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Working with the Complexity and Refusing to Simplify: Undocuqueer Meaning Making at the Intersection of LGBTQ and Immigrant Rights Discourses

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ABSTRACT
This study brings gender, sexuality, and immigration status, and their conceptual margins, to the center of analysis via the narratives of 31 self-identified undocuqueer immigrants. Undocuqueer immigrants ascribe meaning to their experiences by producing alternate subjectivities and subject positions that resist multiple axes of oppression. These subjectivities problematize the exclusionary repercussions of single-axis identity categorization that mostly benefit those who already have some structural privileges. Undocuqueer as a form of resistance to essentialized identity discourses was evidenced in participants’ opposition to heteronormative, homonormative, and DREAMer discourses. This study has implications for further understanding the way that queer politics and identity interact with various axes of inequality.

KEYWORDS
Undocuqueer; undocumented; immigration status; LGBTQ; DREAMer; homonormativity; heteronormativity; intersectionality

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) undocumented immigrants have played a prominent role in political debates as DREAMers within the immigrant rights movement and as same-sex binational couples in the movement for marriage equality. Consequently, undocuqueer has emerged as a hybridized political identity highlighting the positionality of individuals at the intersection of LGBTQ and immigrant rights discourses (Chávez, 2013; Dahms, 2015; Seif, 2014; Terriquez, 2015; White, 2014). Out of the closet and no longer living in the shadows, undocuqueer immigrants have tapped into the common thread of confronting fear through organizing and have utilized the coming-out narrative of the LGBTQ rights movement for the purpose of self-realization, political mobilization, and coalition-building. The experience of organizing for LGBTQ and immigrant rights simultaneously has provided the impetus for coming out “undocumented and unafraid, queer and unashamed” (United We Dream, 2017).

Undocuqueer immigrants organize to address the various forms of marginalization and silencing they face through the denial, displacement, misidentification, and co-optation of their experiences. Their visibility highlights how racialized
queer and trans undocumented bodies are targets of surveillance, criminalization, and incarceration, particularly within the current sociopolitical context of the United States. In 2017, immigration enforcement executive orders called for the prioritization for deportation of all undocumented immigrants, no longer exempting classes or categories of undocumented immigrants from potential enforcement (White House, 2017). Additionally, with the expanded use of 287(g) agreements, state and local law enforcement now increasingly act as federal immigration agents to enforce immigration laws (Strunk & Leitner, 2013). Linking criminal and immigration enforcement, these measures pose a significant threat to LGBTQ undocumented immigrants who already face disproportionate policing and fear as a result of their gender, sexuality, and immigration status (Chávez, 2011; Gruberg, 2017).

Though LGBTQ and immigrant rights are at the forefront of political debates today, there is often little discussion of how immigration status is an issue for LGBTQ people and how sexuality and gender similarly implicate the experiences of immigrants (Carillo, 2004; Luibhéid, 2004, 2008; Manalansan, 2006). LGBTQ and immigrant rights discourses, which are largely understood to be separate, have generally advocated a politics of inclusion in and assimilation to mainstream national values, utilizing normalizing discourses of belonging to frame their issues (Chávez, 2010, 2013). The tendency to present each issue in terms oriented to the dominant culture has pushed the experiences of undocuqueer immigrants to the margins and negotiated their perspectives. Bringing gender, sexuality, and immigration status, and their conceptual margins, to the center of analysis, this study explores the ways undocuqueer immigrants ascribe meaning to the intersection of their LGBTQ and undocumented identities. This study highlights the voices of undocuqueer immigrants via their personal narratives and explores the ways queer politics and identity interact with various axes of inequality. Rendering undocuqueer immigrants and their perspectives visible functions to complicate assumptions that unwittingly reify normative notions of gender, sexuality, and immigration status and encourage LGBTQ and undocumented immigrants to be less visible.

**Politics of LGBTQ rights in the United States**

For over half a century, LGBTQ rights activists have invoked the language of Americanism and appealed to national ideals (e.g., patriotism, liberty, equality) in their struggle for equal rights (Hall, 2013). While the prominence afforded to direct action advocacy groups has, at times, worked to obscure the appeals to Americanism, since the 1990s, the politic of LGBTQ has increasingly been about seeking access into mainstream culture through demanding equal rights of citizenship (D’Emilio, 2000; Hall, 2013; Richardson, 2004; Seidman, 2002; Vaid, 1995; Ward, 2008). These approaches have become the dominant political discourse in the United States, where the subject of equality is interpreted as equal entitlement.
to recognition and resources (Warner, 1999). A common justification of these and other demands for social inclusion is that LGBTQ persons are ordinary, normal citizens, same as heterosexuals (Muccioni, 2008; Richardson, 2004; Seidman, 2002). Hence, rather than challenge the institutionalization of systems of power that oppress people both as individuals and as a movement, these efforts have promoted a politic that strives for conventional citizenship, upholds heteronormative ideas and institutions, and promises “a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 2002, p. 179).

Such rights-based discourses have produced narratives of progress and modernity that reassert the state’s authority to make determinations about who should be subject to rights and who can and should be rightfully excluded (Eng, Halberstam, & Muñoz, 2005; Puar, 2007). Seeking inclusion within an exclusive system, after all, legitimates colonial, gender, and racial control and establishes distinctions between “deserving” and “undeserving” people. These distinctions reinforce existing race, class, and gender divisions and justify the harm these systems and institutions perpetuate, particularly for queer and trans people of color (Spade, 2013). According to Warner (1999), this is precisely the trouble with normal. Through assimilation politics, which ignore power and privilege, dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions remain unchallenged and unquestioned (Ferry, 2012). LGBTQ identity becomes “privatized” and “depoliticized” (Duggan, 2002, p. 179), and the structure of social inequality remains materially intact (Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2003). By prioritizing issues such as marriage, for example, this rhetoric of homonormativity (Duggan, 2002) privileges certain forms of sexual expression and perpetuates the cultural unintelligibility of certain bodies, sexualities, and expressions.

For this reason, the acronym LGBTQ and the distinctions maintained within this grouping neither effectively communicate information about these groups as a whole or individually (Moraga, 2009; Muñoz, 1999). The assertion of a collective identity marginalizes and excludes those unable or unwilling to conform to it and similarly negotiates and commodifies the experiences of queer and trans people of color to reinforce and (re)produce a false homogeneity (Ferguson, 2003; Ferry, 2012; Muñoz, 1999; Spade, 2013; Vaid, 2012). Positioning the LGBTQ other as White and the racial other as straight proliferates homonational formations that no longer unequivocally exclude LGBTQ people from the status of the “good citizen,” but depend on the legal and representational consolidation of homonormativity to uphold the expansion of state power to engage in surveillance, detention, and deportation (Puar, 2007).

**Politics of immigrant rights in the United States**

The youth-led immigrant rights movement emerged from marches, hunger strikes, and actions of civil disobedience during the last two decades. In these
efforts, undocumented youth came out of the shadows and jointly advocated for the passage of the federal Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act—a narrowly tailored bill that would allow eligible undocumented youth to legalize their status in the United States if they attended college or joined the military (Nicholls, 2013; Schwiertz, 2016; Wong et al., 2012). Despite the dangers involved in speaking out publicly, campaigns based on the speech tactic of coming out have been used as a fundamental mobilizing strategy and collective identification tool among undocumented youth, forcing Americans to put a face to the label (Corrunker, 2012; Seif, 2004, 2011). Despite the failure of the DREAM Act in 2010, the announcement of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012 reflected the power of undocumented youth organizing. DACA provided a qualified group of undocumented immigrants an opportunity to apply for temporary work permits and protection from deportation. It was a success championed by cultivating the notion of cultural Americanism (Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014).

Cultural Americanism has been the most utilized tactic within the youth-led immigrant rights movement, offering undocumented youth an opportunity to reach out and build support on the basis of shared values and ideals (Nicholls, 2013). Built on a discourse of exceptionalism and normative, privatized notions of citizenship, the aim of this collective strategy has been to dismantle negative public perceptions and depictions of undocumented immigrants as being undeserving (Anguiano & Chávez, 2011; Anguiano, 2015; Seif, 2014). DREAMer has become a term synonymous with undocumented youth who are exceptional, hardworking students and American “in every single way but one: on paper” (White House, 2012). Yet the decriminalization of high-achieving undocumented youth has done nothing to problematize the criminalization of undocumented immigrants unable to claim the DREAMer identity for themselves. Accepting the “good immigrant” versus “bad immigrant” dichotomy, DREAMer discourses have subtly consented to the production of legal violence against undocumented immigrants (Gonzales, 2014). For this reason, many undocumented youth have become critical about the use of the term DREAMer for its close link to the political establishment and its exclusionary effects (Schwiertz, 2016).

Though DREAM Act legislation first emphasized why an immigrant with lower-priority status warrants deferred action from removal proceedings, DACA materialized the divider that separates those undocumented immigrants who were deemed deserving from those who were not (Anguiano & Najera, 2015; Baker-Cristales, 2009; Chavez, 2013; Seif, 2014). Today, as the youth-led immigrant rights movement continues to push for a pathway to citizenship, there is an increasing awareness that when activists “emphasize the right of some to remain within, they also define who gets left out, marginalized, criminalized, and deported” (Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014,
An overemphasis on worthiness has the danger of justifying exclusion and even vilifying those who fall short of the ideal.

**Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is an appropriate framework for the study of undocuqueer immigrants’ positionality, as it locates individual subjectivities and experiences within intersecting, hierarchical systems of domination and subordination (Collins, 2009). Intersectionality is used as a way to make visible the experiences, identities, and subject positions that single-axis models of oppression obscure, collapse, or ignore. Particularly, it demonstrates how discourses of resistance and claims of solidarity can themselves function as sites that produce and legitimize marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). In this sense, intersectionality takes marginalized subjectivity as an analytic starting point and reveals the complexity, simultaneity, and irreductability of lived experience (McCall, 2005).

Intersectionality begins with the theoretical assumption of anticategorical complexity, stating that single-axis categories are too simplistic to capture the complexity of the lived experience. It proclaims intracategorical complexity, problematizing the exclusionary repercussions of categorization in multiply marginalized subjects’ experiences, and highlights the relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups by asserting intercategorical complexity (McCall, 2005). It defines the interlocking nature of identity and power, and it reveals that there is no single identity category that satisfactorily describes how we respond to our social environment or are responded to by others (Shields, 2008). Within this approach is the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of oppression that compose complex identities linked to broader structures of inequality (Collins, 2000, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989). Because intersectionality is attuned to subjects who exist within the overlapping margins of identity discourse, it is used for exploring and theorizing the simultaneity of identity constructs as social processes and understanding the power undergirding the relationship between identity and intersecting systems of inequality (Crenshaw, 1991).

Anzaldúa’s (1987) borderlands and mestizaje have contributed to the study of intersectionality as a lived experience and a method of inquiry that places oppression at the center of analysis. By contextualizing intersecting points of marginalization, intersectionality offers the opportunity to critique the manner in which the experiences of undocuqueer immigrants are lost to categories that discursively misrepresent their experiences. Building on previous literature on queer migrants of color (Acosta, 2008; Decena, 2008; Gopinath, 2005; Gray, Mendelsohn, & Omoto, 2015; Wat, 2002), intersectionality will be used to render gender, sexuality, and immigration status suspect and to uncover the power and oppression that emerge from unequal relations between essentialized categories of analysis.
Methodology

Undocuqueer immigrants represent a sensitive and relatively invisible sub-community within the broader LGBTQ and immigrant population. For this reason, the Queer Undocumented Immigrant Project (QUIP) served as an important access point for recruiting participants. QUIP is a program of United We Dream, the largest youth-led immigrant rights organization in the United States. Launched in 2011, QUIP organizes LGBTQ-identified undocumented immigrants to raise consciousness about the ways criminalization and immigration enforcement have impacted communities (United We Dream, 2017). Thirty-one self-identified undocuqueer immigrants from 10 different states, plus Washington, DC, and six different Latin American countries of origin consented to participate. The majority of participants (30) were between the ages of 19–32 and identified as cisgender (21), genderqueer (6), and transgender (4). Twenty-one participants were DACA recipients, and 22 had at least some college experience.

Interviews were conducted in person, via phone, or through Skype video-conference between October and November 2014. Interviews were designed to elicit participants’ perspectives of the meaning they ascribed to living at the intersection of LGBTQ and immigrant rights discourses. Though I relied on a uniform interview protocol, participants retained the discretion to lead the direction of the interview and to choose how and in what language to relay their narratives. Interviews ranged between 45 minutes and 3.5 hours.

To interpret the content constructed within the text of the narrative, I used open coding techniques. I labeled concepts that described events, experiences, and feelings reported in the interviews and defined and identified meta-themes based on similar properties and dimensions across all interviews. As a naturalized U.S. citizen and queer Latino, I approached this study with awareness that my privileges, in terms of (cis)gender and citizenship, represent what may be significant blind spots in my ability to fully understand participants’ experiences. For this reason, I employed peer-debriefing strategies and member-checks to enhance the trustworthiness of interpretations. Peer-debriefers challenged the interpretations of data, identified gaps in the analyses, and constructively responded to preliminary interpretations of the de-identified data. Collaboration with participants via member-checks similarly ensured that interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations aligned with participants’ narratives and meanings.

Identity and safe spaces

Unable to be easily located within normalized acceptable identities and categories, undocuqueer immigrants came together and developed their own self-definitions. They worked hard to develop their own public narrative, and often found
themselves in the position of challenging oppressive norms internalized by the communities they otherwise felt a part of. They rejected discourses that they felt harmed them, and they combated the consistent erasure of their experiences within the larger LGBTQ and immigrant rights movements. Participants’ marginality was not simply a point where identities intersected, but also a space where the dynamics of identity, power, and history played out. Jesse, a 23-year-old undocuqueer DACA recipient from Arizona, for example, reflected on his positionality and described the ways in which his embodied complexity was often deemed expendable by both LGBTQ and immigrant rights discourses.

Jesse described feeling constantly excluded from advocacy efforts aimed at improving the social condition of his communities. Pervasive normative assumptions and rhetoric exclusive of his positionality exploited his body as one of the 28,500 binational same-sex couples dependent on marriage equality, or one of the more than 11.2 million undocumented immigrants in the United States in need of immigration relief, yet never as one of the more than 267,000 LGBTQ-identified undocumented immigrants displaced from both social movements as a result of their marginality (Gates, 2013). Participants, hence, described the intersection of their LGBTQ and undocumented experience as being complexly intertwined, yet commodified by single-axis frameworks.

Patricia, a 25-year-old undocuqueer DACA recipient from Texas, described how this recognition of her own complexity enabled her to advocate for the inclusion of other marginalized perspectives and to resist the separation of her identities within the different spaces she occupied.

I saw how my immigration status was being discussed in one space, and then we were told, don’t talk about your sexual identity, don’t mention it. And in LGBT spaces, I’m like, why are we not talking about these other identities that folks have, whether it’s their immigration status or whether it’s their socioeconomic background, that limit them to have resources—in terms of what it means to be LGBT? I think it’s just both of them pushed me to never divorce them at all.

For Patricia, being undocuqueer meant resisting the impulse to hide certain facets of her experience to conform to single-axis frameworks. She did not necessarily find inclusive communities when she started organizing. Rather, she had to fight for inclusivity by asserting her multidimensional existence.
She discussed having to make visible every one of her identities to incite conversations about how those identities were overlapped and interlocked.

Daniel, a 21-year-old undocuqueer DACA recipient from Connecticut, best summarized this sentiment, proposing that safe spaces not go un-interrogated.

... the truth is that a lot of queer spaces remain racist and xenophobic and classist, and I think it’s important to call out a space to challenge that. Similarly, I think a lot of immigrant spaces, in general, a lot of immigration organizations remain homophobic and sexist, and possibly trans-phobic. And, so, I think it’s important to talk about these, again, to challenge that.

LGBTQ and immigrant spaces were often regarded as safe spaces where participants could identify with others based on their shared LGBTQ or undocumented identity. The impulse to build collective identity with distinct group boundaries, however, often perpetuated the erasure of undocuqueer immigrants’ experiences. For this reason, Daniel proposed moving away from the oppressive, normative, and abusive qualities of LGBTQ and immigrant rights discourses, and instead creating spaces of resistance, where participants could question and reshape the hetero/homonormative and racist nativist approaches to LGBTQ and immigrant rights. Reclaiming and redefining what it means to be LGBTQ and undocumented, the political visibility of undocuqueer immigrants destabilized false notions of collective identity within LGBTQ and immigrant rights frameworks. Undocuqueer as a form of resistance to essentialized identity discourses was evidenced in participant’s opposition to heteronormative, homonormative, and DREAMer discourses.

**Heteronormativity**

The emphasis placed on issues of family separation within immigrant rights frameworks placed undue emphasis on heteronormative relationships that helped suppress participants’ LGBTQ identities. While family separation and deportation were certainly relevant to undocuqueer immigrants, as they, too, had families or kinship networks (Manalansan, 2003; Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn, & Woodford, 2017), the unintended consequence of solely organizing around heterosexual relationships was that it reinscribed heteronormativity. Camilo, a 20-year-old undocuqueer immigrant from Massachusetts, for example, described how heteronormative scripts within immigrant rights discourses essentialized undocumented immigrants’ experiences and marginalized LGBTQ experiences, including his own.

I think that I walked into a very heteronormative environment, which isn’t to say that it was a hostile environment, because that is not actually the sense that I got. It wasn’t hostile. It wasn’t aggressive, you know, but it was heteronormative. The interesting thing about heteronormativity is that it’s not particularly overt. It does
not necessarily have to be aggressive and it does not necessarily have to be intentionally hurtful or oppressive, but it is.

Camilo described seeing how the stories and narratives of LGBTQ immigrants were often not included within immigrant rights advocacy efforts, and that exclusion consequently made “safe” spaces unsafe for him. Consequently, he described using undocuqueer as a way to create LGBTQ visibility within immigrant spaces and resist compulsory heteronormativity.

Ester, a 26-year-old transgender DACA recipient from Washington, DC, described a similar experience becoming aware of heteronormativity within immigrant spaces. For her, it was more about coming to the realization of her perceived difference, even within “safe” spaces.

…in terms of identity, it’s something that took place actually by entering Latino immigrants spaces that were meant to address my immigrant self, but neglected my queer self. So that’s when I really was confronted with like, okay, because at LGBTQ places I would enter queer, and people would hear my immigration rhetoric and background and not prioritize it, not try to understand it, but it wasn’t an issue that I was an immigrant and queer. As opposed to many Latino immigrant spaces, it was an issue that I was queer. So that’s when I was actually confronted with like, what am I?

Ester highlighted some of the ways in which heteronormativity manifested itself as transphobia and the general exclusion of LGBTQ experiences within immigrant rights advocacy work. This exclusion forced her to reconceptualize her own self-definition and resist the compartmentalization of her identity. Identifying as undocuqueer, hence, enabled her to disrupt taken-for-granted heteronormativity within immigrant spaces. As Lalo, a 27-year-old undocuqueer DACA recipient from California, stated,

I think that if there wasn’t an undocuqueer movement I don’t think there would be a push back like against the criminalization of our trans brothers and sisters. I don’t think people would be fighting for deportation cases of an open gay male or female that is incarcerated for a minor crime. Injustices for these folks would not be out there. People would not know that injustices are happening.

Participants described intentionally bringing undocuqueer to the forefront of their identities in an effort to complicate the conversations around what it means to be undocumented and also what it means to be LGBTQ—a complexity that single-identity politics obscured and neglected.

Draco, a 26-year-old undocuqueer immigrant from Arizona, similarly resisted heteronormativity within organizing spaces by adopting an undocuqueer identity that challenged the invisibility of queer immigrants. For him, undocuqueer signified acknowledging the diverse identities that exist within our communities, and doing work inclusive of their voices and experiences.
I see constantly, and it pisses me off, how the undocuqueer story is pushed to the side, and just brushed to the side because there is not a lot of undocuqueer presence in these organizations and a lot of these actions are being led by faith organizations. And I think when we are talking about immigration, or some type of relief, we need to keep in mind that not everyone has a family, and families look different—let’s be honest.

Draco described recognizing the exclusivity of immigrant rights discourses when it came to LGBTQ concerns. Immigrant rights strategies often did not take into consideration issues of family rejection, barriers to adoption and second-parent recognition, and the general criminalization of LGBT lives that implicated undocuqueer immigrants’ access to family-based immigration processes and deferred action programs (e.g., DACA). This erasure of LGBTQ experiences incited him to come out as undocuqueer and resist essentialized conceptions of undocumented immigrants as strictly heterosexual.

Joel, a 30-year-old undocuqueer DACA recipient from California, identified a similar experience and confronted the heteronormativity undergirding immigrant rights work by highlighting the presence and leadership of LGBTQ folk, as well as the blatant disregard for their experiences within existing frameworks.

I started to see that there were other queer people or people part of the LGBTQ community, but no one brought that up. People just kept talking about their undocumented identity. To me it was very intriguing to see that identity, that energy, and those faces, but no one really vocalizing it and acknowledging it until I sort of started questioning, you know, myself and those folks around me. And so, I felt that the only way that I could, in a way, open up the space for that identity to become acknowledged was for me to sort of say, hey, like, I’m not just undocumented, I’m also gay, also queer, and we need to figure out ways to bring that in, and to start to integrate that type of work and those identities and experiences.

For Joel, sharing his undocuqueer identity created opportunities for others to develop and critically reflect on their gender and sexual identities. Undocuqueer, as a discursive formation, resisted the underlining genderism and heteronormativity that single-axis identity politics generated within immigrant spaces and the constitutive role cisgender heterosexuality plays in conceptions of citizenship (Luibhéid, 2004; Manalansan, 2006).

**Homonormativity**

Participants also highlighted how mainstream LGBTQ rights discourses tended to the experiences of a particular LGBTQ demographic that did not necessarily include undocumented immigrants. Many felt that this demographic consisted primarily of White, citizen, cisgender, gay males, even though the movement often claimed to represent the entire LGBTQ community. Josh, a 25-year-old undocuqueer DACA recipient from California,
for example, shared how he did not necessarily feel recognized as part of the LGBTQ community.

I feel like the immigrant rights movement has been a little bit more receptive. I don’t know about necessarily the gay movement people. I don’t necessarily know if that is something that we are recognized as part of the community too, like, oh there is undocumented queers? I don’t necessarily feel like that is how it’s been. I feel like that movement represents a certain demographic of people that don’t really associate themselves with us.

To help reshape the mainstream LGBTQ narrative, participants actively sought opportunities to increase the LGBTQ community’s awareness of undocuqueer immigrants. Lalo, for example, used his undocuqueer identity to challenge homonormative scripts that did not necessarily address his identity as an undocumented immigrant within the LGBTQ community.

It has also been discussions about the criminalization of queers, and not just specifically undocuqueers, but anybody that is queer. I feel that the value of undocuqueer work is high, leading all of the same issues that a lot of the LGBT nonprofits do, but adding this extra layer of undocumented, the undocumented population, and adding this extra layer of how being undocumented puts you at a higher risk of all these other things that all these other organizations work for.

For Lalo, it was about highlighting the exclusion of undocuqueer immigrants when conversations about LGBTQ issues did not take into account their interrelation with poverty, sex trade, homelessness, and "illegality."

Tommy, a 24-year-old undocuqueer DACA recipient from California, similarly used his personal story as a tool for challenging the homonormativity of the LGBTQ rights movement, as well as the community’s perception of what it means to be undocuqueer.

As an undocumented person I think it was feeling like when we were in queer spaces that are dominated by a non-immigrant narrative, that I can use those feelings of being undocumented and share them, or that I could share those experiences with those communities that are not aware of immigrant folk who are also queer.

For Tommy, sharing his story was particularly important for creating awareness of the homonormativity underlining current LGBTQ advocacy efforts. Highlighting undocuqueer immigrants’ systematic exclusion from LGBTQ victories was important for dispelling essentialized notions of LGBTQ rights.

Jesse shared a similar feeling regarding the ways undocuqueer immigrants were consistently glossed over by LGBTQ rights discourses. He described his exclusion as follows:

…it’s supposed to be the home of the LGBT, fighting for our rights, but the fact that you are undocumented, or even bigger, the fact that you’re an immigrant or
person of color, being left out of this vision is what I think affects me more, because any win that we have gotten as queer people most of the time has not been a win for myself or my community.

Jesse experienced his LGBTQ and undocumented identity as interconnected. Situated at the overlapping margins of two socially repressed identities, it was almost impossible for him to benefit from the victories of the LGBTQ rights movement, given his undocumented status.

For example, call marriage a win, like something that I still don’t benefit from because I can marry all I want, I can fall in love tomorrow and say, let’s get married, and even if he was a citizen, I would still not benefit from him because of the immigration laws. And if he wasn’t, nothing assures me that our marriage is going to be there because any day I could get deported. Any day I could be taken away. And then you have the Executive Order of ENDA, that’s a win for the gay community. Like, that’s a win for discrimination, but that’s not a win for me or my community because tomorrow we can wake up, DACA ends and we have no job. Discrimination or not in the workplace, it’s not going to happen because we won’t be in the workplace. And that’s minimal to the reality that we’re facing. You are celebrating these wins that are not wins for the whole community that you’re claiming to represent.

Jesse referenced how current immigration laws prevent individuals who entered the country without legal inspection from qualifying for relief through marriage. Hence, marriage equality was not equal or applicable to him or others within his community. Similarly, even employment nondiscrimination offered little to no support, given his reliance on DACA for work eligibility and the fact that DACA is a matter of discretion and not law and can be revoked at any time. Hence, compelling individuals to reveal their immigration status or LGBTQ identity to authorities for the purpose of rights exposed individuals, like Jesse, to the constant threat of rejection, discrimination, detention, and deportation. For these reasons, LGBTQ victories did not reflect undocuqueer victories.

DREAMer

Identifying as undocuqueer also represented a shift away from the DREAMer narrative. While all participants in this study identified as undocuqueer, only a few simultaneously identified as DREAMers. Participants described how identifying as a DREAMer was their doorway into activism. DREAMer, as an identity, was better than “illegal” when they began to advocate for the passage of the DREAM Act. Over time, however, their politicization and critique of the systems in place incited them to identify instead with a more complex identity moniker reflective of their lived experiences and the intractable challenge of managing multiple identities simultaneously. As Daniel explained:
I think at the beginning I probably did identify as a DREAMer, and I think it remains a sort of good access point to people who may not be out yet or be aware of their status, and continues to be an entry point and a euphemism for politicians who don’t want to say the “u” word, so to speak. So I think it serves its purpose. I think it’s kind of an expired sort of outdated sort of term because it’s so entrenched in the policy that is so exclusive and I would argue has a lot of, it creates this sort of design to moral elitism between the “good immigrants” and the “bad immigrants.”

Daniel felt critical of the term and no longer identified as a DREAMer. He described recognizing how much language played a role in perpetuating the culpability of parents for making the choice to immigrate and become undocumented. For Daniel, this rhetoric reinforced class-based suppression and division, as it absolved the blame from children but continued to criminalize parents and other non-student identities. Challenging the DREAMer narrative was essential for dismantling the criminalization and elitism found in the immigrant rights movement.

Patricia similarly described how the “good immigrant” student identity purported by the DREAMer narrative did not account for other salient facets of her identity that were deemed less desirable by essentialized American ideals—for example, identifying as queer and trans and working in the underground economy.

I remember being in 2010, and I was like, oh, why are we only claiming the student identity when, you know, we are also working? Like, a lot of us are workers, we are under the table, so why don’t we claim that we-are-making-the-economy-run identity? Or, why are we not claiming this I-am-LGBTQ identity? So I just saw that when I came into the movement in 2010, I felt like it was still very young... I felt that a lot of people, including myself, saw how following a talking point or just claiming one identity or framing the “good immigrant” versus the “bad immigrant” wasn’t something that we should be doing just because of the fact that it was still affecting our community in so many levels.

Similar to the homonormative politics of sexuality (Duggan, 2002), immigrant youth participated in political efforts and related speech that supported normative, privatized notions of citizenship that attempted to erase difference between undocumented immigrants and American citizens. However, for Patricia, immigrant rights went well beyond just the “good immigrant” identity. She described recognizing the diversity of experiences within her immigrant community, and how positioning DREAMers as somehow deserving of a pathway to citizenship simultaneously defined who was not. The politics of deservingness, hence, continued the perpetual criminalization of undocumented immigrants and exclusion of non-student identities.

Julio, a 20-year-old undocuqueer DACA recipient from Arizona, for example, described how his LGBTQ experience in high school pushed him outside the bounds of the DREAMer narrative, given experiences unique to his undocuqueer identity.
Like some of us would say, I am not your typical DREAMer; the typical DREAMer, the one portrayed on TV. Unfortunately, mostly always the DREAMer that always excelled in class, always did extra credit, always was the teacher’s pet, always did anything and everything they could to get an “A.” Like I mentioned, I was different. I was gay and I was going through a lot of issues when I was in high school.

Beyond the challenges imposed by his undocumented status (e.g., ID, license, college, financial aid, and family separation), which other undocumented youth could relate to, Julio was also confronted by the added pressures of being gay, which included coping with issues of family acceptance, bullying, harassment, and the heteronormativity of the DREAMer narrative. DREAMer, as an identity, did not fully capture the nuances of his multiply marginalized experience because it was grounded on the premise of exceptionalism and normative assumptions of American ideals, which did not include being LGBTQ. Such a label constrained his undocuqueer experience and constructed a hierarchy of worthiness that marginalized his LGBTQ identity. As Joe, a 22-year-old undocuqueer DACA recipient from Nevada, similarly described:

If you watch the President, as a prime example, in his speeches when he talks about undocumented immigrants and DREAMers, there is a very clear message that is being portrayed, and like I talked about earlier, it is very heteronormative and you hear these ideas of, these are people that just want to be American they are just like us. It’s a very normative kind of saying. It’s like saying they are normal too. I think what undocuqueer does, it’s a critique of the normal saying that…you’re portraying undocumented people as just normal people. But undocuqueer is saying, well actually, no. Let’s critique that because that is coming from a place of like heteronormativity and only further perpetuates oppression in every day because it takes people out of being not normal to normal, but it does nothing to critique why we think people are not normal in the first place.

Joe described the way the DREAMer narrative was positioned in the backdrop of the default American profile. He alluded to the ways the socio-political context of the United States framed discourses around normativity, and how those discourses, unfortunately, did not include LGBTQ identities or the nuances of being forcibly displaced into underground economies and low-level survival crimes as a result of the animus against LGBTQ people embodied by U.S. culture and law. For this reason, recognizing their inability to assimilate, participants resisted labels, such as DREAMer, that unnecessarily tied their labor, income, and education to their personhood, yet failed to acknowledge the reality of their LGBTQ identities. As Jesse described:

I think as undocuqueers now, that’s why most of us push back on the narrative of “good DREAMer” versus “bad DREAMer,” or “good immigrant” versus “bad immigrant.” Because if you are to analyze it and write it down, all undocuqueers
fall either one way or another as a “bad immigrant,” however you want to write it. The fact that you love the same sex you are bad.

Challenging these simplified conceptions of deservingness, participants opted for more complex self-definitions outside of the DREAMer narrative that better conveyed their positionality amidst hetero/homonormative and racist nativist power structures.

**Discussion**

Placing gender, sexuality, and immigration status at the center of analysis, this study positioned undocuqueer as an alternative formation of identity resisting the neoliberal lures of assimilation. Jasper (1997) described how self-naming is an important tool by which the dominant logic may be shifted. The naming of one’s own group or movement is an important part of creating an identity “in whose name the movement justifies its own actions” (p. 103). Undocuqueer, as a discursive formation, was responsive to the invisibility participants experienced as marginalized members of LGBTQ and immigrant organizations. Unable to be easily located within LGBTQ and immigrant rights discourses, undocuqueer immigrants established a hybrid culture and queer politic of immigration that insisted on challenging normative assumptions and simplistic conceptions of what it means to be LGBTQ and undocumented (Chávez, 2013; Gopinath, 2005; Wat, 2002). Developing their own self-definitions, participants described feeling empowered to learn about themselves and their experiences in ways that transcended the limitations of heteronormativity, homonormativity, and citizenship orthodoxies.

Identifying as undocuqueer privileges individuals’ positionality and disrupts conceptions of respectability within LGBTQ and immigrant rights discourses. Undocuqueer offers a way to foreground and challenge the spectrum of struggles facing people who are LGBTQ and undocumented using a politics of confrontation rather than assimilation and accommodation (Seif, 2014). Undocuqueer for several participants signified comprehensively addressing themselves and no longer having to check any of their identities at the door. Publicly adopting undocuqueer as a label challenged and reshaped the grounds for their exclusion by rejecting the fear, shame, and invisibility inherent within their gender, sexuality, and immigration status. Undocuqueer challenged the notion of “illegality” and the criminalization of their queer and trans bodies. Undocu- was a reminder of the diversity within the LGBTQ community, while -queer forced attention to how gender and sexuality are as significant as other systems of oppression within immigration politics.

Undocuqueer is a reminder of what is uncontainable within single-axis identity frameworks. Umbrella terms such as LGBTQ and undocumented do not account for the centrality of gender, sexuality, and immigration status to
undocuqueer immigrants’ understandings of themselves. Interlocked within heteronormative, homonormative, and racist nativist discourses of belonging, participants described bringing their undocuqueer identity to the forefront in an effort to disrupt the perimeters of Americanism upheld by LGBTQ and immigrant rights frameworks. As Joe described, these concepts present LGBTQ and immigrant rights in terms oriented to the dominant culture and justify access to rights by measuring deservingness according to norms reflective of White supremacy and cisgender heterosexual normativity. The visibility of undocuqueer immigrants thereby exposes the privileging and normalizing tendencies of organizations and institutions that cast LGBTQ undocumented immigrants to the shadows and into the closet.

Occupying a different position within gender, sexuality, and immigration status as intersecting systems of power, participants resisted the compartmentalization of their identities and contested LGBTQ and immigrant rights organizations’ plight for inclusion within exclusionary systems. They challenged the normative models of citizenship and nationalism that perpetuate the exclusion of LGBTQ and undocumented immigrants simultaneously within LGBTQ and immigrant rights discourses. Their positionality as LGBTQ undocumented immigrants highlights the challenge that undocuqueer identities pose for LGBTQ and immigrant rights frameworks; they challenge and directly confront normalizing discourses undergirding LGBTQ and immigrant rights. Doing so, undocuqueer immigrants defy the markers of “progress” unevenly passed down to us by LGBTQ and immigrant organizations: political recognition by officials and institutions that criminalize, incarcerate, and deport members of our communities (Spade, 2013). As Jesse described, progress in the areas of marriage and deferred action (e.g., DACA) do not comprehensively address issues of gender, sexuality, and immigration status as experienced by LGBTQ undocumented immigrants. LGBTQ undocumented immigrants are simultaneously afflicted by the criminalization of poverty, sex trade, homelessness, and “illegality” that mark their bodies as undeserving.

Because claims of progress mask the plurality of experiences and attributes of the members of an identity group, the visibility of undocuqueer immigrants within the political context of LGBTQ and immigrant rights problematizes the exclusionary repercussions of single-axis identity categorization that mostly benefit those who already have some structural privileges (Luibhéid, 2008). Working against exclusive policy based on one identity elides the experiences of another by glossing over the interlocking nature of systems of oppression. Most queer and trans undocumented immigrants reap no benefits from the surface change of formal legal equality. Their experiences help shed light on the systematic exclusion of LGBTQ undocumented immigrants within existing policy frameworks. Because assimilation mutes identity as much as diversity amplifies it by highlighting distinctions (Ghaziani, 2011), undocuqueer immigrants dispel notions of equality within collective identity frameworks. Intersecting LGBTQ and immigration politics
reveal the fallacy of assuming that gender, sexuality, and immigration status affect all in similar ways. It is the evolving and shifting nature of their relationship that must continue to be examined. Intersectional critiques help build spaces and movements that are committed to interrogating gender, sexuality, and immigration status and simultaneously identify, challenge, and counter the overt and embedded forms of cultural Americanism that shape them.

References


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