

# Too Close to the Work/ There Is Nothing Right Now

Daysi Diaz-Strong, Maria Luna-Duarte, Christina Gómez, and Erica R. Meiners

1

Each one of us gets phone calls looking for hope. Sometimes these phone calls are from allies to undocumented students, other times from young people wanting assistance related to higher education. Every time we do a public talk someone hangs around after, by the door, ducking in and out, waiting for one of us to be alone. On the phone, at a talk, in a school, the questions are always the same. *Is there anything you can do for me?* We recycle the same responses: our time and care, lists of advocacy organizations and groups, and sometimes rhetoric about “revolution,” “organizing,” and “justice,” but the end result for the many young undocumented men and women who ask us if we can do anything for them is the same. *There is nothing right now.*

In 2012, there are still no pathways for legalization for those undocumented in the United States, a population of approximately 11 million by current conservative estimates (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Routes that might have been opened in the past, such as marrying an American citizen or being sponsored by a family member, are now more complicated or simply unavailable. This leaves most people, including students, without hope.

In 2007 we collectivized and began to educate ourselves about higher education and immigration policies that affect undocumented students, as we are invested in progressive and just immigration reform that unifies families, offers clear legalization pathways, and eradicates punishing immigration policies. We—Maria, Erica, Daysi, and Christina—joined together in part because of our overlapping research areas of interest, but also because we wanted to work together on a project that at the start appeared overwhelming, unwieldy, political, and complex. We also recognized that as a collaborative, we could do more with our resources and skills. While this project started as a politically motivated scholarly project, we quickly found that we ended up at many scholarly conferences responding (to the best of our ability) to “basic” and “practical” questions from the audience. Since few researchers besides us were doing this work, the folks in the room often had little knowledge about the complexities of immigration policies and had few structural ideas about what their educational institution could (or should) do. These experiences pushed us into offering workshops for high school, community college, and university staff to educate our colleagues and ourselves.

We also wanted to gather better data about what was happening to undocumented students and their families. Therefore, over a four-year period (2007–2011), we interviewed 40 currently and formerly undocumented students—27 females and 13 males—about their educational pathways and other issues, including family, border crossing, relationship to U.S. identity, and future plans. Our participants self-identified as Latinos and students who were at least 18 years of age, enrolled in high school or college, and working to be academically successful. Clearly, this is a select sample and not representative of the total population of undocumented youth in the Chicago region or the nation.

After years of working very closely on these issues, we also interviewed ourselves about our methodology and how we had been impacted by our participation in this (ongoing) four-year project, and over the 2011 summer we wrote short reflective essays to each other about our processes. This chapter draws from all these sources: our interviews with participants, our organizing, our self-interviews on methodology, and our own essays.

We formed this team because we were angered by ongoing media coverage that routinely depicted immigrants as “illegal aliens” and offered little historical context for immigration policies and trends in the United States (Newton, 2008). Immigration continues to shape the lives of each of us. Two of our core team members were formerly undocumented immigrants, one of us is not a U.S. citizen, three of us have undocumented family members living in the United States, and all of us have relationships with nonfamily undocumented individuals. As students, faculty, and staff, we work at different federally designated “Hispanic Serving institutions” (HSIs) with over 25% Latino enrollment, where students often disclose to us that they are undocumented. We have published editorials in local papers; participated in strategy meetings, rallies, and marches; circulated information on access to resources for the undocumented; advocated policy changes in higher education and immigration; and helped youth to informally network and gain access to support and resources. Our goals, as this chapter outlines, continue to shift. We understand ourselves as allies to those most impacted, and we are also invested in making more visible the experiences of a criminalized population. We work at the local level to leverage resources and educational access for those in need, and to use our research and power to support systemic and structural changes in immigration and educational policies. We struggle to juggle these goals with our other full-time demands as caregivers, students, workers, and justice mobilizers in other movements.

Throughout our process, we found ourselves, many times, overwhelmed by the feelings associated with this project. As Maria states below, being personally connected to the research continuously changed the process:

For me, this research project was so intimate. I cannot detach it from who I am. While I was listening to the stories, it was also very depressing, and I would cry when I would leave them because many of their stories were my story, but fortunately

I've been able to adjust my status, but they haven't. As they ask what could we do for them, in many ways they pushed me and I think pushed some of us to continue doing things around our community. Like putting on workshops for undocumented parents or going to conferences to educate people.

Driving away from a meeting on immigration mobilization or a conversation with a young person, we would cry. We found ourselves angry during our planning and writing meetings; upset, depressed, and sad while trying to think and to write. Our anger was associated with legislative and institutional failures, our anxiety and fear linked to the political realities of people whose presents and futures we cared about deeply. We were depressed thinking about how little we could offer. Sometimes our engagements triggered memories of our own immigration experiences of separation, anxiety, fear, and loss. Occasionally, we were exhilarated and motivated by our collaborations and the work of many in the immigrant justice movement. We were also inspired by the ability and tenacity of many women and men to overcome tremendous obstacles and to be politically active and to retain hope. We were, we told ourselves, *too close to the work*.

Throughout our four years of work we have not paid significant attention to these feelings, yet they persist and continue to shape our work. They still cause pain and invite us to pay attention. Through engagement with work on political feelings, including affect theory, this chapter focuses on our “feelings,” particularly our *bad* feelings, and names these as public and pervasive rather than simply individual or private. Affect is the body's response to the world—amorphous, outside of conscious awareness, undefined, full of possibility—and we use the term “feelings” or “emotion” to refer to how *affect* is marshaled into personal expressions and shaped by social conventions (Massumi, 2003). Our feelings demonstrate how affect not only is used to regulate political practices such as immigration policies, but also shapes our investments and labors as scholars, including our resistance to retaining the veneer of objectivity in scholarship and our desire to move beyond research to support and participate in justice movements. The twin titles of this piece point to the focus of this chapter: to share narratives from our participatory action research surrounding what it means for us to be “too close to the work,” and also to share how we negotiate internal and external demands on this project to actually make desperately needed material differences in the lives of many.

Highlighting how emotion is threaded throughout this project and changes shape according to whom and how we are accountable, this paper starts with a short description of the political contexts for our work and includes some basic findings from our participatory action research project. The second part looks at feelings, focusing particularly on our process and how emotion emerged and continues to reshape this project. In particular, this second section looks at how the increase in undocumented students “coming out” shifted our feelings about our roles within the work.

## THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

---

Access for undocumented students has always been controlled in part by federal and state policies. In the 1982 U.S. Supreme Court case *Plyler v. Doe*, the court held that states could not discriminate against students enrolling in K–12 public schools in the United States on the basis of their citizenship or legal permanent residency status. The decision, however, did not address public education beyond high school. In the absence of federal guidelines for higher education, states have created their own rules. Although undocumented students can apply to most colleges, they are not eligible for federal or state financial aid. Consequently, most undocumented students can attend only community colleges or affordable state universities. As of August 2011, 12 states had tuition equity laws on the books: California, Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, and Washington. In addition, Minnesota has a “flat tuition rate” available in some of its college systems. At least two of these states, Texas and New Mexico, also offer state financial aid to eligible students, regardless of their status (National Immigration Law Center, 2011). Other states have laws that ban undocumented students from receiving in-state tuition (Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, and North Carolina), or from attending community colleges (Alabama and South Carolina) altogether.

While it is difficult to assess the total and direct impact immigration status has on the lives of these young people, our work clearly indicates that undocumented youth are under particularly severe psychological stress. As children, they may not have fully experienced the impact of their immigration status, but during high school they become all too aware of the grim futures awaiting them in the United States: physically demanding work earning less than minimum wage, no mobility, constrained options for economic advancement, and possibly deportation. As one of our participants, a 23-year-old student named Mario who attended a community college and successfully transferred to a four-year university, stated, “There are so many things you can’t do and so many limitations that make you feel out of place and make you feel like your arms and legs are tied up and you can’t move.”

While undocumented students confront difficulties similar to those encountered by many low-income and first-generation college students across the United States, they also face unique challenges. For example, in most states, undocumented students cannot legally drive and have to depend on public transportation and rides from family and friends or put themselves at risk by driving without a license. Unable to work legally, their ability to access postsecondary education is predicated on their ability to pay for tuition through non-living wage work, familial support, or a small number of private scholarships. Their lives and those of their families are at the center of often vicious public debates regarding employment, health care, and social services; recently, even the right to U.S. citizenship of children born in the United States to undocumented parents—known derogatively as “anchor babies”—has come under attack. Chavez

(2008) suggests that the public discourse on Latinos has been “plagued by the mark of illegality, in which in much public discourse means that they are criminals and thus illegitimate members of society undeserving of social benefits, including citizenship” (p. 3). Furthermore, with the 2001 folding of Immigration and Naturalization Services into the Department of Homeland Security, the undocumented have become an integral and expanding component of a criminalized class subject to raids, detention in a network of private and public prisons, and deportation.

While the 1980s were characterized by prison construction, fueled by the war on drugs, the post-9/11 decade is about detention center expansion, scaffolded by the war on terror. In 2010, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) removed 392,862 undocumented immigrants—a 35% percent increase over 2007. With a workforce of more than 17,000 and a 2009 budget that topped \$5.5 billion, ICE is the largest enforcement agency in the United States, deporting an average of 977 noncitizens daily (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2009; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2008).

[ICE] is responsible for one of the largest, most transient and most diverse detainee populations in U.S. custody. On any given day, at more than 300 ICE-managed detention facilities and contract facilities nationwide, the agency is responsible for overseeing the well-being of thousands of detainees hailing from countries around the world. ICE detainees include men, women and juveniles of all ages, including families. . . . ICE detention bed space has grown from 18,500 beds in FY03 to approximately 32,000 beds in FY08. (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2008, p. 19)

The *Washington Post* calculated that

with roughly 1.6 million immigrants in some stage of immigration proceedings, the government holds more detainees a night than Clarion Hotels have guests, operates nearly as many vehicles as Greyhound has buses and flies more people each day than do many small U.S. airlines. (Hsu & Moreno, 2007, p. 8)

Given this context, many undocumented students have extreme difficulty knowing whom to trust with their status and how to negotiate the most basic registration pathways for college. This tension is exacerbated by the hesitation of most institutions to formalize resources or widely communicate possible strategies to students—or even to faculty and staff. Those ostensibly closest to the students—their teachers or counselors—often lack basic knowledge of the barriers and are sometimes unaware of state and institutional policies. This lack of awareness and transparency means that it is up to the student to navigate the system and locate the one or two knowledgeable and trustworthy advocates at the high school or college campus. Most students rely on informal networks among students or on the one great high school teacher or counselor who knows their status and can assist them in accessing pathways to college.

Our research and organizing project transpires during a particularly oppressive context for immigration “reform.” Comprehensive immigration reform has achieved no success. For almost a decade, proposed federal legislation has floundered. The only legislation that has received any mobility has specifically targeted undocumented students. The Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, first introduced in 2001 by Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah, attempted to provide a legal path to citizenship for undocumented students. As of December 2011, the most current iteration of this legislation would provide undocumented students who had arrived in the United States before the age of 16, had lived in this country for at least five years, and were of “good moral character” temporary residency for six years, during which time they would be required to obtain at least an associate’s degree or complete two years of military service. After satisfying these requirements, a young person *could* be eligible to receive permanent residency. Those who did not meet the requirements would be subject to deportation. While the DREAM Act, if it passes, will help undocumented students enrolled in postsecondary education, it will not help their families. Additionally, within a few years undocumented students graduating from high school will once again have no pathway for legalization. The military service provision must also be questioned, as Latinos have some of the lowest rates of college entry and college completion.

In 2007, Hispanics represented about 15% of the American population and about 12% of full-time college students. However, Hispanics received only 7.5% of the bachelor’s degrees awarded that year. Even more discouraging are the low attainment rates among Hispanics. According to a 2003 report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), about a decade after graduating from high school, only 23% of Hispanic students in the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 had earned a postsecondary credential—half the percentage of white students in the same cohort (Kelly, Schneider, & Carey, 2010).

Given this gap in postsecondary educational attainment, undocumented students who do not enroll in college may view military service as their only option. A comprehensive immigration reform that would allow students to select among the workforce, college, or the military would be a more viable option for these students. Ten years later, the DREAM Act has been the only the viable immigration legislation on the table, and still it has not passed.

While there is limited hope for other legalization options in the future, the landscape for immigration justice work has changed remarkably in just two years. Starting in 2009, young undocumented students, often participating in DREAM Act campaigns, began to “out” themselves as undocumented (Preston, 2011) while organizing nationally and locally. The 2011 campaign of the Chicago-based Immigrant Youth Justice League is “Undocumented and Unafraid,” and many members of this group (and others across the U.S.) have not only publically outed themselves at rallies and in interviews with mainstream media sources but have also continued to be arrested at high-profile and public mobilizations in Georgia; Washington, DC; Arizona; Alabama; and Illinois. These tactics are the result of trainings and collaborative consultation processes within the immigrant justice

movement. These outing tactics have politically educated the nation about the impact of our punishing immigration policies and engendered limited public sympathy for select young people. Amid a bleak political landscape for legalization, youth and immigrant justice organizing has reframed the context of our work and also made us feel hopeful, worried, and galvanized.

## RESEARCHING FEELINGS

---

Feelings are not simply byproducts of organizing or research; they are a central component of contemporary political life. From George Bush's "compassionate conservatism" that masked the further privatization of the state to Barack Obama's campaign evocation of hope, politics is, as Feel Tank Chicago points out, a "world of orchestrated feeling" (2008, para. 3). Immigration policies and other punitive policies are built on affect, and the (attempted) production of feelings to regulate and to secure state-sanctioned goals is not new; panic, terror, and shame are central to the stories of dismantling welfare and public education and maintaining a permanent warfare economy. The fear of terrorist violence, of "illegal aliens" taking U.S. jobs, of prisoners using tax dollars—the feelings of disgust, fear, and anger produced through the public repetition of these tropes—all help to justify expanding the punitive arm of the state. The circulations of these feelings become "affective economies" that "seduce us all into the folds of the state" (Agathangelou, Bassichis, & Spira, 2008, p. 122). Fears are also often framed as threats—to marriage, safety, traditions—requiring *defense*: Department of Defense public schools, a Defense of Marriage Act, the U.S. Patriot Act, and on and on. Feelings matter.

As feminist theorists from Audre Lorde (1984) to Dorothy Smith (1990) have realized, affect is also used by the state to disqualify and to control those targeted for violence. While anger is a legitimate response to institutions that systemically propagate hate or deny the rights of full humanizing participation to many, it can be dangerous for some to be angry. Lorde (1984) warned that displays of "outlaw emotions" will be used against those who are marginalized. Outlaw emotions can be defined as feelings like anger and resentment that are considered wrong and denied to marginalized groups precisely because these emotions challenge cultural hegemony and open avenues for social change (Jaggar, as cited in Steinberg, 2011). Outlaw emotions can be tools to mobilize communities and individuals for change, yet simultaneously these affects can be used to devalue or erase the responses or analysis of those who are marginalized.

In this analysis of political feelings, we are careful to note how affect is also used by justice movements with problematic consequences. As exemplified in the earlier discussion, the DREAM Act trades on tropes of "innocence" and "merit" directly linked to the identity of the student. The DREAM Act (the 2010 version is also a de facto racial and economic draft) separates a population that typically accrues the most sympathy—youth and students—and provides this limited

group access to pathways for legalization, thus possibly making it difficult to pass wider legalization initiatives for other undocumented groups that are less able to engender sympathy or are potentially the “real” criminals and undeserving or guilty immigrants (day laborers, domestic workers, or those over the age of 30).

The DREAM Act and associated organizing is not unique, as other justice movements have historically struggled with negotiating difference. Images of enslaved and beaten women (and children) were used by abolitionists as a strategy to challenge slavery, as the assumption was that an image of brutally beaten pregnant women would trigger more sympathy or pity than one of a man being attacked. Yet, this often functioned to produce pity that would work in the long term to weaken demands for abolition. As Angela Davis writes, we should not permit “emotions such as pity to foreclose possibilities of solidarity” (2010, p. 36). Even when deployed by “progressives,” emotions can be problematic and leave audiences “touched” but not moved (Morrison, 1994, p. 211). The mobilizations surrounding the DREAM Act created sympathy for young undocumented college students, who therefore might merit legalization pathways, but not for day laborers, domestics, or queers.<sup>1</sup> Feelings are political and central to shaping common sense about who counts in our communities.

Aiming at “emotional epistemology” (Feel Tank Chicago, 2008, para. 2), or evaluating feelings as political and methodologically strategic, is a central component of our research. This section explores some of the “bad” feelings that continue to emerge—depression, fear, and shame—and chart our own engagements with these feelings throughout our research and organizing. These feelings are rarely discrete; they intersect and overlap in our work and in our engagements with students and shape us.

This chapter is primarily focused on *our* negotiations; that is, we examine our “bad feelings” and less those of our participants. The focus of this chapter is not intended to encourage sympathetic responses from readers to the plight of the emotionally overburdened scholars who sacrifice all, or to center ourselves. Instead, we contend that focusing on feelings can help us see and challenge norms, including those of professions and institutions that often value only objectivity and rationality. We offer snapshots to these discussions to encourage opportunities to think through how feelings circulate and shape our work.

## Depression

Sadness and depression are laced throughout this project. Most concretely, in our interviews, participants routinely named themselves as depressed, or identified the experiences of others undocumented as depressed.

**Carlos (age 20):** I guess; I was basically raised up here. This is what I know. To me this is my country. What makes me not believe I am American, I guess, is all the hate, all the prejudice. I guess you can only take so much before it breaks you down.



**Angela (age 19):** So it was just kind of like those [high school years] were the worst years of my life, because I just felt, like, so useless, almost in a sense . . . You know, like, it just . . . it wasn't . . . it was really, like, depressing and I just . . . where I just felt, like, useless, like what's the point.

**Elena (age 21):** It's not easy being like this you know, especially as you grow up every day, some people give up. I think it was before I started college, someone who had straight A's through grammar school and high school because of the same reasons as me and he just killed himself, he committed suicide.

Frequently students would apologize for their public expressions of depression and sadness during interviews, as Daysi describes:

I had one student that I interviewed and he cried, and that wasn't abnormal; a lot of the students cried during their interview. But what was weird was that later that day he emailed me and apologized for crying. . . . I'm so sorry. I could sense that he was very embarrassed that he had cried, and I was trying to reassure him: "It is okay; it's very personal, of course," and he said, "Yeah, I've never talked to anybody about this except my family."

The persistent expressions of sadness, anxiety, isolation, and depression by the young people we spoke with had a ricocheting impact on our ability to negotiate what we initially identified as professional boundaries between this work and ourselves, and this wore us down.

Christina: Yeah, I cried in the car afterwards. I saw a lot of sadness in the students that in the beginning, when you start the interview, they usually . . . they know how to do the interview; they say all the right things, but somewhere, usually in the middle, something happens, often, and you ask a question and then you can see it almost in their eyes that they understand how hard this is, and the stress . . . and they get emotional and they start crying, and often this came up because so many of them drove without licenses, and the stories about being stopped by the police and the fear that brought them about being deported. For me that was hard because I knew I couldn't do anything; there was nothing I could do for them and I think they knew it too. I'm always surprised when we give talks; students always linger behind at the end and want to talk. All the rules that you learn when you're in graduate school have disappeared for me. I don't care if I cry anymore.

The inability to hold this sadness refracted back into the work, and pushed us to question exactly why we were doing research and the expectations these young people possessed. As faculty and staff members at postsecondary institutions, much as we tried not to represent ourselves as lawyers or in possession of any magic pathways or useful resources, we struggled with our absolute lack of ability to offer material options.

Erica: I got super depressed after I first did a few interviews, and while sometimes, yes, people wanted [their story] to be heard, . . . they also, almost all the time they asked me, what can you do? What is there? Even though I never made any promises, there was always the assumption that there must be something that I could do, right? I still feel that today; I feel like I still have those kinds of interactions with people.

### Fear (or Lack of Fear)

Participants offered divergent statements about their own levels of “fear.” In one breath, a participant would state both that she was not afraid of the police or deportation and also that she did not drive on any freeways or expressways or ever go to the airport or the train station. These deep contradictions, however, made sense. The young people we spoke with self-identified as students, were in educational programs, and were “successful.” We argue that a certain amount of disidentification is required to function in a world where your life is erased.

While we argue that some participants worked hard to keep their fears at a distance, we had not practiced these skills. Fear mobilized us in complex ways and shaped our organizing and research. Recognizing that this is possibly very patronizing, as the young people and the families we spoke with were extremely competent and skilled, we still are often afraid for the students and for their families. Our fear increased as the political context shifted between 2009 and 2011 and increasing numbers of young people publicly identified as undocumented.

Erica outlined her anxieties when she first heard young people identify publicly as undocumented:

I remember a panel a couple of years ago, which was one of the first times I heard somebody come out [as undocumented], and it was a packed room. There was one young White guy with a baseball cap and one young African American guy that looked like they were not our students; they totally looked like they did not belong in the room, and I remember all the little hairs on the back of my neck went up and we were thinking, like, “Oh my god, they’re, like, cops or ICE agents. What are they doing here?” I remember taking photos of them with my cell phone thinking, “Oh my god, we have to track them down and find out who they are,” because I felt like they were there infiltrating and watching and taking notes. I talked to some of the other professor types in the room, like, “Don’t they look weird? Who are they?” One actually stood up and tried to, like, agitate, which I think is a total textbook 101 tool, and I was, like, we’re so screwed! I think they’re brave [those that come out], but I still think they’re very vulnerable; I don’t trust the government, the police.

For Daysi, formerly undocumented herself, her *loss of fear* reshaped how she thought of engaging with the “research” components of our project:

The interviews were harder, or they got harder the more that I was distanced from being undocumented. When I did this the first time as a graduate student, I was still in the process of adjusting my status; I had a work permit, but I was still in fear of

what my status meant and possibly getting deported and what if things didn't work out. I could approach the students a little bit more easily. I had some contacts and I had some people who I thought would help these students because I still felt like I could relate. It was easier. I felt like I was trustworthy and now I notice a little bit of a shift now I'm a citizen. I don't have that fear, and somehow you begin to forget what that felt like.

Often our fears for the students triggered our own memories of fear and anxiety in relation to border crossing. Maria remembers how the fear does not leave with the possession of legal status:

Three years ago, after I became a resident, I actually forgot my Green Card, and my husband and I drove down to Texas and it was so horrible. We were in El Paso and a few miles from the border, and I could see the border and I could see the border patrol, and the whole night I couldn't sleep, like, thinking because I forgot my Green Card here [in Chicago]. I had to call my mom and she FedExed it the next day, because every 10 miles [there was] a border stop, so that brought back a whole bunch of memories. The first night that I was there I could not sleep because I thought, "Oh, somebody is going to come for me and they're going to pick me up and deport me. What am I going to do, going back to, I guess, a country that is no longer mine?" My husband said, "You're crazy; you're a U.S. citizen already." I'm like, "I'm not, I'm just a permanent legal resident," and I remember having a big argument with him about it. I'm like, "You don't know what it means to be undocumented. You don't know what it's like driving, being afraid the police are going to catch you if you're driving."

As members of our team held varying positions in postsecondary education (faculty, students, staff) and thus very different levels of academic freedom and employment protections, the political nature of the work translated into very different abilities to participate in the various levels of advocacy and organizing. Given the immigration policy context in Illinois, some of us were afraid of retaliation.

Daysi: I work at a public community college, and we have a group of students that are coming together to advocate for the DREAM Act on campus. I backed away from that because I'm an administrator. I'm at will. If what I do is not in line with what administration wants, then they can say bye-bye tomorrow? I wish I could really afford to go to meetings. If they need help with something I'll help them. It's moments like that where I feel like I'm failing or somehow giving in to pressure. I have to keep my job at the same time.

## Shame and Shifting Contexts

Our situations and memories of either being undocumented or having family members who were undocumented have continued to emerge throughout this work. In particular, interviewing respondents has triggered memories of our own

shame about immigration and the tensions involved in pursuing a research agenda when movement building is also required. Below, Christina discusses her understanding of who was undocumented and what it meant to be undocumented when she was a young girl. As she grew up in the 1970s in the Mexican South Side neighborhood of Chicago, there was little discussion of immigration or the undocumented. Silence about being undocumented signaled the “wrongness” or “shame” of the situation—being undocumented or “illegal” was understood as “bad”—it would undermine your character.

When my father first came to the U.S., he was undocumented, and it was only ever brought up when my mother was really angry at him and it would come out as something negative, but otherwise it was never talked about. One time I asked my dad and he said, “Oh, we don’t talk about that,” and the idea was because it was shameful, and the people that we knew who were undocumented, it was always like they were shady characters, like “Roberto.” The joke was he would let himself get caught so he could get a free trip to Mexico for the holidays. It was very funny. . . . The big thing was always, especially for the women, “Don’t hang around with the wetbacks, because they only want to marry you for the papers.” Everyone bought that: “Yeah, yeah, yeah, if someone is from Mexico and he’s kind of after you, it’s because you’re an American. He wants the citizenship.” It was very negative, rarely talked about, but if it was talked about it was to criticize. It was a bad thing, but clearly people were around and clearly there must have been [undocumented] kids, but who knew?

In response to a discussion about the changes in context for undocumented people, particularly students, in the last 10 years, and the small but highly visible numbers of young people who have chosen to “come out,” Maria reflects on how this change has impacted her:

Back in 1996, when the law changed, I would have never . . . I mean, I never told anybody that I was undocumented. I did not tell anyone until I was going to get married, and my college mentor was wondering why I was getting married so quickly since I had these other plans. I remember I went to her office and asked her to close the door because I didn’t want . . . it was like a shameful thing. Even the people that were my friends [made] it very difficult because they never knew that I was undocumented. Simple things like going out to a nightclub: I remember one time I tried to go to a nightclub with a Mexican ID card, and they actually didn’t let me in and it was embarrassing because my friends couldn’t get in because they didn’t want to leave me alone, but I couldn’t tell them I was undocumented. Now students are very vocal about that; it’s definitely a different time. I tell my students that are undocumented that they need to be careful. There are students that have those political connections to be very vocal and unafraid and apologetic, and there are those students that are not as vocal, in the background just trying to stay above the ground, and trying to be involved in school but also not open about their status. I don’t know why that is, if it’s because of shame? Is it because they’re afraid? Some students feel really open and able to share their status . . . because they know they have rights and have advocates that could fight

alongside them to be able to stay, and not being deported, but there are other students that I'm not sure would be willing to disclose their status.

Both Maria's and Christina's comments remind us that shame, circulating within families and institutions, also works to maintain social and institutional silences. As researchers, we negotiate shame when working to advocate for, or even to make visible, those targeted by the state for destruction and surveillance. Maria's and Christina's comments highlight the shifting landscape of immigration policies and how young people publically identifying as undocumented, along with years of immigration justice organizing, has reduced the shame surrounding being undocumented, although the dangers of being deported are still very much alive.

Maria and Daysi outline the shifts between their experiences in the 1990s and the lives and work of undocumented young people today, and specifically how shame has shifted:

**Maria:** I mean, I think that they're really brave, because I would have never done that [come out]. I would have never done that because of shame more than anything, because being undocumented was kind of, like, shameful.

**Daysi:** Yeah.

**Maria:** Well, it was shameful and also it was like . . . I was scared to be undocumented, you know? I was not scared, but afraid because my mom always told me, you never tell anybody.

**Daysi:** When we were undocumented, I think we operated much more secretly, because there was just a lot less knowledge; they didn't have student ID numbers instead of Social Security numbers, so you had to come up with what you had to come with. If you did tell someone they probably knew very little about it, but now people know what it means to be an undocumented student; it's kind of out there in the mainstream. It wasn't like that for us. There were no scholarships. On the other hand, it was easier because it was easier to get a driver's license. I had a driver's license. I've never had that fear in me, of "I'm going to get pulled over," you know. It was fine. I could travel because I had a driver's license. I could get on an airplane. You never heard about people like you, positive or negative. Now it's like there are so many messages out there and it could probably get a little overwhelming, I can imagine.

It is important to note that the contexts for undocumented youth today are uneven, as Maria and Daysi pointed out. Many young people we spoke with were not organizing and did not identify themselves as undocumented to anyone,

and a lot of them, particularly those living outside Chicago, had experienced unsafe encounters with police. One of them had been arrested after running a stop sign in a county adjacent to Chicago that is notorious for racial profiling by the police:

Matilda (age 22): He [the police officer] told me, “I’m going to have to arrest you; I’m not going to tow your car; you can leave it here,” and of course I started crying. I’m like, “Do I have to sit in the back of the car?” “Yeah, you do,” and so I did. I was embarrassed more than scared. I didn’t want anyone to see me because I’m always afraid someone is going to know that I’m undocumented. (Matilda, Age 22)

### Conclusions: Reshaping Our Work

The constellation of these “bad feelings”—depression, fear, and shame—in ourselves, laced throughout our wider political moment, and from the people that participate in this project and related organizing work, have reshaped our work and often left us, at our monthly or bimonthly meetings, feeling frozen. Participating in this process has moved us to continually think about the relationships between research and organizing. Below, Daysi charts her own shifts, from undocumented individual to researcher to someone who also engages in advocacy and political support:

When you’re doing the interview, you know the questions, you almost kind of know the answer a little bit, or at least you have a sense of their responses. You forget that for them this is very real and this is very emotional and they haven’t talked about it. I realized, wow, I sort of have forgotten a little bit and I sort of have gotten away from it, and that made me feel bad. Now I’m a little more cautious about asking people to interview, because now somehow I feel like I am taking advantage of them. I meet somebody; they tell me they’re undocumented and then the first thing I do is go, “Would you like to get interviewed?” I’ve backed away from that. I feel like I don’t want to take advantage of them. I don’t want them to feel like my interest in them is for something outside of just my interest in them, and so unless we can build a little bit more of a relationship I don’t want to introduce that. So that’s been kind of weird for me, feeling distanced from the experience more now and feeling guilty about that.

The research project and engaging with students also push us to continue to think about our participation in movements. Christina describes how she was moved to do more while driving an undocumented student to her volunteer position in the 2008 Obama campaign:

She made me really think, we as professors need to come out and support them, we should be doing more, not them. We have nothing to lose; she has everything to lose. We needed to do more. As time has gone on I now worry much more and I think things, in a weird way . . . because they do this [organize] and do it so well, they let us off the hook, right?

Thus far the “more” has often led to guilt and internal conflict, because there is always work to do, and we never feel like we are doing enough. We never started this project to be saviors, and those undocumented students we work with don’t need to be saved; yet we feel as though there is more we can do. Writing about it and reporting on our research is not enough. The students we work with live a very different experience that we try to understand and document, but don’t fully comprehend.

Christina: I always feel guilty. There’s a march or there’s a meeting and I’m like, I can’t go. I have to go home or I have to . . . I always feel guilty, like it’s moving ahead without me and I want to be a part of it, but then there’s also the whole issue with the DREAM Act and some of our criticisms of it, and so even that . . . I just feel a lot of guilt. It’s like every week and this week we signed four petitions on email and again it’s very small; it doesn’t take much for me to do it, right, organizing is so much more than that; it’s easy to sign those petitions. I sit down in front of the computer and I can just do it. But the difference is to go out and be at the marches. I’m always really aware of that; there are different levels of commitment to this.

We have no answers for the right way to negotiate the many tensions and “bad feelings” mentioned throughout this paper, and instead see that publicly naming the complications when one is *too close to the work* is vital and potentially transformative. Research and organizing matter, particularly in desperate times. We close this chapter with a pointer for our future thinking and feeling. We recognize that our varied professional trainings did not prepare us to be workers in justice movements, or even to work collaboratively. We have felt isolated, like the only ones who have ever felt so depressed about their work and completely bereft of ideas about how to move. Generally, scholars are professionalized to produce discrete products, to acquire and to keep jobs, to build expertise, to be objective, and to advance the discipline or the field. As we move between research and advocacy and participate in organizing, we recognize the immense resource—time, money, technology, and more—that are located within universities, and we want better linkages between justice movements and scholars. This is our work to do and we must build these networks, train ourselves, and reframe what counts as scholarship. For example, if we are conducting work with human subjects, we must go through an Institutional Review Board (IRB) process (generally to protect the institution from any liability). What if we develop processes that asked the question, how is this work linked to other justice mobilizing scholarship? Or, how will this work redistribute resources or access to life pathways? Changing how and to whom we are accountable can move us away from “research of convenience” to research that responds to express material, political, or historical needs. Our networks can develop pathways among organizations, people, and institutions to focus work and channel resources (e.g., graduate students desiring experience in participatory action research) toward entities that need this labor (i.e., “This is what we know” and “This is what we need assistance with”). Collectivizing moves against so much of what the academy centers on—individual

expertise and success (or failure)—but as resources for justice work continue to diminish inside universities, pooling our labors will provide needed strength.

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

---

As you plan and carry out your research, consider the questions that have guided us in the collaborative research we shared in this chapter:

1. Why are you engaging in this research project? Whose lives will it impact? How and why will these lives be impacted?
2. Who will you collaborate with to engage in this research? How will these relationships be established? When and how throughout this process will you talk about race, gender, sexuality, and other relationships between identity and power?
3. What are your political goals for this research project? What contributions can you make toward these political goals in addition to your research?
4. How have your emotions shaped how and what you research? What emotions are produced through your research, in the researchers and in the participants? How are these individual emotions linked to wider circulations of public feeling? How have your emotions shifted throughout the research process?
5. After the research has been completed, what are your ongoing commitments to the political goals you identified as important in this research? What are your ongoing commitments to your participants and collaborators?

## NOTE

---

1. Nancy Fraser's (1997) analysis of how our tactics result in recognition but not redistribution (of resources, state systems, and more) is instructive. For Fraser, justice strategies all too often agitate for recognition (a liberal multicultural model), thus inviting additive responses that are not capable of transforming systems of power, oppression, and privilege. In addition, recognition can often only be on a single axis (race, gender, or sexuality).

## REFERENCES

---

- Agathangelou, A., Bassichis, D., & Spira, T. (2008). Intimate investments: Homonormativity, global lockdown, and the seductions of empire. *Radical History Review*, 100, 120–143.
- Chavez, L. R. (2008). *The Latino threat: Constructing immigrants, citizens, and the nation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Davis, A. (2010). *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave, written by himself: A new critical edition*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books.
- Feel Tank Chicago. (2008). *Manifesto*. Retrieved from <http://www.feeltankchicago.net/> (accessed November 13, 2008)



- Fraser, N. (1997). *Justice interruptus: Critical reflections on the "Postsocialist" condition*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hsu, S., & Moreno, S. (2007, February 2). Border policy's success strains resources: Tent city in Texas among immigrant holding sites drawing criticism. *The Washington Post*, p. A01. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2007/02/01/AR2007020102238.html?referr>
- Kelly, A., Schneider, M., & Carey, K. (2010). Rising to the challenge: Hispanic college graduation rates as a national priority. American Enterprise Institute.
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. New York, NY: Crossing Press.
- Massumi, B. (2003). Navigating movements: An interview with Brian Massumi. In M. Zournazi, (Ed.), *Hope: New philosophies for change* (pp. 210–243). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Morrison, T. (1994). *The bluest eye*. New York, NY: Plume.
- National Immigration Law Center. (2011, August). *State campaigns on education for immigrant students gain momentum in 2011*. Retrieved from <http://www.nilc.org/immlawpolicy/DREAM/2011-ed-legislative-session-summary-2011-08.pdf>
- Newton, L. (2008). *Illegal, alien, or immigrant: The politics of immigration reform*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Passel, J., & Cohn, D. (2009). *A portrait of unauthorized immigrants in the United States*. Pew Hispanic Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/107.pdf>
- Preston, J. (2011, February 8). After a false dawn, anxiety for illegal immigrant students. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/09/us/09immigration.html>
- Smith, D. E. (1990). *Texts, facts, and femininity: Exploring the relations of ruling*. London, England, UK: Routledge.
- Steinberg, S. (2011). Teaching and (Re)learning the rhetoric of emotion. *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*, 11(2), 349–369.
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security. (2009). *Budget-in-brief, fiscal year 2009*. Retrieved from [http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/budget\\_bib-fy2009.pdf](http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/budget_bib-fy2009.pdf)
- U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. (2008). *ICE fiscal year 2008 annual report: Protecting national security and upholding public safety*. Retrieved from [http://www.ice.gov/doclib/pi/reports/ice\\_annual\\_report/pdf/ice08ar\\_final.pdf](http://www.ice.gov/doclib/pi/reports/ice_annual_report/pdf/ice08ar_final.pdf)

