

Abstract – Kathryn Abrams, UC-Berkeley Law School

Affect, Emotion, and Subjectivity in the Undocumented Immigrants' Movement

The decision of undocumented immigrants to come out as “undocumented and unafraid” and place themselves at the forefront of the movement for immigrant rights has produced a cascade of questions about the experience, expression, and regulation of affect and emotion. Many of these questions revolve around storytelling, a familiar vehicle in movements for personhood or equality, and a centerpiece of the undocumented immigrants' movement. Beyond conveying to decisionmakers or the public the concrete details of often unfamiliar lives, stories gain power and impetus from the affects that infuse those lives: the sense of urgency created by the persistent risk of familial rupture, the disorientation of being and not being a member of one's geographic community. Yet these complex responses must also be channeled into recognizable narratives and emotions that can be readily grasped by those who are not experientially proximate. This demand gives rise to a series of difficult tensions and choices. How do activists choose among competing and potentially inconsistent emotional frames: those that highlight the hope and resilience necessary to survive in an unfamiliar and hostile culture, those that foreground the indignation aroused by state equivocation or hypocrisy, or those that channel the raw anguish and outrage triggered by family separation? Can the communication of emotional vulnerability produced by injury be reconciled with the manifestations of moral agency necessary to recognition as an equal legal subject? How can activists persist in an environment that demands affective transparency, while managing the demands of a movement that entails both high risk and likely frustration? The ways that undocumented immigrants have negotiated these questions shed light on what it means to be, and to present oneself as being, a human subject challenging the boundaries of law.