

2015

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Recommended Citation

Valenzuela, Jéssica I. (2015) "The DREAMers: How the Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate," *Diálogo*: Vol. 18 : No. 2 , Article 30.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol18/iss2/30>

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The DREAMers: How the Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate

BY WALTER J. NICHOLLS. STANFORD, CA: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013. 240 PP. ISBN 978-0804788847

Recounting the movement by the youth, dubbed “DREAMers” from the immigrant rights organizations that envisioned them as the face of immigration reform efforts, to autonomy and independence, the book *The DREAMers: How the Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate* is one of the first scholarly works mapping the trajectory of the Undocumented Youth Movement. The author’s purpose is to develop a theoretical framework for understanding “how undocumented immigrants overcome barriers, construct a powerful and legitimate voice, and assert this voice in the public sphere” (9). A sociology professor, Nicholls cites the DREAMers as a great example of a self-determined group that harnessed resources to impact immigration policies, and earned their place among national immigrant rights organizations. He posits that the DREAMers are an unusual group of undocumented immigrants because they do not shy away from demanding basic human rights, despite facing a hostile political and social environment.

The book is divided into three periods that contextualize and provide a timeline for the narrative: the 1990s through 2005; the important activism period of 2005-2007; and the more recent period of 2008-2010. Citing the escalation of border enforcement measures from the 1990s to 2005, which resulted in the increased permanent settlement of immigrants, paired with strong anti-immigrant policies at the federal, state, and local levels, Nicholls shows that the number of undocumented children grew, which built a significant base which would become the DREAMers. In the early 2000s, immigrant rights associations trained DREAMers with media messaging carefully crafted to gain support for the DREAM Act as a stand-alone bill, and later as the selling component of comprehensive immigration reform. Nicholls labels 2005-2007 the period of promising political climate for a shift in strategy to advocate for comprehensive immigration reform (46). While working with immigrant rights organizations, the DREAMers expanded their networks nationally, and honed the organizing skills that would eventually secure their autonomy. Finally, the period from 2008 to 2010 is characterized as the peak of centralization efforts where tensions rose from disagreements in

strategy by the immigrant advocating groups (46), by the end of which the DREAMers asserted and defined their own political voice.

One of Nicholls’ significant contributions is his documentation of how the DREAMers utilize cultural and symbolic capital, national habitus, and middle-class cultural capital to produce a public voice and national infrastructure. Having formed their own political analysis, the dissenting DREAMers managed with limited resources to engage in hunger strikes and acts of civil disobedience, taking the lead in the broader immigrant rights movement by pushing for the DREAM Act as a stand-alone bill. When traditional supporters blocked their efforts, DREAMers exposed grievances against the “social justice elite” (93-95) who refused to recognize them as political equals. Nicholls captures the complexity of this break by giving voice to the DREAMers, while describing their newfound allies and the organizations they severed ties with.

Nicholls employs “the term ‘DREAMer’ to describe politically active undocumented young adults who self-identify as ‘DREAMers’ and who have worked in campaigns to advance the rights of undocumented youth in the country” (18). But while aptly defining how the DREAMers claim their autonomy from the immigrant rights organizations and develop their own voice within the debate, the book falls short in recognizing the various autonomous movements that emerged during this period and their potential for transformative change. That multiplicity of voices includes DREAMers, Bad Dreamers,¹ undocumented and/or immigrant youth,² UndocuQueer/UndocuTrans³ and UndocuQueer Wombyn.⁴ These groups and individuals are at the forefront of intersectional organizing, building collaborations across social movements. Nicholls continues to group all undocumented youth organizers only as DREAMers, even after he states that the “‘undocumented and unafraid’ theme [...] has complicated past depictions of the good immigrant, which stressed total conformity with national values and [the] silencing of foreignness” (125). In doing so, he misses an opportunity to recognize what he labels as the undocumented and unafraid “theme” (124) as a

significant catalyst for transformation within/beyond the undocumented youth movement.

Some individuals and groups have rejected the DREAMer label for themselves and nevertheless played key roles in the community organizing that resulted in President Obama's 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) executive action, as well as the 2014 series of immigration executive actions. The new wave of immigrant youth community organizers and activists refer to themselves broadly as immigrants or undocumented youth, and at times more specifically as UndocuQueer, UndocuTrans, UndocuQueer Wombyn, and Bad Dreamers, among other terms. By leaving the DREAMer label behind, this matured and new wave of immigrant rights advocates engages in social justice efforts creatively, through *modus operandi* in education, arts, health advocacy, law careers, and social media. No longer seeking the validation that the DREAMer cloak espoused, they have moved away from the spotlight and creatively seek new solutions to the struggles faced by immigrant communities. Furthermore, through this multiplicity of voices has the ability to build bridges across social movements and to transform the meritocratic and hierarchical classification of immigrants. Nicholls briefly discusses undocumented youth involvement in enforcement campaigns. However, there is more to be said about the leadership role undocumented youth have played in ending deportation efforts and demanding the recognition of human rights for the undocumented immigrant community at large.

Recognizing the factions of the undocumented youth movement has implications for human rights. The youth and young adults who emerge from the DREAMer movement possess skills sharpened from working with immigrant rights organizations. Paired with their critical lens and autonomy, this generation of immigrants has the ability to impact social movements and radicalize the immigrant rights debate across the nation. Furthermore, with the increased deportations and relocations of such talented individuals, there is no doubt that they have the ability to influence social movements around the world.

Nicholls' book instills a sense of admiration for the DREAMers, yet, it falls short in recognizing their potential to transform the immigrant rights debate. The author does not consider the ways in which the DREAMers and other factions of the Undocumented Youth Movement continue to evolve as self-determined and autonomous

political bodies that challenge definitions of citizenship and belonging. The autonomy and independence sought by youth who once called themselves DREAMers has helped them, and the new generation of undocumented youth, remain committed to the struggle for human rights.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Folks within the undocumented youth movement who openly critique the idea that legal status should be earned and highlight the privileges afforded to DREAMers.
- 2 Youth and young adult community organizers who refuse the DREAMer label and opt for one that is more inclusive; an example is the Immigrant Youth Coalition.
- 3 Folks whose community organizing is centered on the intersectionality of their identities as undocumented, queer and/or trans.
- 4 Folks whose community work transcends community organizing with immigrant rights groups mentioned above and who seek to address and heal from sexism and other layers of oppression perpetuated within pro-immigrant rights spaces.