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Shapeshifting Displacement: Notions of Membership and Deservingness Forged by Illegalized Residents

Introduction

In July 2016, a member of our research team met with Julieta, a forty-two-year-old woman living in Los Angeles. She originally entered the United States from Mexico at the age of eighteen, so she had lived in this country for twenty-four years. At a café in Los Angeles, Julieta spoke of her frustration over not being able to regularize her status. Well-educated, Julieta hoped to launch a career, but instead worked as a caretaker in a home. During the previous year, she contracted pneumonia and, without health insurance, had paid for treatment herself. Julieta felt that the 2016 presidential campaign—ongoing at the time of our interview—had heightened racial tensions. She recounted an incident at a local fast food restaurant. A white woman who was waiting for her food had muttered an obscenity at the workers—behavior that Julieta attributed to the influence of then-candidate Donald J. Trump. When asked what stance she wanted the 2016 US presidential candidates to take on immigration, Julieta replied,

Negotiate an immigration reform, within the Congress, which we know is difficult . . . The reality is that not everybody would qualify. Not everybody maybe deserves to stay in this country because there are . . . people who have done damage. But that's for the . . . authorities to decide, to find out who . . . deserves to stay and who has to go. Those who deserve [to stay] are hardworking people. They have paid taxes. They've been out of trouble. They have contributed, one way or another to their communities, also by . . . a business or they volunteer with say like those who go to the armed forces. They have served us, even though they were not born here. But they love their—this country. And they are willing to sacrifice. They are willing to give . . . their lives. Those definitely deserve to be here . . . And those who do not deserve . . . might be . . . the real criminals, those who . . . sell drugs, [and have] abused children, women. They don't contribute in a positive way to this . . . society . . . In my case, I love this country very much, believe it or not. I've learned the Constitution. I want to learn the Star Spangled Banner.

Analyzing perspectives such as Julieta's sheds light on how displacement is actively produced and contested, as those who have experienced illegalization “actually live with(in) migration regimes that keep them trapped or in the loop of repeated moves towards what is perceived to be a better life.”¹ One way that illegalized residents such as Julieta “actually live with(in) migration regimes” is by producing narratives that assign

meaning to their social locations and that actively interpret law and policy. Julieta argued that US immigration law should be more inclusive, so that those who contribute societally by working, paying taxes, volunteering, and serving in the military could qualify for status. Moreover, she linked social exclusion to racism, contending that politicians mobilized racial categories to foment social divisions. Yet, Julieta herself also drew lines around the deserving. Julieta suggested that those who committed crimes or did not contribute to society deserved to be removed. Significantly, Julieta saw herself as deserving, stressing her patriotism and suggesting that she was all but a citizen. For her, though, legal status—and the job opportunities, healthcare, and respect that she presumed legal status would deliver—were beyond reach.

The central theoretical contribution of this paper is to consider how accounts produced by illegalized residents *shapeshift* immigration enforcement regimes. Anthropologist Aimee Cox, who analyzes the narratives, relationships, and actions of young Black women and girls in a Detroit homeless shelter, develops the notion of “shapeshifting” to refer to “shifting the terms through which educational, training, and social service institutions attempt to shape young Black women into manageable and respectable members of society whose social citizenship is always questionable and never guaranteed, even as these same institutions ostensibly encourage social belonging.”² In the case at hand, illegalized residents’ accounts critique immigration law and policy for being arbitrary, racially biased, and failing to fulfill an implicit social contract with US workers. These accounts *also* reproduce individualized and neoliberal tropes of deservingness associated with structural adjustment and welfare reform.³ As Rebecca Sharpless notes, “Any claim to respectability reinforces and reproduces existing social and economic inequalities in our society. Because a person is respectable by virtue of complying with hegemonic norms, any claim of respectability legitimizes and perpetuates these norms.”⁴

Yet, in that they also *redefine* and *revalue* discourses of deservingness, illegalized residents’ accounts do more than reproduce hegemony.⁵ Such accounts redefine displacement by *emplacing* narrators and their communities as “belonging” in the United States. In so doing, they “move away from place as location toward place as a process of socio-affective attachment, as a point of valued or tenable being.”⁶ Interviewees saw the United States as not simply a location but also the environment where they had developed and would flourish. Through efforts to emplace themselves narratively, articulating how and why they may someday qualify for status, illegalized residents practiced “agency-in-waiting,”⁷ keeping hope alive,⁸ and insisting that they deserve to live dignified lives.⁹ Residents’ accounts of deservingness are not monolithic. While some, such as Julieta, sought to broaden inclusion, others would dismantle borders altogether.

Illegalized residents’ accounts show that studies of displacement (in the spirit of this special issue) are enriched by examining how persons and communities interpret and reshape the institutions and experiences that rupture a sense of belonging in the world. The claims staked by illegalized residents reveal that displacement is not so much a static “condition,” as is implied by the term “displaced persons.” Displacement is, rather, an ongoing process that residents actively defined through accounts that “shapeshift” the institutions in which they are embedded. Understanding shapeshifting requires approaching displacement not primarily as movement across borders (presumed to have occurred in the past) but rather as a “sense of experiencing . . . non-navigable situations, in which the possibility of a self-directed future is constrained by external forces, and particularly

those that derive from processes of dispossession.”¹⁰ In shapeshifting enforcement regimes, illegalized residents also shapeshift meanings and experiences of displacement. Their accounts situate them (and others) along trajectories that not only move them into or out of place, but also redefine social institutions. Their accounts perform a politics of displacement, redrawing boundaries of belonging by variously displacing and emplacing themselves and others within sites that they consider meaningful.

Illegalized residents’ narrative accounts show that displacement cannot be reduced to formal legal categories and institutional frameworks. As Kamal Sadiq notes, “a variety of marginalized groups . . . experience a gap between formalized institutional citizenship and their actual lived reality.”¹¹ Illegalized residents share commonalities with residents who have not crossed international boundaries but who are unhoused, racialized, criminalized, or precarized. Formal citizenship is insufficient to guarantee social inclusion, particularly when state institutions do not always recognize membership,¹² and when local definitions may differ from national ones.¹³ Yet, illegalization does not always result in full exclusion, as illegalized residents defy policies that prohibit their presence. To do so, they cite the affective and substantive connections that emplace them in local communities, regardless of their immigration status. They also provide rationales for their hope to someday be granted status, even as their critiques of racialization and economic privilege acknowledge other dimensions along which marginalization occurs. In recognition of their efforts to shapeshift the discourses within which they are situated, in this paper, we use terms such as “illegalized resident” instead of the more common “migrant” or “immigrant.” “Illegalized resident” highlights the dynamic nature of illegalization, while the latter terms incorrectly suggest a static (and stigmatized) category. We thus practice the “dis-identification” advocated by Claudia Aradau, that is, to break out of securitized discourses not simply by countering them, but also by employing alternative framings.¹⁴

Our analysis of illegalized residents’ accounts of deservingness derives from interviews conducted between 2014 and 2017 with seventy-eight Latinx and Asian American and Pacific Islander community members who lived in Southern California and who had hoped to qualify for forms of executive relief that were announced by the Obama administration but subsequently enjoined in the courts. Our interviews also included policy-makers, activists, and advocates—some citizens, some out of status, and some with legally recognized immigration status. Examining accounts of deservingness during this period right before the Trump administration took office is important because residents had endured an escalation of deportation in the early years of the Obama administration, only to have a very limited form of regularization dangled before them and withdrawn. Immigration policy was front-and-center during the 2016 presidential campaign, with Trump’s pledge to build a wall competing with Clinton’s promises of immigration relief. Deservingness, broken promises, and the hypocrisy of claims that US immigration law was a moral system were very much on interviewees’ minds and formed part of their social discourse, not only in interviews with us, but also on talk shows, in hair salons, and in the offices of the nonprofits and grassroots organizations where we met them. This discourse *enacted* the forms of belonging that interviewees espoused, making “displacement” not something that “happens to” people but rather something that is produced and contested by them. Like Julieta, most interviewees argued that a cluster of constructs, including behavior, acculturation, rootedness, kinship ties, and societal contributions, emplaced them in the United States. A minority of interviewees, in contrast, openly

rejected such notions of deservingness for prioritizing mainstream values in distinguishing “good” from “bad” immigrants. Finally, and cutting across both of these perspectives, interviewees denounced racism, nativism, labor exploitation, and police harassment. By contesting their own positioning, interviewees simultaneously repositioned institutions, for example, defining their labor as “work” rather than “unauthorized employment,” depicting US immigration law as arbitrary and irrational, and seeing policing as racialized.

Illegalization

Interviewees’ understandings of membership were forged through multiple experiences of illegalization and displacement in their countries of origin and destination.¹⁵ Neoliberalism, securitization, and rising nativism are neither new nor isolated, so it is important to understand how such processes are experienced. As Monica Varsanyi notes, immigration restrictionism has been a key focus of right-wing populism in Europe—trends that have emphasized individualism, prioritized the market over state regulation, and promoted fear of “outsiders.”¹⁶ In the United States, interior surveillance, detention, and deportation have increased over the past two decades, while opportunities for regularization have declined. Access to employment opportunities, driver’s licenses, health care, transportation, and higher education has been limited by legal status, while rhetoric blaming “immigrants” for terrorism, crime, and unemployment has led to stigmatization.

In the United States, such social exclusion has been challenged by a vocal immigrant rights movement that has cited the ways that illegalized residents are already integral members of families, communities, and the nation.¹⁷ Some states and localities have adopted inclusive measures, such as allowing residents to apply for drivers licenses or pay in-state tuition regardless of legal status.¹⁸ Illegalized residents may be able to work, find housing, and establish families, even as they face racial slurs, being stopped and questioned by the police, or being detained and deported. Their ability to pursue a “meaningful everyday life” is always in jeopardy.¹⁹ Yet, though intended to challenge divisiveness, the immigrant rights movement may stress grounds for deservingness that reflect dominant cultural standards, such as hard work, autonomy, individualism, and law-abidingness.²⁰

Such a “model movement strategy” follows a “practice of lifting up ‘model’ members of a group to transform negative stereotypes associated with the group as a whole.”²¹ This strategy attributes financial need and criminal convictions to character rather than to structural conditions.²² Furthermore, just as in the United States criminality and welfare use have been racialized, the model movement strategy echoes notions of respectability that undergird anti-Blackness.²³ In other words, when immigrant rights activists hold up high-achieving students or entrepreneurs as deserving, they draw implicit contrasts with the figure of the “welfare cheat” or the figure of “the criminal,” both of which have been racialized as “Black” in US popular discourse. The immigrant rights movement can therefore play a role in excluding those who do not meet dominant models of deservingness.

These debates play out over a changed legal landscape. In the 1980s, crossing the US-Mexico border without authorization was still possible with the assistance of so-called “mom-and-pop” smugglers, and those apprehended at the border were often able to successfully enter the country after several attempts.²⁴ The 1986 Immigration Reform and

Control Act (IRCA) enabled some 2.7 million residents to regularize their status, and IRCA beneficiaries were in turn able to petition for family members.²⁵ However, IRCA also stiffened border enforcement and put sanctions on employers who hired unauthorized workers. The US enforcement landscape changed further in 1996 when the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) expanded the array of criminal convictions that made individuals ineligible for lawful permanent residency.²⁶ Additionally, IIRIRA eliminated hearings through which residents with certain criminal convictions could petition to remain in the United States, and barred adults in the United States without authorization for six months or one year from reentering the country legally for three years or ten years, respectively. Penalties for unlawful reentry following deportation and for false citizenship claims escalated, leading to long-term or permanent prohibitions on legalizing. Many residents in removal proceedings also face mandatory detention as a result of these laws.

These tensions between restriction and inclusion have created forms of partial legality, such as Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and have fueled national debates over immigration policy.²⁷ In 2016, Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton pledged to submit a proposal for comprehensive immigration reform to Congress during her first one hundred days in office, and Republican nominee Donald Trump, promised to build a wall along the US-Mexico border, ban Muslims from entering the United States, and deport eleven million illegalized residents.²⁸ In this context of heightened debate and political action, how did the targets of these policies come to understand belonging and deservingness? We turn now to illegalized residents' own ideas about valid bases for determining membership. Their efforts to assign meaning to their experiences make displacement a lived and contested process.

Methods

Our analysis of illegalized residents' accounts of how US immigration law and policy *ought* to work derives from 135 interviews conducted between 2014 to 2017 with residents, community organizers, immigration lawyers, and government officials. For this paper, we focus on the subset of interviews with seventy-eight illegalized residents who had approached Southern California nonprofits and community groups in hopes of regularizing their status. The organizations that collaborated in our study included established nonprofits that served Latin American, Asian and Asian American, and Pacific Islander communities, labor groups, and grassroots youth- and religious-based community organizations. When we began our study in 2014, President Obama had announced that parents of US citizen and lawful permanent resident children would be able to apply for Deferred Action through a program known as Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA) and had also expanded the eligibility criteria for DACA. We recruited interviewees at "know your rights" forums, document preparation workshops, and legal clinics, and through referrals from the organizations that were holding these events. As we were carrying out our project, twenty-six states that favored restrictive policies sued the federal government. Both DAPA and the expansion of DACA were enjoined. We therefore had the opportunity to examine how would-be applicants understood and responded to the announcement—and then suspension—of these opportunities for legal relief. Our final round of interviews was conducted during the 2016 presidential campaign and the very early days of the Trump administration, so interviews captured the heightened

tension over immigration policy engendered by those events. Interviewees were diverse in terms of gender, national background, and age. We also interviewed immigrant rights advocates and former Department of Homeland Security officials, gathered legal and administrative guidance documents associated with deferred action, and conducted observations at immigrant-serving organizations. This paper draws primarily on our interviews with would-be applicants for deferred action. Their experiences of preparing to apply for relief through programs that were suspended give them unique insights into the ongoing and contested nature of displacement.

(Re-)drawing Boundaries

A prominent perspective among the illegalized residents we interviewed, particularly those we met through more established nonprofits, was that US immigration law should be more inclusive, but that it is legitimate to exclude “bad immigrants” who do not exhibit law-abidingness, a strong work ethic, and a willingness to contribute to society.²⁹ As we noted above, such boundary redrawing participates in respectability politics in ways that reproduce anti-Black racism; and may also be evidence of internalizing dominant framings of deservingness focused on hard work and individual autonomy.³⁰ Critiques of the ways that the “DREAMer” narrative reproduces notions of undeservingness have sought to move beyond such accounts.³¹ Yet, close analysis of these perspectives reveals ways that they deviate from dominant framings, providing an important form of social commentary. For example, highlighting socially valued behaviors critiques the notion that deservingness can be assessed on the basis of arbitrary legal characteristics, such as how someone entered the country. Claiming deservingness generates hope in the face of prolonged uncertainty while critiques of exploitative practices highlight what interviewees see as a double standard: acquiring status requires exhibiting qualities and behaviors that, from these interviewees’ points of view, exceed those required of formally recognized citizens. Such commentary *theorizes* displacement as a lived experience.

Interviewees who espoused boundary re-drawing tended to cite measures of deservingness, such as working hard, paying taxes, and contributing to society, that are at the heart of debates over immigration policy. For example, Graciela, a hair stylist in her early thirties who was originally from Mexico and whom we met through a Los Angeles-based nonprofit, commented, “We don’t do any wrong, right. We are people who work. We contribute by shopping here. They charge taxes on that so the economy will flourish.” Likewise, Alfaro, an independent businessman in his thirties who was also from Mexico and whom we met through the same nonprofit, complained, “I am married to a US citizen, my family depends on me, I have a daughter, I pay my taxes, I am a decent person, a hard-worker, I don’t have crimes in the United States. That is, I am a responsible person, moral. But I can’t get status.” Emphasizing tax-paying critiques the United States for being willing to take illegalized residents’ money without awarding them status. Such comments echo broader social movement calls for dignity. According to Susana Narotzky, those who protested 2008 structural adjustment policies in Spain also sought not only material benefits, but also dignity, which “expresses social worth; it asserts the value of the person in a particular structure of social reproduction.”³² Alfaro’s argument implicitly invokes social contract theory: working and paying taxes fulfills illegalized residents’ end of an implicit social contract, so the state should fulfill its obligations by granting membership. Tomás, a construction worker in his fifties whom we met through an immigrant

rights organization in Los Angeles, commented: “We do the jobs that the *güeros* [whites] are not going to do. We do it . . . We take care of children. All the agricultural workers that are in the fields. They do the work to grow the vegetables and fruits.” In contrast to narratives about autonomy and upward mobility, Tomás’s comment *revalues* agricultural and domestic labor, occupations with constrained mobility.

Interviewees who moved to the United States as children also stressed their *emplacement*—that is, their deep and almost inextricable affective connections to US life experiences—as grounds for status, appealing to affiliation as a basis for membership.³³ Vanessa, a twenty-eight-year-old DACA recipient who worked in office administration and whom we met at a Los Angeles nonprofit, articulated this argument: “Everything, my friends, my family is here, my school. And, even though I’m not a citizen, I like the government . . . compared to the government in Mexico. So in my head, I’m from the US, I’m a citizen. Even though I’m not legally a citizen.” Vanessa’s comment highlights the gap between formal citizenship and lived experience.³⁴ Some interviewees said their ties to the United States were stronger than to their country of origin. Mateo, who was in his twenties and whom we met through an Orange County social justice coalition, explained, “I came here very young and so the majority of my culture is Anaheim [California], the majority of who I am is Anaheim. I’ve known the [Los Angeles] Angels before I was a big fan of the Mexican soccer team over there, so a lot of my interests are very Americanized. I love hip-hop more than I love *rancheras*.” These notions of affiliation highlighted mainstream forms of patriotism (liking the US form of government) but also adopted broader values (hip hop) in claiming US cultural citizenship.³⁵

Significantly, interviewees who grounded deservingness in social contract, character, or affiliation typically also were willing to exclude some sectors. For example, Alfaro told us, “If I were a criminal, of course, obviously, I’d have no right to anything.” Such comments echo the stigmatization of immigrants as criminals as well as the logic of exclusionary policies. Beatriz, an undocumented sixty-year-old homemaker from Peru whom we met through a Los Angeles nonprofit, remarked, “I always give Trump a little bit of understanding that if there are people that are misbehaving or are not moving forward and sometimes there are entire families including a drunken mom, selling drugs, gangsters, so then it’s true that if those people who are misbehaving . . . punish them by taking their documents and deporting them but to do it right and make sure.” Such comments reproduced racialized stereotypes (“drunken mom, selling drugs, gangsters”) that undergird mass incarceration and dismantling of the welfare state. Thus, like Beatriz, other interviewees criticized those who “come to cause problems up here or go around slacking off with gangs” or who “live solely off government handouts . . . like parasites of this place.”

Interviewees who sought to redraw boundaries were particularly irked by what they saw as a double standard in that citizens did not have to meet the standards of deservingness to which illegalized residents were held. These comments generally missed the potential to identify racialized and criminalizing forms of exclusion as a source of solidarity. Bertriz, the fifty-year-old manager of a fast-food restaurant, complained, “I have twenty years [of being] in this country and I don’t have benefits . . . But I do see that while you’re a citizen, you enjoy those benefits and you don’t work and you don’t study. You’re on the street all tattooed.” Perla, a twenty-seven-year-old office worker who had hoped to apply for DACA but did not meet the eligibility requirements and whom we met

at a Los Angeles nonprofit, observed that US immigration law often prioritized arbitrary factors such as age at time of entry over more substantively meaningful facts such as behavior. She said, “We never had any issues with this country. Never, ever, ever, had any issues at all. Never involved in drugs or anything like . . . So like worse people out there they got in, and then being a good kid doesn’t get you anything.”

Some interviewees who sought to redraw lines around the deserving argued that doing so was merely a matter of political pragmatism. Samuel, who was affiliated with a grassroots youth organization, remarked, “You have to start peeling the onion from whatever you can. I think that, I agree with that but I have mixed opinions sometimes I think that people can fight for everybody but at the same time, I know everybody, not everybody is going to qualify.” Likewise, Lupita, a twenty-year-old student activist, said that her attitude is “Chill, it’s step by step. You’re not just going to give papers to everyone. That’s impossible.” Alondra, who originally immigrated to the United States from Peru legally but overstayed her visa and who volunteered with a Los Angeles nonprofit, argued that advocates should focus on obtaining status for students, agricultural workers, and highly skilled workers, groups with whom legislators might sympathize. Pragmatic considerations also were key to some interviewees’ contention that the United States would benefit from legalizing immigrants.

The thinking of interviewees who sought to redraw boundaries was complex. These interviewees reproduced racialized notions of deservingness, but also challenged arbitrary measures, pointed out the injustice of immigration policies, countered displacement with emplacement, and held out hope that, someday, more just policies would be adopted. Such interviewees sought to broaden inclusion, and sometimes critiqued overcriminalization and heteronormativity. Alfaro, who was quoted above, suggested that “a lapse of judgement or commit[ing] some infraction, shouldn’t be generalized to the point where, ‘Oh, you have violence? You’re out, period.’” Similarly, Julieta, who was quoted at the outset of this paper, described images circulating among Latinos on social media after President Obama announced the DACA expansion and DAPA: “Latinos, they start making these pictures with Obama, President Obama and it’s in Spanish. President Obama is kind of like, touching his forehead and it translates: Oh, I forgot about the singles. I left out the single men and women . . . And the gay community, it’s saying like I left them out.” Such critiques of overcriminalization and heteronormativity hint at the broader inclusivity that, in parallel with the prison abolition movement, could derive from transcending or abolishing borders themselves.

Rejecting Borders

While most interviewees advocated redrawing boundaries in a more inclusive fashion, some interviewees, especially those affiliated with grassroots youth organizations, explicitly critiqued boundary-drawing for promoting a “good immigrant/bad immigrant” dichotomy that sought opportunities for some—especially young people and students—at the expense of others. Such interviewees grounded their rejection of boundaries in the notion of collective good rather than individual merit.³⁶ Interviewees who rejected boundaries argued that people share a common humanity, therefore the law should not impose artificial distinctions based on country of origin or mode of entry. Appeals to humanity as ground for legalization implicitly invoke universal notions of human rights,³⁷ while rejecting the “good/bad” immigrant dichotomy interrogates limitations of formal

rights themselves.³⁸ Appealing to common humanity as a basis for dismantling borders and conferring rights on all may privilege the idea that the desire to progress is intrinsic to human nature. For instance, Sonya, a grassroots activist who had hoped to apply for DAPA, argued, “To the American community we’ve also got to tell them, ‘we’re human beings like you. I’m trying to make myself better like you.’” At the same time, appealing to commonality as grounds for granting status can highlight the forms of exploitation that legal distinctions enable. Lucas, whom we met through a Los Angeles nonprofit, criticized what he seemed to see as hypocrisy in distinguishing among individuals from the Americas. White people, he noted, like to appropriate the term “American” to refer to only the United States, when in fact, “we are all Americans from the United States to Argentina, we are all part of the American continent.” Lucas asserted, “They treat us like we are different from everyone else. But our blood is the same. It’s red. The flesh is the same. It rots. You die and it rots.”

Some student activists whom we interviewed had developed abolitionist theories of membership and belonging that went beyond universal notions of humanity. Such activists drew connections between multiple struggles (for example, over immigration and criminal justice policies) and questioned the validity of both national and internal borders. We focus here on two examples: Carla, who was born in Peru and was president of the undocumented student club at a private university, and Reese, who was originally from China and who participated in multiple undocumented student groups both on and off of a public university campus. Carla called the distinction that some immigrant rights activists made between “deserving” and “undeserving immigrants “respectability politics,” noting that the “good immigrant” narrative bases deservingness in characteristics associated with white, heterosexual, middle-class society.³⁹ She explained,

“Respectability politics” is wanting everyone in your group to be good so that those outside can say, “Oh, they are so good that I am going to give them this, because they are so similar to us”—and blah, blah, blah. While more radical activism says, “Yes, we are different. We have different ideals. That doesn’t matter. We have these ideals and we are going to follow what we want and you have to give us our rights even though we are anti-patriotic, though we are LGBT, though we are single mothers.” That is, we don’t have to be . . . the perfect people in a white family. We are different and just the same, we deserve our rights.

Likewise, Reese argued, “What I would like to see is mainly just like move away from the Dream Act narrative. And instead talk a lot more about undocumented workers, undocumented parents, LGBTQ immigrants, um, even like undocumented Black immigrants because nobody ever, ever talks about them, and they do exist.” In these passages, Carla and Reese reject what they see as exclusionary and individualized definitions of deservingness and instead embrace groups, such as single mothers, LGBTQ community members, or criminals, that deviate from white, patriarchal, heterosexual norms. These perspectives were echoed by some other youth activists, such as Joaquin, a member of an Orange County student organization, who critiqued the DREAMer narrative for “putting us . . . on a pedestal.”

Both Carla and Reese also suggested eliminating the very institutions that enforce distinctions based on legal status. Carla explained how her perspective had evolved,

“Before, I thought, ‘Reform it, give us citizenship, give us more visas.’ And I thought afterwards, ‘Reform the bureaucracy so that we all can have visas.’ And now . . . I am thinking, ‘Why do we need visas? Why do we need borders? Who is served by them? These [are] tools to divide us.’” Reese also adopted an abolitionist perspective. She stated, “It’s actually possible that we don’t need prisons or detention facilities, and we find another alternative.” When asked to describe this alternative, she advocated creating a pathway to citizenship and simultaneously pursuing social equity so that all citizens would enjoy rights. She explained, “This isn’t just for immigrants, you know. It’s for, like, all communities of color, that everybody has, like, fair access to education, housing, employment.” Reese saw true inclusion as overcoming not only the boundaries between citizens and the undocumented, but also between first- and second-class citizens. Likewise, Catalina, a college student, pointed out that even with citizenship, people suffer inequities: “Citizenship is just a little tiny part of like what the issues [are.] Labor wise, it’s not going to get any better with citizenship . . . Healthcare wise, it doesn’t get any better.”⁴⁰ In contrast to the perspective of those who sought to redraw borders in a more expansive fashion, the abolitionist perspectives developed by Reese, Carla, and a minority of other interviewees emphasized that conferring legal citizenship was not enough to achieve social justice. Such activists sought to link struggles over immigration policy, racial justice, workers’ rights, housing, and education in ways that would allow multiple marginalized communities to enjoy the social benefits that membership is supposed to confer.

Challenging Privilege

Within our interview sample, both those who argued that boundaries should be redrawn and those who felt they should be abolished critiqued white privilege and presumptions that those with higher socioeconomic status were more deserving. Many described being mistreated due to their race, ethnicity, language skills, or immigration status. They complained about police harassment, racial slurs, abusive employers, politicians who used immigration as a political tool, and policies that reserved work authorization, health care, educational opportunities, and other resources for the advantaged. This critique depicts white privilege and economic advantage as illegitimate grounds for assessing deservingness, and thus resonates with literature that critiques nativism, racialization, and criminalization.⁴¹ Interviewees’ denunciations of discriminatory practices therefore articulate a social vision in which race, income, appearance, and country of origin would not be used to exclude individuals. Like redrawing boundaries and rejecting borders, challenging privilege promotes a more inclusive social order, and does so by emphasizing intersectionality between forms of social exclusion.

Latinx interviewees were particularly critical of policing practices that, they felt, targeted them due to their race and then used immigration status as grounds for issuing a ticket for driving without a license and impounding their vehicle.⁴² Alondra, who was quoted above, stated bluntly, “If you are Hispanic, the police will stop you.” Because illegalized residents in California were ineligible for driver’s licenses until recently, many drove without licenses, which placed them at risk of having their cars impounded. This risk led to a vicious cycle in which some chose to drive old cars, knowing that these might be confiscated, which in turn gave the police a pretext to stop a car due to a broken taillight. Many interviewees were also concerned about encountering police checkpoints.

Some feared the police. Beatriz, for example, reported that illegalization led her to avoid interactions with the police altogether.

Fátima, whom we met through a nonprofit in Los Angeles, was in her forties and had her own small business selling beauty products. She described an incident that she found deeply humiliating. Fátima had been waiting at a red light when a trailer sideswiped her car, breaking the side mirror. She followed the trailer and asked to see the driver's license and insurance. The driver refused, saying, "I'll give you \$200 and you can shut up already." Four officers arrived on the scene, but they spoke to the other driver, whom she described as "an American," rather than to her. According to Fátima, the officers then advised her to either accept the \$200 payment or be ticketed and have her car impounded for driving without a license. Fátima recalled, "We are used to [the attitude that] because you are a Latino, you are a second-class, starving [hambrienta] person. But like I told him [the officer], I prefer not to take the \$200 because I know that I am worth more than those \$200." Fátima insisted that she was valuable, not "second-class," something she felt so strongly about that she was willing to pay the full \$1,327 to recuperate her car rather than simply accepting the \$200 payment.

Fátima's insistence that she deserved to be treated with dignity—which, as noted above, is a common refrain on the part of those who protest structural adjustment policies—was echoed by the many interviewees who complained that they had experienced racial, ethnic, or immigration-related slurs. As Oralia, who had immigrated to the United States from Guatemala and whom we met at a Los Angeles nonprofit, put it, "Here there are people that humiliate you, that yell at you, treat you very lowly." Interviewees encountered these slurs unexpectedly, while going about their daily lives. Perla was at the Cheesecake Factory, a popular restaurant, and had to use the restroom. She related, "I had an encounter with a lady . . . She was just knocking the door really hard and I said well you know, 'Give me a minute, I'll be right out.' When I got out she's like, she told me, 'You immigrants, you shouldn't be here.'" Other interviewees reported similar experiences, in which members of the public felt free to tell them they did not belong, often using insulting language. Such experiences are jarring reminders that feelings of connection and stability can be disrupted by nativism and racism.

Another key focus of interviewees' complaints about discrimination was labor exploitation. Wage theft was common. As Tómas, whom we met at a Los Angeles nonprofit, put it, "I can't really work with confidence that I will be paid." Interviewees described suffering workplace accidents without compensation from their employers, being underpaid or unpaid, and having employers who threatened to report them to immigration authorities. Oralia told of an instance in which her employer criticized her work as a janitor due to her limited English skills: "There was a supervisor. He told me, '[Oralia] you should be grateful to be working here during the day.' 'Why?' I said. He said, 'Because those that don't speak English work at night.' 'In that case am I working with my tongue? Am I cleaning with my tongue? No I work with my hands, not with the manner in which I am speaking.'" Like Fátima's refusal to accept a \$200 payment from a driver who owed her more, Oralia's insistence that her work should be judged by its quality emphasizes her dignity as a person.

Finally, interviewees expressed extreme frustration with politicians who seemed to them to be approaching immigration reform—something that impacted interviewees deeply—merely as a matter of political maneuvering. Interviewees complained both about

President Obama's unfulfilled promises and about 2016 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's and Donald Trump's use of this issue to garner votes. Carla compared deferred action to gaslighting, a form of abuse. She explained,

For example, somebody is cheating on his girlfriend. She comes home and sees that—"I know you were cheating! You didn't answer my calls, and there's lipstick on your shirt" and all of that. And he's like, "No! I didn't answer because there was no service. And this lipstick—it isn't lipstick, it's actually catsup." And he's telling her that she's hysterical and he's already done so much for her and all of that, because she doubts her perception of reality and doesn't know what to do and ultimately ends up forgiving him. It's an abusive tactic. The way that I see Obama enacting DACA and also deporting people, I think is gaslighting on a massive scale.

Such comments challenged the political privilege that, in some interviewees' eyes, allowed policymakers to prioritize their own welfare over that of illegalized residents.

Conclusion

This article contributes to theorizing displacement by highlighting the ways that displacement is performed and contested discursively as residents narrate the grounds on which they already are de facto members of society who only lack formal recognition. By articulating grounds for belonging, residents who have undergone illegalization emplace themselves in the United States (even as they sometimes discursively displace others), arguing that they are so inextricably connected through their life projects that to remove them would be a form of violation. The illegalized residents interviewed for this paper espoused notions of deservingness that reshaped boundaries that undergird US immigration policies. Their understandings were a way of contending with the "non-navigable situations" that are the hallmark of displacement.⁴³ Many interviewees sought to argue that, in their cases, displacement was actually misplacement: based on their behavior and character, they deserved to be grouped with formally recognized citizens. In that it reproduced individualized notions of merit rather than examining social conditions that shape behavior and highlighted qualities such as autonomy and law-abidingness associated with both neoliberalism and the politics of respectability, this argument also implied that others were undeserving. At the same time, a smaller number of interviewees, particularly those associated with grassroots youth and student organizations, challenged boundaries altogether, arguing that everyone deserved legal status and that, for citizenship to be meaningful, struggles needed to encompass workers' rights, feminism, and prison abolitionism. Cutting across both of these perspectives, interviewees denounced the racial injustice and labor exploitation that they had experienced. Such denunciations critiqued US policies for furthering white privilege and economic advantage.

Drawing on Aimee Cox's notion of *shapeshifting*, we have argued that illegalized residents' accounts perform a politics of displacement by discursively reshaping social and political institutions. Regarding the Black girls who were her interlocutors, Cox writes, "how they experience their lives is thus 'inherently political,' even while their politics are inaccessible in the narratives that situate them in various, often competing discourses."⁴⁴ Similarly, interviewees' narratives took on inherently political significance as they critiqued US immigration policy for being arbitrary and racially biased, sought to invoke

an implicit social contract according to which they deserved recognition, revalued agricultural and domestic labor as socially worthwhile, and in some cases, positioned themselves not just as individuals but also as members of collectivities, such as workers or women. In so doing, interviewees countered dispossession and displacement with emplacement, attempted to envision agentive futures, and kept hope alive despite prolonged waiting. In their vision, institutions would treat them as residents, enabling them to live dignified lives, something that became even more challenging under the Trump administration. Whether any of this vision becomes an actuality remains to be seen.

NOTES

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