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December 2015

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Beyond the Dreamer Narrative – Undocumented Youth Organizing Against Criminalization and Deportations in California¹

December 2015

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Introduction

When a group of undocumented migrants blocked a road in San Bernardino, California, in the summer of 2011, it was at first sight one out of many events organized by the protest movement of undocumented youth. While they marched down the road and started their action of civil disobedience, they were chanting “education not deportation” and wore academic caps and t-

¹ I would like to thank all the undocumented organizers and activists who gave me the opportunity to take part in their actions, events and meetings and I would like to thank especially the persons who I had the chance to interview: Aiko, Alex, Anthony, Edna, Erick, Esperanza, Gina, Janeth, Jonathan, Luis O., Luis S., Marcela, Marlene, Seth, Sofia and Yessica. Furthermore, I would like to thank Chris Tilly, Kent Wong and their colleagues at the UCLA IRLE, where I presented a first draft of this paper (IRLE Dialogues, February 17, 2015, UCLA, Los Angeles), as well as Ana Muñoz, Philipp Ratfisch and Maurice Stierl for their comments.

shirts with the campaign slogan “The DREAM is coming” as a reference to higher education and the federal DREAM Act². On the one hand, they were thus continuing the activism of the undocumented youth movement, which became nationally known because of its struggle for the rights of students without legal status in the US since its inception in the early 2000s (cf. Nicholls 2013; Corrunker 2012; Anguiano 2011; Unzueta/Seif 2014; Seif 2014; Costanza-Chock 2014; Eisema/Fiorito/Montero-Sieburth 2014; Negron-Gonzales 2014, 2015). On the other hand, this direct action was symbolic of a shift in the movement that heavily impacted the political practice of groups, coalitions and alliances of undocumented youth in California over the last years.

In previous actions, the participating youth activists could mostly be understood as neatly fitting into the norms of national mainstream society as students with good grades and an appealing identity as “cultural Americans” – youths that have been called “Dreamers” in reference to the DREAM Act. Up until the San Bernardino action, according to the Dreamer narrative, mainly youth were visible in the protest, whose only “failure” seemed to be that their parents brought them to the US without having citizenship rights: “[Before] the environment with civil disobedience was like here’s the perfect case: no criminal record, no real chance of getting deported” (Jonathan Perez). However, the protest in San Bernardino was different. It was not only the “first action of undocumented youth getting arrested and risking deportation” (Alex) in California, but it was also done by undocumented youths with diverse backgrounds, who were not represented before. It was the first time that undocumented queer youths, youths with a criminal record, undocumented women and an Asian undocumented student practiced civil disobedience together (ibid.). Furthermore, the direct action in San Bernardino was also going beyond the strategy of the Dreamer narrative in another way: Whereas the undocumented youth movement in the region was mainly focused on a campaign for the California DREAM Act, a piece of state legislation that would grant financial aid to undocumented students, this action was still connected to DREAM Act campaigns through the *National Immigrant Youth Alliance* (NIYA) but also going beyond the particular fight for education rights and legislative reforms (Perez). It was opposing directly the threat of deportation resulting from the cooperation of the local police with *Immigration and Customs Enforcement* (ICE), which extended the reach of the federal law enforcement agency responsible for detention and deportation on the basis of a 287(g) agreement (Cano 2011). This fight against immigration enforcement led to the establishment of the *ICE out of L.A. Coalition* and other initiatives that finally achieved to end the 287(g) program in San Bernardino in 2014 and in Los Angeles in 2015, albeit the cooperation with ICE still continues (NILC 2015).

² The federal DREAM Act is a piece of legislation that would legalize the status of certain undocumented youth who go to college or serve in the military.

Analyzing the fight against the enforcement of immigration policies and the deportation and detention regime on state and local level in California, this paper seeks to reflect on the recent transformations of the undocumented youth movement that have not gained adequate attention in media discourses and academic debates. Referring to Alfonso Gonzales' analysis of the American migration regime, I argue that this new wave of the undocumented youth movement deeply challenges the "anti-migrant hegemony" in the US (2014: 5) by favoring the organizing of affected diverse communities over short term activism and by rejecting the criminalizing "good immigrant" versus "bad immigrant" divide. The main argument of this paper is that the undocumented youth movement in California is in a process of transformation towards a more inclusive organizing of the own communities, in respect of intersectional power structures, and a more radical critique of borders, criminalization and deportations that goes beyond the demand for citizenship and legislation. This shift is linked to an emancipation from the Dreamer narrative that has been criticized for its exclusionary effects. Furthermore, I contend that this shift also occurs due to the specific political context of the state of California that has, compared to other states, become some kind of a sanctuary space over the last years. Whereas California once was a role model for anti-migration politics on the state level in the US, it is now one of the most progressive states regarding pro-migrant rights.

In this paper, I present a first outline of my research in California, where I conducted participant observations, qualitative interviews and document analyses, mainly in the Los Angeles region between September 2014 and March 2015.³ I had the chance to interview 17 undocumented organizers who were between the ages of 20 and 28 and part of groups on the local, state and national level: *IDEAS at UCLA*, *Dream Team LA (DTLA)*, *ASPIRE-LA*, *LA- and East Bay IYC*, *RAIZ* and *San Diego Dream Team (SDDT)* on the local level, *Immigrant Youth Coalition (IYC)* and *California Immigrant Youth Justice Alliance (CIYJA)* on the state level as well as *United we Dream (UWD)* on the national level. All these semi-structured interviews were then transcribed and coded with MAXQDA, a software for qualitative data analysis. Furthermore, the undocumented organizers allowed me to come to their meetings, workshops and retreats. Taking part in direct actions, marches, concerts and other events, I spent more than 300 hours accompanying the movement of undocumented youth in California. This paper thus

³ The research is part of my dissertation project, which analyses struggles of undocumented and refugee youth against the deprivation of rights and repressive migration policies in Germany/Europe and the USA. In March 2014, I already had the chance to visit the *New York State Youth Leadership Council (NYSYLC)* and college-based Dream Teams in New York (Schwartz 2015). In Germany, I am accompanying the group *Jugendliche ohne Grenzen (JOG)*, Youths without Borders, that is fighting for "Bleiberecht" (the right to stay) for everybody. Youths without Borders is a nationwide association of young refugees in Germany founded in 2005 that is following the principle that those affected have their own voice and do not need paternalistic politics (<http://jogspace.net/about>; cf. Kanalan 2015).

fundamentally draws on the experiences, insights and analyses of the undocumented youth organizers.⁴

The struggles of undocumented youth in the US are covered by a fast growing body of academic literature. In the mid-2000s, various studies began to pay attention to the living conditions and forms of discrimination against undocumented youth as well as their everyday tactics of navigating different social systems despite the barriers they face because of a lack of legal status (Chavez 2013; Abrego/Gonzales 2010; Gonzales 2011; Perez 2009, 2012). Some studies especially examined related legal and policy aspects (Olivas 2010; López/López 2010). Since the undocumented youth movement was fighting particularly for the DREAM Act, a bill that was first introduced in 2001 and that offered a path to citizenship for certain undocumented youth who went to college or serve the military, most of the studies examine access to higher education and the conditions for students without legal status (Chavez et al. 2007; Rincón 2008; Abrego 2008). For the same reason, most of this academic work analyzing the movement of undocumented youth focused on student activism and organizing linked to the Dreamer narrative, which was established in the early stages of the movement (cf. Seif 2011; Wong et al. 2012; Corrunker 2012; Nicholls 2013; Milkman 2014; Eisema/Fiorito/Montero-Sieburth 2014; de la Torre/Germano 2014; Negron-Gonzales 2014, 2015; Truax 2015). Going beyond the scope of this literature, I will analyze the more recent forms of organizing and political practices of undocumented youth in California that go beyond an exclusive focus on students and the framing of the Dreamer narrative (cf. Unzueta Carrasco/Seif 2014; Perez 2014).

Instead of providing a comprehensive overview of the undocumented youth movement in California, I will rather highlight three specific aspects that are crucial to understand the recent transformations of the movement. First, I show why it is no longer appropriate to describe the organizing of undocumented youth with the still prevailing categories of the Dreamer narrative. Second, I describe shifts in the organizing processes and political strategies that go along with the tensions between the Dreamer narrative and the diversity of undocumented communities. Third, I analyze in which way the movement in California goes beyond the focus on advocacy and activism as well as beyond demands for legislation and citizenship. But before I analyze these recent transformations, I will sketch out the political context of the undocumented youth movement as well as its history.

⁴ Passages from the interviews are quoted with real first or full names as well as with pseudonyms, depending on the preference of the interviewees. Although anonymity is an important principle, as stated for example in the "Code of Ethics" of the American Sociological Association (ASA), I seek to credit the intellectual work of the interviewed organizers as far as possible by using various naming strategies (cf. Unzueta Carrasco/Seif 2014: 281f.; Seif 2014: 116).

Undocumented youth and the US migration regime

The “anti-migrant hegemony” in the US and the state of California

After the last mass legalization in the US in 1986, the number of undocumented migrants has grown from an estimated 2,5 million to more than 11 million people (Gonzales 2011: 602; Passel/Cohn 2009). A further legalization program or comprehensive immigration reform have not been adopted since then. Nonetheless, undocumented migrants have successfully fought for their rights and pushed politicians to pass and implement laws and policies, especially on local and state level. According to the US Constitution and legal culture, the federal government is responsible for immigration policies and has the rights to control borders and “make decisions about the admission and exclusion of outsiders”, whereas state and local governments are not allowed to act in this realm of immigration law and principally have to follow “the tradition of equal personhood and rights for territorially-present persons” (Wells 2004: 1313f.). The actions of state and local governments are therefore primarily grounded on the de facto residence of persons in a community or state and, according to US federalism, not on the illegalization of citizenship status by federal immigration law.

Especially in California, undocumented movements succeeded in winning rights, like driver licenses (AB 60), effective since 2015, or a certain protection from deportation with the so called TRUST Act (AB 4), effective since 2014. Two decades ago, the situation was quite different: With Proposition 187, California was a starting point for racist and nationalist campaigns on the state level that had led to the implementation of anti-migration laws in states like Arizona (SB 1070), Georgia (HB 87) and Alabama (HB 56), although states are not allowed to act within the sphere of immigration (cf. Motomura 2014). The repressive Proposition 187 passed as a referendum in 1994 and would have barred undocumented migrants from public schools and health care and allowed local police forces to act as immigration police: “We’re the first Arizona, we were the template with Proposition 187” (Perez). But most of the provisions of the law were found unconstitutional in a federal court decision and it has also been an impetus for the emergence of a “Proposition 187 generation”, mostly young organizers of color who years later “played a critical role” in the mass mobilizations for migrants rights in 2006, when millions took to the street during the mega-marches (Gonzales 2014: 55). Over the years, California therefore “has made a complete switch” (Luis O.) and became the “Anti-Arizona”⁵: a state that could be described as a “blueprint” for pro-migrant transformation (CIPC 2015). The struggles of migration – and foremost the undocumented youth movement – also pushed

⁵ <http://www.ndlon.org/en/pressroom/press-releases/item/530-trust-act-california-arizona>.

president Obama to announce deportation relief programs with DACA in 2012 and DAPA in 2014.⁶

Nevertheless, despite its often mentioned and upheld history as a “nation of immigrants”, the deprivation of rights and the criminalization of non-citizens is – like in other states of the “Global North” – a structural element of US politics. Drawing on the hegemony concept of Antonio Gramsci, Alfonso Gonzales (2014) describes the migration regime in the US, as an “anti-migrant hegemony”, where the criminalization of migrants has become naturalized and widely accepted in the dominant society. In the last 10 years, the US has deported more people than in the last 110 years combined, the Obama administration has deported more than 2 million people, deporting around 1,100 people every day, and also spends more money on immigration enforcement than on any other federal law enforcement combined (ibid.: 2). Thereby, the US economy profits of the cheap, precarious labor of undocumented migrants who are highly exploitable because of their “deportability” (De Genova 2002) and migration control has become a huge business for the “immigration industrial complex“, whereby private corporations profit from incarceration and lobbying for more repressive migrations policies (Hernández-León 2013; cf. Marcela; Alex).

But such anti-migrant hegemony goes beyond the repression and economy of the “Homeland Security State” and its securitization of migration and citizenship (De Genova 2007: 440). It is effective in civil society, by naturalizing discourses that there is an ongoing “immigration crisis” that should be responded to by more and more migration controls (Gonzales 2014: 5; cf. Meissner et al. 2013).⁷ With the ideological glue of criminalization, the anti-migration hegemony has set the boundaries of the immigration debate in the US: The binary opposition of “good” and “bad” migrants is not only reproduced by conservative, but also by progressive politicians and established migrant rights organizations. Gonzales criticizes that despite their achievements, migrant movements were not able to challenge the anti-

⁶ The *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals* (DACA) gives certain undocumented youth a temporary relief from deportation and work permits, but it is not a formal legal status and it does not offer a path to citizenship. Furthermore, only half of the eligible youth applied in the first two years, whereby many cannot afford the fees (cf. Batalova et al. 2014; Gonzales et al. 2014; Patler/Cabrera/Dream Team Los Angeles 2015). In November 2014, Obama announced an extension of DACA and the *Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents* (DAPA), albeit these executive orders are still blocked by a court decision (For an overview check: <http://www.nilc.org/dapa&daca.html>). But even if DACA and DAPA were to be fully implemented and continued by the administration following Obama, more than half of the undocumented population would still not qualify for any relief from deportation and would be even more targeted by migration control (cf. Lal 2014).

⁷ For Gonzales, the anti-migrant hegemony and its suppression of the majority of migrants is a “form of consensual domination”, which is mainly the work of an “anti-migrant bloc” with diverse actors in different social fields: “a contradictory and fluid constellation of forces composed of elected officials, state bureaucrats, think tanks, intellectuals, and charismatic media personalities who, under the influence of strategic fractions of global capital, have set the boundaries of the immigration debate around narrow questions of criminality and anti-terrorism” (2014: 7).

migration hegemony. Many organizations have instead reproduced the discourses of criminalization and the “good immigrant” / “bad immigrant” binary in favor of a so called comprehensive immigration reform – which shows that the anti-migrant hegemony traverses pro-migrant forces as well. Once activists “accept this binary”, Gonzales writes, “they subtly consent to the production of legal violence against migrants” (Gonzales 2014: 7).

The political movement of undocumented youth

It is important to describe the specific situation of undocumented youth to understand the emergence of their political movement. Because school education of all children is guaranteed according to the Supreme Court decision *Plyler v. Doe* since 1982, schools are a relatively safe space for undocumented youth, where they do not have to worry about their illegalized status every day (cf. Nicholls 2013; Rincón 2008). This formally equal access to school education leads to a subjectification as US-American youth in the case of many undocumented students, although many youth of color experience quite early on that their opportunities are limited because of structural racist discrimination. Some youth internalize the stigma and also the “normality” of being illegalized from childhood. Still, many undocumented youth experience especially the end of school education as a radical break in their lives. It is often the first time that youth learn about their status or that they realize its far-reaching consequences: They have to engage in a “process of learning to be illegal” (Gonzales 2011), occupying “the space between belonging and exclusion” (Negrón-Gonzales 2014: 260). Those who start to work are forced to accept precarious and underpaid jobs because of their status. Those who want to go to college have to deal with legal and financial barriers when seeking to access higher education, and many have to work on the side to make their living (Nicholls 2013: 3f.). Moreover, many seek to keep their status secret, because they are afraid of deportations or negative responses from their peers (ibid.).

The specific situation of undocumented youth who were barred from access to education led to the campaign for the DREAM Act in 2001. This campaign started as a project of politicians and non-profit organizations like the *National Immigration Law Center*, but became an impetus for organizing undocumented youth. Over the last 15 years, the movement of undocumented youth in California emerged from a loose self-support network of undocumented students and a legislative campaign for the federal DREAM Act to an autonomous political movement led by the undocumented youth themselves (cf. Nicholls 2013: 47ff.; Wong et al. 2012). Although migrant youth had important roles in struggles against the criminalization of People of Color and anti-migrant laws like Proposition 187 in previous decades, that movement

was the first to organize “undocumented people based on their struggles and based on their identities” (cf. Perez).

In 2010, the movement of undocumented youth fully developed into a strong and united movement, led by those affected who organized actions on the local, state and national level. With marches, hunger strikes, and actions of civil disobedience, youth came “out of the shadows” as “undocumented and unafraid”, as some of their main slogans state, whereby the movement jointly advocated for the passage of the DREAM Act. After 2010 and the failure of the DREAM Act, the movement changed strategies and went in different directions, thus causing rifts in the movement (Luis S.; Seth). Because the policy process on the federal level failed to recognize their claims, undocumented youth shifted their political practices to the local and state level, adopting thereby the “piecemeal” strategy of local activism employed also by anti-migrant campaigns (cf. Nicholls 2013: 79f.). The strategy has aimed at pushing national change through victories in local and state politics: “California has been the first state to change a lot, to make a lot of pro-immigrant legislation. And that has pushed other states and that has pushed national discourse as well” (Marcela). Many groups across the US organized campaigns for a state DREAM Act, like the *New York State Youth Leadership Council* (cf. Schwiertz 2015). Furthermore, the activism of undocumented youth has shifted from targeting legislation to targeting immigration enforcement on all levels of government. On the national level, the focus shifted thus from congress and the fight for the DREAM Act to the administration. In 2012, the *Right to Dream* campaign and sit-ins in Obama’s campaign headquarters finally pushed the president to announce the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) that gives certain undocumented youth a temporary relief from deportation and work permits.

After DACA was won in 2012, the “next chapter” (Erick) of undocumented youth organizing began and the differentiation within the movement continued. First of all, the movement was occupied with supporting the community in claiming these new rights and many quit organizing and started working regular jobs after they received their temporary status and work permit (Luis S.). Whereas the youth movement was once united by the common goal to fight for the DREAM Act and then DACA, the movement now pursues separate approaches: Some still advocate for comprehensive immigration reform, others demand students’ rights, and seek to facilitate the implementation of DACA and other policies with workshops and legal clinics, or fight against immigration enforcement (cf. Janeth). For the statewide networks of CIYJA and IYC this fight against enforcement and criminalization and for the rights of all undocumented residents has become increasingly important (Perez). Overall, the focus of the undocumented movement in California shifted from undocumented students and the Dreamer-identity to undocumented youth and their families and, in an ongoing process, to the undocumented community as a whole and “people that have been the most affected” (Alex):

undocumented queer and transgender migrants, as well as undocumented migrants that have a criminal record (cf. Seth; Alex). In this process, more and more youth in the undocumented movement became critical about describing themselves and being labeled as “Dreamers”.

In the following, I argue that the political practices of the undocumented youth movement in California constitute a strategy that radically questions the anti-migration hegemony and its discourses and that could possibly challenge it in the long run. Its *radicalization* results from their rejection of the Dreamer narrative and strategies that go beyond rather reformist campaigns for citizenship and legislation. Its *sustainability* results from a more inclusive way of organizing, which goes beyond short term activism linked to specific campaigns. The organizing of the undocumented youth movement also aims at building up a community of political subjects that links the empowerment and struggle of migrants to other issues of equality and liberation. Furthermore, it can build on pro-migration achievements of the last years, especially in California.

“Challenging the ‘DREAMer’ narrative”

In the first 10 years of the undocumented youth movement, “Dreamer” became a common term to represent undocumented youth, who were portrayed as exceptional and hardworking students and cultural Americans (cf. Erick). Leading non-profits and immigrant rights organizations invested cultural and symbolic capital to create the public figure of the “Dreamer”: “They argued that these youths were exceptionally good immigrants and particularly deserving of legalization” (Nicholls 2013: 13). By now, the Dreamer narrative has become omnipresent and is articulated also within the discourses of the anti-migrant hegemony. Even the president has been using the talking points of the Dreamer narrative in his DACA announcement when he stated that “‘Dreamers’ [...] are Americans in their heart, in their minds, in every single way but one: on paper” (White House 2012).

However, since the failure of the DREAM Act in 2010, more and more youths in the movement became critical about the term “Dreamer” and as of 2012 it started to get a “mainstream change, when folks didn’t want to be identified as Dreamers” (Erick; cf. Marlene Montañez). CIYJA organizer Luis O. states:

“We could no longer use the word Dreamers, because everybody else is using it to say: ‘These are the Dreamers and they deserve something. And then these are everybody else and they don’t deserve anything, because they are criminals, or they did it knowing what they did, while as Dreamers are innocent and they were brought here as children through no fault of their own’.

And I think for us it was sort of we don't want to be associated with that, like we didn't like that, those terms. So that's why we moved to immigrant youth." (Luis O.)

In fact, all the California based undocumented youths I interviewed and most of the organizers I talked to in 2014/2015 rejected the term Dreamer. Nevertheless, many recognize that it has been an important tool and a crucial stepping stone for the movement. Most of the undocumented youth have indeed begun their activism related to the Dreamer identity and it was useful to counter the negative representation of undocumented migrants as "illegals" and the related devaluation, internalized by many youth (Montañez; Erick; Gina; cf. Negrón-Gonzales 2014, 2015). For example, Edna, a CIYJA organizer, suggested: "It was kinda helpful, but at the same time I don't think we really thought about the consequences of how it would create the two categories: 'good immigrant' versus 'bad immigrant'".

The Dreamer narrative is mainly criticized for two reasons (Erick; cf. Perez 2014; Diaz 2014): its employment by politicians and its close link to legislation as well as its exclusionary effects. The term Dreamer is rejected, because it came from the DREAM Act campaign that primarily tried to bring change through legislative reform and because it was "coined by a white legislator in an attempt to create sympathy for some undocumented youth", as IYC co-founder Jonathan Perez wrote in "Challenging the 'DREAMer' narrative" (2014):

"It became more and more apparent that if left in the hands of 'advocates', our humanity would be defined by a piece of legislation, one that they could use for their own agenda while also doing what 'advocates' do best: make concessions to the state." (ibid.)

But above all, the Dreamer narrative has been criticized by the undocumented youth because it indirectly reproduced the "good immigrant" versus "bad immigrant" divide, by contributing to the "division of the deserving and the non-deserving" migrant (Luis O.). Highlighting the extraordinary achievements of undocumented students, youth that do not attend college for various reasons seemed to be less deserving:

"We soon realized that DREAMer, instead of being something empowering, set a standard for undocumented youth. The expectation was to complete a four year degree in communities where the system historically has been set up for just a few to succeed. It makes it so that in order to be considered a DREAMer, one must pursue education and only through demonstrating an ability to endure and survive the institutions of higher learning can someone become desirable in this society." (Perez 2014)

The movement of undocumented youth have succeeded in breaking up a form of citizenship that is restricted to legal status by legitimizing the residence of undocumented students, because of their US-American socialization and their aspirations as students. But while the Dreamer narrative promotes a right of residence and citizenship, which is not linked to a nativist and

racist imagination of a homogenous American nation, it presupposes individual achievements as a condition for rights. This form of neoliberal, meritocratic citizenship entails a promise that youth could counteract the exclusion caused by their illegalized status with an inclusion through high achieving (Abrego 2008: 721; cf. De Genova 2010: 229; Rose 2000). Already in 2009, the group *Students Informing Now* countered this mainstream discourse that anyone who works and studies hard enough can succeed in the US, because there is no level playing field: “The media and theories that promote meritocracy fail to mention how immigrant communities are faced with institutionalized racism that makes it almost impossible to achieve the so called ‘American dream’” (S.I.N. 2009).

The hegemonic discourse of criminalization led the youth using the Dreamer narrative “seeking a connection with the ‘establishment’”, but at the same time they indirectly separated themselves from the larger undocumented community (Anguiano 2011: 107; cf. 113). The slogan “We are not criminals, we are Dreamers”, symbolically points to the exclusionary side effects of the Dreamer narrative (cf. Edna). While it de-criminalizes Dreamers, it does not problematize but indirectly normalizes the criminalization of other undocumented migrants that could not claim the Dreamer identity for themselves: “I was realizing that by using that language, that tactics, that strategy, we will throw people under the bus” (Edna). The Dreamer narrative thus had effects on the distribution of roles and positions. In campaigns using the narrative mainly undocumented youth who perfectly fit in were selected to represent the movement in public, states the former DTLA member Erick: “I would never get chosen to be the one at the press conference to speak, or the one that will get to be interviewed by TV or anything like that, cause I was just a community college student” (Erick). This selection of positions is also compliant with the codes of communication with the media, where research shows “that campaigns focusing on undocumented immigrant students are more likely to receive coverage than those for non-students” (Patler/Gonzales 2015: 1454).

Furthermore, challenges to the Dreamer narrative emerged in the process of (re-)organizing the movement. In January 2012, former members of the Dream Teams of Inland Empire, San Gabriel Valley and South Bay founded the statewide *Immigrant Youth Coalition* (IYC) to push beyond the Dreamer narrative and to organize undocumented youth in a way that included persons the most affected by the migration regime. In the same process, undocumented youth became more and more critical about their representation as all-American students and the related dispositive of assimilation to US culture. Jonathan Perez, the co-founder of the IYC, compares this development to the history of the civil rights and Black Power movement:

“I saw the pattern, they went through the same thing we went through. Going from being in suits, to where the Black Panthers are: militant, leather jackets, black. For us, we was like from

cap and gowns to rejecting that uniform of assimilation, much like the suits were about, like both of these costumes were about appealing to Americans to say: ‘Hey, we’re not dangerous’.” (Perez)

Some groups changed also their names over the last years, which reflects the growing criticism of the Dreamer narrative. Whereas the *California Dream Team Alliance* (CADTA) primarily organized “undocumented students”⁸ in the beginning, the alliance later changed their name to *California Immigrant Youth Justice Alliance* (CIYJA) and their focus to “current and future immigrant youth and their families”⁹ (cf. Alex; Luis O.). Also the *Orange County Dream Team* (OCDT), one of the first groups led by undocumented youth established in 2004, changed their logo and their name into *Orange County Immigrant Youth United* (OCIYU): “In the end, the group came to the conclusion that it was time to hang the caps and gowns for good, and build on the legacy of the OCDT by adopting a more inclusive name and logo that were no longer confined to the DREAMer narrative”.¹⁰ A few years ago, some members of the former OCDT already broke away to found RAIZ (which stands for *Resistencia, Autonomia, Igualdad, lideraZgo*), a groups that emancipated itself from the Dreamer narrative from the beginning and which later became a chapter of the IYC.



Old logo of *Orange County Dream Team* and new logo of *Orange County Immigrant Youth United*

On the national level, organizations like UWD as well as groups in other states, like their affiliate, the *Arizona Dream Act Coalition*, still continue to use the Dreamer narrative. In an attempt to avoid exclusion, UWD aims at broadening the definition of Dreamers, for example with the “11 Million Dreams” campaign that refers to all of the approximately 11 million undocumented migrants in the US. Sofia, one of the former leaders of UWD, emphasizes that

⁸ <http://www.cadta.org/aboutus.htm> [Snapshot from 25.11.2011 via <https://web.archive.org/web/20110925023507/http://www.cadta.org/aboutus.htm>]

⁹ <http://www.ciyja.org/#!about/c6mv> [12.11.2015].

¹⁰ <http://www.ociyu.org/about.html> [11.2.2015, meanwhile the text of the “about”-page was changed]. Other groups also changed their name: *Central Valley Dream Team* to *Fresno Immigrant Youth in Action* (FIYA); *DREAM Alliance of Sonoma County* to the *North Bay Immigrant Youth Union* (<http://www.sonomadreamers.org/>).

the Dreamer narrative is less excluding and was at times used as a frame to include more people, who could pass through the DREAM Act as an “opening window”:

“The Dream Act was just a window, it allowed people to see the bigger picture. We would talk about the Dream Act and say: ‘Undocumented youth should have a pathway to citizenship, because we are in college and we are trying really hard and we’re working hard and we’re as Americans as apple pie’. Once you get them hooked [...], then I could be like: ‘Well yeah, and my parents, too. And then all these people, too. Like how can you say no to them – they are what brought me here; they are what produced me; they are also good people’. Use it as an opening window. That was always my strategy at least.” (Sofia)

Aware of the criticism toward the Dreamer narrative, “because it did come from the Dream Act legislation” and its relation to the “narrative of the deserving versus the undeserving immigrant”, Sofia explains that for her “Dreamer means anybody who is down for the fight.” The term holds emotional and experiential meaning from her time in the immigrant youth movement. Many of her friends and colleagues were deported, arrested, or passed away in that time, most of whom used the Dreamer narrative as a tool to fight in those years. She emphasizes that she does not agree with clinging on to a political framing or strategy that divides the immigrant community or does not speak to its base, and at the same time she stresses the importance of honoring the authentic work and people who supported undocumented youth in getting to where they are today. However, it is unclear to what extent the exclusive meaning still mostly associated with the word Dreamer could be changed and if youth employing the Dreamer narrative can use their “position as ‘deserving’ to crack open space and demand a kind of immigration reform that will also address the needs of the ‘undeserving’ immigrants“ (Negrón-Gonzales 2015: 108).

Whereas Dreamer was at first a political subjectivity advanced to refuse the subordinated position of undocumented youth in the US, it became more and more a position within the hegemonic regime itself – an identity implicit in the control and limitation of migratory struggles. Now, many undocumented youth are struggling to dis-identify and emancipate themselves from this Dreamer identity and its limited representation of the undocumented community. And even if many youth do not see and name themselves anymore as Dreamers, they and the entire movement are still described with this term in mainstream politics, media and academia as well as in everyday conversation. In the following sections, I show how the rejection of the Dreamer narrative in California is linked to the organizing as well as to the political practices and strategies of the movement.

Organizing diverse communities

In the beginning, the movement was organized and represented mainly as a movement of undocumented students, who constitute only a small part of the undocumented community.¹¹ This strategic focus was due to the *representation* of the Dreamer narrative, but it was also due to the *organizing* of the movement that was mainly based on campuses in the beginning. In the first years of the undocumented youth movement in California, the statewide organizing was facilitated mainly by the *California Dream Network*, a project of CHIRLA founded in 2003, which is a network of college campus organizations. But the organizing started to extend gradually from campuses to undocumented communities, as more and more undocumented activists had graduated from college and wanted to continue their engagement (Erick; cf. Luis O.; Eisema/Fiorito/Montero-Sieburth 2014: 30). The first steps in this direction were made when the former *Orange County Dream Team* (OCDT) was founded in 2004, *Dream Team LA* (DTLA) in 2009 and the former *California Dream Team Alliance* (CADTA) in 2011, although their membership was still closely linked to college groups and networks. In the last few years, even more and more campus-based groups aimed at going beyond the Dreamer narrative and an exclusive focus on students, as an organizer of IDEAS at UCLA declared:

“Like we say we don’t wanna focus just on the Dreamer narrative we don’t wanna focus just on the student and like you know, Dreamer and Dreamer base everything, because not everyone’s a Dreamer, not everyone’s a parent, there is people, [...] not everyone’s heterosexual, there is queer folks within our organization.” (Esperanza)

The visibility of diversity in the organizing and representation of the movement increased, as the movement became more and more organized by the undocumented youth themselves around 2010. Jonathan describes it as a “defining moment” when the *Immigrant Youth Justice League* (IYJL) formed in Chicago at that time, after one of their friends was subjected to deportation proceedings (Perez). Because he had been charged with a DUI (“driving under the influence” of alcohol or other drugs), people did not want to support him. But when the IYJL was formed in October 2009, they did not only successfully stop his deportation with their campaign, they also expanded “the notion of who was worthy of immigrant rights advocacy and how that would be represented in public speech” (Seif 2014: 99).

In 2010, the IYJL started the practice of *Coming Out of the Shadows* to expand the narrative and to empower, organize and politicize undocumented youth (cf. Seif 2014). Drawing on the

¹¹ The exclusionary effects of the Dreamer narrative are also rooted in the selective education system. In 2008, nearly half of the undocumented youth population did not finish high school and only one fourth was in college or had a college degree, which is a relative small number, compared to youth that have the privilege of a US passport, where more than half of the population has access to college (Passel/Cohn 2009: 12). Therefore a political subject based on a status as student can only include a minority of undocumented youth.

LGBTQ tradition of coming out, members of the IYJL, who were partly themselves active in the LGBTQ movement and who had their coming out in this context before, organized the first Coming Out of the Shadows event in spring 2010 (ibid.: 115) Their aim was to educate the public and show the diversity of the undocumented community (Marcela; cf. Perez; Seif 2014). At the same time, it was also a strategy of empowerment and a radical political practice. By coming out of the shadows, undocumented youth render their disenfranchised position in US society visible, turning it from a private into a public issue. They socialize the responsibility for their situation, which many experience as an individualized problem, by proactively and confidently appearing as undocumented in public. Coming out as “undocumented and unafraid”, they transform “shame” about being illegalized and marginalized into defiant pride (cf. Japser 2011). Coming out as undocumented and unafraid directly protests subordination and the fear of the permanent threat of deportation, which Nicolas De Genova (2002) referred to as “deportability”. Furthermore, it is also a performative act, in which youth not only name their undocumented status, but create a political subjectivity as undocumented (cf. Butler 1997; Kim 2009: 253). The different albeit related experiences of undocumented youth are articulated in a common discourse, linked by associational notions like “undocumented and unafraid”, thereby politicizing those experiences and connecting different struggles to organize against anti-migration hegemony (cf. Laclau/Mouffe 2001).

Regarding the organizing of diverse communities, the individual story telling of the coming out events allowed for a much broader and inclusive narrative than the tailored and preset stories of the Dreamer narrative. In this way, Alex describes his experience with Coming Out of the Shadows:

“So that gives us empowerment, that gives us humanity within ourselves that we are not perfect, that we are not DREAMers only, that I am not just ‘undocumented and unafraid’, that I mean it, and I am willing to do something about it.” (Alex)

Whereas the Dreamer narrative was first linked to a rather narrow representation with ready-made talking points individuals repeated, Coming Out of the Shadows introduced an open communication method. Thereby it is a tool to foster a *representation* as well as an *organizing* of the undocumented youth movement that is going beyond an exclusive focus on students with good grades and no criminal record. Besides the anti-deportation campaign in Chicago, the civil disobedience in San Bernardino, described in the beginning, is another example of an action including undocumented migrants with a “criminal record”.

Furthermore, the transforming organizing practices of the undocumented movement increasingly reflect intersectional power relations and the demographics of the undocumented population especially regarding gender, origin and age. Although the movement has been led by

women and queer men since the beginning (Esperanza, Sofia, Seth), “you could still see that patriarchy, very male dominated discourse” in a lot of spaces of the movement (Marcela). Queer undocumented migrants often had to choose between either being active in queer organizing or in undocumented organizing (cf. Nicholls 2013: 127). In the process of emancipating the undocumented youth movement from the more established migrant rights organizations and in the context of new protest forms like *Coming Out of the Shadows*, the positions of queer undocumented youth became more visible. The struggles articulated with the slogans “undocumented and unafraid” and “queer and unashamed” have been associated with the emerging self-description of being “undocuqueer” (Lal/Unzueta 2013; Salgado 2011). Besides the representation through projects like the *UndocuQueer Book* there are also specific organizing spaces to better include queer as well as transgender migrants into the movement and connect with their specific struggles.

Although a large part of the undocumented population are Asian Pacific Islanders (API) and there are well known undocumented API activists like Tam Tran and Ju Hong, the undocumented movement is still organized and represented mainly as a movement of Latinxs. That is why undocumented API youth have created own spaces to organize and represent the Asian community.¹² Probably the most well-known group is ASPIRE, founded 2011 in San Francisco, which is “the first Asian Pacific Islander undocumented immigrant led organization” in the USA. Organizing the API community means struggling with specific problems like the strong stigmatization of people with illegalized status, language barriers and the representation as a “model minority” (Anthony). Therefore it is the central goal of ASPIRE, which is also connected to the broader undocumented youth movement and affiliated with CIYJA, to work towards a “cultural shift” in the undocumented API community, to empower them and change dominant representations (Anthony). However, most of the undocumented groups with predominantly Latinx members still struggle to organize more API migrants, which is also because API undocumented youth did not adopt *Coming Out of the Shadows* to the same extent as their Latinxs peers (cf. Perez). This shows that the practices of *Coming Out of the Shadows* – despite its crucial role in the current undocumented youth movement (“that’s our base, that’s like the way we do things” (Perez)) – is under some circumstances not the most suitable form, especially in more rural and conservative areas (cf. Luis O.).

This could be the case also in organizing older undocumented migrants (cf. Aiko). In the last few years, many organizers are discussing the focus on youth and there are different attempts to include undocumented adults. Especially parents are taking part from time to time or

¹² In the context of the *Black Lives Matter* movement and campaigns against the prison-industrial complex, networking has furthered the organizing of black undocumented migrants, which recently led also to the creation of specific safe spaces, inventing the term “UndocuBlack” (cf. <http://blackalliance.org>).

have even become regular members of groups in the undocumented movement. Whereas UWD on national and CIYJA on state level decided to maintain their focus on youth organizing (Sofia; Luis O.), more local community based groups like RAIZ are increasingly including older undocumented migrants. In 2011, Martin Unzueta, the father of the IYJL co-founder, was one of the first undocumented parents arrested in a civil disobedience, while he, along with three other parents and undocumented youths, was protesting against criminalization and the anti-migrant law HB 56 in Alabama (IYJL 2011). Later, he became also part of the Not1More campaign by NDLON, which organizes undocumented migrants from different ages and backgrounds to fight against all deportations, while building also on the achievements of the undocumented youth movement. With the campaigns for a broader administrative relief, which pushed Obama to announce DAPA in 2014, the organizing of parents and other older undocumented people increased further.

The attempt to build a more inclusive movement led undocumented youth in California not only to question the rather narrow student identity and the Dreamer narrative, but also the focus on legislative reform and citizenship status, which I will discuss in the following. Describing this shift in the movement clarifies also why many youth do not describe themselves any longer as activists but as organizers.

Beyond immigration reform and citizenship status

“Because it’s not only changing a little piece of legislation, it’s actually changing a whole system that still gives advantages to some people or others and keep some people in poverty, with lack of resources, with lack of safety and exploits a lot of our community members.” (Marcela)

Beyond legislation

The rejection of the Dreamer narrative is not only due to its exclusionary effects and its strong link to the DREAM Act, but also to a shift of the movement away from legislative reform altogether. Whereas undocumented youth groups have long participated in advocacy for specific legislation or the so-called comprehensive immigration reform, the movement is now primarily struggling against criminalization and enforcement – a fight against detention and deportation:

“Our movement is no longer about legislation. I think a lot of us no longer have a whole lot of hope in immigration reform or the Dream Act or any piece of legislation that’s gonna solve the problem. I think for us the issue is criminalization” (Luis O.)

Legislation is not seen as a potential and definite solution, but rather as a more or less useful instrument to fight against deportations. For example the TRUST Act, which limits the collaboration between *Immigration and Customs Enforcement* (ICE) and local law enforcement, was “watered down” and not well implemented, compared to the campaign efforts of undocumented youth in 2013 (Aiko). Nevertheless, it is used by the movement to fight against detention and deportation: “it didn’t end the deportations in California, it didn’t decrease it, but it did kind of help to pull us leverage” (ibid.). So the TRUST Act became a tool for holding politicians accountable and publicly denouncing deportation cases in which officials act unlawfully by violating the TRUST Act (ibid.).

However, amongst the interviewed organizers, there is no hope in a comprehensive immigration reform, for a good solution in the context of the established political regime.

“We want to stop deportations and the criminalization of immigrants, it has nothing to do with immigration reform, immigration reform actually furthers the criminalization and incarceration of immigrants.” (Luis S.)

“Immigration reform is not broken. It’s perfect, it’s working perfectly to the system, that’s what they want. And they gonna reform it, they gonna give us piecemeals, like you stay, you go, but it’s gonna continue to be the United States, where you’re not welcome, when you’re poor.” (Alex)

Instead of fighting for legislative compromises and an improved and more “humane” border regime, the undocumented migrants are resisting the best way they can to reverse the deprivation of their rights as far as it is possible. And as a consequence, they dismiss the interpellation as active citizen subjects and future voters who participate in the political institutions of the state for becoming political subjects beyond national citizenship. To some extent, they could be described as “activist citizens” (Isin 2008: 37), who “constitute themselves as citizens” regardless of status: “as those to whom the right to have rights is due” (ibid.: 18; Arendt 1973; cf. Rygiel et al. 2015; Balibar 2003; Rancière 2004).¹³

¹³ Engin Isin defines the figure of *activist citizens*, who “engage in writing scripts and creating the scene”, in contrast to “active citizens who act out already written scripts such as voting, taxpaying and enlisting” (2009: 381). Activist citizens therefore are questioning a preset body politic and opening borders in their political subjectification: “*Those activist citizens that act are not a priori actors recognized in law, but by enacting themselves through acts they affect the law that misrecognizes them*” (ibid.: 382).



“With or Without Papers, We Will Always Be Illegal” by Irina Crisis¹⁴

Beyond citizenship

It is not a lack of citizenship itself that is problematized, but the criminalization of non-citizens. Because of the continuing exclusion from rights in the US and the risk of deportation that friends, family and community members face every day, many do not want to become US citizens. This is connected to a critique of the limitations of formal citizenship status inside national borders, the intersectional power structures that marginalize also people with US citizenship, as well as beyond these borders, regarding the exclusion of future migrants.

First, citizenship status is criticized due to its exclusion of future migrants, the “non-citizens” to come. The collective fight for US citizenship is not regarded as a long term solution, because after each partial legalization there will be more people coming who will be the new non-citizens and who will be exclusively targeted by the apparatus of the border regime: “By giving everybody status who is currently here, that is not gonna change the future migration cycles” (Yessica; cf. Janeth). If the goal of the movement is to

“become citizens, we just gonna shift power completely to one side and neglect the other people. For example if we give citizenship to all these people here in the US, we just gonna create a huge border to the new immigrants that are coming, the generations to come.” (Alex)

Reflecting that each bounded form of citizenship status excludes others (cf. Benhabib 2004), and that their inclusion on the one side indirectly reproduces its excluding effects on the other, organizers of the undocumented youth movement criticize citizenship as a whole.

¹⁴ <http://migrationnow.com/post/30470739084/irina-crisis-irina-crisis-was-born-and-raised-in>.

Second, besides the external limitations regarding future migrants, the formal citizen status is also criticized because of its internal limitations regarding the intersectional power relations of class, gender and race, traversing the national state. Their own experiences of racism as well as the discrimination and criminalization of African Americans despite their citizenship status, lead many youth to question the meaning of citizenship for them: “Getting papers is not gonna change how we’re oppressed as minorities or as people of color” (Luis S.). And even if undocumented youth of color get certain civil rights they know about their limitations (Marcela). This critical awareness is pointedly symbolized in the slogan “With or without papers – we will always be illegal”. This internal exclusion of undocumented youth and youth of color leads to a defiance of US citizenship and the desire to be included into the “national fabric”:

“So we are not really trying to appeal to other people of like: ‘Hey look, you should be an ally, because we are human, too’. It’s like we kind of stopped that rhetoric a really long time ago, I think it was after the federal DREAM Act didn’t pass.” (Aiko)

“[We] no longer want to be accepted, because we’re never gonna be accepted, we just never will be. We continue to be brown bodies, we continue to be placed in these categories and that’s not gonna change.” (Marlene Montañez)¹⁵

Going beyond a skeptical attitude towards formal citizenship status, many undocumented youth reject US citizenship also because of its “cultural” aspects. They are rejecting the pressure to assimilate to an American cultural identity and refuse to appeal to the national discourse of the US – a strategy that was closely linked to the Dreamer narrative in the beginning:

“I would never jeopardize my identity as somebody that comes from an indigenous background, somebody that comes from a corruptive Mexican government, and I still don’t wanna be American, even if I get citizenship. Like I feel that we have the right to refuse citizenship, even though we have the right to get the same benefits citizens deserve.” (Alex)

Although Alex resists the pressure to naturalize as a citizen, he claims the right to have rights: “We need to make something about it, where, regardless where you are from, you are welcome to drive and you are welcome to succeed as any human being” (Alex).

Finally, the criminalization of non-citizens is seen as the fundamental problem and not the lack of citizenship: “The problem isn’t that we don’t have papers, the problem is that when you don’t have papers there are certain consequences to that” (Luis O.). Many don’t think that they

¹⁵ The emancipation from the pressure and desire to identify as Americans, who are only discriminated because of their lack of legal status, has also opened the way to see struggles that undocumented youth have in common with other oppressed communities and movements and to gradually overcome their separation: “once we stepped out of that process of wanting to be accepted have connected us to so many other movements” (Montañez).

have to become US citizens, “we don’t need papers right now” (Perez; cf. Yessica). They fight instead for the ability to live where they are and struggle for their rights as residents of a community: driver licenses, health care, a work permit and “being able to stick with your family” (Perez; cf. Seth). This shift away from citizenship and reform towards defending undocumented communities against immigration enforcement has become a mainstream change traversing different undocumented youth groups in California like SDDT, whose organizer Gina states: “For now, we just need to stop all deportations, to take away the fear from our community. We don’t need citizenship”.

Organizing over activism

Because the focus has shifted from legislation and citizenship to a fight against enforcement and for access to resources for undocumented communities, the need for campaigns and networks on the national level decreased. Groups like IYC mainly organize on the local and state level, because there are better chances to win important rights and resources in California than on the national level (cf. Marcela; Perez). There is not so much hope anymore that it is a realistic goal to change the public discourses and the migration regime in the US directly (Luis O.). But also on these levels it seems less important to participate in political institutions and to be visible in the dominant discourses about migration and more effective to reach out to their own communities to empower and organize them:

“I think, there’s a sense that only politicians can change our community and for us we don’t believe that, we believe that we can change our own community, organize within our own community and protect ourselves and in the process we will see more systematic change.”
(Marcela; cf. Alex)

The long-term goal of organizing communities has the priority over short-term activism (Anthony), and some youth in the movement do not see themselves as activists, but rather as organizers (Perez, Aiko). Following the principles of grassroots organizing, they focus on building up the capacities of the undocumented movement for supporting communities to organize and defend themselves (Perez). But despite this priority, the visible politics of activism are still a crucial aspect of the movement and there have been diverse public actions to protest the criminalization of undocumented migrants: Deportation buses and ICE offices were blocked, sit-ins were held on intersections and in offices of politicians, marches and a statewide caravan for the TRUST Act were organized, and even detention centers were infiltrated and collective border crossings from Mexico to the US were organized as part of the Bring Them Home campaign coordinated by the *National Immigrant Youth Alliance* (NIYA) (cf. Aldana 2014; Perez 2012).

Conclusions

The action in San Bernardino, which I described in the beginning, was certainly only one event in a longer transformation process of the undocumented youth movement. At this first action, in July 2011, the activists were still chanting, wearing, representing messages of the Dreamer narrative. Only half a year later, at the counter-action in San Bernardino in January 2012, the ongoing shift beyond the Dreamer narrative became apparent: The youth were chanting more inclusively “immigrants are marching here – no papers, no fear” and they were not wearing the academic dress uniformly anymore, but, instead, leather jackets and more individual clothing. The slogans on the t-shirts changed as well from “The DREAM is coming” to “I am undocumented” and “We will no longer remain in the shadows”. It is also symbolic that the counter-action was in front of the Department of Homeland Security office and not next to the college campus, like the first action in 2011.

In this paper I have argued that the undocumented youth movement is maybe the most promising force to challenge what Gonzales calls the “anti-migration hegemony” (2014). In the same vein, he writes undocumented youth position themselves “in a way that defies the good immigrant-bad immigrant binary and brings attention to the plight of detainees and deportees” (ibid: 170). Regarding the potential of a counterhegemonic movement, he builds hopes on the leadership of the undocumented youth movement: “Beyond efforts to create a kinder and gentler ‘civil’ homeland security state, these young leaders are pushing for the demilitarization and democratization of our society” (ibid.: 171).

The transforming movement in California has the prerequisites to emerge as a counter-hegemonic project to come, (1) because they are rejecting a message that reproduces the criminalizing “good immigrant” versus “bad immigrant” divide, (2) because they favor the organizing of affected, diverse communities over short term activism and (3) because they go beyond a narrow fight for legislative reform and citizenship status. By fighting directly against criminalization, the movement has become more radical in the sense that they engage the fundamental structure of the anti-migration hegemony, “really attacking the root causes” (Aiko). It also seems to be a more sustainable strategy to counter the anti-migration hegemony than the fight for US citizenship. In the near future, a relatively broad legalization seems to be feasible only through a so called comprehensive immigration reform, which would include citizenship rights for parts of the undocumented population but most probably also a further militarization of the border and even more repressive migration controls (cf. Alex; Aiko). The naturalization of some of the undocumented migrants currently living in the US would be possible only at the cost of reproducing the national form of citizenship and worsening the conditions for remaining and future non-citizens.

Although the undocumented youth movement in California progressively moves beyond the Dreamer narrative, this narrative was clearly a crucial step in the emergence of the movement of undocumented youth (cf. Nicholls 2013). I argue that it decisively contributed to its visibility and wins and that it has to be understood as part of a learning process. The success of the Dreamer narrative and the incentives to continue its framing is not least grounded in the “narrative fidelity” or “cultural resonance” (Benford/Snow 2000: 622) of Dreamer stories that can tap into the perspectives and values of the dominant US society. It has to be made clear that “Dreamers” did not invent meritocratic citizenship and the myth of the American dream. Rather, they were socialized themselves by its values and principles growing up in the US and they are partly drawing on discourses of neoliberal economy and dominant US culture to improve their chance to claim a legitimate position despite their criminalization in the anti-migrant hegemony. But these indeed ambivalent references to dominant discourses of meritocracy and national culture are telling more about the social formation of the US and other states of the Global North, than about the movement of undocumented youth, which is referring strategically to these discourses for improving their chances of a better life. The ongoing search for strategies and opportunity structures that could advance the struggle of undocumented migrants remains a challenge in the anti-migrant hegemony of the US. Thereby, it has to be tested to what extent dominant and divisive narratives could be avoided without losing the ability to influence hegemonic discourses for creating change.

The organization and mobilization of undocumented youth has to show to what extent it can reach its goals without employing or indirectly relying on the Dreamer narrative. Even when undocumented youth do not intend to appeal to mainstream US society, they still can rely on the positive images of undocumented youth mainly build through the Dreamer narrative. Not only groups using the Dreamer narrative, even more radical groups like the IYC are partly referring to dominant discourses, for example in campaigns and petitions for individual deportation cases or with the demand to “restore trust” by ending the cooperation of the local police with ICE. This makes clear that there is no radical political position on the complete outside of power and hegemony (cf. Foucault 1978): There is no pure politics, only politics within contradictions. Political practices have to draw on the discourses of the established “police” order at least to some extent for building a political stage on which their voices could be heard in public (cf. Rancière 1999).

Given the strength of the anti-migrant hegemony, there are huge obstacles for a radical undocumented movement. Therefore many crucial questions remain: How can a broad and inclusive narrative together with an organizing of diverse communities lead to political strategies that effectively push the migration regime and challenge it in the long run? In what way could the movement overcome the rifts regarding different narratives and strategies? Is

there again a need for a national – or better, a transnational – movement or should there be a primary focus on local community organizing? To what extent could the movement benefit from new policies and the resources of the “non-profit industrial complex” without losing its relative autonomy and its radical direction?

Being a great success for the movement, DACA had also ambivalent effects: While it granted some youth a temporary right to stay and work permits, it also had an impact of pacifying “radical, angry ideas and water them down” (Luis S.) as well as absorbing young organizers into professional, more established and less radical organizations or just regular jobs (Aiko). The further development of the movement is also related to the political context of California, where advancing rights for undocumented youth led to demobilization as well as radicalization. This reveals the shift beyond the focus on the Dreamer narrative and student organizing: Because undocumented youth – in contrast to their peers in other states – have won many rights as students in California, they can quit their activism and concentrate on their studies, if they succeed in having access to college, or they could go beyond the fight for the rights of undocumented students and get involved in other struggles of the broader undocumented community off-campus.

In this paper I have only pointed at central aspects of the recent transformations of undocumented youth organizing in California. Future research – and above all the organizing itself – have to show how the different approaches of organizing diverse communities and the strategies to fight immigration enforcement and struggle for rights as community residence will evolve, and what factors will contribute to the defense of undocumented communities and challenge the anti-migrant hegemony in the US.

Like in the history of non-citizen struggles in other political contexts, the movement of undocumented youth combines different elements of an “*in/visible* politics of migration” (Ataç et al. 2015). The undocumented youth movement comprises *visible* political practices that are seeking to change the position and representations of undocumented migrants and to fight publicly for their rights, but at the same time it comprises relatively *invisible* political practices of fighting back against deportations and enforcement and of organizing the life of oneself and others in the undocumented community. This combination of everyday community organizing and public rights claims brings also important insights for critical citizenship studies.

The critique and rejection of citizenship that is only granted and governed “top-down” points to the crucial role of migratory struggles for the transformation of citizenship (Balibar 2003: 31f.). Although they are deconstructing the borders, ideologies and forms of national citizenship, the political subjectification of these undocumented youth – who claim their rights against the law and despite their illegalized status – could be understood as a form of activist

citizenship. In addition to these insurgent “acts of citizenship” (Isin 2008) the fight for rights despite a lack of formal status indicates an open form of residency or transnational citizenship that is grounded in the de facto presence in a city or community, where belonging is not associated with the nation-state (cf. Rygiel et al. 2015). The radical organizing of undocumented youth is pushing the citizenship concept beyond its limits – maybe even past the point where this concept still is meaningful:

“Citizenship is not gonna save us. It’s not gonna change the conditions that are happening. You know, we have to address them from the root. So for us it’s like: Who are we trying to fool? Are we trying to be Americanized, like blend in to the society, like achieve the American dream, is that what we are trying to do? Or are we trying to fight for something bigger?” (Edna)

By rejecting the national form of citizenship and by struggling for their rights as community residents, undocumented migrants are subverting the contingent national order and revealing the possibility of a post-national formation of the social.

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Interviews

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- Alex (*Immigrant Youth Coalition / East Bay IYC*): Personal Interview, December 31, 2014.
- Anthony (*ASPIRE-LA*): Personal Interview, January 26, 2015.
- Edna (*California Immigrant Youth Justice Alliance*): Personal Interview, February 14, 2015.
- Erick (*Dream Team Los Angeles*, former member): Personal Interview, February 10, 2015.
- Esperanza (*IDEAS at UCLA*): Personal Interview, December 10, 2014.
- Gina (*San Diego Dream Team*): Personal Interview, February 15, 2015.
- Janeth (*IDEAS at UCLA*): Personal Interview, January 30, 2015.
- Luis O. (*California Immigrant Youth Justice Alliance / LA IYC*): Personal Interview, January 13, 2015.
- Luis S. (*California Immigrant Youth Justice Alliance / LA IYC*): Personal Interview, February 2, 2015.
- Marcela (*Immigrant Youth Coalition*): Personal Interview, December 15, 2014.
- Montañez, Marlene (*Dream Team Los Angeles*): Personal Interview, December 21, 2014.
- Perez, Jonathan (*Immigrant Youth Coalition*): Personal Interview, January 9, 2015.
- Seth (*IDEAS at UCLA*, former member): Personal Interview, February 3, 2015.
- Sofia (*United We Dream*): Personal Interview, January 2, 2015.
- Yessica (*Immigrant Youth Coalition*): Personal Interview, February 18, 2015.