

# Can the Undocumented Speak? Undocumented Immigrants and Self-Representation

ASJ [asjournal.org/69-2020/can-the-undocumented-speak-undocumented-immigrants-and-self-representation/](https://asjournal.org/69-2020/can-the-undocumented-speak-undocumented-immigrants-and-self-representation/)

*Maria José Canelo*

**Undocumented immigrants usually trust their voices to immigration activists rather than engaging with strategies of visibility to reclaim their rights. The universe of illegal border crossing is about radical experiences of invisibility, misidentification, erasure, dispossession, and disappearance. First person testimonies by undocumented immigrants have, however, seen the light of day throughout the last decade in unsuspected media venues, from the *New York Times* to the *Guardian*, small sites of independent journalism, and also some book publications. Revealing their presence, their names, and their faces seems a brave decision, when the risk of deportation is part of their everyday reality. In my reading of their testimonies and the photographs illustrating them, I follow two theoretical lines that engage with the subjectivities of marginalized groups: sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos' elaboration of a post abyssal thinking and cultural critic Nicholas Mirzoeff's ideas of spaces of appearance and practices of counter visibility. Combining them will allow me to analyze how instances of self-representation by undocumented immigrants in the United States contribute to crafting a new subject position by a group who, by definition, cannot speak because it is deemed non-existent in legal terms. The issue brings back to the discussion Gayatri Spivak's classical questions on subalternity and power.**

- 1 In my reading of the testimonies and the photographs illustrating undocumented immigrants, I follow two theoretical lines that engage with the subjectivities of marginalized groups: sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos's elaboration of a post abyssal thinking and cultural critic Nicholas Mirzoeff's ideas of spaces of appearance and practices of counter visibility. Combining them will allow me to analyze how instances of self-representation by undocumented immigrants in the United States contribute to crafting a new subject position by a group who, by definition, cannot speak because it is deemed non-existent in legal terms. The issue brings back to the discussion Gayatri Spivak's classical questions on subalternity and power.
- 2 The social invisibility imposed on undocumented immigrants by the lack of a legal status aggravates their subalternity in US society. Those crossing the border without formal authorization to enter the country strategically discard their identities by carrying no IDs and burning their fingertips in order to avoid

registration in case they are caught by the border patrol. They expect to be able to come back as many times as necessary—until they make it. Many others become undocumented once they overstay work permits or tourist visas, whereas a fair number of cases are children brought by their parents or relatives without official permission to reside or work in the United States. Despite these differences, in all cases a shadow existence becomes the rule. In all cases, too, illegality proves not to work as a deterrent factor, neither do detention nor deportation. That there are over eleven million undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States speaks volumes about the ineffectiveness of US exclusionary immigration policies in the past decades.

- 3 The visual representation of these immigrants, or the representations in place—those that circulate mainly in the media and which allow the public at large to come up with an idea about the identities of the undocumented—, are usually tied to particular spaces that immediately evoke transgression, like the border area or detention facilities. If they are caught by either border patrol or vigilantes and reporters are at the site, criminalization is immediate: the snapshots produce their illegality to the public eye in the spectacle of the immigrants being chained and searched by the guards. Invariably they look frightened, hopeless, humiliated, derided, defeated. The viewer is taken to believe that this is a transitory moment in their way to disappearance because all the surveillance mechanisms around them indicate that they are not allowed in. In exhibiting their illegality, the regime of visibility brands them as invisible, meaning non-existent, while the surveillance state mechanisms will eventually seek an even more effective politics of disappearance through deportation. As for those who escape the picture and the police, their experience is not so different because they must seek protection in nonexistence in order to survive. They live in secrecy and fear of public disclosure, and their lives are typically undocumented also in the sense that there should be no proof of their existence, no documentation of their whereabouts, history, and experiences.
- 4 The current moment of exposure was, however, anticipated by previous attempts to conquer some space in the public sphere. 2006 witnessed a watershed event when millions marched in favor of immigration reform in major US cities, many of them undocumented themselves. The march counted on the support of a collective of artists who composed and sang a free version of the US national hymn in Spanish: “Nuestro Himno.” music became so popular that President George W. Bush made a public statement to condemn the appropriation of one of the sacred symbols of the nation in a language other than English (Ruthenberg). The episode symbolically suggested that there were non-legal spaces where immigrants, undocumented, and activists were finding room to claim belonging to the nation, along its rights framed by citizenship.



Watch Video At: [https://youtu.be/f4gP\\_pSOCz4](https://youtu.be/f4gP_pSOCz4)

- 5 As in those marches, by stepping out into the open and attracting media attention, the immigrants in the cases discussed here are resisting objectification in both public and political discourses. By appropriating their own narratives and deploying their own choices about who they are, they contribute to reframing their identities and their claims to political existence. The initiative, risky though as it may be, is part of a trend to bring to the fore not just the issue of immigration but the people themselves in order to humanize immigrants, make their experiences relatable and immigrant rights more acceptable. The choice of ‘undocumented’ instead of ‘illegal’ is part of the activists’ strive for legalization and decriminalization, in the understanding that public acceptance is crucial to changing the legal and political debate.
- 6 The question is not only one of semantics though. Lacking official documents to work and reside in the United States, immigrants in this condition often resort to fake documents in order to be able to work and navigate society, at least in their everyday lives. For this reason, some critics remark that undocumented immigrants are in fact falsely documented immigrants (Yee, Davis, and Patel report 1.8 million working under false Social Security documents). The practice reveals the bitter irony that while being denied citizenship status, they are paying millions in taxes every year in the form of direct deductions on their incomes through their false Social Security numbers or in direct taxes (Roberts). Perversely, this contribution comes with the deprivation of the most basic citizenship rights, from health benefits to the possibility of calling the police for protection or applying for financial benefits such as scholarships or reduced tuition fees. Obviously, the undocumented are not completely invisible, as they are actively contributing to the nation-state—so there is a civic dimension in citizenship that they do ‘own’ but without benefits or rights therein entailed.

## Illegal Immigration: A Humanitarian Crisis

---

- 7 Although the problem is by no means new, ‘illegal’ immigration has become a humanitarian crisis. And even though it is not an issue exclusive to the Latino/a community, it is more debated in its context, also for demographic reasons. Discounting the eleven million undocumented immigrants, over half of whom are from either Mexico or Central America,<sup>[1]</sup> Latino/as compose the fastest growing ethnic group in US society: they are currently the biggest minority in the United States. In 2018, the United States Census Bureau counted 58.9 million Latino/as, most of Mexican origin, which makes about 18.1% of the US population. The same institution projects a total of 111 million Latino/as living in the United States by 2060. This may account for readings of cultural appropriations like ‘Nuestro Himno’ as extending into political rights, which is perceived as menacing to white privilege.<sup>[2]</sup>
- 8 While a large number of immigrants does enter via the southern border, Latino/a immigrants have been affected by the so-called ‘zero tolerance operation’ which has been executed on the border from May 2018 on, as well as by the restraint on asylum rights, the federal reaction to several immigrants’ caravans. These measures have not only contributed to the criminalization of immigration, but also to the dangers of a long and harsh migration all the way from Central America. One of the most problematic issues has been that of the detention and criminalization of undocumented parents with the consequent separation from their children who crossed the border with them. Despite the later reversal of this order, the reunion of separated families has not been running smoothly and there are claims that the practice of separation still continues (Davis and Shear). Humanitarian organizations have also protested the treatment of unaccompanied minors, with 49,000 arriving in 2018 alone (Kinosian and Holpuch) and increasing to 76,020 in 2019 (Villegas), all channelled into the custody of the border patrol while awaiting deportation.
- 9 Immigration legislation cut across the recent mandates of both Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Yet, the forms each administration found to address it have been quite different. Although President Obama beat all records regarding the deportation of ‘illegal’ immigrants until that point, most of whom for minor offenses, he also took some inclusionary measures, namely provisions to safeguard the right to stay for children of parents who entered the country without official permission, in the understanding that children could not be held responsible for the parents’ choices. These young undocumented immigrants became the self-entitled ‘DREAMers,’ who started pushing Obama’s administration towards legislation that might apply to their condition in particular. They identified themselves after the so-called DREAM Act. The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act—first introduced in 2001—created high expectations for legalization, as it was designed to provide a path to permanent residence for young people who had been educated in the country. DREAM was defeated but not forgotten,<sup>[3]</sup> and DACA—the Deferred

Action for Childhood Arrivals program—was approved under the Obama administration in 2012 in response to advocacy by Dreamers (American Immigration Council). In providing temporary deportation relief, together with work permits and Social Security numbers for undocumented immigrants, as well as benefits renewable on a two-year basis, DACA proved that the undocumented could easily be turned into documented immigrants by legal means. President Trump in turn revoked DACA in 2017 upon taking office, as part of his strike on ‘illegal’ immigration.<sup>[4]</sup> The exclusionary take on citizenship under the Republican administration has only increased since then, with the proposition of adding a particular question on citizenship status to the 2020 census aimed at leaving the undocumented yet more vulnerable, a measure that has been contested and battled in the courts (Cherry).

- 10 The denial of citizenship rights to undocumented immigrants has also been accompanied by a discourse of dehumanization from different sectors, including the political leader: Besides the infamous invectives against Mexican immigrants as rapists and criminals on the campaign trail, the later elected President Trump applied similar dehumanizing language to characterize Central American immigrants as animals. Even though on this occasion he was referring to street gang members, the Mara Salvatrucha or MS 13, the President neglected to mention that a history of US military and political interference in Central America played a part in the impoverishment and political instability of those countries and motivated migration to the North. The deported youngsters, usually with a history of drugs and violence in the United States took with them a peculiar product of their former experience of imprisonment in the United States: the gang formed while awaiting deportation in Los Angeles prisons. Gang-violence in the last decades has dramatically affected Central American countries already ravished by civil wars and poverty. This is the short history of the so-called ‘Northern Triangle’—Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—one of the deadliest areas on earth and one from which many of the asylum seekers now reaching the United States in caravans are desperately fleeing from.

## **Impossible Activism or the Emergence of New Political Subjects?**

---

- 11 In formal terms, as non-authorized immigrants are amassed under the category ‘undocumented,’ they are deprived of everything, including the legal framework to pursue citizenship rights. Amalia Pallares, therefore, defines the undocumented immigrants’ claim for rights as impossible activism (1–2). Both verbal and visual discourses of criminality and demonization ultimately aim at rendering these individuals less than, if at all, human in the public eye, thus reinforcing the condition of illegality the State attaches to them. In this sense, the undocumented match the subaltern position theorized by Gayatri Spivak to the extent that they do not have the means to speak for themselves because the State does not provide them with the position nor the tools to render their claims

audible. Indeed, Spivak stresses that the subalterns' inability to speak and express their subjectivity is not an identity as such but rather a predicament that results from the fact that the system is structured in a way that they are automatically excluded from agency in any form. In the case of undocumented immigrants, the State deprives them of the possibility of constituting themselves as subjects and claiming a voice because they are non-existent in the eyes of the law. Politicians, lawyers, and activists have therefore looked for solutions to mitigate the immigrants' status as 'illegal.'

- 12 In addition to humanitarian reasons as a motivation to help illegal immigrants gain legal status, activists promote citizenship as a construct to produce political subjects. Citizenship transforms belonging into membership; it assigns rights and duties for participation in society, but these are subject to discussion and change and citizenship continuously evolves and expands. Boaventura de Sousa Santos suggests that, in their enforced invisibility, the undocumented hold alternative forms of subjectivity and belonging that may contribute to this continuous revision of citizenship. He argues that it is at the forefront of exclusion that we find the impetus for, and the imagination of, new forms of belonging. They emerge from different subjects-to-be who aim at trespassing the radical division between the lawful and the illegal he calls the abyssal line (Santos 48), and seek the recognition to do so (64).

## **Counter Visuality: Claiming the Right to See and Be Seen**

---

- 13 If we suppose that we are witnessing a moment when the undocumented immigrants are articulating their subjectivity by coming to the fore, fully exposing their identity, names, bodies, and stories, could their self-fashioning correspond to "knowledge-as-intervention-in-reality" (Santos 70), a form of knowledge that grants them some degree of political agency and empowerment to advance new proposals regarding citizenship and belonging? Do the immigrants cling to established discourses of national identity, or are they sketching other forms of attachment to land and community—new terms for inclusion, participation, and belonging? To what extent is recent legislation such as DREAM or DACA part of the reconfigurations of their subalternity providing locations from which they can be both heard and seen? These are the questions leading my exploration of the photographs and texts I shall discuss ahead.
- 14 Following Rebecca Schreiber's remark that "[i]n contemporary US society, visibility is associated with empowerment and invisibility with powerlessness, including an absence from political and cultural life" (5), the recent phenomenon of coming out in the public media as undocumented can be explained as a practice of counter visibility, that is to say, emancipatory forms of seeing and being seen. These offer alternatives to the representations in place and appropriate the gaze to defy the authority of established visual forms: "the right to look, challeng[es] the law that sustains visibility's authority in order to justify [the subject's] own sense of [what is] 'right'" (Mirzoeff 25). The ways the

undocumented immigrants choose to portray themselves in the images I analyze relate both to a critical awareness about the power of visibility and to their perception of their own power to reveal their identities—how they mean to be seen. Nicholas Mirzoeff associates these forms of agency to Hannah Arendt's theory of the spaces of appearance which she valued as spaces of active agency in the public sphere (Arendt 50). Agency takes shape when the immigrants speak of private experiences in the media, take command of the terms of the narrative, use poses in lieu of performance, and select private photos that work as documents—these images document the immigrants' existence for all to see. Images create meaning; they allow us to re-evaluate meanings as ways of seeing, which can contribute to the debate on immigration.

## Self-Portraits of Undocumented Immigrants

---

- 15 Jose Antonio Vargas was the first undocumented immigrant to disclose his condition in an article in the *New York Times Magazine* titled “My Secret Life as an Undocumented Worker” in 2011. Vargas, originally from the Philippines, arrived as a child on a tourist visa to visit relatives, but the family plan had always been to stay permanently. After excelling in high school, greatly driven by his need to prove his right to be accepted by US society, he eventually became a high-profile reporter, winning a Pulitzer prize for the coverage of the Virginia Tech shootings, in a team with other *Washington Post* journalists in 2008. As he points out, Vargas contributed to newspapers and magazines such as the *Huffington Post* and the *New Yorker* and interviewed many prominent figures in American society who trusted him as they would any regular citizen, welcoming and sharing their homes and workplaces with him. Having attained so much recognition, he felt safe enough to attach his face and body to his sense of belonging. He knew, however, that this margin of safety was based on unsafe facts: fake documents and the solidarity of co-workers and friends he called ‘benefactors,’ those who were not intimidated by his illegal status and supported him. The *NYT Magazine* article introduces him via headshot adding authority and authenticity to his testimony. The photo also shows the ordinariness of the undocumented migrant whose life expands beyond the established image of hiding or leading a life of seclusion, as he states:



Author Jose Antonio Vargas at the 2018 Texas Book Festival in Austin, TX, photo by Larry D. Moore, own work, 27 Oct. 2018, CC BY-SA 4.0.



There are believed to be eleven million undocumented immigrants in the United States. We're not always who you think we are. Some pick your strawberries or care for your children. Some are in high school or college. And some, it turns out, write news articles you might read. I grew up here. This is my home. Yet even though I think of myself as an American and consider America my country, my country doesn't think of me as one of its own. (Vargas)

- 16 Vargas's words encompass the dilemma of belonging and nonbelonging, as he also sheds light on the omnipresence of undocumented immigrants in every path of life and every class, humanizing them as the next-door neighbor or someone you know and are fond of, regardless—because perhaps unaware—of their legal status in the country. Despite the suggestion of proximity and the obvious reach for empathy, the pain of secrecy runs throughout his narration. He describes his life as a permanent race against time, or against the deadlines on his fake documents. And the moment of exposure becomes inevitable, as a debt to his authentic self: "I'm done running. I'm exhausted. I don't want that life anymore." The only way out is revealing his status, a decision that he takes on as a civic mission, for when he writes: "I don't know what the consequences will be of telling my story," he refers to his personal fate but also to the impact his public appearance may have on others.
- 17 The consequence of Vargas's public confession became clear about a year later when his face stood out amidst a group of undocumented immigrants on the cover of *Time* magazine (June 25, 2012). The spotlight is on him, the focus point among thirty-five other immigrants, all youngsters, all appropriating the gaze and looking straight into the reader's eye.<sup>[4]</sup> Vargas seems to assume his role as the leader in this deliberate act of appearance in the public sphere. The title gives voice to the group and introduces them in terms of nationality rather than legal status: "We Are Americans\*", followed by the subtitled "\*Just not legally."
- 18 The issue does not feature much text; instead, it contains a gallery of individual portraits, one per page, each individual literally coming out of the shadows: on every page, either a headshot or a half body shot—gazing directly into the reader's—, lightened up against a black background. Below each photograph, a full name appears, followed by a sentence in which each individual states their personal aspiration about their individual place in US society, alongside the acknowledgement of undocumented status and country of origin:

I'm an undocumented immigrant . . . and I want to be a journalist . . . I will run for office in the state of Arizona . . . I want to be a member of Congress . . . a professional soccer player . . . an architect . . . a psychologist . . . a dancer . . . a graphic designer . . . an immigration attorney . . . .

- 19 Vargas concludes the introductions by expressing a powerful and also personal desire: "I am a journalist, and I want to see my mother who I haven't seen for almost 19 years." While Vargas' revelation of his illegal status did not ease his pain, apparently his high profile protected him from penalties (Hudson). He has



not abandoned the spotlight as an activist for immigration ever since: he runs an immigration advocacy group aptly called ‘Define American.’

20 Julissa Arce, another illegal immigrant, chose the moment for taking her space in the public eye when she felt safer in her legal status. She only came out when she managed to get her papers, in a process that involved a marriage to a US citizen as a way to citizenship. By publishing an autobiography, like Vargas, she assumed the position of a role model. Hers is as much a success story as Vargas’: She also came to the United States with her parents as a child who owned a business across the border. It was only after finishing high school that she began facing the odds of being unable to apply for tuition to finish her studies. She shares many features with Vargas: Both were brilliant college students who gained the sympathy of teachers and co-workers alike who came to their rescue and were, in some cases, both accomplices in getting legal papers and facilitators to the legalization process.



Julissa Arce at “Claiming Williams 2028,” Williams College, 1 Feb. 2018, photo by Williams College staff, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

21 Arce’s stepping into the public sphere is part of her immigration activism and takes the form of a published autobiography in two versions, for an adult readership and for children, both available also in Spanish translation. Published in 2016 and 2018, *My (Underground) American Dream: My True Story as an Undocumented Immigrant Who Became a Wall Street Executive* and *Someone Like Me: How an Undocumented Girl Fought for Her American Dream* suggest moving self-representation one step further in that the autobiography as genre elevates the individual to a higher level of visibility, as a representative type.<sup>[5]</sup> I will not delve into the narrative but will take a brief look at the images on the book covers and Amazon’s marketing strategies in advertising the books as ‘national bestsellers.’

22 While the author’s face and gaze dominate both covers, the adult version suggests determination<sup>[6]</sup> with Arce, in business attire, looking over her shoulder directly at the reader. The young reader version reflects satisfaction or happiness with a younger Arce posing as the all-American Cheerleader. The long descriptive title emphasizes Arce’s achievement in the context of the classic American Dream of opportunity and prosperity usually associated with people with legal status. Despite being undocumented, Arce was employed by well-established, distinguished firms like Goldman Sachs and Merrill Lynch, her

merits overriding the fake papers. She achieved her dream not necessarily against, but just outside the law. Both book titles appropriate the discourse of Americanness in summoning the myth of the American Dream, but with a twist: Secrecy is the odd detail; success and being undocumented suggest a paradox that is likely to catch the reader's attention. The children's version also evokes the narrative of achievement but is more intent on identification as is typical in coming-of-age narratives.

- 23 The marketing questions on the book covers in turn promise to de-mystify the idea of the undocumented as someone radically different from the regular citizen; the back cover of the adult version reads: "What does an undocumented immigrant look like? What kind of family must she come from? How could she get into this country? What is the true price she must pay to remain in the United States?" The children version in turn mentions an extract which connects fear and secrecy, making being undocumented a horrible secret for a child to have, but one bred within the family and kept for the sake of familial unity: "I wanted to tell him that I was undocumented and how afraid I was everyday that someone might find out. I was afraid to be deported and separated from my family. But I kept hearing my mother's words over again: YOU CAN'T TELL ANYONE."

## **Background as Identity**

---

- 24 One might be tempted to relate the bold appropriation of the American Dream discourse only to high profile immigrants like Arce or Vargas. But the image of the Dream also appeals to other kinds of immigrants as a legitimization strategy: In an interview for an article on the diversity of undocumented immigrants in the United States, precisely in the wake of President Trump's repeal of DACA, Indira Islas, both a 'DREAMer' and a DACA recipient follows the American Dream narrative as well. "The Only Way We Can Fight Back Is to Excel" evinces educational excellence as a counternarrative to that of the poor undeserving immigrant: "Succeeding for me is how I can get my revenge. [...] I want to break the stereotype of us being here taking jobs away and not helping the economy. I want Trump to see we're the total opposite of what he thinks," states the young student of Mexican descent (Russakoff).



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/uPSdYq9qRco>

paranum]Indira Islas’s story is one of the richest in visual terms. Besides a posed portrait from which the viewer infers that Islas is fully aware of her presence and means to be seen (as in the classic portrait tradition), there are also children and family photographs, and photos taken on special occasions, such as graduation day, as well as college photos that depict everyday routines or ordinary events, where she appears surrounded by her mates. She seems to be a regular—full citizen—university student, but the text tells a different story. In fact, each section highlights Islas’s comments about how being undocumented becomes a part of her subjectivity: “This pain—it pushes us. It’s motivation. It has made me who I am. It makes me go through every day” (Russakoff).

25 But her testimony is also visually interesting because her portrait sets a contrasts to the title of the article. It is taken indoors, probably in her room, which is full of meaningful details, suggesting Islas is in command of how she is to be seen. Her pose against this background reads like an expanded version of an identity card. She stands against a wall that comprises different kinds of photographs and various graphic messages as well (in the original text, this image takes almost a full page and therefore every detail can be closely scrutinized). Islas’s visual representation entails a counter visuality in the sense that it suggests that her life, rather than hiding in the shadow in shame and fear, is an open book and it speaks for and with her. In the article, she says that, in allowing her to work and get a driver’s licence, DACA had freed her from the fears her mother faced as an undocumented immigrant. This perception of difference in relation to her mother raises a good measure of awareness of the degree of entitlement these provisions can provide to people like her.

26 If we take the background wall in the photo as its frame, we understand how the

visual elements spread across the wall allow her to forge a particular discursive position through a counter visuality that relies heavily on the agency conferred by DACA, on the one hand, and on a different play on the myth of the American Dream, on the other. The latter conflates with the promises of the project of legislation that has empowered the undocumented immigrant struggles since 2001: the DREAM Act—in the form of the letters D, R, E, A, and M printed on separate sheets of white paper—floats above her, certainly not only as a loose wall decoration but almost suggesting guardianship over her. But it also reads as a statement, a powerful source of self-identification. In addition, we read the tag below, “No human being is illegal,” that seems to be in dialogue with the category above, as inviting a discussion about the condition of being undocumented. To the right, still in the background, one literally sees Indira Islas’ history: a collection of photographs the viewer can peruse at will, as in a family album, documenting her life from childhood to the present.

## Belonging and Bonding: Family

---

- 27 Family pictures play a role in nearly all of these appearances. The family picture is central to shape undocumented immigrant Hugo Carrasco’s identity, in a 2014 article published in the online magazine *Salon*. Carrasco speaks in the first person and discloses the typical narrative of the illegal border crossing, reaching the United States with his mother and siblings at age 10 to join his father, who had immigrated earlier. As a DREAMer, he would have been eligible for DACA except that he was caught working without papers resulting in a criminal record incompatible with eligibility for DACA.
- 28 Bereft of a discursive position based on some sort of legal grounds, he resorts to his family to justify his belonging and shed the real danger of deportation. The core of the article is Carrasco’s current life: his family now, a family *made in the United States* becomes the hook of his life story. Carrasco is married to a US citizen, and they have two US-born children. All four of them are in the picture, close together, Carrasco to the left holding their baby daughter, his wife next to them holding their toddler daughter. The parents are smiling into the camera (the children—as typical in staged photographs—look somewhat sceptical). This family photograph speaks beyond matters of law; socially speaking, the family still bears a powerful symbolic resonance—belonging begins in the family, so arguing for the right to be with one’s family is widely accepted, whereas application to family reunion is a sustainable requirement for immigration.
- 29 The nation itself often grounds its legitimacy in notions of kin—the metaphor of the nation as a broad family cuts across cultures and polities. Last but not least, it is only human to relate to others, so the trope of the family also seeks an emotional response because everyone belongs to one. Obviously, the other figures in the picture add to the counter visuality at stake: Carrasco crafts an identity through this opportunity to appear in the public sphere that establishes him as a father and a husband. The other figures in the photo *document* this

identity. In the photograph, Ricardo Carrasco is so much more than the undocumented immigrant—his identity relies on the bonds he holds with all the other figures within the frame.

- 30 In terms of the way the image is put together, it looks like an ordinary photograph. It could be a selfie—were it not for the stark contrast expressed in the title of the article, right under the picture: “I live in fear of deportation.” The photo suggests that family bonding is stronger than national bonding and functions as a wall against fear. It also suggests that fear is a secret sentiment because when lived in the open it threatens the family unity, and this is more precious than fear. Again, as in Vargas’s testimony, Hugo Carrasco eventually chooses to run the risk of coming public for a greater good, the legal status that will allow him to protect his family.

## The Family Album

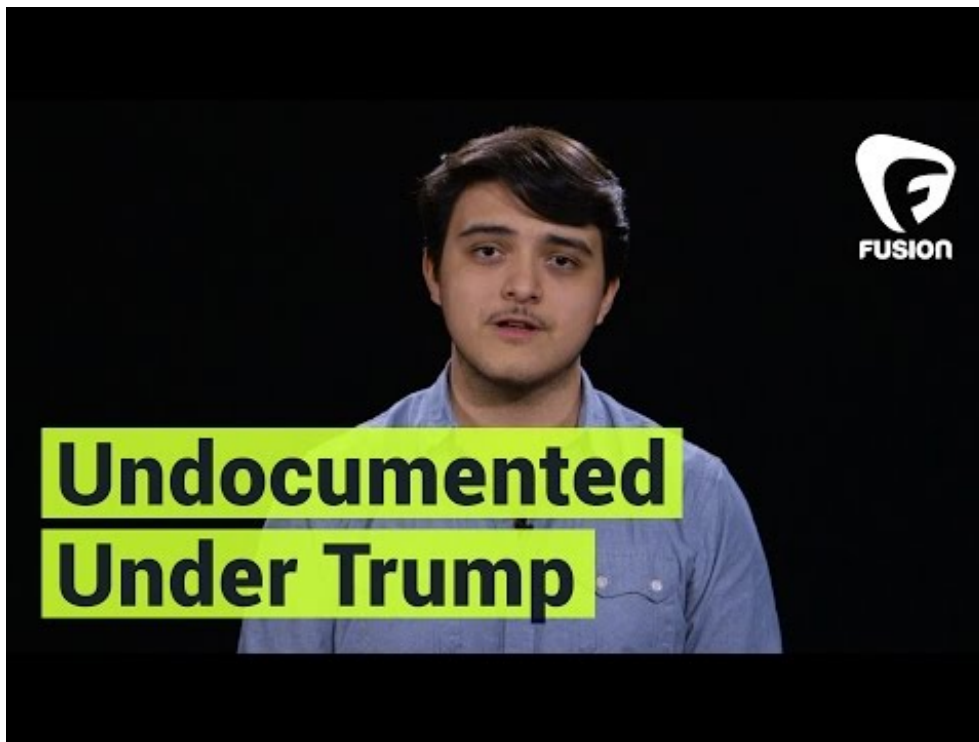
---

- 31 Karell Roxas’s story is also based on family ties, but, contrary to Hugo Carrasco’s family which he had started with his American wife in the United States, it centers around her Filipino family. The way she makes sense of her history of being undocumented is based on childhood portraits typical of a family album. The photographs featured in the story show Roxas as a child together with other members of her family, mostly other children, including typical motives of family albums, like a “First day of school”-shot together with her brother. Despite the fact that she has recently obtained US citizenship, she still conceals her face at present. She has attained legal status through yet another legal pathway to citizenship, an “Adjustment of Status,” under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), after long juridical battles.
- 32 Published in *Elle* online magazine in 2017, “My Secret Life as an Undocumented Immigrant” exposes how Karell Roxas was brought from the Philippines into the country by her mother at age four and lived most of her life as undocumented. The fear of deportation is never just an individual fear, neither was Carrasco’s nor that of the others in the previous narratives. It is a fear for the loss of family, in Roxas’s case being separated from her youngest sibling, who is also featured in one of the photos as a baby surrounded by Roxas, her brother, and their mother. She was born in the United States: “My biggest fear was that my little sister, a citizen, would grow up alone—that one day she would wake up alone because deportation agents had taken us in the middle of the night. I had heard stories of it happening to others around me.” The family is also the only reference to being safe because fear mediates every relation outside the family: “the basic message was that we could trust no one outside the family,” and for the same reason exposure is always very limited and self-policed, even by the children themselves. Hence the pressure to excel, the same as in Arce’s and Islas’s narratives: “As I grew into my teenage years, I learned that I could not afford to make mistakes.”

33 Reterencing family memories by including childhood pictures also has a humanizing effect that overrides the particularities of the undocumented experience because it relies on the idea of bonding and belonging. The photographs function as the surrogate for a history and an individuality that have been denied or erased in legal terms, but which the viewer-reader easily associates with this type of personal tokens. In this sense, the use of these images urges the common viewer to identify with the undocumented immigrant, as the intimate moments shared here are typical habits and pleasures any child enjoys whether growing up in the shade or not. As in the previous case, the photographs work as a common denominator, enhancing empathy on part of the viewer. They also document the undocumented immigrant's past history as any orderly family album does.

## The Larger Family: Symbolic Sites of Citizenship

---



Watch Video At: [https://youtu.be/N\\_TH3sEooPc](https://youtu.be/N_TH3sEooPc)

paranum]The online publication *Splinter* also published an undocumented immigrant testimony in 2016 by Jorge Corona, a Mexican national who overstayed a travel visa eleven years earlier and was, at the time of writing, a DACA recipient. Several pictures originally accompanied this article, all of them courtesy of the author, but they were removed “due to legal reasons,” as stated on the page. The author, however, maintains a short video film which includes the picture commented on here. The video actually makes the first-person discourse more vivid and its authority more powerful.

34 Like in Roxas's article, Jorge Corona resorts to emblematic family photographs, but his evoke a larger and more abstract commonality vis-à-vis the average American citizen. One of the pictures registers a typical holiday visit to one of

the most emblematic sites of American culture and its most cherished symbols, the Statue of Liberty. As in the previous set of pictures, Corona retrieves meaningful memories that speak about his feelings about growing up and being integrated in the United States. But here the context of reference is that of the nation. The young immigrant in this picture is not just standing by the national monument but appropriates the values embodied by Liberty in replicating her pose. The gesture, symbolic as it is, suggests a sense of belonging, with or without documents. Moreover, it poses a stark contrast to snapshots of immigrants caught red-handedly by the border patrol. It stresses that citizenship is also cultural and may therefore be affectively appropriated in ways that escape State control because they are not, and possibly need not, be legally defined.

- 35 Perhaps despite the fact that this take on cultural citizenship may be just a nuance or somehow easier to claim than legal citizenship,<sup>[7]</sup> I find the title of the article also worth mentioning: “I am Undocumented. I Am American. Trump Doesn’t Change That.” Both Corona and Islas address the US President directly, obviously challenging his importance as head of State in an expression of their anger. They both send open, fearless, proud, individual messages that may be at odds with the idea of ‘good citizenship,’ or else just critical of decisions they consider unjust since they did not result from debate or negotiation that are the lifeblood of democratic societies. The title, retrieved in the film, battles with the very definition of ‘America,’ again hinting at forms of belonging that are not part of a strictly legal discourse. Yet, Corona’s whole testimony is about how the arrival of his DACA card changed his life, enabling him also to reclaim protective cover that mitigates being undocumented. As mentioned in the text introducing Indira Islas, these youths understand themselves as ‘DACAmended’ (Russakoff).
- 36 In crafting his space of appearance, Corona appropriates the myth of America as the Promised Land to make legible his own subjectivity, one that, despite all setbacks and denials, is ruled by hope—and promise, for he says: “Our hope is raw. Our hope is beaten. Our hope is bruised. But our hope is there. Our hope is there when we wake up every morning, and it’s with us when we go to bed at night. And in the morning, we still have hope. And no law, policy, or mean talk can take our hope away.” His statement links back to the subjective elaborations in the previous articles, where fear runs through these experiences but eventually fails to deter the immigrants from struggling to find a position from which to speak out.
- 37 Corona’s final words in the text, as in the video, take a very direct target: “I urge those in power to work with that hope, to work with us, to bring us into the fold. Because we are America. And if America allows it, we have a lot of hope to give.” (Corona). We are told that he managed to acquire permanent residency meanwhile, but 800,000 other DACA holders remained “outside the fold.” Altogether, we understand these appearances in the public sphere as activism and the struggle for social justice as a legitimate and powerful form of participation in society.



## Final Thoughts

---

38 These narratives and the counter visualities they establish may fall short of matching the radical post abyssal thinking proposed by Santos in that they still cling to established discourses of national identity and kinship. But these appropriations are marked by twists that evince the particularity of the undocumented immigrant's status defined by limitations based on being excluded from citizenship. What seems to be changing is that these limitations do not demand invisibility anymore or deprive the immigrants of voicing their claims to political rights. In their claim to space and in their visual appearances in the public sphere, they express and perform alternative forms of belonging. These spaces to see and be seen, in articulation with the legal provisions that entitle the undocumented to *a sense* of citizenship suggest that they are developing a critical awareness about their ability to attain a position between subalternity and citizenship from which they can indeed speak. In this sense, they are crossing the abyssal line and the condition of subalternity. They may not be representative of the heterogeneity of undocumented immigrants,<sup>[8]</sup> but they are articulating a discourse for the condition of being undocumented. Coming to the fore is part and parcel of that discourse that enables them to change the terms of the debate in replacing the common citizen's misconceptions by representations authored by themselves. By doing so, undocumented immigrants might contribute to bringing progress to the debate on immigration.

### Notes

---

[1] Asia also contributes heavily to the number: 268,000 nationals from China; 267,000 from India and 198,000 from Korea. Asian immigration takes a different path, though, as migrants come on temporary visas and overstay them (Yee, Davis, and Patel).

[2] The 2019 El Paso massacre, a hate crime directed specifically at "Mexicans" is proof to the reaction of white supremacists to the visibility of the Latino community in the US.

[3] Many different versions of the bill have since been introduced and discussed in both Houses but never approved; the most recent bill is entitled the American Dream and Promise Act.

[3] Even though the President's action was widely publicized, opposition has been so strong that most eligible DACA candidates have been able to apply and to get coverage. See [National Immigration Law Center](#). The [Supreme Court](#) has blocked Trump's revocation only recently.

[4] The cover photograph is by Gian Paul Lozza. The 'gallery' runs through pages 2–37. See also [Sun](#).

[5] The pedagogical intention is obviously stressed in the choice for a children

book. Actually, the genre of the undocumented life story, either fictional or autobiographical, has been thriving in young adult fiction lately. Brygida Gasztold, for example, explores bildungsroman features of this kind of writing and relates the genre to immigrant activism.

[6] Reading through *My (Underground) American Dream* may bring the reader to revise that initial visual impression and perceive some bittersweetness in Julissa Arce's gaze, but that goes beyond this analysis.

[7] I use the concept of cultural citizenship as defined by Renato Rosaldo as immigrants' claims to spaces where they can actively participate in civic life, which can range from community activities to protests or activism. See *Culture and Truth. The Remaking of Social Analysis* (1989) and "Cultural Citizenship in San Jose, California" (1994).

[8] It is revealing that manual workers, those lacking any legal cover, continue to refuse to face the camera gaze; see, for instance, Yee, Davis, and Patel.

### **Works Cited**

---

American Immigration Council. "The Dream Act, DACA, and Other Policies Designed to Protect Dreamers." *AmericanImmigrationCouncil.org*. 3 Sept. 2019. Web. 20 July 2020.

Arce, Julissa. *My (Underground) American Dream: My True Story as an Undocumented Immigrant Who Became a Wall Street Executive*. New York: Center Street, 2016. Print.

Arce, Julissa. *Someone Like Me: How One Undocumented Girl Fought for Her American Dream*. New York: Little, Brown, 2018. Print.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: U of Chicago P. 1958. Print.

Carrasco, Hugo. "I Live in Fear of Deportation: My Life as an Undocumented Worker." *Salon* 18 May 2014. Web. 11 Sep. 2018.

Cherry, Ceridwen. "Census Citizenship Question Illegally Discriminates Against Immigrants." *American Civil Liberties Union*. 6 June 2018. Web. 20 July 2020.

Corona, Jorge. "I Am Undocumented. I am American. Trump Doesn't Change That." *Splinter* 11 Nov. 2016. Web. 11 Sep. 2018.

Davis, Julie Hirschfeld and Michael D. Shear. "How Trump Came to Enforce a Practice of Separating Migrant Families." *New York Times* 16 June 2018. Web. 20 July 2020.

- Gasztold, Brygida. "In Pursuit of the American DREAM, or Mirage? Undocumented Youth in YA Fiction" *Ad Americam: Journal of American Studies* 20 (2019): 15-27. DOI 10.12797/AdAmericam.20.2019.20.02. PDF.
- Hudson, John. "Why Hasn't Jose Antonio Vargas Been Deported?" *Atlantic* 14 June 2012. Web. 19 July 2020.
- Kinosian, Sarah, and Amanda Holpuch. "Fleeing Home Alone: The Migrant Children Blocked at Mexican Border." *The Guardian* 19 Dec. 2018. Web. 20 Feb. 2019.
- Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011. Print.
- National Immigration Law Center. "Status of Current DACA Litigation." 9 June 2019. Web. 20 July 2020.
- Pallares, Amalia. *Family Activism: Immigrant Struggles and the Politics of Noncitizenship*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2014. Print.
- Roberts, Nina. "Undocumented Immigrants Quietly Pay Billions into Social Security and Receive No Benefits." *Marketplace* 28 Jan. 2019. Web. 21 Feb. 2019.
- Roxas, Karell. "My Secret Life and an Undocumented Immigrant." *Elle Online* 9 Mar. 2017. Web. 11 Sep. 2018.
- Russakoff, Dave. "The Only Way We Can Fight Back Is to Excel." *New York Times* 25 Jan 2017. Web. 19 July 2020.
- Ruthenberg, Jim. "Bush Enters Language Fight on Language." *New York Times* 29 Apr. 2006. Web. 20 Feb. 2019.
- Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. "Beyond Abyssal Knowledge: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges." *Review* 30.1 (2007): 45–89. *JSTOR*. 10 Aug. 2020.
- Schreiber, Rebecca. *The Undocumented Everyday: Migrant Lives and the Politics of Visibility*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2018. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia UP, 2013. 66–111. Print.
- Sun, Feifei. "Behind the Cover: America's Undocumented Immigrants." *Time* 14 June 2012. Web. 19 July 2020.
- Vargas, José Antonio. "My Secret Life as an Undocumented Worker." *NYT Magazine* 22 June 2011. Web. 19 July 2020.

Villegas, Paulina. “Detention of Child Immigrants at the US Border Surges to Record Levels.” *New York Times* 29 Oct. 2019. Web. 20 July 2020.

United States Census Bureau. “Hispanic Heritage Month 2018.” 13 Sept. 2018. Web. 20 Feb. 2019.

Yee, Vivian, Kenan Davis, and Jugal K. Patel. “Here’s the Reality About Illegal Immigrants in the United States.” *New York Times* 6 Mar. 2017. Web. 8 Oct. 2018.

## Author

---

**Maria José Canelo** holds a PhD in American Studies from New York University and is Assistant Professor of English and American Studies at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Coimbra (Portugal) and also full researcher at the Center for Social Studies (CES–UC), where she has also been the editor of the online journal *ecadernos CES*. Her interests gather around cultural and literary studies and interamerican studies: issues of citizenship, nationalism, difference, representation, visibility, and literary magazines. Her latest publications include: “Nations in Review(s): modernist ‘little’ magazines and the (trans)national imagination,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 55.3 (2018): 595–617; “Redefining the Terms of National Belonging in War and Peace, Randolph Bourne, “Critique of the Great War,” *American and British Studies Annual* 12 (2019): 9–23.

## Suggested Citation

---

Canelo, Maria José. “Can the Undocumented Speak? Undocumented Immigrants and Self-Representation.” *American Studies Journal* 69 (2020). Web. 16 Oct. 2020. DOI 10.18422/69-04.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).