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RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Forced into the Shadows: Undocumented, Unafraid, Unapologetic

by Junior

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*"The United States is not the passage of death, the United States is 'Death itself.' At the border during the day, temperatures go from 120 up to 140 degrees… It is proven that at the border, out of every 100 migrants, between 10 and 20, or more, will die. Maybe many of you here will die. Many of you will never see your families again. Many of you here will never return to your countries because you will die on the way. Now, who here really wants to get to the United States? Raise your hand!" *Everyone in the crowd raises their hands.**

- *Which Way Home (Rebecca Camissa, dir., 2009)*

"Undocumented" - A person who doesn't have a legal right to be or remain in the United States (Gasson)

For immigrants, the United States is not just a land of opportunity; the United States is hope itself. A place where people do what it takes to build a better life for themselves and their families. For your parents, that meant accepting hardship in exchange for possibility. Like many others, your family's journey is shaped by sacrifice and uncertainty. You arrive in the United States at the age of one. Only later do you learn that you were smuggled in, given false documents, and quieted with medicine to carry you across the border. Your family relies on the goodwill of others, finding ways to get by, even as these years mark some of the most difficult of your parents' lives, defined by injustice and constant fear.

Your parents rarely speak about this time, but some moments stay with you—like when your father was rushed to the emergency room in critical condition. Ironically, his injuries were likely what spared your family catastrophic medical debt. Because it was deemed a "medical emergency," he qualified for emergency Medicaid. Had his life not been at risk, he would have been denied coverage altogether. Your status disqualifies you from Medicaid: the system intervenes only when you are at death's doorstep (Kullgren). After surgery, the care he needed for recovery, rehabilitation, and follow-up treatment was not covered. Your mother was told to "figure it out." And so she did. She worked multiple jobs while your father stayed home to care for you and your siblings out of necessity; he learned how to move again.

As a child, you don't recognize your family's circumstances, not because they shield you, but because survival leaves little room for explanation. Renting a single room for a family of five doesn't feel like a struggle when you are together. These years when you are indifferent to your status are blissful. You'll often find yourself recalling these years later in life. But you don't get to grow up at your own pace. Before you can fully understand it, you're told you're undocumented; it means you don't have the papers that say you belong, even though this is the only home you've ever known. It means pretending everything is fine even when it feels like the ground could shift at any moment. Like that time when your landlord raised the rent after a minor disagreement and threatened to call ICE; your parents don't know if they had rights or if fighting back would only make things worse. So you left. You were given a week. You remember feeling helpless, voiceless, and so alone. Regardless of those feelings, you move forward. You finish elementary school, surpassing your father's formal education. By eighth grade, you are only the second person in your family to graduate. Throughout high school, one question follows you: belonging. You belong, don't you? So what is a piece of paper or nine digits to tell anyone else otherwise? You find others who ask the same questions, people with stories like yours, people who believe you belong. You find your community.

"Unafraid" - Feeling No Fear or Anxiety

Being part of an immigrant-led community organization grounded in service, education, and collective care changes something in you. It is a space for organizing, learning, and mutual care in the absence of state support. For the first time in your life, you openly talk about your status. Growing up, you were always taught that sharing your status was dangerous, that safety meant insisting you were "legal." Yet there you were in your first summer meeting, naming it aloud, half-hoping no one noticed, half-hoping someone would know what to do. Your youth organizer could not change your status, but for the first time the whole of you was recognized. Being seen was more than enough. You learn that people with your status have always been involved in this work, challenging silencing narratives and pushing for lasting political change. You learn about the 2010 "Coming Out of the Shadows" demonstration, where hundreds of mostly young, undocumented people demanded legalization under a banner reading "Undocumented and Unafraid" (Sepúlveda). These activists took the stage and openly shared their status. Learning about this courage pushes you toward action. Even before you had the language for it, you knew you wanted to support those around you, knowing harder years were coming.

As the fear from the results of the 2016 election takes hold in your community, you and many others stand against relentless waves of anti-immigrant rhetoric. You continue this work despite the fear your family and status carry. But over time, the conditions harden. It becomes more difficult to gather signatures or canvass for change when your efforts are met with increasing rejection. When you're told to "never take this work personally," you wonder, of all people, how could you not. When people rally behind ethnic cleansing dressed up as immigration policy, they are including you. When courts threaten DACA, they endanger people you love. When politicians speak of "removing illegals," they are speaking about families like yours. How could any of this not feel personal? You are repeatedly forced to prove your worth, your value, your humanity. For most people, not having their right to belong constantly questioned is an unacknowledged privilege.

Still, there were days you wondered what it would be like not having to take this work personally. Living in New York makes the contradiction impossible to ignore. You are told your community takes from this nation, despite

undocumented immigrants paying $6.7 billion in state, local, and federal taxes in New York alone (American Immigration Council). That money is funneled into social safety nets like Social Security, Medicaid, and most public benefits, and still your community is excluded (Office of the New York City Comptroller). The pandemic descends. Nearly 70% of undocumented workers are essential, running restaurants and grocery stores, building infrastructure, keeping transit moving, and caring for the sick, elderly, and young (Center for Migration Studies). The truth becomes unavoidable: you are more than essential to the lifeblood of this nation; you are its lifeblood. That knowledge sustains your hope, even as the world emerges from a pandemic and the possibility of change feels within reach. In 2020 and 2021, you saw a glimpse of what the nation could be if forced to confront its inequities, suddenly aware of how much it relied on the very people it had spent decades excluding. There was a sense that the future might finally include you.

PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR. THE PHOTO ON THE LEFT IS FROM THE FIRST-EVER PROTEST I ATTENDED IN HIGH SCHOOL; I WAS TERRIFIED. WE ENDED UP WALKING ACROSS THE MANHATTAN BRIDGE. THE PHOTO ON THE RIGHT IS FROM MY FIRST-EVER TRIP TO DC; WE MARCHED ALL DAY, PASSING BY FEDERAL BUILDINGS, EVEN AT ONE POINT STANDING RIGHT OUTSIDE OF THE ICE BUILDING. THAT'S WHERE, IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT, I FLIPPED IT OFF; IT FELT RIGHT, REGARDLESS IT WAS SCARY BEING THAT CLOSE TO A PLACE I NEVER WANT TO END UP INSIDE. I HAVEN'T GONE BACK TO D.C IN YEARS NOW.

Then it shifts again. The summer and fall of 2024 echo your worst fears in 2016, only sharper. "Latinos for Trump," once an ironic fringe, grows rapidly, with men across communities of color backing a far□right regime defined by family separation, getting the 'criminals,' and the dismantling of social programs, including cuts to food assistance, Medicaid access, and housing support--supported by those it will harm most. You find that this alignment isn't new. A generation ago, conservatives of color were already appearing in state and federal races, but the scale of support in 2024 reveals a deeper shift. Analyses show that 21% of Black men voted for Trump (up from 12% in 2020), and 50% of Latino men voted for him (up from 39%). Among women of color, the numbers rose too 10% of Black women (up from 5%) and 46% of Latinas (up from 33%) but the gender gap is unmistakable (Pew Research). You recognize something else too, the role traditional masculinity plays in these far right movements. They offer men of color a seductive promise of belonging built on dominance, exceptionalism, and proximity to power. They tell them they can be "different" from other men of color, that they can rise above those deemed undeserving, that exclusion is proof of their strength.

Beyond electoral politics, far-right groups like the Proud Boys, Patriot Prayer, and the "Stop the Steal" movement have elevated men of color into visible leadership roles, offering them a place in the hierarchy, a chance to feel exceptional, to believe they 'earned' a belonging that others supposedly have not. Issue-focused campaigns have followed suit. Anti-abortion efforts increasingly cloak themselves in the language of civil rights, placing young women of color at the forefront to oppose reproductive freedom. Gun manufacturers and Second Amendment groups like the NRA have also expanded their reach, deliberately targeting communities of color as Black gun ownership surges (HoSang).

Still, no amount of research could prepare you for the results of November 5th. You are left speechless once again: *How and why w*ould the children of immigrants vote against their communities, against themselves? Why would low-income people place their hopes in someone intent on dismantling the very safety nets they rely on to show their own worth? Even if met with indifference or abandonment, you know a collective struggle is coming, one against authoritarianism and an oligarchy rooted in malice. And once again, the question returns: belonging. How do you make sense of people who share your language, culture, and struggles, yet align themselves with those who would strip you and your family of the right to exist? How do you hold pride in your community when they helped enable this? Belonging was always fragile. Now it feels broken, and you're left wondering who truly sees you, who claims you, and what it will take to hold onto the vision of justice that first made you unafraid.

“Unapologetic” -- Not Acknowledging or Expressing Regret

It’s been eight months now, but life for you hasn’t fundamentally changed; you're still undocumented, with no pathway to citizenship, no protection from deportation, and just as uncertain about your future in this country. This isn’t something new to you or your community, but it is new to those who were certain about their future in this country, those who had protection from deportation through a temporary status, those who came here “legally” (whatever that means) with a pathway to citizenship. For the first time in many people's lives, they too are a target; they have a small glimpse into what life is like for those whom the state denies basic rights and their humanity. However, while being undocumented makes you a target in many ways, you're one of the lucky ones. It sounds messed up, right? However, it's

PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR. THIS PHOTO IS OF MY LITTLE BROTHER (IN BLUE) AND ME (IN WHITE) ON THE DAY OF MY KINDERGARTEN GRADUATION. I REMEMBER HEARING SOMETHING ABOUT COLLEGE THAT DAY, AND AFTER I HELD MY DIPLOMA IN MY HAND AND FELT PRIDE IN MY ACCOMPLISHMENT, I KNEW I WANTED TO CONTINUE MY EDUCATION. I DIDN’T KNOW WHAT COLLEGE WAS; I JUST KNEW THAT REGARDLESS OF THE CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS I WOULD FACE, I WANTED TO GO SO I COULD HOLD ANOTHER DIPLOMA AGAIN AND MAKE MY FAMILY PROUD, LIKE THEY WERE THAT DAY.

true; remember when you conducted research for a paper once and found that in 2024 there were 75,385 high school seniors across NYC, 62,454 graduated, and of those, fewer than 4,000 were undocumented students (NYC Public Schools; Higher Education Immigration Portal). And even among those who graduate, only a fraction make it to college.

At CUNY, undocumented students account for roughly two percent of all freshmen--just 2165 students across six years--despite consistently outperforming their citizen peers in high school GPA, college prep coursework, first year GPA, credit completion, and retention (City University of New York). The irony is impossible to ignore: undocumented immigrants are constantly told to “do things the right way,” to work harder, to prove they deserve to be here, yet the data shows they already do. They are among the most academically prepared students in the country, but face some of the steepest barriers to accessing the very education they excel in--barriers that make simply graduating high school, let alone enrolling in college, an act of privilege, luck, and resistance.

Despite all this, your future still lies in academia, and your family ensures that remains your focus, as day in and day out, they work off-the-book jobs to keep you all afloat, like hundreds of thousands of immigrant New Yorkers. Immigrants keep your city running, yet in that same city, your community faces terror unlike anything seen till now. High school students are kidnapped off the streets, unmarked vans patrol your communities, while masked officers with no identification grab whoever they deem as not belonging here (Kramer). 26 Federal Plaza, a place where people who “do it the right way” attend their immigration hearings or naturalization processes, has become a hunting ground for ICE agents seeking to meet their quotas by arresting as many immigrants as possible, immigrants who only ask for their right to due process, like everyone else (Hogan and Chu).

But as fears of attending immigration hearings grow, people begin to take action, accompanying immigrants who now need it more than ever. As the months have passed, more people have become infuriated, and mass protests ripple throughout the nation, as people take a stand against authoritarianism and their neighbors, friends, and loved ones being kidnapped and taken to an unknown fate. Even those who voted against their best interest begin to have the veil over their eyes forcibly removed as they realize the promise of a ‘Great America’ doesn’t include them. While some may only be taking a stand for their self-preservation, they now regret their vote and feel apologetic. Yet they’re still met by many exclaiming, “This is what you voted for,” even “What did you think was going to happen?” But you, like many others, acknowledge that this isn't the time to turn on one another. Rather, you must do what's most difficult: work to welcome people back and organize as one, to reunite people under a new collective struggle for their freedoms. Progress towards this may be slow, but you know, arguing over the differences within your communities is what got you all here in the first place. They may have easily divided you, but now the hard work begins to rebuild stronger than before.

However, before you can begin, you realize something has changed. As the students you once helped challenge the genocide in Gaza now stand in solidarity with you, taking up the fight as their own, they often do this at the cost of their freedom. With some having their visas revoked (Barnes), while others face being abducted in their homes (CUNYCLEAR), people take to the streets and march in protest of these injustices, and then they turn to you. You’ve

always been ready to take direct action for what you believed in, and now others are ready to join your fight for freedom, but you hesitate. Peaceful student demonstrators are brutalized and arrested (Cozzarelli); you can't afford these consequences, because you don't pay the same price as everyone else. An arrest was something you could never afford to happen, but now, more than ever, the consequences you'll face are growing in severity quickly; expedited removal could mean being taken from the only place that ever felt like home, to a cell where you're denied food, water, and any essential medical needs (National Immigration Project; Moses). The promise of your survival is not guaranteed, but more importantly, this could mean never seeing your family again or even worse, putting them in danger.

The tension only deepens in May as DHS begins enforcing REAL ID requirements; the right to move freely, something most people take for granted, has been taken from you. Friends can fly across the country to protest, organize, or simply breathe; you can't even board a domestic flight (Immigrants Rising). Their world expands while yours shrinks. The following year, waves of executive orders like 14406, "Restoring Integrity to America's Financial System," put people like you who opened bank accounts with an ITIN or foreign passport at risk, limiting access to basic financial tools like Zelle and Venmo (Sanchez-Adams). Even the ability to pay rent, send money to family, or receive payment for work becomes precarious.

Others get to act; you get to calculate risk. Others get to move; you get to stay still. Others get to speak; you get to wonder what speaking might cost. As all these thoughts plague your mind, those around you turn to you once more. But what do you say? How do you explain to those around you that the issue you've predicted your entire organizing career on, this fight for fundamental human rights that you've never backed down from, is something you can't fully take part in? You can't risk putting those you love in danger, so you step back and support from a distance, doing the best you can. But at your core, you know you could be doing so much more, something other organizers and activists in different spaces remind you of daily. You can feel it: sometimes confusion, other times judgment, as to why you're not the first person to speak out. Out of everyone they know, why aren't you leading the charge? And quickly, you find yourself feeling isolated, left behind by those who have the freedom to take direct action in this movement.

On one hand, you're grateful for people who are willing to take a stand and fight for what you both know is right, but on the other hand, there is a sense of envy and longing to be able to fight for your rights, free of the constraints that leave you feeling helpless. Maybe if you explained yourself to everyone, you wouldn't feel so alone, but it's not that easy, and you know it. You've spent most of your life hiding your status, not knowing who you could trust to keep your secret. Especially now, who can you trust with that knowledge?

While some are quick to cast you aside, others still reach out, hoping they can reignite that spark they think you've lost. It's an oddly comforting thing that they don't see you for your struggle; you aren't undocumented to them, you're just you. You remember what you learned so long ago; you don't have to prove yourself to anyone or justify why you chose to show up the way you do. It isn't your responsibility to make it clear your "undocumentedness" is the thing that holds you back. Your status won't define you; it may attempt to control you, but your resistance has never been contained by the borders they build. You alone shape the way you show up, even when the world tries to shrink your choices. More than ever, you refuse to apologize for your status, or for the decision your parents made out of love and desperation. And in that clarity, you remember why you began this work, not to prove yourself to anyone, but to fight for the people who live through the same constraints you do.

You could stay off the radar, blend into the crowd, fade into the background while the world moves around you, but you don't, not because you're special in some way; you do this work not for yourself but for every immigrant here and those to come.

It's for your parents, who did the best they could.

It's for the students, who dream of a better future.

It's for the workers, whose hands build a nation that refuses to claim them.

It's for the neighbors, who march beside you even when they don't share your story.

It's for the generations yet to come, who will inherit the freedom you fight for.

It's for the ancestors, who crossed oceans and deserts so you could stand here today.

And, yes, it's even for immigrants who voted against you.

To be undocumented is to carry the weight of erasure; to be unafraid is to speak anyway; to be unapologetic is to know that your very existence is resistance. And in that resistance, we all find our belonging. But belonging is not built by turning away from people, but by welcoming back those who once abandoned you, even those who could not see you then. Now is the time to extend the solidarity you once longed for, the solidarity that makes belonging possible. Because in the end, we do not belong in isolation; we belong only when we stand together.

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Author's Note

Hi, my family calls me Junior, and I'm a fourth-year student double majoring in Sociology and History at Brooklyn College. I love photography, fashion, and advocating for my undocumented and immigrant community, but really I'm just a kid from Queens.

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