

Neither Sinners nor Saints: Complicating the Discourse of Noncitizen Deservingness

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Abstract

This article explores how non citizens, primarily members of the 1.5-generation, experience and rhetorically contest deservingness. We argue that deservingness is constructed through multiple sources including the media, immigrant rights movements, and the law, resulting in a binary of good/bad migrants that does not fully capture the lived experiences of noncitizens. Drawing from three distinct qualitative projects examining the lives of 133 noncitizens, we demonstrate structural conditions underlying divergent experiences of “illegality” and “deportability” (De Genova, 2002). We further complicate the discourse of migrant deservingness through an explication of the commonalities of a range of noncitizens, including DACA recipients, the formerly documented, undocumented migrants, and deportees, highlighting their humanity and worthiness in the process.

Introduction

On November 20, 2014, President Barack Obama addressed the nation on immigration, announcing an executive action that would expand the *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals* (DACA) program. He claimed that the U.S. has long been a “nation of immigrants” and that current policies toward migrants ought to reflect, if not honor, that history (The White House, 2014). In addition to increasing law enforcement, facilitating streamlined deportations, and expediting the admission of high-skilled migrants, he vowed to utilize discretionary authority to defer the removal of undocumented migrants who met certain qualifications. Much of his speech was dedicated to constructing as deserving of administrative relief those who lived in the U.S. for at least five years, had U.S. citizen or permanent resident children, passed a criminal background check, and could pay taxes. He argued that these migrants often labor in difficult conditions to support their families, many of whom are U.S. citizens. They also share social spaces with citizens, including churches and schools, and maintain “hopes, dreams, and patriotism, just like ours” (The White House, 2014).

Obama complicated popular rhetoric portraying unauthorized migrants as uniformly threatening, burdensome, and incapable of incorporating (Chavez, 2013). He also expanded the category of noncitizens considered worthy by drawing on themes, like work ethic, ability to contribute, family connections, religiosity, and patriotism that resonate with the so-called “moveable middle” of the U.S. population—the segment who are not fervently pro- or anti-migrant, but who can be persuaded to support or at least sympathize with the plight of migrants (Martinez, 2008). Obama is not alone in such efforts; similar appeals have also been employed by sectors of the immigrant rights movement to garner broad support for the DREAM Act and other anti-deportation campaigns (Bloemraad, Voss, & Silva, 2014). Pro-migrant movements, such as the undocumented student and new sanctuary movements, have encouraged “model immigrants” to “come out of the shadows” and demonstrate social citizenship, good character, and potential to contribute to society (Gonzales, 2008; Nicholls, 2015; Yukich, 2013). Such activism helped make possible piecemeal reforms like DACA and prosecutorial discretion for “low priority” removal cases. But the “ideal migrant” discourse underlying these reforms continues to reify the problematic notion that most noncitizens are unworthy of regularization and rights.

The construction of any “desirable” category rests upon the production and demonization of undesirable “others.” By valorizing “good” migrants who came to the U.S. “through no decision of their own,” hold great

potential to contribute to U.S. society in particular ways, and have the support of authority figures, non citizens whose lives do not fit neatly into rigid ideal types are systematically excluded. Undocumented adults with weak ties to the U.S., youth who are not college bound, noncitizens not regularly employed or bound to the military, and migrants cast as somehow “criminal” are routinely left out of the discourse of the deserving (Bloemraad et al., 2014). Sometimes their lives are even used as collateral damage to support the more sympathetic (Patler & Gonzales, 2015).

In his speech, Obama utilized the “good” migrant versus “bad” migrant binary to fend off detractors and persuade the movable middle of the necessity of deferred action. He claimed the government would focus “enforcement resources on actual threats to our security. Felons, not families. Criminals, not children. Gang members, not a mom who’s working hard to provide for her kids” (The White House, 2014). While such a claim is more inclusive than most discourse on deportable noncitizens, it fails to acknowledge that migrants commit lower rates of crime than later generations (Ewing, Martinez, & Rumbaut, 2015), the way laws and its enforcement actively *create* felonious noncitizen identities (Chacón, 2012; García Hernández, 2013; Stumpf, 2006), and the structural conditions at work in the lives of so-called “felons,” “criminals,” and “gang members.” In glossing over these realities, Obama ultimately justified the campaign of detentions and removals undermining migrant communities in recent decades.

This article aims to reconcile the false binary between the deserving and undeserving migrant by examining how deportable noncitizen youth experience, internalize, and discursively navigate around deservingness. We draw from 133 interviews from three distinct qualitative studies, 70 of which were conducted with Central American and Mexican undocumented youth living in the U.S. and 63 with deportees in El Salvador. The stories of DREAMers, deportees who grew up in the U.S. and other noncitizens demonstrate the limits of a dichotomous framing that casts migrants as either sinners or saints. Migrant lives, like those of all humans, are non-linear, messy, and structured by outside forces. The narratives presented here—especially those subjected to criminalization and deportation—show a multitude of ways migrants push back against the discourse of deservingness. The migrants and deportees we interviewed challenge politicians, the media, and the immigrant rights movement to adopt a more inclusive framework that acknowledges the nuances of noncitizen lives, and interrogates the institutions and processes upholding mass deportation.

The Unintended Consequences of DREAM Framing

According to Snow and colleagues (1986), frames are conceptual bridges that link social psychological considerations with structural/organizational ones (p. 476). In choosing resonant frames such as those emphasizing hard work or family ties, immigrant movement activists render certain meanings and experiences significant, which can then be used to guide action (Benford & Snow, 2000; Cress & Snow, 2000). As Giugni and Passy (2004) argue, the use of culturally relevant frames is especially important for migrants whose claims may be constrained by formal criteria for citizenship. For instance, in the summer of 2010, undocumented youth across the nation emerged from the shadows with the now familiar refrain, “Undocumented and Unafraid!” Up until 2010, an influential faction of the DREAM movement relied on a meritocracy frame rooted in a discourse of “educational achievement” and “vulnerability.” This frame strongly resonated with the values of achievement and hard work consistent with Americans’ notions of deservingness. While the “education” and “vulnerable child” frames resonated with the moveable middle, and in many ways reflected the lived experience of a certain group of DREAMers, it also had the unintended consequence of brightening the boundary between “deserving” and “undeserving” undocumented migrants (Lamont & Molnar, 2010).

The DREAMer frame became a metaphor for the most deserving undocumented migrants. Youth activists invoked these frames primarily because it resonated more strongly with the public, as do frames emphasizing family unity (Bloemraad et al., 2014; Martinez, 2010). While the failure of the DREAM Act to pass devastated undocumented youth, their families, and movement allies, a key development emerged from the summer’s activism. Undocumented youth activists openly questioned the relevance of the “education” and “vulnerable child” frames for both the movement and in their own daily lives as they and their families must navigate an increasingly hostile anti-migrant context (Negrón-Gonzales, 2013).

This has led to a shift in the immigrant rights movement and the undocumented student movement to

a focus on ending deportations and the criminalization of undocumented immigrants. Yet, the deservingness frame endures as undocumented migrants including undocumented youth continue to engage in discourses of contribution, meritocracy, and law-abidingness. These framings continue to re-emerge in response to a powerful and dehumanizing discourse that characterizes unauthorized migrants as lawless and dangerous. In doing so, such framings, perhaps inadvertently, legitimize the detention and removal of those migrants who fall outside categories of “good” migrants.

In this article, we examine how some noncitizens and deportees have internalized and distanced themselves from the discourse of the deserving both in the undocumented student movement and in their everyday lives. We argue that the binary of “good” and “bad” migrants does not reflect the humanity of deportable noncitizens, whose lives are often messy and complicated, filled with detours and disruptions. We believe the media and political actors, including the immigrant rights and undocumented student movements, can develop more nuanced frames that acknowledge the complexity and structured nature of migrant lives in order to advance more inclusive and humane immigration law and enforcement.

Methodology

This article draws from three distinct qualitative studies of noncitizens of Mexican and Central American origin to highlight the ways the I.5-generation—both those living in the U.S. and those who have been deported—experience deservingness. Though we did not initially set out to study deservingness the concept surfaced and resurfaced in our interviews. Focusing on 133 of 212 total interviews conducted by the authors between 2008 and 2015, we examined how deservingness constructed, internalized, and contested over time and in transnational space by noncitizens who entered the U.S. before age 18. Our research yielded rich data capable of critiquing problematic representations of migrants informing hyper-restrictive immigration policies.

Between 2009 and 2015, Edeline Muñoz Burciaga conducted research with undocumented students in the Los Angeles metropolitan area including semi-structured interviews with approximately 20 undocumented student activists in 2010. Data also comes from ethnographic research she conducted in the metropolitan Atlanta region between October 2014 and March 2015, including 32 interviews with undocumented young adults between the ages of 18-26 years old. This time span allowed her to observe a shift in the discourse and framing of deservingness both amongst undocumented student activists and undocumented young adults who do not consider themselves activists.

Between June 2012 and August 2013, Lisa M. Martinez conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with Latina/o and undocumented youths ages 16-26 in Colorado. The goal of the larger study was to understand youths’ pathways to educational and occupational mobility. A subset of 18 undocumented youth was interviewed to understand their trajectories following the implementation of DACA and an in-state tuition bill for undocumented state residents. The analysis in this article is limited to the narratives of the undocumented respondents, permitting us to show how they understood and navigated deservingness within changing national and state-level socio-political contexts.

Between 2008 and 2013, Katie Dingeman-Cerda conducted life-history interviews with 63 Salvadoran I.5 generation migrants who grew up in the U.S. and were deported to El Salvador years later as adults. Consistent with national trends (Rosenblum & McCabe, 2014), most were deported after immigration violations and misdemeanors, though several self-identified as “gang-involved” or “inactive gang members” and some were convicted of violent crimes.¹ Together these narratives reveal deportees are diverse in life experiences and degrees of criminalization. The ways they narrate deservingness after removal and within the post-deportation context in El Salvador also offer important suggestions on how political actors can move toward a critique of state practices.

1 We recognize the problematic use of the term “gang.” Many youth designated by the state are simply “hanging out” with friends and are criminalized as “gangsters” in need of surveillance, criminalization, containment, and deportation (Rios, 2011). Uncritical use of the term implicitly justifies such practices. Still, in our research, many youth identified themselves as belonging to “gangs,” in one way or another. They used terms like “gangsters,” “gang members,” “soldiers,” and “ex-gang members,” “inactive gang members,” and “gang-involved.” Though hesitant in our application, we refer to such persons as self-identified “gang-involved,” a term employed by some activists and social service providers. We also note the structural factors that lead youth to involvement in “gangs,” as appropriate.

“You Have to be More Worthy”: The Long Reach of the DREAMer Frame

In 2010, at the peak of DREAM Act mobilization, Dolores², an undocumented student activist explained how she would persuade individuals in the moveable middle to support the DREAM Act and other California legislation that could benefit undocumented youth.

I would tell you first, please don't look at it as an immigration issue. Think of it as an educational issue. And we're all here (*in college*) because we have worked so hard. Just because you're undocumented the universities don't hand you the application and you're accepted. We've all worked hard, we have the grades, and we're smart, and it's just that we weren't born here. And it's an impediment, not just for ourselves but for the fact that we can be helping our communities and progressing as a whole, not just ourselves.

Dolores, like other DREAMers, firmly believed that without legal status they could not attain their own or their parents' dreams for them. It made strategic sense to appeal to American values of meritocracy and hard work. In this same year, though, the movement was profoundly impacted by the failure of the DREAM Act (Pallares, 2013). As movement members and leaders contemplated the unintended consequences of the “education” and “vulnerable child” frames, both frames that resonated with the moveable middle, undocumented children across the country were coming of age in the shadow of the DREAMer narrative. This narrative in conjunction with the hyper-criminalization of the undocumented migrant as a subject, constructs undocumented youth, and undocumented migrants generally, as either “bad” or “good” migrants.

The long reach of the DREAMer narrative came across clearly during interviews conducted with undocumented young adults in Georgia in 2015. Enid, who came to the United States at the age of six described the ideal DREAMer, a category she distanced herself from even though she had completed her GED, was employed at a leading Latino migrant rights organization, and was completing a paralegal certificate: “I don't really consider myself a DREAMer...it will be the people who really finish high school and that are ready to go to college, you know, and they don't have children. So that's what I think it is, that's why I don't think I fit there.” Enid, who had dropped out of high school, viewed herself as outside of the DREAMer frame because as a teenager she was not college-bound and was a young parent. Like Enid, several undocumented youth interviewed identified what they considered less than ideal life experiences such as having a GED instead of a high school diploma, losing Deferred Action, or not being active in the undocumented student movement, as excluding them from the DREAMer narrative. This discourse of exceptionalism, both actual and perceived, created a symbolic boundary between undocumented youth who did not consider themselves the cream of the crop and the narrative of the ideal DREAMer.

While undocumented youth like Enid distinguished themselves from the narrow conception of the high-achieving college bound DREAMer; those who were ideal DREAMers expressed feeling pressure to be exceptional, as Alicia shared during our interview:

When you're undocumented you feel like to have to make yourself worthy for this country, and I feel like that's what drove me throughout high school. I strove to get the highest grades, and take the most rigorous classes, and I was just like I am going to show them who they are missing out on.

For Alicia and other high-achieving undocumented youth, the DREAMer frame alone did not create pressure to be exceptional, but the frame in conjunction with the increasing criminalization of noncitizens made undocumented youth acutely aware of their own potential to change societal perceptions of undocumented migrants by being smart, dedicated, hardworking, and ultimately making a positive contribution to the United States.

During our interviews several undocumented youth struggled in their everyday lives with their desire to attend college, and the consequences of “access to higher education” movement framing. As Olivia, who migrated when she was four years old from Mexico and who like Alicia was an exceptional student in high

² Pseudonyms are used unless otherwise requested by participants.

school, shared:

They present this narrative of undocumented students, we're good students, this is what we deserve because we're good students, but the fact of the matter is, we don't deserve this because we're good students, we deserve education because we are human beings that have lived here. I mean, yes I worked my whole high school to get a 3.5 GPA and get top SAT scores ... we're not presenting some fake narrative that we're actually good students, we *are actually good students*, but we're not coming here for some kind of handout or something. We're not saying, "we are students" so we deserve this, and that are other undocumented people who are actually criminals who are breaking the law that they don't deserve it, we're not saying that all...

Olivia wanted to make sense of how her experiences as a model student may contribute to excluding undocumented migrants who were not "good students" or even "lawbreakers" from the discourse of the deserving. Besides recognizing the unintended, yet possibly harmful consequences of the model student narrative, she and other undocumented young adults had a relatively clear understanding of the structural conditions that contribute to the criminalization of undocumented migrants. Several of them had seen their own parents criminalized for minor violations including driving without a license.

While DREAMers have developed an understanding of the criminalization of undocumented migrants through programs like Secure Communities, we found that the DREAMer discourse endures for two primary reasons. First, as Olivia's narrative highlights, being "good students" is their reality and access to higher education, especially in restrictive states like Georgia, continues to be the primary struggle of the undocumented youth movement. Secondly, as Alicia poignantly captured, once in the country without legal permission, to be worthy undocumented migrants *must* lead a law-abiding life. In truth, most undocumented migrants do lead law-abiding lives and yet are still vulnerable to deportation. The deeper implicit meaning of Alicia's statement is that noncitizens are held to a higher legal and moral standard, and the discourse of deservingness emerges in large part in response to this standard. Yet, this perspective leaves very little room for the reality that undocumented migrants are often criminalized for their very presence in the United States.

"Everyone Who Thinks Big is a DREAMer": Expanding the DREAMer Frame

As the narratives above suggest, some undocumented young adults internalized worthiness as law-abidingness. Not only limiting, this framing fails to account for those who straddle a line between the "good" and "bad" migrant. For DREAMer youth, the idealized "good" migrants, the path might not always be straight and narrow and may involve brushes with the law or involvement in criminal activities. In some cases, participants' paths moved them closer to one end of the spectrum and further from the other as a result of personal circumstances or unintended consequences.

Such was the experience of Lupe, an undocumented, self-identified gang-involved youth and straight A student. Lupe's gang involvement stemmed from the alienation she experienced at school where she was one of only a few students of color and from rejection by family members who criticized her academic success. Her cousins became gang involved as a result of blocked opportunities that alienated them from school. They told her, "You think you're all that because you're going to school?" Lupe explained, "I didn't want that because that's not how I was trying to be. I was just trying to get educated but at the same time I didn't want to lose my cred with my family." Lupe claimed she eventually joined a gang because of peer pressure and fear of losing her sense of family, which gang life provided. Nonetheless, she felt conflicted:

A lot of my cousins at this point either had dropped out or just were doing their own thing. Since I was one of the younger ones I hung out with a lot of the older ones. So a lot of the older ones were in gangs and all that and so when I wasn't in school I was hanging out with them, so I had that influence. And then I had to go to school and to be a kid in a private school, completely different worlds. So I was trying to balance both and it was hard.

Lupe described the tension navigating different worlds, one where she was a model student by day and the other where she was gang involved at night, often having to finish homework in the wee hours of the morning after a night of “go[ing] off and doing things.” Despite being gang involved for two years, Lupe’s grades never suffered, allowing her to maintain her grades and keep her scholarship. The pressure of leading a double life was not what compelled Lupe to leave gang life behind; rather, it was the loss of a cousin to gang violence that prompted her exit. Once again, she was faced with the dilemma of fully embracing her academics at the risk of alienating her cousins or continuing to be gang involved at the risk of getting hurt or killed. Lupe described her decision as a turning point, which was not well received:

There was a lot of calling me names. They said I was scared, that I wasn’t down, that my cousin had passed away in honor and things like that. And to me it was not like that. To me someone got shot and that wasn’t really an honor. And so to me that was the hardest thing was trying to figure out if I did leave this lifestyle and try to get away from it, it wasn’t going to happen because my family was the influence. Which also meant that if I stayed in it, what was I going to end up doing with my life? What if the next person to go through that was me? And so, it was hard and I decided I didn’t want that anymore and I lost touch with a lot of my cousins...I found out that most of [them] are either locked up or they got deported to Mexico. Some of my cousins are single moms because of the violence, because they lost their husbands, because they lost things like that.

Lupe was one of the few respondents to adopt the DREAMer frame. Not only did it inform her choice to major in human services, it influenced her perspective on her own challenges such as migrating to the U.S. as a child, attending an under-resourced elementary school, being one of only a few students of color at her middle and high schools, and being gang involved. Reflecting on these experiences, she commented, “I am a DREAMer because of the DREAM Act. I am a DREAMer because I am undocumented and yet I do all these things. But I also refer to DREAMers because everyone who thinks big is a DREAMer.” By her own admission, Lupe was no saint when she was gang involved and recognized her divergent path was at odds with most people’s notions of DREAMers as law-abiding straight-A students, but she internalized the DREAMer frame and remained resolute that she was no less deserving because of her past.

Had Lupe remained gang-involved, she could have ended up incarcerated or deported like her cousins as unauthorized youth are often criminalized by virtue of their unlawful status in the U.S. (Abrego, 2006; Annamma, 2013). However, the internalization of the DREAMer frame and a belief in her academic promise, coupled with losing a cousin to gang violence, prompted her to leave that life behind to focus on school. In that regard, Lupe is similar to the other undocumented youth in our studies, but her conceptualization of the DREAMer frame was an expanded one in that it provided a space for her and others who had also fallen off the “right” path. That she internalized the DREAMer frame to mean “everyone who thinks big,” rather than just those who excel academically allowed her to be fallible but no less deserving.

Not everyone is able to escape the “bad” migrant label. Once attached, it is difficult to remove, as one respondent, Tania, discovered. Tania’s mother, Inez, was facing a deportation order after a failed attempt to renew her cosmetology license. Under a new law requiring individuals to show they were “lawfully present” in the U.S. in order to obtain a license, Inez was denied as she could not provide a valid Social Security number. Because her family’s livelihood depended on renewal of her license, she consulted a *notario* (notary). After paying several thousand dollars, the notary promised Inez she would be able to renew her license, but ended up defrauding her and other clients before fleeing the state. During the investigation, authorities were alerted to the fact that Inez lacked documents. Her brush with the law did not stop there. Shortly after the *notario* investigation, Inez’s younger daughter called police to their home, leading to a child neglect charge. Tania explained:

My mom has a case of neglect and its being considered by ICE as child abuse. One day she left my siblings alone to go run an errand [and] as siblings often do they started bickering. My brother was bothering my little sister and making her angry. She called the police. My mother arrived a

little after the police had gotten there [and] she was charged with neglect. That small incident has haunted us with her case.

Inez pled guilty to the child neglect charge and was later granted a deferred judgment, requiring her to complete a year of probation and parenting classes to have the case dismissed. What Inez did not know was that, by admitting to child abuse, she would still be considered a criminal in the eyes of federal immigration authorities, making it considerably more difficult to petition Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to drop her case. After being charged with child neglect, Inez was placed in deportation proceedings, which she had been fighting for 5 years at the time of the interview. Tania noted, “The lawyer who defrauded my mom is on the run from the law. While he gets away with his crime, my mom is in danger of being separated from her family for simply trying to renew her cosmetology license.” As Tania suggests, her mother did not deserve the criminal label even though, in the courts of law and public opinion, she was perceived as such for being unlawfully present and the child neglect charge. Although Tania challenged her mother’s criminalization, Inez could not escape the stickiness of the “criminal” or “bad” migrant frame (Heath & Heath, 2007; see also Soule, 2009). The *notario* went relatively unpunished while Inez faced deportation, proof of how draconian immigration policy is used to justify the categorical removal of those deemed undeserving.

“I Deserve a Second Chance”: Re-imagining Deservingness after Deportation

The discursive production of “undeserving” migrants helps justify the deportation of approximately 400,000 noncitizens from the U.S. annually, rupturing the lives of countless deportees and their family members (Dingeman-Cerda & Coutin, 2012). Once deported, notions of deservingness continue to haunt deportees, who are often returned to countries in which they are once again constructed as threats to public safety and economic development (Brotherton & Barrios, 2011; Dingeman-Cerda & Coutin 2012; Golash-Boza, 2015). Internalization of these multiple layers of stigma interacts with the practical challenges of post-deportation survival, leading deportees to accept their realities without contestation. Some believed they “deserved” to be deported because of their unlawful status or criminalized behavior in the U.S. But many others challenge criminalization and removal by employing familiar deservingness frames, re-imagining what it means to be a worthy migrant, or subverting the discourse of deservingness entirely.

To demonstrate deservingness despite deportation, Salvadoran deportees often highlight their moral character, potential to contribute to society, and social and economic connections to the U.S. They also work to redraw the boundaries of deservingness through contextualization of their lives, especially by articulating structural forces influencing migration and criminalization. The case of Antonio is illustrative. He understood himself as an *hijo de la guerra*, or child of the U.S.-backed civil war that ravaged El Salvador in the 1980s. He fled to the U.S. at age five after being caught in a bloody shootout between the military and rebels on a public bus. He eventually settled with his family in Los Angeles, where he quickly attained asylum and permanent residency. However, like many low-income families, Antonio’s parents were constantly working to sustain the family. With few resources to pay for childcare and a dearth of community organizations to support Salvadoran refugees, Antonio was often left to fend for himself.

Antonio believed that experiencing civil war at a young age desensitized him to the street violence he eventually encountered in L.A. Walking home from school in a poor, racially-charged part of the city, he regularly encountered youth who threatened and tried to recruit him into what he described as “gangs.” Antonio initially resisted, but eventually joined and became heavily involved in MS-13. He explained that his decision to enter was “kind of like peer pressure.” He also understood his criminality and ultimately the deportation succeeding it as a product of the geography of violence (Zilberg, 2010). Reflecting on the area in which he was raised, he said:

What really affected me like turning to gangs and stuff is where I grew up... That’s where everything happened... If I would have grew up in Iowa or Wisconsin or some other state in a little town, I would have probably been a totally different person.

Antonio’s claim that he might have been a “different person” had he been positioned in a locale with an

institutional complex to support marginalized youth was supported by his conversion to an “inactive” status after deportation. After spending 19 years of his life in the U.S., Antonio encountered his future wife in immigration detention. The two were deported together and eventually became affiliated with an Evangelical church supporting deportees and “gang-involved” individuals. With the help of this new community of support, Antonio was able to locate employment and mostly avoid police contact in El Salvador. At the time of his interview in 2008, Antonio’s wife was giving birth to their second child and Antonio was focused on dedicating his life to his family.

Salvadoran deportees like Antonio who grew up in the U.S. and were deported many years later often highlight in their narratives the violence of being torn away from the U.S., a country to which they claimed substantive citizenship. Noting that they do not “belong” in their post-deportation countries, they argue for a “second chance” to re-enter the U.S. lawfully. Most speak English fluently and established families and careers during their time in the U.S. and believe they were denied their right to due process because these factors are not considered in removal decisions. Such was the case for Jorge, an individual entrapped in the LAPD Rampart Scandal and deported after agreeing to a plea he was not informed carried immigration consequences. Jorge was alienated not only afraid for his life in El Salvador, but his family was permanently severed by removal. His six children were also placed in foster care, a consequence Jorge deeply resented:

I used to think being a resident of the United States was—made me a citizen of the United States. But now, I see it’s not like that...I used to think I would be killed in El Salvador...But to get sent back over here, it was like *that* killed me. It was depressing me, my mom, my kids, my girl, my whole family, you know. *Everything’s* over there...When I got here I couldn’t speak Spanish. My life was English...I didn’t know my family here. I left young so my family here didn’t know me, [or] how I looked...I don’t know why the government deported me. I got six kids to take care of over there! Why do you want to take care of my kids? Let me take care of my kids, you know!

Some deportees understand their removal not only as a form of state violence denying their claims to deservingness, but as a machine that serves specific politico-economic actors often at the expense of the rights of migrants. Such individuals focus less on constructing themselves as deserving and more on shifting analytic gaze back to the state. Several highlighted that mass deportation is linked to the imbalanced neo-colonial economic relationship between the U.S. and Central America, especially the dollarization of the Salvadoran economy and remittance dependency. They also point to the existence of an “immigration industrial complex” composed of a complicated and mutually dependent network of military contractors, the prison industry, politicians, and the media (Golash-Boza, 2009).

Recognizing that their lives are embedded in these structures, some deportees developed politicized identities post-removal. Giovanni was one such individual. After emigrating to the U.S. at age five near the end of the civil war, he and his family became agricultural workers in a town outside Seattle. Giovanni was aware that his family’s remittance-sending subsidized the wages of family remaining in El Salvador. Though he recognized his imperfect behavior in the U.S., he did not believe his deportation reflected his deservingness. Rather, it was a result of the existence of a transnational “business” in which he and other migrants are pawns. Passionately distancing himself from the discourse of the deserving, he proclaimed:

Man, it’s a business in all parts! You know what I am saying--because the Mexican government gets so much money from the U.S. so they can stop the immigration. Then, all they do is get you, lock you up, send you to your country, and you just go back. You don’t have much say...Who is giving them the money so they can do all this? Up there! *Uncle Sam!* Uncle Sam is doing all of this!

Like Giovanni, deported persons who avoid discursive boundary-making emphasize their shared humanity and affirm their right to dignified treatment under the law. They reject association with labels like “alien” and “criminal” and contest inhumane treatment during detention and removal. As Armando proclaimed, “They treat us like we ain’t human beings anymore, like we arrived on UFO’s.” Pablo added, “They don’t treat you like you are a person. They just treat you like you are a dog, an animal, or a prisoner.” Some deportees adopt even

more explicit human rights frames in efforts to push back against dehumanization. When Enrique was asked for final comments at the end of his interview, he simply and poignantly responded, “yes, we are humans and we have rights.” Similarly, when reflecting on changes he would make to immigration law if he were given a voice, Frank pled, “Please don’t view the cover of a book for just what the cover is. View the *inside*...I mean, we’re all human beings.”

Frank’s contention that the U.S. should consider the “inside” of noncitizens powerfully challenges the good/bad migrant binary. By asking us to move beyond categorical thinking, he forces us to acknowledge the complexities of human character and behavior. He does not reject immigration law, national borders, or deportation as mechanisms to manage migration, but requests that the law and enforcement practices recognize the humanity of its subjects. Such a view affirms our contention that the lives of noncitizens should be represented in more holistic and nuanced ways in political, media, and social movement discourse. It also demands that the U.S. reconsider the institutions and criminalizing processes upholding mass deportation.

Conclusion

In his 2014 address to the nation on immigration, President Obama invoked both the “good” and “bad” migrant frames, applauding those who embody the values and ideals of the U.S. and are “a part of American life” while also castigating “lawbreakers” and “violent felons.” Such a binary reflects larger public discourse informing immigration policies (Patler & Gonzales, 2015). As “good” migrants have been placed front and center of progressive efforts to bring about comprehensive immigration reform at the federal and state levels, “bad” migrants have become the face of illegality, supporting restriction (Patler & Gonzales 2015). Accordingly, on the national level, opportunities for undocumented youth (mainly DREAMers) have expanded, while deportations of border crossers and criminalized non citizens are at an all-time high. Similarly, at the state level, binary discourse informed tuition subsidies for undocumented students, while simultaneously popularizing discriminatory and criminalizing show-me-your-papers laws, 287(g) agreements, and Secure Communities (Cebulko & Silver, 2013).

That both pro- and anti-migrant laws and policies have gained such traction speaks to the power of the media portraying unauthorized migrants and other noncitizens as deserving or undeserving (Patler & Gonzales, 2015). Public sentiment tends to be more favorable—or at least more forgiving—of undocumented youth, especially if they are framed in ways that resonate with American ideals of hard work and meritocracy. However, Americans are more ambivalent about migrants’ having access to public benefits such as healthcare (Marrow, 2012), giving legal status to those who serve in the military (Summer, 2015), or their participation in civil society (Chavez, 2012). Recognizing which frames resonate more strongly with the public (Bloemraad et al. 2014; Yukich, 2013), migrant rights activists and religious and political leaders portray DREAMers as neighbors, model students, and good Americans while ignoring or portraying criminal(ized) migrants as aimless and lawless. In other words, DREAMers are uplifted and potentially swept into educational pipelines while non-DREAMers are tracked into the deportation pipeline.

In constructing migrants who will not qualify for administrative relief as “felons,” “criminals,” and “gang members,” political actors fail to acknowledge the ways “illegality” and “criminality” are socially and legally constructed (De Genova, 2002; Stumpf, 2006). In reality, migrants, including the unauthorized, commit crimes at lower rates than later generations (Ewing et al., 2015). Moreover, most of the so-called “criminals” to which Obama and the media refers were convicted of immigration violations (like unlawful entry) and nonviolent criminal offenses (including misdemeanors) re-classified as “aggravated felonies” for the purposes of prosecution (Rosenblum & McCabe, 2014). Moreover, while some migrants do commit serious crimes, their lives are influenced by structural forces outside their control, including transnational political-economic inequalities, war, and racial dynamics in U.S. urban spaces.

A legitimate political function is served through the rhetorical construction of a category of “undeserving” noncitizens, overestimating their quantity, and negating the factors influencing their lives. For example, the immigrant rights movement could be compromised if it adopted more inclusive frames (Bloemraad et al. 2014). By eschewing the good/bad migrant frame, activists risk losing support for incremental immigration reform from elected officials and the moveable middle. Nevertheless, the narratives of our interviewees suggest that binary framings foster ignorance around what happens in the grey space between ideal types. They feed into

individualistic logic, breeding denial about the social problems, legal constructs, and policing practices making vulnerable the lives of deportable noncitizens. In doing so, they legitimize the disproportionate targeting of Latinos by immigration and criminal justice enforcement and uphold a deeply inhumane program of mass deportation violently tearing apart migrant families (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). We suggest that a more inclusive framework would not only more accurately represent the lives of migrants, but open space for a much needed critique of current immigration laws and practices.

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