political science attempted to make sense of this outpouring of mobilization (Gonzales 2008), asking both how this mobilization happened as well as what it means for the future of immigrant political participation in this country. These studies largely serve to document a primarily unrecorded history and contribute to the recognition of undocumented young people as political actors and as a meaningful political force, which is an important political and intellectual endeavor. However,

there is still much to be learned about the process by which undocumented young people develop oppositional consciousness and become engaged in political activism, and in particular how their lived experiences as undocumented young people shape this personal-political trajectory.

Lastly, the literature on the educational and political lives of undocumented young people rests on and reinforces a conception of undocumented students as “worthy” of citizenship. An insistence that these children *are* American despite their legal status, and therefore deserving of certain rights and privileges, reinforces the dividing line between “deserving” and “undeserving” immigrants, a political and discursive conundrum that will be discussed in much greater length throughout this study.

### ***Problematizing Political Consciousness***

The question of what causes subordinated people to consent to their own oppression or to revolt against it is a critical one for activist-intellectuals and theorists of social movements. However, though the concept of “political consciousness” has long captured this imagination and attention, there is a relative shortage of literature on the subject. In this section, I will explore some of the bodies of thought that shed light on these questions, drawing from a diversity of disciplines. What links these bodies of thought together is their attempt to answer the question of what political consciousness is, and how is it constituted, developed and formed in a context in which oppression, inequality and injustice are considered normal, inevitable and natural.

### ***Political Consciousness in the Marxist Tradition***

From a social science perspective, political consciousness is difficult to describe, analyze, and explore. How does one talk about something that is, by definition, an internal mental process, while at the same time socially situating it? In much of the literature, the ideological realm as a site of struggle is glossed over and under theorized, rendered somewhat magical. Stuart Hall notes this dynamic, in talking about the “problem of ideology”, which he describes as being concerned with “the processes by which new forms of consciousness, new conceptions of the world, arise, which move the masses of the people into historical action against the prevailing system” (Hall 1986: 27). In Hall’s analysis, the rise of the “cultural industries” as well as the widespread support among the working class for capitalism is responsible for the persistence of the issue of ideology and consciousness. He calls for the development of a materialist conception of ideology, reminding us that “no such theory exists fully prepackaged, in Marx and Engels’ works” (Hall 1986: 27). Hall roots these processes in the broader political, economic, and social context, conceptualizing consciousness as not only personal, internal, and mental but also profoundly social, historically situated and historically contingent, and crafted through the social relations of capitalism.

Several thinkers within the Marxist tradition have given thought to the question of the development of consciousness within the context of capitalism. Lenin distinguishes between two types of consciousness – trade union consciousness and revolutionary consciousness. He argues that experiences of exploitation under capitalism lead the working class to develop a trade union consciousness which provides them an awareness of unequal power relationships, perhaps even exploitation, that they experience as workers. This trade union consciousness will lead them to engage in struggles against these conditions.

This shows that the ‘spontaneous element’, in essence represents nothing more nor less than consciousness in an embryonic form. Even the primitive revolts expressed the awakening of consciousness to a certain extent. The workers were looking their age-long faith in the permanence of the system which oppressed them and began...to sense the necessity for collective resistance, definitely abandoning their slavish submission to authorities (Lenin 1987: 74).

The key shortcoming of trade union consciousness, Lenin describes, is that it does not allow workers to understand the irreconcilable conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie and as a result, workers will continually engage in efforts to reform the inherently exploitive system. Revolutionary consciousness only develops when workers are exposed to the correct ideas, which happens rarely due to the illusion of democracy that the bourgeoisie state is protected by. It is only an exposure to the true nature of the state and the inherent exploitation of capitalism brought to the proletariat by conscious forces that can result in the development of a revolutionary consciousness.

Dissatisfied by Lenin’s idealistic conception of the development of consciousness, Louis Althusser attempted to develop a theory of ideology and consciousness that moves away from a conception of individuals being duped to believe in a system that does not benefit them towards an understanding of how the capitalist state manages the production of ideology. Althusser identifies key ideological apparatuses, such as the educational system and the institution of the family, which “exercises an overseeing or ‘overdetermining’ control over social experiences” (Turner 2002: 18). These ideological state apparatuses achieve ideological ends by establishing and legitimizing social norms through everyday practices (Althusser 2001).

Gramsci moves beyond Althusser’s formulation, arguing for a conception of consciousness which accounts for the complex interplay between coercion and consent that is a hallmark of advanced capitalism. He represents a move away from an economic determinist

stance which argues that the economy determines all forces in society, and argues for the need to look at the cultural, social, and intellectual as material forces just as powerful as the economy. His articulation of common sense aids us in understanding the non-linear, contradictory spectrum that is oppositional consciousness. Common sense refers to the elements which comprise the practical, everyday conceptions and thinking of the masses of people. Gramsci's argues that common sense is historically constructed, and contains contradictory elements.

It contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science...Common sense is not rigid and immobile but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life. Common sense creates a folklore of the future, that is as a relatively rigid phase of popular knowledge at a given place and time. (Gramsci 1971: 324).

Common sense, according to Gramsci, is the terrain upon which ideological struggle plays out.

One of the most puzzling elements of oppositional consciousness concerns its contradictory nature. How do we make sense of the political consciousness of someone, for example, who is active in feminist political struggle but is in an abusive relationship with her partner? Gramsci's notion of common sense does not treat these contradictions as anomalies because his conception of consciousness is inherently contradictory. Thus, elements of bourgeoisie ideology and liberatory ideas inform the way all people see the world. Stuart Hall, in "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity" explains why this is such an important formulation:

Because [common sense] is the terrain of conceptions and categories on which the practical consciousness of the masses of the people is actually formed. It is the already formed and 'take-for-granted' terrain, on which more coherent ideologies and philosophies must contend for mastery. The ground which new conceptions of the world must take into account, contest and transform, if they are to shape the conceptions of the world of the masses in that way become historically effective. (Hall 1986: 431)

Gramsci's work aids us in understanding consciousness as inherently contradictory and historically constructed. Additionally, his work situates ideology and consciousness in the

everyday practice of living and making sense of the world. He disrupts the false disconnect that locates political consciousness outside of the realm of everyday consciousness, instead situating oppositional consciousness within the realm of everyday life, and asserting that everyone from the most compliant to the most radical live with a contradictory common sense.

### *Contemporary Efforts to Define Political Consciousness*

There are several contemporary efforts to articulate a conception of political consciousness that build off of and deviate from these conceptions. Jane Mansbridge conceptualizes oppositional consciousness as a spectrum rather than a state of arrival. Mansbridge uses the concept of “class consciousness” as an analytical starting point for the idea of oppositional consciousness, stating that oppositional consciousness is what comes to mind when we think about class consciousness, extended to other categories as well such as race, gender, ability, and sexual identity. Thus, Mansbridge is concerned with identity but pushes beyond a conception of consciousness that is solely rooted in identity such as those articulated by Shingles (1981), Rinehart (1992), Gurin (1985), Sigel and Welchel (1986). Mansbridge, like Hall, insists on the socially-situated character of oppositional consciousness, arguing that structural circumstances are key in the development of oppositional consciousness.

One of the ways that theorists deal with the cognitive elements of political consciousness while retaining their emphasis on consciousness as socially situated is to focus on the role that emotion plays in the construction of oppositional consciousness. Mansbridge draws a careful distinction between general frustration and oppositional consciousness. “Oppositional consciousness takes free-floating frustration and directs it into anger ... cognitive and emotive processes mix together, as an emotion focuses cognition and cognition triggers an emotion” (Mansbridge 2001: 5). Thus, to Mansbridge, pure emotion is a pre-cursor to oppositional consciousness, and the latter serves to systematize the former.

Mansbridge departs from Hall in her close connection between identity and oppositional consciousness. She does not address how her conception of oppositional consciousness applies to people who are not part of subordinate groups, naming the identification with a subordinate group as a critical and necessary component of oppositional consciousness. Mansbridge does not elaborate on this “identification” so it is difficult to discern if identification refers only to an individual affiliation with others like oneself or if someone from outside of a population can choose to “identify” with a subordinate group through empathizing with their plight. This intricate connection between identity and consciousness appears in much of the writing within the fields of ethnic studies and gender studies. Chicana feminist scholar Chela Sandoval talks

about the crafting of a “differential oppositional consciousness” as a task that Third World feminists are taking up by producing discourse on the intersection of oppression (2000).

Several authors use Mansbridge’s articulation to problematize the idea of political consciousness, and to craft an understanding of consciousness that makes space for non-linear processes and complex formulations. Sharon Groch (2001) explores the way that segregation and physical space contributes to the development of oppositional consciousness by exploring the different ways that the deaf community, the blind community, and disabled people with mobility impairments form oppositional consciousness. Groch determines that “both the degree and the nature of the segregation influence the formation of oppositional consciousness” (2001:66). Anna Maria Marshall, in her study of legal cases dealing with sexual harassment (2001), demonstrates the true spectrum of oppositional consciousness, focusing on the different location that both lawyers and plaintiffs in landmark sexual harassment cases occupied in their ideological commitment to the cause of sexual harassment. Yet another articulation, offered by Brett Stockdill examines the formation of a multidimensional oppositional consciousness by documenting the way that this consciousness is formed among people who stand at the intersection of many different kinds of subjugation and oppression (2001). Stockdill interviews HIV positive AIDS activists of color, and examines how they confront multiple systems of oppression and develop a consciousness that reflects that multi-sited interconnection.

I draw heavily from Mansbridge’s conception of oppositional consciousness, with an important alteration. At the essence of her definition is the idea that oppositional consciousness is a “mental state”. Drawing on Brazilian popular educator Paulo Freire’s exploration of the nature and character of consciousness allows us to alter Mansbridge’s definition. What is significant from Freire’s work on *conscientizacon* is the emphasis he places on praxis - the connection between theory and action. Freire squarely locates the process of *conscientizacon* in the realm of lived practice, not as a mental process. Freire acknowledges the mental processes at work within conscientizacon, however, he discards any use of pedagogy that stops there. Freire insists on a formulation of consciousness that “is understood to have the power to transform reality” (Freire 1993: 29). Thus, with this alteration, I build on Mansbridge’s articulation and assert that oppositional consciousness is an empowered mental state that is expressed through action of some sort. The action associated does not need to be participation in public protest, it may be much more subtle or personal.

This conception of oppositional consciousness is closely related to a Gramscian notion of common sense. Common sense, in this formulation, is critical to hegemony; it is the stage upon which hegemony is built, changed, and recreated. Understanding how marginalized people come to question and challenge this oppression through political activism must account for common sense, as the challenging of societally-accepted truths is a process that involves the

making and unmaking of “common sense”. Because common sense is fractured and contradictory, it is a place of political potential - the place in which counter-hegemony can grow. I argue that this “fracture” is particularly evident in the common sense of undocumented young people as a result of the contradiction between their profound institutional outsidership and deep insidership that is a result of growing up in a country that they are not legally able to fully participate in. Thus, a study of how common sense is “made and unmade” is particularly appropriate with this population, as is evidenced by the burgeoning political movement which seeks to secure the rights of undocumented people. Their lived experience as undocumented young people shaped by their racialized legal status creates a particular kind of fractured common sense, which I argue is generative, in a complicated and contradictory way, of political activism and the development of oppositional consciousness. The increase social movement activity in recent years among this sector is evidence of this dynamic and indicates why this is an excellent population to illuminate these questions.

Oppositional consciousness is not any type of resistance, nor is it general anger or discontent. Rather, it involves a systematization of those emotions, and taps into different resources such as, but not limited to, identity. The particular type of political consciousness we are dealing with here, oppositional consciousness, is centrally concerned with a consciousness that is rooted in action. Lastly, consciousness is inherently contradictory and is not monolithic nor static. It is, as Gramsci asserts, fundamentally comprised of contradictory elements and is manifested in the cultural practices of life itself. Much of the theoretical work on oppositional consciousness is based on the idea that there are hegemonic (reactionary) ideas and counter-hegemonic (progressive) ideas and that oppositional consciousness is forged when the progressive, counter-hegemonic ideas win in the struggle between the two. We see roots of this argument in the Marx-Engels-Lenin lineage which posits that through false consciousness, the working class is duped into working against its own materialist interest (Eagleton 1991, Lenin 1969). Recent innovations on this idea, such as Jane Mansbridge’s (2001) work, have argued that not only is the idea of false consciousness far too simple, but that oppositional consciousness is not “one point on a binary” (6) but rather a historically-contingent spectrum. However, despite its many merits, the concept of oppositional consciousness partially reinforces the foundational notion that hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideas are in struggle with one another, and that oppositional consciousness results when the counter-hegemonic ideas win. My study is heavily influenced by Antonio Gramsci’s (2000: 423) work on hegemony, which he defines as the exercise of “moral, political, and intellectual leadership” in a society. Gramsci conceptualizes this exercise of power beyond the traditional notion of the state as the singular institution that rules through force, an idea we find in Lenin (2004). Gramsci contends that the state does not rule through force alone, but cultivates consent through “a multitude of other so-called private



initiatives and activities [that function] to the same end—initiatives and activities which form the apparatus of the political and cultural hegemony of the ruling classes” (1995: 258). Hegemony, therefore, is a process by which “educative pressure [is] applied to single individuals so as to obtain their consent and their collaboration, turning necessity and coercion into 'freedom’” (1995: 242).

Oppositional consciousness is a crucial component of collective action. Before collective action can occur, a group must construct a shared set of interests and a common understanding that “the social arrangements that are ordinarily perceived as just and immutable must come to seem both unjust and mutable” (Piven and Cloward 1977: 12).” Contemporary literature on social movements has attempted to address the previous blind spots in the literature as a whole around the centrality of ideology and consciousness in the development of social movements (Benford & Snow 2000: 613). Studies of collective action framing (Benford 1993, Tarrow 1992, Benford and Snow 2000)<sup>13</sup> emerged to explain *the mechanisms through which* activists come to understand their social situation as problematic, and in turn, how they mobilize this understanding to foster collective action. *Collective action frames* are “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings” that activists purposefully construct to “inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization” (Benford and Snow 2000:614). The predominant focus of this literature is in examining how social movement actors use collective action framing to generate specific movement-related outcomes. For example, studies examining the relationship between framing and collective action tend to look at how the logical structure of collective action frames convinces people of the need for action. These studies have shown that specific types of movement frames – those that identify social problems particularly severe or those that generate a collective identity – may be more likely it to stimulate collective action and recruitment (Gerhards and Rucht 1992; Benford 1993; Gamson).

Increasingly, the social movements literature has used the concept of collective action framing as an analytic tool that attempts to make sense of the ways people utilize ideological constructs and the social and institutional environment structure that surrounds them. This literature has shown how movement actors invoke particular ideologies through their collective action framing in the service of the social movement – to legitimate the movement’s goals and to

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<sup>13</sup> The sources cited here deal specifically with collective action framing. However, it is important to note that *collective action framing* is a concept developed in the social movements literature from earlier work on *cognitive framing*, which analyzed how culturally constructed symbols guide social interpretation and produce meaning. “The term 'frame' (and framework) is borrowed from Goffman to denote the 'schemata of interpretations' that enable individuals 'to locate, perceive, identify, and label' occurrences within their life space and the world at large. By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective” (Snow et al. 1986, p. 464).

spur future action (Oliver and Johnston 2000). For example, activists might draw on ideological notions of equality and civil rights to frame a government policy as illegitimate, which in turn stimulates collective action and resistance (Scheingold 1975). This theory on framing was an important innovation within the field of social movement literature, because it gave serious attention to the ideological constraints under which movements construct innovative (or counter-hegemonic) discourse. By showing how “[c]ollective action frames function as innovative amplifications and extensions of, or antidotes to, existing ideologies or components of them” this literature has contributed to theoretical understandings of how “ideology functions as both a constraint and resource in relation to framing processes and collective action frames” (Benford & Snow 2000: 613).

The literature on collective action framing is relevant to theories of counter-hegemony because it has demonstrated one mechanism through which movements deploy elements of hegemonic ideologies in a transformative way. However, the predominant focus of this literature is an examination of the ways social movements *deliberately* use ideology to generate concrete outcomes related to social movements.<sup>14</sup> Similar to the broader body of social movement literature of which it is a component, framing literature is over-concerned with concrete outcomes (e.g., recruitment, mobilization, coalition formation, and policy change) and under-concerned with consciousness as a process. The focus on measurable and concrete outcomes usurps an examination of the ways in which people are shaped by the hegemonic and ideological constructs that shape daily life, and how this shapes political identity and political engagement. This is the focus of my study, and reflects an underlying belief that people come to ideas through practice and performance, not only through discourse or language. As others have noted (Cadena-Roa 2002, Kane 2000, McAdam 1996), the framing literature is about *deliberate* action on the part of actors who are *already politically aware* to consciously deploy aspects of their environment to the benefit of the movement. My research differs both because it discusses how hegemonic constructs relate to political consciousness by examining the ways they shape the daily lives of undocumented youth, as well as discusses how hegemonic constructs shapes the very potential for political awareness. A key critique of the literature is that it “tends to focus on the speeches, writing, statements, or other formal ideological pronouncements by movement

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<sup>14</sup> Framing is thought of as “the *conscious strategic efforts* by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action” (McAdam, MacCarthy, and Zald 1996:6). It is “an active, process-derived phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction” (Snow and Benford 1992: 136).

actors” (McAdam 1996: 341).<sup>15</sup> My research speaks to this problem because it examines how events and daily life shape individual actors’ consciousness and situates collective movement discourse in the context of hegemonic, institutionalized ideas.

### *Theoretical Summary & New Directions*

The bodies of literature explored here have much to offer an analysis about the way that political consciousness is developed within the context of U.S. hegemony. Despite these contributions, there are some pressing theoretical gaps that must be addressed. The first gap relates to race and racial construction. We lack an understanding of the complex location of people of color living in the first world who not only suffer under the system but also benefit from it in complex and, at times, contradictory ways. We lack a meaningful understanding of how race and experiences of racial injustice both encourages and discourages the development of political consciousness. This is connected to the second gap, which relates to the work on crafting a conception of political consciousness. We are not given a substantial account of how resistance on a social level comes about, only how individuals resist beyond an individual level. We do not know specifics about the transformative process that enables people to modify, suspend, or alter deeply-held conceptions in order to be open to new ways of seeing the world. We are lacking an understanding of how social ideas that are in contradiction to the dominant narrative arise and how they become materially constituted. Another gap is the under theorization of the connection to social movements. We do not understand the role of ideas play in social movements aside from as a “resource” which compels people to get involved, or as a coming out of movement participation. We are lacking a dialectical understanding of the relationship between counter-hegemonic ideas and political action. The last gap is methodological in nature. Methodologically, we are lacking an account of the development of oppositional consciousness that is not backwards looking – something that tracks in an on-going manner, the way that oppressed people engage in meaning-making processes around social ideas about injustice and inequity.

My study is centrally concerned with the question of how marginalized people, despite being inundated with dominant notions that inequality inevitable and that people earn their place in society by their own merit and not as a result of structural barriers, come to a place in which they not only question these ideas, but mobilize in action against them. Specifically, I examine the processes by which undocumented immigrant Latino youth develop oppositional

consciousness and how their lived experiences in anti-immigrant California shapes this process. Chapter 2 focuses on citizenship, the racial state, and what I describe as the fine line between accommodation and resistance. Chapter 3 takes up the question of the development of oppositional consciousness, examining how lived racialized experiences shapes oppositional consciousness in complicated and surprising ways. Chapter 4 takes up the question of collective action, the relation between political ideas and political action, and how non-political contexts can produce surprising political results. I do not believe there is a causal relationship between marginalization and the development of an activist identity, nor that oppositional consciousness is a state of “knowing” that one can reach in a quantifiable or measurable way. Rather my approach takes a critical look at the complicated, conflicting, and conflicted process which marks the political development of undocumented youth and how this development complicates the way we think about political consciousness, the relationship between political thought and political action, and the radical possibilities in mainstream social movements.

## **Research Methodology, Positionality and Decentering Ethnography**

### ***The Study***

The central question this dissertation set out to answer is how both the discourse and practice of immigration policy shape the political consciousness of undocumented Latino youth in California. Related to this central question, I also ask how does the lived experience of institutional exclusion shape the political consciousness of undocumented Latino students? What are the political possibilities and limitations of non-political associations that form out of necessity in a hostile political climate and how does this shape the development of collective political identity among undocumented young people? How does participation in a mainstream legislative campaign around citizenship can contribute to the development of a structural analysis of inequality?

The campaign to pass the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act is the newest phase of this struggle and is very much an outgrowth of the previous struggles. The DREAM Act is a piece of pending federal legislation that would allow undocumented young people access to federal financial aid and a path to legalization. In order to qualify for the DREAM Act, an undocumented young person must have lived in the United States since age 15 or younger, be between the ages of 12 and 30 when the legislation passes, have graduated from high school and completed two years of college or military service, and have a “good moral character” (Govtrack.us 2009). The bill has appeared before Congress on several occasions, first appearing in an earlier form in 2001, and was most recently brought to the floor of the U.S. Senate in October 2007 as a cloture vote. The DREAM Act failed to pass, lacking 8 votes. The bill died on the Senate floor in Spring 2008. The campaign to pass the

DREAM Act led by undocumented youth is an apt site to ask the question of how lived exclusion shapes political consciousness, for several reasons. First, as a piece of legislation that only aims to naturalize college students or young people in the military who have a “good moral character,” the DREAM Act is intertwined with one of the hegemonic components of immigration discourse, which draws a line between “deserving” and “undeserving” immigrants. Additionally, the campaign to pass the DREAM Act is both mainstream in its demands and tactics, and also radical because of the risks associated with “outing” oneself as undocumented. In a climate in which immigration raids are on the rise, undocumented youth engaging in a highly-visible legislative battle is significant and risky. In 2007, a nationally-recognized undocumented activist<sup>7</sup> was recently deported, and Tom Tancredo publicly called on authorities to arrest AB540 students who spoke at a DREAM Act Rally (Bernuth 2007). This study allows us to see how the young people engaged in this campaign confront, contest, and comply with dominant notions of racism and immigration, and how they construct political identity and oppositional consciousness within this context and through this process.

### ***Research Methodology***

My methodology blends formal and informal interviews with participant observation in three interconnected spheres. I conducted 50 life-history interviews with undocumented Latino youth activists aged 16-28 involved in the DREAM Act campaign in Northern California. These interviews allowed me to map their political trajectories and their theories about race, racism, and inequality. I also conducted ongoing participant observation during the 2007-2008 school year at a Northern California college-based support group for undocumented students, United People Struggling for the Right to Graduate (UPSRG), which is active in the statewide DREAM Act campaign. Lastly, I monitored the statewide campaign to pass the federal DREAM Act by collecting and analyzing media coverage produced by formal and informal media sources and by conducting interviews and participant observation with members of a statewide DREAM Act student coalition. Participants were contacted through their participation in the DREAM Act campaign and/or UPSRG, and I also used the snowball sampling method to reach others. Studying undocumented Latino youth in each of these spheres has allowed me to examine how these youth theorize race and racism, how they encounter and contest dominant conceptions of “illegal” immigration, and how they come to see themselves as political participants in a context that excludes them. I intentionally chose a blend of methodologies in order to capture the multi-faceted, complex realities of these young people’s lives, understanding that only conducting formal interviews or only observing youth in ‘activist spaces’ would yield incomplete data.

The life-history interviews served to provide a space for these young activists to tell the stories of their lives in a guided, yet open-ended manner. Questions focused not just on their

lives as activists, but also on their childhoods and family histories, their border-crossing stories, their schooling experiences, and their path to activism. Drawing on Kathleen Blee's (1993) ethnographic project on women in the white supremacy movement as an example, I used interviews not only to record facts about the lives of these young people, but also to provide a space for each interviewee to reflect, theorize, and analyze their experiences. I also conducted less formal interviews with members of the campus-based student group and members of the statewide network, which served to collect both their reflections on the campaign at different moments and their thoughts about racism, immigration, and social justice more broadly.

I conducted participant observation with UPSRG and the statewide coalition. Participant observation with UPSRG involved attending twice-weekly group meetings, frequent informal gatherings, and group-sponsored DREAM Act activities including rallies, protests, forums, lobbying visits, and coalition meetings. Participant observation with the statewide coalition involved being in regular contact with coalition staff and members through regular conference calls, emails, and regional meetings. All members of the coalition also convened twice per year for a statewide retreat, which I also attended. At all of these gatherings, I took detailed field notes, spoke with participants, and when appropriate and when invited, participated in the discussion. I will discuss this at greater length in a subsequent section in which I examine my positionality as a researcher. I regularly wrote memos throughout periods of participant observation, and used this as a way of integrating regular analysis and personal reflection into my practice as a researcher.

Lastly, I reviewed formal and informal media sources as a way to monitor the statewide movement to pass the DREAM Act. This included tracking the dialogue about the movement and the bill in major California newspapers like the Los Angeles Times and the San Francisco Chronicle, and it also included analyzing informal media produced by the undocumented youth activists themselves, including blog postings, fliers, public reflections, and participation in electronic communities. This media tracking was done throughout the data collection period of this research, however it was not a central component of the methodology. I have used the media analysis to enrich the data collected in interviews and participant observation, not as an independent component.

### ***Positionality and “Decentering” Ethnography***

This project grew out of my own political, personal and intellectual trajectory. I am a second generation Chicana – my mother was born in Tijuana, Mexico and my father in San Diego. I grew up a few short miles from the US-Mexico border during a specific historical moment – the 80s and 90s – which has profoundly shaped me. As a child, I remember seeing the nightly news give a daily tally of the number of people who died crossing the border in the hot

summer months, their bodies found in the desert. I remember my father being rudely questioned by the border patrol as we returned home from Tijuana after attending a quincinera. I remember when the construction began on the newer, “better,” more lethal border fence. Bearing witness to the differential treatment and the violence enacted on people who were seeking a better life compelled me to get engaged in community organizing for immigrant rights at age 15, when Prop 187<sup>16</sup> was on the ballot in California. I was 26 at the start of this research, having spent more than 10 years in the immigrant rights struggle.

I am both an insider and an outsider to the subjects of this study. As a first generation Chicana college student who grew up on the border, I share many life experiences with the subjects in this study. On many occasions I blended into the group and would have been completely unnoticed to anyone who did not know I was conducting research. This is in part due to what I look like and in part due to the choices I made about how to conduct myself in those spaces. I made attempts to genuinely engage in the work of the groups and not just sit on the side jotting down notes – I lugged protest signs from the BART to Nancy Pelosi’s office with the students, cleaned up the bagels on the breakfast table at the statewide retreat, attended birthday parties and helped proofread scholarship essays. At the same time, I am very much an outsider, marked not only by my privilege as a university researcher but also by my citizenship privilege. Thus, I did not share many of the “traditional” challenges faced by outsiders in the ethnographic process, however a degree of “insiderness” does bring complications.

My “insiderness” allowed me easy entry into the sites of my study but also opened up other challenges that I needed to stay attuned to. This was especially true at the UPSRG site because it was the location of my deepest ethnographic work and I developed personal relationships with the young people at this site. As someone who fit in easily with the group, I had to be diligent in reminding the students that I was conducting research and not just a political ally. As someone with more years of experience in campaign work and grassroots organizing (and many opinions about these things) I had to be cognizant of not directing the group’s work with my suggestions, which were often solicited. As someone who cares deeply about this issue and these students, and therefore is far from ‘neutral,’ I had to work hard at remaining critical in my reflections, asking the hard questions, and ensuring that I was not glossing over anything that might portray things negatively. Though no methodology is without its flaws, I believe that by frequently reflecting on my positionality in my field notes and by being in regular

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<sup>16</sup> Prop 187 was a California ballot measure passed in 1994 that sought to deny undocumented immigrants access to basic social services including emergency room care and public schools. Proposition 187 was later struck down as unconstitutional by California’s Supreme Court.

communication with colleagues and members of my dissertation committee, I have been able to minimize the risks inherent to my identity and positionality.

In the early stages of this study, a number of questions arose for me as a researcher that required me to step outside of the confines of traditional ethnography and think creatively about new ways to conduct this research. Studying consciousness proved difficult from the start of the project because it is difficult to “observe” what is, at essence, a mental process. Traditional research methods instruct me to define “markers” and to assess consciousness through these markers. I was uncomfortable with this approach on two levels. First, it seems to undermine the “deep, rich data” that ethnographic research seeks to collect and serves to virtually “quantify” what is fundamentally a process that is better analyzed through qualitative analysis. Second, it strikes me as perpetuating problematic dynamics by assuming that because I am a researcher, I have the authority to judge and measure political consciousness of undocumented youth when the very dynamic I was trying to give space to entails an inquiry into how undocumented young people perceive their own racialized, immigrant experience. I felt it was my responsibility as an aspiring public intellectual and as an “insider-outsider” researcher to wrestle seriously with these questions and to build in methodological decisions that deal in a principled way with these difficulties. These practices are part of what I call “decentered ethnography” which aims to disrupt the traditional roles of the “researcher as analyzer” and the “research subjects as the analyzed.”

There were three specific methodological elements that I integrated into the project in order to aid in this “decentering.” The first element was to extend beyond interviews and participant observation to include an analysis of informal media produced by the undocumented young activists such as blog posts, campaign materials, and spoken word pieces. By including the creative work of these research subjects as part of my data collection, I seek to position their work as legitimate “dispatches” from the frontlines of the immigration debate. The second element was to include reflexive interviewing – asking research subjects to reflect on their own interviews, a few months after being interviewed, and theorize their own analysis. The third element was incorporating what I term “analytical inquiry.” I designed interviews that included questions designed to get at who my participants are and the details of their lives, as well as questions about what they believe, what they think about a particular issue or event, and how they understand their own lives and experiences. I often brought pertinent newspaper articles and asked for their opinions. I posed questions such as “If you were the researcher here, how would you make sense of this?” Additionally, I paid special attention to moments in which the young people themselves built analysis into their own work, whether in the form of a political education session or a campaign debrief evaluation.



Integrating these “decentering” methodological elements, though not a “solution” for the power dynamics inherent in ethnography, has allowed me to make a space for the analysis, theorization, and understanding of the research subjects themselves. Additionally, this methodology has enabled me to study consciousness in a grounded way that does not require me to reduce it to a checklist of “consciousness markers” or quantitative data.

### **Dissertation Map**

This dissertation is an exploration of how despite a dominant narrative that inequality is inevitable and “illegality” is criminal, undocumented Latino youth come to question hegemonic ideas through political activism. Drawing from my methodological, ideological, and political commitment to both amplify the voices and stories of these young people as well as situating their experience within a broader theoretical and intellectual conversation that can move forward the body of literature, each chapter attempts to make both empirical as well as theoretical arguments. This introductory chapter has presented the political context surrounding undocumented immigrant youth in California, a literature review of the theoretical trends that seek to explain the experiences of undocumented youth, and a description of my study and methods. Chapter 2 focuses on the statewide campaign to pass the DREAM Act, and takes up questions involving resistance/ accommodation, constructions of citizenship, and the racial state. Chapter 3 focuses on the individual undocumented youth activist by examining his/her development of oppositional consciousness and draws largely from the interviews I conducted with undocumented youth activists across California over the period of 18 months – before, during, and after the height of the DREAM Act campaign. Chapter 4 focuses on collective action, the development of collective political identity, and the tensions and possibilities that come from an organization that has an identity as a support group and an activist group. This chapter draws on data collected during the 2007-2008 school year during my in-depth participant observation of UPSRG. In my conclusion, Chapter 5, I ask how we can utilize the findings from this study to understand how other marginalized groups become engaged in counter-hegemonic social movements.

## Chapter 2

### The Courage to Dream & Act: Assimilation, Accommodation and Resistance

“What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore-- And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over-- like a syrupy sweet?  
Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.  
Or does it explode?”

Langston Hughes (2002: 1606)

#### Introduction

In the fall of 2007, DREAM Act proponents got word that the United States Senate would soon vote on the DREAM Act. It was the moment undocumented student activists had been waiting for, because though it would likely be a cloture<sup>17</sup> vote, and therefore non-binding, this vote would determine if the DREAM Act would once again die on the Senate floor or would be advanced legislatively. The young activists sprung into action - planning rallies, mobilizing allies, calling senators, setting up lobbying visits, and organizing local and statewide actions. Balancing school, work, family responsibilities, and activism was difficult, and often required 16-18 hour days. As I saw 4am emails in my inbox and listened in on 11:30pm conference calls, I remembered the agitational words of one of the student leaders a few weeks prior, at the statewide end-of-summer campaign retreat. With tears in her eyes, she shared:

Look, I don't know what's gonna happen with the DREAM Act. None of us do. And I hope it passes. But if it doesn't pass, I wanna feel like I did *everything* possible, *everything* in my power, to get it passed. I don't wanna be like, 'oh, if I had only done that' or 'if I had only done this' or 'if I had just put in a few more hours'. I'm doing it

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<sup>17</sup> *Cloture* is a congressional procedure by which a time limit can be placed on consideration of a bill. Therefore, a cloture vote acts as a non-binding vote to gauge how many people will vote for or against a bill as a means by which to ascertain if it should be pushed forward or killed.

now, because this might be the only chance we have  
(Carmen).

And it is true. The DREAM Act is, very possibly, the only chance they have. Not only because legislative possibilities pass quickly and the DREAM Act has been put up repeatedly and always lacks the votes necessary to move forward; it is also because for many of these young people, the DREAM Act represents the only possible path they have towards legalization. Because complex immigration laws differentiate among undocumented immigrants based on how and when they immigrate, many literally have no other options to legalize their status. Thus, the repeated failure of the DREAM Act is profoundly political and devastatingly personal. Additionally, because the DREAM Act applies only to immigrants under the age of 30, the window of possibility is shrinking. If the DREAM Act ever does pass, it will likely be in part because of the work of a generation of young activists who are, by that point, too old to benefit from it.

The young activists had been working around the clock when the news finally broke. The DREAM Act had been struck down, narrowly lacking the number of votes necessary to move forward. I woke up the next morning, wondering what the tone of that night's meeting would be – somber and defeated, or hopeful and optimistic? I wasn't sure what to expect, and wasn't sure how to analyze whatever it is that I would see. When I opened my email that morning, I was surprised to see a message from Nicolas, one of the UPSRG students, with the subject line: "The DREAM Act didn't come true because it wasn't our dream". In a reflection titled "A Chicano student sheds light on the Dream Act Not Passing", Nicolas shares:

The Dream Act didn't come true because it wasn't our dream. Since when does a people in vast numbers (12 million+) who lie in the margins ask for a reduction in college fees instead of a real dream where Chicano students not only get instate tuition but instate enrollment that reflects the size of our population, instate enrollment that accommodates the intelligence and potential of our people. Even more, the few successful undocumented students distract us from the fact that half of our men are in prison and the other half are on their way. And they are completely as intelligent and capable as the rest. The DREAM Act didn't come true because it wasn't our dream.

I found myself surprised by Nicolas' reflection, and then found myself surprised that I was surprised. It was a sentiment that on one hand, resonated with many progressives who shook their heads at what the DREAM Act had become. Yet on the other hand, it was a sentiment shared by an active participant in the campaign. Yet after months of fieldwork, this apparent disconnect made perfect sense.

Throughout the campaign, the young people at the forefront of the statewide effort struggled with ambivalence about the legislation they were fighting for. It was not an ambivalence that signified a lack of investment or a partially-formed analysis, but rather illuminated the difficult line between pragmatism and optimism. The DREAM Act does not represent the manifestation of their vision for change and hopes for the future, yet it does represent what is perhaps the only possibility for many of becoming citizens in the country they have lived in since they were children. Though it is not perfect, it is something. Yet the reality of what stands to be gained and what is realistically at risk haunts them.

The campaign to pass the DREAM Act is the most recent incarnation of a movement in California led by undocumented young people that stretches far beyond this demand. This vibrant movement has the potential to both change the face of public education in California and also to shift the debate around undocumented immigrants in the state. The DREAM Act fight is at its essence, a fight around citizenship, which can be seen as one of the most assimilationist, mainstream demands that the immigrant rights movement can put forth. Citizenship, as a legal right and status, is a demand for full inclusion in American society, it is a demand to not be seen as "other" but to be seen – in both the humanistic and legal sense – as part of this country. In fact, the immigrants rights movement of the past 5 years has been criticized by progressive forces for being too assimilationist, and for "yielding to a racial hierarchy" (Banks 2006: 2) rather than resisting it. It is a scathing critique, and one that is launched against and by groups who appear to be on the same side - progressives working for racial justice and against racial discrimination. This critique lacks a real understanding of the nuances of this movement and the real possibilities that exist. It would be a mistake to assume that a demand for citizenship always signifies an assimilationist politics within the immigrants rights movement. In fact, as I will centrally argue in this chapter, not only is the assumption of an assimilationist politics based on the demands around citizenship incorrect, mainstream and seemingly "assimilationist" campaigns to access citizenship can actually play a significant role in shaping a structural, radical political analysis among marginalized people. This is evidenced by Nicolas' ambivalence about the DREAM Act not passing.

This argument is significant not only because it allows us to understand the potential and possibility within this movement but also because it signifies a much broader process at work, both within the lives these young activists and among the larger political context. Through these

appeals for citizenship, undocumented youth are actively reconfiguring and renegotiating the institution of citizenship, the idea of belonging, and the role and responsibilities of the racial state. Embedded in this is an understanding of citizenship as a lived experience (Oboler 2006) and an analysis of citizenship and the racial state. In this chapter, I will trace the origins and the contours of the movement of undocumented students in California for educational justice over the past 15 years, and argue the ways the campaign to pass the DREAM Act, and even the legislation itself, is an outgrowth of this contested political trajectory. I will then take up a discussion of citizenship and the racial state, using this theoretical anchor to take on the question of the nature of the current immigrant rights movement, and ultimately argue that an analysis of the racial state and its intersection with the policing of citizenship as a lived process is critical to our understanding of the potential of this movement. The next section will lay out my central argument of this chapter by examining the ways in which mainstream and seemingly “assimilationist” campaigns to access citizenship can actually play a significant role in shaping a structural, radical political analysis and action among marginalized people and will draw on the experiences and political engagement of the DREAM students to demonstrate this possibility. I will conclude this chapter with a brief assessment of the campaign, its possibilities for impacting change, and its potential pitfalls. This analysis of the campaign to pass the DREAM Act, and the students pushing this campaign forward, ties into the overall argument of this dissertation, by pushing us to rethink our understanding of what resistance and accommodation look like, and how the messy thin line between the two is the space of enormous political potential.

### **Where There is Struggle: The origins of the undocumented youth movement**

The existence of a generation of undocumented Latino children graduating from high school in the United States is a relatively new phenomenon. This is largely a result of the fact that the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) legalized a large part of the undocumented population and by relation, their children. Among other provisions including employer penalties for hiring undocumented immigrants, IRCA granted amnesty to certain undocumented people who entered the United States before January 1, 1982 and had resided in the United States continuously since that time. The legislation was aimed at curbing undocumented immigration through legalizing a segment of the undocumented population and employer sanctions. IRCA also granted a path towards legalization to certain undocumented workers who worked in agriculture and who had been continually present in the United States since 1982. It is estimated that 2.7 million people were granted legal status through IRCA (Edmonston, Passel and Bean 1990). Once granted legal status, previously undocumented immigrants were able to petition on behalf of their children as well, thus the undocumented children of many undocumented parents also were able to access a path to legalization during

that time. IRCA was not a result of the benevolence of the United States or then-president Ronald Reagan, but rather an economic safeguard to secure the immigrant agricultural labor force the country depended on.

Applying for citizenship through IRCA was also not a flawless process, and many people were confused and misled by the bureaucratic steps. One participant in this study, Sylvia, an undocumented college junior, was the only member of her family who remained undocumented. Her younger siblings were all born in the United States, and thereby birthright citizens and her parents were naturalized through IRCA. However, they did not understand that they needed to file separate paperwork for their daughter who was born in Mexico. Facing life as the only undocumented member of her family meant that Sylvia was simultaneously frustrated at the barriers she had to face alone, and grateful that her parents and siblings were protected in a way she could not be.

IRCA changed the face of immigrant America, but it did not come close to resolving the core issues that cause immigration in the first place. Thus, undocumented immigrants continued to come to the United States, and the absence of any comprehensive immigration reform or amnesty program since IRCA has left an entire generation of young people growing up in this country without the legal clearance to do so. The following chapters of this dissertation detail that experience in more depth. What is important to note here, though, is that the children of post-1986 migrants, as well as the people who were not eligible to get legal status through IRCA, have come of age in the past 10 years. This has created the pressing situation and the political imperative to think about the future of these children, who have grown up in this country but remain in a state of legal limbo.

The institution of schools have also historically been a site of contestation and political struggle – not just for Latinos and not just for immigrants. Notable examples include the brave children being escorted into Little Rock High School in 1957 or the 1931 school boycott by Mexican parents in Lemon Grove, California which led to the first successful school desegregation court decision in the history of the United States (Alvarez 1986). Education as the key to social mobility has not been lost on racist forces, and as a result, struggles over educational exclusion have historically been a part of the history of many marginalized communities. Education has been a particularly focal point for immigrant groups, perhaps in no small part due to the fact that opportunities for their children and economic imperatives are repeatedly cited as key impetuses for migration among most immigrant groups (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, and Todorova 2008). Almost every participant of this study cites their parents' desire for them to have educational opportunity as one of the principle reasons they left their homeland. Elizabeth's story is indicative of many I heard:

I came here when I was 2. I know my parents specifically wanted to come... well, because I was born. My dad was in school at the time. He was in University studying. He had a year left when I was born . . . but he had to work, you know, to support the family. So he couldn't finish. He wasn't able to finish, because I was born. So, that was their plan – to come here, so that I could have the opportunity to do what they couldn't in Mexico. They wanted me to be able to get an education.

Within the context of a history of exclusion and the desire of immigrant parents to seek out educational opportunities for their children, struggles over education have been a focal point of struggle in the history of the Latino immigrant community in California. In chapter 4, I will discuss *Plyler v Doe*, the landmark legislation passed in 1982 that secured the right of undocumented children to access public k-12 schooling. This legislation, though hard won and a major victory for undocumented children, was predicated on the division between them as “deserving and innocent” and their parents who were presumably “culpable and undeserving” by contrast. This is a division that has continued to characterize and complicate the political subjectivity of undocumented young people fighting for their rights, because their very existence in this country is often cast as the unfortunate result of the actions of their law-breaking parents. The passage of House Bill 1403 in Texas and AB540 in California, which granted in-state tuition to public universities for undocumented residents of these respective states, was the next major campaign launched to secure the rights of undocumented young people as students deserving of an education. The AB540 campaign in California struggled with a similar political message as *Plyler v Doe* had - in this case, the line was drawn not between deserving children and their undeserving parents, but between aspiring immigrant students and their non-college-bound peers.

The struggle for in-state tuition is still an unfolding story, as 10 states have passed similar laws, with more than a dozen other states with similar pending legislation (NILC 2010 *Tuition*). Aside from the actual legal rights AB540 secured for undocumented students, which undeniably resulted in a larger number of undocumented young people being able to access higher education, there was another political ramification as well. With the passage of AB540, I argue, we saw the emergence of a new political subjectivity – the AB540 student. This political subject is very much an outgrowth of the tensions and contradictions embedded in this movement history, and represents the tension between resistance and accommodation. This will be taken up at greater length at a later point in this chapter. This history is an important precursor not just in understanding the political engagement of undocumented young people but also in understanding how the DREAM Act came to be a central focus of this movement, how

the legislation has changed over time, and what this has done not only to the movement but also to its participants.

This trajectory is significant because in order to understand the context from which the DREAM Act emerged, we have to understand the ways in which the discourse and legislation around undocumented young people and education was shaped by these earlier years of struggle. The designation between the deserving and undeserving immigrants is a consistent theme, both in this discourse and also, as the evolution of the DREAM Act will demonstrate, in the actual legislation and demands coming out of the undocumented youth movement around access to education. Thus, the DREAM Act campaign, and its carefully articulated components, did not emerge out of nowhere. It came out of a long history of exclusion, and a long history of struggle. It is also a history of contestation, accommodation, and negotiation with the state.

Through this all, the DREAM Act campaign has walked the fine line between accommodation and resistance virtually all social movements deal with. This negotiation is particularly apparent in this campaign because it engages a population that is outside of the formal political and economic system organized around the demand for citizenship. Fighting for a place of inclusion and legal recognition is a logical starting point for undocumented people, which directly and indirectly draws from the civil rights movement. However, at the same time, the fight for full inclusion in mainstream American society through citizenship can be seen as a desire to assimilate. Theorists, social movement practitioners, and grassroots groups have pointed to the dangers of assimilationist approaches, arguing that immigrants should not have to leave behind their own culture, values, and practices in order to be accepted into “American” society. They promote a vision in which all be engaged in a process that pushes society to be inclusive of many realities, various cultures, different values and non-Euro-centric practices. Thus, the demand for full inclusion via citizenship navigates the difficult terrain between a pragmatic demand for inclusion reminiscent of past struggles for the civil and political rights of marginalized people, and the dangerous assimilationist thrust of mainstream discourse on immigration which posits that immigrants should embrace all that is “American” or go back to where they came from. The DREAM Act movement and this history brings up a several critical questions. Can one fight for inclusion without bending to assimilation? If so, how and what does that look like? If not, what are the options, both legally and practically, for undocumented young people? The evolution of the campaign to pass the DREAM Act offers some interesting considerations on these questions.

**‘What Do We Want? Colonial Papers! When Do we Want Them? Now!’  
Conflict, Controversy, & The DREAM Act**



The facilitator at a statewide DREAM Act campaign strategy meeting was attempting to restart the meeting after a mid-morning break. As is sometimes customary in political meetings, rather than shouting for everyone to get back into their seats, she began a protest chant to reconvene the group.

“What do we want?” she yelled.

“Justice!” the group yelled back.

“When do we want it?”

“Now!”

The chant served its purpose, and participants reassembled into their seats. The facilitator, moving forward with the momentum that had been created from the chant, went for another round. Though this time, when she yelled “What do we want?”, Jacobo, the jokester of the group, replied in his booming voice, “Colonial Papers!”. The group erupted in laughter, and he finished the chant on his own. “When do we want them?” “NOW!” he yelled.

Jacobo’s chant was a joke, though it illustrated a deep and complicated relationship between the DREAM Act and the young people who poured thousands of hours into the campaign. To call it ambivalence would be too simplistic. Rather, most of the young people who steered the DREAM Act campaign actively grappled with the growing space between their own vision of justice and what the DREAM Act had become. On one hand, the DREAM Act represents what is likely the only chance many of them have of ever fixing their legal status and living a normal life in the country they have grown up in. On the other hand, the DREAM Act has changed over the years, and now includes a provision for undocumented youth who join the military. At a time of war, when the body count of U.S. soldiers in Iraq continued to be tallied on the nightly news, this concession was not lost on anyone. Some progressive groups called the DREAM Act a defacto draft of undocumented children. When the DREAM Act was introduced on the Senate floor in 2007, it was attached to a military spending bill because proponents assessed its chance of passing was higher as a rider to this bill, since military spending bills at times of war are rarely contested. As Marco, one of the leaders of the statewide campaign said,

If they are attaching the DREAM Act to the military spending bill, its like, oh here’s money for Iraq, and here’s the troops. So that does bug me. And at times, I’m like, are we trying to make deals with the devil here? Either way we’re gonna lose? If we advocate for the DREAM Act, they’re gonna mess up our communities. If we don’t, were still left in a position where we can’t get an education. So

at times, it seems like your choosing between losing one way or losing another way (Marco).

The military component of the DREAM Act was not the only part that gave these undocumented youth activists pause. Aside from having to constantly interface with the sentiment that undocumented students are deserving of rights because they should not be punished for the actions of their “law-breaking” parents, there is also a possible pragmatic cost to pushing forward a piece of legislation which only seeks legalization for students and young people in the military. The students debated what the cost would be of passing this legislation separate from a larger comprehensive immigration reform bill. Would separating out the “desireable” immigrants make it less likely for a bill to pass that would provide a path to legalization for their parents, tios and tias<sup>18</sup>? Should they hold out for comprehensive reform, or a broader amnesty program, despite the fact that it looked nearly impossible that anything would pass through Congress in the next 10 years? The DREAM Act campaign was fraught with these questions and considerations, and this complication was not lost on the young activists. Despite the impression that the campaign was moving forward without considering these possible implications, the view from the inside revealed exactly how carefully these factors were being considered, and how the demand for the DREAM Act was not a clamoring plea for the right to assimilate, blind to the possible risks.

The story of the evolution of the DREAM Act reveals how it came to be so controversial, hotly debated even by its proponents. It is a story of negotiation with the state, of a bill that began as a grassroots movement with a vision of social justice and demanding the rights of undocumented young people and changed over time into a bill that even its proponents had misgivings about. Claudia Gomez-Arteaga, a community activist with more than 10 years of experience in the immigrant rights movement, was an integral part of the early stages of the DREAM Act campaign in 2001, and is one of the few people I came across in my research who has a recollection of this largely unrecorded history. The following chronology comes from an in-person interview I conducted with her in the Fall of 2007, as well as from an email reflection she sent out to political allies that same fall, after having been repeatedly asked why she was not supporting the DREAM Act as it was currently proposed.

The DREAM Act was first introduced in the House of Representatives as the Student Adjustment Act in 2001, and included three central components regarding the rights of undocumented students – the right to in-state tuition, a path to legalization, and access to federal

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<sup>18</sup> Uncles and aunts

financial aid. Immigrant rights advocates wanted to see a similar bill in the Senate, and a slightly different bill was introduced, fashioned from the Student Adjustment Act though slightly more restrictive, called the DREAM Act. Both the Student Adjustment Act in the House and the first DREAM Act in the Senate sat around for a few years, not moved forward but not voted down. In 2003, a national alliance was formed to try to force action on these bills. It was then that the military component of the bill was introduced, including a path to citizenship not only for undocumented young people who had completed 2 years of college but also extending this stipulation to undocumented young people who had completed two years of military service. The introduction of the component caused a fissure between D.C.-based national immigrant advocacy organizations and grassroots groups that worked on a state and local level. As Gomez-Arteaga states, “Some [grassroots groups] thought the DREAM Act had been changed from its original goal of breaking barriers to higher education and promoting legalization of immigrant status . . . to a strategy based on how to garner Republican support to move the Republican majority to support the bill” (Gomez Arteaga 2007). A tentative, reluctant compromise was reached, and both sides agreed to allow the military option to remain in the bill, as long as a community service option was also added, to provide a non-academic option alternative to joining the military. Gomez-Arteaga goes on to explain, “This was a bottom line that was forfeited when D.C. immigrant advocates met with bill sponsors during some of the first hearings on the bill post these add-ons. The Republicans gutted the bill by taking the community service option out and denying DREAM students federal aid like Pell Grants, which would help many of these students pay for college” (2007).

The current version of the DREAM Act was born through this process, and as it currently stands, the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act<sup>19</sup> is a piece of pending federal legislation that would allow undocumented young people access to federal financial aid and a path to legalization. In order to qualify for the DREAM Act, an undocumented young person must have lived in the United States since age 15 or younger, be between the ages of 12 and 30 when the legislation passes, have graduated from high school and completed two years of college or military service, and have a “good moral character” (Govtrack.us 2009). The National Immigration Law Center summarizes that the DREAM Act has passed twice through the Senate Judiciary Committee, first in the 2003–04 108th Congress, and again in 2006 “by a voice vote without dissent as an amendment to the comprehensive

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<sup>19</sup> For clarification, there is also a state-specific bill in California by the same name – the California DREAM Act – which is similar but has slightly different provisions. The young people in this study mobilized around the Federal DREAM Act, for a variety of reasons, thus whenever the “DREAM Act” is mentioned in this dissertation, it refers to the Federal DREAM Act, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

immigration reform bill. In May 2006, the DREAM Act passed the full Senate as part of the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2006 (S. 2611). On October 24, 2007, in a 52-44 vote in the Senate, the DREAM Act (S. 2205) fell just 8 votes shy — with four senators absent for the vote — of the 60 votes necessary to proceed with debate on the bill” (NILC 2010 *Dream: I*). The DREAM Act was reintroduced in the House and Senate on March 26, 2009, and remains today, awaiting legislative action.

This final version of the DREAM Act has caused controversy in progressive circles, as many immigrant rights and social justice groups have vocally opposed it. The Association of Raza Educators, a California-based organization of Latino teachers who raise money for college scholarships for undocumented students released a statement strongly renouncing the DREAM Act:

In essence, the Dream Act will create a de facto military draft for our undocumented youth. We say de facto because although students are given a ‘choice’, the fact is that the deplorable and inadequate conditions of Latino schooling will make military enlistment the only ‘choice’ for our undocumented youth. ...With this reality, we pose the question; where will those students end up? Dead on the battlefield in Iraq or Afghanistan? Will they join the 6,000 troops that are currently occupying the U.S./ Mexico border?...The Association of Raza Educators does not come here to antagonize or minimize the efforts of those who advocate for the Dream Act on behalf of undocumented students. We are here to challenge all organizations that support the DREAM Act to join us in the struggle for the legalization of all students and our entire community by supporting a stronger and more just bill that doesn't force any of our youth to join the U.S. military. We are all brothers and sisters in this struggle, but we must never negotiate the future of our youth in exchange for the legalization of a few of our students (Association of Raza Educators 2007: 1).

In a similar spirit, Fernando Suarez Del Solar, released a statement against the DREAM Act. Del Solar, the father of one of the first U.S. servicemen killed in Iraq, became an outspoken peace activist in the wake of his son’s death. On the DREAM Act, he shares:

It gives me great joy to see students taking non-violent action to find a solution to the immigration question. Many of them came to the United States as children and have finished their high school education. Now, because they lack legal documents, they face an uncertain future that may deny them the opportunity to attend college or find a decent job. The DREAM Act offers them a light at the end of an otherwise dark and uncertain road. I see students on fasts, in marches, lobbying elected officials, all in the name of the DREAM Act's passage. But BEWARE. Be very careful. Because our honorable youth with their dreams and wishes to serve their new country are being tricked and manipulated in an immoral and criminal way. ...Our young people may not see that this is a covert draft in which thousands of youth from Latino families will be sent to Iraq or some other war torn nation where they will have to surrender their moral values and become a war criminal or perhaps return home in black bags on their way to a tomb drenched with their parents' tears" (Suarez del Solar 2007: 1).

The progressive voices against the DREAM Act are steady and strong. And they are convincing. The DREAM act students, or DREAMers, as they sometimes call themselves, are compelled by these words. As Adriana, one of the leaders of the statewide movement said to me, "I get it. I get what they are saying. And I understand why they are saying it. I have no hard feelings towards those groups working against the DREAM Act. How can I? I agree with everything they say". However, despite the conflict and controversy embedded in the DREAM Act, a group of young people have decided to carry it forward. This is not without difficulty, and does not signify a lack of awareness about the costs and risks of doing so. However, discarding this movement and these young people as reformist, assimilationist, and reactionary would be a mistake. My in-depth ethnographic research has demonstrated that there is much to be learned from this movement and these students, about the fine line between resistance and accommodation, and about what can be gained in those moments in which it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins.

The uneasy connection between citizenship and militarization is a complicated one. There is undeniably a racialized nature to military service in this country, with low-income people and people of color disproportionately target for military recruitment and enlistment (Sojourners 2007, Harlow 2007) and simultaneously under-represented in higher-ranked positions within the military. The management of citizenship further intensifies this racialized nature, as

undocumented immigrants are faced with barriers to inclusion in nearly all realms U.S. society aside from the military, including education, employment, and formal political participation (Hannah 2006). The practice of posthumous citizenship embodies this uneasy nexus in a blatant way – undocumented immigrants are welcomed to give their lives in the name of defending the country which refuses their full human and civic participation. In death, once their racialized bodies no longer need to be contended with, they are finally recognized as full members of U.S. society. Thus, the nexus of militarization and citizenship reflects a wide web of interactions, power relationships, and practices that create the context within which the DREAM Act and its military component must be seen as a part of.

### **Citizenship & The Racial State**

A conversation that has recently gained traction in both the academy as well as grassroots movement wrestles with the role of Latinos in the racial hierarchy in contemporary U.S. society. A small but persistent strand of this conversation warns that Latinos are “becoming white”, steadily climbing their way up the racialized hierarchy of the United States and leaving other people of color behind as they climb. This conversation does not point to middle-class/professional Latinos as evidence, but rather the largely spontaneous, mass mobilizations of 2006 against House Resolution 4437. An article published in a progressive, racial-justice journal the day after the massive May 1<sup>st</sup> demonstration and *paro* in 2006, began “Immigrants on the march today threaten to go the way of the Irish, the Italian, and the Jewish: they may pay the price of the ticket for American citizenship by yielding to racial hierarchy that leaves Blacks at the bottom” (Banks 2006: 2). The crux of this argument is that rallying around the call that “immigrants built this nation” erases the important role of slave labor in the economic and political development of the United States. In doing this, Banks argues, newer immigrants render invisible this important legacy in exchange for a higher place in the racial hierarchy in the US. He writes, “with cries that immigrants built this country, a favorite calling card, this burgeoning movement at once revoked the history of slaves and their descendents and obscured important truths about power, migration, and social mobility in this country” (Banks 2006: 1).

There are several flaws in this argument. First, the critique about the movement’s messaging conflates the logic and belief internal to the movement with a sound-byte crafted for popular consumption, aimed at garnering public support. Additionally, Bank’s assumes that the assertion that immigrants built this country suggests that *only* immigrants built this country. A movement cannot be reduced to the clips that are showcased on the evening news or the t-shirts handed out for free at the marches. Though the mainstream coverage may have boiled down the message to this central focal point, the breadth and depth of the analysis as held within the movement stretches much further. Not only do many of the organizations participating have an

anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist analysis that deeply informs their work, many of the politically unaffiliated individuals who participated spoke about drawing inspiration from the Civil Rights Movement and building a movement in solidarity with Blacks and African-Americans. This is not to deny that anti-black racism exists within all aspects of society, including social movements, but to disregard an entire movement as homogenous and playing into the racist hierarchy of the society they themselves are oppressed by does a disservice to everyone involved.

Second, this argument is ahistorical and relies on a racial analysis that refuses to push beyond the falsely constructed black/white binary. The idea that Latino immigrants have the option of “going the way of the Irish, Italian, and Jewish” (Banks 2006: 2) ignores the stark difference between immigrants who come from Europe and those who come from the Global South. Though history clearly demonstrates that upon arrival, the Irish, Italian and Jewish were not seen as “white” but as racially different and inferior (Ignatiev 2008, Roediger 2006, Brodtkin 1998) there is a colonial relationship between the United States and Latin America that has profoundly shaped migration flows, immigration patterns, and the racialization and subjugation of Latin American immigrants upon arrival (Bacon 2008, Davis and Chacón 2006). Insisting that “as [blacks] struggle for basic rights, every new immigrant group has moved faster and further up the ladder” (Banks 2006: 2) does not make place for an analysis about immigrant groups in this country who have remained at the bottom of the racial hierarchy as well – and not just immigrants from Latin America. The movement against HR4437, though clearly majority Latino, was also forged by Asian immigrants and African immigrants who share a similar immigration history as their Latin American immigrant counterparts.

Though there is considerable work left to be done, and anti-Black racism does exist in immigrants communities and therefore the immigrant rights movement by extension, this analysis is dangerous and has profound implications for the building of multi-racial alliances. This position Banks’ advocates seeks to divide marginalized groups who have a shared history of exclusion, rather than recognizing this mobilization as the growth of a movement fighting for equal rights, personhood, and a challenge to the market-driven social policy. I argue that the “Latinos becoming white” discourse needs to be challenged with an analysis that understands citizenship as a fundamental organizing principle of the racial state and that regards racism, the state, and citizenship as integrally connected. I attempt to lay out this framework in the section that follows, by exploring two concepts critical to this analysis – citizenship as a lived experience and the Racial State.

### **Citizenship as a Lived Experience**

The traditional notion of citizenship regards it as a set of legal rights conferred on a group of people based upon a set of criteria. Citizenship, as a legal construct, not only entitles segments of the population with certain rights and provides access to certain protections, it also sanctions their ability to participate in the formal political processes of society. In a world progressively consumed by global capitalism, in which it has simultaneously gotten easier for goods and commodities to cross borders and harder for people, the power of this traditional notion of citizenship is undeniable. However, I believe it is also important to consider a more complex notion of citizenship that rests on the idea that citizenship is not *only* about legal rights. This assertion regards citizenship as a “lived experience”, and does not discount the real power differential between citizens and non-citizens, but also recognizes that constructions of citizenship, belonging and exclusion do not reside in the state alone.

In a collection titled Latinos and Citizenship, Susan Oboler describes citizenship as a lived experience, stating that “the focus ... is on citizenship as constitutive of the self-understanding of a community – a process that is inclusive and ongoing and one that is neither imposed nor dictated by the state alone. Rather, it is a lived experience, grounded in the negotiated participation of all groups, of all sectors and individuals within the community” (Oboler 2006: 5). It is this conception of citizenship that aids us in understanding the political participation of the DREAMers. Political participation is an assertion of belonging, within a context in which citizenship (as a legal construct) and belonging (as a lived experience) are generally equated. Thus, political participation of undocumented people, and young people at that, is an assertion of belonging that pushes society as a whole to recognize not just their existence, but their right to belong. Conceptualizing citizenship as a lived experience enables a more critical analysis of these struggles around citizenship, illuminating how the demand of legal rights through citizenship is not the singular, or even central aim, of this political articulation. Grassroots and legislative struggles around citizenship are certainly concerned with legal characterization but also about the broader set of policies, practices, and ideas that are constantly in motion – being reinforced, being contested, and reconfiguring themselves in both the legal realm and also in the lived experiences of daily life. “While the state has various legal procedures for determining belonging, the experience of Latino/as – like that of African Americans, Native Americans, and other people of color in the US – would suggest that there is more to the sense of belonging than the formal state rules and regulations concerning birthplace, naturalization, and citizenship” (Oboler 2006: 11, citing Hedetoft and Hjort).

What is at risk here is that an overemphasis on the non-legal aspect of citizenship can reprioritize the critical importance of exclusion based on citizenship that is a critical reality in the lives of non-citizens. It would be a grave error to dissolve the meaningful categories of citizen/non-citizen such that this distinction becomes theoretically meaningless. My analysis



does not question the very real division that exists between citizens and non-citizens, the rights and responsibilities monitored and policed by the nation-state, nor does it downplay the concrete ways that citizenship status impacts the lives of non-citizens. However, a traditional notion that analyzes citizenship as a legal category alone does not account for a dynamic meaning of the concept, and its role in shaping the lived reality of non-citizens.

### **The Racial State**

One of the critical ways to anchor this notion of citizenship is through an analysis of the state and its role in the management of citizenship. The state both monitors and manages citizenship in the traditional sense in that it is the body vested with the power to distribute legal rights and status, though its reach also extends beyond this role. The state also plays a critical and central role in the management of citizenship as a lived process. Omi and Winant's seminal text Racial Formation in the United States demonstrates how the "racial state" manages racial exclusion not just through legal and legislative processes but also through the production of hegemonic principles, categories and conceptions that seek to serve the ever-changing racial order. "Racial movements, built on the terrain of civil society, necessarily confront the state as they begin to upset the unstable equilibrium of the racial order. Once an oppositional racial ideology has been articulated, once the dominant racial ideology has been confronted it becomes possible to demand reform of state racial policies and institutions. . . . A new political terrain has been opened up" (Omi and Winant 1994: 1). Omi and Winant argue that the authority of the racial state rests on these components working in concert with one another. David Theo Goldberg's conceptualization of the racial state builds upon this analysis, challenging what he calls a "conceptual discreteness about the state" (Goldberg 2002: 4) present in Omi and Winant's analysis that he seeks to challenge. Goldberg argues that "the apparatuses and technologies employed by modern states have served variously to fashion, modify, and reify the terms of racial expression, as well as racist exclusions and subjugation" (Goldberg 2002: 4). Goldberg builds on Omi and Winant's assertion about the varied functions of the racial state, saying "the state is inherently contradictory and internally fractured, consisting not only of agencies and bureaucracies, legislatures and courts, but also of norms and principles, individuals and institutions" (1994: 7). Though Goldberg does not devote much attention to questions of migration, immigration and citizenship, in promoting the idea of "deracializing the state" which he sees as a necessary and timely project, he argues

Deracializing the state entails critically evaporating the hold of race on state powers over defining borders, the profiles of immigration, and on the body of citizenship...All

this...presupposes a dramatically altered conception of citizenship. The question with which I am concerned thus becomes how we can conceive of state engagement and citizenship ...outside of the constitutive oppositions identified above (2002: 265).

Goldberg argues against this closed, fixed notion of citizenship in his argument for the deracialization of the state, a process that is a reality in the increased movement of people, capital, and ideas which is a hallmark of advanced capitalism. I argue that in thinking about citizenship, an analysis of the role and function of the racial state is critical, and not just in thinking about the dissolution of the “racialized” state. “Through its exclusionary structures, U.S. citizenship has long served as a proxy for race – historically defining inclusion and exclusion – not so much in its theoretical, legal formulations but rather in the differentiated daily life realities and expectations of this society’s members” (Oboler 2006: 9). Bringing citizenship theory in conversation with theory about the racial state, I argue, cuts to the heart of the way that Latinos are not and could not “go the way of the Irish, the Italians, and the Jewish” (Banks 2006: 2). Understanding citizenship, borders, and the regulation of belonging as a critical component in the functioning of racial exclusion – vested in the state and also reaching far beyond it – demonstrates how advanced capitalism relies on this racial exclusion, and how the marginalization and also the forced exclusion of Latino immigrants is critical in the functioning of the advanced capitalist state.

The analysis of the DREAM Act that follows is both an exploration of how young people who live at this intersection interact with it, engage with it, and fight against it. I argue that their negotiation of their racialized legal status through activism demonstrates how seemingly assimilationist campaigns to access citizenship can actually play a significant role in shaping a structural, radical politic among marginalized people. Additionally, their campaign work on the DREAM Act demonstrates how through these appeals for citizenship, undocumented youth are actively reconfiguring and renegotiating the institution of citizenship, the idea of belonging, and the role and responsibilities of the racial state.

### **The DREAM Act Campaign: When Resistance Looks like Accommodation**

Understanding the management of citizenship as a fundamental organizing principle of the racial state enables us to see how struggles around citizenship have the potential to challenge the power of the racial state and of racial hierarchy in the United States. This complicates the notion prevalent in both academia and grassroots movements that regards struggles around citizenship as fundamentally about assimilation. I posit that the campaign to pass the DREAM Act, though seemingly assimilationist in the nature of its demands, is an apt site to understand

how these mainstream fights can actually open up the space for a more fundamental challenging of the oppressive system. I argue that the campaign to pass the DREAM Act has played a significant role in shaping a structural, radical political analysis among undocumented youth and has engaged them in a process by which they have come to challenge the legitimacy of the racial state. This has happened through 2 key features/processes which I will examine more closely in this section. First, participation in the campaign has brought the DREAMers into direct confrontation with the state which has allowed them to see the limits of electoral politics and participatory democracy as it is currently configured in this country. Second, participation in this campaign has enabled them to think critically about the institution of citizenship, reframing both personally and publically what it means to fight for sanctioned inclusion in a country that has repeatedly made it clear that they are not welcome.

### **Confronting the State**

In the United States at this historical moment, there are many avenues for sanctioned political participation that does not require one to come into direct contact or contradiction with the state, including voting and participation in grassroots and legislative campaigns. In essence, there are ways to politically participate without putting oneself at risk of breaking any laws. The experiences of undocumented students, the kind of political participation they have chosen in the DREAM Act campaign, and moments of “accidental” and unplanned direct action is an interesting area of inquiry in understanding the ways in which participation in this campaign has shaped their critique of the racial state and has aided in the development of a structural political analysis.

A theme that came up repeatedly in the course of my research is that students wrestled with being non-confrontational as a cultural value. “We come from a culture of respect,” says Araceli at one of the statewide meetings, “so we do not want to do anything that will be seen as disrespectful to people who are above us. But if we really want to move this forward, we have to trust that passionate feeling inside”. The value of being respectful of elders and people in positions of authority is a “cultural value” that the students clearly are proud of, yet they simultaneously feel it is something they needed to work against in order to be successful in passing the DREAM Act. It is a tension that young women, in particular, struggle with. Felicia shares “I mean, I just wasn’t raised that way, you know? You are supposed to be polite. It is the way I was raised. So you know, shouting at someone, demanding that they listen, it’s hard for me to do. But you know, its kinda like there’s no other option you know? They are not listening to us otherwise”. The value in being polite, well-behaved, and respectful is manifested in both small decisions and larger strategic choices about the direction of the campaign.

It was common practice for students to dress nicely for legislative visits and protests in front of elected officials; they addressed everyone from security guards to elected officials as “sir” and “ma'am”. “We’ve gotta take down that impression of what an undocumented person looks like, you know? Not that there is something wrong with being a laborer or a housecleaner – my mom does that work every day of her life. But, like, I want them to see, you know, I can be taken seriously” (Efrain). The attention to how they present themselves to the larger public is reminiscent of the young people involved in the civil rights movement who wore church clothes to sit-ins. Adelina shares, “We have to show our faces, we need them to see what we look like. When you say you are not for amnesty, when you say you are not for the DREAM Act, I want you to know what I look like”. Students frequently spoke about the importance of “humanizing” themselves in the public eye; their efforts were explicitly about trying to publically reframe perceptions of undocumented people.

The value on being respectful also shaped larger strategic decisions made by the young activists who steered the campaign. The students involved in the campaign repeatedly chose tactics that were less confrontational, in part because of their own legal vulnerability in terms of risking arrest but also because, as one student said in a statewide meeting in which they were discussing the possibility of doing direct action, “We don’t want them to hate us. We want them to help us. If we piss them off, they are not going to want to do that”. The DREAM Act campaign was largely comprised of lobbying visits, coordinated phone blasts to elected representatives, press conferences, and permitted rallies and marches held in public places.

However, there are moments in which the state’s disinterest in making space for the voices of marginalized undocumented students becomes particularly acute and the students are confronted with this reality. This has caused direct, albeit controlled, confrontation with representatives of the state, often at moments in which it was not anticipated. To examine this, I will juxtapose two actions executed by the statewide network, both intended to put pressure on Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives. Pelosi has vocalized support for the DREAM Act but had never taken action to actually promote it, and students decided it was important to pressure her to do so.

Students organized a week-long , state-wide “fast” in the summer of 2007. The fast was publicized by a caravan of 40 young people, who travelled across California to “call attention to the DREAM Act” (campaign flier). The caravan left from Southern California and arrived a week later in Northern California, after stopping several times for press conferences and lobbying visits along the way. A couple student groups in the northern region of the state planned a week-long camp-out in the plaza in front of the San Francisco City Hall, just down the street from Nancy Pelosi’s statewide headquarters. The week-long event was well-covered in Spanish-language media outlets like *Univision* and *Telemundo* and several prominent print media

sources such as *La Opinion*. The event also gained considerable traction in English-language print media including the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *San Jose Mercury News*. Several details of this action demonstrated the overall non-confrontational tone of the campaign. Campaign materials called the action a “fast” and not a “hunger strike”, invoking a personal act of sacrifice as opposed to a confrontational political act. The camp-out was help down the block from Nancy Pelosi’s office, choosing a site of more foot traffic but significantly less direct contact.

Several months has passed, and Pelosi had still taken no steps to move the DREAM Act forward. Students from the statewide coalition called for an action and press conference at her downtown San Francisco. The students planned to gather outside, enter the building, ride the elevator to her floor, and ask for a meeting with her, but the plan was quickly thwarted when the students realized they needed to have a valid identification to enter the building, and a student ID was not considered “valid identification”. “I hate this, you know?” said Alma. “I mean, it always comes back to being undocumented”. What was supposed to be a straightforward, non-confrontational action changed at the last minute because they could not even enter the building. The group had mobilized for weeks, some had travelled from Southern California to attend, and they were unwilling to leave without having a chance to speak with someone from Pelosi’s office. About 1/3 of the group went in with valid identification of some sort (some of them had Mexican passports, some had *matricula* cards from Mexico). Fueled by what it felt like to leave behind 2/3 of the group, they marched into Nancy Pelosi’s office and demanded that the rest of the group be let in. Her secretary stumbled over her words, and called in Pelosi’s aid to the deal with the demanding protestors. He informed the group that Pelosi was out of state at the moment, chuckled at their request to let everyone else in, and told them in a patronizing manner that someone from Pelosi’s office would have been “thrilled” to meet with them and “hear [your] concerns” but “you should have called first. There is a set process and it is *very* important to follow it”. He handed over a business card, encouraging them to call ahead, and turned to walk away. The students resolve was strengthened by his dismissal, and they insisted the meeting was not yet over. The stand-off ended with his hesitant agreement to meet the entire group outside. Once outside, he attempted to steer the meeting, but was interrupted by the 3 students who had prepared their testimonials. The students launched into their deeply personal stories of struggle as undocumented students, and how the DREAM Act would help them. The aid waited uncomfortably for them to finish, hands crossed in front of him. The rest of the meeting was uneventful. The aid pledged Pelosi’s support for the DREAM Act, asked for their patience as she “has a lot on her plate right now”, and assured them that he would “pass on [their] stories and concerns”.

What was particularly meaningful about this event was both how the students were forced into a more confrontational stance - clearly demonstrated by the difference between the first gathering to put pressure on Pelosi (the fast) and the second one – as well as what they took from this experience. In the debrief immediately following the action, it was apparent that the limits of their prior tactics was dawning on many of them. The emphasis on “sharing our stories” as a primary tactic in their campaign was called into question when, as one student shared, “it's obvious that he doesn't really care what we say. She is not gonna push the DREAM Act forward just because we are asking nicely”. Several students reflected on the different, more confrontational tone of this action, and reflecting that though they did not get the outcome they wanted, a meeting with Pelosi, they felt the event was successful. “We're taught to be obedient, you know? And we could have just left when they told us we couldn't get in. But we pressed, and we made him come out to hear us. We should be proud of that”. Though the confrontation was mild in nature, and the representative of the state was relatively benign (a legislative aid in a well-pressed suit as opposed to riot police or a border patrol agent), the impact was strong.

In the months that followed, the students referred back to that situation, continually reflecting on, questioning, and thinking about what it was really going to take to pass the DREAM Act. “I don't know, you know, I'm not saying we shouldn't do the phone calls and the lobbying visits and stuff, but I mean, then what happens? Then they go back to their offices and keep ignoring us. So in the end, what does that really accomplish?” (Catalina). The experience also highlighted to many of the young people that even when people in power hear their stories, bear witness to their testimonies, and understand the issue, they are still resistant to passing the DREAM Act. When I asked why they thought that was, I expected most to respond with an analysis of the lack of true bipartisan support for the bill or the need to appease anti-immigrant constituents as they had when I posed that question in the past. Instead, many spoke of a deeper resistance and a structural reality that requires immigrants to retain a certain level in the social and political hierarchy.

“You know, I'm starting to realize it's like, I mean . . . we're being persecuted, we're being treated worse than animals, our parents are being deported, our children live, more or less, in concentration camps. We're agents of social change through ideas, through things we participate in, but I guess there's an economic threat, a social threat, I think they feel that their culture is threatened. That our culture is threatening. . . . You know, we have political agency and we take action for the benefit of our communities so that's something that. . . it threatens them”(Antonio).

### **Thinking Critically about Citizenship: Rethinking and Recasting Frames and Discourse**

Participation in this campaign has enabled the DREAMers to think critically about the institution of citizenship, reframing both personally and publically what it means to fight for citizenship in an unwelcoming country. Though the demand for citizenship can on the surface appear to be an appeal to the right to assimilate, and for some it is, there is also a more complicated process at work. These young activists are changed through the experience of fighting for citizenship, and one key site of this change is the way they think about citizenship.

What has emerged from this process is an articulation of citizenship among these young people that is fundamentally about challenging inequality in society, which I believe comes directly out of the way that the political identity of the AB540 student has been configured. The political campaign to pass AB540 resulted not just in the legislative change of enabling undocumented students to access higher education without having to pay out-of-state tuition fees, but also resulted in the emergence of a new political identity that resonated with undocumented young people. The AB540 student as a political subject arose from this period, on a nexus of educational achievement and caring for the community. This salience of this new identity was so powerful, in fact, that through the course of my research, I encountered many young people who called themselves “AB540 students” as a stand in for “undocumented students” despite the fact that they themselves were not eligible to qualify under AB540. Carolina, who immigrated to the United States when she was 16, only attended one year of high school in the United States before she went on to pursue her Associates Degree at a community college. She was ineligible for AB540, and as a result, had to pay out-of-state tuition rates when she began her college career. However, Carolina saw herself as an AB540 student and identified this way, not just because it provided a bit more “cover” than publically identifying herself as undocumented, but because it also places her in membership with a broader community of young people like herself. “I mean, I’m not AB540, but I am an AB540 student” (Carolina). Similarly, many undocumented high school students or undocumented young people who had left school (temporarily or permanently) that I met through the course of this research, identified as AB540 students. Saying that one is an AB540 student means something – not only that one values education, but that one is engaged in her/his community and committed to change.

So what does citizenship mean to an AB540 student? It is a question I asked many times, in different ways, though the course of this research. The answers of the young activists stood in contrast to the mainstream messaging they felt forced to take up in their public campaign work, in which they argued for the DREAM Act because it would benefit the economy. Instead, when asked what citizenship means to them, and why they are fighting for it, nearly every student in this study articulated something about accessing citizenship to be a force for social change. Pablo shares, “Well, my ultimate goal is to go to law school, and maybe graduate school to do a joint degree in law and education. . . . Helping stay active in the political realm, in whatever

form I can, and helping undocumented communities develop their own companies, help them own the fruits of their labor” (Pablo). In a letter to the editor submitted to her university newspaper, Elizabeth writes:

What I would like to do with my education is to contribute to my community by designing affordable and sustainable environments that provide a better quality of life for those with the least opportunities. I want to address the quality of life afforded to the urban poor, especially among communities of color, because poverty should not dictate whether students receive a quality education or whether families live in substandard housing (Elizabeth).

For Elizabeth, citizenship is a vehicle for her to challenge historical inequities facing marginalized communities. She is aware she can do that without citizenship, of course, because it is work she is engaged in daily as an activist and as a volunteer in several community organizations. But she can’t shake the reality that she holds a degree in architecture from one of the nation’s top universities, and has a vision for the kind of social change work she can do as an architect, if only she had the ability to be legally work.

Engagement in activism broadens the worldview of these young people, and a part of that is not just their vision for social change but also their place in bringing that about. As Andrés shares,

You know, what I want to do with my life has really changed. I used to want to be a lawyer, you know, because I know they make a lot of money. And it wasn’t like I was an asshole, like, I want money because I’m greedy and want to have a big house and a fancy car and shit. It was like, I could see that was the only way out for my family, you know? My sister, she’s married with kids and you know, just doing that. My brother, I mean, he’s never gonna do anything. You know but I’m the one who has a chance and I think about my parents, and they like, I mean, I wanted to make money so they don’t have to work so hard, so they can live in a house and not a teeny-ass apartment. You know? So I mean, I used to think that was it, you know, I’ll be a lawyer, I’ll be rich, that’s the way to change their situation. And mine! (laughs). But you know, getting all political, doing this, going to the capital,



learning how to speak my testimony, man, it makes me think that's the other way I can change this all, you know? I can change it for my family but also a lot of other families. And so now I think I can maybe be an immigration lawyer, you know, fight to change these policies (Andrés).

Engagement in a campaign to access citizenship has pushed these students to recast the demand for citizenship – defining it as not about assimilation but about political and civil participation. For these young people, citizenship is not about finding a place in the status quo, but challenging it.

### **Conclusion**

Making sense of the DREAM Act is not easy. The legislation is straightforward, but as a social change qualitative researcher interested in questions of the development of social movements and counter-hegemonic consciousness, the DREAM Act and the campaign to pass it brings up more questions than it does answers. I have struggled throughout the years I have worked on this research with a fundamental and simple question that I am still unable to answer – do I personally support the passage of the DREAM Act? I am caught between the space of pragmatism and hope. I believe, on one hand, that with enough people and the right kind of political pressure, it is possible to force the state to enact a broader amnesty policy, one that does not force the military on undocumented youth and also has a path to citizenship for the immigrants who are not the superstar, college-bound cream-of-the-crop. On the other hand, I am deeply moved by the stories and struggles of these students, I have seen their futures constrained and constricted by a senseless policy that forbids them from being whole human beings and I know that the DREAM Act could help chip away a small but critical part of that exclusion and fragmentation. And because U.S. capitalism forces migration, I strongly believe the United States government has a debt to the people of the Global South broadly, and to those who immigrate specifically.

The campaign to pass the DREAM Act has been led by undocumented youth and their allies, and despite the fact that the bill has not been approved through Congress, there have been many victories. There is a palpable growing awareness, which is possibly shifting public perception about undocumented students. Major English-language news outlets including the TODAY show and National Public Radio have profiled very sympathetic stories of undocumented youth and have identified the DREAM Act as the solution to the conundrum they are in. Grassroots campaigns, coupled with savvy media work, have successfully achieved stays on deportation orders for a few highly-profiled students across the nation. Just a few years ago,

few people had heard of the struggles of undocumented students. It was a social justice and equity issue that was not even on the map. Today, the important work undocumented young people are doing on the ground has changed things - both in the unquantifiable court of public opinion and in the actual wins represented in the students who have successfully fought deportation and in the number of states passing in-state tuition laws.

Still, the framing of the plight of undocumented students remains to be an important site of struggle. Holding up high-achieving students as deserving of citizenship implicitly and explicitly makes a judgment about the worthiness of the “other” immigrants – both their parents and family members, as well as other young people who are not on the college (or military) – bound path. The costs of this are unknown. Not only is there a risk in terms of public messaging and framing around the rights of undocumented people in general, there could also be a real cost in terms of the likelihood of comprehensive immigration reform passing if a separate bill has already been passed to provide legalization to the more “desirable” portions of the immigrant population.

The management of citizenship by the racial state, and the engagement undocumented youth have in this process, illuminates an important point about oppositional consciousness and counter-hegemony. Oppositional consciousness, sown through an ideological and practical engagement with the lived reality that is created through their racialized legal status, can be directed against the state’s technologies for the management of citizenship. The work by these young DREAMers is representative of that possibility. However, this oppositional consciousness – fragmented and perpetually in formation by nature, as will be explored in the next chapter - can also incorporate these young activists into the arena of statist discipline, regulation, and control, which is the dynamic we see hints of in their uneasy engagement around the delineation between the deserving and undeserving immigrants. This dynamic has the potential to not only fracture the immigrant community, but also raises important questions about cooptation, accommodation, resistance, and oppositional consciousness. Specifically, if we understand oppositional consciousness as contradictory by nature, how do we make sense of political activity that is both radical and challenges hegemonic constructs while simultaneously reinforces problematic divisions, delineations, and popular ideas?

There are no easy answers, though this formulation allows us to see how the line between hegemony and counter-hegemony is thin, and at times, difficult to discern. In this, there are risks yet there is also enormous political possibility. Disregarding the DREAM Act and the young people who are fighting for its passage, as assimilationist and nothing more than opportunistic or pragmatic politics, is to ignore the profound political possibility that has been opened because of this mobilization. The DREAM Act campaign, and the young people who led it and were transformed through it, demonstrated that mainstream and seemingly “assimilationist”

campaigns to access citizenship can play a significant role in shaping a structural, radical political analysis among marginalized people. The next chapters examine this process in more depth, looking both at collective action and the creation of collective political identity among undocumented students as well as the development of oppositional consciousness among undocumented youth leaders.

## Chapter 3

### From “Having a Secret to Being a Secret”: Fear, Shame, Otherness and Oppositional Consciousness

“Only a crisis, actual or perceived, produces real change. And when the crisis occurs, the change depends on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to keep the ideas ready until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.”

Milton Friedman  
(quoted in Klein 2008: 174)

#### Introduction

Miguel nearly died crossing the border. He was 4, too tired to walk anymore, and stacked on the shoulders of the reluctant coyote<sup>20</sup>. When the coyote stumbled in the dark, Miguel tumbled to the hard earth below, smashing his head against a jagged rock. His mother scooped him up, held him close, and began checking his head to assess the damage. He remembers thinking *this is how you check a melon at the market*. His mind wandered to the Mercado in their pueblito, and in that moment, with a throbbing head, in his mother’s arms, all he wanted was to go home.

Miguel still thinks about home, though his memories have faded. He can’t conjure a clear picture of the mercado anymore, or even his grandmother’s face. Fifteen years have passed, and he is not sure if he will ever get there. His life is here now, and because he doesn’t have his papers<sup>21</sup>, going home means taking the risk that he would not be able to return to the life he has built for himself in the United States. So he makes himself content with what he has, tries to ignore the nagging reality that his future is uncertain, and keeps hoping that something, somehow might change.

Hoping is something Miguel has gotten good at, despite many signs that immigration reform will not happen any time soon and that the legal status of undocumented students is unlikely to change before he graduates. Political and legislative realities aside, his hopefulness is

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<sup>20</sup> A coyote is a person who is paid to escort immigrants without legal clearance to cross the border.

<sup>21</sup> “Not having papers” is a colloquial phrase, indicating that one does not have legal clearance to reside in the United States.

fueled by his participation in a burgeoning community of undocumented young people in California fighting for the rights of undocumented students. Miguel never planned on becoming an activist. Though, at seventeen, faced with his impending high school graduation and no way to attend university despite his high grade point average, he began to look for options. His journey to realize his own dreams turned into what he now sees as a life-long commitment to change education and immigration policy for all undocumented immigrants.

Undocumented young people grow up amid a fierce anti-immigrant discourse that casts them as intruders, undeserving, and inferior. They are relegated to the shadows by a hostile society, continually navigating the space between profound institutional exclusion and the supposed promise of the American Dream. Undocumented youth, like all subordinated people, are inundated with the idea that inequality is inevitable and that the division between the “haves” and the “have-nots” is fundamentally unchangeable.

The process of coming to challenge dominant societal norms and beliefs is both personal and political, and is a fundamental component of social movements. Little is known about how and why this happens, but what we do know is that somehow, despite the prevalence of these hegemonic ideas, some subordinated people do develop an oppositional consciousness. Oppositional consciousness is, drawing from Jane Mansbridge’s (2001) seminal work on the issue, “an empowered mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to act to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination... Although consciousness is, by definition, internal to an individual’s mind, the kind of consciousness that we describe is inextricably derived from the social world” (5). The question of how subordinated people develop an oppositional consciousness is fundamentally a question of the relation between lived experiences of oppression and the empowered realization that things do not have to be this way; that change is indeed possible.

The problem of ideology, as stated by Stuart Hall (1996), is “to give an account, within a materialist theory, of how social ideas arise” (26). He says, “We need to understand what their role is in a particular social formation, so as to inform the struggle to change society and open the road towards a ... transformation of society” (26). This chapter attempts to make a small contribution to Hall’s question by focusing specifically on the meaning-making processes that accompany and shape the political engagement of Latino undocumented immigrant youth in California. Antonio Gramsci’s conception of hegemony and common sense (1995), discussed at length in the previous chapter, aids us in understanding consciousness as inherently contradictory and historically constructed, situating ideology and consciousness in the everyday practice of living and making sense of the world. This articulation of hegemony allows us to differentiate between ideology and hegemony, as common sense, in this formulation, is the terrain upon which ideological struggle plays out.

The literature on activism among undocumented young people is limited, and focuses largely on chronicling campaigns and legislative battles (Rincon 2009, Gonzales 2008). It does not attempt to theorize the meaning-making processes that shape the political consciousness, and therefore the political engagement, of these young activists. Undocumented youth are shaped by societal discourses and hegemonic constructs around illegality in ways that, I argue, catalyze political activism. This research follows a group of undocumented Latino youth involved in the campaign to pass the DREAM Act<sup>22</sup> and asks how both the discourse and practice of immigration policy shape the political identity and activist engagement of undocumented Latino youth. The central question explored in this chapter is: How does the lived experience of institutional exclusion shape the political consciousness of undocumented Latino students?

Undocumented Latino young people in California are particularly important subjects of hegemony/counter-hegemony because of their unique structural relationship to the state as a result of their racialized legal status. In California, both because of its geographic proximity as well as its deeply-intertwined political, economic, and social history with Mexico and Central America, the undocumented population is primarily Latino. Undocumented youth are legally and structurally very much on the outside – unable to fully participate in the only national context that many of them have ever known. At the same time, they are deeply enmeshed in this context as a result of growing up in the United States and spending formative years of their lives here. The fact that they are not only undocumented but also young is consequential – they spend the crucial years of identity formation in this country. They spend 8 hours a day, for the better part of 12 years, being educated in U.S. schools. Many grow up speaking unaccented English and struggle with finding the correct word in Spanish. They are saturated with the discursive forces, dominant narratives, and collectively held “common sense” around immigration, illegality, and citizenship.

Further, studying the ideas, practices, and consciousness formation of undocumented youth allows us to ask new questions and interrogate existing understandings of the development of movements and political consciousness. Various theorists as well as grassroots movement practitioners have explored the ways that dominant discourse shapes collective societal understandings, which in turn influences policy and political realities in response to public sentiment. In other words, we understand how dominant discourses about immigration have created a popular understanding of the issue, which then comes to influence what kinds of

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<sup>22</sup> The DREAM Act is a proposed piece of federal legislation that would enable undocumented young people who entered the U.S. before the age of 16 to apply for federal financial aid and also includes a path to citizenship after two years of college or military service.

policies and legislation are passed. However, very little is known about the ways in which the political subjectivities of people who are directly implicated in this dominant discourse are shaped as a result of being saturated with it. This study aims to do just that, by examining how the lived experiences of sustained institutional exclusion shape the political identity and the political consciousness of undocumented Latino students.

My research, while located within the Marxist tradition and building on Jane Mansbridge's work (2001), takes a different step in understanding oppositional consciousness and its development. My central argument is that not only is oppositional consciousness a spectrum, as previous theorists have claimed, but it is also, in a Gramscian sense, forged out of the dialectic between ideas that are both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. It is not the case that counter-hegemonic ideas win over, even temporarily, thereby leading to oppositional consciousness. Rather, oppositional consciousness is forged through the constant tension between the two.

As was discussed in the introductory chapter, traditional social change movement literature has under-theorized consciousness, relegating it to little more than a "resource" that can be "mobilized" in the service of a social movement (McCarthy and Zald 2001). Newer work within this trend has identified the important work of "frames" and (in)formal conceptual categories which shape social movement participation and outcomes (Snow and Benford 2000: 137). Though this is helpful, there is still considerable work to be done on the question of how oppositional ideas arise, take hold, and contribute to the building of political consciousness and social movements. In this chapter, I argue that oppositional consciousness is not born when counter-hegemonic ideas and practices win out over hegemonic ideas and practices. There is never a total replacement, but rather the practice and process of continually wrestling between the two is generative of oppositional consciousness. Just as hegemony is ever-changing and reconstituting itself (Williams 1978), so too is oppositional consciousness. My notion of oppositional consciousness illuminates how wrestling with the ongoing tension between hegemony and counter-hegemony does not indicate a partially-formed consciousness or a "contradictory" consciousness, as other theorists have implied. Rather, this tension is a critical component of the ongoing, non-linear process of the development of oppositional consciousness.

I support this argument through evidence from 18 months of fieldwork with undocumented high school and college-aged student activists. Specifically, I examine two contexts in which these students actively wrestle with this tension in a way that is generative of

oppositional consciousness and, by relation, political engagement<sup>23</sup>. The first context I examine is the management of fear and shame, and the second is the navigation of the dominant and pervasive societal discourse around “illegal immigration.” By examining how undocumented youth navigate these two contexts, I demonstrate how they negotiate these tensions in a way that is generative of oppositional consciousness. I also argue that being in a state of perpetual outsidership, reflected in these two contexts, allows undocumented young people a removed and more critical location from which to contest societally-accepted truths, which is the basis of oppositional consciousness. This analysis is significant because it innovates and builds upon existing frameworks (Gramsci 1995, Mansbridge 2001) for understanding counter-hegemonic consciousness in a way that does not attempt to work out the tension between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideas. Rather, my findings identify that tension as part of a generative process. This insight aids our understanding of the limits and possibilities of ideas and ideology in the building of social movements.

I begin this chapter by laying the broader context for this study with a discussion of California’s undocumented youth and their struggle for educational justice. In the two subsequent sections, I present fieldwork data which supports the central argument. I first examine the fear and shame that undocumented youth experience, and then I examine their navigation of the dominant societal discourse around “illegal” immigration. I then synthesize these arguments, and draw on more ethnographic data to develop the idea of outsidership as generative of oppositional consciousness. I conclude with a discussion of the relevance of these findings and their connection to the broader questions guiding this research.

### **California’s Undocumented Youth and the Struggle for Educational Justice**

Critical to this exploration is an understanding of immigration as both discourse and practice (Chavez 2001), two mutually constitutive processes that characterize contemporary racial politics in California. Chavez (2008) asks, “How did Mexican immigration...come to be perceived as a national security threat in popular discourse? Such ideas do not develop in a vacuum. They emerge from a history of ideas, laws, narratives, myths, and knowledge production” (22). Understanding immigration policy as both discourse and practice acknowledges that immigration is both material and ideological, and it also underscores the methodological and analytical imperative of recognizing this interconnection. The discourse and

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<sup>23</sup> The relationship between political consciousness and political activism is a rich topic that cannot be fully explored in this research. I draw from Mansbridge’s (2001) assertion that though the two are not causally related, they are connected to each other.



practice of immigration not only influence each other; at moments, it is difficult to tell where one starts and the other ends. I contend that there is much to be gained from an approach that acknowledges the messy interconnection between immigration as discourse and practice.

Chavez is not the first theorist to make this claim, and I am not the first researcher to incorporate this analysis into my work. However, much of the existing work on immigration focuses on how ideology and discourse shapes policy in order to demonstrate that discourse and conceptual frames can in fact become materially constituted and codified (Carbado and Harris 2006). Much less attention has been spent on understanding the ways that policy, which is shaped by and through discourse, in turn shapes the way that people think about themselves and the world they live in. This analysis gives us a way to think about ideas in a materialist way; ideas are not everything, nor are they what “moves” history, but they must be understood as a concrete force that plays a role in shaping the way subordinated people understand themselves and the possibility of change.

There are an estimated 12 million undocumented people living in California (Ludden 2007), and 1.8 million are children under the age of 18 (Gonzales 2008). Being “undocumented” means that these young people are living in the United States without legal authorization to do so. Some crossed the border without documentation at some point in their childhood, others immigrated legally and then overstayed their visas. Some of them are in the process of “fixing their papers” and others have no legal basis upon which to argue for citizenship or permanent residency. Many theorists have documented the challenges facing undocumented people, including abuses in the workplace, inability to work legally, targeted violence, an absence of legal protection, constant fear of deportation and family separation (Orner 2008, Chavez 1997). There are many difficulties that accompany the reality of living without authorization in the United States, especially in a time of increased legislative and grassroots attacks against immigrants. Within the realm of education, undocumented youth also face unique barriers and challenges, which have begun to be documented in recent years (Diaz-Strong and Meiners 2007, Dozier 2001, Mehta and Ali 2003).

Although these studies are undeniably important in terms of documenting challenges unique to undocumented students in order to inform policy changes, much of this body of work casts undocumented youth as politically powerless. Daysi Diaz-Strong and Erica Meiners write, “[Undocumented students] cannot author a letter to the local paper complaining about negative media coverage surrounding ‘illegals’ and ‘aliens,’ violence perpetrated by border police, or unjust and unfair treatment by the Department of Homeland Security. Nor can they make changes through the ballot box or through personal advocacy, yet their lives—and the labor and work of their families—support the economy of the nation” (2007: 2). This is not only a serious

mischaracterization, it obscures the profound ways undocumented young people are changing the political landscape and challenging dominant notions of illegality, exclusion, and belonging.

Educational justice has always been a site of struggle for undocumented immigrants in California. It is estimated that 60,000 undocumented students graduate from high school every year (Gonzales 2008). In 1982, in the landmark case *Plyler v Doe*, the United States Supreme Court asserted that undocumented children are “persons” under the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution and cannot be denied access to public elementary and secondary education on the basis of their legal status (Olivas 1984). In 2002, California passed a piece of landmark legislation, Assembly Bill 540, which allows undocumented students who attended high school in California the right to pay in-state tuition at state-run California universities and community colleges. Though this legislation made higher education more accessible, the reality that undocumented students are ineligible for any form of state or federal financial aid locates them in a tenuous place in relation to pursuing higher education. Araceli, an undocumented high school senior recalls the emotion that accompanied the process of receiving college acceptance letters, the culmination of so many years of hard work. , “It’s like, you get that acceptance letter, and you really wanna feel happy, you know. This is everything you worked for. But you can’t. Because its like, okay, I’m in, but there is no way I can go.” Moreover, the reality that upon graduation they remain legally unemployable renders the college path an even less “reasonable” choice for these students. Undocumented students who graduate from the country’s highest-ranked universities find themselves with a future in gardening, construction, or cleaning hotel rooms.

Undocumented young people in California grow up amid a dominant discourse that casts them as intruders, as undeserving, and as inferior. This pervasive societal discourse clearly shapes individual young people, who develop their personal, political, and academic identities within this frame. I posit that with the passage of Assembly Bill AB540, a new political subject was born – the AB540 student. This identity, I argue, was forged on a particular nexus of academic achievement and social justice involvement and therefore, to examine the academic outcomes of undocumented students, we must also examine their political involvement.

The campaign to pass the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act is the newest phase of this struggle and is very much an outgrowth of the previous struggles. The DREAM Act is a piece of pending federal legislation that would allow undocumented young people access to federal financial aid and a path to legalization. In order to qualify for the DREAM Act, an undocumented young person must have lived in the United States since age 15 or younger, be between the ages of 12 and 30 when the legislation passes, have graduated from high school and completed two years of college or military service, and have a “good moral character” (Govtrack.us 2009). The bill has appeared before Congress on

several occasions, first appearing in an earlier form in 2001, and was most recently brought to the floor of the U.S. Senate in October 2007 as a cloture vote. The DREAM Act was struck down, lacking 8 votes. The bill died on the Senate floor in Spring 2008, and was reintroduced in Spring 2009 but has yet to be voted upon.

The campaign to pass the DREAM Act led by undocumented youth is an apt site to ask the question of how lived exclusion shapes political consciousness, for several reasons. First, as a piece of legislation that only aims to naturalize college students or young people in the military who have a “good moral character,” the DREAM Act is intertwined with one of the hegemonic components of immigration discourse, which draws a line between “deserving” and “undeserving” immigrants. Additionally, the campaign to pass the DREAM Act is both mainstream in its demands and tactics, and also radical because of the risks associated with “outing” oneself as undocumented. In a climate in which immigration raids are on the rise, undocumented youth engaging in a highly-visible legislative battle is significant and risky. In 2007, a nationally-recognized undocumented activist<sup>24</sup> was deported, and Tom Tancredo publicly called on authorities to arrest AB540 students who spoke at a DREAM Act Rally (Bernuth 2007). My central research question asks how lived experiences of sustained institutional exclusion shape the political identity and the political consciousness of undocumented Latino students. This study allows us to see how the young people engaged in this campaign confront, contest, and comply with dominant notions of racism and immigration, and how they construct political identity and oppositional consciousness within this context and through this process.

### **Building Community out of Fear and Shame**

Fear is a reality of daily life for undocumented youth. At different moments, the fear can be more or less consuming, but it never disappears completely. Ixchel, a 3<sup>rd</sup> year university student, reflects on how she took cues from her parents about feeling fearful. “I felt the most scared when I was around my parents because they were scared so I felt that energy from them. We didn’t go out a lot. We stayed home a lot because they felt safe in the house they worked in. And I remember I would cry because I wanted to go out with my cousins and stuff. But they were like ‘no mija, let’s just stay home, let’s just hang out with the family.’” Undocumented youth actively manage this fear, develop ways to cope with it and live with it. The most

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<sup>24</sup> Elvira Arellano is an internationally-recognized immigration rights advocate who lived in the United States undocumented, with her U.S. citizen son. Arellano is the president of La Familia Latina Unida, an organization that advocates for immigrant family reunification. Arellano was arrested, detained, and deported in 2007 after seeking sanctuary in a Chicago church for one year.

fundamental fear that undocumented youth manage is the fear of being “discovered,” a fear that is grounded in both the embarrassment that accompanies the stigma of being undocumented as well as the possible consequences of exposure – deportation. Carmen, an outspoken advocate for the rights of undocumented students in higher education, remembers the sense of embarrassment she had as a child:

I came to the US when I was about five years old. I think I first found out that I was undocumented in the fifth grade - it was during the [Proposition] 187 stuff and I remember being in the cafeteria with a friend and her saying, “Oh, did you know that they are going to come and get all the illegals out of the school?” And I'm like, “Oh yeah,” you know. And I just remember at that moment, just kinda pausing and thinking, ‘Wow. Like... I'm going to be so embarrassed. They are going to take me, they are going to call me, and everyone is going to see me being taken to the office and everyone is going to know’. (Carmen)

The fear of deportation – perhaps the most fundamental in the litany of fears – also raises anxiety about family separation, about the fate of younger siblings in mixed-status families<sup>25</sup>, and in some cases, a return to difficult economic, personal, or familial dynamics that caused the migration in the first place.

Undocumented youth also struggle with the constant anxiety that accompanies the reality of life in any low-income immigrant family, though these struggles are even more pronounced in families in which some or all of the family members are undocumented. Undocumented youth struggle with the stress of their families’ precarious economic status, which many theorists describe as particularly intense both because of the low-wage jobs their parents frequently occupy as well as the insecurity of these jobs (Milkman 2006). Liliana, a 4<sup>th</sup>-year college student, describes how her family survives on the work of her aging parents, who drive around the large metropolitan city they live in, collecting cardboard scraps to turn into the recycling yard for cash:

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<sup>25</sup> Many undocumented young people live in “mixed-status” families, which means that the immediate family unit is comprised of both undocumented and documented people. Though this difference often falls along the axis of age (younger siblings were born in the United States and therefore have citizenship), circular migration patterns often make this mix more complicated.

My dad is the one who drives and my mom is the one up in the truck. They do it all, they go to work usually three or four in the morning and come back around nine, ten. The goal was to get the truck full, to get tons of cardboard. You have to get tons and go to the recycling center where they accept cardboard and then exchange it for money that way. They get about fifty dollars for the whole truck. And then on the side, they get the glass and the cans. Usually they're collecting it in dumpsters so they're always dirty, they can't help it. And I hate it, because my mom is the one that gets in there. She jumps in there, she's really good at it though... she jumps in there, she can get cut, they've cut themselves before and they're still going. She's the one going around the trash and grabbing the glass, whatever they can get that's useful to get money out of. (Liliana)

When Liliana speaks of her parent's work, it is with a mix of frustration and admiration; she is both proud of how hard they work and angry that it is their only option. Liliana avoids answering when college classmates ask her what her parents do for a living. She struggles with not wanting to be ashamed by revealing how they make their living, but she also knows that middle-class students will have no context within which to understand her reality. It is widely documented by immigration scholars that economic stress and all of the fears it brings, is shared by the children in immigrant families (Portes and Zhou 2005), and the subjects of this study are no different.

Being undocumented, and the accompanying stress that this brings, can exacerbate the tensions and difficult dynamics that exist in these students' families. For example, the stress of her family's precarious employment also exacerbates the tensions that exist in her parents' marriage, which Liliana describes as abusive. Financial instability contributing to strained family relationships is a reoccurring theme in speaking with these young people. Carmen shares, "In my family, it was like almost this resentment that was between us. So that resentment was always really alive in my family – very alive. And so that also highlighted for me, it was like, other than this, my parents get along really well, you know, so why does this have to exist?" The young people in this study carry not just the stress of being undocumented, but also the fear and shame that come with their precarious situation.

Undocumented youth also frequently speak about fear of the future, which is particularly heightened at moments of life transition such as high school graduation, college graduation, and milestone birthdays. When I congratulate Carolina on the completion of her third year in

college, she doesn't share my enthusiasm. Her impending graduation does not make her excited, it makes her worried:

I'm scared sometimes, you don't know what it's going to be like, maybe I should stop. And [at the] same time, I'm like, "What if it doesn't change, and what if I can't get a good job?" I know that I can help the community, just start something, but how am I going to be able to survive? And I'm going to be like wasting so much money on this. But I think that fear is like, it's kind of a fear that all of us have, "What if I can't handle the future? Find a job?"  
That kinda thing. (Carolina)

Rites of passage that are generally moments of joy and accomplishment for young people are frequently anxiety-producing for young people with precarious legal status. They struggle with the fact that a college degree does not actually do anything to allow them to secure legal employment. These moments of transition highlight the uncertainty of their lives and raise questions that are, at some level, impossible to answer. What is so consuming about this anxiety is both its constant presence as well as the feeling that there is no way to rectify the situation that causes the fear.

These young people, like all people under stress, have different strategies for dealing with this stress. Some, like Liliana, describe periods of their lives in which they were scared to leave the house: "Because I'm not as brave as some other people, they go on the airplane, they go wherever they need to. I'm just like, 'I'm sorry – I think about these things too much.' I try to be spontaneous and do it, but I can't." Others feel that living in a predominantly immigrant community affords them a sort of protection because "everyone is undocumented" so they do not stand out. Learning to not be immobilized by the fear is not a linear process in which ones goes from more fearful to less fearful, because different things make that fear more heightened at certain times and less debilitating at others. Although individuals develop specific ways to cope with the uncertainty of their status – from constantly worrying to finding safety in numbers – the broader political context can disrupt these strategies.

A year into my fieldwork, news of ICE raids in their Northern California City had the UPSRGE members on edge. Emergency meetings were called, "know your rights" pamphlets were hastily mass-produced, and the students came together to share their concerns, to voice their worry, and to offer support to one another. Marcela, a new student and one of the less-active UPSRGE members, commented that she was remembering her mom coming home from work at the sweatshop after there had been a raid, and how scared she was: "I thought that at the

university, we would be protected somehow, you know, as students. But I guess nothing changes the fact that we're still just illegal, and they don't care if we are trying to get an education." It is here, in the management of fear, that shame is a relevant consideration.

Undocumented young people are not immune to the stigma that is associated with being an "illegal" immigrant. The shame associated with this label is something that all of these young people deal with, some more profoundly than others. The experience of hearing anti-immigrant sentiments and remaining silently ashamed is nearly universal among the participants of this study. Carolina reflects on these moments, and explains,

I'm not that open. Because...well, I don't really feel comfortable telling people I'm undocumented because some people, um...they are against undocumented immigrants. And I just feel like...I'm quiet but I observe a lot of things. I don't want to put myself in that situation where I would have to deal with that – where people are not really trying to understand. I don't think they would be really nice. Or like, I don't want them to say mean things to me, so I don't tell them. And the other thing is like I don't know how they're going to react. I feel that it's just a risk I don't want to take.

The shame can, at times, be overwhelming. In response to a question about her process of coming to political consciousness, Carmen reflects,

I would say, the first of anything - it's the shame. It's the shame. It's the shame. You aren't scared, its not even fear yet – it's just the shame. You are just like, 'I'm not going to talk about it. I'm not as valuable as anybody else.' And then integrated with that, is the fear. Depending on the political context, your fear goes up and down. But again, still, the dominating thing is the shame. (Carmen)

Some undocumented youth, like MariLuz, are clear to draw the line between fear and shame: "It's also a little bit shameful. But it's not like I'm ashamed of who I am but at the way its looked at in society. I know that I'm gonna get that look of like [rolling her eyes]. 'Oh. You're undocumented? So how did you get here?'" In MariLuz's case, fear is a healthy skepticism about the intentions of others, and she emphasizes that being guarded about her status is not a result of being ashamed, it is a consequence of her being careful. Though some young people can draw this line, it is not difficult to see how shame and fear can become closely related. Elena, a community college student, states, "For the longest time I never told anybody. It was always so hush-hush. Even my best friends – nobody knew. So it's this secret you have, and you go from having a secret to being a secret. You just feel bad, like you are nothing." The weight of carrying around the secret of one's status often translates into feeling ashamed, which

is compounded by the societal stigma associated with being undocumented. Gramsci's work on hegemony is helpful in understanding how even young people who have an analysis about the structural conditions that shape their legal status, struggle with feelings of shame.

Being overcome with fear, constant anxiety, and shame often results in undocumented young people becoming isolated. It is easy to not reach out, to not connect to others in the same situation, which in turn reproduces the isolation. However, every student in this study speaks of having to break through this isolation at a certain point, often before they were ready to do so. This moment, for college-bound youth, often occurs when they begin to prepare to apply to college. Adriana, a college graduate, attributes her making it to college and through college, to her willingness to be honest about her status and seek support.

The career counselor at our school knew about it and that's how I was able to get some of the scholarships. For me, it was really, it's a good thing that I did that cause a lot of people are willing to help. And if they didn't know about it, then they wouldn't. You're kind of telling your situation to...in a way, I guess it would make it seem like you're telling me your sad story, putting yourself in a vulnerable position, and maybe they need to know that. But it's only for your benefit in a way...But if you don't look for help, nobody comes to help you. (Adriana)

A temporary, pragmatic decision to break this silence and reach out for support does not erode the fear or the shame – it temporarily de-prioritizes it. However, my research shows that this temporary break often brings undocumented students in community with other undocumented students, and that this community-building unintentionally and inadvertently brings the students into a process of dealing with their fear and shame. Liliana, who arrived at her large college campus not sure if she would be the only undocumented student, describes building community with another undocumented student. “I started talking to him and we started thinking about forming a support group. At that point it was just the two of us...I didn't know any other undocumented student. And at that point, we had no idea who else was there, how we were going to do it. And at that point, I didn't want people to know about my situation yet. I don't want to be that open.” Fear of “coming out” as undocumented is tempered at a basic level by collectivity and recognizing that there are others in a similar circumstance. Kristina, a third year community college student, describes how sharing an identity as undocumented students transcends some of the differences that exist. “You know some people have harder stories because they had tougher times coming over here, but you know at the end it just makes us all a



family. We are all united because of that one thing – we are undocumented. And all we want to do is go to school.”

Traditional sociological theory on political engagement posits that overcoming fear and shame are a necessary precursor to political engagement. In what he calls “cognitive liberation,” Doug McAdam (1985) argues that people need to name and recognize “social conditions” as harmful and stop acquiescing to them before they can start organizing against them. In other words, if people have not gone through this cognitive process, they cannot become politically engaged. According to McAdam, political engagement, which begins with a shift in political consciousness, is a linear, forward-moving process. What I have found, however, is that students frequently engage with other undocumented students out of necessity, which then propels them into political activism. This activism in turn helps them deal with fear and shame. When part of a collective group – even in objectively more fear-inducing circumstances (such as a direct confrontation with police or security personnel during a direct action) – undocumented youth feel a sense of righteousness about who they are and what they stand for, which comes about through this collectivity and erodes both the fear and shame associated with being undocumented. Theorists and social change practitioners generally think that political involvement comes at a late stage of consciousness, after feelings of shame and fear have been overcome, and that people will not engage in political action unless they have first dealt with these feelings. My research demonstrates that people engage early on, before they have overcome fear and shame, in order to help deal with these feelings. Being an active member of a political group and engaging in political work is attractive to these youth not despite their unresolved vulnerability, fear, and shame, but because of it.

The social context of undocumented students’ lives requires that they reach out for support. In doing this, they build community with other undocumented students, which has the impact of beginning to erode the shame and fear that they have learned to live with. However, the erosion of fear and shame requires that the causes of them be confronted, and it is in this confrontation that the young people in my study are enabled to engage in two meaningful processes. First, they develop a social analysis of their shame and realize how it is socially constructed. This happens through the building of relationships with other undocumented young people, and a collective process of trying to understand their shared situation. After not being able to talk about their citizenship status openly for so long, being able to share with someone else who genuinely understands is not only therapeutic and liberating, it is also instrumental in illuminating that the shame they have come to see as a natural consequence of their situation, is created by the broader social context.

Second, they begin to confront the real fear of being deported that their status makes them vulnerable to, and they begin to think about the system that instills this fear. Again,

connection with other undocumented young people fuels this process. A part of developing close connections with other undocumented youth also illuminates how different they are from their citizen peers. Having to be concerned about possible deportation when their classmates' biggest concern is a midterm not only puts things in perspective, it also prompts questions about what they have done to deserve such differential treatment. For the young people in this study, the only answers to these questions lead to a conception of immigration policy as not only broken but also arbitrary. There is nothing linear about this process. Rather, the process involves an active tension that is worked out over time.

What we learn from this process is, first, the pragmatic necessity to reach out can be the catalyst for a much deeper and wider process of engagement if supportive networks and communities exist to nurture this process. Second, we learn that overcoming fear and shame in order to engage in activism is not causal. A person does not have to deal with fear before he or she can engage politically. Often, activism through collective community is the entry point and the erosion of fear and shame follows. For many of the young people in this study, the creation of collective community has happened within an educational context – high school or college – though I do not believe these are the only contexts in which it is possible. Connecting with other undocumented youth through church affiliation and non-political social groups, provided there is a space and sense of security to share one's status, have also proven important in the lives of these young activists. Engagement in activism as a result of participation in a non-political social group will be discussed at length in the following chapter.

The tension that plays out in this context is the tension between what is perceived to be “deserved” fear and shame as a result of their status, which turns undocumented youth inwards and isolates them. This is in active tension with their own assertion that they deserve to be able to continue their education, and that their status should not determine which rights are withheld from them. The undocumented youth in this study work out this tension by building connections and relationships with other undocumented youth, which enables them to collectivize their own personal subjugation and frequently leads to a form of collective action that seeks to change power dynamics on a broader level.

### **A Constant Struggle: Dominant Public Discourse and Internal Meaning Making**

One of the central goals of the anti-immigrant agenda over the past 20 years has been to control the public discourse around immigration and to create a narrative that comes to be the ‘common sense’ way that people understand immigration. When these common sense ideas take hold, the terrain shifts, and the result is no longer two competing stories on the same question. Instead, the dominant narrative becomes situated as the universal truth that all other conceptions of reality must be measured against. Devon Carbado and Cheryl Harris offer a compelling

example of this in their description of the ways in which racial frames shaped the rescue effort in the wake of Hurricane Katrina: “What are the material consequences? . . . And how if at all, did it injure black New Orleanais in the wake of Hurricane Katrina? The answer relates to two interconnected frames – the frame of law and order and the frame of black criminality. Working together, these frames rendered black New Orleanians dangerous, protectable, and unreachable” (2006: 97). Narrative, though a discursive, ideological component, can become materially situated and thus a force to contend with. This was Gramsci’s interjection into traditional Marxism – that we must understand the ways ideas can become materially situated, and develop a materialist idea of the role of ideology in the building of a revolutionary movement. In other words, ideas and ideology play a role in the balance of forces as active participants – not simply as the background or “superstructure.”

The narrative produced by anti-immigrant forces over the past 20 years casts undocumented immigrants as criminals who take advantage of scarce resources and are unwilling to assimilate into American society. Intellectuals like Victor David Hanson (2007) and Samuel Huntington (2009), politicians like Tom Tancredo, media forces like Michael Savage and Sean Hannity, and grassroots forces like the Minutemen represent some of the most outspoken, and seemingly fringe-element, conservative anti-immigrant forces. However, the mainstream discourse around immigration, immigrants, and illegality is not significantly different than these far-right elements. Leo Chavez details the creation of the “Latino Threat” discourse, emphasizing how “the Latino Threat Narrative is pervasive even when not explicitly mentioned. It is the cultural dark matter filling space with taken-for-granted ‘truths’ in debates over immigration on radio and TV talk shows, in newspaper editorials, and on internet blogs” (2008: 3). He goes on to explain,

The Latino Threat Narrative posits that Latinos are not like previous immigrant groups, who ultimately became part of the nation. According to the assumptions and taken-for-granted ‘truths’ inherent in this narrative, Latinos are unwilling to or incapable of integrating, of becoming part of the national community. Rather, they are part of an invading force from south of the border that is bent on reconquering land that was formerly theirs (the U.S. Southwest) and destroying the American way of life (2).

Undocumented immigrant youth grow up not only exposed to this discourse but directly implicated within it. Little research has been done, however, to examine the ways that growing

up saturated by this discourse shapes these young people, let alone how it impacts political outcomes, political identity, and political engagement. Miguel, a high school senior, believes the impact of this cannot be understated.

It really has an impact on you when you're constantly discouraged by teachers, by the system. They have all these ideas about undocumented students. It's like if you're Mexican, and if you're an immigrant, they would straight up tell you, "Don't take AP English – too much reading, too much writing," things like that. And it's the whole experience of that, it can have a really negative impact. (Miguel)

Although most of the young people in this study talk about experiencing a disconnection when they heard anti-immigrant comments such as those described above while growing up, we cannot assume that their reaction was a simple rejection of these ideas. The characterization of undocumented people as lazy and criminal falls squarely in opposition to how these young people see their parents and themselves, and when discussing their repeated interaction to these ideas, they demonstrate a natural hesitancy and resistance to them. However, on repeated occasions, I saw many of these young people accommodate to these ideas, stereotypes, and values, by incorporating them into their own vision, framing and immigrant-rights dialogue – usually in relation to their rights as “students”. In a statewide meeting of students organizing around the DREAM Act, Irma shares her frustration about the way that the rights of undocumented students are dismissed in the mainstream media, casting all undocumented youth as law-breakers and trouble-makers. “We are not out there breaking the law, making trouble, we are not ‘those’ kinds of kids. We are just trying to get an education!” Some of this accommodation of a dominant frame of the anti-immigrant narrative can be attributed to political strategy – the students are appealing to common values and a popular line of argument as a way to garner public support. However, in arguing that their identities as students should afford them a certain set of rights, they inadvertently and uncomfortably fall into the creation of a false dichotomy between “undeserving” and “deserving” immigrants.

It is critical to note that this contradiction is not lost on the youth activists. They talk about it, they agonize over it, they rethink it and rework it. Yet, in the current climate, it is clear to them that comprehensive immigration reform that deals justly with all immigrants is unlikely to pass. In fact, the CIR bills died in Congress during the course of my fieldwork, further providing evidence for this concern. At the same meeting Irma spoke out at, just a short time later, the facilitator, Carmen, an undocumented youth activist herself, makes a critical point:

Look, sometimes when people talk about this, when they get on the news and stuff, they say ‘I shouldn’t be held responsible for the decisions my parents made when I was a baby.’ But we don’t say that. We don’t say that. We don’t criminalize our parents, we don’t take the blame and put it on them. That’s not something we are willing to do to pass the DREAM Act. (Carmen)

Thus, these young people walk a fine line, trying not to perpetuate the false dichotomy but at the same time arguing for their own rights on the basis of their identity as immigrant students. The result is a hybridized, popular line of argument that appeals to the sentiments behind the dichotomy between deserving and undeserving immigrants, while actively taking steps to undermine that dichotomy. It is a complicated walk, and the results are not always easy to analyze.

This complicated scenario speaks to the broader process that undocumented young people constantly negotiate within their lives. This is best characterized as complete inundation by the anti-immigrant discourse and an ideological rejection of it. At the same time, the fact that it the discourse is “common sense” means that it creeps into their consciousness in ways that are not totally self-evident and that the students are not completely reflexive about. Some social movement theorists and grassroots practitioners would write off this complexity as evidence of students selling out and appealing to a popular line of argument at the expense of their ideals, which is a testament to the power of hegemonic ideas. However, extended ethnography and in-depth conversations which included their own self-analysis leads me to a different conclusion.

Undocumented Latino youth are shaped by public anti-immigrant discourse, but not in a simple or causal way; they do not believe it but neither do they outright reject it. Instead, I have observed a constant process of negotiation that entails a back and forth acceptance and rejection of these dominant ideas. It is through this active negotiation, and having to continually work through this tension, that undocumented young people are constantly engaged in a profoundly personal-political process of theorizing exclusion, race, inequality, oppression, and exploitation. The dual existence of these “ideas” – hegemonic and counter-hegemonic – cause these young people to constantly engage in a process of theorization and meaning-making that calls these things into tension with one another. Raymond Williams (1978) argues that hegemony “does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not all its own” (112). Consistent with Williams’ conception of hegemony as dynamic, I argue

that consciousness is also dynamic and ever-changing. One of the key ways that this tension is worked out is through the personal-political practice of *testimonios*.

Testimonios are a practice of “documenting silenced histories” (Acevedo 2001). This concept has been written about in the context of alternative modes of theory production of marginalized communities, such as feminist theorists. Luz de Alba Acevedo writes, “Testimonio [offers] an artistic form and methodology to create politicized understandings of identity and community” (2001: 3). Creating and sharing testimonio is a practice of reflecting on one’s own life, and connecting one’s personal experience to a broader social and political context. Though the UPSRG students did not use this term when describing their work, I believe it captures the conceptual frame that guides their personal-political work. In fact, a campus-based organization at UC Santa Cruz of AB540 students and their allies explicitly identify the role of testimonio in the building of their organization, S.I.N.: “We emphasize the role of testimony within S.I.N. and the importance of S.I.N. as a zone of safety that enables the development of a critical consciousness and political identity as AB540 students” (S.I.N. Collective 2007: 78).

Despite the many informal conversations and planning sessions that went into the creation of UPSRG, founding members fondly recall the true start of the group as an evening gathering in which they all shared their “stories.” Adriana, who was among the first generation of undocumented students to enroll in a California university after the passage of AB540, explains, “What happened in that first meeting is that people became so close because everyone shared their experiences, their stories. People were there, and each of them went around the room, and talked like 20 minutes, about their experiences, from the very beginning. And we all had similar experiences, we all crossed the border, we’re all young, we all go to the same college. We all share this same commonality. And that was really powerful. That was the first time I had ever talked like that, with other AB540 students.” These testimonios include border-crossing stories but also their broader (im)migration stories – their families’ lives in the United States, the challenges they have faced, their road to college, and their path into activism/advocacy on behalf of undocumented people. When new students join the group, they are encouraged to share their testimony. When UPSRG is planning an event – an educational event, a lobbying visit, a rally, or a protest – testimonios always figure prominently into the agenda.

There is a sense, both implicit and explicit, that the students’ stories have the power to change public opinion. Miguel, one of the group’s leaders, asserts, “I really think it’s something that [UPSRG] can do – one way we can make a difference. Stressing the idea, changing the story, altering the conception of what it means to be undocumented. Hearing our stories, you know, it has the power to change the way people understand this issue.” Testimonios can be either formal or informal, some UPSRG students have them written down and some just speak

freely, and despite many shared experiences, the testimonios of individual young people stand distinct from one another. However, one common feature they all share is that testimonios are spoken. Some are spoken to just one other person, shared between friends over the kitchen table of a messy college apartment, some are shared before a crowd of thousands at a rally or congressional hearing. The shared feature of the stories being spoken is central to their role as instruments of both healing and transformation; testimonios are for those who hear them but they are also for the person sharing testimony. The process of developing and sharing one's testimonio is reflective and inward-looking yet also broad and outward-looking. It is a process that requires the students to connect the deeply personal occurrences of their lives to the very broad practices, policies, and politics of immigration. It is a process that requires these young people to make sense of these broader practices and policies by assessing the impact they have had on their own lives, and to understand their own lives in light of these practices and policies. Testimonio provides a space in which to ask why, and to envision and imagine how things can be different. Additionally, because the UPSRG students utilize testimonios as one of their central political strategies to raise consciousness and fight for the rights of undocumented students, they construct a political practice that even the newest members can participate in because it is something they can all do – share their own story. This blurs the line between UPSRG as a space for support and UPSRG as a space for activism.

Thus, testimonios as a central component of undocumented young people coming together is significant in terms of the development of oppositional consciousness for three key reasons. First, the creation of a personal-political counter-narrative is an illuminating experience that brings these undocumented youth into direct confrontation with the popular imaginary about immigration. Importantly, it places them in opposition to that imaginary. Second, it is an empowering experience, in the truest sense of the word, because it gives these young people power over their own stories and positions them as active participants in the immigration discourse, not just as the subjects of it. Third, it is a collective experience because in sharing testimonio they come to see their stories as connected to the stories of other undocumented young people. This connection builds a sense of a shared identity as undocumented students, which fuels activist work.

Testimonios are one way in which the undocumented students of UPSRG negotiate the tension between the dominant societal discourse about immigration and their own lived experiences as undocumented. Creating a counter-narrative is a powerful act for young people who spend much of their lives feeling like so much is out of their control. However, importantly, it is not simply engagement in this empowered action that encourages political activism. It is also the intimate realization that different texts and narratives are afforded different authority and legitimacy. Huntington and Hanson's narratives easily find a home in Chavez' "Latino Threat

Narrative” frame, and therefore are afforded legitimacy in the mainstream discourse. Undocumented students are very much aware of the power-laden field within which their testimonios reside. They are aware that their lived experiences of illegality not only does not afford them any legitimacy in the dominant discourse, it renders them suspect and dangerous. Thus, it is both the empowerment as well as the disempowerment of this experience that shape political engagement.

### **Outsiderness and Critical Consciousness**

A consistent theme that arises as these young people reflect on their lives is a persistent feeling of “outsiderness” as a result of being undocumented. This is true for every student in the study, including those highly engaged in extra-curricular activities, leadership activities, and church communities. The feeling of being on the outside is universal. Ixchel reflects on her childhood, recalling, “I did feel different all the time. I was just different. Like I said, that fear. I always felt that there was something about me that was different but I couldn’t share it with anybody because it was something my parents told me not to share – being Mexicana, born over there, not having papers.” This feeling of being different even impacted young people who had parents who consciously worked to make sure that their kids could have a “normal life.” Elizabeth, the oldest child in her family and the only one born in Mexico, shares,

[My parents] actually put me through Catholic private school for two years. I even took chess classes! Like, what kind of undocumented child is taking chess classes, you know? But I think it was, it was my parents’ hope to give me more than what they had...And even though I had that all, I remember them, like 2, 3am, cleaning restaurants, and I knew everyone else’s parents weren’t doing that, everyone else’s parents where home by that time. (Elizabeth)

Undocumented young people struggle with this reality, and recall even relatively stable and happy times in their childhoods marked by this looming feeling that things were not quite right.

This “outsiderness” also frequently takes on more explicit forms; at times this “difference” manifests as an explicit exclusion. Many young people shared stories of being excited about participating in an academic enrichment program or going on a school trip, only to find out that they were ineligible to participate because of their status. “I’ve had opportunities where I could get a good job or whatever but then they are like ‘Ok, I’m sorry you can’t qualify.’ But for me that has been the hardest - being rejected.” (Raquel). Typical rites of passage for



teenagers take on a stressful, hurtful tone as these young people have to make up excuses for why they are delaying getting their drivers licenses, why they are not applying for certain scholarships, or why they cannot go out to celebrate a friend's birthday at a club because they don't have a valid ID. The pain of exclusion takes on the added element of being forced to lie to conceal the reasons for the exclusion.

Another form of outsidersness is the inability to trust completely and fully reveal oneself to one's friends. Undocumented youth share that not only is it difficult to carry their secret around on a daily basis, but that it also impacts their ability to form meaningful relationships with other people. MariLuz, a high school junior, constantly wrestles with this reality. "You don't know who you can trust. You never know. There's always that fear that someone is gonna tell on you. And that's a big risk. ...It's really fucked up because you can't really get to know another person. Because friendships and stuff, they're never gonna be deep because you don't know my status. You don't know the most important thing about me." It is widely documented that peer relationships are one of the most critical and foundational aspects of early adulthood. Navigating these relationships for undocumented children can be a painful and isolating process.

Outsidersness, for some undocumented youth, becomes a part of their self-conception. Nicolas, an outspoken activist and visible leader in the undocumented youth movement, shares a poignant story from a youth leadership camp he participated in as a member of his school's student government.

One of the things that I was so scared of was that we were going to go meet the border patrol and have question and answer session. And this was so devastating to me, because I hadn't told anybody. And I was like, "God, what if they ask?" And ... I was the only Mexican kid. See that's the thing. I've learned to be uncomfortable. Everything in my life has stressed me out, that's how I look at it. I'm the only person, I'm the only guy that stands out in everything I do. So the border patrol dude let us climb the border, sit on top of it. And the whole time that I was there, I was like, *man, I'm climbing the border going to Mexico*. And on the other side I saw thousands of people...I climbed the border. I put my head over and I was like, man, how many kids get to do this? And then afterwards, we rode in the jeep all along the border, and he talked to us the whole time, and he was like, "Yeah, I catch them coming over" and he... showed us all his tricks. How he looks at the tracks, how he can track people. And then, he was

running off all this stuff to us, he was like, “You guys came on a good day, today we’re racing our ATVs.” And I was thinking, *man, if only they knew.* You know, and that’s how I feel everyday. If only people knew. (Nicolas)

Nicolas’ story exemplifies how this outsidership becomes ingrained as a part of his identity – a part of the way he sees himself. At the same time, though it is central to his personal and political identity, his outsidership is something that in many contexts, he cannot or will not share.

Operating in a constant context of otherness and extra-legality<sup>26</sup> allows undocumented students to assume a removed and more critical location from which to contest societally-accepted truths about the inevitability of inequality. Constantly situated “on the outside looking in” as Carmen says, gives these young people a naturally-arising skepticism about ideas, notions, and assumptions that are taken to be “common sense.” This happens on multiple levels, from the daily and mundane ideas they call into question such as the importance of prom, to the deeper ideas that make up the dominant discourses within which they grow up. Some, like MariLuz, who immigrated as a pre-teen, have memories of life in their home countries, and this critical analysis arises out of being exposed to a different “common sense”:

I think part of it, I’m not sure how much of a part of it, but I think it’s pretty significant, is the fact that they’ve been fed this whole lie for their whole lives. But not me, you know, because I didn’t grow up here. I mean, in a lot of ways I feel like I had two childhoods. Weird I guess. But there’s all these lies, you know, about how Mexicans are lazy and stupid, how all of us are just gonna get pregnant and drop out of school. Yeah, that’s a big one. And my friends, my friends who grew up here, you know they fall into what’s expected of them. Because they’re being like fed all this bullshit about people. About themselves.

MariLuz attributes her analysis around racialized expectations of Latino youth to her outsidership. She is not only clear in her analysis and critique, she is also clear on what it means for her own life and her decision not to fulfill these expectations as a young, working class, immigrant Latina.

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<sup>26</sup> I use the term “extra-legality” instead of the word “illegality” because illegality denotes criminality. I speak of this in the first chapter when explaining the use of the term “undocumented immigrant” rather than “illegal immigrant”. However, when speaking about the context these young people live in, their legal status as undocumented does categorize them as “illegal” and this designation shapes their lived reality. Thus, in an effort to capture the lived, material reality within which they live while simultaneously avoid the association with criminality, I use the term “extra-legality” to describe the social situation undocumented young people live in which is created as a result of their socially-scripted legal classification.

For others, living outside of the law by necessity naturally opens up a critique of the law. When speaking with Nicolas about his participation in a civil disobedience action, I asked him if he was worried about risking arrest, since the consequences are potentially much worse for him than for activists who are citizens. He dismissed the question, saying, “Everything we do is illegal! Living our lives is illegal. Every morning, I wake up in my bed, and that’s illegal. Living my life, trying to be a good person, a member of the community, trying to get my degree – its illegal. I mean, at a certain point, you just gotta say, whatever.” In a deeply personal way, Nicolas has come to understand the limits of the legitimacy of the law. He knows he is doing nothing wrong, yet deals with the ever-present reality that everything he does is wrong. Thus, his contempt of a legal system that makes no space for him to establish himself as a full member of the society he has lived in since he was a toddler has grown into a political decision to disobey these laws in order to advance a political agenda. Undocumented youth constantly negotiate the disconnect between the societal narrative they hear about “illegal” immigration which casts their parents, and themselves, as law-breaking criminals trying to steal resources. Time and time again, these young people speak of the pain of that dominant image, and juxtapose it with how they see their parents. The persistence of these ideas frustrates Miguel: “We’re not coming here, my parents didn’t come here to take the jobs of a CEO or a professor at UCLA. We came here for a better life. I just wanna get my degree, have a good career with it, and give back to my family, to my community.” The contrast between these two narratives – their parents and themselves as lawbreakers vs. good citizens – is something that these young people confront on a daily basis. This clash understandably often leads to an interrogation of why misinformed images of immigrants appear with such great prevalence, as young people are pushed to question why their own lived experiences stand in such sharp contrast to the way society sees them. This is particularly true when students confront the material limitations of their status, excluded from certain opportunities or ineligible for certain programs because they are undocumented. My research subjects demonstrate that dealing with the pain of exclusion often initiates a process of understanding the basis of this exclusion, which often starts as a self-reflective process and often leads to an analysis of the broader political system.

Naturally, political engagement is not the only response of undocumented youth to isolation and “outsiderness.” There are many who respond to the daily exclusion they face as a result of their status by disengaging further – from school, from their families, from their communities. However, understanding how outsiderness can serve as a catalyst for oppositional consciousness among undocumented youth activists is important for two reasons. First, the pervasive experience of being “othered” impels undocumented young people to create community and collective identity with other undocumented youth. The deeply personal impacts of perpetual outsiderness not only shape collective political engagement but also, as my research

demonstrates, often propel a reflective, analytical process that causes these young people to question the exclusion they face. As Elizabeth shares, “You always feel like you have this secret in a way, and that does make you different than other people. It makes you see things differently.” This is a profoundly personal-political process, one of those moments where the lines between the two are virtually indistinguishable. These young people turn to theorizing out of the pain of exclusion, and it is this same pain that allows them to be able “see” injustice in a critical way. As feminist theorist bell hooks explains, when describing her own personal journey of political analysis, “I came to theory because I was hurting – the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing” (1994: 59).

Second, it is significant because these are not simply the kids who turned their exclusion into involvement. Had I spoken with these young people at a different moment in their lives, many of them would have fallen squarely into the “disengaged” category. Indeed many of the students in this study described times when, feeling hopeless about their situation and future prospects, they not only disengaged from academics or activism, they disengaged from the hope that things could change. Periods of disengagement are present in the life trajectory of many of the undocumented youth activists, including those who are recognized as leaders and deeply committed to the cause. This disengagement takes different forms, from stopping making an effort with school, to joining the informal street economy, to focusing inwards on taking care of one’s family rather than trying to alter social structures. Despite these periods of disengagement, different forces at different moments, pushed them into activism. This demonstrates that political engagement is not a linear process that has a one-way door. Rather, for these young people, political engagement is a process that happens over time, is not linear, and is sometimes married with periods of what appears by traditional measures to look like “disengagement.”

## **Conclusion**

This chapter begins with the central question, How do experiences of exclusion shape the political identity and political consciousness of undocumented young people? I have argued that in order to answer this question we must reconsider the way we think about oppositional /counter-hegemonic consciousness. Specifically, we must acknowledge the complex interchange of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideas as a generative site for oppositional consciousness and engagement in activism.

My research demonstrates three key ways that experiences of exclusion shape both the political consciousness and engagement of undocumented young people. First, the fear and shame caused by one’s undocumented status can serve as a catalyst for political engagement, if a

supportive community is in place to encourage this. This is an innovation on earlier thinking on this topic, which holds that fear and shame must be dealt with first in order for someone to seek out political engagement. The youth in this study demonstrate that feelings of fear and shame can act as a catalyst for forging community with other undocumented youth, which can then lead to collective political actions that enable them to overcome their fear and shame. Second, sharing testimonios about experiences of exclusion plays a critical role in the development of oppositional consciousness by involving these young people in the process of creating a public-private counter-narrative. The telling of one's story is inherently internal and external, crafted through introspection and reflection and simultaneously transformative in the process of speaking this story aloud. Engaging in this process allows the undocumented young people of this study to theorize their own experiences within the broader context of anti-immigrant policies, practices, and discourse. Lastly, the experience of outsidership offers a more critical location from which to question ideas that are taken to be true by mainstream society. With outsidership comes the pain of exclusion, but as the lives, stories, and political work of these young people demonstrate, outsidership can also inspire the development of critical thinking more broadly, and critical consciousness specifically.

The findings of this study are significant because they challenge traditional ways of thinking about how and why people engage in political work on an individual level and how that process takes place in relation to other factors such as shame, fear, and the development of a political self-identity. In contrast to conventional theories about the formation of oppositional consciousness, these findings show that oppositional consciousness is not solely a reaction to and an overcoming of hegemonic ideas. Instead, for the youth in this study, it is experienced as a state of tension and an outcome of a generative process that entails a constant negotiation between hegemonic and non-hegemonic ideas. Understanding the dialectic between the hegemonic and the counter-hegemonic compels a move away from a totalizing view of liberatory consciousness and make space for a non-linear, more nuanced way to understand the development of oppositional consciousness and political engagement. This allows a reconceptualization of what political engagement "looks" like, illuminating the assertion that political engagement and political consciousness is not a state of arrival nor a final point on a spectrum, but a body of thoughts, experiences and actions that are negotiated over and over again.

This finding holds implications for how we theorize the role that ideas play in building social movements. In coming chapters I will expand the scope of my analysis and explain how what happens to oppositional consciousness on an individual level shapes what happens on an organizational level, and ultimately on a movement building level. What is clear is that undocumented young people in California are profoundly changing the political landscape

through their struggle for educational justice. This struggle is profoundly personal and transformative on an individual level and also has the potential to change the course of history in the state. These young people are demanding a resolution to the contradiction that has shaped their lives – the reliance of the United States on their presence and its simultaneous refusal to recognize them as human beings deserving of fundamental civil rights. Their presence in this country is, both directly and indirectly a result of the free-market policies espoused by Milton Friedman whose quote begins this chapter; policies that have come to govern US policy in the last decades. As Friedman observes, ideas are important in the production of social change. Undocumented young people, their lives shaped by the global displacement of people and capital that is a hallmark of free market policies, are taking up Friedman’s challenge. They are actively challenging the dominant discourse around immigration and illegality, both through the production of new discourses through their own testimonios and through their campaign work which seeks to change policy. They are guided by a vision of access to education for undocumented young people, a commitment which at many moments seems politically impossible. Yet they march on, insisting that there will be a moment in which the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable and they know this will happen only because they demand it. Their insistence on being heard despite profound institutional exclusion demonstrates that their voices will not be silenced.

## Chapter 4

### We Are Many, We Are One: Collective Identity, Collective Action & Collective Consciousness

“El pueblo unido jamas sera vencido!”

(popular protest chant<sup>27</sup>)

#### Introduction

It is a chilly May night, and this Northern California college campus is uncharacteristically still. I make my way into one of the main academic buildings, noting how quiet the halls are, how empty the classrooms look, and how the normal constant chatter of students is missing. It is the end of the semester, final exams are approaching, and the hundreds of students that generally hang out in the main quad, on the steps of buildings, and on patches of grass around campus are not out. I reach my destination, a large classroom on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor filled with attentive students crouched over flipped-open notebooks, furiously trying to capture all of what the speaker is saying. At this time of year, a reasonable assumption would be that I had walked into a review session, a last lecture of the semester. However, these students are not gathered in this room to prepare for final exams. They are scared, they are offering each other support, and they are gathering much-needed legal advice.

Just days before, news of ICE<sup>28</sup> raids in their generally-quiet Northern California City broke out. Students sent a flurry of text messages and emails, warning each other to be careful. ICE agents had arrived at a home only a few blocks from campus, questioned citizen and non-citizen members of a Latino family, and detained a teenager and middle-aged woman whom were suspected of residing in the country without proper documentation. Word spread quickly and undocumented college students were uneasy. So, during the midst of final exams, while their classmates and friends are worrying about exam questions and research papers, undocumented students have another priority – knowing what to do if ICE agents come knocking at their doors.

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<sup>27</sup> Translates to “the people united, will never be defeated”. Popularized as a part of Salvadore Allende’s call for a socialist transformation of Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship.

<sup>28</sup> ICE stands for U.S. “Immigration and Customs Enforcement”, and is the governmental body that handles all deportation orders and immigration business. ICE was formerly known as the “INS” (Immigration and Naturalization Services) but was renamed under the post-9/11 restructuring that placed immigration enforcement under the Department of Homeland Security.

ICE raids are one of the pressing realities of living without documentation in California. The ever-present risk that immigration officials can approach you and demand evidence of citizenship weighs heavily on undocumented people, because the consequences are potentially life-altering. The possibility of being detained indefinitely in a county jail or immigration detention center pales only to the risk of being deported. The thought of deportation is even more daunting for immigrants who migrated at a young age. Growing up in the United States without the freedom to cross the border for visits often results in these young Latino immigrants losing all connection to their home countries. Many have no memory of their nation of citizenship and would not know how to find the family who stayed behind. Some do not even speak Spanish.

The “Know-Your-Rights” training was coordinated by Undocumented People Struggling for the Right to Graduate (UPSRG), a college-based group of undocumented students and allies who build community with each other, offer support to each other, and engage in community work together. The organization was founded in 2006, when a group of undocumented college students found each other and collectively identified the need to create a space in which undocumented students could connect and provide support to one another. Prior to the founding of UPSRG, most of these students had kept their citizenship status a secret, a decision that meant they had to navigate their unique experience as undocumented college students on their own. Though the group is based on the campus of a Northern California university, is it also a beacon of support for undocumented young people in the surrounding community who dream of going to college. UPSRG, by most people’s telling, started with the explicit intention of providing support to its members, though it was not long before this purpose expanded to a broader, more community-based, activist vision. This process, and the evolution from support group to support/activist group was not without its difficulties and contestation. I conducted extended ethnographic fieldwork with UPSRG during the 2007-2008 school year, during its second year of existence, at a time when this evolutionary process, and its accompanying challenges and opportunities, was coming to a head. I posit that analyzing UPSRG’s work at this particular moment in its development illuminates answers to some of the central questions of this study, concerning how people come to develop an oppositional consciousness and become politically engaged, and how that process intersects with multiple overlapping processes that entail the way they see themselves and how they understand the possibility for social change in the society they live in.

The central argument of this chapter is that undocumented youth - because of both their racialized legal status as well as their age - experience a unique kind of insider/outsiderness which shapes their political engagement and their personal-political activist trajectories. I argue that constant, mandated interaction with state institutions that are required of all young people, takes particular importance among undocumented youth because it comes to constitute a unique



insider-outsider experience. This is important because this duality not only shapes a simultaneous belief in and distrust of the system that was discussed in the previous chapter, it also encourages the formation of “mutual-aid” organizations self-organized by undocumented young people. These self-organized associations have cropped up exponentially in California during the past 7 years, a proliferation I attribute largely to the unique experiences of the first generation of AB540 students settling into college. Their existence, as well as the campaign work they have spearheaded to demand immigration reform for undocumented students, have played a meaningful role in Californian politics in the past period, challenging dominant notions of who undocumented immigrants are and what political activism looks like.

In the first section of this chapter, “Complicating Marginalization” I will build on the analysis of undocumented young peoples’ experiences of exclusion detailed in the previous chapter. I explore the dilemma of insider-outsiderhood as a nuanced way to understand the lives of undocumented children who grow up in the United States, which accounts for both their experiences of systemic exclusion as well as the multiple ways in which they are shaped by their conditional, mandated integration into U.S. institutions, especially public schools. Second, I will analyze the emergence of UPSRG, and its role in contributing to the building of a political movement of undocumented youth in California, as a manifestation of this insider-outsider dilemma. In this section, I pay specific attention to understanding UPSRG as an institution of civil society and consider the ways that functioning both as a support group and a political force has strengthened its impact. Third, I will utilize ethnographic data to expand on the idea of “unlikely activists” by closely examining the stories of 3 leaders in UPSRG who demonstrate the ways in which their unique experiences of insider-outsiderhood as a result of being undocumented has shaped their political identities and political trajectories. Drawing on my commitment to decentered ethnography explained in the first chapter, I utilize this data not just as examples of this phenomenon but also to explore how these students themselves think about, negotiate, and make sense of this dilemma. This chapter explores the political possibilities of a support/activist organization of undocumented youth, and ends by offering some initial thoughts about the constraints and limitations of the burgeoning political movement UPSRG and its participants are a part of.

### **Complicating Marginalization: The Dilemma of Insiderhood-Outsiderhood**

Undocumented young people have a unique personal, political, and social experience growing up in this country. They differ from their citizen peers in a clear and critical way, yet they also differ from their immigrant parents, most of whom live a large portion of their lives in their home country. Many immigration scholars have analyzed this “in-between” state of immigrant children through the lens of assimilation (Kainitz, Waters, Mollenkopf, and Holdaway

2009) ultimately examining this phenomenon in service of questions around immigrant integration and characterizing immigrant youth as “belonging to neither here nor there”. I am interested in a more nuanced set of questions that focus on how this unique experience of being undocumented and young- being born in the home country, crossing the border, and growing up in the United States without documentation - shapes the political identities of undocumented immigrant youth and their visions of social change.

Undocumented young people, like all young people, have a sustained relationship with state institutions over the course of their childhoods; the clearest example is the institution of schooling. Undocumented children spend roughly half of their daily waking hours in public schools, bringing them into constant interaction with one of the central institutions of the state. The relationship with schooling is deeply formative for undocumented immigrant students, as it is a site in which these young people learn not only academic subjects but also a key site in which they “learn America” (Olson 1998). This is a critical way in which the immigrant experience of undocumented young people differs than that of their parents. Because of residential segregation as well as the concentration of undocumented workers in particular industries and trades, the parents of these undocumented students are largely surrounded by others similar to them. Moreover, because of language barriers, their interactions with state institutions are often mediated and translate by their children. Thus, the interaction undocumented adults have with larger societal institutions are less frequent and less sustained than that of their children.

In this section, I first examine the different ways undocumented youth experience their “otherness” to demonstrate the varied experiences and the fine line between inclusion and exclusion. I then broaden the analysis to what I term the “College for All” era, which is a characterization of the current discursive climate around higher education and how this has particularly impacted the educational goals and attainment of undocumented young people, further complicating the insider-outsider dynamic and also providing fertile ground for the formation of undocumented youth groups. I conclude this section with this analysis, which sets up a context to understand the emergence of UPSRG, which is taken up in the following section.

### **Varied Experiences of “Otherness”**

Undocumented young people grow up with different levels of understanding about their legal status. Some are like Adriana, who immigrated when she was 6, and cannot identify a particular moment in which they learn about their status; it is something they have always known.

Yeah, it's just the way things were, you know? We didn't have papers, that meant certain things. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I wanted to work for Clean and Green, you know some silly job for kids who care about the environment and it was like, 'oh, I can't work here because my papers aren't right.' It wasn't a surprise, cause I always just knew. It was a part of daily reality. (Adriana)

There are differences even within the group of undocumented young people who have "always known" about their status, as some remember knowing the fact early on but not fully grasping the reality until much later. Magdalena is 18-year-old, and the second-oldest of 5 children. Because her youngest sister was born in the United States after her family immigrated, citizenship was an open topic of conversation in her family. Despite this openness, Magdalena did not have a real sense of the ramifications of being undocumented until years later.

When I was in like the 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I thought it didn't matter. I was like, it doesn't matter. I don't care that I don't have papers. I didn't see it as an issue. But then in high school, like in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, it was 2006, and HR4437 came up, and I started to realize. Then I was applying to scholarships, cause there were ones that required a social security number. And then I was applying to college, that's when I was like, 'oh, I can't apply to financial aid'. That was when I started to hate that I don't have papers (Magdalena).

MariLuz represents a different experience, in that she cannot remember a time in which she was not burdened with the knowledge of her legal status, and all of its accompanying ramifications. In remembering her first year of school in the United States, MariLuz remembers "I felt like a freak. ... First, it was the language barrier. Speaking, I still have an accent, which I will probably always carry with me. I will probably for the rest of my life. But, because of my status, even when I could read and write well, I was still a freak" (MariLuz). She attributes this to her age when she crossed the border, 13, saying that she old enough at that age to be acutely aware of how much of an outsider she really was.

Others recount particular moments in which they learned they are undocumented, usually from an older sibling or a parent. Kristina, who immigrated with her mother and sister when she was 10 and settled in a predominantly Latino neighborhood in a major city, never had any idea to even ask about her status; it was not a designation she realized existed. It wasn't until she

wanted to put in an employment application when she was 16, that her mother told her she could not legally work.

I was like , ‘ok, ma, I need my social security card’. And she was like, ‘mija, you don’t have one.’ And I was confused, I was like, ‘what?’. But she took me back to that time, and helped me remember how we had crossed, and then ...in thinking about it...you know, I started to realize how everything from our lives just started to fit together you know, it explained a lot once I realized. Once she told me. (Kristina)

Roberto recalls the transformative moment when his brother told him about his status. He was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and had learned about a summer math enrichment program from one of his teachers who saw him as a promising student. He was flattered to have been recognized, and excited about participating in the program. After attending a lunchtime informational session about the program, Roberto got an application and ran home after school, anxious to ask his brother to help him fill it out:

So he said, ‘You know, I’m gonna have to talk to your teacher about this, because you don’t have a social security number.’ And I was like, ‘What’s that? How do I get one?’ ... So the next day, he went to my school and he talked to my teacher ... and he said, “Oh, you know, I don’t think Roberto is gonna be eligible. I didn’t know about his immigration status. I don’t think he’s gonna be eligible.’ I was very confused, you know? And disappointed. (Roberto).

Each undocumented young person has a story that falls somewhere along the varied spectrum between “finding out” and “always knowing” about his or her status. The differences in their experiences highlights the many different ways there are to live as an undocumented young person in California. Some of these young people carried the experience of profound exclusion and “otherness” from a young age. Others spend some period of their lives not actually seeing themselves as different from the other Latino kids in their neighborhood. The variation in experience illustrate one key aspect of the insider-outsiderness that I posit characterizes the undocumented youth experience in California.

Another important aspect of identity formation is “coming out” as undocumented. This is the term most undocumented students I spoke with used when describing the act of sharing their status with other people. Because immigration status is not something that can be “seen”, “coming out” as undocumented is not a one-time event, but rather a choice that is made daily. Additionally, the choice of identifying oneself as undocumented depends on the context, and even young people who are open with their status in most aspects of their lives exercise more caution in certain situations. When making a presentation to the student government of her university to request funds to support a conference for undocumented students, Adriana wasn’t sure who was in the room of 50 people. She played it safe when talking about the need to outreach to undocumented young people, saying “these students” and never identifying herself as one of them. Similar to educational theorists who discuss code-switching as a survival mechanism that low-income children utilize within and outside the classroom (Zentella 1997), undocumented youth constantly negotiate the boundaries that exist within and around this identity, moving in and outside of identifying as undocumented.

Though the process is constant, it is not easy or effortless. It requires undocumented youth to constantly assess risks (and possible opportunities, as will be discussed in the next section), to outing oneself. The consequences are potentially life-altering. “I was taught to not talk about [my status] at all. That’s how I grew up. ... I don’t really trust, I mean, you can’t ever know ... not just because of me but because of my family. I feel like it’s not just that you are putting yourself out there, but you’re putting everyone else out there too” (Elizabeth). It is important to note that the identities of undocumented youth are also shaped by broader processes of racialization and class-based subjugation that these young people face, as low-income Latino children. Thus, the spaces and moments in which they are able to pass as “not undocumented” does not situate them as “insiders” to white, mainstream American culture. Not being detected as undocumented does not render them immune to the other challenges that come along with the racialization, discrimination, and subjugation of low-income Latino children.

Both the variation in how undocumented young people come to fully learn about their immigration status as well as the repeated process of “coming out” as undocumented (or conversely, deciding to keep one’s status a secret) demonstrate the duality of insider-outsiderness undocumented young people face on a continual basis. It is easy to see the outsiderhood and exclusion that undocumented youth face, given both the hostile discourse surrounding undocumented immigrants in California as well as the material lack of rights and protections undocumented people face. However, I argue there are also ruptures in this broader trend of exclusion specifically among undocumented immigrant youth, as a result of their age. These temporary moments of inclusion, instances of non-detection, and also hard-won fights that have resulted in the gaining of rights for undocumented young people living in the United States.

Compulsory schooling in the current socio-political context occupies a key role in this story, as will be discussed in the next section. The unity of these experiences - sustained exclusion coupled with instances of inclusion - situate undocumented youth in a unique location to the broader society they live in. Central to my exploration, I believe that this duality has profound significance for the development of political identity, political engagement, and the imagining of the potential of social change among undocumented youth.

### **Schooling in the “College for All” Era & Conditional Institutional Inclusion**

One of the key places in which conditional inclusion manifests in the lives of undocumented young people is within the arena of schooling. Mandated by law to attend elementary, middle, and high school just like their citizen peers, undocumented young people have a consistent, sustained interaction with and participation in the institution of public schooling. However, upon high school graduation, they face substantial barriers in continuing their education. Thirty years ago, this may not have been particularly noteworthy, as higher education was popularly considered to serve only a small percentage of high school graduates. However, educational discourse has changed and most of the nation’s young people interact with the push towards being “college-ready”. The chasm between discourse and practice is vast, though the power of this discursive frame is palpable among undocumented students. Undocumented youth, who spend years of their lives participating in the educational system in a largely unconstrained way<sup>29</sup>, have sustained and repeated exposure to what I term the “College for All” discourse. Upon graduation from high school, however, the clash between what they had been preparing for and what is actually possible, is profound. Examining the “College for All” discourse, and how it shapes undocumented youth, exemplifies the insider-outsider dynamic that shapes the educational experiences of undocumented students.

I posit that for roughly the last 15 years, there has been a shift in the ways that we talk about higher education in this country, marked largely by a nearly universal belief in the importance of and the accessibility of higher education. While “college-preparatory” used to be a label reserved for the upper echelon of high school students and came up with an accompanying curriculum and pedagogy that was not available or intended for all, most urban high schools today espouse a “college for all” ideology. I believe the emergence of this discourse is connected to the idea that we live in a “post-racial society”, the idea that exclusion

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<sup>29</sup> This is not to discount the numerous difficulties undocumented students face, but describes their legal, formal inclusion in k-12 schooling.

and discrimination based on race is no longer a barrier to success (Bonilla-Silva 2009). The “College for All” discourse fits neatly into this narrative, positioning higher education as within reach of all the nation’s students, provided they work for it. This stands, of course, in stark contrast to increasing public awareness of vastly unequal resources for public schools along the lines of race and class (Kozol 1992).

It is critical to note two things in this formulation. First, what I term the “College for All” era consists largely of discourse, not access. Stated simply, though students are being more exposed to the idea of higher education as attainable by all, this is not matched by a genuine increased ability to attend college. In fact, a key contradiction in the “College for All” trend is the fact that this discourse has grown as the cost of higher educational has exponentially increased, leaving even public universities out of reach financially for many of California’s students (Lewin 2009). I will explore this contradiction more fully in the discussion that follows. Second, it is important to not discount the strong work done by hardworking people and organizations to close the achievement gap and, not only encourage, but enable, low-income students, students of color, and marginalized students to obtain college degrees. My critique of the “College for All” era does not intend to discount that important work or its successes, however it is important to note that those sort of programs and approaches largely occur outside of the formal institution of schooling in California and do not represent an institutional shift in making higher education more accessible but rather represent exceptions to that overall trend.

What then, is the problem with the “College for All” trend? Certainly one can argue that even without institutional support to actually increase access to higher education there is no harm in encouraging a discourse in which historically marginalized students can re-imagine themselves as college students. It might even be argued that this reimagination can result in students being compelled to strive academically towards that goal. Though that may superficially be true, I argue that the widespread “College for All” discourse has two unintended and largely unseen consequences.

The first of these consequences is the deepening of a popularly-accepted hierarchy between the college-educated and the non-college-educated. As Stuart Tannock discusses in his work on what he describes as “the new caste system”, which is rooted in “the widely accepted link between skill or education level and social rights and privileges”. Tannock goes on to say,

In a democratic and fair society, social justice, equality and inclusion should be extended to all members, not just the most highly skilled. . . . [There is] a whole range of inequalities, exclusions, and deprivations of the lesser and low-skilled in contemporary society. The very discourse of education and skill

which is allegedly supposed to set us free and empower us is in actuality being used to divide, control, and deflect our demands for justice and equality” (Tannock 2009: 249).

Tannock’s analysis illustrates the critical point that encouraging college as the key to social mobility and greater economic security, further entrenches the socially-manufactured correlation between education and social rights.

The second consequence of the prevalent “College for All” era rhetoric is closely connected to the central thesis of this chapter. Many theorists and researchers have noted that marginalized students nearly universally see themselves as “college-bound” despite the material conditions of their lives. In other words, low-income students of color do not aspire to work in menial, low-wage jobs. On the contrary, they share similar aspirations as their middle-class classmates but structural barriers and differential access stand in the way of them actualizing these goals. The following section will examine the particular barriers undocumented students face in the college-bound process. Returning to the larger point, what is significant is that the disconnect between the “College for All” rhetoric and the material reality that leaves higher education beyond the grasp of many deserving young people leaves whole sections of the population with a huge disconnect between what it sees for itself and what it is actually able to practically manifest. For many years, educators, researchers, and theorists have discussed the myth of meritocracy (MacLeod 1995, Johnson 2006, McNamee 2009) and how the realization that hard work alone does not ensure success is damaging to the aspirations specifically of marginalized young people. This is certainly true for undocumented young people, though findings from my research demonstrate that this disconnect can also be generative of political action.

My data demonstrates that the “College for All” discourse has a surprising impact on the political lives and political organization of undocumented students. In short, the drive towards college is magnified with this population because it is seen as the way out of poverty among a population which has few options because of exclusion from the labor market. This drive comes into contact with the material, financial, barriers undocumented students face, despite their hard work and talent. This tension exposes the contradiction of the “College for All” discourse, which is in many ways tied to the American dream discourse, pushing students to question these constructs and fundamental notions of fairness, justice, and equity. The connection with other undocumented young people facilitates that process, as the UPSRG case study demonstrates. The next section of this chapter will detail how and why this happens, rooted in the extended ethnographic study of a group of “unlikely activists” who by virtue of their citizenship status and the corresponding challenges that come along with it, came together for mutual support in a



hostile environment and inadvertently developed themselves and each other into leaders of a statewide movement for educational justice. The story of UPSRG is a story of how and why this happened, what we can learn from this group about the development of political consciousness and engagement in social activism, as well as how the challenges UPSRG faces as an organization actually strengthen their work, their identities as activists, and their effectiveness.

I will close this section with some analytical points about what I call “conditional inclusion” and the heightening of contradictions, which I argue is generative of political activism. In 1982, The United States Supreme Court’s verdict in the landmark case *Plyler versus Doe* secured the right of undocumented children to access public elementary education. As legal theorist Maria Pabon Lopez describes, the ruling was historically significant not just because of the right to public elementary and secondary education it conferred but also because the ruling itself rested on a particular characterization of undocumented children. “*Plyler* is a groundbreaking case in that, for the first time, the Supreme Court clearly stated that undocumented persons are protected under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment” (Lopez 2005: 1385). *Plyler* provided legal precedent for a conceptualization of undocumented children as individuals worthy of legal protection, while simultaneously entrenching a criminalized notion of their parents. “The fact that it would be unfair to penalize the undocumented students for their parents illicit act was another concern for the Court. The Court found that undocumented children ‘can affect neither their parents’ conduct nor their own status’” (Lopez 2005: 1389). The special designation given to the children of undocumented immigrants set them aside from their presumably less-deserving parents.

Approximately 10 years later, California passed Assembly Bill 540, which guaranteed the right to pay in-state tuition to California colleges and universities to students who graduate from a California high school, despite citizenship status. This piece of legislation was passed through the hard work and political pressure placed by undocumented students and their allies, though the beneficiaries of AB540 encompass citizen students as well. In fact, some educational justice advocates believe that AB540 passed not because of the work of undocumented youth activists, but in spite of them. A sizeable portion of the beneficiaries of AB540 are students who grew up in California, and attended high school in the state, but for some reason had an extended absence from the state and therefore lapsed their residency. Common situations include children who move out of state when their parents divorce and then return back to California for college, and those who grow up in California, obtain their bachelor’s degree outside of the state, and return to California for graduate school. Thus, many believe that the broader constituency allowed AB540’s passage. California was the second state in the country to pass a bill like AB540, following the example Texas set forth in the 2001 passage of House Bill 1403. Though, the fragility of these legislative gains is ever-present, as *Plyler v Doe*, AB540, HB1403 and all other

legislation that grants educational rights to undocumented students have been challenged frequently and consistently since each has passed.

This history illuminates a consistent theme in the legislative trajectory of immigrants to the United States – the division between “deserving” and “undeserving” immigrants. This distinction plays out along different axes in different contexts, and in the realm of educational policy, when rights are conferred to undocumented children, it is frequently on the basis of their innocence in relation to their parents’ criminal actions. The tension becomes more acute as these innocent children near adulthood, and the neat dividing line distinguishing them their parents becomes blurrier. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the discourse around undocumented college students - they are cast as undeserving, accused of hoarding resources, and trying to claim what is not rightfully theirs. They are the same children, in the same circumstances, though suddenly who they are and what they deserve has changed. Undocumented children are shaped by this experience of conditional inclusion – allowed to participate in some institutions such as public schooling, but simultaneously disallowed from full participation in multiple societal arenas. This disconnect grows, and the contradiction becomes more and more apparent, as undocumented children grow into undocumented young adults. It is this context and this set of tensions, that created the conditions for the emergence UPSRG and many other organizations like it around the state. The next section examines how this occurs as well as the complications that arise.

## **UPSRG!: Undocumented People Struggling for the Right to Graduate**

### *The formation of UPSRG*

Though Assembly Bill 540 passed in 2001, it was not enacted until 2002. That year, some of the first “AB540 students” enrolled in California colleges and universities, inaugurating not only a new era in their own lives but in the history of the state. Most of these students thought they were alone in this journey, assuming there were no others like them on campus. For undocumented students, familiarizing oneself with the new terrain did not just consist of making new friends and finding out where buildings are located, but rather was a complicated, and at times alienating, process of assessing how, when, and under what circumstances it was safe to reveal their status.

Though the exact origins of UPSRG are a bit murky as organizational histories often are, it is clear that a group of undocumented young people who did not previously know each other found each other on their large college campus and came together around a vision of a group made up of people like them. Conversations about forming a group began in late 2005, and the group was formally founded in early 2006. Elizabeth, Marco, Adriana, Miguel, Liliana, and Roberto played a pivotal role in that process. Elizabeth did outreach for the initial meeting, and

though a last minute issue prevented her from attending, she was excited about playing a role in bringing people together. “I wanted it to be a support group. Academic support. You know – let’s share information, networking, even personal support” (Elizabeth). A Latina staff member on campus gave her the names of a couple other AB540 students to invite. Miguel and Adriana were among them.

Miguel remembers the early days of UPSRG fondly. “That’s when I met another AB540 student. It was a blessing and still is. That helped a lot, gave me my own little niche. ... We shared our stories, shared what we were going through. So yeah, we just got together, took out a marker, some cardboard, and started jotting down ideas” (Miguel). Adriana had arrived as a student on the campus 3 years earlier, and had spent the majority of her college career never knowing another undocumented student on her campus. “I didn’t know anybody else. I was probably the only one, that’s what I thought. It wasn’t even an issue people were conscious of. Even the other Chicanos, they would talk about immigration and stuff, but never ‘undocumented’. Never that” (Adriana). Adriana credits the founding meeting of UPSRG with facilitating a tight connection between her and Liliana, now one of her closest friends who she met at that first meeting in 2006. Liliana remembers her first lonely months of college. “When I came here, I was by myself. ... I had a couple of friends, and I told them I was undocumented, but it was really hard to relate to them, they were interested but they didn’t care about it in the same way I do. That I have to. At that time, I knew no one that was in my shoes” (Liliana).

Liliana met Roberto by chance, and when she learned he was undocumented, she was surprised he was so open about his status. For Roberto, being open was a natural choice:

I went to a very small high school, there were lots of committed teachers, and I felt I had to be open with them about my status. I wanted to go to college, I wanted to go to college, and I knew I wasn’t gonna be able to do it on my own. So the only choice was that I had to tell people. And then once you start to tell people, you realize that there is no shame in it, and then it gets easier and easier to share that. So when I came to [this university], it was the same thing. Not as easy, but whenever I could, I would be honest about who I am and take the opportunity to educate people.

(Roberto)

Roberto was the first undocumented student Liliana had met, and she was surprised he knew others. “I started talking with him and we were saying ‘we should form a support group’ ... At that point, it was just the two of us. I had no idea who else there was, how we were going to do

it, And at that point, I didn't want people to know about my situation yet. I don't want to be that open. I wasn't able to open up just like that" (Liliana).

Rodrigo introduced Liliana to Marco, one of the other undocumented students he knew. Marco had arrived at college, a community college transfer students from another part of the state. He knew nobody, did not have a place to live, and planned to work construction to pay his tuition. Marco tells a poignant story about his arrival to this university, that though extreme, typifies the uncertainty and ingenuity that marks the experience of these undocumented students:

I got emails from the online University directory. I searched all the Latino last names, like Gonzalez, Garcia, all the Latino last names I could find. So then I did an email – so I put 'dear, whatever. I got admitted to [this university] for the next semester but I don't have a place to stay. I don't have money to pay for it, but I'm willing to work to compensate for the spot. I'm willing to clean your car, take care of all the household stuff that needs to be done, as long as I have – it doesn't need to be a room, it could be your living room, your garage, even your back yard - as long as I know I have a place to stay'. So I put my email, and asked, 'if you have any questions or anything, you can please contact me'. I thought that since all of them were Latino last names, that somehow maybe they could relate to the issue. I explained a little bit – 'due to my immigration status, I'm not able to get financial aid, so I'm not able to pay for housing'. (Marco)

Marco knew it was a long shot, but could not find any other way to fulfill his dream of attending the university. His mother pleaded with him to attend a local university instead, worried that her son would have to live on the streets in order to get a college degree. Marco sent the email, and the responses came in pretty quickly.

I got mixed responses. Some were like, 'well, if you can't even pay for that, how are you gonna pay for university'. Some people said, 'are you even allowed to attend?'. But then some other responses were like, well-intentioned like 'just come over here and I'll give you a job'. And then I wrote back and said, 'you can give me a job as long as you give me cash'. And then they would be like, 'oh, no, it's gotta come through the university'. And I would

say, ‘no, it’s because of this this and this’. You know? Some didn’t understand the issue so well. ... But, luckily the email got forwarded, and forwarded. And a student from San Diego, he got it forwarded, and he called me like a week before school started, when I was about to come to [the university]. And he was like ‘oh, you know, you can stay in my living room, that’s alright with me.’ So that’s what I did for the first two months. Luckily it worked out (Marco).

As the intertwined stories of these six students demonstrate, the coming together of UPSRG was a transformative moment in their own lives, and as I will go on to describe, went on to transform the political terrain of the state. UPSRG started with 6 students and during the 4 years since its inception has at times swelled to 25 and at other times shrunk back to 10. The group was, at its inception, envisioned as a mechanism to bring undocumented students together, to offer support, and to facilitate connections. The question of if it was only that, is the subject of some debate among UPSRG members, and will be explored at length in the subsequent sections which look at the nexus of support and activism.

### **UPSRG in the statewide context & The Dream Act campaign**

In December 2005, a bill was introduced in the US House of Representatives that sought to rewrite the nation’s immigration laws. The Sensenbrenner Bill, House Resolution 4437 (HR4437), included provisions to make it a felony to live in the United States without documentation and promised to prosecute anyone who assisted undocumented people with up to 5 years in prison, including members of the clergy. The bill also sought to allocate funds for the construction of a massive fence at points along the Southwest border with the highest number of immigrant deaths, and to bar asylum-seekers and refugees convicted of minor criminal offenses from ever being granted citizenship. The Sensenbrenner Bill passed through the House of Representatives amid a broader debate about the passing a comprehensive immigration reform bill. A more thorough description of HR4437 was provided in Chapter 1, though because the HR4437 context helped create the conditions for the birth of UPSRG, it is important to briefly discuss this context.

It is important to give a sense of the broader political climate within which such a piece of legislation can arise. There are two key features of this political moment I contend helped create the conditions for the emergence of such a harsh and criminalizing piece of legislation, and the subsequent grassroots response. The first is a generalized revitalization of right-wing politics, and the identification of immigration as a particular front of struggle for right-wing

forces. 9/11 prompted significant reorganization and reprioritization at the federal level, and one of the most significant changes that occurred in this period was the restructuring of immigration enforcement in the newly created Department of Homeland Security. This was significant not only because this reorganization changed protocols in dealing with immigrant detention and expediting deportations, but also because it also had a larger political significance in the identification of immigration as a security issue.

In the aftermath of Sept 11, the restrictionist camp found that their messaging about ‘illegality’ and ‘criminality’ of undocumented immigrants took on a new resonance. ...Undocumented immigrants now represented a threat to the ‘rule of law’ inside a nation that had just come under foreign attack by foreign outlaws. Their new language about immigration policy started popping up everywhere, from the pronouncements of immigrant-rights groups to the Democratic Party platform. Instead of promising an ‘earned path to citizenship’ as it had in the past, the party stated that undocumented immigrants will be required to ‘get right with the law’ (Barry 30-31).

Though casting undocumented immigrants as criminals in this period was not a new tactic among anti-immigrant forces, the legislation of this criminality was certainly given a boost in the post 9/11 period.

The second important feature of this climate is Congressional inaction on passing comprehensive immigration reform legislation. 2006 marked 20 years since IRCA’s passage, which for all intensive purposes, is the last comprehensive immigration bill passed in the United States Congress. It also marked 10 years since the passage of IIRIRA, a smaller-scale piece of legislation that passed in 1996. In the space of these 20 long years, a generation of undocumented children have migrated and grown up in this country, occupying a nebulous and contentious space in the American political, social, economic, and racial order. Many scholars have noted that in the absence of comprehensive immigration reform at the federal level, local governments have taken it upon themselves to pass immigration-related legislation at the local level (Davis 2001). The majority of these policies were pushed by political conservatives who believed Congressional inaction encouraged more unauthorized immigration; they therefore sought to discourage unauthorized immigration through repressive legislation at the local-level. The San Diego Union-Tribune followed the public debate surrounding the Southern California city of Escondido, which passed a law forbidding landlords to rent apartments to undocumented

immigrants (8/13/2006). Though far fewer, there were also some politically progressive measures that took place on the local level, such as the public reaffirmation by the city of San Francisco of a 20-year old ordinance that designated it a “sanctuary city”, meaning that the city would not direct municipal funds or employees to immigration enforcement and that police officers and city employees could not inquire about immigration status while serving the public (City of San Francisco Executive Directive March 2007). This both worried and angered anti-immigrant congressional forces who feared that the absence of action on a federal level would encourage more lenient policies at the local level. It was in this context that House Resolution 4437 was passed through the United States House of Representatives, and it was in this context that massive protests erupted around the nation.

The HR4437 protests do not figure prominently when founding members tell the story of USPRG’s organizational beginnings. However, data collected from conversations with undocumented youth activists both in USPRG and around the state of California demonstrates that these protests were as a politically significant moment in the consciousness and activism of this generation of Latino youth activists. Similarly to how Ruben Salazar’s killing at the Chicano Moratorium in 1970 was a defining moment for that generation of Chicano activists, so are the mass mobilizations against HR4437 a defining moment for this generation. Juan, who was 15 at the time, shares:

Participating in that all made me think you know, I think it was when I start thinking about all the different laws that they have tried to pass out about immigrants they feel threatened. ... The U.S is supposed to be a white country. To have all Mexicans it’s kind of a threat to them. If they do legalize us there is a bigger change of us getting more education and more power and then could eventually kind of control the government. They are just scared that we might get smart and stop taking all the bullshit (Juan).

Yadira, who was 18 at the time of the protests, remembers the HR4437 protests as opening the space for her to share her status with other people. Her status was something she had previously kept closely guarded, but the immigrants rights mobilizations encouraged her to be more open.

Just being able to march together as a group down Mission Street was really great ...It was nice to be able to march with people who aren’t directly affected but support you. You as an immigrant

being able to express your thoughts and not be afraid of the consequences. That was nice. I remember people with their pots and pans. It was nice – it felt like a community. I felt really safe. I thought - here I have a group of people who support me and who wouldn't let something... who wouldn't leave me behind. It was a nice sense of group leadership and community. It's good. It's important for people to speak out so that you can put a face to the problem and hear peoples' stories. I did an interview with some... radio program. I just told my story and why I was there and it was a sense of empowerment, being able to say like 'here I am' (Yadira).

Yadira went to work the day after the May 1st protests – a nanny job with a family she had worked for for the previous 2 years - and suddenly had the courage to tell her employer about her status. She felt that she had been a part of something life-changing, it was not an experience she could keep from them.

Most of the founding members of UPSRG participated in these mobilizations - some as high school students with their friends, some with their families at their parents' urging, and some as budding college-student activists – and most remember them as a moment of the recognition both of their incredible vulnerability as undocumented immigrants and also of the power of collective action. They were fearful of the legislative backlash against undocumented immigrants, yet also emboldened to fight for change once they had seen the power their community held. The initial conversations that ultimately resulted in 6 undocumented students coming together to found the organization began in the months following the Spring 2006 mobilizations.

During this same period of time, a non-profit organization that advocates for immigrant rights began to develop the idea to found a statewide coalition to connect undocumented student groups around the state. This corresponded to the time in which, largely as a result of the passage of AB540, their founding members had gone off to college, and began forming groups at their respective colleges, community colleges and universities. The organization wanted to create a mechanism for these students to be in touch with one another, and also to engage in collective campaign work to help pass the Federal DREAM Act. Though I will not discuss the DREAM Act campaign in depth in this chapter because it is the central focus of the next chapter, it is important to note that UPSRG was one of the groups in the coalition most active in the campaign. The group was compelled to work on the campaign, and it remained a consistently large part of the organization's work through the year I conducted research, despite the fact that



there was some ambivalence about the choice. UPSRG's DREAM Act activities over the course of the year included participating in the coordination of a statewide hunger strike, legislative visits both locally and at the state capital, local and statewide actions, protests, and press conferences, teach-ins and consciousness-raising media work, and participation in a letter-writing campaign. The campaign work was varied and diverse, employed a range of tactics, and was a central focus in the lives of UPSRG's leaders.

UPSRG is one of many organizations located on high school and college campuses around California, comprised of undocumented youth. Nearly every single one of these groups started out as a "support group" – intended to offer a safe space for undocumented young people to connect with each other, offer mutual support and advice, and build relationships – and at some point in their evolution (some nearly immediately and others after a period of time) widened their scope of work to engage in community work to address the issue of educational justice for undocumented students. Thus, UPSRG's story is unique in what it can teach us about political identity, consciousness, and engagement in activism, though it is also emblematic of a growing type of organization of undocumented young people around the state, which proliferated in the period following the HR4437 mobilizations.

### **The “Withering” of Civil Society?**

There are multiple ways one can enter into the conversation about collective action and collective political identity formation of undocumented immigrant youth. Many theorists approach this from the standpoint of assimilation and immigrant integration, posing questions about how to understand and theorize the civic engagement of immigrant youth and tie this to the question of the formation of racial and national identity (Galston 2001). Social movement theory largely focuses on how and why people join together to take collective action (McAdam 1999). My inquiry into this question is less concerned with the how and why mechanics of group formation and what that says about how much immigrants see themselves as “American” or not. I am interested in how these kinds of social formations among Latino immigrant youth represent a promising model of political engagement that bridges the historical divide between service provision / support and activism, as well as how the formation of group identity can inspire political engagement and, in some cases, challenge the authority of the racial state and the exclusive institution of citizenship. An analysis of civil society is a helpful frame for this inquiry.

In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature concerned with the decline of civil society. In his bestselling book Bowling Alone (2000), Robert Putnam popularized the term “social capital” to a non-academic audience, defining it as “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (19).

Putnam argues that “American history ... is a story of ups and down in civic engagement” (2000: 25) and regards the previous period as one of steady decline. Putnam’s central observation is:

For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago – silently, without warning – that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third century (2000: 27).

Putnam’s sees his work as a call to action for the return to mutual support, mutual aid, and community-building. What is at its core, though, is the observation that, though it may be part of a larger trend that ebbs and flows, that we are living in a period of decline of the institutions of civil society.

Putnam is not the only one to make this claim. Michael Hardt argues that even if there is a consensus that civil society is desirable, the changing nature of social relations and democratic functions steadily undermine the possibility of a vibrant civic society. Hardt argues:

When we look at the contemporary societies of Western Europe and North America, it seems that these various, rich, promising, and frightening theoretical visions of civil society, both in the Hegelian version and in the Gramscian and Foucauldian reformulations, no longer hold—they no longer grasp the dominant mechanisms or schema of social production and social ordering. The decline of the paradigm of civil society correlates to a passage in contemporary society toward a new configuration of social relations and new conditions of rule. This is not to say that the forms and structures of social exchange, participation, and domination that were identified by the concept of civil society have ceased entirely to exist, but rather that they have been displaced from the dominant position by a new configuration of apparatuses, deployments, and structures (1995: 34).

Hardt concludes that the society we live in is better described as a “post civil society”.

Though I agree that any analysis of civil society must take into account the changing nature of the state and the economy, I contend that both Putnam and Hardt have overly-generalized their assessments. The mass mobilizations that erupted when House Resolution 4437 was introduced captivated and surprised the country – progressive and right-wing forces alike. The sheer scale of these demonstrations, as well as their composition, signified to many the power that the immigrant Latino community holds when harnessed. In recent years, as researchers have tried to theorize how and why this happened, one of the dominant themes that has arisen has been the extensive and developed networks of Latino immigrants, not political in nature, that were sites of mobilization for the HR4437 protests (Lazos-Vargas 2007, Flores 2006). Stated differently, to say that the Latino immigrant community is politically unorganized does not capture the full complexity of the political state of the community. More precisely, the Latino immigrant community is organized, though not in political organizations. This diverse community has an extensive and diffuse network of mutual support, mutual aid, social, religious, and support organizations and institutions that were able to be mobilized in a moment of crisis, around a singular cause (albeit with different messages and surely, different visions for change). The HR4437 mobilizations were certainly spontaneous in nature, and far outstripped any kind of progressive institutional infrastructure that existed at the time, yet they were also possible, in part, as a result of these deeply developed networks. Thus, while there is a growing consensus in many popular and academic circles about the decline of civil society, Latino immigrant political mobilization stands as a contrast. Latino immigrants, many of whom are undocumented, come together for survival, and in the process, connections are formed and institutions of civil society are built, with surprising and politically significant results.

It is critical to note that this is not a new development in immigrant communities. For many years, immigrants have come together in both formal and informal associations, to provide support, pool resources and build strength in community. Built on the principle that being in community with other people who share similar struggles builds the capacity of all, “mutual aid” associations have long-been institutions within immigrant communities. Political associations and grassroots activism in immigrant communities are also not new (Pardo 1998), though there are often active tensions between non-political and political immigrant associations.

For the most part, immigrant mutual aid societies and grassroots organizations have been the domain of adults. In recent years, however, immigrant youth have begun to forge organizations and institutions on the basis of a shared identity as immigrant youth, and these organizations are bridging the historic disconnect between support and activism. UPSRG is emblematic of these emerging institutions, both building on this long tradition of mutual aid and political activism in a synergistic way that unifies the two rather than separates them. This unity, however, has been a carefully negotiated one, and has not always been embraced as a

complementary unity. Similar to the previous chapter's argument that the tension between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic can be generative of oppositional consciousness rather than simply regarding it as contradictory consciousness, my research demonstrates that the active tension between support and activism has yielded politically-significant results.

Any analysis of civil society, must also follow Gramsci's lead and conceptualize civil society as intimately connected to the state. Gramsci (1995) characterizes the particular nature of the state under advanced capitalism, in contrast to the role the state played in less economically advanced societies:

In Russia, the state was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled, a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks: more or less numerous from one state to another...this precisely necessitated an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country (1995: 237-238).

Gramsci's interjection is a critical one, in that he characterizes the advanced capitalist state as operating through a tenuous combination of coercion and consent. The state functions not just as "armed bodies of men with prisons" as Lenin described (1943), but rather through the institutions of civil society that essentially function as an expanded state (Burawoy 2002).

This analytical interjection brings us to a critical theoretical and practical conclusion. If the state and civil society are integrally intertwined under post-industrial advanced capitalism in a way that positions civil society as an integral part of the hegemonic leadership of the state, we come to conceptualize civil society as an agent of rule and repression. This is based on an understanding that this rule and repression does not rest on force alone, but operates through a delicate balance of coercion and consent. However, if the exercise of hegemony rests on civil society, then we must also see it as a site of possible resistance and challenge to the state. I believe that an analysis of UPSRG's work allows us to take a critical look at this question. In this moment of post-industrial capitalist development, the economy is changing, and therefore so is the state, and therefore, so is civil society. Thus, we are no longer talking about the factory councils of Gramsci's times, or even the unions of a few years ago. Immigrant youth are changing the face of civil society, formulating new kinds of institutions and models, including mutual support organizations that utilize activism and have the power to challenge the repression of the state.

Organizations like UPSRG push us to think about the power of civil society in a new and promising way. Despite the prevalence in contemporary discourse about the decline of

institutions of civil society and community, this decline is not manifesting in the Latino undocumented immigrant community of my study. For people in desperate situations, reliance on others is a critical component of survival, and this forging of community can lead to the development of civil society networks and institutions which can yield politically significant outcomes. I also argue that having an understanding of the power of civil society is critical for social movement theorists and all people concerned about social change because as Gramsci reminds us, the power of the state under advanced capitalism also rests in civil society. In this assertion, we can also argue that the ability then to challenge the power of the state also rests in the institutions of civil society. UPSRG serves as a case study of this unique type of civil society institution that is attempting to challenge the repressive power of the state through surprising strategies and tactics. Connected to the central argument of this chapter, UPSRG's emergence is both a consequence of the insider-outsiderness that is particularly acute as undocumented young people make the transition from high school to college, but is also an example of these kinds of organizations, which are fast becoming a political force in the state, challenging dominant notions of who undocumented immigrants are and what political activism looks like.

### **“Supportive Activism”**

In the previous section, I briefly discussed the activist work UPSRG was engaged in, and in the following chapter, I will analyze the campaign to pass the DREAM Act, and the role of UPSRG in that fight. However, to get a full sense of the way that the support-activism tension played out during the course of the year I was conducting research, it is important to first examine what the “support” looks like within this community of students, and how this has active practice of providing support has given rise to not only engagement in activism but also the development of a collective political identity. Most of UPSRG's support mechanisms are informal in nature, though there are also instances of formalized support. Informal support often takes the form of sharing material resources, something I frequently witnessed during the school-year I spent following UPSRG. When a student could not cover rent and was forced out of her apartment, a group member offered a couch for her to stay on, for as long as she needed. Marco describes a general practice of keeping tabs on who “needed money the most” and how fellow UPSRG members would make sure to invite those people over for dinner every night. Lilitiana offers emotional support, taking it upon herself to call and check in with the new students each semester to make sure all is going well, to see if they have any questions, or need any help. Students regularly circulate employment opportunities and internships that don't require a social security card, and pass on helpful resources they find like scholarship lists and legal support services. Formal support mechanisms include group-sponsored “scholarship nights” in which one student gathers scholarship applications with upcoming deadlines, and organizes students to

meet at a certain place and time to work on the applications together, offer support and suggestions, and to proofread each other's applications.

Though UPSRG's support systems were largely informal, other similar student groups at other campuses have more formalized structures that UPSRG hopes to integrate into their work as well. One affiliated allied organization keeps an up-to-date contact sheet of all group members' parent numbers and addresses, in case a student is detained by ICE, so that his/her friends can be in immediate touch with his/her family. This same organization asks members who can apply for financial aid (because they have permanent residency or citizen status) to consider "tithing" a portion of their financial aid check to help offset living expenses for another student. While social, personal, emotional, and academic support is important to all college-students, it is particularly important for undocumented students because of the inordinate amount of barriers they face and the lack of resources they can access. My research demonstrates that along with the concrete material support, being a part of a collective community with other undocumented students is in itself profoundly formative, both personally and academically. Miguel, an undocumented community college student, attributes his decision to stay in school with being a part of an organization like UPSRG, called *Estudiantes Luchando*:

I'm not going to say that I'm proud, but I'm not going to say that I feel bad for it, because it's gotten me here. When I was in high school I started selling certain things, certain substances... I sold Vicodin, and it was quite lucrative for me. Pretty much for six years of being in school – first high school and then community college - that's what maintained me. It's really strange because I know other people who did the same things I have done, only they didn't go to college they just continue down that road. I still know a couple of them. And, really I'm not sure why it is that I decided to use my money to go to college, and not just use my money to buy more stuff to sell more because that would have been easy. As soon as you make your, say, your \$200 it becomes easy. It really does. The idea of taking that money and buying a bunch of books, it's hard to do that. And you know, the only reason I felt like I had to be back at school next semester, the only thing pulling me back, was that I had *Estudiantes Luchando*. I had a responsibility to them, those guys, and you know, I knew that I had to be back in school. No matter how much I wanted to take that money and, man, just run, I knew I needed to go back. (laughing) So I did.

Even though I thought about it every semester – running, I mean (Miguel).

What is particularly notable about the support these students share is that it is anti-competitive despite being in an ultra-competitive university environment in which it is common for students with far more resources to be reluctant to share any. The fact that these students have very few material resources to give in the first place, makes it even more striking that they are so generous with one other. A student who gives a portion of her paycheck to help cover the rent for a struggling friend does not have a savings account or disposable income. She is also low-income and struggling, yet she also feels a sense of responsibility to help. In this sense, UPSRG's support work is more than just about being friends, or providing services – it is about forging a new way of being in community with one another. These students are simultaneously learning how to compete and succeed while seeking to nurture a different model of being in the world, one more embedded in relationships of reciprocity, redistribution, and interconnection. This reconfiguration, reconsideration, and recreation of social relationships, within the context of capitalist social relations and the competitive university environment, also comes to be a part of the group's vision of social justice.

During the year I conducted extended ethnographic research with UPSRG and was integrally connected to the group's work, the pull between support and activism - and which should be the principle focus of the group - was a key tension. Some UPSRG members wanted the group to focus inwards on supporting its members, and others felt like the group needed to focus outward on passing the DREAM Act. This tension played out in different ways, which will be explored more thoroughly in the analysis that follows, but there were two things that were particularly notable to me about the way that this tension played out. First, people were not clearly on one side or the other. Though each position definitely had its strongest advocates, these advocates frequently spoke to the importance of the other kind of work, and at times had a high level of participation in the other kind of work. Elizabeth attributed her waning participation in UPSRG to the fact that the organization was moving too far towards activism and not focusing enough on support and networking. At the same time, she was an active participant in nearly every DREAM Act event the group sponsored. Roberto, on the other end of the spectrum, is known and looked to by undocumented young people around the state as a radical activist. Despite his commitment to activist work, and his consistent push for UPSRG to be more political, he frequently advocated for a return to “how the group started” and encouraged the integration of support mechanisms and even a “support committee”. In essence, the tension between support work and activist work that played out on a group level was a reflection of a tension that many of the students wrestled with individually. In the new university

environment, their “outsiderness” compels them to connect with other students like them and their “insiderness” compels them to use their privilege in a way that supports and helps other undocumented students.

Second, the tension between support/service and activism is a tension that has historically played out in social justice movements and organizations in a very polarizing way. What is particularly noteworthy about the way this tension played out within UPSRG during the 2006-2007 school year was that the working out of this tension actually strengthened the group rather than weakened it, a surprising and rare outcome.

Though the tension between support and activism was nearly always present in some form, at times it was urgent and explosive and at other times simmered just below the surface. Though this tension flared up at different times, it seems to have been present even in the founding of the organization. Adriana shares:

When they called the first meeting, I think some people thought of it really as a support group. But I had a different vision. I was like, no this is not a club where we are gonna watch a movie about immigration. Cause that was one of the disagreements, you know, like what are we gonna do at this meeting? And some people were like, ‘we should have pizza and watch a movie’. And I was like, yeah, that’s not gonna happen’ (Adriana).

While Adriana describes the push and pull between the two as having always existed in the organization, other UPSRG members see activism as an outgrowth of the group’s support focus. Marco shares:

It really came out of knowing that we were all facing similar hardships, that they had to deal with a lot trying to survive, trying to get an education. And hearing about friends who had to steal food in order to stay in college because they couldn’t buy food because they had to pay for their books – they had to choose between their books and food. That was kind of an incentive to feel like we should form a support group. First, to make sure that everyone has a roof on their back, if they need housing, you know. ‘You can stay in my place for as long as you want’ that kind of thing. If they need food, in the group, when we started getting to know each other, we talked some about who needed money the



most, but we tried to be discreet about it. So, we would cook, and invite them over for dinner every night. So we kind of made sure that we were watching each others' backs. And at a certain point, it became clear, okay, we're trying to help undocumented students [here at this university], but how can we make a bigger impact to make sure that undocumented students have their needs met, in the larger sense. You know, beyond just here in this setting. We started to think about nationally, how we mobilize something to happen. (Marco)

In the early Fall, when the DREAM Act campaign was at an all-time high because it was slated to be voted on in the Senate in the coming weeks, UPSRG held its first meeting of the school year. Senior members of the group described how the group was started and what the group was for, a story which highlights their shared experience of needing support for undocumented students at Berkeley. Yet, the entirety of the meeting focused on legislative updates on the DREAM Act, recruiting people to attend a regional summit with other DREAM Act advocates, and making plans for a DREAM Act rally in their city. When the numbers at the second and third meetings of the school year waned, Elizabeth plainly shared her assessment, "People aren't coming because all we are talking about is the DREAM Act. I mean, I'm not saying it's not important, but we have to get back to what this group is about also, supporting us as undocumented students" (Elizabeth).

At the start of the second semester, UPSRG scheduled a midyear retreat to regroup, plan, and revisit the mission statement, vision statement, and structure of the organization. These conversations illustrated both how central the debate between support and activism was, but also demonstrated that nearly all the group members felt that the organization needed to "return to how it started" and actively provide support to undocumented students who came to the group looking for that support. At the retreat, UPSRG designed and adopted a new committee structure which included a "support committee" and an "academic committee" which, perhaps not surprisingly, all of the newer members joined. As a researcher, I wondered how much of this regrouping, redesigning, and return to support had to do with the fact that the DREAM Act has failed to pass in the Senate at the conclusion of the previous semester and this was UPSRG's first opportunity to redefine what that meant for the organization. However, at the first meeting of the Spring semester, the DREAM Act was back on the agenda, as present as it had been before. Legislative visits were planned, conference calls with statewide allies were scheduled, and a local action was envisioned.

I argue that the presence of this tension actually strengthened the group rather than weakened it. This is a surprising result, both because tensions often impede group work rather than encourage it, and also because this is a historic tension that has existed in progressive efforts. I argue there are two key ways this has happened. First, struggling between support and activist allowed for a wider base of people to be recruited to the organization. The active tension meant that both support work and activist work stayed on the table, even if in a slightly antagonistic way. One never superseded the other for a long period of time, which resulted in the recruitment of new members who were looking to be involved in one of those things, and in some cases, just tolerated the other. What happened as this played out, especially because there were not clear sides and because of the strength of the personal relationships, is that people gained an appreciation for the importance of the other and a tenuous, but mostly harmonious, balance that was formed.

Secondly, the tension between support and activism strengthened the group as a political force, which also led to an overall strengthening of the group. By engaging in the support elements, they were able to bring new people into the political work, and also politicize these support elements by bringing them in close relation to the political work. In essence, the posing of the question of why it is that undocumented students are pushed out, pushed aside, and left to fend for themselves leads to a clearly political answer. This led to an overall strengthening of the group as a political force because it got more people invested in working on the DREAM Act, and also garnered statewide recognition for the group. This statewide recognition increased members' investment in the organization because they wanted to be a part of something that was seen as significant, successful, and important. My observation from a year of in-depth fieldwork is that UPSRG's move to political work was almost like a tide that could not be held back – it was an inevitable growth for the organization, by virtue of who these students are, by the way they think about their own futures in this society and centrally, by the ways that insider-outsiderness shapes these processes. The process of politicization among these undocumented students is inherently social – it cannot happen in isolation and hinges on the simultaneous process of their peers, who they are bound to as a result of being in a hostile environment that they need to navigate in order to successfully survive. Their activism is a natural outgrowth of that trend, and despite reticence, hesitancy, or even outright disagreement, the growth of the organization and the individuals who make it, is fundamentally headed in an outward rather than inward direction.

### **The Unlikely Activist**

*How undocumented students complicate the college student-activist connection*

It would be easy to dismiss the politicization of undocumented college students as typical college-student activism, which is neither noteworthy nor uncommon. However, the development of a political identity among undocumented students and their engagement in activism, I argue, is much more complex than that picture might suggest. History has demonstrated the significant role that college students have played in the building of social movements and the winning of concrete gains. Students for a Democratic Society and The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee are two well-known historical examples, and more contemporary examples include the divestment campaign to protest apartheid in South African in the 1980s and the national student movement to stop sweatshop exploitation in the 1990s. The propensity of college students to get engaged in social movement or activist work is generally characterized as a temporary idealistic experimentation that is a fleeting moment in their professional lives that they are simultaneously preparing for. This is attributed to various factors, including that they do not have significant financial responsibilities (no children), have financial flexibility (the assumption is that they receive aid from school and from their families), and have freedom from “adult responsibilities” in this period before they formally enter the workforce and start to build their careers. This is coupled with the generally open environment universities are attributed with in relation to diverse and unconventional thinking and the low-risk associated with student activism, which in more extreme cases involves campus-level disciplinary action, but rarely formal legal action.

Undocumented students complicate and problematize this on a number of levels; their political consciousness and engagement in activism cannot simply be characterized to typical college student activism. Undocumented students have significant financial responsibilities; they not only have to gather the resources to support themselves through school, the vast majority of students in this study contribute financially to their families as well. Further, they manage these significant financial responsibilities without being able to legally work in this country. Most undocumented students cannot remember a time that they were free of adult responsibilities. For some of them, this intersects directly with their status, and involves the managing of that fear and logistical difficulty since a young age. Nearly all of them take on what are traditionally parental responsibilities because their parents lack the language capacity and social capital to navigate these situations on their own. Immigrant children serve as translators, ambassadors, negotiators, and emissaries for their parents, navigating complicated interactions and relationships with ICE agents, city employees, medical professionals, and teachers (Orellana 2001, Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Freedom from “adult responsibilities” is not afforded to those young people who are required to act as a bridge between their parents and mainstream U.S. society starting at a young age. College offers little respite for these students before they launch into their professional lives because their degrees are essentially meaningless – a degree even from a top university does not

assure any kind of security when one cannot work legally. For undocumented students, the college years are stressful as they truly transition from being undocumented students to being undocumented workers, a transition that brings tremendous challenges. Lastly, the risks of involvement for undocumented students are great. Legal action, deportation, and putting their families at risk of exposure are all calculations that undocumented students must face when considering engaging in civil disobedience or confrontational actions.

*Three student portraits of unlikely activists: Adriana, Elizabeth, & Liliana*

One of the central arguments of this chapter is that engaging in non-political work with other undocumented students out of necessity, often encourages activism among undocumented students, even those who are fearful and reticent to engage in political work. To illustrate this phenomenon, I will tell the stories of 3 undocumented young women, who fell into activist work, among many different circumstances and as a result of very different circumstances. What unites their stories is that they are all “unlikely activists” – people who came to activist work despite significant deterrents, and in some ways, in spite of themselves. The different yet unified stories of these three young women speak to the ways that connections with other undocumented young people in a non-political sphere propel students into activist work. Though what follows are the stories of three individuals, I use these three people to tell a much larger story that resonates throughout the stories of the dozens of undocumented young people I interviewed during the nearly two years I conducted this research. Their stories are personal and unique, yet there are reverberations of these same stories throughout the life stories of nearly every undocumented youth activist I spoke with.

*Adriana: Personal Crisis Leading to Political Awakening*

Adriana immigrated to Los Angeles with her family when she was 6. As a resident in an urban center that has a history of social movement activity, she was exposed to activism before she actually got involved in it. For Adriana, not getting involved in political work was a conscious choice.

When I was in high school I wasn't really politicized then – that's when Prop 21<sup>30</sup> was happening. I think that was my junior year.

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<sup>30</sup> Proposition 21 was a voter-approved proposition in California that sought to restructure the juvenile justice system in a way that increased harsh penalties for young people convicted of crimes and had particularly harsh penalties for young people deemed to be gang-affiliated. The campaign to defeat Proposition 21 was a major

And I was in AP classes, I was a college bound student, so I cared more about getting good grades and doing well in my cross country and track than being political active...I was like...I don't wanna get involved in that stuff. (Adriana)

Adriana was a driven student, on the honor roll, enrolled in college-prep classes. Growing up in a low-income, high crime area of Los Angeles where nearly all of her peers were entrenched in gang violence, substance abuse, and unplanned parenthood, Adriana had learned to block out the distractions. It was hard for Adriana to not see activism in that way – a distraction. She had dozens of examples around her of what could happen if she lost focus, so she buckled down and tuned out everything else other than school and sports, which she also attributed to helping her remain academically focused.

Were Adriana's story to be told as a human interest story on the nightly news, it would surely end with her being rewarded for her hard work, her focus, and her determination. She would leave the ghetto, as a result of her personal initiative, and excel in college. But because Adriana is undocumented, her hard work and determination did not culminate in numerous scholarships and a triumphant matriculation into a top university. Instead, the schism between what she had been working towards and what was actually possible became painfully apparent as she entered the final years of high school.

It wasn't really till I graduated that you know, I was really faced with the situation that I wanted to go to college like the rest of my peers, cuz I was college-bound since like the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. That's what I was gonna do, that's what everybody talked about. But it was hard because ...at the time, AB540 hadn't passed. So for me, it was gonna be even harder. I was gonna have to pay out-of-state tuition fees. No financial aid. Nothing. (Adriana)

Adriana was awarded a small scholarship from a private agency, and met a newspaper reporter at the awards ceremony who took an interest in her story. The reporter came to the 2-bedroom apartment Adriana shared with her parents and 4 siblings. The visit resulted in a half-page article in a major newspaper on Adriana's plight – having incredible promise but no means to

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rallying point for young people in the state, and caused statewide protests and actions that galvanized many young people who had no prior experience in political activism.

attend university because of her immigration status. Adriana had no idea that that article would change her life. Ultimately, she didn't seek out the movement for educational justice for undocumented students – the movement came to her.

When the story was published, a local non-profit working on immigration reform issues, and who had been lobbying for the passage of AB540 contacted Adriana through the reporter. The organization was planning a lobbying trip in Washington DC, to pressure legislatures to pass AB540. They invited Adriana to attend. She had no political experience, nor any particular desire to get engaged politically. But she had graduated, had no job, no ability to attend university, and no prospects for how any of that would change. So she went.

That trip was profoundly transformational for Adriana. “For the first time, you know, I saw these 13- and 14 year-olds having an opinion, and voicing it. Being very conscious of their surroundings. I was very inspired by all that” (Adriana). When she returned home, she joined the youth project of the advocacy organization that had sponsored the trip, and found community for the first time with other undocumented students. She had to defer her university admission because she did not have the money to pay for school, and instead threw herself into volunteering full-time for the campaign to pass AB540. “It was like they had another full-time organizer. I wasn't getting paid, it was volunteer, but I was working full-time. Because when I get really involved in something, that's what my life becomes” (Adriana). For Adriana, this transformative moment did not just rest on the fact that her personal struggle to access college propelled her into activist work, it also rested on the precise moment in which this all unfolded. Adriana graduated high school in May 2001, threw herself into the AB540 campaign work that summer and fall, and in October 2001, the campaign had a major success – AB540 passed. Thus, not only did her personal struggles compel her to get involved in the campaign work, a huge victory within that work resulted in cementing her belief in the power of collective action, and also gave her a sincere hope that things can change, because in fact, they already had. In reflecting on this moment in her life, Adriana regards it as the moment she knew that activism would always be a part of her life's work, that she has a responsibility to engage in creating change at the grassroots level.

I just felt really good that there were all these students that were my age...feeling empowered that we actually knew something about the world and that we were actually putting it in to practice. Because we're dealing with a lot of real issues, something that is actually impacting somebody. So all the work that we put in was not for a grade, was not for somebody to tell us that we're doing a good job. You're doing it because you know, it's work that can

affect people, it's a social justice issue. So that is a lot more important. (Adriana).

Adriana's entry into activism illustrates the ways in which personal challenges can lead to building community with others, and how "investment" or "consciousness" does not need to precede engagement, but rather how engagement can come accidentally based on circumstances. In Adriana's case, this led to a deeper process of consciousness transformation and a deep commitment to social justice issues. Adriana is a young woman who was not looking to become politically engaged. In fact, she had passed up the opportunity to do so earlier in life. Yet when certain circumstances aligned themselves, she fell into activism, a choice she had no idea at that moment that would profoundly shape the way that she sees herself, the society she lives in, and the potential for meaningful social change.

*Elizabeth: The Personal Doesn't Have to Be Political*

Elizabeth's activist path was different from Adriana's very public acknowledgement of her status – with friends, at school, even to reporters. Elizabeth shares,

I was taught to not talk about it at all. That's how I grew up. I know some people who are really open about it, even now. The first person I ever told was my best friend our senior year in high school. And that's only because we were going to be roommates in college and I felt like she had to know. But we had been best friends for like 6 years at that point (Elizabeth).

In part because of how guarded she had been with her status, when Elizabeth arrived at campus as a new student, she was unsure about how to access support. She found an older Latina staff person who was familiar with AB540 student issues, and that staff person served as a mentor, resource, and support person to Elizabeth throughout her time as a student. In fact, it was this mentor's desire to connect Elizabeth with other AB540 students who had also sought her out on that basis, that was one of the strands that led to the founding of UPSRG, as was discussed in an earlier section of this chapter. So from the beginning, Elizabeth had a vision for UPSRG that was rooted in collective support. And when the group decided to move in a decidedly political direction, Elizabeth was not shy about voicing her disagreement.

I wasn't very active my first semester, just because I think I had a different idea of what I wanted UPSRG to be. I think I wanted it to

be less political and more a support group. More academic support – you know, let’s share information, networking, even personal support, you know, for students. But ... there were some students who had already come from that political background, and when they brought it up, I was like ‘no. I don’t think that’s what this group should be’. But I think the majority of them felt strongly about it – if you are undocumented you have to be involved, you should be, you should at least know what’s going on in the political arena of immigration. Which is fine, I guess, because it’s not my group, you know? (Elizabeth)

However, at the same time, Elizabeth has not only been involved in the activist work with UPSRG around the DREAM Act, she actually points to her involvement in this work as being foundational to her in thinking about what she wants to do with her life. The particular moment that crystallized this for her was during a hunger strike the group sponsored. Elizabeth admits she was opposed to the idea at first:

And actually I ended up taking care of the people that were fasting, making sure they were drinking their liquids and everything. And I was like, okay, wow. I was like, actually the fast, I would say – I was undecided about applying to Medical School, but when I was just um, taking care of these students, I was like, wow – I love taking care of people, you know? Um, I think also its kind of the mother instinct because of my sisters. You know, I took care of them when they were little and I like taking care of people, it really ingrained in me that yes, I do want to apply to medical school. (Elizabeth)

Elizabeth was reluctant to get engaged in activism work, and had it been her call, UPSRG would have remained a completely support-based organization. Her reticence was rooted in both her own concerns about security, as well as, her own assessment of what the pressing needs of UPSRG students are and what the group’s role should be in addressing those needs. Elizabeth was compelled to get engaged in the hunger strike out of her personal relationships with the hunger strikers, and her concern for their well-being. It was for that reason that she assumed the role she did, and also the same reason that she cites for staying connected with UPSRG despite her continued misgivings about the activist nature of the organization.



But I don't know, I mean, they became my friends. So I started going to meetings again, and even though our agenda was political. My friend and I talk about this all the time – why do people have to bring politics into everything? Can't we just meet and be friends?! You know? (laughs) But anyways, we would meet at people's houses and it would just be very homely. Very homely. So that's when I just decided, you know, I like this group. And they've become my friends. And then there was the fast, and I think last summer and last semester was my most active time with UPSRG. And then this past winter/fall, I wasn't that active because of classes and stuff. (Elizabeth)

Thus, despite this reticence, Elizabeth not only got engaged in the activist work of UPSRG but also found herself meaningfully enriched by it.

*Liliana: "I Used To Be Scared to Leave the House, Now I'm Pounding Down Pelosi's Door"*

Liliana remembers the early years of her life in the United States being consumed by fear. Her parents were immobilized with fear about the possibility of ICE raids, and took the only precautions that they saw possible – keeping their children in doors as much as possible. Liliana remembers hearing from high school teachers and counselors about the importance of involvement in extracurricular activities for college applications, and being frustrated because her parents insisted that she come home right after school. “It didn't matter how important it was, it didn't matter how I explained it. They just saw it as too much of a risk” (Liliana). Growing up within this environment of fear, feeling scared that something catastrophic could happen at any moment through no fault of her own, profoundly shaped Liliana. She still describes herself as nervous, by nature, as a result of those years, and marvels at the risks her peers take that are unimaginable to her – including stating that one is undocumented to a television reporter or flying on an airplane. Liliana was among the founding group of students who began UPSRG, and though she was not opposed to activism on principle, the fear that had consumed her life for so many years was difficult to manage. “When I came here, I didn't have that idea. I wasn't thinking, ‘oh I can make a difference in politics because I'm here trying to cope and I have something to contribute’. At that time, I had no idea that people like me could actually make a difference on that scale” (Liliana).

Liliana recalls a particular moment when her desire to be involved in this newfound community came into direct conflict with the fear she had learned to live with. UPSRG was

debating if it should officially register with the university as a student group. Proponents of the idea argued that this would bring greater visibility, which was essential for new students to be able to connect to them.

But I was one of the only ones opposed to that. Because I was really concerned about the conservative forces on campus. I was worried that would give us too much exposure to the community and that it would open us up to get bashed on a personal level. That hasn't happened, thanks goodness. But they convinced me, because they are my friends, I trusted them. (Liliana)

Like Elizabeth, Liliana was convinced that it was a risk worth taking, mostly through the strength of her personal connections to other group members.

In many ways, Liliana sees UPSRG as a refuge – a place where she does not have to deal with the difficulties of navigating her status on a continual basis. Yet it is actually her participation in the group that forces her to do so.

But one of my main issues personally is to not...kind of... be exposed like that.... Somebody who is not very educated about the issues ...That's something I have trouble with, I don't want people to think that. It's really hard for me to counter peoples attacks. Sometimes I just don't want to deal with it because I've had to deal with it for so long. That's not why I came here. I don't want to deal with you being ignorant and addressing me this way so I don't even bother. (Liliana)

Though the fear she inherited from her parents was a deterrent to her engagement in activism that she had to overcome or bypass, it is actually that same fear that has propelled her into this work in a meaningful way. Liliana talks about the fact that she has made some progress in terms of constant worry and fear, though her parents remain as fearful as they always were. Liliana's progress has largely come about through her interactions with other undocumented young people, watching the way they move through the world, the commitment they have to not allow fear to rule their lives. When she thinks about the way her parents live, it brings her sadness. Like many undocumented students, Liliana sees her activism as a way to honor the many sacrifices her parents have made to bring her here.

To me, I know I can do this right now because I am not in the situation they are. So I am going to put my voice out there for others too. ...So many of us get caught in the cracks in very different ways. Some of us have it easier than others, and are able to flow better. But I hear stories and I'm like – you deserve it more than me, here. But then like, if I am not here, nobody is. If I didn't help, nobody would be helping. (Liliana)

Intimately understanding the daily anxieties and fears that come along with being undocumented, yet also having some ability to transcend these fears is what has propelled Liliana into activism. It is not something she ever saw herself doing; she never knew it was even a possibility. But the unity of these experiences have propelled her on this path, one that has profoundly shaped her conception of herself, as well as the way she sees her community and the power it holds.

## **Conclusion**

Because of their unique experiences with the duality of insiderness-outsiderness, the stories of undocumented students who became engaged in political activist work have a lot to teach us about movement building, political consciousness, and the connections between support work and activism. In this historical moment, undocumented young people are fundamentally transforming the political landscape of California in complex ways. In this chapter, I have argued that undocumented youth - because of both their racialized legal status as well as their age - experience a unique kind of insider/outsiderness which shapes their political engagement and their personal-political trajectories. I posit that constant, mandated interaction with state institutions that are required of all young people, is particularly important among undocumented youth because it encourages the formation of “mutual-aid” organizations self-organized by undocumented young people. These self-organized associations have cropped up exponentially in California the past 5 years, challenging dominant notions of who undocumented immigrants are and what political activism looks like. Moreover, engaging in non-political work with other undocumented students out of necessity, often encourages activism among undocumented students, even those who are fearful and reticent to engage in political work.

Though the political promise of these burgeoning activist spaces must be recognized, they naturally have constraints and limits. The tension between support and activism, despite yielding politically promising results in UPSRG's evolution, is a tension nonetheless. The fact that support is such an integral part of the group's work and identity, presents the risk that it could easily usurp the activist work and convert the organization into a traditional support group.

Related to this, nurturing an ongoing tension which is never really worked out creates the risk that people can fall out of the group because of the tension. It is possible that the attrition I noted at different moments was related to this dynamic. A related risk is that people who are engaged solely in the organization's support work can develop the sense that this support work is inherently political, which runs the risk of falsely labeling all activities as resistance. When this happens, the true value of the concept of resistance is lost, and possibilities of active pockets of resistance dwindle.

A central limitation in this analysis is related to my research design. This study, in its explicit decision to focus on activists, examines the ways in which insider-outsiderness generated political consciousness and political action. These are the stories of young people who have walked the line between exclusion and inclusion and from that experience, have been compelled to use their positions to fight for a more inclusive, more egalitarian society. There are surely others, who walk the same line, and make other choices. In fact, experiencing institutional exclusion can understandably have the opposite impact, and cause someone to see his/her interests as primary, above all else, because the cards are institutionally stacked against them. This study, because of its focus on activist students, does not examine this other trajectory, but in this methodological omission I do not intend to suggest that activism is the only path from the experience of institutional exclusion.

There is also a larger limitation to this hybridized support/activist work that deserves mention. Within this population, the development of collective political consciousness rests on a self-conception as not only as undocumented, but as undocumented students. Because they fight for their rights on that basis, it is necessary to acknowledge that there is a cost associated with this. Undocumented students are one small part of the undocumented population – undocumented college students an even smaller fraction. In the great game of sorting out who are the “deserving” versus “undeserving” immigrants, undocumented students clearly rise to the top of the pile. Thus, insider-outsiderness that is a product of the unique experiences of these young people in the schooling system spurs a certain kind of political identity. In some ways, what is produced is beautiful, hopeful, and filled with political possibility. In other ways, though, collective political identity and collective political action by undocumented students as undocumented students, can play into the divisions between the immigrants who are worthy of citizenship and those who are not. As detailed in Chapter 2, this is an issue that becomes particularly crystallized in the struggle to pass the DREAM Act, and is a tension not lost on the undocumented youth activists themselves. These undocumented youth activists, in the process of reconceptualizing their own political selves, both individually and as a community, must navigate the thin line between inclusion and cooptation.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion: “The Power to Change History is In Our Hands”

“There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, you can't take part. You can't even passively take part. And you've got to put your body upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop.

(Mario Savio, 1964<sup>31</sup>)

### Introduction

Eliseo was born in a Mexican orphanage, adopted as a baby, and raised by a loving couple who tried their best to provide for him. But as the Sonoran economy changed in the aftermath of NAFTA's passage, providing for their child became more and more difficult. They held out for as long as they could, not wanting to leave their pueblo – a pueblo both of them had been born in. Grudgingly, they saw their only option as continuing in the path that their older children had forged several years earlier – to cross the border and try to make a better life in the United States.

Eliseo was 12 when they crossed in 1999. Soon after, both of his parents were struck and killed in a car accident. He survived. Orphaned for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time in his life, without papers, and in a new country that he was barely learning to navigate, Eliseo was alone in a way that most people cannot even begin to imagine. He was reluctantly taken in by a sister, the adult child of his adoptive parents, who he had never met before. The next two years were filled with emotional and physical abuse at the hands of his sister and her boyfriend. A kind-hearted next-door neighbor who happened to work at a youth shelter caught glimpses of Eliseo's life, could see that he was being abused, and told him she would leave the back door unlocked in case he was ready to escape. He left one night, at the age of 14, and was raised for the next 4 years by the staff of the homeless youth shelter that was his home. Throughout these years, Eliseo survived by working in the street economy and made family by joining alliances on those same streets. There were many moments he wasn't sure he would make it to 18. And once he did, he was positive he wouldn't see 21.

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<sup>31</sup> In a speech delivered on December 2, 1964, at a sit-in on the steps of Sproul Hall as a part of the free speech movement at UC Berkeley. Available here: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mariosaviosproulhallsitin.htm> Accessed on 1/3/2010.

Eliseo was 23 when I met him, enrolled at community college, and making plans to be a Chicano Studies Professor. It was a decision he made in the aftermath of the protests against HR4437.

I had every reason to go the other way, you know? I coulda stayed in that life forever. But I got to a certain point when I realized that ‘forever’ wasn’t gonna be that long from now if I kept up with all this mess. ... I heard about the bill they were trying to pass, and I knew I had to do something. ... When we there, marching in Chicano Park, it was beautiful. And it was family. And I hadn’t had that for a long, long time. (Eliseo)

Eliseo was one of the leaders of the anti-HR4437 protests in San Diego. Just a few short years before, he felt he had nothing to live for. And in this movement, he found his life’s work.

Undocumented Latino youth in California occupy a complicated position in the contemporary social, political and economic system. Their lives were profoundly changed when they crossed the border to enter the United States, though perhaps even more striking is the fact that their lives as unauthorized immigrants living in California during this political-historic moment requires them to cross borders on a daily basis. They are both insiders and outsiders in a nation which, for many of them, is the only place they have any memory of but which denies them fundamental rights and protections. They were brought here through a series of complex social, political and economic processes which not only propelled the migration of their families, but which are reconfiguring the movement of people, families, and communities on a global scale. Those same processes make the idea of returning to their homelands a near impossibility because what they left has been transformed through global capitalism. Their lives are marked by uncertainty; they cannot make long-term plans because at a fundamental level, what will happen is entirely out of their control, and the disappointment of that reality is too heavy to bear.

But there is another story to tell as well. A story in which undocumented young people are not only working through the social stigma, they are finding their voices to share their stories and demand change. A story in which undocumented young people are fundamentally altering the political landscape of California. A story in which undocumented young people are not just passive victims in a global process of displacement and migration, but active participants in the creation of a new vision for human and civil rights.

These stories may seem dissonant, yet the political landscape of undocumented youth for the past 15 years demonstrates manifests these realities, and the unity of these seemingly dissonant contexts comprise the essence of what it means to be undocumented in California today. As scholar-activists, movement-builders, and social theorists, this brings up a set of

practical, political, and intellectual questions. This moment is marked by an amazing outpouring of activism by undocumented people, one of the most marginalized groups in California. One would expect that heightened grassroots and legislative attacks on immigrants coupled with real risks for political participation would deter undocumented immigrants from engaging in social change efforts. However, the massive immigrant rights mobilizations against HR4437 in 2006 demonstrate this is not the case. The sustained political involvement of the UPSRG students demonstrates that this is not the case. What explains the political participation of undocumented immigrants, who are among the most vulnerable and marginalized in US society? What factors contribute to the development of oppositional consciousness in undocumented immigrants, propelling them out of the shadows and into the public sphere? This study is concerned broadly with the questions of how marginalized people become engaged in social movements to challenge inequality on a structural level. This leads to my central research question, and it constitutes both the political and intellectual context and imperative for this inquiry.

### **Key Findings**

The central question this dissertation set out to answer is how both the discourse and practice of immigration policy shape the political consciousness of undocumented Latino youth in California. Related to this central question, I also ask three subquestions. First, how does the lived experience of institutional exclusion shape the political consciousness of undocumented Latino students? Second, what are the political possibilities and limitations of non-political associations that form out of necessity in a hostile political climate and how does this shape the development of collective political identity among undocumented young people? Third, how can participation in a mainstream legislative campaign around citizenship contribute to the development of a structural analysis of inequality?

In relation to the central question, my research demonstrates that the negotiation of the tension between insiderness / outsiderness that undocumented youth face on a personal level can compel them to challenge broader conceptions of insiderness / outsiderness on a societal level. Undocumented young people are shaped by a configuration of overlapping and entangled processes that include growing up saturated by a discourse that vilifies them and their families, experiencing profound systemic and structural exclusion, yet also having access to compulsory k-12 schooling. This particular constellation of experiences cast undocumented young people as both insiders and outsiders, which is status they negotiate on multiple levels and scales. This outsiderness is not accidental, the legislation of illegality mandates this dynamic. Undocumented immigration is not something that is an unanticipated byproduct of the system, but rather an integral part of the survival of the economic and political system in this country. Thus, the “outsiderness” of undocumented young people is deep and wide, shaping all aspects of their

lived experiences. However, growing up in this country, particularly during the formative years of childhood and adolescence, renders them “insiders” in a natural way. This negotiation often leads (in a non-linear way ) to challenging dominant narratives of illegality, race and belonging, and an engagement in activism, creating a trajectory of politicization that spans a personal process of developing an oppositional consciousness to challenging the racial state on its responsibility to its marginalized people. In essence, the findings from this study push us to rethink the concepts of political consciousness, activism, and social movements.

There is also much to be noted about the experiences of institutional exclusion faced by undocumented young people within this current socio-political climate, and how this shaped political consciousness. I argue that not only is oppositional consciousness a spectrum, as previous theorists have claimed, but it is also, in a Gramscian sense, forged out of the dialectic between ideas that are both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. It is not the case that counter-hegemonic ideas win out, even temporarily, leading to oppositional consciousness. Rather, oppositional consciousness is forged through the constant tension between the two. This analysis, an innovation on other scholars’ conception of oppositional consciousness, is predicated on 4 central findings. First, with the passage of AB540, a new political subject was born – the AB540 students – which is an identity that was forged on the nexus of academic success and community involvement. The passage of this legislation birthed this political identity, which then shaped the youth movement around the rights of undocumented youth in California. This challenges the dominant conception of the Latino adult male being the political torch-bearer of immigrant activism, and provides insight into the critical questions of social movement-building and the development of oppositional consciousness among a population that is changing the political face of California, despite exclusion from the formal political sphere and legal vulnerability as political actors.

Second, dealing with fear and shame is not a precursor to engagement in activism. Rather, many undocumented young people engage in building community with other undocumented students to deal with the fear and shame, and this process inadvertently propels them into activism. Thus, some undocumented young people get engaged in activism not despite fear and shame about their status, but because of it. This challenges the idea that the development of political ideas precedes political action.

Third, undocumented Latino youth are shaped by public anti-immigrant discourse, but not in a simple or causal way; they do not believe it but neither do they outright reject it. Instead, I have observed a constant process of negotiation that entails a back-and-forth acceptance and rejection of these dominant ideas. It is through this active negotiation, and having to continually work through this tension, that undocumented young people are constantly engage in a profoundly personal-political process of theorizing exclusion, racism, inequality, and illegality.



Testimonio plays a key role in this process for the young people who emerge as politically active from this process. Lastly, Operative in a constant context of otherness and extra-legality allows undocumented students to assume a removed and more critical location from which to contest societally-accepted truths about the inevitability of inequality.

My research is also concerned with the political possibilities and limitations of non-political associations that form out of necessity in a hostile political climate and how these associations shape the development of collective political identity among undocumented young people. Based on a case-study of UPSRG, this chapter complicates the notion of the “outsiderness” of undocumented young people in California. I argue that undocumented youth experience a unique kind of insider/outsiderness which shapes their political engagement and also their personal-political trajectories. This is characterized both by the undocumented youth movement’s embracing of “supportive activism” that consciously blends support and activism in a way that strengthens both and does not undermine either. Though it is easy to see the institutional exclusion faced by undocumented young people, there are also ruptures in this broader trend of exclusion specifically among undocumented immigrant youth, and not necessarily their parents. These temporary moments of inclusion, moments of non-detection, and also hard-won fights that have resulted in the gaining of rights for undocumented young people living in the United States. The unity of these experiences - the sustained exclusion as well as the ruptures in that trend - situate undocumented youth in a unique location to the broader society they live in. And central to my exploration, I believe that this situation has profound significance for the development of political identity, political engagement, and the imagining of the potential of social change among undocumented youth. A key finding in relation to this question is that undocumented children are shaped by this experience of “conditional institutional inclusion” – allowed to participate in some aspects of mainstream society such as public schooling, but simultaneously disallowed from full participation in multiple societal arenas. This disconnect grows, and the contradiction becomes more and more apparent, as undocumented children grow into undocumented young adults. In exploring the role non-political networks can play in the development of oppositional consciousness, I come to argue that for people in desperate situation, reliance on others is a critical component of survival, and this forging of community can lead to the development of civil society networks and institutions which can yield politically significant outcomes. I also argue that having an understanding of the power of civil society is critical for social movement theorists and all people concerned about social change because as Gramsci reminds us, the power of the state under advanced capitalism also rests in civil society. In this assertion, we can also argue that the ability then to challenge the power of the state also rests in the institutions of civil society.

One of the key articulations in this dissertation concerns resistance and accommodation, and how the campaign to pass the legislatively mainstream DREAM Act has played a significant role in shaping a structural, radical political analysis among undocumented youth and has engaged them in a process by which they have come to challenge the legitimacy of the racial state. I find that the division between undocumented young people as “deserving and innocent” and their parents who are presumably “culpable and undeserving” has continued to characterize and complicate the political subjectivity of undocumented young people fighting for their rights, because their very existence in this country is often cast as the unfortunate result of the actions of their law-breaking parents. I also find that participation in the campaign has brought the DREAMers into direct confrontation with the state which has allowed them to see the limits of electoral politics and participatory democracy as it is currently configured in this country. Participation in this campaign has enabled them to think critically about the institution of citizenship, reframing both personally and publically what it means to fight for citizenship, and therefore sanctioned belonging, in a country that has repeatedly made it clear that they are not welcome.

In essence, this study complicates notions of political consciousness, activism, and social movements. I put forth a notion of political consciousness that is non-linear, and fraught with contradictions. I believe that a notion that consciousness is achieved once the contradictions have been worked out is not only far too simplistic, it also obscures the political potential in this contradictory state. This has profound implications for the way we understand the potential for movement-building among oppressed people because it pushes away from a conception that a population has to reach a certain point of analysis or awareness before it is able to be motivated to act in its interest (the Marxist distinction between a class by itself and a class for itself) and instead proposes that contradictory consciousness is a critical element of liberatory practice.

In relation to rethinking and recasting the notion of activism, UPRSGs work, and the work of undocumented young people through California during this period, demonstrate the ways in which service provision and support work can both foster activism but also enrich and develop the activist potential of a broader grouping of people. My reconceptualization here is similar to the argument put forth by Kathleen Blee, in her study of women in the white supremacy movement, who found that ideological commitment was secondary to the fulfillment of the need for community by these women, and that through community-building, ideological commitment could be built. This reconceptualization of the relationship between ideological commitment and activism rests on the very human, very personal connections built between people, demonstrating how these kinds of connections, which have traditionally been cast outside of the true “political” realm actually play a principle force in shaping that realm.

And lastly, I propose a reconceptualization of social movements. Though demands and tactics are central components of what makes up the essential character of a social movement, my study finds that the internal impacts of that fight on the participants who launch it, far outstretch the limits of those demands and tactics. Rather than understanding resistance and accommodation as two extremes, my research demonstrates the utility in seeing these two poles and residing next to each other, joined by a space of enormous political potential. The risks in this conceptualization are significant – and it would be detrimental to pretend that all reform work is resistance or that all resistance work has an element of accommodation. Instead, I propose that we do not disregard the potential that can come from mainstream reform work. , not just in terms of ground that stands to be gained but more principally in terms of the potential this work has on the development of oppositional consciousness among marginalized people. The marginalized people want desperately to believe in the system, and are profoundly shaped through the process of recognition that the system is not set up to meet their fundamental needs.

### **Outstanding Questions, Future Directions**

The findings from this study suggest that there are many questions that remain unanswered, not only about the political engagement of undocumented young people but also about hegemony and counter-hegemony and social movements as well as about the political engagement of undocumented Californians as a whole. Though they lay outside of the scope of this current project, I believe strongly that these questions should be prioritized, as they ask critical questions about the possibilities and limitations of immigrant-led social movements in the context of the current immigration debate in California.

### *A Broader Analysis of Hegemony & Counter-hegemony*

This research was initially guided by questions about the development of oppositional political consciousness among marginalized communities, who are inundated with the idea that inequality and injustice are inevitable fixture of contemporary life. The central context for this inquiry draws directly from a Gramscian analysis of hegemony as a cornerstone of advanced capitalism and the modern state, which establishes rule and authority through a delicate balance between coercion and consent, rather than simply relying on force alone. This dissertation takes up a central part of that process as it relates to undocumented youth – the production and reproduction of ideology, the role of common sense and good sense in maintaining societal power relationships, and the ways in which conceptual categories of understanding are shaped by the broader economic, political, and social process at work within advanced capitalism. However, a Gramscian analysis does not rest solely in the realm of ideas and ideology. Another key aspect of an analysis of the functioning of hegemony is in the concrete practice of building

counter-hegemony outside of the ideological realm. Gramsci's conceptions of historic bloc, war of position, war of maneuver, and the modern configuration of the state and civil society are critical in this examination. As a Gramscian scholar and one who draws heavily from his framework in understanding the development of oppositional consciousness, I think this analysis would be more full with an expanded analytical lens that also accounts for these elements that do not solely lie in the "ideological" realm.

### *Gender and Generation*

Another key questions that has arisen from this study is: what is the significance of gender and age in the development of oppositional consciousness? Though my dissertation research did not allow me the space to specifically focus in on the question of gender and age, my findings suggest that this is a generative area of inquiry. My findings suggest that though there are commonalities in the experiences of undocumented young people, gender plays a key role in shaping the life experiences of undocumented young women, and therefore, their consciousness and engagement. The undocumented young women in this study cite an acute sense of fear and vulnerability in their young lives as a result of being both undocumented and female, which I argue contributes to the development of oppositional consciousness. Further data collection would enable me to deepen this analysis and expand the "gendered story" of this research. On the question of age, my findings suggest that the experience of being born outside of the United States but raised here without documentation contributes to the development of oppositional consciousness. Less clear is the extent to which age and generational experiences shape this process and what can be attributed to the broader lived experience of racialized illegality, an experience these undocumented youth share with an older generation of undocumented immigrants. A future study, that focused in on undocumented immigrant women activists of different generations, would bring these two populations together and illuminate the commonalities between younger and older undocumented women who have made the choice to engage in political activism, with the intent to draw out key parallels and differences. I suggest further research specifically to answer the question: how do the racialized and gendered experiences of undocumented Mexican immigrant women shape their engagement in counter-hegemonic social change efforts? Answering this question will contribute to the scarce scholarly work about political engagement among undocumented Latinos, will challenge the dominant conception of the Latino male being the political torch-bearer of immigrant activism, and also provide insight into the critical questions of social movement building and the development of oppositional consciousness among a population that is changing the political face of California, despite exclusion from the formal political sphere and legal vulnerability as political actors.

In addition, I am also interested in examining the “gendered” story here that is not about the women. My research demonstrated that the political participation of undocumented young men, was regarded by many of them as an alternative to gang-life, yet it also hinged on a particularly masculinized notion of racial pride and respect. I did not have the space to fully examine this question in this study, and would like to explore this aspect of gender and political consciousness / political engagement as well.

### *From Undocumented Students to Undocumented Workers*

One of the central tensions in the movement for the rights of undocumented students that was explored in this dissertation is the divide between them and their parents, which rests on a division between “deserving” and “undeserving” immigrants. I explore this tension, as well as how the students manage it, at length, however there is an aspect of this tension that lies outside of the scope of this dissertation, though is worthy of further examination. How does the shift from being an undocumented student to being an undocumented worker impact the political engagement of these young people? Stated differently, what happens when these kids become their parents? More examination is needed to examine the political engagement of undocumented young people entering adulthood, as the terrain shifts in terms of who they are in society and the way that shapes perceptions in broader society of what they deserve. What is of central interest to me is that these young people, having graduated from high school, community college, or university occupy a different class and cultural space than their parents because they have degrees, and therefore have different options before them (including going back to their home countries as US-educated workers). However, despite this stark difference, they occupy the same racialized legal position as their parents, and their relationship to the racial state is very similar. The question of how this transition shapes the political activism and political consciousness of these young activists is worth exploring, and can illuminate another dimension of the experience of this generation of undocumented youth in California.

### **Rarticulating and Re-envisioning Rights of Undocumented Youth in California**

In the last few years as I have been envisioning, researching, and writing up the findings from this project, I have found myself in many conversations about the rights of undocumented students. These conversations have happened with strangers on the bus, at academic conferences, with activists and intellectuals and normal everyday people who are shaped by the public discourse around “illegal” immigration in California. Though I have certainly found myself in the center of a heated debates with people who don’t believe that undocumented young people should have any rights, the majority of these exchanges have been based on a mutual understanding that immigration is the result of complex political and economic factors on a

global scale that the United States has had a heavy hand in creating, that the immigration system is broken and needs to be fixed, and that these young people are unfairly caught in the middle of this contested and complex dynamic. However, even among these well-meaning supporters, I frequently found myself surprised at the underlying notions that backed the support of undocumented students. I sat on panels with people who argued that the reason that undocumented young people should have access to a path to citizenship is because its good economic policy that would provide the U.S. economy with skilled workers. I spoke with people who based their entire assessment on the fact that we are talking about the “good” kids who clearly deserve a break, but that if we were talking about many of their peers, it would be a different question all together. Many well-meaning people nodded their heads in agreement with me, sharing what they assumed would be an easily agreed-upon sentiment, “Sure, these kids are American!”. The most repeated refrain, predictably, was that these kids should not be held responsible for the acts of their law-breaking parents.

I spent nearly 2 years listening to the stories, the struggles, and the successes of undocumented young people trying to better not only their own lives but the structural conditions that foster injustice. I met a promising young physicist who was working construction after earning his degree from a top university. I spoke with a scared teenager, whose father had been deported, leaving the rest of the family to jump every time there was a knock at the door. Something that is clear to me is that arguing for the rights of undocumented young people is not solely a pragmatic calculation designed to appeal to the widest grouping of the voting public as possible. The vision that is articulated fundamentally shapes not only the outcome of this particular campaign, but also the conceptual categories, ideological frames, and hegemonic constructs that constitute this country’s approach to undocumented immigration. The young people who participated in this study fiercely want a path to legalization for undocumented young people. Yet, they also want to live in a society in which that demand is realized not because it makes economic sense or because they are seen as more valuable and deserving than their hard-working parents. They do not want this gain to be built upon the idea that they are essentially “American” and therefore worthy of rights the rest of the world’s people are not. The struggles of these young people, their parents, and their communities demonstrate that it is time for an unashamed vision of immigrant rights that asserts these rights on the basis of building an anti-racist, anti-xenophobic society.

As so many oppressed and marginalized communities that have come before them, undocumented young people in California are at the forefront of this fight and this rearticulation of immigrant rights. It is a complicated balance, and a profoundly personal and simultaneously political process. I have attempted to document the stories of these young people to demonstrate that this complex, non-linear process - which theorists for so long have written off as partially-

formed consciousness or contradictory consciousness - is actually the space of enormous political potential. This opportunity is not lost on these young activists. In reflecting on how being undocumented has impacted his life, Raul pauses for a minute before he concludes: "I'm happy I'm undocumented. I mean, I'm not happy. But I am grateful to have this experience. Because being undocumented right now, you know, it's like, we are in the position to change history. Just based on who we are, and what we have gone through, it's like, we're the ones. This is in our hands. And I am happy. I'm happy that's me".

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