

# The DREAM Act Controversy: Collective Action and Public Self-Representation of Undocumented Youth

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**ABSTRACT:** This article investigates the advocacy of so-called undocumented immigrant youth for the United States DREAM Act, a highly controversial piece of legislation proposed to provide qualifying undocumented, educated immigrants a pathway to permanent citizenship. While earlier phases of activism (2001 to 2007) were characterized by strategies of a neoliberal immigration reform discourse, from 2007 onwards undocumented youth changed their tactics, using a more radical approach which involved increased visibility and vocality, the use of civil disobedience tactics, and the disclosure of their undocumented status. I argue that undocumented activists thereby managed to create narratives and perform acts that challenge existing neoliberal discursive frameworks and re-envisioned their self-understanding and representation.

**KEYWORDS:** DREAM Act, Undocumented Youth, Public Discourse, Immigration Rhetoric

## Introduction

In his remarks on comprehensive immigration reform on 29 January 2013, U.S. President Barack Obama declared that one of three central steps to improve the U.S. immigration system was taking up the cause of the DREAMers,<sup>1</sup> “the young people who were brought to this country as children, young people who have grown up here, built their lives here, have futures here” (Obama). He referred to the DREAM Act—the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act—which aims to provide conditional permanent residency to undocumented<sup>2</sup> immigrants who have arrived in the U.S. as minors, have graduated from

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<sup>1</sup> The term “DREAMers” was coined in 2003 and has been used by undocumented immigrants to describe the roughly 1.8 million undocumented migrants in the United States who might benefit from the DREAM Act, i.e. might be eligible for conditional citizenship. The term however quickly expanded to also include all those activists who were fighting for the acceptance of the DREAM Act. Whenever the term is used in the context of this article, it is restricted to its original coinage and thus solely refers to activists with an undocumented status.

<sup>2</sup> The term “undocumented” certainly cannot be adopted in a critical analysis of immigration discourse without a comprehensive analysis of the term itself. Using the term “undocumented” to describe migrants in the United States is indeed controversial, as many of them do have documents (educational certificates, library cards, debits cards etc.) which speak to their identities. The term “undocumented,” parallel to other terms such as “illegal” or “unauthorized,” must thus be understood as one way of discursively neglecting their very real and indeed very much documented participation in the United States on the sole basis of their lacking the adequate passport. For the purpose of this paper, however, I still make use of the term “undocumented,” as it is the term used by the DREAMer youth movement I am

U.S. high schools, and have lived in the country for more than five years. The President further emphasized how the DREAM Act represented an important and necessary step towards fixing the “broken immigration system” (Obama). To be eligible for the Act, undocumented immigrant students are required to undergo a criminal “background check” and must prove “good moral character” (DREAM Act of 2011).<sup>3</sup> After approval, they would be given six years to complete two years of college education or serve in the U.S. military, in order to eventually become permanent residents.

When the Act was first introduced by Representative Luis Gutiérrez on April 25, 2001 as the *Immigrant Children’s Educational Advancement and Dropout Prevention Act of 2001*, proponents considered it a “common-sense piece of legislation [that] hoped for a quick passage” (Gerken 284). However, following the events of 9/11, U.S. immigration politics became more reserved toward foreigners, and the Act suddenly found itself surrounded by an unwelcoming atmosphere, consequently discussed but repeatedly rejected in both Senate and Congress between 2001 and 2007.<sup>4</sup> The bill was supported and heavily promoted by President Barack Obama during his election campaign and subsequent presidency in 2008, but was eventually defeated once again by the Senate in September 2010. The Act nonetheless continued to be supported publicly and as of November 2013, thirteen states have adopted their own versions of the DREAM Act, which deal with in-state tuition rates and allow undocumented youth to qualify for state financial aid.<sup>5</sup> As the only proposed legislation that aims to create a pathway to citizenship for *undocumented* immigrants, the DREAM Act therefore represents one of the most controversially discussed benevolent immigration bills in recent U.S. history.

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writing about.

<sup>3</sup> While the term “good moral character” might be considered ambivalent and unprovable, the term is chiefly used in U.S. immigration law and is understood as an absence of involvement in certain illegal activities which are defined in INA (Immigration and Nationality Act) 101(f).

<sup>4</sup> In the Senate: S. 1545 (108th Congress), S. 2075 (109th Congress), S. 774 (110th Congress), and S. 2205 (110th Congress). In the House: H.R. 1684 (108th Congress), H.R. 5131 (109th Congress), and H.R. 1275 (110th Congress).

<sup>5</sup> The states that have adopted Acts for undocumented immigrants are Texas, California, Illinois, Utah, Nebraska, Kansas, New Mexico, New York, Washington, Wisconsin, Massachusetts, Maryland, and Minnesota.

The persistent discussions and the reluctant passage of the Act on the state level reflect the long-standing ambivalence toward immigration in the United States. Yet the fighting of young undocumented activists that has surrounded the DREAM Act seems unique. Obama's immigration reform speech and the adoption of local DREAM Act versions were preceded by years of organized collective action by the so-called DREAMer movement,<sup>6</sup> which started forming with the Act's introduction in 2001. With the numerous rejections and the ongoing discussions of the Act on several political levels, tactics and narratives of undocumented activists have however changed over time. Claudia Anguiano points to two distinctive phases of the DREAM Act movement,<sup>7</sup> both "with unique internal and external strategies used to advocate for social change" (83). In the first phase from 2001 to 2007, self-representation strategies mainly tried to create a collective group identity and a unique, repeated narrative of the DREAMers. The concomitant narrative represents individual DREAMers as exceptional students and valuable assets for the U.S. economy, and thus aims to counter the derogatory and dehumanizing stereotype of the 'illegal alien.' An analysis of the rhetoric and the strategies practiced in this first phase reveals that they represent a perpetuation of the neoliberal logic that dominated immigration reform discourse since the 1990s. Through success stories, migrants portrayed themselves as eager to contribute to the U.S. labor market and as victims of an unfair political system. This portrayal neglected larger discussions and a potential revision of the U.S. immigration system. In the second phase however, which roughly began after repeated defeats of the DREAM Act in 2007, a striking divergence in tactics from the earlier phase can be observed, as undocumented activists now started to display an oppositional consciousness.

In this article I therefore want to examine the debates surrounding the announcement of Obama's executive action and the adoption of local versions of the Act in the second phase

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<sup>6</sup> The movement is often also referred to as the *Undocumented Youth Movement*. DREAM youth organizing started as early as 2001 firstly by other, already existing immigrant rights groups. By the mid-2000s, the young students began to organize themselves and new immigrant youth organizations were created, mainly on the state level or affiliated with universities. All state-level organizations are now connected by the only national activist network *United We Dream* (UWD), which helped to unite the scattered group of students all over the United States to become a national network.

<sup>7</sup> Anguiano also refers to a third phase of the movement (May to December 2010). This phase was neglected for this investigation, as the aspects that set this phase apart from phase 2 do not regard strategies of self-representation, but are mainly concerned with how the DREAM Act movement is organized.

of the movement. In light of the persistent and escalating support of the DREAM Act in the public sphere, I seek to present and analyze their strategies of discursive self-representation. While previous studies describe the undocumented population as existing “in the shadows” (Chávez et al. 1997, Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011, Corrunker 2012), these undocumented students have made themselves visible and have become increasingly vocal and public about their demands for social and legal inclusion. Particularly after 2007, the young DREAMers reached an unprecedented level of vocality and publicity for undocumented migrants. My analysis of exemplary self-representations will show how participants were able to challenge common reform discourse strategies—such as the depiction of immigrants as desirable neoliberal subjects—by, for example, not adhering to dominant U.S. societal norms. I especially focus on three main tactics: the public disclosure of the undocumented status, the use of civil disobedience tactics, and the non-compliance with U.S. gender norms. While I will also point out parallels to other U.S. activist movements, I will eventually contend that both the visibility and the vocality that DREAM Act activists have attained from 2007 to 2011 inaugurate a new chapter in how undocumented immigrants strategically represent themselves vis-à-vis the United States as a political entity and as their country of residence and upbringing.

### **Immigration Reform Discourse and Self-Representations of Undocumented Migrants**

The study of rhetoric representations of migrants and migration immediately directs attention to the differentiation between the discourse and the practice of migration, denying an uncomplicated separation of these two. On the contrary, scholars of political rhetoric have argued that the public comes to comprehend immigration through its depiction in the media. It has been argued that contemporary media creates a specific locale, “a space, where social issues collide, where political issues are struggled over and subject positions [...] are constituted” (Ono and Sloop 2). Following this argumentation, the political and the symbolic arenas of migration are never neatly distinct, “which makes attention to the mediated complexities of immigrants crucial” (Flores 365, also see Lowe 1996, Osajima 1988). Scholars of political rhetoric have further argued that “[immigration] rhetoric shifts borders, changing what they mean publicly, influencing public policy, altering the ways borders affect people, and circumscribing political responses” (Ono and Sloop 5).

There is consensus in studies of U.S. immigration discourse studies that these shifts in public discourse are affected by and subjected to the changing circumstances of immigration policy and societal attitudes toward immigration.<sup>8</sup> While this theoretically drafts immigration rhetoric as susceptible to change, recent studies nevertheless reveal that most conversations have “point[ed] to uniformity in the public vocabulary surrounding immigration” (Flores 23). From the colonial period via the early years of the republic to eras of policy restriction (1917 to 1964) and liberalization (1965 to the present), a recurring strategy can be identified that racializes immigrants and particular immigrant groups by presenting them as the ‘racial other’ and by implicitly or explicitly excluding them from the American (imagined) community. There is an unresolved contradiction here: On the one hand, the narrative of a ‘nation of immigrants’ was and is taught in American schools, has replaced narratives of white supremacy and assimilation, and is thus by now understood as a core narrative of the United States. On the other hand, public rhetorical strategies connect immigration to ‘illegality’ and ‘criminality,’ and immigrants are depersonalized as ‘masses’ and condemned as a ‘threat’ to the nation (Flores 368, 372; Ono and Sloop 34, 44, 50ff; Santa Ana 217f). While counter-stereotypes may foreground the potential positive contributions of immigrants to the nation, the overall tone of discourse has not been changed by them.<sup>9</sup> Whether invoked directly or indirectly, the figure of the ‘illegal alien’ is hauntingly persistent, as is the quick turn to deportation and criminalization. A xenophobic rhetoric pattern can be traced that closely connects immigration and criminality, implying that “the slippage from immigrant to criminal almost seems natural” (Flores 363, also Ono and Sloop 32f, 56, 94).

Studies of immigration reform discourse also reveal that even the strategies adopted by undocumented activists to promote immigration reform were “reifying many of the most troubling and racist aspects of anti-immigration rhetoric” (Ono and Sloop 159). Racial stereotypes remain uninvestigated and do not challenge dominant logics. Contemporary

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<sup>8</sup> See Ono and Sloop 2002, particularly Chapter 1, for a comprehensive synopsis of this argument. Also see the articles by Flores 2003, Kingsolver 2010 and Mehan 2014.

<sup>9</sup> The trope of the ‘peon laborer,’ as one example of such a counter-stereotype, describes a hard-working, ideal migrant who is often depicted as Mexican and is seen as “docile, obedient and loyal” (Flores 371). This narration was crafted in times of U.S. labor shortage (during the early nineteenth century). While it can be categorized as an example of a benevolent depiction of migrants on the one hand, its meanings as a political tool to enhance immigration on the other hand should not be neglected.

rhetoric studies regularly identify the metaphors which cast migrants as objects, diseases, criminals and enemies even in pro-immigration texts. Furthermore, strategies of self-representations, used for example by undocumented activists, tend to fall back on a larger neoliberal framework. The DREAMers portray themselves as desirable economic subjects, as highly assimilated, and as “eager to adhere to dominant U.S. norms, particularly gender norms” (Gerken 285). In contrast, representations that counter dominant logics and create new rhetorical representations are rare. Their discursive strategies hence present a continuation of the neoliberal logic that controlled immigration reform discourse in the mid-1990s: the U.S. would only admit those migrants who had the potential to develop into “net contributors” (Gerken 285)—meaning people who work hard, preferably in positions that ‘white middle-class Americans’ do not want, pay taxes, do not use any public services, and act responsibly and respectfully. In response, undocumented migrants understandably have tried to present themselves as exactly those net contributors. Self-representations include narratives of exceptional, highly achieving immigrants who deemphasize their history, their heritage, and their family ties. By distancing themselves from their own parents and their country of origin, undocumented migrants align themselves with legislators and U.S. citizens, and often mark their innocence by highlighting the fact that they were brought to the United States by their parents when they were still too young to decide for themselves. However, by maintaining this logic, these self-representations do not address potential structural inequalities in the United States. This rhetoric hence obstructs a more substantial examination of the U.S. immigration system and a more fundamental debate about who undocumented immigrants are, where they are historically situated and why they are in the U.S. illegally.

The following analysis of the unprecedented activism of young undocumented migrants surrounding the DREAM Act passage will firstly show how the first phase of the movement picks up this neoliberal logic. However, in a next step that is looking at the second phase of the movement, I will show how DREAMers edged away from a narrow-minded emphasis on personal merit and innocence, and thus were able to inspect the greater realities of the U.S. immigration system and the contingent structural (and discursive) barriers that continue to exist.

### **Self-Representations Surrounding the DREAM Act (2001 to 2007)**

As I have already briefly sketched, undocumented activists in the first phase of the DREAM movement mainly tried to establish a collective group identity. Proponents also made a strategic choice to not use the proposed legislation as an opportunity to discuss a more far-reaching overhaul of the U.S. immigration system. Quite to the contrary, undocumented activists emphasized that the DREAM Act was a “narrowly tailored bill” (Anguiano 217) that would only benefit a select, limited group of particularly ‘deserving’ individuals who have earned their legal status and demonstrated their commitment to become ‘productive’ citizens of the U.S. By rhetorically downsizing the Act and its implications, undocumented activists thus tried to prevent that it could be interpreted as a ‘threat’ to U.S. society.

This narrative was mainly spread through the form of testimonials, which were related by individual activists anonymously<sup>10</sup> during public hearings and were afterward collected on activists’ web sites. Earlier studies have already revealed that the testimonials represent a continuation of the neoliberal logic that dominated immigration reform discourse since the 1990s. As Gerken points out, undocumented activists advanced a “powerful rhetoric that portrayed legal immigrants as productive neoliberal subjects [...] eager to contribute to the U.S. labor market” (286). They furthermore portrayed themselves as “innocent victims of an unjust system” (286), exemplified in the testimony by Silvia R. published by the Harvard initiative *Act on a Dream* in March 2002:

My name is Silvia R. I will be 23 years old later this month. I was brought to Arizona from Mexico over 20 years ago, when my family came in search of a better life. We entered the country with visas, which later expired. Our family lived like every other family: my mother and father worked, my brother and sister, both US citizens, and I, grew up with the children around us. I learned English at a young age from a purple dinosaur, enjoyed pizza, and pool parties with friends. But our lives at home were not ideal. [...] Things did not get better when I wanted to get a driving permit, apply for scholarships to attend college, or register to vote. My mom brought me to reality by telling me that our families’ visas had expired. [...] I have now been accepted to start my Masters at Harvard University this fall [...] As I stand with my community, with Dream Act students, and the state of Arizona, we are crying out for help. We cry out for justice. We cry out for respect, and we defend our dignity here in Washington DC, and at home. [...] pass the Dream Act as a stand-alone bill. (“Silvia R.” 15 March 2002)

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<sup>10</sup> Undocumented activists either spoke under a false name or would only provide their first name.

All three distinctive aspects that mark the first phase of activism can be traced in these short extracts from Silvia's testimonial: firstly, Silvia uses only her first name and an initial to disguise her identity and to protect herself from possible deportation measures. The testimonial is published on a website without additional references or material (such as e.g. a picture, as is common with testimonials), the reader can thus never trace the author of the testimonial. The main emphases of the testimonial are on her personal merit ("I have now been accepted to start my Masters at Harvard University this fall") and her values and morals which fit into the U.S. system ("learned English," "pool parties with friends," "attend college"). Silvia's testimonial is also typical for the moment of revelation it entails: She relates how she came to the United States as a young child and explains that only when her parents acknowledge that their residence in the U.S. is not officially authorized, she realizes that her status is also not covered by residence law. By doing so, Silvia claims a certain innocence, as she was only a young child when brought to the U.S. She also points to the limited choices that migrants have when they realize they are indeed undocumented ("As I stand with my community, with Dream Act students, and the state of Arizona, we are crying out for help"). The underlying assumption is that her testimonial relates an experience shared by many of her generation and demographic. Lastly, Silvia presents the DREAM Act as the resolution for adopting her—the exceptional student—into U.S. society. In line with Gerken's findings, she emphasizes how the DREAM Act might be passed as a "stand-alone bill" and how that would resolve the status- and statelessness of undocumented students.

In the first phase of the movement, young DREAMers thus wanted to be respected for their potential and their commitment to education. They described themselves repetitively as hard-working, non-threatening and highly assimilated. Their personal stories were used in a variety of different contexts, presented in different formats, in congressional debates and also on mainstream media. Their testimonials are examples of the depictions of individual hardship and an economically-oriented discourse strategy that highlights participants' potential to contribute to the U.S. economy. This portrayal of education benefits as an investment in immigrants and the accentuation of the liminality of the DREAM Act certainly adheres to the typical post-1990s reform discourse, and hence neglects larger discussions of U.S. immigration problems.

### Strategic Self-Representation after 2007

When the DREAM Act was brought to a vote once again in the Senate on October 24, 2007, the vote was 52 to 44, therefore short of the 60 votes margin required to begin a debate on Capitol Hill. Even though political analysts had proclaimed that this was the best time for enactment of the bill, several factors resulted in the Senate voting down the DREAM Act.<sup>11</sup> The bill was challenged from both sides, being too expansive “for conservative legislators who feared being tarred as supporting ‘amnesty,’” while also being too narrow for liberal legislators who feared that “enacting it would torpedo the larger strategy of reforming overall immigration problems” (Olivas 65). While this rejection certainly was one deciding factor in why activists decided to change their tactics after October 2007, it was furthermore accompanied by several high profile deportations of undocumented students. As a result of both events, the conversation by undocumented immigrants activists about the “dire need to do something” (*DreamActivist* “Outline”) basically catapulted the debate to a different level of critical consciousness.

By the end of 2007, several undocumented immigrant activist groups resolved to speak out strongly about the Act and to redesign their tactics. The impact of the vote, which was understood as a defeat, was “the creation of a full-fledged undocumented youth movement with a whole new set of used tactics” (Anguiano 134). In striking contrast to the earlier phase, undocumented activists started to demonstrate an *oppositional* consciousness. According to Taylor and Whittier, such a consciousness becomes evident “when a group develops an account that challenges dominant understanding” (179). This challenging of dominant understanding is first traceable in the expansion of the label DREAMer, descriptions of which often include the keywords “unapologetic,” “unafraid,” and “unashamed” after 2007. This phase hence points to a progressive sense of agency and vocality for the DREAMers involved in the social movement, which arguably enabled a shift in discourse tactics. Particularly the acts of “coming out,” of challenging heteronormativity,

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<sup>11</sup> Political scholars mainly associated the failure of the Act with the absenteeism of several Democratic supporters, redacted support of two Republican Senators, and the White House’s efforts to dissuade passage (Olivas 88).

and of civil disobedience are worth investigating for their potential of re-envisioning U.S. immigration discourse.

### Coming Out of the Shadows

“Coming out” or “coming out of the shadows” of undocumented youth has been at the core of the DREAM Act activist movement after 2007. As has been noted earlier, undocumented immigrants in the United States are often described as existing only “in the shadows”: their status does not allow them to openly speak or present themselves in public because they risk deportation. The phrase “coming out of the closet” usually refers to moments when “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (“LGBTQ”) individuals decide to reveal their sexual orientation or gender identity to their families, friends, and communities” (Villazor 1). Parallel to that, “coming out of the shadows” stands for the act of revealing one’s undocumented status, firstly to friends and acquaintances. This not only empowered the DREAMers, as they for the first time were able to express their situation in society, but also inspired solidarity and created co-conspirators. In a next step, DREAMers also came out in legal and public settings (such as court room testimonials, media portrayals and protest speeches). While in the previous phase an unofficial policy of anonymity had guided the movement, this was officially broken when students started to disclose private information publicly. Student narratives were now shared personally and directly – rather than anonymously and preferably online – with the public and the institutions that had power over the bill.

One exemplary event was the *National DREAM Act Graduation Day* in Washington on June 23, 2009, organized by *United We Dream*, the largest nonpartisan immigrant youth-led network that advocates for the DREAM Act. Exclusively organized for undocumented youth, this “national” graduation ceremony permitted young undocumented immigrants to descend on the Capitol wearing caps and gowns, thus bringing visibility and public attention to their cause of promoting the DREAM Act. As the *United We Dream* network is made up of 52 affiliate organizations in 25 states, they were able to gather more than 500 students from across the country on Capitol Hill on that day (*DreamActivist* “Mock Graduation Ceremony”). All participants of the symbolic ceremony dressed in graduation attire and often wore signs around their necks reading “Future Engineer” or “I support the DREAM Act.” While the

format of a graduation ceremony can still be associated with the foregrounding of personal merit, the event nonetheless significantly differed from the type of discursive and legislative efforts that had characterized the strategies of the first phase. In contrast to a similar ceremony in 2004, undocumented students who addressed the audience on stage used their full names, thereby signaling a stride towards vocality. Every testimonial began with the sentence “My name is [First Name/Last Name] and I am undocumented.” In doing so they, of course, faced the threat of deportation; the activists, however, used this to their benefit by pointing out the risk of deportation to the public as part of their speeches. From 2007 onward, they openly announced the injustice of deportation whenever disclosing their status. The fact that undocumented students began not only to speak in public and give a face to the protests, but also to use their full names therefore signaled a distinct shift in movement tactics towards a critique of the general deportation process. This brings attention to the larger DREAM cause and also highlights individual DREAMers, particularly those who were already in the middle of high-profile deportation proceedings at the time.<sup>12</sup> By calling for an end to the deportations of all immigrant youth, and by using real names in the process, DREAMers hence signaled that they were advocating at a different level from before. Founding members of *United We Dream* and *DreamActivist*<sup>13</sup> also further encouraged the undocumented activists in attendance to continue to organize collectively, to reveal the status of being undocumented tactically, to point out the injustice of deportations of undocumented immigrants regularly, and thereby to stay on the path of resistance. The 2009 *Graduation Day* can thus be understood as a major milestone during the second phase of activism, as it displayed the new strategies of visibility, vocality and resistance for the first time to a greater audience.

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<sup>12</sup> The first story that gained broad public attention was the one of Karen Maldonado, who already was a *United We Dream* activist when she received her deportation order in 2011. Her story was followed by that of Heydi Mejia, who illegally entered the United States with her mother when she was 4 years old, graduated from high school in 2012 and was scheduled to be deported a few days later. After weeks of protests and discussions, she was granted a one-year deferral by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

<sup>13</sup> The website <http://www.dreamactivist.org> is one of the major migrant youth-led social media hubs born out of the movement to pass the DREAM Act and pursue the enactment of other forms of legislation that aim to overhaul the U.S. immigration system. The related organization *DreamActivist* is one of the affiliate organizations of *United We Dream*.

The changes in strategy can however not only be traced in DREAMer appearances in the public sphere. Also within the movement, strategies toward visibility and vocality were integrated and translated into directions for undocumented activists. One example is the *Coming Out Guide of DreamActivist*, which was created in connection with the National Coming Out Day in Chicago in March 2011:

In the same way the LGBTQ community has historically come out, undocumented youth, some of whom are also part of the LGBTQ community, have decided to speak openly about their status. Your courage will open the way to having even more conversations about your immigration status. Sharing your stories will allow us, as a movement of undocumented youth, to grow, as we continue to learn to accept ourselves. (*DreamActivist "Coming Out"*)

The step-by-step guide explains the maneuver of "coming out" and connects it to regaining control over one's own cause:

Being undocumented doesn't define who you are. By Coming Out we take back our right of speech that for years others have been trying to control and oppress. Being undocumented is something that has given us strength and patience throughout the years. Nobody, not even the Senate, can stop us. We're here and we're not leaving, be proud and be loud! (*DreamActivist "Coming Out"*)

Not unlike other earlier movement efforts by African-American activists or the Chicano movement, DREAMers efforts to "come out" and regain empowerment thus "helped constitute, maintain, and defend advantageous conceptions of the self" (Morris and Browne 3). Also on the rhetorical level, tropes and narratives were directly borrowed from earlier movements, as the phrase "be proud and be loud" demonstrates, which clearly alludes to James Brown's "Say it loud! I'm black and I'm proud," the funk song that became an unofficial anthem of the Black Power movement. Other examples include the adoption of the Spanish version of Obama's campaign slogan, "Sí, se puede," used by undocumented activists to close their testimonials in court but also as a slogan during demonstrations. DREAMers thus draw a connection to the motto of the United Farm Workers and the various adoptions of the slogan by civil rights organizations. Borrowing language from several civil rights movements and deploying it in their immigration justice movement is a sign for locating the DREAMer cause in a broader civil rights discourse. By both aligning themselves with other civil rights movements and pointing out the injustice of the deportations, DREAMers in the second phase of the movement not only aim to overcome their silence by

describing their own conditions and experiences, but also upgrade their problem to a general civil rights problem and thus challenge the overall immigration framework of the United States.

### Challenging Heteronormativity

The alignment of the DREAMer movement with other civil rights movements is even more remarkable when looking more closely at the connection to LGBTQ claims. When Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jose Antonio Vargas publicly “came out” in 2011 in a cover story in the *New York Times*, his name became immediately connected to the DREAM Act movement. However, his “coming out” was not only limited to revealing his undocumented status. In his article, Vargas exposed and chronicled his life as an undocumented and homosexual immigrant:

I majored in black studies, I’m gay, and I’m undocumented. I’m like an affirmative action hire gone amuck. But I actually think I liberated myself a couple of years ago when I started thinking, “I’m not a minority. I’m actually a majority of one.” That’s where we’re headed in this country, I think. We have to stop thinking of ourselves as minorities. (Vargas 2011)

In a sense, one could refer to his narrative as one of a twofold coming-out: by being a “border gay,” as Stephen Colbert called him in a subsequent television interview, Vargas not only faces the challenges of being homosexual in the predominantly white, heteronormative society and of being illegally in the nation, he also faces the challenge of being a homosexual in an undocumented community. By saying “I’m not a minority. I’m actually a majority of one,” he refers to the fact that up until his outing, homosexuality had not been publicly discussed among undocumented groups. By coming out, he also risked alienation from the undocumented community. This, however, was his clear intention as he wanted to change the way that people see undocumented immigrants, including how undocumented migrants see and present themselves.

Vargas additionally wrote an essay for *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* in which he related more details about his life and how being undocumented had affected him. He reported how he discovered being undocumented as a teenager, and then had to hide his status for more than 15 years. In those years, he worked, paid taxes, but he always worried that his status could be exposed. Both the cover story and the essay received much

attention within and outside the DREAM Act movement, as they marked the first time that a prominent undocumented immigrant not only revealed his/her status, but also revealed his/her homosexuality and thereby challenged traditional gender roles. Vargas' representation can therefore be seen as a counter-product to the post-1990s self-representations of immigrants as heteronormative, conformist U.S. citizens:

Later that school year, my history class watched a documentary on Harvey Milk, the openly gay San Francisco city official who was assassinated. This was 1999, just six months after Matthew Shepard's body was found tied to a fence in Wyoming. During the discussion, I raised my hand and said something like: "I'm sorry Harvey Milk got killed for being gay. . . . I've been meaning to say this. . . . I'm gay." [...]

I hadn't planned on coming out that morning, though I had known that I was gay for several years. With that announcement, I became the only openly gay student at school, and it caused turmoil with my grandparents. Lolo kicked me out of the house for a few weeks. Though we eventually reconciled, I had disappointed him on two fronts. First, as a Catholic, he considered homosexuality a sin and was embarrassed about having "*angaponabakla*" ("a grandson who is gay"). Even worse, I was making matters more difficult for myself, he said. I needed to marry an American woman in order to gain a green card. (Vargas 2011)

Vargas' article is also exemplary for new accounts of self-representation in that he intensively describes his history and the 'unlawful' contacts and networks that accompanied him when he was young. While earlier self-representations kept quiet about accounts of their parents and of possible connection with illegality, Vargas is 'unafraid' to include them in his statement:

The "uncle" who brought me here turned out to be a coyote, not a relative, my grandfather later explained. Lolo scraped together enough money—I eventually learned it was \$4,500, a huge sum for him—to pay him to smuggle me here under a fake name and fake passport. (I never saw the passport again after the flight and have always assumed that the coyote kept it.) After I arrived in America, Lolo obtained a new fake Filipino passport, in my real name this time, adorned with a fake student visa, in addition to the fraudulent green card.

Using the fake passport, we went to the local Social Security Administration office and applied for a Social Security number and card. It was, I remember, a quick visit. When the card came in the mail, it had my full, real name, but it also clearly stated: "Valid for work only with I.N.S. authorization." (Vargas 2011)

Vargas' self-representation is therefore exemplary of the 'new' adopted tactics of DREAM Act activism and started a re-envisioning also within the movement. His revelations encouraged other DREAM activists to also commit to twofold coming-out statements, thus giving rise to the label "UndocuQueer" for homosexual undocumented immigrants in the

United States. Vargas himself used his media attention and founded *Define American*, a non-profit project aimed at aiding dialogue about immigration problems and possible solutions including the DREAM Act, but also general immigration overhaul. Vargas' life-narrative thus is another exemplary account of how self-representations tend to move away from portrayals of 'perfect' U.S. subjects and instead begin to produce narratives that counter dominant discursive frameworks.

### Civil Disobedience

While publicly announcing one's undocumented status and constructing self-representations which challenge traditional gender norms are certainly shifts in how immigrants represent themselves, a further disappointment in political processes in 2008 led to an even more radical approach of activism. When in 2008 Obama won the elections, his engagement with the DREAM Act, as promised during campaigning, was anticipated by activists. Obama served as a role model and inspiration for many DREAMers, as his life story showed parallels to theirs. When the DREAM Act however took a backseat as Obama's presidency was forced to deal with the severe economic downturn and the housing-market crash, the DREAMers were left feeling as "if they're sitting on a bus that's out of service" (*DreamActivist* "United We DREAM"). Undocumented activists started using the phrase "Deferred dreams from my father" (Vasquez "Deferred Dreams"), which picks up Obama's memoir *Dreams from My Father* and characterizes their disappointment in the new president and the legislative developments surrounding the DREAM Act. When in 2010 the issue was still not on the President's priority list, and the focus was instead turned to health-care reform and midterm elections, the DREAMers felt once again that the Obama administration was no longer listening to their concerns. This time, their disappointment led to an interrogation of the general structural inequalities in the United States by adopting civil disobedience tactics.

At the end of 2010, DREAM activists stated that "instead of proceeding down the same path to nowhere, now we are beginning to see bold action by immigrant youth" (*DreamActivist* "Reform Dies"). While "the same path to nowhere" here refers to promoting the passage of the DREAM Act and adhering to legal proceedings, "bold action" would soon be translated into acts of civil disobedience. At the core of the civil disobedience efforts was a focus on showing DREAMers' commitments to the movement, and DREAM activists were presenting

“the courage to venture into the unknown, risk failure, say no to current demands, and commit to a course of action that we can only hypothesize will yield the desired outcome” (Ganz 8). This can be demonstrated by taking a statement from *The DREAM is Coming*, a website that unites the newly composed strategies:

We are compelled by our frustration and the fierce urgency of our dreams to act as agents of our destinies and be the catalysts for a future in which we are empowered, mobilized, and living with the dignity we deserve. We are a group of undocumented youth who have worked for years on a path to legalization. We are at a point in our movement where radical action has become necessary for our communities and ourselves. Through civil disobedience, we are demanding that Congress and President Obama pass the DREAM Act immediately. This action is a catalyst for the escalation of the immigrants’ rights movement. (*The DREAM is Coming* 2010)

While the moral appeals and the ongoing goal of the passage of the Act are important and remarkable here, it must also be noted that the rhetorical stances for moral legitimacy were seen as being more effective when “backed by such nonviolent direct actions as sit-ins, boycotts, mass marches, and strikes” (Ganz 5). *The DREAM is Coming* therefore featured a countdown on their website site which purposely ended on May 17, 2010. On that day, five undocumented leaders of the immigrant student movement engaged in an act of civil disobedience: Mohammad Abdollahi from Michigan, Raul Alcaraz from Arizona, Yahaira Carrillo from Missouri, Tania Unzueta from Illinois and Lizbeth Mateo from California performed a sit-in at the office of Senator John McCain. After several hours, four of the five were arrested by Arizona law enforcement officials and were sent to detainment. By staging this act on May 17, the exact date of the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision on *Brown v. Board of Education*,<sup>14</sup> they intentionally linked their protest to the civil rights movement. Undocumented activists argued that still no equal protection of the laws is available when it comes to legal status.

This first act and its successful creation of media attention soon inspired other activists to stage similar civil disobedience actions across the country, always with the intention to “push legislators to help enact the DREAM Act” (Anguiano 187). Most took place at the

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<sup>14</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education* is a landmark U.S. Supreme Court Case, which in 1954 declared separate public schools for black and white students as unconstitutional. It is known to be a major victory of the civil rights movement.

offices of senators or other politicians in key positions, and the acts were always restricted to a nonviolent resistance, i.e. a sit-in or a protest. The parallels to other social movements, particularly again the civil rights movements, are obvious as DREAMers not only used the same civil right strategies, but also adopted slogans and concepts from the movements. At the end of May 2010, the Kansas/Missouri DREAM Alliance for example coordinated a three-city sit-in in Kansas City, Washington, D.C., and St. Louis, urging the selected senators to sponsor the DREAM Act. Other protests in California followed in June, when twelve students were arrested in Senator Dianne Feinstein's office. While all actions clearly expressed disappointment with the political system of the United States (and its president), they were also used strategically to again point to the injustice of detention, thus challenging the immigration system and its definitions of citizenship. In the course of the acts, immigrants represented themselves not as exceptional students, but, quite to the contrary, as "law-breakers" (Anderson n.p.) by staging acts of civil disobedience. It is peculiar that they retained the legal passage of the DREAM Act as their goal. A re-envisioning of the Act itself and a reflection on how far it might actually serve undocumented activists towards fulfillment of their 'dreams' has not happened in this stage. The acts of civil disobedience were merely used as a support to promote the legal passage of the DREAM Act.

## **Conclusion**

Since the mid-1990s, mainstream immigration reform discourse has drawn a clear line between desirable immigrants, who are portrayed as hard-working and eager to be 'productive' neoliberal subjects, and those immigrants who are considered undesirable, i.e. undocumented immigrants. Undocumented activists in the twenty-first century have, as a logical result, primarily highlighted the significance of personal merit, and have downplayed the role that structural inequalities might play in denying them recognition as citizens. Undocumented immigrants have thus produced self-representations of the highly achieving, conformist future U.S. citizen. In the discourse surrounding the DREAM Act from 2001 until 2007, this logic can still be traced. Undocumented youth used testimonials and narrative self-representations to portray themselves as responsible neoliberal subjects, who invest in their education and are outstanding students. They thereby created a counter-narrative

against the stereotypical and deeply problematic representation of the so-called ‘illegal’ alien.

The debate that followed the defeat of the DREAM Act in 2007, however, has in several ways represented a break with the neoliberal logic that dominated the reform discourse. The use of civil disobedience, the “coming out of the shadows,” i.e. the revelation of one’s status, and the non-compliance with gender and societal norms was at the heart of these new debates. Particularly through new, norm-challenging self-representations, these accounts seem to have the potential to enable an essential re-envisioning of the U.S. immigration system as they stir a fundamental debate about who undocumented immigrants are as well as about their identifications and motivations. By continuing this path of argumentation, the DREAMers might be able to uncover the larger realities of the U.S. immigration system and the structural barriers that continue to exist. While further research is certainly needed to examine the field of immigration discourse in its entirety, my analysis has pointed to important areas that were subject to discursive shifts in the context of the DREAM Act and created an insight into resulting potentials for undocumented immigrant activism.

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