

Introduction: Immigrant Latina/o Youth and Illegality: Challenging the Politics of Deservingness

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On September 23, 2015, 5-year-old Sophie Cruz made headlines when she crossed security lines to run to Pope Francis during his visit to Washington, D.C. Despite heavy security, Sophie successfully delivered her message—an appeal for his support for the implementation of Deferred Action for Parents of US Citizen and Legal Permanent Resident Children (DAPA). Sophie’s undocumented parents stand to benefit from the legislative action announced by President Obama in November 2014, but at the time of this writing, anti-immigrant forces in Congress have mounted legal challenges to indefinitely stall the implementation of the program. As this political spectacle plays out at the federal, state, and local levels, draconian immigration policies continue to tear families apart, create a climate of fear, and criminalize the immigrants whose labor contributes crucially to keeping this nation afloat. In this context, children like Sophie have fought for—and at times won—the opportunity to make their case in the court of public opinion for greater inclusion. Not all children, however, are represented in the media with sympathy, nor are their messages received so enthusiastically by those in power. The notions of innocence and inherent value that are commonly associated with white children in U.S. society have often been denied to immigrant Latinos and other children of color. In this special issue, we bring together a set of papers that examines the particularities of how Latino immigrant children and youth are both included and excluded from rights and protections in this country, particularly on questions of “illegality.” The authors in this issue critically explore the boundaries that are constantly being drawn and redrawn to include and exclude children of immigrants and immigrant young people, for whom age alone does not guarantee basic rights. Within the dialogue across regions, disciplines, and age groups that the papers represent, we center the notion of deservingness. Deservingness, as we apply it here, refers to a method of discipline that is based in a politics of respectability. Deservingness sets the rubric against which society determines the worthiness of immigrants to access basic human rights; it is a process with roots in decades past, part of an ongoing effort to further re-entrench borders both literal and figurative.

In the summer of 2014, tens of thousands of children and families made headlines as they crossed into the U.S. through the southern border fleeing multiple forms of violence. The sorting of bodies takes place at various points throughout the process, in countries of origin and as U.S. trade and foreign policies stratify migrants’ designations of worthiness by nationality, class, race, gender, and sexuality. In this special issue, our focus is on designations of worthiness that begin at the border but stretch beyond this entry point; where Mexican youth are summarily deported without the possibility of any official review of their claims; where unaccompanied Central American children and youth are detained and then allowed to remain with sponsors around the country only while they await court hearings that will likely lead to deportation orders; and where adult women travelling with their children are transferred to now-infamous for-profit immigrant family prisons. Although such movement across borders is not new, the summer of 2014 was the first time in recent memory that mainstream media exposed large numbers of the U.S. public to images of refugee children in this country packed into bare rooms, sleeping on the floor, in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in makeshift detention centers.

A collective, if short-lived, outrage at the treatment of these Central American children was simultaneously accompanied by angry nativist protests that blocked buses of children and their families from entering towns, inspiring counter-demonstrations by people who argued for their basic human rights as refugee children. Anti-refugee protestors spoke of the children as dangerous, germ-carrying invaders, while supporters invoked

¹ Each author contributed equally.

notions of innocent childhood, a discursive move that despite being well-intentioned, served to distinguish the children's deservingness from their adult counter-parts, including their own parents. The media coverage and competing actions illuminated the ways in which children are caught up in the cross-hairs of a violent U.S. immigration system inextricably tied to foreign and trade policies.

More than a year later, and despite ongoing efforts from a broad range of advocates, lawyers, scholars, and faith leaders, these children's rights continue to be denied. There is insufficient will in the U.S. to extend humanitarian relief or refugee designations to brown children displaced by poverty, war and violence. By the summer of 2015, when media attention turned to the refugee crisis in Europe, the images and stories of Mesoamerican refugees had all but disappeared from public view and public consciousness. Despite the opportunity to draw parallels about the horrors of forced migration around the globe and the practices and policies that fuel exodus, the conversation in this country has turned to a disdain for "foreign" regimes, sympathy for the overwhelmed European receiving countries, and debates about whether governors have the legal right to block Syrian refugees from entering their states. The refugee babies washed ashore and the migrant bodies languishing in detention centers quickly recede into the forgotten annals of the U.S. collective conscience.

On another front, U.S.-based undocumented and DACA-recipient youth continue to demand a more just immigration system. A movement that was initially marked by an upholding of values of innocence and inherent value of children has since evolved along multiple lines, often including a critique and rejection of tropes that uphold the boundary between deserving youth/children and undeserving adults/parents. Many of the undocumented young people designated as "deserving" within and through these binaries are collectively pushing back against the devastating consequences that these politics of respectability have had for others in their own communities. Some of these young people are now also at the forefront of fighting for the rights of refugee children, denouncing the practices and policies that suspend dignity and humanity for refugees. Undocumented youth in the immigrant rights movement continue mobilizing to put an end to the reprehensible immigrant detention and deportation system devastating their families and communities. Careful attention to their stories reveals the dangerous inadequacy of formulations that reduce them to ideal types of deserving/undeserving objects of sympathy or tragic figures "caught between two worlds." By exposing the complexity of subjectivities, tremendous diversity of experiences, and messiness of their full humanity, we hope this collection of academic articles and creative works contributes to undocumented Latina/o youths' own efforts to demand recognition of their rights.

As editors, we draw on our many years of experience in various sectors of the immigrant rights movement—the undocumented student movement, immigrant women and domestic worker rights movements, and Central American solidarity work—to bring attention to the temporality of the issues covered in this collection. Undocumented youth have lived through vast changes in policy, organizing tactics, and discourses over the past 15 years. Some have benefited from DACA, many have access to new (though temporary and conditional) rights and privileges, and their movement is continually redefining itself, trying to be more inclusive while also limited by a pervasively xenophobic political context. While there are various narratives that intersect with the lives of undocumented youth at this current historical moment, the politics of deservingness continues to be centrally deployed to sort, prioritize, and ascertain worthiness of immigrant groups. This special issue is devoted to a critique of deservingness as an axis of stratification and as the metric by which immigration policy is debated and decided.

The articles in this collection highlight the complex and important ways in which the experiences and institutional interactions of refugee children, undocumented youth, and young immigrants are both distinct and interconnected. Challenging notions of deservingness that distinguish between "good" and "bad" immigrants, contributors share a structural analysis of the categories and associated experiences of childhood and youth. The goal of this special issue is to contribute to the body of critical immigration scholarship that grapples with the production of illegality, citizenship as a commodity, and a disruption of the deserving/undeserving immigrant narrative. We have included pieces that complicate the contemporary conversation about undocumented young people as well as those that problematize the myth of a U.S. context that protects childhood and families of color. The special issue brings together conversations about "DREAMers," unaccompanied migrant children, deported youth, and undocumented workers to analyze the current immigration system and consider ways to end the institutional violence it engenders.

Leigh Patel's theoretical essay draws from legal case law, educational research and policy to explore the trope of deservingness as a form of racialized legitimacy, examining how deservingness acts as a discourse of racialization, narrating across racially minoritized groups to reconstitute the benefits for the racially majoritized. Lindsay Perez-Huber utilizes a Latina/o critical theory framework to analyze national newsprint media coverage of DREAMers and Central American unaccompanied children. She finds that constructions of "deservingness" are divergently employed in these narratives that assign values of non-nativeness to both groups to justify continued subordination. Jennifer Nájera examines how the activism of undocumented college students in Southern California's Inland Empire is productive of not only new political subjectivities, but also contributes to new forms of teaching and learning by explicitly challenging the hierarchies and divisions that the ideology of deservingness fosters among and between undocumented students, immigrant students, Latina/o students and their non-Latina/o peers and professors. Shannon Gleeson's article analyzes the impact of immigration discourse and policies such as DACA and the U-visa on immigrant youth and young immigrant low-wage workers in Houston and the San Francisco Bay Area. She argues that young adult workers are structured into the US economy as "institutional youth" with exclusionary consequences. Katie Dingeman-Cerda, Edeline Burciaga, and Lisa Martínez combine their diverse research projects and results from multiple sites with DACAmented, formerly documented, and deported migrants in El Salvador to reveal how structural conditions lead to different experiences and understandings of the politics of deservingness. Luisa Heredia's work explores how undocumented youth are using their liminal legal status and their valorized social status to access and challenge invisible spaces of migration control and the technologies of discipline enacted on migrants. Chantiri Ramirez Resendiz and Aracely Mondragon contribute creative pieces to this special issue, illuminating the connection between the structural and the personal. Finally, Kathleen Arnold provides a review of Alfonso Gonzales's, *Reform Without Justice*, a book that centers analysis on how the politics of deservingness have played out in the immigrant rights movement in the context of securitization and the "war on terror."

While articles in the volume highlight problems that emerge when the immigrant rights movement mobilizes tropes of deservingness in service of administrative relief and legislative reform, they also call attention to the structures of violence that enforce the ideology of deservingness; U.S. intervention, global capitalism, geopolitics, and racism are all implicated in this multi-layered migration regime. Children from Mexico and Central America would not have a need to risk their lives and place themselves in the path of such violence if they were not being expelled from their home countries. The lack of educational and economic opportunities along with the growing insecurity can all be traced back and identified as devastating consequences of U.S. foreign and trade policies in the region. Humane refugee policy would recognize most of these youth as meritorious of protected, refugee status; instead, these young people confront a racialized enforcement regime that discursively and materially denies them their humanity in service to a political-economic regime that depends upon accelerating social inequality rather than equity or justice.

For those already based in the United States, the struggle over the politics of deservingness is about challenging the idea that one monolithic DREAMer experience, frame, or political platform exists. Rather than seeing undocumented youth as "caught between two worlds" or in some "grey area between two ideals" we seek to re-center the racialized experiences of migrant Latino youth within the structural context of the deportation regime. Divisions amongst un/deserving undocumented youth align with other fundamental drivers of inequality in the U.S., where meritocratic rationales are still employed to explain disparate opportunities and outcomes for youth that are structurally determined by nationality, age, race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability. In the wake of persistent state violence against children of color and their families for generations, rejecting the politics of respectability and hierarchies of deservingness requires recognition of the potential for solidarities between communities of color and the institutional-rootedness of these conditions.

To return to the story of little Sophie Cruz, the fact that she and her family appeared in the media at all is a testament to grassroots immigrant rights organizing in Los Angeles. These activists seized the opportunity of Pope Francis' visit in light of his advocacy for "welcoming the stranger" everywhere - from refugees of the war in Syria arriving in Europe to immigrants arriving to the U.S. from economically and politically ravaged Oaxaca. Mobilizing key tropes of deservingness, the exceptionally articulate five-year-old Sophie asserted (in perfect English and Spanish, for multiple audiences) her parents' right to remain in the U.S. based on their desire of a better life for their family. Sophie's interjection in the immigration debate and national discourse about who has the

right to belong helps undermine hierarchies of deservingness in law and in discourse by demanding attention to the humanity of undocumented immigrant subjects, especially undocumented youth but also their often mixed status families.

As editors, our goal in this project has been to contribute to the reframing of a politic of “illegality”; one that rejects categories of un/deservingness that divide immigrants in the US, as well as those that reify distinctions between politically convenient refugees fleeing military violence and changing political regimes versus those escaping structural violence of poverty and global inequality. Humane immigration policies should recognize all subjects as equally deserving of the right to work, shelter, education, family integrity, and to live without fear of violence. Critical immigration scholarship must contest narratives of deserving/undeserving immigrants that correspond with the discursive and intellectual production of illegality and its violent consequences, while always contextualizing movement across borders within a global neoliberal capitalist system. The articles in this volume, along with the creative works and reviewed book, are diverse in focus, theoretical and methodological approaches, yet together they offer resources for social analysis and political critique of an untenable immigration system and the ideologies of division and hierarchy amongst immigrant subjects that help sustain it.