Winter 2014

Countering the DREAMer Narrative: Storytelling, Immigration Reform, and the Work of 67 Sueños

Drew Schmenner

University of San Francisco, adschmenner@usfca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.usfca.edu/thes

Part of the International and Area Studies Commons

Recommended Citation


https://repository.usfca.edu/thes/117

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, Capstones and Projects at USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master’s Theses by an authorized administrator of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.
Countering the DREAMer Narrative:
Storytelling, Immigration Reform, 
and the Work of 67 Sueños

by

Drew Schmenner

Prof. Dorothy Kidd, Advisor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment 
of the requirements for the 
Degree of Master of Arts 
in International Studies

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

San Francisco, California

December 2014
Abstract

Research question: *How has the practice of storytelling been used in the current U.S. conflicts over immigration?*

Telling an effective story is an essential part of a complex strategy to bring about social change, but storytelling as a part of collective action has not been extensively studied. For activists in the United States fighting for immigrant rights, especially the passage of the DREAM Act, storytelling has been an important tactic, but the nature of the narrative that was constructed has its drawbacks because it excluded some members of the immigrant community. In 2010, the Bay Area-based group 67 Sueños (“67 Dreams”) was formed in order to express the voices of undocumented youth not represented in the debate. Storytelling is one of the tactics the group utilizes. The nature of the group’s storytelling practices was investigated during the summer of 2014 during which members of 67 Sueños completed two immigration-themed murals in the Bay Area. Storytelling plays a central role in helping members of the group overcome trauma and transform themselves into vocal activists. The group’s employment of universal human rights discourse in the stories they tell prompts important questions about how to tell stories that include such principles while connecting with stakeholders more familiar with arguments focused on the concept of the nation-state and national belonging.
Table of contents

Acknowledgments                                             i

Chapter 1: Introduction                                        1
  Theoretical background                                      4
  Methodology                                                  5
  Contributions of research                                   6

Chapter 2: Literature Review                                    7
  Undocumented immigrants and the battle for reform           7
  Storytelling and the DREAM Act                              14
  Storytelling and collective action                          15
  Politics of storytelling                                    18
  The American dream as “folk history”                       20
  DREAMers and the American dream                             22
  Adapting the DREAMer narrative                              24
  Developing a more nuanced DREAMer narrative                 27

Chapter 3: “That’s the Thing About Storytelling; It Changes Everything”        30
  The origins of 67 Sueños                                    32
  Giving voice to the 67 percent                              33
  Healing trauma through storytelling                         36
  A family’s struggles                                       39
  The journey of unaccompanied minors                        41
  Black and brown unity                                       43
  Getting their humanity back                                 45
Chapter 4: “These Stories Give Us Back Our Humanity”  47

Storytelling and the DREAMers  47

Constructing a public narrative  50

A storytelling alternative  54

Chapter 5: “Hi, Human”  60

The healing power of storytelling  61

Building a public narrative  63

The challenges of employing a human rights discourse  67

References  72

Appendix  76
Acknowledgements

Many people helped me on this academic journey. I would not have been able to write my thesis without 67 Sueños opening its doors to me this summer. Pablo Paredes and all of the youth who are part of 67 Sueños are an inspiration for their spirit, courage, and leadership. My thesis advisor, Dr. Dorothy Kidd, guided me through this arduous process with thoughtful feedback and sincere encouragement, and Dr. Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales offered me indispensable advice when I first decided to investigate the general topic of storytelling and immigration reform in the spring. I would not have been able to take on such a project without the scholarly foundation that I built thanks to the instruction of Dr. Kidd, Dr. Anne Bartlett, Dr. Rue Ziegler, Dr. Lindsay Gifford, and Dr. Christopher Loperena and the perspectives and insights of my fellow colleagues, especially those in my cohort. Lastly, all of this would not have been possible without the unwavering support of my parents Roger and Barbara Schmenner and my girlfriend Jennifer Soliz.
Chapter 1: Introduction

In a primetime address on November 20, 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama explained how he would take executive action to make changes to the immigration system. The new policy would enable qualified undocumented immigrants to emerge from their shadowed lives and gain temporary status that would shield them from the constant fear of deportation.

Toward the end of his speech, President Obama told a brief story about one student, Astrid Silva, to highlight the plight of undocumented immigrants whom he had called “our neighbors, our classmates, our friends” and the urgent need to take action to ensure they would be able to remain in the country. He began the story by describing how Astrid came to the U.S. when she was 4: “Her only possessions were a cross, her doll, and the frilly dress she had on.” He concluded by sharing something about whom the little girl had become: “[T]oday, Astrid Silva is a college student working on her third degree” (The White House).

Astrid has told her own story as an activist affiliated with the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada. When she was honored with a national award in April 2014, the organization’s communications director lauded her for her activism, including how she incorporated storytelling in her work: “Astrid could have quietly gone on to fix her own status, but she selflessly uses her story to motivate community members across the state to take action and make the case for comprehensive immigration reform with a pathway to citizenship” (Lapan 2014). Astrid’s activism underscores not only how politicians such as President Obama use stories as a way to make the case for
immigration reform, but also how activists employ them as a rallying cry to encourage others to join the battle.

Astrid Silva is one of many young immigration rights advocates known as DREAMers who have played a pivotal role in moving the debate about immigration reform forward. The name of this political group comes from the DREAM Act, federal legislation first introduced in 2001 that could provide a pathway to citizenship for qualified undocumented youth. In the early 2000s, small openings for immigration change emerged in a climate generally hostile toward immigrants but marked by uncertainty about the extent to which all undocumented immigrants could be considered criminal. These openings enabled national immigrant rights organizations to lobby for a group of undocumented immigrants who have become known as the DREAMers.

Since the DREAM Act was first introduced, the complex battle over immigrant rights has evolved. Facing countless setbacks at the legislative level in Washington, a movement united in its goals for comprehensive reform in the mid-2000s has splintered into a more diffuse, decentralized set of national, regional, and local organizations, which includes DREAMers who have formed their own more localized, autonomous groups. Nevertheless, one of the strategies that has not changed is the DREAMers’ approach to storytelling: “Storytelling has remained an important technique in the movement’s general messaging strategy. This new generation of DREAMers employs storytelling trainings mastered in the earlier stage of the movement” (Nicholls 2013: 135).

The practice of storytelling has long been an effective means of bringing about social change. Marshall Ganz, a former activist and organizer in the United Farm Workers campaign who now teaches about storytelling and social movements at the
Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, and has developed a theoretical framework for what he calls “public narrative.” By using the key elements of plot, character, and moral, a public narrative incorporates a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now to create a purposeful community calling for urgent action: “Through public narrative, leaders—and participants—can move to action by mobilizing sources of motivation, constructing new shared individual and collective identities, and finding the courage to act” (Ganz 2011: 288).

However, unintended consequences resulted from the stories that were initially told as part of the lobbying effort to pass the DREAM Act. The DREAMers’ stories of successful integration into U.S. society, which were trumpeted by the national immigrant rights groups, excluded the young undocumented immigrants from other members of their community, including members of their families.

In 2010, a group of youth joined forces in Oakland to give a voice to those who were excluded from the debate surrounding immigration reform. They named their group 67 Sueños (“67 Dreams”), referring to the nearly 67 percent of undocumented youth who would not qualify for the DREAM Act (Batalova and McHugh 2010). The members of 67 Sueños have embraced storytelling as an important principle. The group’s practice of storytelling as a response to the initial narratives told to lobby for passage of the DREAM Act prompts a key question in need of investigation: How has the practice of storytelling been used in the current U.S. conflicts over immigration?

In this thesis, I argue that the practice of storytelling for localized groups such as 67 Sueños is significant on two levels. It forges individual identities, helping individual undocumented immigrants overcome their personal traumas and emerge as engaged,
powerful voices in the movement. Like the Latin American tradition of testimonio, storytelling can build a collective identity, enabling organizations such as 67 Sueños to claim a powerful political space and push the political debate forward. The narrative frame in which stories are told, however, can be problematic as they bring to light similar challenges that immigrant rights groups on the whole face. For example, the stories of groups such as 67 Sueños, which are framed within the inclusive concepts of universal social, cultural, and human rights, do not necessarily fit well into the more normative narrative of national belonging and incorporation used by the major national organizations who are seeking policy change in a hostile legislative climate.

In this paper, I first outline relevant scholarly research, which includes literature about U.S. immigration, the DREAMers’ role in the immigrant rights movement, storytelling and collective action, and storytelling’s role in the DREAMer movement. I then present a case study of 67 Sueños conducted during the summer of 2014 and discuss the findings, illustrating how storytelling has helped to transform members of 67 Sueños as well as forge a strong collective identity for the group. To conclude the thesis, I explicate how 67 Sueños employs universal human rights discourse in its storytelling, explain how this practice follows the tradition of testimonio, and evaluate the strengths and challenges of this approach.

Theoretical background

Scholars who have provided theoretical underpinnings to this research include those who have investigated the potential impact of the DREAM Act, examined the DREAMers’ contributions to the fight for immigrant rights, and researched storytelling and social action — including those drawing from the Latin American tradition of
Sociologist Walter Nicholls (2013) has provided a wealth of information and context about the DREAMers, the impact of their movement, and how they constructed a public voice in his book about the DREAMer movement. The analysis of storytelling and social action draws from public policy researcher Marshall Ganz (2011) and his explication of what constitutes a “public narrative” — a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now — and political scientist Frederick Mayer (2014) and his theory of how narrative motivates collective action. The explication of testimonio originates primarily from Latin American literature professors John Beverly (1996) and George Yúdice (1991); the analysis of the exclusionary effects of the DREAM Act originates from immigration law scholar Elizabeth Keyes (2013) and family development scholar Duhita Mahatmya and political communications scholar Lisa Gring-Pemble (2014).

**Methodology**

Research was conducted with members of 67 Sueños from June to August 2014 as the group worked on two immigration-themed murals in the Bay Area — one in the Mission District in San Francisco about the journey undertaken by unaccompanied minors to the U.S and one at Allen Temple Baptist Church in east Oakland about black and brown unity. Six semi-structured, individual interviews with members of 67 Sueños who were 18 or older served as the primary research method. The interviews were conducted at the 67 Sueños office in downtown San Francisco, and access to the interviews was restricted. Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Pseudonyms were given to all of the subjects who are undocumented. To supplement the interviews, participant observation of 67 Sueños was conducted, primarily at the unveiling of the murals in San Francisco and Oakland. As part of the partnership with 67 Sueños, the
researcher helped the group with its summer projects as a way to reciprocate for the data the group provided.

**Contributions of research**

The research will contribute to several bodies of academic work. The thesis updates investigations into the U.S. immigration literature, and particularly the most recent campaigns for the DREAM Act. It contributes knowledge to political and social movement studies of the DREAMers and the contemporary strategies that groups such as 67 Sueños are employing as a consequence of the lessons gained in the DREAMers’ campaigns. Finally, the investigation adds perspective to a growing body of literature examining the employment of narrative in collective action in the fields of sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and political science.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Undocumented immigrants and the battle for reform

One of the longstanding quandaries that political actors in the United States have wrangled over is immigration policy and the fate of millions of undocumented immigrants. In 2013, 11.3 million undocumented immigrants, 10.4 million of whom are 18 or older, were living in the United States, according to a report from the Pew Research Center released in September 2014 (Passel, Cohn, Krogstad, and Gonzalez-Barrerra 2014). The population more than tripled from 3.5 million in 1990 to 11.1 million in 2007 and has remained relatively steady since then. Deportations of undocumented immigrants have climbed from 165,000 per year in 2002 to 419,000 in 2012 (Passel, Cohn, Krogstad, and Gonzalez-Barrerra 2014).

Immigration policies have always been central to the economic development and cultural narrative of the U.S. In the last three decades, the United States government has contributed to the influx of migrants across its borders with detrimental economic and border security policies. Flows across the U.S. border with Mexico, including trade, visitors, and temporary and contract workers, dramatically increased with the adoption of neoliberal economic policies, marked by Mexico entering the General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1986 and the creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. These flows have been partly influenced by the economic undermining of agriculture and manufacturing in Central America, creating such desperate conditions that many people have been forced to flee to the U.S.
Despite championing unrestricted economic movement of finance capital and agricultural and manufactured goods, the U.S. government has tried to control the flow of labor across its borders:

Indeed, since 1986 the United States has embarked on a determined effort to restrict Mexican immigration and tighten border enforcement. U.S. policy toward Mexico is inherently self-contradictory, simultaneously promoting integration while insisting on separation. (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002: 83)

Its citizens’ own fears have informed the U.S. government’s border enforcement strategy, which “was related more to the nervousness felt by many Americans at the increasing volume of people, goods, ideas, and products—a direct result of U.S. trade policies” (Masey, Durand, and Malone 2002: 103). In order to placate these fears, the U.S. stepped up its border enforcement starting in the mid-1980s. These policies have prompted migrants to seek more dangerous, desolate routes from Mexico to the U.S.; resulted in money being poured into an ineffective border control regime; and undermined migrants’ working conditions and wages in the U.S. by criminalizing the hiring of undocumented labor. The overall impact of increased enforcement has not resulted in keeping migrants from entering the United States, but ended up prolonging their stay: “A perverse consequence of draconian border enforcement is that it does not deter would-be migrants from trying to enter the country so much as it discourages those who are already here from returning home” (128-129). While the share of undocumented immigrants who lived in the U.S. long-term (10 years or more) and short-term (less than five years) was equal in 2003, now four times as many undocumented immigrants live in the U.S. long-term than short-term (Passel, Cohn, Krogstad, and Gonzalez-Barrerra 2014).
In the late 1980s and early 1990s, parallel to the Republican party dominance in Washington, anti-immigration rhetoric began to be propagated on a much wider, national scale. National organizations such as Numbers USA and Americans for Immigration Control spread negative messages to politicians and the media, while “a new generation of public intellectuals began to articulate a coherent discourse that painted immigrants, particularly Latino immigrants, as a cultural threat, not simply an economic one, to the nation” (Nicholls 2013: 23). Although undocumented immigrants were born in countries all across the globe, including 1.3 million in Asian countries and 300,000 in European countries, the majority are Latinos, and they have continued to be painted as a cultural threat to the U.S. (Baker and Rytina 2013). In his book *The Latino Threat*, anthropologist Leo R. Chavez (2013) identifies the assumptions of what he calls “the Latino Threat narrative that are ingrained in U.S. discourse: they do not speak English or want to assimilate into U.S. society; they are bent on taking over parts of the U.S. that used to belong to Mexico; and their high fertility rates threatening a white majority are driving a demographic shift” (ix). The cumulative effect of this propaganda has reduced undocumented immigrants, especially Latinos who come from many different countries, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds, to a single sinister contagion: “Each immigrant, no matter how innocent or deserving, was conceived as a virus that threatened to spread and eventually drain life from the national host” (Nicholls 2013: 25).

All facets of undocumented immigrants’ lives and rights are at stake in the debate over immigration — not just civil and political rights, but also economic, social, and cultural rights. As linguistics scholar George Lakoff and former Rockridge Institute researcher Sam Ferguson (2006) write, “The ‘immigration issue’ is anything but. It is a
complex mélange of social, economic, cultural and security concerns — with conservatives and progressives split in different ways with different positions” (6).

Lakoff and Ferguson explicate how the political battle over immigration is fought over these issues by identifying a variety of frames anti-immigrant advocates have used to put forth numerous arguments. For instance, “security hounds” argue about the security threat and the need to beef up borders; “bean counters” decry how undocumented immigrants are taxing the government by using public services such as health care and education; “nativists” argue that undocumented immigrants are threatening the sanctity of U.S. culture; “profiteers” underscore how a low-paid workforce is essential to sustaining an affordable lifestyle and profitable economic climate; and “law and order” politicians proclaim that the rule of law will break down if undocumented immigrants are not punished for their crimes for illegally entering the U.S. (6).

In the face of such extensive vitriol directed toward undocumented immigrants in the late 1990s, immigrant rights activists did willingly not push for wholesale changes to the system and instead searched for openings to exploit to win incremental gains for the immigrant community. In 2001, one of the measures promoted by major immigrant rights groups such as the National Immigration Law Center and the Center for Community Change was the DREAM Act, or the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act. The legislation provides a path to citizenship for young undocumented immigrants who fit certain criteria. Despite a handful of attempts, the legislation was never passed. To qualify for the latest iteration of the DREAM Act, which was introduced in 2009 as a stand-alone bill, undocumented immigrants must have:

- Entered the U.S. before age 16;
- Possess good moral character;
- Have obtained a high school diploma or its equivalent (i.e., a General Education Development diploma or GED);
- Are less than 35 years of age (Batalova and McHugh 2010: 2)

Undocumented immigrants fitting that criteria would receive conditional status for six years and then could obtain lawful permanent residence if they had:

Obtained a degree from an institution of higher education, completed at least two years in a program for a bachelor’s degree or higher, or honorably served at least two years in the U.S. military; And b) have maintained good moral character while in conditional resident status. (2)

At first, major national immigrant rights groups led the lobbying effort for passage of the DREAM Act. Undocumented youth took a backseat; they were reliant on rights groups, labor unions, and religious organizations at the movement’s nascence:

The DREAMer as a political group was not necessarily created by undocumented youth themselves. Rather, professional rights associations identified a niche for well-integrated undocumented students in 2001 and launched a campaign to pass the DREAM Act. Investing considerable cultural and symbolic capital, leading immigrant rights associations created the public figure of the “DREAMer.” (Nicholls 2013: 13)

A select few undocumented youth, however, played an important role in initial campaigning for the DREAM Act by telling stories about how the legislation would make an impact in their lives:

Central to this campaign was the recruitment of a handful of exemplary undocumented students with the most compelling stories to give a face to the core message of the campaign: the DREAM Act was designed to allow these good and productive youths a fair chance to achieve the ‘American dream.’ (Nicholls 2013: 32)

The initial bill did not pass, but with staunch support from select members of Congress as well as immigrant rights groups such as the National Immigration Law Center and the Center for Community Change, its passage remained a possibility.

This period marked by immigrant rights groups responding to small openings evolved into a more cohesive, united approach. In 2006 and 2007, a host of national and
local groups joined forces to fight for passage of Comprehensive Immigration Reform in Congress, and the coalition remained relatively centralized from 2008 to 2010. Ruptures began to emerge, however, as factions split away from national organizations. The DREAMers played a pivotal role in this evolution:

[T]he ‘common’ struggle for the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act … resulted in important conflicts between DREAMers and some of the leading forces of the general movement. These conflicts triggered the move toward a more decentralized and pluralistic immigrant rights movement. (Nichols 2013: 185)

The DREAMers were at odds with the decision by prominent national immigrant rights organizations to include the DREAM Act as part of Comprehensive Immigration Reform, not as a stand-alone bill. Major immigration rights groups, including the Center for Community Change and the National Immigration Forum, had formed a coalition called Reform Immigration for America (RIFA) to push for the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act. The DREAM Act was one piece of this legislation, and to push for passage, the major groups that had initially sponsored the DREAM Act in 2001 created “a network of DREAM-friendly associations called the ‘United We Dream Coalition’” (Nicholls 2013: 60). This network included groups at the state and local levels, including the California Dream Network composed of student-led groups at college campuses and the Center for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA).

Young dissident immigrant rights activists, however, broke away from RIFA because they wanted to push for passage of the DREAM Act as a stand-alone bill, not comprehensive legislation. In 2010, these activists were frustrated that Congress had yet to pass any comprehensive immigration legislation, and they believed not only that the DREAM Act had a better chance to pass Congress as a stand-alone bill, but also that their
window of opportunity was closing (Nicholls 2013). Ruptures emerged between national
immigrant rights groups in Washington and the network of smaller, localized activists
across the nation. “[T]he immigrant rights associations, which had long assumed a
dominant role in representing the DREAMers, were now criticized by the dissident
DREAMers for denying them recognition as political equals” (Nicholls 2013: 92).
Unshackling themselves from the top-down structure that had marked the immigrant
righs movement, DREAMers struck out on their own to create a more decentralized
space, feeling “they had achieved the power to speak and express themselves in the
public sphere” (99).

This decentralized approach includes advantages and risks. Since local groups
have more autonomy, more avenues are available for “new recruits to become grassroots
leaders, helping them to become important voices in the movement” (167). In addition,
the base of support for undocumented immigrants is widened, involving a range of
stakeholders in local communities: “Localization transforms all those people who are in
touch with immigrants to take a direct stake in the politics of immigration in their
communities and country” (167). However, this diffusion has drawbacks because of
“greater difficulty in maintaining messaging consistency and discipline”:

Many voices are now emerging: some are designed to cohere with American
values, while others ignore them, and still others consciously reject them. At best,
this can water down the central message of the movement. At worst, timorous
natives may move to reject all immigrant claims as “noise” from a foreign and
threatening mob. (167)

These discordant voices call upon different types of human rights principles in
their messaging. Sociologist Tanya Basok (2009) identifies these opposing norms as
“hegemonic and counter-hegemonic human rights principles” (184). Hegemonic human
rights principles, such as U.S. protections of individual civil rights, are not controversial
or contested because they are “congruent with liberal notions of formal equality between individuals and individual freedom from coercion, as well as principles of national sovereignty” (184). On the other hand, counter-hegemonic human rights principles, such as more expansive protocols of social, cultural, and economic rights:

…are the ones that in one way or another challenge the status quo, either by undermining the political economic foundations of liberal democracies and/or the principles of national sovereignty. As a result, while hegemonic human rights values tend to enjoy wide recognition, counter-hegemonic values may be supported by some and rejected by others. (184)

Like Nichols, Basok identifies similar limitations to norms that flout the conventions of the nation-state:

[I]n the absence of a consensus on the legitimacy of these principles and their rejection by most major migrant receiving states, relying on the moral power of globally circulating counter-hegemonic discourses on migrants’ rights is not sufficient to persuade states to extend rights to migrants and [therefore] it becomes necessary to draw on other human rights principles that do enjoy greater levels of acceptance or on instrumental reasons to pressure nation-states to grant more rights to migrants. (201)

**Storytelling and the DREAM Act**

In their fight to pass the DREAM Act, advocates counted storytelling as an important part of their comprehensive strategy. An organizer for the California Dream Network said, “We tell them that storytelling is the most important way of getting our message across, in organizing, lobbying, in media outreach, in everything” (Nicholls 2013: 63). The strategy had worked for immigration advocates before. They employed a similar game plan in the mid-1990s to win permanent resident status for Salvadorans who had fled their war-torn country in the ‘80s for the U.S. While activists had first characterized this community as refugees by telling stories of how violence had torn apart lives and families, they shifted focus in the ’90s and told stories about Salvadorans’ contributions to American society:
As they rejected the term refugee as disempowering, activists claimed the notion of immigrant that is part of the American immigrant story, according to which self-reliant individuals who are interested in bettering themselves set down permanent roots in the United States. (Coutin 1998: 916)

Immigration advocates initially summoned the American dream in a call for collective action. The authors of the original DREAM Act explicitly chose the title in order to link the movement with fundamental American values (Nicholls 2013: 50).

National immigrant rights organizations and politicians publicized the stories of exceptional DREAMers as part of their strategy to win support for the DREAM Act:

The students were one of the most well-liked and least stigmatized groups within the broader immigrant population and their stories resonated well with the moral and humanitarian sentiments of the media, politicians, and the general public. They were, in this context, held up as the “poster-children” of the general immigrant rights movement and employed as a way to gain broad popular support for Comprehensive Immigration Reform. (32)

The stories of exceptional undocumented immigrants were connected to a broader shared national narrative. Nicholls (2013) writes, “Placing one’s personal life with this general narrative structure enables the DREAMers to convey their message in a morally and emotionally compelling way to the general public” (63). Their stories all shared similar characteristics: how they beat the great odds they faced as children to attain educational achievement and how passage of the DREAM Act is necessary for them to continue their great contributions to the U.S. (Keyes 2013; Nicholls 2013).

**Storytelling and collective action**

Scholars have recently begun to investigate more seriously the role that storytelling and narrative has played in compelling groups to bring about social change. Sociologist Joseph E. Davis (2002) writes about how the study of narrative in social movements is “overdue” (4). Sociologists Francesca Polletta, Pang Ching Bobby Chen, Beth Gharrity Gardner, and Alice Motes (2011) observe that the majority of research
about storytelling has examined meanings within the narrative itself rather than the meaning of its use. They write: “Popular beliefs about storytelling—about how stories work, what they are good for, and whether they should be trusted—should be central to a sociological approach to storytelling. Yet they have received relatively little study” (110). In *Narrative Politics*, political scientist Frederick Mayer (2014) explains that most scholars investigating political behavior have passed over the function of stories and narrative:

Focusing almost to exclusion on interests and institutions—although both clearly matter—and largely ignoring stories, not only loses the color, the passion, and the drama of real politics, it almost misses “the best clues about why people act as they do.” … Stories are not merely the surface of politics; they are at its heart. (Mayer 2014: 3)

Some scholars have attempted to explain political behavior through the concept of framing. Social movement scholars such as Robert Benford and David Snow (2000) and Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998) have investigated the concept as part of the explanation for what compels people to act, and the assessment of their effectiveness in changing public discourse and policy. In *Activists Beyond Borders*, Keck and Sikkink utilize the term framing to mean the “conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action” (3). Groups fashion this understanding by constructing collective action frames, which Benford and Snow (2000) define as “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization” (614). One way that collective frames differ is in their “degree of resonance” (618). One factor that influences a frame’s resonance is its “cultural resonance” (622). Cultural factors play a key role in the process of framing:
The cultural material most relevant to movement framing processes include the extant stock of meanings, beliefs, ideologies, practice, values, myths, narratives, and the like, all of which ... constitute the cultural resource base from which new cultural elements are fashioned, such as innovative collective action frames, as well as the lens through which framings are interpreted and evaluated. (629)

While Mayer (2014) acknowledges the presence and importance of frames in collective action, he argues that they are insufficient in fully explaining their construction and adoption and how they motivate collective action. He writes that scholars have not spelled out the forces behind their obvious influence or how frames connect individuals to groups: “[M]issing is a theory that can more fully explain how frames are constructed, how they are transmitted and shared, and, most importantly, how they stir our passions, engage our identity, and move us towards collective action” (47). Benford and Snow (2000) are aware that frames on their own may not be sufficient in explaining the linkage between individual and collective identities: “In fact, the question of how participation precipitates the enlargement of personal identity, or the correspondence between individual and collective identities, has not been satisfactorily answered by scholars investigating this linkage” (631).

Public policy researcher Marshall Ganz, a former activist and organizer who now teaches public policy at Harvard University, has constructed a theory based on storytelling and public narrative that helps to answer some of the important questions that Mayer asks. Developing a theoretical framework for public narrative, Ganz (2011) defines narrative as the “discursive means we use to access values that equip us to make choices under conditions of uncertainty” (274). Strategic analytical thinking is a necessary element of social action, but what emanates from the head must merge with something that comes from the heart: “But to answer the why question—why does it matter, why do we care, why must we risk action—we turn to narrative. The why
question is not simply why we think we ought to act, but rather why we must act, what moves us, our motivation, our values” (275). Narrative — the “why” that strikes at the heart — combined with strategy — the “how” which emanates from the head — results in shared understanding that leads to action. Narrative helps answer why social action is necessary and turns inhibiting emotions such as isolation into motivating ones such as solidarity. The appeal of narrative not only motivates those who tell stories, but also those who listen. By using the key elements of plot, character, and moral, what Ganz calls a public narrative incorporates a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now, to create a purposeful community calling for urgent action: “Through public narrative, leaders—and participants—can move to action by mobilizing sources of motivation, constructing new shared individual and collective identities, and finding the courage to act” (288).

What constitutes the key elements of plot, character, and moral helps to determine the narrative’s influence to mobilize social actors, construct lasting new identities, and compel people to act. Personal stories are only part of this equation; speakers must link their own experiences to those of the larger community. Ganz (2011) writes, “Points of intersection become the focus of a shared story—the way we link individual threads into a common weave. A Story of Us brings forward the values that move us as a community” (285).

**Politics of storytelling**

While Ganz limits his analysis to the use of public narrative for progressive social change, the political deployment of storytelling is not only used for benevolent purposes. Comparing the virtues of Martin Luther King Jr. to the evils of Adolf Hitler, Mayer (2014) writes, “The great gift of narrative is not always benign” (10). In *The Politics of*
Storytelling, anthropologist Michael Jackson (2002) writes about the divergent paths on which stories can take listeners:

Stories have the potential to take us in two very different directions. On the one hand, they may confirm our belief that otherness is just as we had imagined it to be — best kept at a distance, best denied — in which case the story will screen out everything that threatens the status quo, validating the illusions and prejudices it customarily deploys in maintaining its hold on truth. (25)

Stories, however, can highlight, rather than suppress, difference. Jackson writes:

And while some stories create and sustain dehumanizing divisions between the powerful and the powerless — as in nationalist myths and fascist propaganda — others work to deconstruct such imbalances, enabling the powerless to recover a sense of their own will, their own agency, their own consciousness, and their own being. (28)

Culture can influence the stories people construct of themselves. Psychologist Jerome Bruner (2002) explicates how the creation of the self through narrative comes in part from “the outside in—based on the apparent esteem of others and on myriad expectations that we early, even mindlessly, pick up from the culture in which we are immersed” (65). The empowerment of self through storytelling, however, is a powerful example of political agency. In one of her most renowned works The Human Condition, Hannah Arendt (1958) describes how storytelling plays a central role in turning something private and hidden into something public and visible:

Even the greatest forces of intimate life … lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling and generally in artistic transposition of individual experiences. (50)

In other words, the public action receives its meaning from the act of telling a story. The only way that we learn about “who somebody is” is through the telling of his or her biography, and the courage involved in telling that story is not associated with whatever costs arise from publicizing it, but with the act of telling itself, “in leaving one’s own
private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one’s self” (186). Once individuals themselves attain cultural significance and political traction through telling their stories, they join forces with like-minded storytellers to create a new group of collective actors. Francesca Polletta (2006) pinpoints this feature of storytelling in her analysis of the sit-in narratives during the civil rights movement in the 1960s:

Rather than simply being persuasive devices used by strategic collective actors, narratives helped to constitute new collective actors and stakes in action. Multiauthored and told in formal and informal settings, stories made participation normative. (52)

The American dream as “folk history”

External forces influence how narratives are crafted and received. A public narrative may resonate more with a community when it is more familiar with a popular character, plot, and moral, as Mayer (2014) argues, “particularly with the public narratives—religious, historical, ideological and popular—that are at the core of a community’s culture” (102). Mayer calls these types of narratives “folk histories,” and they not only define the community themselves, but also define the collective identity of the community itself (104).

The power of these archetypal narratives is considerable. Their framework constructs a veritable patriotic paint-by-number of the status quo. Stories that rely on overarching dominant cultural narratives, Mayer (2014) writes, “ring true because they follow expected plot patterns, feature conventional characters, and repeat familiar meanings. The predilection for stories that fit existing cultural narratives can be so powerful that they all but construct themselves” (115). Their political power is as dominant as their popular appeal. Certain narratives can have considerable influence over political discourse and shape the course of policy despite representing a “narrow
representation of reality”; it is difficult to challenge this dominant narrative because it “meshes with deeply held ideological values” (Polletta, Chen, Gardner, and Motes, 2011: 119).

Invoked in countless political speeches and advertisements, the folk history of the U.S. has been ingrained in the American psyche. Mayer (2014) writes:

From John Winthrop’s description of America as a ‘City on a Hill,’ America has seen itself as exceptional, a beacon of hope to the world, the champion of liberty, the land of opportunity, in which those who work hard and live virtuously can share in the ‘American Dream.’ (107)

This term itself is attributed to James Truslow Adams (1933), who writes in the *Epic of America* about:

[T]hat dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement, … It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (374)

The theme was prevalent in literature before then, however. J.A. Leo Lemay (2009) argues that Benjamin Franklin “gave us the definitive formulation of the American Dream” in his autobiography (23). The autobiography espouses ideals synonymous with the archetypal American dream — individualism, free will, and optimism. Lemay writes:

The American Dream is a philosophy of individualism: it holds that the world can be affected and changed by individuals. The American Dream is a dream of possibility—not just of wealth or of prestige or of power but of the manifold possibilities that human existence can hold for the incredible variety of people of the most assorted talents and drives. (25)

These dominant cultural forces can dilute the potency of political actors’ stories and negatively influence their aims in telling them. Taking stock of various cultural constraints of the use of narrative, Polletta, Chen, Gardner, and Motes (2011) explain how people’s stories must contend with greater narratives of collective memory:
“Accounts of the nation’s past may figure as one kind of background story against which political actors’ stories, but also their arguments, explanations, and evidence, are heard” (119).

**DREAMers and the American dream**

The power of the American dream as an archetype was apparent when DREAMers first argued for passage of the DREAM Act in the mid-2000s. As activists lobbied for passage of the law, especially in more conservative areas of the country, undocumented immigrants made sure to trumpet their American values, display American symbols, emphasize their exceptional qualities, and underscore their innocence in how they arrived in the U.S. As one organizer says, “If you want to reach these people, you have to stick close to these talking points because they work really well with people in these places” (Nicholls 2013: 54). William Perez (2009) wrote a book featuring young undocumented immigrants’ personal narratives whose overarching theme is explicitly stated in the title — *We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream.*

While the DREAMers’ prevailing narrative has positively influenced the fight for immigration reform, it also has drawbacks. Elizabeth Keyes (2013) argues that while the DREAMers’ narrative, which harnesses the American dream, illustrates the group as worthy of citizenship and blameless for its arrival in the U.S., it opens the door for a discourse focused on unworthiness and undesirability toward other undocumented immigrants:

While [DREAMers] have also done something radical and laudable by expanding the idea of citizenship itself, an over-emphasis on worthiness has the danger of using the inspiring efforts of this exceptional movement to justify exclusion, and even vilification, of those who fall short of the ideal. (155)
Those who fall short of the ideal include DREAMers’ families. Using the principles of Family Impact Analysis, Duhita Mahatmya and Lisa M. Gring-Pemble (2014) examine how Congressional debate about the DREAM Act and related legislative documents has served to undermine immigrants’ families. With arguments mirroring those of Keyes (2013), the authors illustrate how the stories have in fact endangered other undocumented immigrants. For instance, the stories that DREAMers tell perpetuate the Latino Threat narratives, as DREAMers’ parents are described as “uneducated and unskilled, unable to support themselves, and people who cause a myriad of problems in our country” (83). Overall, the discourse surrounding the DREAM Act treats the family as a legal, structural unit rather than as a functional body (84).

By telling stories that underscore how undocumented youth consider themselves Americans, a portrait is painted that is devoid of the nuances and differences present in this diverse community. This reliance on stories highlighting DREAMers’ affinity for America, as Mahatmya and Gring-Pemble (2014) write:

…crafts a homogeneous narrative around who undocumented children are or should be. The language that commends immigrant children’s American values ignores the heterogeneity that exists in immigration communities in the U.S. and creates a hierarchy among those deemed to have good moral character and those who have the power to judge what constitutes good moral character. (84)

In their DREAM Act analysis, Mahatmya and Gring-Pemble (2014) also identify deep-seated influences that shape perception of the legislation. The authors analyze the origin of the contemporary juxtaposition of “legal” and “illegal” immigrants:

Briefly, the ‘legal’ immigration that policymakers reference in the hearings and debates over the DREAM Act is typically White European immigration (e.g., Italian, Russian, and Polish immigrants). The very polarizing of immigrants between Dreamers and their parents then opens up opportunities to create division between ‘legal’ white American citizens and ‘illegal’ non-white minorities who are defined outside of America and citizenship. (85)
The authors also underscore “Western, individualistic notions of resource inequity rather than more collectivistic ideas of resource-sharing” they found in their analysis of the DREAM Act (85).

Valuing characteristics such as individualism over collectivism has historical precedent. In what she terms “the White ethnic immigrant narrative,” Sylvia R. Lazos Vargas (1998) argues that four major elements of this cultural ideology — individualism, merit, fairness, and exceptionality — “form a myth about Americans, a common narrative that explains who we are and why we are here, and construct a basis for understanding who belongs and who does not in the cultural community” (1,522). This hegemonic narrative claims that:

1) the immigrants’ success “proves” that race and racism can be overcome—therefore, race and racism exist in the past;

2) to be part of America requires that distinct groups accept and follow the mandate to assimilate;

3) immigrants’ partial or complete attainment of the American Dream demonstrates that failure to advance is due to lack of willingness to work hard and therefore lack of virtue. (1,523)

This well-established political discourse influences how undocumented immigrants are depicted in popular culture. Stacey K. Sowards and Richard D. Pineda (2013) analyze the effects of the portrayal of undocumented immigrants in the television show Ugly Betty, the album The Town and the City by Chicano band Los Lobos, and the CNN documentary Immigrant Nation. The authors conclude that these narratives depict individual undocumented immigrants as pursuers of the American dream, and these portrayals “have the effect of absolving collective responsibility, minimizing problems, and erasing the need for more in-depth discussion” about immigration issues (86).

Adapting the DREAMer narrative
Mindful of the limitations of their initial narratives, DREAMers have adjusted and taken on a more active role in the construction of their stories. Many came to resent the way politicians and well-funded national immigrant rights organizations used them as “puppets” in the early stages of the fight for passage of the DREAM Act (Nicholls 2013: 94). In a blog entry, a prominent DREAMer:

… stresses the role of these associations in producing discourses that restrict the ways in which undocumented youth present themselves and their cause in the public sphere. She argues that the mainstream rights associations produce ‘neat’ discursive boxes that contain ‘migrant bodies’ with ‘pretty labels.’ (96)

This description matches the DREAMers’ initial dominant narrative that omitted threatening details such as “their complicated national loyalties, sexualities, conduct, and so on” (Nicholls 2013: 54). Advocates believed such details would muddy their message and possibly raise red flags with an otherwise sympathetic audience, jeopardizing their battle for passage of the DREAM Act. DREAMers argued that these organizations kept them from developing “their own ‘authentic’ voices in the public sphere” (98). In their fight for greater autonomy through organizing themselves and crafting their own narratives, DREAMers “expanded the scope of the struggle from one focused narrowly on gaining legal rights to one that sought recognition for the DREAMers as a legitimate and equal political subject” (98).

Several scholars have categorized recent DREAMers’ efforts into storytelling as testimonios. The term’s origin is relatively recent, dating back to Latin America in the 1970s (Reyes and Curry Rodriguez 2012). George Yúdice (1991) defines testimonio:

…as an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.). Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history. (17)
Yúdice writes about how testimonio “is first and foremost an act, a tactic by means of which people engage in the process of self-constitution and survival” (19). The use of testimonio can empower those who are waging “their struggle for hegemony in the public sphere from which they are hitherto excluded or forced to represent stereotypes by the reigning elites” (25).

The body of testimonios is rich and varied. Although it has its roots in Latin America with such works as I, Rigoberta Menchú: A Woman in Guatemala, oral histories of the white American poor, slave narratives, and accounts of Japanese Americans interred in camps during World War II can all qualify as testimonios because they are all “informed by economic and political inequality” (Reyes and Curry Rodriguez 2012: 531). Testimonio parallels the 1970s development of oral history that emanated from the new social movements of women, people of color, and LGBTQ groups. All these different accounts also share structural similarities — an individual voice reflecting on his or own life and connecting it to a collective experience of oppression (Reyes and Curry Rodriguez 2012).

Young undocumented immigrants have added to this vast collection of testimonios. Reyes and Curry Rodriguez (2012) highlight publications from undocumented college students in Southern California as examples — Underground Undergrads and The College & Financial Aid Guide for AB540 Undocumented Students. René Galindo (2012) explains how five prominent young undocumented immigration activists used testimonio. Known as the DREAM Act 5, this group publicly declared their immigration status and participated in a sit-in in Arizona Senator John McCain’s office in Tucson in May 2010. The sit-in is considered one of the seminal acts of civil
disobedience in the DREAMer movement. In letters they wrote several months later to President Barack Obama, they shared their personal stories of immigrating to the U.S. and coming out as undocumented in what Galindo identified as *testimonios*. Mirroring Menchú’s work, the five activists started their letters by stating their name and revealing they are undocumented immigrants (600). Their aim fit the definition of *testimonio*: “As a collective, the DREAM Act 5 and their supporters formed a counter-public whose aim was to make undocumented immigrant students visible and bring national attention to their plight” (607).

**Developing a more nuanced DREAMer narrative**

Although DREAMers have developed more nuanced stories since gaining more autonomy from national immigrant rights organizations, ideological remnants remain from the initial stories they told at the outset of their movement. They do not censor themselves as much as they did, but they still understand their stories must include certain themes to connect with certain audiences: “The DREAMers needed to be more open about their multiple selves and radical about their claims, but they also needed to make sure their message would resonate with their targeted publics” (Nicholls 2013: 118-119). The DREAMers have embraced new messages, coining the slogan “undocumented and unafraid” and illustrating how their status was part of their U.S. identity. They have stressed other parts of their identity as well, including gender and sexual orientation, and discussed the structural “pull” factors that compelled their parents to migrate, rather than painting it as a choice: “Now, dissident DREAMers maintain certain themes from the past (American values, talented students, and so on), but they have also crafted more complex, nuanced, and forceful representations of DREAMers” (130). Despite making
some changes to the stories themselves, DREAMers remain committed to storytelling as the primary means to disseminate their message.

Despite embracing a bottom-up approach to their activism, DREAMers still manage their public image and narrative as closely as when large immigrant rights organizations were directing the discourse and strategy. The pressures of conforming to the narrative of the “good immigrant” remain strong:

This new generation of DREAMers has therefore celebrated the new discourses and messages within the movement, but they have continued to exert control over how they craft representations of themselves in the public sphere, carefully choosing to highlight certain attributes of this complex group while actively silencing others. (Nicholls 2013: 138)

For instance, two DREAMers had their arrest by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement filmed and posted online. Some fellow activists criticized one of the DREAMers’ behavior and language as being “too working class, too inner city, too foreign, too unschooled, too criminal, and so on” (139). This exchange exemplifies how “[m]any DREAMers had internalized the rationale of presenting a good public image” (140). While attending college, some DREAMers themselves learned how to censor these attributes of their upbringing while fighting for reform:

Many learned middle-class codes of language, dress, and taste through their university experiences, which allowed them to cleanse themselves of the stigma associated with the immigrant and inner-city working-class worlds. They could draw upon this culture to present themselves not just as any Americans but as “nice, middle-class” Americans. (102-103)

Some DREAMers have fought back against this silencing of certain aspects of their identity. This critique taps into more radical views about how DREAMers should frame their arguments for attaining rights. Dissenters reject the notion that they must fight for rights within a national context: “They argue that equality should not be granted because of conformity to dominant national norms. Equal rights should be granted only
on the basis that immigrants are human beings with inalienable rights” (Nicholls 2013: 141).

This conflict reflects the dilemma facing not just DREAMers and everyone else fighting for immigration reform. While the argument that undocumented immigrants deserve universal human rights may not resonate beyond activist circles, countering claims made within a framework of national citizenship may do next to nothing in humanizing the population:

Advocates employing a global frame may find themselves talking past the mass publics they want to influence and unable to counter their opponents effectively. Yet the advocates’ dilemma is that those who tackle these arguments head on may find themselves trapped within a national paradigm and unable to lay the discursive groundwork for a significant shift in the way the public view unauthorized migrants. (Cook 2010: 160)

Despite a current climate unreceptive to such arguments, Basok (2009) sounds a hopeful note for the future for those groups using what she calls “counter-hegemonic human rights principles”: “While the position taken by these activists may appear utopian at the present time, it is possible that, give the increasing mobility of labor around the globe, in the not-so-distant future, some of the demands for greater rights for migrants will be met” (201). Groups such as Bay Area-based 67 Sueños are the ones who are laying the groundwork for change in the future.
Chapter 3: “That’s the Thing About Storytelling; It Changes Everything”

On August 10, 2014, hundreds packed into the gymnasium and auditorium at Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland to celebrate the unveiling of a large mural depicting black and brown unity. The project was a collaboration involving the black youth of Allen Temple Baptist Church in east Oakland and the Latino youth of 67 Sueños (“67 Dreams”), an organization formed in 2010 to lift the voices of undocumented youth who would not benefit from the DREAM Act.

Before attendees went outside for the mural’s unveiling, they gathered for a collection of speeches and performances. Aztec dancers gyrated to pounding drumbeats. Pastors from the church blessed the mural project with prayer. Oakland Mayor Jean Quan, who was one of the local politicians in attendance, gave a speech. The crowd’s energy waned as the program dragged on for more than an hour.

The energy picked up again, however, when Pablo Paredes, who helped found 67 Sueños in 2010, and 17-year-old Julian*, one of the youth in the group who had worked on the mural, took the stage. They had stayed up late the night before to write a spoken-word piece they were about to present.

“I don’t like to do anything without one of my young folks up here with me,” said Paredes, a Berkeley resident and activist who grew up in the Bronx. He introduced Julian and praised his dedication to 67 Sueños.

Pablo and Julian then launched into their untitled piece. “I’m thinking of how we all know the name of that great big ship” began Paredes, referencing the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 that killed approximately 1,500 passengers. He then juxtaposed the untold

* Pseudonyms are used for each undocumented immigrant in this thesis in order to protect the subject’s identity.
number of slaves who died on their way to the U.S. with the well-known maritime
disaster and the worldwide hit movie it spawned starring fictional lovers Jack (Leonardo
DiCaprio) and Rose (Kate Winslet): “And 150 years since/Who among us knows the
name of a single slave ship/But we all got emotional when Rose let Jack’s fingertips
slip.” Julian then lamented the portrayal of Latinos in the media and U.S. popular culture:
“I’m tired of gangbangers being the only representation of me on TV/I’m wondering why
there had to be a Beverly Hills Chihuahua 2 and 3.” Julian paused as the crowd laughed
at the line.

As their voices intensified, Pablo and Julian linked the injustices suffered by
blacks and Latinos. They lamented, “The struggle is real, and what we feel/Has gone on
for centuries/From the plantation to the penitentiaries.” They juxtaposed Bull Connor, the
public safety commissioner in Birmingham, Alabama, who ordered officers to confront
nonviolent protestors with attack dogs and water hoses during the Civil Rights
Movement, with Joe Arpaio, the current sheriff of Maricopa County in Arizona whom the
U.S. Department of Justice claims has overseen a “pattern of unlawful discrimination”
targeted at Latinos in a lawsuit filed in 2012 (Santos and Savage 2012). They mourned
the losses of Jose Elena Rodriguez, an unarmed Mexico teenager who was fatally shot by
the U.S. Border patrol in 2012, and Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager fatally
shot by George Zimmerman. They then marked the cultural bonds that African
Americans and Latinos shared, including the humanistic spirit represented by the Mayan
concept of In Lak’ech and the Southern African philosophy of Ubuntu. As they closed
with a chant of “Black brown community/Let’s build unity,” the crowd cheered. Some
impassioned spectators even rose to their feet.
The origins of 67 Sueños

Part of the American Friends Service Committee’s official programming in the Bay Area, 67 Sueños is based at the Quaker organization’s office in downtown San Francisco. Founded in 2010, the group was initially made up of youth from Oakland, but opened a San Francisco chapter this year. The name of the organization refers to the roughly 67 percent of undocumented immigrants who could benefit from the DREAM Act, but would not receive permanent resident status because of a range of factors.

Paredes drew inspiration from James Lawson’s work with black youth in Nashville, part of the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement. “I saw conditions that were much like what young black people were facing in the South right now,” Paredes said in an interview conducted August 22, 2014. “It’s mostly around migrant justice issues — same kind of racism, same kind of criminalization, same kind of hate, life being about fear.” He said that the major national organizations leading the migrant justice movement were discounting the contributions that young people could make:

These young people are the most capable at leading this work. Their voices are the most powerful when they feel the strength and the safety to use them. They know the story better than anyone because they lived it and they’ve watched their parents live it. They’re in this powerful place, just like black youth in the South during the civil rights movement.

Paredes summed up the objectives of 67 Sueños as getting “the migrant justice movement to hear these youth” and “transforming pain to power and creating a deep sense of community and commitment to community.” Born and raised in the Bronx by immigrant parents from Ecuador and Puerto Rico, his political consciousness was awakened when he enlisted in the Navy and refused to board the USS Bonhomme Richard in December 2004. In a prepared statement, he told a judge before his sentencing, “In all I read, I came to an overwhelming conclusion supported by countless examples that any soldier who
knowingly participates in an illegal war can find no haven in the fact that they were following orders, in the eyes of international law” (Cohn and Gilberd 2009: 15).

One of the central strategies that 67 Sueños employs is storytelling. Soon after the group was created, members printed out copies of an online article published in *The American Prospect* with the headline “Culture Before Politics” and passed it out to anyone who was interested. In the online piece, Jeff Chang and Brian Komar (2010) discuss how changing the culture around a political issue is the first step toward enacting lasting legislative change: “Cultural change is often the dress rehearsal for political change.” It is evident that Paredes has taken this article to heart when he explained its thesis almost word for word: “There’s this cultural shift that happens. Once that happens, it’s like the dress rehearsal for political shift.” Paredes went on to say:

> But a lot of times when we conceive of organizing, we don’t have a cultural game at all. It becomes this very abstract idea about how change is made — here’s the bill, and here’s how you get mobilization for the bill, and here’s how you do an educational campaign, and artists are kind of invited in like, “Can you make our flyer for us?” — so it’s not at the heart and the root of it. And we really disagree with that and really fell in love with this idea that we need a language that starts to become household. Things like “No Human Being is Illegal,” making that just a kind of statement that people are bombarded by and have to wrestle with to me is so much more effective in the fight toward legalization than any particular stand-alone bill that people start lobbying for without that cultural gain.

**Giving voice to the 67 percent**

When 67 Sueños was formed in 2010, immigration advocates were fighting for passage of the DREAM Act. First introduced in 2001, the federal legislation would provide a path to citizenship to one class of undocumented youth who qualified based on their age when they arrived in the U.S., their current age, their educational credentials, and their legal record. In 2009, Sen. Richard Durbin and Rep. Howard Berman proposed the latest iteration of the bill (Batalova and McHugh 2010).
Storytelling also served as a key part of the strategy for the DREAMers attempting to mobilize Congressional support for the bill. Countering the negative stereotype of the criminalized immigrant, high-achieving undocumented immigrants recounted how they had already overcome enormous odds to stand out in the classroom; restrictive immigration laws, however, were hindering them from achieving the American dream. While lobbying for the DREAM Act was taking place in Washington, Paredes met with seven youth from Oakland’s MetWest High School. Without a name yet, the group discussed the details of the DREAM Act and were surprised to learn from a Migration Policy Institute report that nearly 67 percent of undocumented youth would not be eligible for the path to citizenship that the DREAM Act offered (Batalova and McHugh 2010). The fact that this majority’s voice was not represented in the debate inspired the youth to organize. “Our work just came together with that, so we decided to talk about that 67 percent that was being left out and use that as a way to bring [them] out of the shadows,” says Jackie Garcia, one of the few youth who helped found the group who is an American citizen.

Joining 67 Sueños has transformed individual members. In 2010, Gabriela was a junior at MetWest High School in Oakland when one of her teachers suggested she attend a meeting led by Paredes. She was not initially interested, but a friend persuaded her to go. Paredes’s passion and knowledge about migrant justice issues inspired Gabriela. Not well informed about immigration issues, she was surprised to learn about the DREAM Act and shocked to hear that it would not help some of her peers. She knew enough to know that she would not likely qualify even if the legislation passed. “Knowing myself at the time, I wasn’t good at school,” she said. “I wasn’t an A- or B-, I was a C-student.
That was the best that I could do.” The revelation spurred Gabriela and the other youth to action. “Being undocumented, I wanted to know about these things. It shocked me. It got me mad. I wanted to do something bad,” she said.

The group was eager to give voice to undocumented youth not represented by the DREAM Act. They noticed a polarized discourse focused on overachievers on one end of the spectrum and criminals on the other. Gabriela said:

Sixty-seven percent also have dreams. Maybe they’re not being supported, they’re not being [put] out there, they’ve been kind of forgotten because you always talk about the ones that go to college, the ones that get good grades, and then you talk about the ones that are doing really bad in school, who are criminals, right? They’re either this or that.

Paredes listened critically to immigration advocates’ reasoning behind the strategy of telling exceptional stories. He said, “The rationale that the big non-profits, the Democratic Party would give is that we need to put our best foot forward, quote-on-quote, or this is a more sympathetic story, quote-on-quote.” He was critical of the movement’s inability to look past the potential short-term gains to comprehend the long-term consequences. He considered the hypothetical situation of the DREAM Act passing:

Now how do you turn your attention to 90 percent of the community that you just defined them against? Now how do you turn around and say, “Oh, but let’s legalize the folks that are not in college. They don’t have these amazing job skills in a high-tech area that the US needs right now”? Because it wasn’t based on the humanity of the DREAMers, it wasn’t based on the human rights of the DREAMers, it wasn’t based on “No Human is Illegal” and all of these things that are bedrocks, it was based on what can the U.S. get out of you. So long term it was a really dangerous strategy. Even in the short term a lot of the language that came out of it was already making it more difficult to do the work of humanizing the rest of the community and fighting for the basic rights of the rest of the community.

Paredes understood the underlying narrative driving the DREAMers’ argument — the summoning of the American dream:
This Protestant work ethic that has been sort of underneath all of this narrative of explaining the United States and the growth of this country and its quote-on-quote greatness, it’s always been a myth, and here we are wielding the same myth on a new stage.

Believing in this myth makes it easier to ignore “what was a lot uglier to accept” about U.S. history, Paredes said, such as how slavery and the genocide of American Indians contributed to the country’s development.

Healing trauma through storytelling

Before they could summon the power to tell the stories of overlooked undocumented youth, the members of 67 Sueños first had to address the trauma they themselves had experienced. Jackie said, “We didn’t start out by going to marches and doing all of this stuff. We had to heal ourselves first and the only way to heal ourselves was to trust each other and to be able to share our stories.”

It was not only a matter of sharing stories about the personal traumas they themselves had witnessed in their families and communities, but also overcoming the idea that these traumas were their collective fault as immigrants. The same myth that immigration activists have summoned in order to fight for passage of the DREAM Act has affected the psyche of millions of undocumented immigrants, Paredes said. Learning that success is defined in terms of the American dream has consequences for immigrant Latino youth, he says, as they grapple with navigating the social construct of race and the notion of “white” as the ideal:

Assimilation is happening. It’s happening so profusely that you don’t need to name it. It’s doesn’t need a language because it’s the default. You go to school and you’re expected to learn a decidedly white way of how to operate and what is valuable and what is not. And it doesn’t even have to be called that because that’s just the norm. It’s the backdrop, and if you’re not white, then what it does as almost a [byproduct] is it tells you everything that you have is worthless, everything that you bring into the classroom and is your history is savage, old, and you need to drop it, cut yourself off from your thousand-year-old legacy, start
over and try to become this better thing. So that’s deeply traumatic and it’s not even noticed or talked about.

As a counterbalance to the individualism celebrated in the American dream, Paredes and youth in 67 Sueños have embraced the cultural traditions of groups from Mesoamerica civilizations such as the Mayans and Aztecs by incorporating healing circles and the use of sage and copal (traditional incense) as part of their practice. Paredes says:

Internally, we are very cultural all the way around. This becomes a space where a very proud cultural identity can be built. And that is going to last way beyond one campaign. So in terms of youth leadership development, it’s very important to me that young people develop this consciousness of being a brilliant culture, a brilliant people who have been around for a thousand years, who have been through a lot of things and survived and have come out on the other side with a lot to show for it. And if we can shift that idea, then it becomes a lot easier to talk about staying in the struggle long term.

Employing these indigenous traditions also enriches the healing process, which is facilitated through storytelling. Jackie said:

It gets us more connected to our indigenous roots and to a way that we can find ourselves that we can heal. It creates that circle, that space. It’s one thing to just be able to be like, ‘Ok, I’m not scared, I’m going to tell you my story,’ but it’s another thing when you have this connection to the land, to the medicina that we bring.

Through sharing their traumas, the members of 67 Sueños aim to shed their individualism and forge a collective identity through the discovery that the traumas they had blamed on themselves were in fact the result of an oppressive system. Paredes said, “At the heart of some of our philosophy is this valuing of collective identity and collective action and collective power versus individualism.” Jackie laughed when asked to think back to how her thinking had changed since joining 67 Sueños. “I’ve been trying to uncolonize my head [so] that I don’t have to actually think of those negative thoughts,” she said. After pausing to think for a second, she continued:
I think one of the things that I used to believe was that if you fuck up, that’s your fault. It’s your fault that you are where you are, you put yourself in that position. And I used to be really harsh like that.

Fabiana went through the same transformation when she first joined 67 Sueños as an intern in the summer of 2012. She especially bonded with Gabriela because they are from the same city in Mexico. Her peers’ knowledge impressed her. “They were so smart. I admire them,” Fabiana said. “They blew me away with all of the information they had. I never had that before.” In addition to understanding how the trauma undocumented youth experienced was not their fault, she learned how certain DREAMers glossed over how relatives and mentors had helped them succeed. Fabiana said:

> It gives that person way more credit than they actually deserve. Working hard does contribute to your success, but all of these other things that you got from other people are left out, all of those opportunities that he got that other people don’t get. The news makes it seem like it’s your fault you didn’t make it.

Gabriela herself broke through her isolation by sharing her traumas with members of 67 Sueños. She talked about growing up in an abusive family with an alcoholic father, getting in fights with her father and others, becoming addicted to drugs and alcohol, losing a lot of friends, witnessing her brother get deported, and having her father get deported twice. Some of the trauma occurred after she joined 67 Sueños, but telling her story to the group saved her:

> Slowly, slowly, slowly, I came out of my shell, and started talking about it, and it was really hard. Even though I’m telling you this really easily I wouldn’t have said this two years ago. I would not say anything. And I feel like, that in the group, that’s one of the things — to not be ashamed of your story, to tell your story, because you’re the one that went through it, nobody else can tell your story for you.

The process transformed her:

> It was really empowering to me, and I was really excited. I think I was blessed to have been in something connected to this because it changed my life. It changed
my perspective — what it is to be a student, to be undocumented, to have pride in that, to not be hiding, to not to have say that you’re different, because you’re not.

The members of 67 Sueños go from internalizing shame about their status as undocumented immigrants to feeling proud about their individual identities and about creating a new collective identity as a group. Paredes compares the isolating stigma attached to the identity of being undocumented to other people wearing “oppression badges” such as addiction and PTSD in the military. “Because the thing is you’re supposed to be in the shadows, you’re supposed to operate from shame, you’re not supposed to let anyone know,” he said. A badge of oppression turns into a badge of courage as youth proudly come out as “undocumented and unafraid.” Paredes said:

It’s cool to say that now. It’s a transformation. And that’s the thing about storytelling. It changes everything. It gets rid of the silence, and once it’s all out in the air, “Wow.” There’s no isolation, there’s no intimidation. Now there’s power.

A family’s struggles

Along with the stories they share in private to heal and use to create a collective identity as a group, 67 Sueños utilizes a variety of public platforms to tell stories about undocumented immigrants, including videos, murals, and spoken-word pieces. Soon after the group was founded, the group recorded a wide range of stories of undocumented youth, some of which are included on the organization’s website. The video with the most prominent placement on the website is titled “The Children Left Behind: Living in the Wake of Deportation.” It is Gabriela telling her story when she was 17.

With music from Explosions in the Sky playing in the background, the seven-minute video opens with title graphics revealing that Gabriela’s brother and father were deported in the previous two years, leaving her mother as the sole income provider. With only the lower half of her face visible in order to protect her identity, Gabriela describes
her brother’s deportation. While her brother, some friends, and she were driving to buy flowers for her mother’s birthday, a police officer pulled the car over because a passenger wasn’t wearing a seat belt in the back. Although the officer assured the group that Gabriela’s brother, who came to the U.S. when he was 9, would only be in custody for a couple of hours, he was eventually deported to Mexico. Gabriela’s mother, who worked in a fast food restaurant, grew increasingly despondent. “She wouldn’t know what to do,” Gabriela says in the video. “What’s next? How are we going to pay rent?” Eager to provide for her family back in Mexico, Gabriela’s mother was limited by the amount in remittances she could send to relatives. Gabriela closes the first segment of the video by saying:

You never really think it’s going to happen to you because you always say I’m not doing anything wrong. You always think that your family’s doing something good. You see them struggle so much, and you’re just like, “How can they think we’re doing something wrong when we’re the ones suffering?”

The video closes with a two-minute postscript titled “A Creative Response,” chronicling 67 Sueños’ first major mural project, which was painted three blocks from City Hall in downtown San Francisco. The phrase “No Human Being is Illegal Y Cada Uno Tiene Un Sueño (And Everyone has a Dream)” is painted at the top of the large mural. After describing the general theme of the mural in the video, Gabriela explains how one character was modeled after her. The teenager is holding a megaphone from which indigenous script is written. “It’s connecting me to my roots,” she says as footage about the mural aired on an Univision newscast is shown in the video. “I love my culture, just learning the history about it. It’s something very powerful.” Working on the mural and unveiling it empowered her. “It puts out a statement that we’re here too, and we’re not going to stay quiet anymore,” she says.
The journey of unaccompanied minors

As part of their cultural projects, 67 Sueños has continued to produce murals, including two in the summer of 2013. For the first mural, youth from San Francisco International High School worked on a mural on a wall on Van Ness Avenue between 23rd and 24th streets in the Mission district in San Francisco. The artwork depicted the journey that unaccompanied migrants have undertaken to reach the U.S. The issue was timely because the surge of unaccompanied minors at the border was making headlines worldwide. The mural depicted some of the imagery reflected in the media, including the train known as La Bestia (The Beast). The mural was a meaningful project for the youth, said Marisela in an interview conducted July 14, 2014. She migrated on her own from Guatemala to San Francisco:

We see our histories in the mural, but maybe others just see it as a drawing that we did because we wanted to. For us it has a different meaning and we tell about our experiences. We are reflecting and telling our stories. We are making our stories public and saying, “Look, this is what happened to us when we came, this is what happened when we came to this country.”

Marisela is cognizant of the stereotypes the public has toward migrants: “Sometimes people just say that we come and just want to do our own thing and sometimes we turn into bad people or join gangs or want to traffic goods, drugs, or children.”

The mural was unveiled on a windy Sunday afternoon in the Mission in late June of 2014. As part of the program, youth performed a spoken-word piece, and Marisela shared her story. “My journey was very difficult,” she said. “I was nervous and unsure if I wanted to share my story.” The staff of 67 Sueños, including Paredes, Jackie, and Gabriela, persuaded her to do so.
Working on the mural and speaking at the unveiling were emotional experiences
for Marisela. On the mural itself, Marisela represents Our Lady of Guadalupe, who is
holding fruit and water in her outstretched arm. She said:

To present the mural was really difficult for me because I had to tell a part of my
story and how I arrived in this country. After seeing the mural, I started to
remember, and I felt very sad, and I felt all the feelings that I experienced when I
came here and all of the suffering I endured in order to live here.

With her parents living in the United States, Marisela decided to flee Guatemala:

I didn’t always have a good connection with my family in Guatemala. I hardly
talked with my parents and I really wanted to be with them. I have always liked
school. I was doing really well but there were a lot of gangs where I lived and it
was really dangerous. So I decided to leave there, but I didn’t have anywhere to
go. I decided to go to my parents.

When she told her story at the unveiling, it helped her to cope with her painful past and
her uncertain future in the U.S.:

When I was remembering and telling my story with words I didn’t know how to
describe it. In that moment I want to cry because they caught me on the way here,
I suffered from hunger, the coyote with whom I traveled didn’t give us money to
buy food. Sometimes we arrived at a hotel to rest for a couple of hours and that is
where we ate. He didn’t give us food or money so it was really hard and I was the
only woman. I was so scared and a lot of other people were too, but I felt unsafe
because I was the only woman. I came by myself, unaccompanied by any kind of
family member. I would always say that I needed someone to take care of me.

When coming here there are always things that happen to us. Now I have
my immigration case and I have two years waiting to see what they tell me. It is a
little hard to be waiting because you feel like you need to know what’s going to
happen with you because the laws are changing so much and a lot of people are
getting deported. I think about what I would do if I was one of those people and
had to go back to my country. So all of those emotions can leave you really sad
when you don’t know what’s going to happen. So telling my story allowed me to
release how I felt because I feel sad sometimes. And remembering those moments
allows me to cry and to release what is going on inside of me.

The staff of 67 Sueños said they witnessed Marisela’s personal transformation as
she decided to open up and tell her story. “Her transition was huge,” Jackie said. “You
could tell that the issue was really close to home because it was impossible for her to talk
about it without tearing up and crying.” Jackie says Marisela personifies the Lady of Guadalupe, “something beautiful, big — a strong woman.” As she continues to take classes with hopes of going to college, Marisela said she hopes to stay active with 67 Sueños:

I want to continue and get to know more young people. I want to tell young people that don’t know about this organization that they listen to young people who want to talk or feel sad or whatever. And if they want to tell their story or they want to work they can.

In the spoken-word piece, three fictional minors share their stories about migrating to the U.S. — one without his parents in Mexico, one facing abuse in Honduras, and one in Guatemala. The refrain juxtaposes their ancestral roots with the current struggle they face when they are all detained in the U.S.: “You see, we be the original peoples of Anahuac/Indigenous to this land como el condor and the bald eagle/and yet today they lock me up and call me illegal.”

**Black and brown unity**

For their second mural project in the summer of 2014, youth from 67 Sueños decided to paint a mural about of black and brown unity and partner with youth from Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland. In order to generate ideas for the mural, interviews were conducted with African-Americans who had been imprisoned as well as Latinos who had been held in detention centers. Listening sessions highlighted shared themes from the interviews, and youth generated ideas for imagery during brainstorm sessions. The 90-foot-by-25-foot mural contains a variety of imagery, including figures such as Maya Angelou, a member of the Black Panthers, and an Aztec warrior; Meso-American and African hieroglyphs; scenes of violence, incarceration, and slavery; and symbolic imagery such as the scarab beetle, which represents rebirth, and the monarch
butterfly, which embodies migration without borders. The center of the mural features a scarab beetle:

In the middle of the Beetle, a dark fist symbolizes resistance, and it comes out of the spinal cord on a race-less figure and eventually becomes a tree whose roots reach out throughout the mural pulling back the hands of oppression. (Allen Temple Baptist Church 2014)

Performed at the unveiling by Paredes and Julian, the spoken-word piece complemented the mural, highlighting the groups’ shared oppressions and cultural threads. To highlight the cruelty they both endure, Paredes said, “I’m thinking of how the media labels my brown brothers/Illegal/While my darker tone kinfolk get branded/Criminal.” Later, Paredes intoned about cultural similarities between African-Americans and Latinos, including the political (Brown Berets and Black Panthers) and musical (blues and corrido).

Youth understood the mural’s importance. Marcos, a sophomore at San Francisco State University who was interning with 67 Sueños, said he witnessed tensions between the two groups while growing up in east Oakland:

You do see a lot of violence between African-American youth and Latino and brown youth due to what society has to say, pitting us against each other. I feel like the mural really brings us together because the struggles that we each go through are [similar] and we’re all trying to achieve one goal.

Jackie said the commonalities between the two groups are overlooked: “There are so many similarities that we don’t get taught, that don’t get passed down, that we forget or this society makes us forget.” Consequences result because of this misunderstanding, she said:

Talking about my own experience, you grow up thinking that the other is the enemy. I grew up with my parents telling me, “Oh black people, you shouldn’t hang out with them, they’re too rough,” — certain stereotypes that our families have been carrying for so many years.
As she grew up, Jackie realized these stereotypes were not true at all, and she said that the importance of creating the mural is in illuminating how the communities could benefit from unity.

**Getting their humanity back**

There are salient points from this investigation of 67 Sueños that should be underscored. First of all, in responding to the DREAMer narrative and highlighting the youth who would not benefit from the legislation, 67 Sueños has introduced another model for immigration activism that revolves around storytelling and education. One of the objectives of this model is not only to help individuals cope with the trauma they have experienced because of unjust immigration policy, but also the structural trauma they have suffered because of deeply rooted oppression. Jackie sums up these two points by explaining how individuals change their way of thinking once they join 67 Sueños:

I came in with a lot of images that is not what I believe now. I feel like that’s with everybody. Your ideas change because we share through political education as well but through storytelling as well – it’s a combination of both where the youth get to learn and your experiences and gather all of this knowledge so that they can express what they feel and what’s unfair and what’s not.

Through this process, the members of 67 Sueños have forged a collective understanding and collective voice. They treat the troubles that an individual member faces together as a group and consider the group a family, as Jackie explains:

We’re like community. We call each other family. … We build that community where we’re there for each other. It’s not only like, “Oh, I’m struggling with this by myself,” but it’s like, “Oh, you’re struggling with this, then we’re all struggling with you, and we’re here to support you and help you no matter what.”

The emotions evoked by the stories the group tells help to build this collective bond. Fabiana explains the stories’ power to humanize: “They gave me a lot of my humanity
back because I got to listen to the stories that had emotion, feelings. They were humans telling these stories. That gave me my humanity back.”

One of the capacities that the youth build through this process is the ability to connect with other oppressed groups. The partnership with African-American youth from Allen Temple exemplifies this point. The listening sessions generated collective themes that were portrayed in the mural and helped the groups overcome perceived differences fed by stereotypes. What it takes to break through these differences is listening and dialogue, as Jackie says:

There’s always this picture that we get fed by the media and by other things that black people are dangerous, they steal, they rob, all that and then they also get painted this image about who we are, like did we come here and steal their jobs, we’re taking all the resources that they need for their families. There have just been a bunch of stereotypes that have been fed to us and that we believe and that creates us to have a lot tensions between each other and we don’t listen to each other, when in reality, if you look at our history, both of our histories, we have deep, deep cultural roots in history that are really rich.
Chapter 4: “These Stories Give Us Back Our Humanity”

Before they were known as the DREAMers, storytelling played an important role in forming a collective identity for undocumented youth and setting the stage for what was at stake in the fight for immigration reform. The tenor of these stories changed, however, once they were tailored for a public narrative formulated to illustrate how undocumented youth were similar to American citizens in many ways. The Bay Area-group 67 Sueños was formed in 2010 to support the voices of undocumented youth who were not represented in this collective story, and they have told very different stories as part of a very different political and cultural strategy.

Storytelling and the DREAMers

Undocumented youth have always formed a distinct part of the immigrant population in the U.S., but they became a political force once they became known as DREAMers. In the book The DREAMers: How the Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate, Walter J. Nicholls (2013) explains what was absent before the social movement took place:

There were no labels to mark the group’s political existence (“DREAMers”), there were no common arguments and stories to express a singular political voice, and there was no infrastructure to foster political connections and consciousness between dispersed youth. (Nicholls 2013: 48)

One essential missing element was an overarching narrative about the DREAMers. Before elaborating about how telling a common story is a crucial part of a comprehensive political strategy to call for and bring about change, it is first important to spell out how storytelling can help a collective come into political existence. In It Was Like A Fever, Francesca Polletta (2006) discusses how the participants in the sit-ins during the Civil Rights Movement told stories among themselves to make sense of a
movement in its infancy. She writes, “Rather than simply being persuasive devices used by strategic collective actors, narratives helped to constitute new collective actors and stakes in action. Multiauthored and told in formal and informal settings, stories made participation normative” (52).

Telling their stories in varied settings has helped to transform undocumented youth into DREAMers. They came to understand themselves and the systemic barriers facing them through storytelling. While they learned how to tell stories as persuasive devices with formal training at official retreats, they also talked about themselves and the movement in more informal settings such as digital media (Facebook, Twitter, websites) and social settings such as parties. Nicholls (2013) writes:

Online and offline networks are strategic mechanisms for socializing new activists into the discourses of the DREAM mobilization. They learn the discourse, assess the meaning and value of particular messages, and come to understand their own particular circumstances through the narrative structure and themes of the movement. They learn not only to speak the language of the movement but also to feel the language. (69)

In other words, not only are they storytellers themselves, but the moment when they decided to listen to others’ stories and tell their own stories became an important moment in the story of the movement itself.

The pivotal moment when undocumented youth decide to talk about their status is an act of political significance. Hannah Arendt (1958) spells out the power of storytelling in *The Human Condition*:

[E]ven the greatest forces of intimate life … lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling and generally in artistic transposition of individual experiences. (50)
Arendt also writes about the courage “in leaving one’s own private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one’s self” (186). Arendt’s language of a “shadowy kind of existence” and “exposing oneself” is echoed in statements about how undocumented youth have reclaimed a political space by revealing their status. In *The Latino Threat*, Leo Chavez (2013) writes about how courageous undocumented youth have left “the relative safety of *living in the shadows*” “by publicly *exposing themselves*” (187, italics mine).

Members of 67 Sueños have explained how storytelling is a transformative process. In 2010, as a junior at MetWest High School in Oakland, Gabriela was not interested in migrant justice issues when a friend dragged her to a meeting in the group’s infancy. Gabriela kept coming to the meetings and slowly emerged from her shell by recounting the details of her life to other members of the group. In an interview conducted August 22, 2014, she explained how the process of listening to others and telling her own story affected her:

> It was really empowering to me, and I was really excited. I think I was blessed to have been in something connected to this because it changed my life. It changed my perspective — what it is to be a student, to be undocumented, to have pride in that, to not be hiding, to not to have say that you’re different, because you’re not.

The transformative power continues in 67 Sueños. This summer staff of the organization witnessed how Marisela opened up and gained strength from telling a crowd at the unveiling of a mural in San Francisco about her journey as an unaccompanied minor from Guatemala. The process has inspired Marisela to continue to work with 67 Sueños. In an interview conducted July 14, 2014, she said:

> I want to continue and get to know more young people. I want to tell young people that don’t know about this organization that they listen to young people who want to talk or feel sad or whatever. And if they to tell their story or they want to work they can.
These examples highlight how storytelling has helped groups such as Sueños forge a collective identity and instituted norms for the process of participation in the group. But the storytelling itself changes once the collective has formed, and in the words of Polletta (2006), they are used as “persuasive devices” to bring about concrete change by shifting the discourse in the public sphere and eventually resulting in revamped policy (52).

**Constructing a public narrative**

When calling for social and political change, in addition to devising a sound strategy, activists must craft a compelling narrative that will motivate people to their cause and win support at the legislative level. The creation of these stories is a deliberate act with important choices and omissions, and their goal is to shift discourse in the public sphere and result in a change in policy. In his analysis of how narrative can spark collective action, Harvard professor Marshall Ganz (2011) spells out the three elements that form a public narrative — a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now. These elements are interconnected, and the stories of self and us combine to form a specific community and movement:

Learning to tell a story of us requires deciding who the “us” is—which values shape that identity and which are most relevant to the situation at hand. Stories then not only teach us how to live, but also teach us how to distinguish who “we” are from “others,” reducing uncertainty about what to expect from our community. (285)

In initial lobbying for the DREAM Act, immigration activists consciously constructed a public narrative that stressed certain values that they thought would appeal to voters and legislators in order to reach their strategic goals. The members of the community who make up this “story of us” is never more explicit than in the title of
William Perez’s book — *We Are Americans* — a collection of stories about undocumented immigrants. This early strategy for passage of the DREAM Act:

…”stressed the youths’ deep cultural and social ties to the United States and their ongoing contributions to the country. By representing them as virtuous Americans, immigrant youths would be transformed from threats to the national community into sources of economic, civic, and moral rejuvenation. (Nicholls 2013: 49)

The DREAMers were aware of how their own stories contended with greater narrative forces. Explaining how people’s stories must contend with other narratives of collective memory, Polletta, Chen, Gardner, and Motes (2011) write: “Accounts of the nation’s past may figure as one kind of background story against which political actors’ stories, but also their arguments, explanations, and evidence, are heard” (119). The American dream is one such background story, and advocates fighting for passage of DREAM Act knew audiences would hear their personal stories within that context to a varying degree. Certain U.S. values and traits in DREAMers’ stories were more forcefully emphasized in certain parts of the country where advocates believed the idea of the American dream held more political sway. One DREAMer said, “You have to say these things [such as the pro-America thing] because we are trying to reach people in Iowa, Missouri, Utah, and North Carolina” (Nicholls 2013: 54).

A line dividing the immigrant community was drawn, however, by employing this narrative. By being part of a definitive “story of us,” DREAMers were abandoning other members of their own community. They had to step forward and proclaim how they were exceptional overachievers and Americans in all but immigration status: “[D]emonstrating belonging in America has been coupled with efforts to distance themselves from the stigmas associated with the general immigration population” (Nicholls 2013: 56). In their analysis of DREAM Act discourse in Congress, Duhita Mahatmya and Lisa M. Gring-
Pemble (2014) illustrate how this “story of us” was depicted in hearings, debates, and bills:

[S]ome immigrants (i.e., Dreamers) are intelligent, industrious, responsible, and capable of making positive contributions to the U.S. while others (i.e., undocumented parents) are uneducated, participate in criminal and other illicit activities, and make poor choices. (84)

In general, this DREAMer narrative celebrates the ideal of individualism at the expense of the collective and people with little cultural, social, or political power. Mahatmya and Gring-Pemble observe how the narrative promotes “Western, individualistic notions of resource inequity rather than more collectivistic ideas of resource-sharing” and that “the Western idea of individualism may cause individuals to neglect the cultural value of filial piety and focus more on what is best for the individual” (85).

The DREAMers were aware of the drawbacks of the initial narrative, and they tweaked their approach once they were able to wrest strategic control from the more mainstream immigrant rights groups. The power shift resulted from the insistence of Reform Immigration for America (RIFA), a national coalition of immigration advocacy groups, and others to lobby for passage of comprehensive immigration reform legislation in Congress instead of a stand-alone DREAM Act in 2010. DREAMers were among those who disagreed with this strategy, and they began to organize on their own and advocate for passage of a stand-alone DREAM Act (Nicholls 2010: 80). Undocumented youth fought for the right to make their own political demands, not just follow the lead of national immigrant rights groups:

The struggle continued to be about winning legal-juridical rights to stay in the country, but it also went beyond that. Now it was also about winning the right to make their own claims in the public sphere. For these dissident DREAMers, equality meant both gaining legal rights to stay in the country and gaining recognition as political equals. (92)
Undocumented youth did gain more political autonomy, but new divisions emerged. Conflict arose over how DREAMers were presenting themselves. In many ways, they could not get rid of the DREAMer narrative that had been dictated by national organizations. They could not free themselves of what Nicholls calls the “‘iron rule’ of the hostile public sphere,” which “requires activists to cleanse themselves of the stigmas attributed to immigrants and demonstrate conformity with the values of the national public” (119). Divisions emerged within the undocumented community:

The DREAMers needed to be more open about their multiple selves and radical about their claims, but they also needed to make sure that their message would resonate with their targeted publics. … They actively train youths in messaging, monitor how activists deliver carefully crafted stories, and exact sanctions against those who deviate from the established understandings of the positive representation of the DREAMer. As certain leaders have assumed a role in instilling order and discipline within their ranks, the critiques and grievances of deviating youths are directed at those charged with ensuring a positive representation of the DREAMer in the public sphere. (118-119)

These dissident DREAMers were making valid points, which centered on the stories that they were telling. As Michael Jackson (2002) writes in *The Politics of Storytelling*, narrative can serve two different political functions. Actors must make conscious decisions about where they want their stories to take them:

And while some stories create and sustain dehumanizing divisions between the powerful and the powerless … others work to deconstruct such imbalances, enabling the powerless to recover a sense of their own will, their own agency, their own consciousness, and their own being. (28)

While the DREAMers had tweaked their narratives, they still tried to portray themselves in a light primarily focused on looking like assimilated members of U.S. society. In sharp contrast, those who were excluded from that narrative and benefiting from the DREAM Act, represented by members of 67 Sueños, used storytelling for very
different internal and external political purposes, as Jackson outlined, such as individual and collective empowerment.

A storytelling alternative

The group 67 Sueños was formed to express the voices of the 67 percent of undocumented youth who could benefit from the DREAM Act, but would not receive permanent resident status because of a range of factors. The group’s vehicle for achieving this aim is storytelling. The stories they tell through spoken word performances, videos, murals, and other artistic forms strive to empower themselves, their members, and the larger immigrant community.

In an interview conducted August 22, 2014, Gabriela, a longtime member of 67 Sueños, discussed the benefits of storytelling. Her description matches one of the purposes of storytelling that Jackson (2002) underscores; it enables the marginalized to recapture their agency and will. Gabriela said:

[W]hen somebody tells a story or tells a testimony, I feel like people feel it, people understand, and people know where you’re coming from. You’re not just an object, you’re not just a number, an undocumented person, you’re a person, you’re a human being when you’re telling your story. You’re saying that you’re real and your struggle is real, and this is what’s going on. So, yes, I feel like we really connect. I feel like even though I don’t know somebody and I hear their story I automatically connect with them through anything they say. I feel like the stories and the way we use it I feel like it makes those connections more real. It makes them more human — it makes them human. A lot of people forget other people are humans too. They don’t look at them that way sometimes and I feel like through stories, through storytelling, just having a conversation, I feel like it changes the perspective of people. It makes you even want to speak up.

This type of storytelling may be defined as testimonio, a tradition borne from social movements in Latin America in the 1960s. In testimonio, the role of the storyteller is not merely personal. George Yúdice (1991) writes, “The speaker does not speak for or represent a community but rather performs an act of identity-formation which is
simultaneously personal and collective” (15). Employing testimonio is also a way to counter national myths and master narratives such as the American dream:

Testimonial writing … coincides with one of the fundamental tenets of postmodernity: the rejection of what Jean-François Lyotard (1984) calls grand or master narratives, which function to legitimize “political or historical teleologies, … or the great ‘actors’ and ‘subjects’ of history — the nation-state, the proletariat, the party, the West, etc.” … The rejection of the master narratives thus implies a different subject of discourse, one that does not conceive of itself as universal and as searching for universal truth but, rather, as seeking emancipation and survival within specific and local circumstances. (16-17)

Without the need to search for an overarching truth, storytellers can slough off the stereotypes that have stigmatized them and grapple with complexity and nuance. Yúdice writes, “As regards literary production, testimonial writing provides a new means for popular sectors to wage their struggle for hegemony in the public sphere from which they were hitherto excluded or forced to represent stereotypes by the reigning elites” (25).

The stereotype that 67 Sueños has tried to dispel is not just the criminalized immigrant, but also the model overachiever. Their stories embrace complexity. In an interview conducted August 20, 2012, Fabiana explains that before she joined 67 Sueños, “I didn’t want to be part of this world. I guess I just wanted to tell myself that I was like my other classmates — if I worked hard I was going to make it like all these other people.” She says she had internalized the idea of the American dream. After she joined 67 Sueños, however, she realized how polarizing the stereotypes used in immigration narratives were and that the group tells nuanced, complex stories that challenge stereotypes, including those based on class and race:

No one is really like a criminal, gangbanger, drug addict, drug seller, all these things. No one’s really that. I’ve met people who are, I guess, you could consider [them] … but they’re not gangbangers. … They’re like people who care about their families. They take care of their siblings. They take care of their family. They look out for each other. … There’s a middle ground to these stories. They’re complex people. It’s not just black and white. These people are complex just like
everybody else is complex. No one’s all evil, and no one’s all good. There’s a combination of both, and that’s what makes us human.

The use of nuanced narrative creates promising openings for activists. Although Nicholls (2013) weighs the problematic difficulties of utilizing complex discourse, including the alienation of the greater American public by “celebrating postnationalism,” or honoring a global, supranational identity, he does touch on the new openings that are created for undocumented activists to align with other actors seeking social change, including the LGBTQ community, people of Asian descent and blacks (131). As an example, Nicholls recounts a campus meeting of undocumented students during which an organizer spoke about SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and the vitality of youth that was a driving force behind the civil rights movement:

[The lead organizer] says that back then the mainstream organizers of the civil rights movement did not want to organize any real big campaigns. The young students wanted to push on and escalate the struggle. He says, “It is always the youth who feels what is right. They are the ones willing to fight for what is right. They are always bombarded with negative criticism. People are telling us not to fight and to just get a Latino Democrat into power. But we know we need to fight.” (133)

Youthful exuberance and doggedness characterize 67 Sueños as well, especially when the group was first formed in 2010. As the new kids on the block, members were not afraid to speak their mind at joint rallies and protests. They were especially vocal when criticizing the predominant DREAMer narrative. Jackie said:

We don’t care especially because a lot of us were a little bit younger – when you’re young you don’t really care, so you say anything that comes to your head. And for some of us there were deportations in our family and there were all of these stories that we were capturing about each other. We were really pissed and really mad. And we didn’t see any of those stories reflected.

Gabriela added:

I feel like we have a lot of energy, sometimes too much energy. Just having that perspective of high school students coming in and giving their voice, their really
strong opinion on the DREAM Act and immigration. It’s not just a college thing, it’s not just an older thing. It affects young people too in communities.

Paredes and 67 Sueños have not only enabled youth to find their voice, but also empowered them to make decisions about which projects to pursue in the community. For instance, it was the youth in 67 Sueños, not Paredes, who decided to paint a mural about black and brown unity at Allen Temple Baptist Church in east Oakland. Gabriela said, “Every year is different. Every year we have a lot of things that we learn. Just giving our youth that power to kind of get involved, work with each other, tell their stories — I think that’s one of the most powerful things that 67 has done.”

With their desire to speak out without a filter, the youth of 67 Sueños also challenge the prevailing notion of migrant activists censoring what they say about themselves in public. As Nicholls (2013) writes, “While certain identities (Queer, undocumented and unafraid) are now readily embraced and expressed in public, other identities associated with inner-city culture (South Central, ‘cholos’) continued to be suppressed by the movement” (137). This prejudice privileges members of the middle class as the ideal DREAMers, and the classism has profound impact: “This process of silencing reinforces feelings of stigma associated with these ‘other’ parts of their selves (that is, working-class habitus, inner city, and so on)” (142).

Such silencing is antithetical to 67 Sueños’ mission of creating a sense of community and commitment to community. Members do not hide the fact that they grew up in Oakland under difficult circumstances by censoring their speech or self-expression. Gabriela said, “I feel like you don’t have to use proper language. You can be yourself, and people will understand.” That is part of the deeper lesson that is imparted to youth in the group. Gabriela continued:
To our youth, we try to teach them, it’s not wrong to be who you are, where you grew up, you don’t have to hide yourself, you don’t have to change. You can be successful, you can do the things you want to do being yourself because if you come like that, if you were born like this, if that’s the way you are present yourself that way, you don’t change. If you want to change your thinking, don’t try to fit in.

Paredes addresses this working-class stigma within a local context. He said he fights the overwhelming depiction of Oakland as a violent, messed-up community:

You internalize that. You come out of Oakland going, ‘Oh, this is a fucked up place. I’m lucky I survived. Let me run away and take care of my kids.’ Right? But I try to create this sense of Oakland is beautiful. Oakland is why you exist. That incredibly tough character that you have, that survivor, that resilience, the game, the way you talk, the narrative that you have, all of it has everything to do with how this community right here, with all its scars, nurtured you to become the person you are.

The stories that Paredes and 67 Sueños tell correspond to the definitions of testimonio that Yúdice (1991) spelled out. Undocumented youth are forming their identity by sharing a story that is simultaneously personal and collective and telling it through a local, not universal lens. Their discourse is not universal, but specific to their own experiences, including their urban space of Oakland. This discourse also focuses on linking them to another oppressed group in the community — African-Americans. Jackie said:

We’ve gone through the same oppression and we need that unity because that’s what the colonizer has been trying to do — keep us away, keep us apart, and they are winning because we’re not in unity with each other. I feel like that’s what the youth wanted and that’s what we wanted to do with this mural.

This narrative of overcoming trauma and surviving has important implications for undocumented immigrants as a whole seeking a path toward citizenship. The predominant DREAMer narrative has not only set apart DREAMers from their relatives and family members by painting them as unworthy for naturalization, but also from other undocumented immigrants with a “criminal” history disqualifying them from pursuing a
The types of crimes that disqualify immigrants have been growing. Keyes (2013) writes, “[T]he DREAMers inadvertently validate the trend by distancing themselves from immigrants with criminal convictions who would be ‘unworthy’ of the relief being offered” (144). Keyes goes on to list the kind of stories that veer too far from the DREAMer narrative to earn relief from the federal government:

Likewise, the woman with two old theft convictions who has been working as a teacher’s aide in a daycare for twenty years would be left out because of her criminal history, as would the refugee and torture survivor who turned to controlled substance abuse as a means of coping with untreated trauma, or the day laborer with three DUIs who has been sober for a decade or more. Even though the DREAM movement has recently made efforts to include more of these stories, and emphasized that their parents were the original “dreamers,” the reforms being debated in 2013 have tracked the implicit divide that has been part of the movement since its beginnings. (145)

The complex stories that 67 Sueños tell, therefore, achieve the goals that Jackson (2002) explicates in The Politics of Storytelling. The stories empower. They reshape the way undocumented youth look at the world, view their place in the world, and understand how the world has shaped who they are. Fabiana simply said, “These stories give us back our humanity.” It is an admission that gets Paredes choked up. He said, “It makes me emotional because it’s that moment where one of your youth have better understood what you were hoping to happen with them than you do. And it’s beautiful, it’s deeply beautiful.”
Chapter 5: “Hi, Human”

Jackie Garcia, one of the founding members of 67 Sueños (67 Dreams), recalled how one member of the group surprised her and others at its office one day with an unconventional greeting. “Hi, Human,” she said to Jackie and others. Soon, everyone else started to greet each other by repeating those two words: “Hi, Human.”

It is a simple greeting, yet its significance for undocumented youth and the mission of 67 Sueños is complex. The organization’s name refers to the 67 percent of undocumented youth who would not benefit from the DREAM Act. Through acts of storytelling, 67 Sueños aims to uplift undocumented youth, humanize their community, and change the public discourse about immigration and about their community. Speaking about opponents of immigration reform, Jackie says, “I’m a human, you’re a human, we’re all humans. And they don’t treat us that way. They treat us less than humans. Be we are humans and we have all of us good things that we have to bring.”

The greeting — “Hi, Human” — underscores the aim of 67 Sueños and why it employs storytelling. The two words — “Hi, Human” signify multiple meanings — the courage and confidence for undocumented youth to speak up and tell their stories, the emotional power of storytelling in humanizing its characters, and the incorporation of universal human rights discourse in their stories.

But the greeting also illustrates the limitations of storytelling for undocumented immigrants on the American political stage. The greeting “Hi, Human” is incomprehensible to an audience not open to such a universal human rights discourse. It is like speaking a foreign language for Americans who have read countless stories about
criminalized, Spanish-speaking immigrants aiming to reclaim American territory for themselves.

The healing power of storytelling

The work of 67 Sueños illustrates the importance of storytelling in nurturing political actors who pave the way to social change. The first step toward creating a political movement for undocumented youth through culture has been for them to formulate their own stories and learn how to tell them. Using the theoretical framework of Marshall Ganz (2011), in order to tell “a story of self,” undocumented youth first have had to come to terms with their own experiences. As Ganz writes, “We construct our identity, in other words, as our story.” They have had to overcome what Ganz calls the “action inhibitors” that keep people from pushing for social change, including self-doubt and isolation (277). Isolation is a particularly powerful inhibitor because in that state “we fail to appreciate the interests we share with others, we are unable to access our common resources, we have no sense of a shared identity, and we feel powerless” (279).

With their work in 67 Sueños, youth have been able to transform isolation into solidarity through storytelling. Their storytelling serves two functions — to learn how to overcome the structural forms of their historic oppression as well as cope with their own personal and collective trauma. The entire process is a form of what Paolo Freire (1970) termed “conscientization,” or critical consciousness, which is defined as “the process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality” (452). In his article “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A
Plea for Narrative,” Richard Delgado (1989) explains how storytelling can facilitate this process:

The therapy is to tell stories. By becoming acquainted with the facts of their own historic oppression … members of outgroups gain healing. The story need not lead to a violent act; Frantz Fanon was wrong in writing that it is only through exacting blood from the oppressor that colonized people gain liberation. Rather, the story need only lead to a realization of how one came to be oppressed and subjugated. Then, one can stop perpetrating (mental) violence on oneself. (2,437)

Telling stories can also heal more personalized wounds; psychotherapists utilize this process to help their clients overcome trauma. In *The Stories We Live By*, Dan MacAdams (1993) writes, “Some psychological problems and a great deal of emotional suffering stem from our failures to make sense of our lives through stories. Therapists help us revise our stories, and produce a healing narrative of the self” (33).

The power of this dual process is reflected through Jackie. Storytelling helped to heal through heightening her political consciousness as well as cope with more personal trauma. When asked what she had thought about her place in society before joining 67 Sueños, she paused before saying: “I’ve been trying to uncolonize my head that I don’t have to think of those negative thoughts.” She then paused and laughed. It is clear that 67 Sueños’s mission had successfully allowed her to overcome her own thoughts that “that if you fuck up, that’s your fault. It’s your fault you are where you are.” Telling stories has liberated Jackie and her fellow members of 67 Sueños. Delgado (1989) writes:

So, stories — stories about oppression, about victimization, about one own’s brutalization — far from deepening the despair of the oppressed, lead to healing, liberation, mental health. They also promote group solidarity. Storytelling emboldens the hearer, who may have had the same thoughts and experiences the storyteller describes, but hesitated to give them voice. Having heard another express them, he or she realizes, I am not alone. (2,437)

The stories that undocumented youth of 67 Sueños tell in order to heal fit the mold of what Catherine Fosl (2004) calls “empowerment narratives” because “the plot
structure moves from its author’s disenfranchisement, impoverishment, and stasis to strength, substance, and resistance” (222). In this analysis, Fosl is analyzing the stories of Rigoberta Menchu, among others. This process of change fits one of the major goals of 67 Sueños, which founder Pablo Paredes calls “transforming trauma into power.”

In the process of liberating individuals, these stories also construct community. The storytellers from 67 Sueños don’t stand out or apart from their community, but represent it; they are recasting a new narrative, too. This aligns with one of the other major aims of 67 Sueños — building community and strengthening the connection to community. The stories they tell are a form of testimonio. Patrick Beverly (1996) writes, “Testimonio represents an affirmation of the individual subject, even of individual growth and transformation, but in connection with a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle” (35).

Building a public narrative

Although empowerment through testimonio is an essential undertaking, it is only a first step toward pushing for social change. A major challenge remains — how to translate the “story of self” into a piece of public narrative. In the public narrative framework developed by Ganz (2011), the “story of self” must connect to the “story of us” by identifying shared values and experiences: “We participate in many us’ s: family, community, faith, organization, profession, nation, or movement. A story of us expresses the values, the experiences, shared by the us we hope to evoke at the time” (286).

For the immigrant rights groups at first, the strategy was to stress the values and experiences that DREAMers shared with stakeholders and policymakers at the national level at the expense of other parts of their “story of us” — complex human beings with
family and community. This strategy fell in line with common strategy used by
immigration advocates. Maria Lorena Cook (2010) writes:

Moreover, they also highlight another shortcoming of many national-frame
debates, which is that advocates are often compelled to show immigrants’
“contributions” and “worthiness” to the national economy or society. This
discourse of worth and deservedness is a long way from a universal human rights
framing, which presumably would not distinguish among immigrants to determine
whether some were more or less deserving of human rights. (157-158)

While the DREAMers’ arguments do rely on framing with regard to their
contributions to the U.S. economy, and their worthiness as assimilated Americans, one
important aspect is overlooked in Cook’s analysis — the emotional power of the
overarching shared narrative itself. By summoning the American dream, DREAMers and
immigrant rights advocates were tapping into a powerful public narrative that established
a “story of us” between themselves and those among the American population
unconvinced of their motives. Frederick Mayer (2014) writes:

The canon of available public narratives is a central element of a community’s
collective memory. As such, it helps define common identity, determining who
“we” are (and who is “other”) and what kind of people we are, and helps establish
common beliefs about how the world works and what a community views as
proper, just, and moral. (103)

The DREAMers’ stories were powerful because they tapped into this powerful
narrative that stirred skeptical listeners’ emotions and assured them the young
undocumented immigrants were like them. In other words, the DREAMers’ stories
assured everyone that “We are Americans,” referring to the title of the collection of
personal narratives compiled by William Perez (2009). Forging these bonds through
narrative is an important step of social action. It assures those listening to these stories
that the storytellers are loyal and dedicated to following through on what they are saying.
Mayer (2014) writes:
Our confidence in the commitments of others depends on what might be called the folk theory of narrative, our working understanding of the role of narrative in human behavior. Because we believe that others, like ourselves, are creatures of narrative, believe that they, too, seek to maintain the integrity of their character, we are confident they will be held to their commitments by the dramatic imperatives of the narratives in which they are engrossed. (138)

Through the emotional narrative that the DREAMers were telling, they were trying to shift the public discourse on who qualified as a U.S. citizen and therefore ensure that the U.S. government would make changes to its immigration policy to reflect this change in discourse. The message that DREAMers underscored in their storytelling — that they were committed to following the same proper, just, and moral path, to paraphrase Mayer, as other worthy U.S. citizens — was central to the attempt to change this discourse.

By hewing to this archetypal narrative to forge emotional connections, DREAMers and immigrant rights groups were moving away from concept of testimonio. The “story of self” had become individualized, losing its collective link to the immigrant community. Beverly (2006) writes about the consequences of losing this link, as the testimonio “becomes autobiography, that is, an account of, and also a means of access to, middle- or upper-class status, a sort of documentary bildungsroman” (36). Beverly elaborates on the difference between autobiography and testimonio:

Autobiography produces in the reader, who, generally speaking, is already either middle or upper class or expecting to be part of those classes, the specular effect of confirming and authorizing his or (less so) her situation of relative social privilege. Testimonio, by contrast, even in the cases of testimonios from the political right … always signifies the need for a general social change in which the stability of the reader’s world must be brought into question. (36)

In effect, any hope for noteworthy social change is snuffed out in exchange for the upholding of the status quo when a connection to the immigrant community at large is stripped away in the narrative being told. With regard to the battle over immigration, any
hopes of using the DREAM Act as a springboard to more comprehensive reform were compromised. Paredes breaks down the limitations of the DREAMers’ strategy:

Let’s say you do the hard work of humanizing the exceptional student, you legalize the exceptional student, and you’ve just convinced America that it was the right thing to do to legalize 10 percent of the undocumented community because they are incredibly, exceptionally academic and are going to do great things for the United States. Wonderful. Now how do you turn your attention to 90 percent of the community that you just defined them against? Now how do you turn around and say, “Oh, but let’s legalize the folks that are not in college, they don’t have these amazing job skills in a high-tech area that the US needs right now.” Because it wasn’t based on the humanity of the DREAMers, it wasn’t based on the human rights of the DREAMers, it wasn’t based on “No Human is Illegal” and all of these things that are bedrocks, it was based on what can the U.S. get out of you. So long term it was a really dangerous strategy. Even in the short term a lot of the language that came out of it was already making it more difficult to do the work of humanizing the rest of the community and fighting for the basic rights of the rest of the community.

Paredes and the youth of 67 Sueños have attempted to fight for the rights of the immigrant community at large by highlighting their human rights. They have entered the public space most notably and permanently with the murals they have painted, including those completed during the summer of 2014 — one in the Mission district about unaccompanied minors and another at Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland about black and brown unity. The words emblazoned in yellow paint on the Mission mural emphasize the message that 67 Sueños supports: “Fronteras (Borders) Were Made to Divide Us.” The group is directly challenging the modern notion of the nation-state with such messages and hopes to steer the discourse toward expanding the definition of citizenship and recognizing everyone’s fundamental human rights. The group utilizes what Tanya Basok (2009) calls “counter-hegemonic human rights principles,” which are:

…the ones that in one way or another challenge the status quo, either by undermining the political economic foundations of liberal democracies and/or the principles of national sovereignty. As a result, while hegemonic human rights values tend to enjoy wide recognition, counter-hegemonic values may be supported by some and rejected by others. (184)
In the evolving battle over immigrant rights, 67 Sueños also represents the emergence of localized activist groups that have gained greater prominence in the movement. With the freedom to craft its own messages and develop its murals without any need to answer to major immigrant rights groups in Washington, the development of undocumented youth as activists and leaders in Oakland and San Francisco, and the strengthening of bonds with African Americans and other community groups and institutions not primarily involved with immigrant rights, 67 Sueños exemplifies the strengths of the current decentralized, localized nature of the immigrant rights movement that Nicholls (2013) outlines:

Activists in this new model function more as autonomous guerrilla armies than as the disciplined foot soldiers of the RIFA generals. This provides more channels for new recruits to become grassroots leaders, helping to empower them and become important voices in the movement. Lastly, the strategy seeks to extend the struggle beyond the traditional base of immigrant rights supporters. By localizing struggles, gaining rights for immigrants becomes a direct interest of local businesses, community organizations, activists, political officials, public servants, and so on. Localization transforms all those people who are in touch with immigrants to take a direct stake in the politics of immigration in their communities and country. (Nicholls 2013: 167)

The challenges of employing a human rights discourse

The efficacy of basing arguments on human rights to bring about immigration reform, however, remains problematic. Some human rights principles are more widely accepted than others, as Basok (2009) distinguishes in her discussion about “hegemonic and counter-hegemonic human rights principles” (184). U.S. protections of individual civil rights stand as an example of hegemonic human rights norms, while more expansive protocols protecting social, cultural, and economic rights of citizens worldwide, including those in the Global South, that remain contested and unsigned by the U.S. exemplify
counter-hegemonic norms. As Basok writes, basing arguments on “counter-hegemonic human rights principles” remains ineffectual at the moment in bringing about reform:

[I]n the absence of a consensus on the legitimacy of these principles and their rejection by most major migrant receiving states, relying on the moral power of globally circulating counter-hegemonic discourses on migrants’ rights is not sufficient to persuade states to extend rights to migrants and [therefore] it becomes necessary to draw on other human rights principles that do enjoy greater levels of acceptance or on instrumental reasons to pressure nation-states to grant more rights to migrants. (201)

To paraphrase Beverly (2006), if enacting social change means destabilizing the structure of the listeners’ world, that would mean, in the case of immigration reform, modifying the economic policies and narrative frames of the nation-state itself by making exceptions to what constitutes of U.S. citizenship. In light of this improbability, undocumented immigrants have faced a conundrum; stressing their U.S. identity is a key condition to acquiring rights. In *The DREAMers: How the Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate*, Nicholls (2013) writes:

[G]aining rights for some undocumented immigrants contributes to reproducing the national basis of citizenship. These struggles for rights are therefore not a harbinger of postnational citizenship. They are constrained by the rules of the game that continue to center on the nation-state. Gaining rights encourages activists to fashion arguments, discourses, and performances that demonstrate national belonging as a means of gaining recognition of the right to have basic human rights. (181)

In addition, activists are compelled to construct stories that must include the narrative of the nation-state as a part of the “story of us.” Nicholls goes on to spell out the major test facing immigration activists:

The trends toward universalizing human rights have been offset by the growing importance of the nation-state in determining the meanings, distributions, and struggles for rights in today’s global world. The great challenge for rights activists in the coming years is to develop ways to push for maximum equality in national contexts that are necessarily exclusionary and unequal. (181)
This complex challenge includes storytelling. Activists must figure out how to craft stories that incorporate, and do not exclude, members of the undocumented population. They must also, as 67 Sueños has demonstrated, create projects that ally their goals with U.S. communities, such as the African American community of Oakland, which face many of the same systemic challenges. The “story of self” that is told must not lose its link to these communities, and the “story of us” must include some common experiences and values that do not revolve around the concept of the nation-state, but around other common themes such as family, faith, or communities struggling for change.

The work of 67 Sueños in Oakland illustrates the possibilities of broadening the coalition of activists in the community. Youth collaborated on the painting of a black and brown unity mural at Allen Temple Baptist Church in east Oakland that focused on the common threads their cultures and communities shared, notably the criminalization and incarceration of Latino and African-American men. Nicholls (2013) writes about a similar coalition focused on anti-enforcement campaigns that was constructed between undocumented youth and community organizations in Los Angeles that were not directly involved with immigration. He writes:

[T]he process of negotiating a common frame with diverse activists has encouraged local activist organizations to recognize their own complementary positions in a broader struggle for social justice. Immigrant rights activists (like DREAMers) have come to recognize that there are multiple movements for social justice and that their efforts constitute one part of the general struggle to create a more just world. As one of the DREAMers put it, “It’s part of getting to that bigger picture.” (158)

While formulating a shared frame for a campaign is important, constructing a common story centered on the marginalized could perhaps be more potent. In an interview, Jackie talks about the importance of weaving together common threads between Latino and
African-American history in order to combat the narratives told to divide the two communities:

There have just been a bunch of stereotypes that have been fed to us and that we believe and that creates us to have a lot tensions between each other and we don’t listen to each other, when in reality, if you look at our history — both of our histories — we have deep, deep cultural roots in history that are really rich. The mural explores these deep roots and tells a shared story about the oppression of these communities.

While it is possible to link two oppressed communities together, the question remains how to find common ground between the undocumented community and the array of stakeholders who hold the key to enacting immigration reform. The various bounded frames of the nation-state that advocates use center on economics, security, and the law, as Cook (2010) points out, and immigration advocates face a challenge because their message “needs to speak to the values, concerns, and fears of the majority without succumbing to the same terms of reference as the dominant anti-migration frames” (156). What values and experiences do these stakeholders share with immigrants that could enable the inclusion of a vast majority of the undocumented population in a narrative call to action, facilitate a resonant “story of us,” and make stakeholders understand the urgency of the problem facing undocumented immigrants? While it is beyond the analysis of this study, it would be fruitful to investigate the efficacy and political reach of stories told by undocumented activists that highlight the toll that deportations are taking on families in immigrant communities across the nation. For instance, a blog post on the Fair Immigration Reform Movement’s website headlined “Youth Activists Tell Their Stories” details how 17 youth activists visited the offices of Republican Congressional leaders Kevin McCarthy, Eric Cantor, and John Boehner in June 2014 to share their
stories about how deportations have torn apart their families. The blog post includes short videos of several youth activists telling these stories (English 2014).

Since 67 Sueños is a group that has recently emerged in the public sphere, more research should be conducted about the organization. Additional areas of study focused on 67 Sueños could investigate how their work has helped shape policy on state and local levels, as well as how their murals, spoken-word performances, and other media have diffused their message to other audiences and brought about social change outside their organization.

Overall, storytelling is an essential component in the movement to bring about immigration reform. The work of 67 Sueños underscores how storytelling can help youth overcome trauma and build a resilient, healthy identity centered on universal human rights. In the political battle to secure rights for undocumented immigrants, however, such a narrative can lose resonance. The challenge remains to find a compelling story fitting the framework laid out by Marshall Ganz that is as inclusionary and communally oriented as possible with regard to the immigrant community while at the same time connecting with stakeholders who can enact immigration reform.
References


Appendix

Painted in the Mission district, this 67 Sueños mural portrays the migration of unaccompanied minors and the hardships they face during the journey.
Located at Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, this mural is focused on black and brown unity. Youth from 67 Sueños and Allen Temple collaborated on the mural.
This is the spoken-word piece about black and brown unity that was performed at the unveiling of the mural at Allen Temple Baptist Church in August 2013. Pablo Paredes, who helped to found 67 Sueños, provided this text.

**Thoughts about B&BU**

I’m thinking of how we all know the name of that great big ship that took the lives of and yet immortalized 1500 brits in a body of water we call the atlantic Yes, The Titanic I’m thinking of how it makes’ me sick!!! Yes! Sick! that below the surface never to be unearthed is a scathing commentary on our humanity see those British bodies landed in a crowded cemetery Black corpses that didn’t go on cruises they were ripped from their mother land’s hip And a hundred and fifty years since Who among us knows the name of a single Slave ship But we all got emotional when Rose let Jack’s finger tips slip. See WHITE life and love matter so much we memorize scripts and easily access holywood clips so that the words slide so smooth from our lips that we don’t notice Our histories.... are eclipsed

I’m trying to forget images of brown people with bongs of cheach and chong Of hard Taco shells from Taco Bell disguised as my culture I’m tired of Gang bangers being the only representation of Me on TV I’m wondering why there had to be a Beverly Hills Chihuahua 2 AND 3 I’m wondering why Narcos is the only spanish word some people know Why Cancun and Acapulco are the only places in Mexico that most people go I’m thinking of El Chapo Guzman
and Pablo Escobar
And how familiar they Are
I’m not just a picky media consumer complaining
I’m talking about my people hunted on national Geographic for pure entertainment
Border Wars took Crocodile Hunter’s place when Steve Irwin passed
And the sad reality is You know his name, but brown people are buried in mass
Mass Graves, mass suffering mass Pain
500 migrantes die each year crossing the sonora desert and we don’t know a single name?
See we mourn white death as national tragedies from Columbine, Sandy Hook, But the media silence around every life that La Bestia, el desierto y la migra took is so loud it drowns out our screams, our dreams,
11 million migrants, 90,000 children and all the suffering in between

I’m thinking of how the Media labels my brown brothers-
illegal
While my darker tone Kinfolk Get branded -
Criminal
I'm thinking of Sherif Bull Conor and Joe Arpaio
I think they shared the same bio.
I’m thinking of the killing of Ruben Salazar and Brother Martin
I'm thinking of Jose Elena Rodriguez and Trayvon Martin.
I’m thinking of Anastacio Rojas and Oscar Grant
I wanna say the things to their daughters that Anstacio and Oscar Cant
The struggle is real, and what we feel has gone on for centuries
from the plantations to the penententiaries, from Bracers to Jornaleros
Enslaved and incaged in the service of gueros

4 block cells designed to maintain us ...Seperate
Ching Ching
4 Block cells designed to turn pain ...into profit
Ching Ching

Cought up in brand names that brand us
Bling Bling
This Gouchie, This Louie, this Fendi, And while we keep spending
Ching Ching
Our people are fitted in Ankle Bracelets and Hand cuffs
Bling Bling
Once you locked up, you LEARN who makes all this stuff
Ching ching

I’m thinking of In Lak ‘Ech - Mayan Precept
I’m feeling Ubuntu - South African Concept
Tu Eres Mi otro Yo - “I am because we are
You are my other me - we are because I am.

Black Brown Comunity
Let’s Build Unity

Vamos Mi gente Sumense
Unete

Black Brown Comunity
Let’s Build Unity
Vamos Mi gente Sumense
Unete

I’m thinking of peoples who built pyramids
And developed hieroglyphs
I’m thinking of Capoeira and Bomba Dancers,
I’m thinking of brown berets along side black panthers.
I’m thinking of Emory Douglas the minister of culture
And malaquias montoya and the power of a Poster
I’m thinking of the Freedom riders and the Undocu-Bus.
I’m thinking the system can’t handle us
I’m thinking of how stop sb 1070 and Stop and frisk
I’m thinking Of 67 Sueños and SNCC
I’m thinking of Harriet Tubman was the first Coyote
I’m thinking of Candied Yams and Chayote
Of Blues and Corridos
break dancing y Quebradita
I’m thinking of Scarab Beatles and Monarchitas

I’m thinking of In Lak ‘Ech - Mayan Precept
I’m feeling Ubuntu - South African Concept
Tu Eres Mi otro Yo - “I am because we are
You are my other me - we are because I am.

Black Brown Comunity
Let’s Build Unity

Vamos Mi gente Sumense
Unete

**Black Brown Comunity**
**Let’s Build Unity**
**Vamos Mi gente Sumense**
**Unete**

**In Lak’Ech Ubuntu**
This is the spoken word piece about the migration of unaccompanied minors that was performed at the unveiling of the mural in the Mission district in San Francisco. Pablo Paredes, who helped to found 67 Sueños, provided this text.

America,
The land of the free
God Bless America
God Bless the American DREAM
The bill of rights
Where we won civil rights
And Yet while we dream

I wake up in a dark michoacan ally solita
Extraño mi madresita
now i only see her in nightmares
blurry visions of parents I havent’ seen in 2 years
It’s my birth day
I think i’m 8 today
I’m not quite sure
I struggle to find something to eat
I have no shoes, there’s sores on my feet
It’s cold at night and I feel alone,
si me muero esta noche, no hay quien le importe
Y mañana my only friend se va pal norte

Estoy segura que fue el….but only the moonlight could see us
It smelled like my uncle’s cheap cologne y el aroma de Salva Vida

Su bebeda preferida
Yo lo queria pero su mirada me amenazaba
I didn’t feel safe, y esa noche cuando sola andaba

everything changed
I mean i was coming of age
Pense que llegaría a mi quinceñera en unos días
Y mi novio, seria al que YO me entregaria
Pero después de esa noche perdí la habilidad de sentir alegría
Mi vida se volvió una eterna pesadilla
The visits became more frequent
the abuse became more violent
Antes de montarme en la bestia i Dropped down to the ground to kiss you
Honduras,
I’ll miss you

A Mi Padre Bueno, lo mato el Gobierno de Guatemala
Todavía recuerdo el trueno de las balas
I stopped seeing life the same, since that day
Without a father I tried to find my way
Mi madre, may she rest in peace
Se la trago la Bestia, The Beast
With both my parents deceased
I strayed and stumbled in the streets
Got jumped in to a new family a place to belong
Everything had gone wrong
bad break after bad break
A teenager with pain, addictions and mistakes
but still a conscience looking for another way
So i migrated to the states to escape

(PABLO)
Muchos Dicen que no soy de aqui, ni soy de alla
Cuando yo tengo sangre Yaqui, mexica, y de los Maya
Yo Estado aqui desde el tiempo de Yemaya
You See, We be the original peoples of Anahuac
Indigenous to this land como el condor and the bald eagle
And yet today they lock me up and call me Illegal

I climbed on la bestia, the train that carries migrant hope
There were maras on every leg trying to make us carry dope
Y en cada ciudad I had to struggle and hustle
Day labor for a few days a couple of scuffles
cuz everyone knows the kids on the trains are vulnerable
One time I got caught slippin, mirada perdida
pensando que pasaba con mi vida
And some OG’s roughed me up for their Mordida
It was like that week after week
I grew hungry and weak,
Never thought I’d leave the Beast

Woke up from the same nightmare pero estavez en el Bass
Estoy cansada, Ya no aguanto mas
Anoche dos hombres se suvieron pidiendo dinero

Me dio tanto miedo
An old man who was death didn’t give them money
they got mad, I started to cry
I was scared, i Closed my eyes
Bang, Bang, Bang
I felt a tickle in my spine
and moisture run down my thighs
Traumada y cansada soñe en los ojos del hombre que habian matado
Y desperté el proximo dia en el otro lado

I’ve been on the Beast for 3 Months and 2 days
It’s always so hard to find a place to stay
I’ve slept in Bodegas, sidewalks and underpasses
What happened to going to school
What happened to classes
What happened to
choco choco la la
Choco chocho te te...
Te, Extraño Apa
I needed you last night. Where were you dad
Al bajar del tren running from la Migra un hombre me ofrecio ayuda
I trusted him, lo segui, corri, Hulli de la patrulla
Y cuando pense que estaba segura
Volvi a vivir esa terrible pesadilla
el es mayor y yo solo soy niña
fue como la ultima vez
yo sin poder correr, gritar, y parar
Trate, te juro que trate.
Pero no lo pude despegar
Why weren’t you there to save Me
To protect me
Me, Tu Hija
Tu Cachetona,
tu chulita
tu negrita
Donde estas tu ahorita
Solo por cruzar la linea
Perdi lo poquito que me quedaba de niña
Sera que valio la pena?
(JACKIE)

Muchos Dicen que no soy de aqui, ni soy de alla
Cuando yo tengo sangre Yaqui, mexica, y de los Maya
Yo Estado aqui desde el tiempo de Yemaya
You See, We be the original peoples of Anahuac
Indigenous to this land como el condor and the bald eagle
And yet today they lock me up and call me Illegal

Llegando al otro lado,
No encontraba trabajo,
I had to sleep on the cold streets of this cold nation
It seemed like I was never to far from deportation
Before long I got Pulled into the gangs and drugs again
Back to where it all began
Flashing lights and police sirens
You have the right to remain Silent

No Estaba segura si era el….Pero la luz de madrugada
Ilumino tu cara
I ran towards him jumped in his arms,
The scent of his aftershave made me feel safe and calm
But the journey wasn’t over
See we were randomly pulled over
Licence and registration they demanded
Pero mi apa, didn’t understand them

Now that I reached the land of the Free
The nightmares weren’t supposed to follow me
I’m suppose to have American Dreams
Pero las alleys en Michi-gan
feel just like the one’s in Michoacan
Still Dark, Still lonely
I’m still Hungry
For a moment i remembered the days in the campo
I reached out and grabbed a Fresh Mango
But this wasn’t abuelita’s rancho
This was petty theft
I was under arrest.
You have the right to an attorney, And the right to a call
Unless your undocumented and underaged
then you have no rights at all
You have a right to la LLelera, A Cold cell
You have a right to the 10 Dollar 5 minute phone cards they sell
You have a right to barely be fed,
If your lucky you have a right to a stale piece of Bread
TO a three point shackel
restraining you at the wrist, waste and ankles

The Judge is pale
The air is stale
I can barely see over the rail
My stomach is full of butterflies
This system is full of lies
The man with the robe has beautiful eyes
There so many of us on this line
I wonder if i’ll have to do more time
I wonder if they know i’m about to turn nine

Detainee Alien-083795307 Country of origin Honduras step forward
Your Asylum Petition is approved,
you will be released to your fathers custody Move

Detainee Alien-003475845 Country of origin Guatemala step forward
You are a threat to society. Now that you are 18 years of age
You will move on to the adult detention facility stage
Take him to his cage

Detainee Alien-005884728 Country of origin Mexico step forward
You are guilty of illegal crossing You will be deported back to Mexico today
But I don’t have any family back home I wanna stay
This court is Adjourned, take her away

(LITZY)
Muchos Dicen que no soy de aqui, ni soy de alla
Cuando yo tengo sangre Yaqui, mexica, y de los Maya
Yo Estado aqui desde el tiempo de Yemaya
You See, We be the original peoples of Anahuac
Indigenous to this land *como el condor and the bald eagle*
And yet today *they lock me up and call me Illegal*