

I Too Am DACA: Awakened Childhood Memories

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Abstract: On March 1, 2018, many DACA recipients who had work permits and were protected from deportation because of DACA were gathered in a home to discuss their feelings and thoughts about the impending Supreme Court decision that they anticipated was going to cause havoc in their lives and those of their families and communities. While a citizen at the time, I listened to the expressions of fear and anxiety from the people in the room. The mood that evening transported me intermittingly to my own childhood memories as an undocumented youth some 40 years earlier. This reflective narrative takes the reader on a journey which explores the intersection of immigration status, race, ethnicity, gender, language, and identity in America at a time when racism and xenophobia are at an all-time high.

Keywords: DACA, immigration, undocumented immigrants

“Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” (Lazarus, 1883)

On March 1, 2018, I attended a gathering at a former student’s home in Connecticut, where I sat in the living room with 12 adults who could be described as members of those *tired, poor and huddled masses yearning to breathe free*. We gathered around the centerpiece of the evening—a succulent dinner. Our discussion centered on the impending Supreme Court Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) ruling scheduled for March 5, 2018. The tenor of our conversation did not reflect a metaphorical *Lady Liberty* lifting her lamp beside a golden door in welcome. Rather, it felt as though she had turned her back from the group. The conversation was not unlike many I have participated in, covering topics such as work, children, higher education, our daily activities, and life in general. What made this conversation different from others was the sense of urgency we felt about the negative and growingly hostile environment experienced by undocumented immigrants under the current immigration policy.

This gathering consisted of people who, for the most part, were bilingual and bicultural. As a monolingual/bicultural woman who has lived more than 40 years in New York City, I have attended many functions and venues where I was a numerical minority as it relates to my racial, ethnic, or linguistic identities. As a social worker living in New York City—one of the most diverse cities in the world—I am still frequently present at gatherings where I am in the minority. Oftentimes, I am the only Black person/woman, or the only Afro Caribbean among African Americans, or the only monolingual immigrant among people from various countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, or Latin America.

Moreover, I am often in the company of people who speak a second language, such as Spanish, French, Russian, or Creole (Haitian), Jamaican patois, and several African languages. However, this language was different to my multilingual ear because it was unfamiliar. This unfamiliarity notwithstanding, I still felt a sense of ease and closeness to the mostly young adults in the room.

At first glance, the reason for my familiarity with this group might not be self-evident. As a Black woman who emigrated from an English-speaking country, I am often categorized as African American, an identity I embrace wholeheartedly. However, while Afro Caribbeans or West Indians share the same racial identity with African Americans, and even though the two groups of people share similar histories of oppression, conflating my ethnic-cultural identity with African Americans' minimizes both groups' culture and identities. However, with this group and at this moment, I shared their experiences as immigrants in the United States and felt connected to their experiences as undocumented immigrants.

When I first entered the home, I observed that everyone seemed acquainted with one another. Some of them sat on the couches and chairs in the living room, others stood around, while a few women were cooking in the kitchen. There were about 12 to 15 people conversing in small groups in a language I did not recognize; this foreign language at first sounded a bit strange to me, but as the host walked me over to the different clusters of people that had congregated, she seamlessly interrupted their conversations to introduce me. As she did, they transitioned their conversations from Portuguese to English to greet and welcome me, some with a hug and others with big smiles. Their welcoming remarks and gestures felt authentic and genuine. While I wasn't an insider in this group, I did not feel like a complete stranger.

After dinner, we sat in a large semi-circle while we waited for the host to interview some pre-selected individuals for a documentary she was making to educate clinicians about the immigrant's experience, and specifically the challenges of the undocumented immigrant. The gathering offered an opportunity for those present to share their thoughts of the impending DACA ruling, which was anticipated to have grave impact on their lives, families, and communities, as well as the rest of the DACA population, estimated to be 703,890 (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2018).

To clarify, DACA is a policy that originated from the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, which was a bill that proposed granting legal status to immigrants referred to as "Dreamers" who were brought to the United States as children by their parents (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019). When the DREAM Act failed to pass, President Obama passed the DACA policy through executive order. This policy gave these young people an opportunity to go to school and work without fear of deportation. However, like many other immigration initiatives passed in the previous administration, the current administration's goal was to end DACA.

On that fateful day in March 2018, many DACA recipients who had work permits and were previously protected from deportation were waiting to find out if the Supreme Court's decision was going to drive them back into the shadows. The discussions illuminated their concerns about losing their jobs, being deported, not being able to go to college or university, or not being able to renew the work permits they obtained during the Obama administration.

As they spoke, I listened intently and participated minimally because I understood this gathering was about them, not me. It was also about the people and communities who were not present that night, but may have been at other gatherings across the United States—talking, worrying, and supporting each other through the life-changing event looming over their heads. Men, women,

and children from places like Mexico, Korea, China, India, the Philippines, Guyana, Japan, Ireland, Poland, Haiti, Nigeria, the Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, and Jamaica to name a few (Hooker & Fix, 2014). I listened as a citizen and social worker who empathized with them but clearly held a privileged position. Yet, as an immigrant, I couldn't stop the intrusive thoughts and memories of the undocumented child within me from interrupting my focus.

I migrated to the US during a time when the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 stimulated a surge in immigrants arriving from non-European countries. When I initially traveled to the United States, I did not understand the different immigration statuses or appreciate the meaning of my family's visas. However, once we overstayed our visas and our immigration status went from *legal* to *illegal* under US law, I began to grasp what it means to be categorized as "undocumented." As I listened to the individuals in the group talk about their children and extended family members, both in the US and in their country of origin, I, too, began to recall what it was like being a child in a transnational family—family members living across national borders (Salazar Parrenas, 2015; Schmalzbauer, 2008). I remembered the apprehension I felt each time someone from our social network called to let us know that immigration raids were taking place. I also remembered my mother's words of caution. Yet as a teenager in those days, I felt conflicted. While I loved my mother and wanted to be with her, that meant giving up my life in Grenada with my friends and boyfriend and living in a new country, going to a new school. Then, I remembered my mother's sobering admonishment accompanied by her cut-eye looks when I would make statements such as "I don't mind going back," or "I miss my life," or "I don't want to live in this cold place anyway. Give me the sun and the beach any day."

That night, the people in the house who had been living here for years and had submitted their paperwork for permanent residency discussed what it was like to be approved to work but still awaiting the illusive "green card" (permanent resident card)—the ultimate confirmation that they could live and work without fear of deportation. As I listened to one of the men in the group speak about waiting four years to get his green card, his statement brought back memories of my mother speaking about the many barriers between her and the coveted green card. I recalled her discussing paying unscrupulous lawyers or people who *claimed* to be lawyers who promised her a green card within a certain period—as long as she would pay. Yet, after many years, and much more money than originally stipulated, all failed to deliver.

The conversation brought to mind the moment when my mother finally received the green card. It was not just any card; for my mother and many undocumented immigrants, this card gives legitimacy, identity, autonomy, confidence, self-worth, and agency. Gaining it improved our self-esteem and our overall health and by extension decreased our fears, anxieties, and looming doom. Once we had it, I stopped worrying about deportation every time I walked out the door and instead focused on being a teenager. The newly found freedom from the pressures of having to worry about my undocumented status made room for other life-changing events. Being a Black teenage immigrant girl in America took on new meaning for me. As a teenager in Grenada and in the US, I was always awkward in my five-foot 11-inch frame. But in America, in addition to my physical unease, I received messages in various ways that as a Black youth I was not as valued as my White counterparts. I received these messages in school and on television, which I watched far too much back then when I initially arrived in NYC. One of the most difficult

psychological issues I had to deal with was the label “minority.” I found it very hard to accept and adjust to. Coming from a country where almost everyone looked like me, I never thought of myself as a majority—but that was a privilege I had that immediately disappeared when my plane landed at Kennedy airport.

In addition to all the perils of being a Black teenager in America, I had an accent, which made me stand out whenever I spoke or felt forced to respond to a teacher’s question. I went from being an extrovert to an introvert who was insecure about my body and identity. I was tall, skinny with no curves like those of my many Latina classmates in the Bronx school I attended. In America, I was a naïve, insecure, and depressed teenager. I felt devalued and invisible to most people, except when my almost-six-foot frame and my accent outed me. Americans—Black, White, Latino and Asian alike—constantly reminded me I was different with comments and questions like “Where are you from?” or “What did you say?” If that was not bad enough, the few West Indian classmates I had often reminded me of my “small island” status. At the age of fifteen, I was a stranger in a strange land. Everything about me heightened my exposure to being “othered” by the dominant group as well as my proximal host group.

So, what made me accept the invitation to attend this gathering with this group of people? Like them, I too had lived a secret life. For years, I was haunted by the secret of being undocumented, which meant living dual identities (Du Bois, 1994). While I interacted with my classmates and teachers, I kept a significant part of my identity from them. Living in the shadows meant living in an environment with a heightened sense of vigilance and apprehension, not unlike many of the people in the room with me and the over 11 million undocumented immigrants living in this country (Krogstad et al., 2019). I was constantly fearful of seeing police cars patrolling the neighborhood I lived in, afraid that any interaction with them could inadvertently reveal my secret. Consequently, I did not have many friends, as I was concerned that bringing visibility to myself could cause me to accidentally share my secret and risk exposure to authorities. At the time, conversations with my cousins about the latest news on workplace and domicile raids were the one opportunity to openly discuss my fears of deportation, which meant leaving my mother. I lived in constant fear from one day to the next because I did not know at any given day if I would make it back home or get stopped, arrested, and deported.

My concerns were mostly for my mother. I was worried about her ability to cope with what it meant to her to be deported. Not only would deportation make her feel like a failure, but I understood that such an outcome would devastate her. Like many immigrants, my mother’s immigration vision of a “better life” included obtaining some level of financial security, but for her it meant much more than that. Her life in America also meant escaping traumatic childhood memories and failed personal relationships. In America, she was a survivor. Back home she lived in a small village, in a small country where everyone knew each other. In that limited space, there was no escaping the pain or physical and emotional abuse and the shame she was made to feel as an orphan. My mother carried her childhood traumas shackled to her ankles, easily seen by those who looked beyond her physical beauty. America for her meant more than the ability to work and take care of herself and her family; it meant anonymity and freedom from her past. Here no one cared or knew she was an orphan, or that she grew up in poverty. My mother’s life in America allowed her to escape her sadness and a lifetime of judgment found in small towns/spaces.

While she initially worked as a nanny when she first arrived, she later went to college and transitioned from having three jobs working in people's homes to one job working for the City of New York for over 20 years before she retired. In one of our quiet mother-daughter moments during the early part of her retirement, she reflected on her life and shared with me what moving to America meant to her. She said, "*I started over. I became the person I wanted to be, not who people decide for me. Grenada was too small for me. I didn't have the opportunities there I had here. Hell, you—*" and she gestured to me, "*—wouldn't be able to accomplish half of what you did with a single mother. I know it wasn't easy for you with me gone, but I did it for you as much as for me.*" My mother's immigration gave her agency and provided opportunities for me that I wouldn't have had. Yes, as a child it was a huge sacrifice, which included at times feeling abandoned, lost, and alone but, as an adult, I do understand her reasons for uprooting my life, both when she left me to travel to America and five years later when she sent for me to live with her. In retrospect, I am less angry (a work in progress) at her and more understanding of the sacrifices we made.

As I examined the people in the room on that March night, I observed their interactions, including the interviews for the documentary. I hoped to be a dispassionate observer but found myself relating at a deeper level given the similarities in our experiences. I understood that, in certain ways, being an undocumented immigrant today is living in a much more hostile climate than I did. Their expressed concerns resonated on many levels, in particular the separation and loss inherent in the transnational family experience (Best, 2014) and their experiences with transnational parenting (Best-Cummings, 2009)—parenting from a distance. As a result of the current archaic US immigration system and restrictive laws, it is not uncommon in immigrant communities for parents to live in the US for a period of time while their children remain in their country of origin. These mothers and fathers are not able to have physical contact with their children and vice versa; this separation can last years since the law does not allow undocumented immigrants to return to the US if they leave to visit their children. Also, without permanent resident status, parents are unable to simply take their children to the US with them in a process known as family reunification—derogatorily called chain migration.

The Dreamers in the room shared what it was like for them to live in two worlds, being American because they had lived here as long as they could remember, yet lacking the rights of other Americans. Specifically, they shared their fears of deportation to a country they do not know and whose language they do not speak well enough to survive professionally. Some of them discussed that, while they do speak Portuguese, they speak it like foreigners and not as educated professionals in Brazil speak; therefore, if they were deported they would be at a disadvantage. Some talked about cultural and ethnic invisibility because they are often referred to as Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Colombian, but never Brazilian. Others spoke about race and the intersection of colorism. For example, some were able to pass for White because of the color of their skin, yet had to deal with the restriction of their immigration status that the majority of their White counterparts did not have to deal with. While many of the people gathered in the room were construed socially as people of color in America or may themselves have claimed that part of their identity, in Brazil they identified as White. In America, many of them chose to "pass" as Whites in order to survive the legal ramifications of their immigration status. In America, the stereotypical phenotype of an undocumented immigrant is a person of color, so passing for White makes you less of a target for restrictive policies, such as stop-and-frisk, detainment, and

“broken windows” policing (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). As one young man who emigrated here when he was six years old pointed out, “Most people think I’m Irish because of the color of my skin, especially when I grow a beard. They have no idea I’m from Brazil.”

Another young man shared his struggles to get into college prior to President Obama’s 2012 DACA executive order. In this young man’s case, he was lucky to have had someone in his life who saw his academic potential and paid for the first semester of college while he and his parents worked to pay for his second semester. Due to the enactment of DACA, he was able to complete college with an engineering degree and he now works in his field. As he shared this very tense time in his life, he exhibited cues of his anxiety by rocking back and forth in his seat. He reported, “I followed and read everything about DACA. President Obama signed the order in June and it went into effect in August. I had my paperwork ready on the first day and I submitted it immediately so I could get a social security card. In school, you are nobody without a social security card.”

These stories were not new to me personally or professionally, but when the host turned to me and asked me to speak on camera, I wasn’t prepared for it. As part of the documentary, she asked me to tell my story as a child who was also an undocumented immigrant, adding the caveat of using my privilege today as a citizen, professor, and researcher. My first reaction was to share my story from the perspective of the “color” of immigration, using policies that are based on xenophobia and theoretical frameworks that included globalization, capitalism, and oppression, including racist restrictive immigration laws that have excluded poor people and people of color. These immigrants’ labor is only valued during wartime, when it’s farm work, or when it’s “niche” work (Eckstein & Peri, 2018) in the service industry, taxi cab industry, or hair dressing, nanny, housekeeping, or in the medical field, etc. However, I was gently reminded of the purpose of the documentary. Our host wanted to help clinicians understand what it’s like to be an undocumented immigrant in an effort to build empathy, knowledge, and effectiveness in their work with this population. She redirected me to focus on my experience as an undocumented youth. Speaking about my experience was exhilarating and painful, yet cathartic because it awakened many old memories riddled with vague losses and feelings of abandonment or, as Boss (1999) referred to it, “ambiguous loss.” Memories of my childhood as part of a transnational family and a life in the shadows flooded me. It made me realize that even though I am now a citizen who researches the immigrant experiences, like many immigrants who arrived earlier and overstayed their visas, I am very connected to an earlier part of my life as an undocumented immigrant—I too am DACA.

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