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# Silencing to Give Voice: Backstage Preparations in the Undocumented Youth Movement in Los Angeles

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**Abstract** Building upon intensive ethnographic research on the undocumented youth movement in Los Angeles, this paper investigates the backstage work done by the leaders and activists within a movement to create cohesive and disciplined frontstage performances. These backstage techniques and strategies are important to examine because frontstage unity is not natural or automatic. As most campaigns are made up of heterogeneous individuals, organizations and groups, frontstage coherence is something that needs to be worked upon. We show that this essential backstage work consists of 1) training activists to become disciplined frontstage performers; 2) converging the feelings of activists through emotionally intensive disciplinary techniques; and 3) managing differences and conflicts in the free spaces of the movement. This paper thus aims to encourage scholars to look under the hood of public protests and give greater weight to studying the backstage work needed to produce strong and powerful voices.

**Keywords** Ethnography · Social movements · Emotions · Free spaces · Undocumented immigrants · Los Angeles

I walk over to the South Steps of City Hall in downtown Los Angeles. There are about 25 undocumented students standing on the steps in front of City Hall. They are dressed in different bright colored caps and gowns and they are holding signs stating “We are not criminals, we are DREAMers,” “Undocumented and Unafraid,” “Education, not deportation,” and “We are the future of America.” There are 10 people standing in front of the steps looking at the DREAMers performing the mock graduation ceremony.

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A couple of them are taking photographs and there are several film crews from the media present.

DREAMer and group leader Ernesto<sup>1</sup> is holding the megaphone and introduces DREAMer Uriel, who is wearing a purple cap and gown. Uriel takes the megaphone and gives his testimony: “Hi, my name is Uriel [sic] and I’m undocumented and unafraid. I came to the US at the age of 1.5 and the only country I remember is the United States. I am a student of urban studies and sociology at Loyola Marymount University and I want to be a real contribution to society, both socially and economically.”

Ernesto repeatedly leads a chant: “What do we want?”

The groups chants loudly “Dream Act!”

Ernesto: “When do we want it?”

Group: “NOW!”

This ethnographic vignette describes a public performance of a group of undocumented students—or DREAMers—in Los Angeles. It serves to illustrate the coherence and homogeneity found in the public performances of the undocumented youth movement in the United States. The public performances that the author witnessed during six months of ethnographic research all followed the same script, highlighting that undocumented students are deserving, well-adjusted and contributing American youths.

In the early 2000s, such a public performance would not have been possible. Undocumented youths in the United States did not exist as a public and political subject. There was great stigma associated with their undocumented status and parents stressed the importance of hiding their status from friends, teachers, and others outside their closest networks (Gonzalez 2011). By contrast, in the late 2000s, undocumented youths exploded onto the public stage with powerful arguments for why they deserved to be recognized as rights-bearing human beings. The initial struggle centered on pushing for the passage of the federal Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, but activists also embarked on state-level campaigns and, more recently, on campaigns to stop the aggressive deportation policies of the Obama administration. Their success was largely linked to a political and representational strategy that hinged on constructing a compelling and sympathetic public persona that adheres to national values and narratives (Nicholls 2013a, 2013b). By crafting a resonant mobilizing frame and producing strong public performances, the youths were able to create a powerful political voice as the DREAMers.

Social movement scholars have long suggested that a strong public voice depends on producing unified and resonant frames, narratives, stories, and performances (Benford 2002; Benford and Snow 2000; Polletta 2006; Snow et al. 1986). While the scholarly focus on frontstage activity has provided important insights into the potential success of social movements, what happens backstage has occupied a marginal space within the existing body of literature. James Scott (1990) once argued that most scholars scrutinize frontstage acts of protest while paying scant attention to the “hidden transcripts” unfolding backstage. Only recently has increasing attention been given to the processes and practices that occur in the backstage spaces of social movements (Haug 2015, 196). This article shows *how* backstage processes help shape unified frontstage performances and identities.

<sup>1</sup> All names used in this article have been substituted by the authors with pseudonyms.

These backstage techniques and strategies are important to examine because frontstage unity is not natural. As most campaigns are made up of heterogeneous individuals, organizations and groups, frontstage coherence is something that needs to be worked upon. Even when people have a common grievance, different ethnic, sexual, religious, class, gender, political, and geographical backgrounds give them different insights into the meanings of these grievances and the best ways to communicate them in the public sphere. Many social movements fail to gain public recognition precisely because of these internal differences and a lack of coordination and unity (Benford and Snow 2000; Fominaya 2010; Snow et al. 1986).

By drawing on the dramaturgical perspective as presented in Erving Goffman's classic sociological work the *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and using the undocumented students' movement as our case study, we aim to show how these cohesive and disciplined frontstage performances are dependent on the intensive backstage work done by leaders and activists within the movement. We show that this essential backstage work consists of 1) training activists to become disciplined frontstage performers; 2) converging the feelings of activists through emotionally-intensive disciplinary techniques; and 3) managing differences and conflicts in the "free spaces" within the movement (Evans and Boyde 1986). We aim to contribute to the literature on the construction of collective political identities (Melucci 1995; Polletta and Jasper 2001) by providing insight into the emotionally intensive work involved in this process. Moreover, we seek to contribute to and widen our understanding of the concept of free spaces (Evans and Boyde 1986; Polletta 1999; Polletta and Jasper 2001) by arguing that allowing critical and radical thoughts and feelings to run freely in the backstage spaces of the movement does not necessarily cause the disruption of a coherent public representation, but can actually aid it instead.

## The Dramaturgical Perspective: Frontstage/Backstage Approach

For Goffman (1959) social interaction is viewed as a type of theatrical performance, hence the term *dramaturgical*. Interaction is governed by people's efforts to manage the impressions they give off to others. Individual or team performers aim to control the information they give to the audience during an interaction in order for the audience to accept the definition of the situation as presented by the performer(s). To ensure that the given performance is regarded as convincing, or "real," dramaturgical control needs to be achieved. This requires an alignment of the setting and the corresponding personal front. The actual front consists of an "assemblage of expressive sign-equipment" (14) such as language, dialect, clothing, facial expressions, gestures, narrative and so forth; but it also consists of more relatively fixed personal characteristics, such as sex, body type and skin color. An actor's appearance, which communicates something about her social status, needs to be consistent with her manner, which communicates something about her role. As fronts carry with them stereotypical expectations, they often become institutionalized and are transformed into collective representations. For example, if someone wants to give a performance of a doctor, or of a middle-class woman, this carries with it certain behavioral and expressive expectations. "This constitutes one way in which a performance is, in a sense, 'socialized,' moulded and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented" (22–23).

Often people cooperate and coordinate their individual acts to perform collectively in teams. These teams need to be in agreement on the impression they want to convey to others. "One overall objective of any team is to sustain the definition of the situation that its

performance fosters. This will involve the over-communication of some facts and the under-communication of others” (87). Hence, performers or teams need to accentuate, or dramatically highlight, those facts or activities that confirm the image the performers want to convey, while concealing, or silencing, those facts that undermine the desired impression. As there is often a discrepancy between people’s appearance, or public performance, and their actual feelings, impulses, thoughts and activities—or in Goffman’s term’s “between our all-too-human selves and our socialized selves” (36)—our public performances need to be worked upon. While the frontstage is the place where the performance takes place, the backstage is the place where the performance is prepared, constructed and perfected.

It is here that the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly fabricated; it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed...Here the team can run through its performance, checking for offending expressions when no one is present to be affronted by them; here poor members of the team, who are expressively inept can be schooled or dropped from the performance. Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character. (69–70)

Goffman thus argued that frontstage team performances need to be disciplined, homogeneous and expressively coherent for the audience to be convinced by the performance. As certain facts and matters can discredit the impression the performance is trying to foster and maintain, information control is essential. To ensure that destructive information, such as “dark secrets” (87), does not go beyond the confines of the back region, choosing loyal team members and controlling the access to the back region is vital. The backstage thus needs to be bounded by barriers to audience perception.

For social movements in general and for marginalized and stigmatized groups in particular, resonant, disciplined and unified public representations depend upon backstage techniques of impression management. Activists who enter the front stage and say, display, or emote qualities that do not align with the desired definition of the situation can produce an impression that fails to resonate with the public (at best) or an impression that reinforces the public’s pre-existing prejudices (at worst). This can render the claims of activists into a disorderly “noise” of deviants and not the legitimate “voice” of a wronged group (Dikeç 2004). In this way, ensuring discipline, cohesion, and unity is of central importance in producing a powerful public voice. The backstage is therefore a strategic space where the messy and often contentious process of constructing frontstage unity can be undertaken outside the public eye. Mobilizations that blur the boundaries between front and back regions (e.g. Occupy Wall Street) can reveal messy internal discord, which results in negative representations of themselves and their cause (Juris 2012; Uitermark and Nicholls 2012).

We now identify three basic backstage processes that facilitate effective public performances.

### **Training to Perform**

Activists employ a variety of backstage techniques to discipline and train themselves and other activists (Benford 2002; Foucault 1978, 1980; Jasper 1997, 1998). Important backstage techniques of impression management that Goffman (1959) discusses include selecting team members for frontstage performances that are disciplined, loyal and circumspect. To heighten the likelihood of dramaturgical circumspection and discipline, team members are prepared for

frontstage performances by rehearsing the whole routine and setting a complete agenda for the performance beforehand. Other techniques include roleplaying exercises, in which team members play the role of the audience, and purposefully engineer embarrassing definitional disruptions in the back region to learn how to deal with them if they would occur in the front region.

Goffman also provides insight into the role social movement leaders play in preparing movement members for frontstage performances. Activist leaders oftentimes have the role of director or training specialist when it comes to team performances. The director is the one who has “the special duty of bringing back into line any member of the team whose performance becomes unsuitable” (61). And the training specialist is the one who has “the complicated task of teaching the performer how to build up a desirable impression while at the same time taking the part of the future audience and illustrating by punishments the consequences of improprieties” (100). For the purpose of creating consistent and coherent frontstage performers, movement leaders thus train and discipline themselves and their fellow activists through such backstage techniques as roleplaying games, media and messaging trainings, civil disobedience trainings and rehearsing and distributing chant lists and talking points.

### **Backstage Emotion Work**

Disciplinary techniques undertaken in the backstage also include collective storytelling, or sharing sessions, and other therapeutic exercises. The emotional content of these disciplinary techniques is essential because emotions play a decisive role in overcoming differences, fostering a sense of groupness, and aligning the subjective worlds of particular activists with their prescribed public roles. Disciplining the words and messages of movement adherents certainly matters for the sake of crafting frontstage representations, but the power of words is magnified when placed within an emotionally compelling storyline (Fine 1996; Hajer 2005; Polletta 1998; 2006; Polletta et al. 2011). Stories that tap into collective sentiments illustrate how the system produces unfair perils in the “real” lives of people and suggest prescriptions to right existing wrongs. Teaching movement participants how to tell an emotionally resonating story is thus an important backstage technique used within social movements.

Benford (2002, 55) claims that narratives and myths about “good” and “bad” public performances are used as a tool for “intramovement social control.” Stories are purposefully distributed through the movement to ensure both “narrative” and “affective” control. “While most movement adherents routinely engage in various activities directed toward controlling the story that is told about the movement, the narratives themselves function as internal social control mechanisms, channeling and constraining individual as well as collective sentiments, emotions, and action” (53). However, Benford does not particularly focus on the role of emotionally intensive *rituals*, such as sharing sessions or therapeutic exercises undertaken in the backstage to help align the feelings of activists and create a sense of team spirit. (Goffman 1959, 120) does mention the importance of emotionally intensive rituals such as group therapy for building team spirit and backstage solidarity and loyalty. Nevertheless, he does not provide any theoretical insight or clear empirical examples of how these techniques might function.

The backstage emotional work described here is not simply about disciplining the untamed words and emotions of activists. It is about harnessing, intensifying, and channeling raw emotions to produce actors who assume their public roles with cohesion and affective power. We suggest that backstage emotionally intensive disciplinary techniques, when effectively

employed, perform two essential roles. First, movement leaders use emotionally intensive techniques like collective storytelling, therapeutic exercises, and protest trainings to assist new recruits in *internalizing* public frames, stories, and performances. These activities encourage activists to not only learn the dominant frames, stories, and performances of their struggle, but also to use these public roles to give meaning to their own complicated emotional worlds. By remaking the subjective experiences and dispositions of activists, the gap between the personal and public is narrowed, enabling activists to play their public roles with greater coherence and affective power.

Second, emotionally intensive disciplinary techniques also help align the subjective worlds of activists making up a mobilization. *Inter-subjective convergence* creates strong emotional bonds and feelings of commonality between previously unconnected people. The emotional rituals and exercises are aimed at fostering a collective mood and affective solidarity by creating a mutual cognitive, emotional, and bodily focus and experience (Collins 2001, 2004; Jasper 1998; Juris 2008). Backstage emotional work makes it possible for activists with very different backgrounds and experiences to feel and think as a group. Through these interactions, participants model their interventions on the basis of preexisting discursive, emotional, and performative repertoires, and they adjust their interventions by learning from others in these sessions. These techniques aid activists in learning the “feeling-rules” (Hochschild 1979) of the movement and aligning their own subjective emotional experiences with each other and the emotional culture of the movement (Gould 2009; Jasper 2011). The process of *inter-subjective convergence* is therefore not simply a process of creating strong emotional ties (e.g. bonding). It is also about *steering* participants to recognize and feel their various traumas, feelings, stories, and experiences in similar ways. As the subjective worlds of activists converge, they begin to see and feel the experiences of their fellow activists in ways that resonate with their own. “Affective control depends in part on implicitly teaching people how they should feel in a given situation of a certain type—when to evoke and when to suppress particular feelings” (Benford 2002, 65).

Emotionally intensive disciplinary techniques therefore transform the previously diverse subjective experiences of activists into a shared experience. They are therefore essential for social movements challenged by their own heterogeneity of social backgrounds and available discourses. One could thus argue that these emotionally intensive techniques aimed at creating inter-subjective convergence is a type of strategic “identity work” that helps create backstage solidarity and facilitates the construction of a collective identity (Melucci 1995). Following Polletta and Jasper (2001, 285), we define “collective identity as the individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution.” Collective identity is not a thing. Rather, it is a dynamic process of social and political construction, which always involves “active negotiation and interactive work among individuals, groups, or parts of the movement” (Melucci 1995, 52). Because this process involves the construction of a singular/homogeneous (political) identity out of many different heterogeneous parts, intensive emotion work—mostly performed in the backstage—is needed to create unity from diversity (Fominaya 2010; Hochschild 1979; Polletta and Jasper 2001). This certainly does not pave over important differences among activists, but it can create enough group cohesion to produce a unified and coherent frontstage performance. The success of such a performance over time transforms what were once scattered and diverse individuals into a durable political subject with a relatively coherent and unified voice.

## Managing Differences and Conflicts through Free Spaces

If identities play a critical role in mobilizing and sustaining participation, they also help explain people's exodus from a movement. One of the chief causes of movement decline is that collective identity stops lining up with the movement. We stop believing that the movement "represents" us... sustaining participants' commitment over time requires ritualized reassertions of collective identity and efforts to manage, without suppressing, difference. (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 292)

Within social movements, producing a unified frontstage performance can create conflicts, because activists differ in their thoughts and feelings on how to make rights claims in the public sphere. Often, activists are connected to different activist circuits (e.g. religious groups, labor rights, LGBTQ, anarchists) with their own norms, ideologies, identities, and discursive repertoires. Critiques of the framing perspective include the notion that frame analysis does not adequately deal with issues of conflict and process, as it fails to problematize the role of discourse within framing processes. Steinberg (1998, 1999) claims that discourses are always internally unstable and dynamic, because they are continuously contested and negotiated, dialogically and relationally formed and situationally sensitive. Activists are part of different discursive fields from which they construct and select "action-specific discursive *repertoires*" (1999, 750; emphasis in original). While Steinberg focuses on the "multivocality" of discourse and on the dynamic processes that allow for the construction of different discursive repertoires within social movements, this "talk and back talk in contentious politics" (772) or "pull and tug of hegemony and counter-hegemony" (1998, 858) does not mean that social movements do not have to deal with discursive hegemony. Nevertheless, as "discursive domination is always prey to its own contradictions and thus is never complete" (1999, 747), movements that want to create disciplined and coherent frontstage representations need to reserve or create backstage spaces that allow for this dialogue, critique and back talk.

Movement leaders can employ a range of different techniques in the backstage to manage difference and defuse and channel inevitable conflicts. Backstage spaces "can be purposefully set up as a time and place for voicing differences in opinion" (Goffman 1959, 4) While the back region can function as a space in which activists are disciplined and shaped into loyal and circumspect performers, it can also function as a space in which different discursive repertoires are discussed and negotiated. These backstage spaces can then be regarded as "free spaces" (Evans and Boyde 1986). Free spaces are "small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization" (Polletta 1999, 1).

These free spaces are encouraged and created by leaders to enable activists to express their "other" identities and vent their frustrations. Team meetings, parties, discussions, seminars, artistic spaces, among other forums (Lichterman 1999) can be fostered where individual members of the movement are allowed the freedom to perform the full scope of their alterity outside the public view. These free spaces in the backstage allow for critical reflection and open dialogue. Activists can celebrate difference and explore radical thoughts and feelings without jeopardizing carefully constructed frontstage representations. Rather than individuals feeling forced to live with their differences and alterity in repressed silence, these backstage spaces allow activists to celebrate and embrace the full complexity of their selves. Such free spaces can certainly facilitate the development of counterhegemonic ideas and oppositional



identities, as suggested by Polletta and Jasper (2001, 288). We however argue that the deliberate construction of free spaces within a movement often facilitates the construction of disciplined and loyal performers who can strategically adopt a conformist or assimilationist—rather than a counterhegemonic—strategy for their frontstage representations. The success of a movement can thus hinge upon “playing down their differences before the media and the country while celebrating it in private” (Tarrow 1994, 10).

The possible resistance of members of the movement to the disciplinary and silencing techniques is thus countered by and incorporated into the movement itself through the use of these free spaces. In these free spaces, critical thoughts and frustration are allowed to flow freely and those aspects of their identities that are silenced in the front regions of the movement are celebrated openly, thus assuring that participants of the movement feel that they can be themselves within the movement and that they do not have to rebel against the movement’s leadership. We therefore suggest that backstage recognition of alterity aids group solidarity and reduces conflicts, because it allows activists to celebrate the complexity of their identities and manage the tensions that arise from suppressing and concealing parts of their identity that are not deemed suitable for the frontstage. The use of free spaces in this way can result in a robust backstage life that is juxtaposed to their more restrained and disciplined frontstage worlds, with activists learning how to aptly switch roles between them.

## Case and Context: The Undocumented Students Movement

Having outlined the theoretical perspective on the different backstage techniques used to construct disciplined frontstage performances, we now turn to the case of the undocumented students—or DREAM—movement to empirically illustrate the previously discussed backstage techniques. The master frame (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1986) or hegemonic discourse (Steinberg 1998, 1999) used within the frontstage performances of the undocumented students presented in the introduction of this paper was born out of efforts made by professional immigrations rights organizations to push for comprehensive immigration reform in the US (Nicholls 2013a). It was crafted in the early 2000’s in Washington D.C. as part of a larger representational strategy for comprehensive immigration reform, as undocumented students appealed more to the general public than other undocumented migrants. As a response to strong anti-immigrant sentiments and a hostile institutional context, undocumented students became the “poster children” of the larger immigrants’ rights movement. By representing undocumented youths as the “best and the brightest” of their generation, as “deserving and assimilated Americans” that were not responsible for their current legal status because they came to the US “not by fault of their own,” they hoped to find support amongst conservative American politicians and voters (Nicholls 2013a).

The representational strategy of the DREAM movement thus stressed these three principal “virtues” and functioned as a counter-frame that tried to negate the stigmatizing effects of how anti-immigrant groups frame undocumented migrants. The process of constructing a positive public image involved selecting words, signs, and acts that reverberated with public virtues *and* silenced those attributes associated with polluting stigmas, such as foreignness (i.e. national identities such as Mexican), gangs and inner city youths.

Professional immigrant rights organizations spent years of resources, time and energy to train undocumented youths in acquiring activists’ skills and internalizing the master frame to be presented on the frontstage. They created an institutional framework for undocumented

youths to meet each other in local activists spaces such as the UCLA Downtown Labor Center in Los Angeles and other organizations on college and university campuses, state settings such as those organized by the California Dream Network, and nation-wide spaces such as those organized by the national organization United We Dream.

In 2010, however, the DREAMers decided to become an autonomous movement, organized and headed by the undocumented students themselves. They had discussed and negotiated the different options, strategies and discursive repertoires available to them and decided to incorporate other mobilizing tactics and change certain elements of the master frame as taught by the immigrant rights activists. These changes consisted of organizing civil disobedience actions to accomplish political goals, incorporating certain discursive repertoires taken from the discursive field of the queer movement and stressing that “their parents were courageous” for bringing them to the US.

While these changes were experienced as quite substantial by the DREAMers themselves and by the professional immigrant rights activists that had trained them, the rest of the master frame or hegemonic discourse remained strongly intact. They continued using the political strategy of representing themselves as deserving American youths fighting for their American DREAM. DREAMers that were once taught by the immigrant rights activists now became the leaders of the newly founded DREAMer organizations and, as such, took over the role of their activist teachers. This entailed training and disciplining new recruits in the activist’ skills and DREAMer discourses they themselves had once acquired and appropriated. Moreover, DREAMers are still strongly connected to the professional immigrant rights organizations and to the local, state and national DREAM organizations mentioned before and, hence, meet each other within these spaces on a regular basis.

These state and national DREAM organizations and backstage spaces are important, because frontstage presentations of DREAMers in other states like Arizona or New York State also reflect on the public image of the DREAMers in California. Goffman would label the relationship between DREAMers nation-wide a bond between colleagues. “Colleagues may be defined as persons who present the same routine to the same kind of audience but who do not participate together, as team-mates do, at the same time and place before the same particular audience. Colleagues, as it is said, share a “community of fate” (1959, 102). Because they “are so closely identified in the eyes of other people that to some degree the good reputation of one practitioner depends on the good conduct of the others” (106). Hence, much time and energy is spent within the backstage spaces of local and national DREAM organizations on creating coherent and disciplined frontstage performances.

## Research Design and Methods: Political Ethnography

Much of the empirical data presented in this article stems from six months of intensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the first author from September 2011 till March 2012. The sample consists of a core group of about 60 DREAMers, the majority of which have a Mexican or Latino background and live in the wider Los Angeles area. Most of the fieldwork was conducted at one of the most important local DREAM organizations in the country: Dream Team Los Angeles (DTLA). DTLA is a volunteer organization that is run by undocumented students. It is located in the UCLA Downtown Labor Center, which hosts many other immigrant rights organizations. DTLA was founded in 2009 as an activist space for DREAMers who had finished college and wanted to continue their organizing work beyond

the campuses where they had once met each other. However, after DTLA was established, it ceased to be only for graduated students as it also attracts many undocumented youths who do not yet attend college and are still quite new to the whole movement. Through the strong connections with DTLA, participant observation was also conducted with other DREAMer organizations in California, such as California Dream Network, Orange Country Dream Team (OCDT), San Fernando Valley Dream Team (SFVDT) and San Gabriel Valley Dream Team (SGVDT). Los Angeles is a very suitable locale to study the DREAM movement, because the city—and wider region—has many Latino migrants, a long history of immigrant rights mobilizing, and a very active and well-developed undocumented students movement.

Access to DTLA was provided by the co-author, who had already been studying the movement prior to the ethnographic involvement of the first author. The co-author had gained access to DTLA through a personal connection with an immigrant rights activist with strong ties to DTLA. It took quite a lot of time, effort and energy for the first author to build rapport and gain the trust of the DREAMers she studied. As she is a privileged, “white,” “middle-class” European woman with the “right legal documents,” there were quite a lot of power differentials to overcome. This meant that she had to prove herself to be more than merely “another researcher trying to get their PhD off their backs.” This was stated by DREAM leader Nadia during a DTLA meeting in which the group was discussing the importance of selecting which researchers should be allowed or denied access to the movement. The statement was not at all directed to the author, but it nevertheless made her very aware of her role and responsibilities as an ethnographic researcher studying the undocumented youth movement in LA. Gaining their trust entailed becoming an active member of the organization; chanting, protesting, fundraising, peace-keeping,<sup>2</sup> lobbying and engaging in civil disobedience actions with them. It meant that, during those six months, she spent nearly every waking hour with them and celebrated Christmas, New Year’s Eve, weddings and birthdays with them.

The intensive ethnographic study, consisting of participant observations, in-depth life-history interviews, informal conversations and unobtrusive observations, took place both in frontstage and backstage settings, which made it possible for the researcher to experience the backstage techniques used within the movement, as well as witness the disciplined and tight frontstage performances resulting from the backstage preparatory work. Through the ethnographic method of “deep hanging-out” (Bryman 2012) in both their personal and politically-active lives, she tried to see their worlds through their eyes and grasp their subtler sensibilities and emotional realities. Nevertheless, sometimes this intensive involvement also proved to be quite complicated, because she had to keep enough analytical distance to accurately observe her research group and analyze and report her findings. When one becomes truly critical about one’s role as an ethnographic researcher, one has to admit that the researcher can sometimes take on the role of what Goffman labeled the “informer” (1959, 90). The author tried to overcome this tension by being very sincere and open to the DREAMers that were studied about the conducted research both during and after the research was conducted.

The ethnographic data consist of 82 events; 22 weekly Dream Team meetings; six preparatory meetings for specific campaign and actions; five training and educational events, such as high school presentations and media workshops; 14 protests, rallies and press conferences organized by different social movement organizations within Los Angeles; 13

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<sup>2</sup> Peace-keeping within this context entailed acting as a mediator and maintaining an orderly atmosphere by ensuring that people with anti-immigrant sentiments did not become too aggressive during the protest actions that the undocumented students performed.

promotional events, fundraisers and panel discussions; nine retreats, candle-light vigils and therapeutic healing events; and 19 informal events such as parties, informal chats, musical events, dancing and drinking, birthdays, holidays and wedding celebrations.

Moreover, the researchers analyzed DREAMer documents that either circulated digitally or were distributed face-to-face. These digital documents include postings on Facebook, blogs, the Huffington Post website, Youtube videos, and documents, posters and invitations sent through emails. The hardcopy documents include flyers, posters, leaflets, chant-lists, talking-point sheets and brochures. Every event, meeting, and action attended was documented in the thick descriptions that make up the field notes and observation reports. While much of the data used in this paper draws on field observations and 10 life-history interviews conducted by the ethnographic researcher, we also draw upon 34 semi-structured interviews with DREAMers and strategic allies.

Auyero and Joseph (2007) argue that while ethnography has been usefully employed to discover the micro-foundations of many social phenomena, it has been used with less frequency to study politics. While we believe that quantitative methods have been extremely effective in detecting major forces in social movements, they have great difficulty accessing the backstage worlds of activists, which we believe to be a constituting element of social movements. Using political ethnography as a method, thus, has multiple advantages: understanding how larger political structures and actions play themselves out in local contexts, regarding how people negotiate their political actions in their everyday lives, and having access to the lived experiences of the political and the mundane details that can affect politics (Baiocchi and Connor 2008, 141).

## Backstage Training and the Construction of the Disciplined DREAMer

DREAM leaders Maria, Claudia, Julio and Ernesto join us in the main room and we start the training for the civil disobedience action. Ernesto informs us, the peace-keepers, on what to do when anti-immigrant activists come to the action. He explains that we have to act as de-escalators and say: “This is a peaceful protest. We are not here to argue or go into a discussion. Could you please calm down sir? If you do not lower your voice, sir, I will have to call the police.” We continue with a role-playing game where the peace-keepers have to practice their function, while the rest of the group plays anti-immigrant activists. We are instructed that we also have to keep our allies and protesters under control and that they should not go into discussion and should remain peaceful at all times. We are there to maintain peace and order.

Then, we continue with the media messaging training. Maria hands out a sheet with talking points and different people read the talking points out loud, one-by-one. Maria explains that, when asked any questions by a journalist, we have to direct them to the media spokesperson. If the spokesperson is not available, we should not divert from the talking-points we just received. I practice the script: “We are asking Obama to stop the deportations of DREAMers and to give administrative relief to all DREAM eligible youths, giving them a work permit and protection against deportation. If Obama does not want to lose the Latino vote, he should give an executive order and grant all DREAM eligible youth [administrative] relief.” Maria explains that we will go in groups of two and interview each other as if we are journalists. I am with Prajit. He seems to be

a professional and knows how to repeat the talking points. Even when I try to throw difficult questions at him, he stands his ground. I say: “You have done this before,” and he confesses that he has done several messaging and media trainings before. While practicing, Maria walks past all the groups to see how we are doing and to offer assistance. After the training, we are told that the location of the action has changed and that we will meet at 9am at Pershing Square on Wednesday. We should all wear our “I am undocumented” t-shirts for the action. The flyer is ready and will be distributed for us to post on Facebook and Twitter. There will be one final training on Tuesday evening. When Maria is finished, everyone claps and laughs. I say goodbye and hug everyone before I leave DTLA at the Downtown Labor Center.

This extended excerpt of a peace-keeper training, in which the author served both as a researcher and an activist/peace-keeper, describes one of the many intensive preparatory meetings leading up to a civil disobedience action. The particular action described above was part of a broader campaign to pressure the Obama administration to grant undocumented youth relief from deportations. The campaign eventually succeeded in pushing the Obama administration to enact Deferred Action for Children Arrivals (DACA) in 2012. This particular protest action involved five undocumented youths marching into the office of the Chief Prosecutor of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and demanding administrative relief. They placed themselves on the floor and were granted an appointment with the Chief Prosecutor. They were then arrested and released four hours later. While five youths were arrested, many youths and allies assumed supporting roles as chanters, peacekeepers, legal supporters, and media contacts.

The backstage preparation for this action consisted of many meetings that involved the development and rehearsal of a well-honed script. Rehearsing the whole routine beforehand and engaging in role-playing sessions in which some of the team-members play the role of the audience (i.e. anti-immigrant activists and journalists) are important backstage techniques DREAMers use to ensure that they will be able to deliver a convincing and coherent frontstage performance. The script was created collaboratively by DREAM leaders, immigrant rights activists and lawyers around the country. It provided participating activists with clear roles and lines (talking points, chants, etc.) to ensure message consistency. The talking points were selected to address the goals of the particular campaign (administrative relief) and offer participants a coherent and consistent argument for why undocumented youths deserved some form of legal status. The role of DTLA leaders Maria and Ernesto is important here. As they are more experienced DREAMers and DTLA leaders, they function as training specialists who take on the role of the future audience and teach their teammates how to build up the desired impression and construct a good frontstage performance.

While much of the framing work was geared to the media, they also developed lines to mediate interactions with adversarial bystanders and the police. Great effort was given to the broader public’s impressions of the protest acts. For the leading DREAMers, there was a need to convey an image of themselves as well-behaved and orderly youths. They could not lose the moral high ground by engaging in conduct that could be used against them by political or media adversaries. Protestors were prepared to respond to hostile bystanders with the following line: “This is a peaceful protest. We are not here to argue or go into a discussion. Could you please calm down sir?” This line was designed to reinforce the general message that undocumented youth were civil and well-mannered individuals while their adversaries were uncivil and disruptive.

In a previous preparatory meeting, the leading DREAMers also spent much time discussing attire. The participants discussed whether they were going to wear businesslike clothing, activist t-shirts with the slogan “I am undocumented,” or the traditional cap and gown (a costume that symbolizes their role as American students). The participants carefully evaluated the symbolic value associated with each costume and whether such symbols would correctly align with and amplify the core message of the action. The participants began the conversation in a lighthearted and excited matter, with many of the activists talking at the same time. A younger, less experienced DREAMer interceded and stated: “We could dress up as homeless people.” Another more experienced DTLA leader responded: “Come on guys, be serious.” Immediately, the mood changed and the individuals became quiet and focused. The younger DREAMer responded seriously and said: “Aren’t we dressing in a corporate, style?” To which the more experienced DREAMer responded: “Yes, and of course the cap and gown.” As such, this DREAM leader functioned as the director of the performance, trying to discipline his teammates backstage to ensure that they would not show this disruptive appearance and manner on the frontstage. It is important to note that the organizers spent much time and effort in ensuring consistency in attire, appearance, manner and conduct. The selection of the “cap and gown” also refers to the broader representational strategy of the DREAM movement. With this prop, DREAM activists aim to give off the impression of real American students during their frontstage performances. This attention to detail reflects the importance of producing impressions that align with and amplify the broader message of their struggle.

DREAMers thus employ a number of backstage disciplinary techniques to ensure the production of highly coherent and favorable frontstage representations. As illustrated by the peace-keepers training for the civil disobedience action mentioned above, many of these exercises focus on interactions with the media. The media is recognized as an essential tool to get their message “out there,” but it also presents many risks, especially for untrained activists. Leading DREAMers are well aware that reporters’ questions can derail activists into saying things that may be deemed controversial by the broader public. As a consequence, much energy is invested in media training prior to protest actions. Various training manuals developed over the years provide generic media training guidelines. Training manuals and backstage preparatory sessions help ensure that well-trained DREAMers are able to naturally articulate the central message and avoid going off script once they enter the public sphere.

However, not all DREAMers stick to the script. Some DREAMers, accidentally or purposefully, wear inappropriate clothes or say things that are considered too radical or strategically unwise by others in the movement. When possible, these DREAMers are corrected. DREAM leaders believe this is necessary, because they feel that delivering coherent and convincing frontstage performances does not only depend on highlighting certain assimilationist “virtues,” but also on concealing, or silencing, stigmatized attributes. For example, Dream Team Los Angeles hosts a yearly Open House event, which aims to inform the community, professional immigrant rights organization, politicians, and newcomers about their work. During this event, Robert was literally silenced by DREAM leader Maria, who functioned here as the director of the frontstage team performance.

As I am the time-manager, I ask to be briefed on the set-up of the event. I receive a copy of the schedule and Maria and Ernesto explain the set-up...Robert is in charge of explaining the DTLA timeline. I see Maria and Ernesto exchange a worried look as he starts talking. Robert speaks in a more free, young, and artistic way. Maria tells me to cut him short for time, as he might not stop talking and could say inappropriate things.

Other times, DREAMers have silenced those aspects of themselves that may draw the ire of the broader public. For example, youth activists in conservative regions may silence expressions of foreignness because these expressions detract from the broader message of national conformity. In an interview with activist Albert, he mentions the backstage deliberations that occurred on the issue of whether to celebrate or silence particular representations of foreignness in the frontstage spaces of the movement.

That is something we all agree on. You can never have a Mexican flag waving at your rally. One time we said, “Hey, wouldn’t it be cool to have a rally showing our different flags, you know, flags from Mexico, Korea, Honduras, etc.” But then we said, “No, we have to be careful because we’re in Orange County [a conservative area of southern California] and people are going to take it the wrong way.” We thought it would be nice to celebrate the fact that we are from all over the world but we didn’t want to risk it. (Albert, personal interview)

With the arrival and flourishing of new technologies, and with social movements such as the DREAM movement extensively using digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter for mobilizing purposes, DREAMers have extended their techniques of impression management to monitoring online platforms. These digital forums are often openly accessible to all types of audiences and can thus be regarded as digital front regions. Emails that are only accessible and distributed to DTLA members can then be regarded as a digital back region in which efforts are aimed at ensuring good frontstage performances. A good example of these virtual monitoring and silencing techniques is provided in an email from DREAMer Julio, who is very active for DTLA’s media committee and group page.

On Tue, Mar 13, 2012 at 11:59 pm, Julio wrote:

Ok, so if folks look at the DTLA group page, you can see what Eliza posted and the accusations she is making. Claudia, Maria and myself tried clearing things up, but she is dead set on blaming DTLA. At this point, it needs to be addressed seriously.

She hasn’t reposted anything and yeah, with the crap she was saying, there’s was no way I was going to leave those comments up there. Ernesto, if you have her number, give her a call, but at this point I don’t think she’s going to change her mind, but she is hella tripping.

I’d say leave it alone and ignore her, but she’s too off her rocker to be left unchecked.

Maintaining the good public image of the DREAMer thus involves both the active training of DREAMers in the backstage, as well as the backstage silencing of attributes that may carry some degree of stigma in the public sphere (for example, foreign, radical, inner city, gang, or deviant). As certain facts about undocumented life are highly stigmatized and do not correspond with the public image of the DREAMer, these facts are never disclosed in public performances.

## **Aligning the Emotional Worlds of the DREAMERS**

Producing a well-aligned and resonant public representation depends partly on overcoming subjective and interpretive dissonance between activists. Before the early 2000s, the DREAMers did not exist as a group or a movement. They were merely an administrative

category of people with many different identifications and loyalties. Speaking with a common public voice therefore depended on them recognizing themselves as a group and feeling, thinking, and experiencing their exclusion in a common way; that is, it depended on them emotionally identifying with other DREAMers. Producing this level of identity requires a process of inter-subjective convergence. DREAMers employ several emotionally intensive techniques backstage to stimulate this process.

DREAM leaders use collective storytelling as a technique to internalize public frames, stories, and performances, but storytelling has also been crucial in emotionally stimulating the subjective convergence of activists. The importance of storytelling is expressed in the training manual used by the leadership team of DTLA. It states: “Stories draw on our emotions and show our values in action, helping us *feel* what matters, rather than just thinking about or telling others what matters. Because stories allow us to express our values not as abstract principles, but as lived experience, they have the power to move others” (Dream Team Los Angeles Training Manual 2011, 16; emphasis in original). The DREAMer story consists of a basic three-part narrative in which the youth is brought to the country at an early age, faces many challenges that result from situations as undocumented immigrants, and, in spite of these challenges, works hard to achieve the American dream. The moral of the story is that the immigration system is fundamentally broken and unjust because it denies hardworking, good Americans the right to stay and contribute to the country. While each individual has a very different experience depending on their background, they are encouraged to fit the particularities of their lives within this common narrative structure. This creates increased coherence in their public representations, but it also helps make them into a single group with a right to stay in the country.

Given the importance of storytelling, new recruits are provided with countless examples of how to construct and deliver their stories in the public sphere. They are provided with exemplary videos, informal coaches, and opportunities to receive constructive feedback from more experienced DREAMers. DTLA also provides formal training sessions to new recruits during their annual DREAM Summer Workshops. This training consists of a general introduction to the importance of storytelling, instructions on how to construct emotionally compelling stories, group analyses of stories by prominent figures (including Barack Obama), and small group exercises that permit new recruits to construct their own stories (“story of self”). In addition to training new recruits to tell their stories, the workshops also train them to evaluate and coach others in the story development process. By training individuals to become coaches, they learn how to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of other stories and apply those lessons to their own. While discussing the role of storytelling in the undocumented youth movement, DREAM activist Manuela expresses the importance of evaluating and improving one’s story by comparing it to others.

I feel like I could take my story in different directions, and I am working on that. People have way better stories sometimes, and I feel like my story is not so impactful yet. I haven’t found that right way to say it. I think I’m getting there, but I’m not usually the one in a workshop who will say, “Ooh, let me share my story!” because I haven’t found that point to bring people home and be like, “*Oh her story is good.*” (personal interview)

Such backstage training is collective and reflexive. It encourages DREAMers to constantly reconstruct their stories through interactions with one another and to maximize their impact in the public sphere.



In addition to collective storytelling, DREAMers stimulate subjective convergence by consciously creating backstage environments that elicit emotional expressions and interactions. Consequently, most meetings are purposefully made emotionally comforting. The meetings and gatherings always begin and end with the different participants greeting and hugging each other warmly. When important news is shared, everyone cheers in unison. And there is always food generously distributed around the meeting table. Constructing welcoming spaces make the environments in which DREAMers operate conducive for emotional expressions and interactions. While discussing a civil disobedience action with leader Nadia, she explicitly mentions the importance of personal interaction and emotional alignment in the backstage spaces of the movement.

I remember in the beginning when I joined DTLA, and especially for the disobedience actions, every single meeting was either at my house, or somebody else's house. I would refuse for us to meet in an office. I was like "No we have to meet somewhere else" and I would always make food and so that's why my house was the easiest. People would come and we would eat first and we would check-in first and then we would work. And that always feels right. It's just, it goes beyond just working together, it is really building a family and understanding why. That is not just like a hippie concept of like, we are all one and peace and love, but no we are. And we have to be, because, we are right now separated from each other and more and more we are put against each other that we have to recognize the beauty within us. Because that is that one thing they cannot take away from us, it is our own spirits and our own hope. They can put me in jail and they did, but they can't take away who I am. (personal interview)

Nadia's quote is interesting because she uses the analogy of the family to give meaning to the relationship between DREAMers. Her description is that of a warm and emotional relationship. This is an emotionally laden description that uses words like "love" and "beauty" to connect the undocumented struggle to issues of the heart and spirit. By sharing food, "checking in," and encouraging emotional talk DREAM leaders consciously construct atmospheres that promote emotional expressions and interactions among activists. Emotions in such contexts become normal parts of structuring interactions, with newer activists having to learn how to share and emote according to the "feeling rules" of the group.

DREAMers also employ therapy-like sessions to harness emotional energies and stimulate convergence. The weekly meetings always start with an introduction-round and a personal "check-in question," such as "Describe your last encounter with the police and how you felt about it?" and "What do you like to do in private?". After this introduction round, the "self-care and healing committee" introduces the opening group activity, which ranges from playing a physical game to facilitating collective meditation. Whenever a DREAMer tells their story, other DREAMers listen attentively and someone will always respond with the – group therapy – line: "thanks for sharing." Several members explained that the "check-in questions" and "self-care and healing" activities have multiple purposes, ranging from sharing the "undocumented experience," to knowing "where everyone is coming from," and creating an "uplifting group experience." The exercises are aimed at fostering a collective mood by creating a mutual cognitive, emotional, and bodily focus and experience. Learning how to share one's most intimate experiences with others enables participants to open up and begin to identify commonalities – or collective identity. "Healing" or "identity circles" are also used for these purposes. Martha specifically mentioned the intentional and emotional aspects of these techniques and how it links up with the undocumented experience:

We also have our identity circle that we just created. So we, more intentionally, discuss our emotions, the emotional side of being undocumented. So whether that's depression, or being really confused about what you're gonna do once you graduate, or being confused about your major, it can be anything. (Martha, personal interview)

These intense emotional sessions allow youth activists to feel their experiences as undocumented youth together. These strong emotive exchanges permit a convergence in the subjective worlds of the activists. Such a process provides a common emotional and discursive template from which individuals have developed similar feelings and thoughts about their immigration status and ways to express their grievances in the public sphere. These exercises can thus be regarded as essential emotion work aimed at constructing a collective DREAMer identity.

Backstage work also involves establishing affective control by overcoming negative emotions that inhibit action (fear, doubt, isolation), while harnessing positive emotions that motivate action (hope, solidarity, urgency). During a training for a civil disobedience action, experienced DREAMers explained to newer recruits that it was completely normal to feel nervous, but that everything would turn out okay. Veronica (an experienced DREAMer) reassured newer activists that there is no need to be fearful. "It will not be a solo act. It will be a strategic and threatening act, a sacred act". She sought to overcome fears and doubts by assuring activists that they were not isolated and that influential allies would provide them support. While seeking to mitigate inhibiting emotions with assurances of support, she goes on to harness motivating emotions by stressing the "sacred" nature of the protest act. These and other trainings are aimed at harnessing positive and motivating emotions prior to public protests. Such backstage emotional trainings help activists overcome their fears while also providing them a common way to feel and interpret high-risk acts of protest (sacred, powerful, solidarity building). The new recruits are in effect steered into how they should feel and experience public acts of protest prior to engaging in them. After these preparations, activists draw upon this training to shape their performances during actual protest events. Rather than breakdown in the face of police repression (response to negative emotions), their training permits them to direct their emotions in ways that generate powerful, sacred, and solidarity-inducing performances.

## **The Backstage as a Free Space to Explore Difference and Radicalism**

The backstage is certainly a space to encourage and discipline activists to talk and feel in a common way, but it also serves as a free space where difference and radicalism can be expressed outside the stigmatizing gaze of a conservative public. This can help release stress that some DREAMers feel about the silencing pressures of their movement.

Within the DREAM movement, there is a collective understanding of the politics behind their message and strategy. They realize that their political strategy entails maintaining a "good image" by filtering out stigmatized attributes of their identity (such as national origin, inner city lives, Latino youth culture). However, this has resulted in many DREAMers ceasing to recognize themselves in the public image that they themselves have contributed to constructing. They assert that others are "real DREAMers" and that they struggle to live up to the standards of this politically constructed group. For example, Jorge observed that Chicana/o activists have the liberty to be more radical and embrace nationalistic Mexican identities.

While he was born in Mexico, he does not want to act too Mexican. He stressed that he did not have the luxury to be nationalistic about Mexico because he is undocumented. He explains that if he shows his Mexican side too much, he would never be considered an American or a “real DREAMer.” Robert also mentions how the concept of “real DREAMer” can be experienced as constraining.

A DREAMer is defined as somebody who is undocumented, a student, you’re in school, you’re working for the DREAM Act movement, a very pre-described identity (...). And also in academia, just talking about undocumented students in a very politically correct way. But, it's also a stereotype, you're just boxed-in into what that stereotype is defined as. (Robert, personal interview)

In this way, the process of constructing an ideal DREAMer can result in feelings of inadequacy, distance, and sometimes resentment among many youth activists. In response to these pressures, DREAMers have fostered free spaces where youth activists can fully explore their diversity, radicalism and otherness. These spaces function as safety valves: they allow DREAMers to vent and celebrate those aspects of their identities that are filtered from the public arena. For example, backstage events provide spaces where youths can still explore their subaltern cultural identities. At one art event, an artist displayed his illustrations of a politically empowered “chola.”<sup>3</sup> While a space was made available to show and celebrate this work, many recognized that such an image could not be a part of the public representation of DREAMers because it complicated their good public image.

**Robert:** Everybody knows that is what we do, that’s what we are. I understand that’s how we’re going to present ourselves, because we can’t be out there promoting ourselves as coming from South Central [Los Angeles] and that we’re cholos or whatever.

**Interviewer:** So the poster child strategy is largely intact.

**Robert:** Well, we might deviate from group to group, but it’s up to everybody’s discretion about what you want to promote. But it’s almost unspoken. You don’t even need to think about it. Everybody knows you promote a positive image.

**Interviewer:** So what about the Chola illustration you talked about earlier?

Robert: *That was just more for us, within ourselves.* (Robert, personal interview)

Similarly, social events are important sites where youth activists can explore their alterity and radicalness. At a Christmas party, DREAMers Marcus and Veronica were having a conversation about the centuries of oppression of black and brown people by white, mainstream America. They both agreed that they should continue their fight against the people in power and envision a world without borders. They were highly aware that this conversation veered from the public transcript and should not be expressed during public performances. Nevertheless, they felt free and happy to explore these ideas with fellow DREAMers in the backstage confines of this party.

<sup>3</sup> Chola(s)/Cholo(s) has many different meanings. The term has long been used in a derogatory way to refer to low-income and inner city (“tough”) Mexican immigrants. More commonly, it has become associated with a subculture of Mexican American gangs with a very particular style of dress and speech. Many activists in the Chicano/a movement have re-appropriated the term and image as a source of cultural pride.

Different discursive repertoires taken from the discursive fields of the immigrant rights movement, the labour movement, the feminist movement, the Chicano movement and the queer movement, but also from academia and different religious and self-help/new age cultures, are thus discussed and negotiated within the free spaces of the DREAM movement. It is in these free back spaces that alterity, radicalism, and “deviant” feelings and thoughts are openly shared and explored. These various backstage spaces function to vent frustrations and celebrate difference, rather than silence them.

[O]ne of the groups that I am part of, which is the Orange County Dream Team, we started within that group a healing circle. So pretty much it is just a small group of the members who get together and have time to just forget about everything that we are doing: all the activist work, all the schooling, whatever we are doing at home. We just like let it go and this is the time we pretty much vent. You know, we say: “Ooh I hate this, I am so mad” and you know just let it all out. So what we started doing is, we get together and have open discussions. You know, private open discussions about anything. (Tony, personal interview)

These free spaces thus allow the movement to manage difference by celebrating, without suppressing, diversity. Because here participants of the movement can be themselves, these free spaces allow DREAMers to feel at home within the movement and thus the need to rebel against the movement’s leadership is lessened. Allowing for difference, alterity and radicalism within these free spaces thus helps the larger representational strategy of the DREAM movement to remain intact within frontstage performances.

## Conclusion

DREAMers have shown remarkable capabilities in articulating coherent representations of themselves and their cause in the public sphere. Their messages in specific campaigns are consistently clear and underline the broader themes and virtues of the DREAMer master frame. Their performances are synchronized in ways to produce maximum effect, both emotional and political. Their abilities to maintain this strong and cohesive presence on the public stage has contributed to their abilities to construct a political voice with legitimacy, resonance, and influence. We argue that this impressive degree of frontstage unity is by no means natural or automatic. Fifteen years ago, undocumented students did not exist as a political subject. While undocumented youths certainly have a common grievance, they also come from very different political and sociological backgrounds and they come into the movement with very different ways of interpreting and dealing with their legal status. Considering the heterogeneity characterizing the activists (or most movements for that matter), this level of frontstage cohesion, unity, and discipline is remarkable and puzzling.

This paper shows *how* the processes and techniques undertaken in the backstage of the movement strongly contribute to the frontstage efficacy of the movement. While many social movement scholars tend to focus on the front regions of mobilizations (framing, performances, interaction rituals, storytelling, mobilization capacities, etc.), this paper emphasizes how intensive backstage work enhances the potency of public protest.

The backstage techniques used to discipline the words and feelings of DREAMers help improve their public performances, but learning these public roles also provides activists from different backgrounds with common ways of seeing and feeling their problems. As individuals

feel and identify as a cohesive group (inter-subjective convergence) and develop a collective identity through emotionally intensive rituals and therapeutic exercises, their abilities to perform publicly in cohesive and disciplined ways improve.

In this paper, we have highlighted the importance of free spaces in the back region of the movement for the sake of good and coherent frontstage representations and performances. As creating a disciplined and coherent frontstage performance depends on emphasizing certain attributes, while concealing others, many DREAMers could feel that they are not allowed to be themselves within the movement. As such, free spaces provide DREAMers a place where they can explore different discursive repertoires and express those aspects of themselves that are not regarded as particularly suitable for the public stage. This allows DREAMers to continue to feel good about themselves, in spite of the need to silence aspects of themselves deemed too controversial or stigmatized for the broader public. In these and other ways, rich and complex backstage worlds of the DREAM movement enable activists to develop and perfect their frontstage performances.

In our writings, we would like to continue to explore how the political project of the DREAMer is connected to larger social, economic, political and historical structures. How are these backstage techniques of emotion management and the frontstage performance of the deserving DREAMer linked to a particular political subjectivity and to larger politico-economic processes of modern forms of governance?

We conclude by suggesting that the power of the performance and its ability to penetrate public discourse and gain support for the cause depends largely on a movement's work to develop a structured and workable back region. In spite of the many twists and turns of the DREAM movement, its ability to retain a strong and resonant representation is a reflection of the intensive emotion work performed in the elaborate backstage of the movement. Considering the importance of backstage work, we encourage scholars to look under the hood of public protest and turn their analytical gaze to the backstage work needed to create strong and coherent frontstage performances.

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