

The Artivism of Julio Salgado's *I Am Undocuqueer!* Series

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the intersections of queer and undocumented identities and experiences as manifested in the artwork of Julio Salgado, particularly in his contemporary I Am Undocuqueer! series, an ongoing collaboration between Salgado and community activist groups such as the Undocumented Queer Youth Collective and the Queer Undocumented Immigrant Project. Hybrid politics inform Salgado's work at multiple levels – in his self-identification as an "artist," his direct involvement of activist groups working for LGBTQ and undocumented rights, his inclusion of multiple languages alongside images, and his use of various public display, such as street art and via social media. In each dimension, Salgado's claims and affirms the presence of those who experience marginalization within the U.S. according to their nationality, documentation/authorization status, gender and sexual identities. His work enables the narration of undocuqueer experiences in a format that utilizes visual and linguistic modes simultaneously; considering the role of both the visual and of language in constructing xenophobic epistemologies, Salgado's chosen format embodies possibilities of resistance that are particularly notable in that they formulate resistance by reframing some of the same modalities that constitute the oppression of people according to their race/ethnicity, nationality, gender, and sexual identities. By rendering multiple dimensions of undocuqueer experience visible, Salgado envisions a politics of resistance in which rights for immigrants and queer-identified people are not separable according to the same logics that marginalize them in the first place.

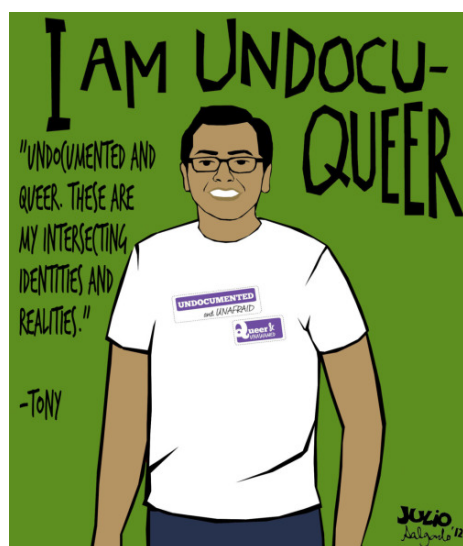


Figure 1. Tony



Figure 2. Prerna

Borders, complexity, and liberation – these foundational themes emerge in Tony and Prerna’s descriptions of undocuqueer identity and experience. Prerna (Figure 2) underscores the complexity of the personal as political. Tony (Figure 1) speaks to the ways in which undocumented status and queerness overlap in the way that he thinks of himself and experiences the world around him. Both seem to address the viewer directly, their poses confident and assured, yet casual enough to be conversational. Alongside one another, their portraits highlight complementary, though not identical, aspects of being undocuqueer. These subjects are two of many in *I Am Undocuqueer!*, a series of digital portraits by Southern California-based artist Julio Salgado. Undocuqueer politics, as Salgado references them, signify the ways in which undocumented and queer identities and experiences overlap and inform one another. As a text, Salgado’s series offers lessons about the importance of documenting social movements in general and undocuqueer movements in particular. Furthermore, it provides concrete ways of considering the politics of language and visibility within the social and legal contexts to which undocuqueer movements are responding. Despite its possibly misleading title, *I Am Undocuqueer!* serves not primarily to identify individuals, but to profile and celebrate a collective movement and the tactics they employ. In this paper, I describe the intersections of queer and undocumented identities and experiences as manifested in Salgado’s series. I explore Salgado’s work as an example of collectivist art that resists fixed identity and essentialist modalities through hybrid, multi-vocal visual representations. Salgado’s configurations of text and images create new possibilities for thinking about the demands of undocuqueer activists as well as the political realities they navigate.

Terminology

It is worth considering why Salgado elected to use the key terms of his series: “undocumented” and “queer.” Both mark specific interventions in existing political discourse – while “undocumented” speaks back to exclusionary policies that criminalize immigrants, “queer” references a critical stance toward attitudes about gender and sexuality. Salgado himself and many of the activists he profiles describe themselves and their experiences as “queer,” as opposed, or even in addition to, “gay,” “lesbian,” or “LGBT” (Salgado, 2011, p. 27). One explanation for this pattern may be that

“queer” can function as an umbrella term for those within a spectrum of non-normative sexual and gendered identities and experiences. However, this use of queer as a catch-all can sometimes have the effect of recentring the most normative identities within the group. For example, if people use “queer” as shorthand for “lesbian and gay” while leaving out other marginalized gender and sexual identities (e.g. bisexual and trans*), it can paradoxically contribute to further marginalizing groups of people. Another way that “queer” can function (and may indeed be why Salgado uses it) is in an anti-assimilationist, radical way that critiques the oppression of people on the basis of race, ethnicity, and citizenship as well as gender and sexuality. In other words, while “queer” can serve as a descriptor for non-normative genders and sexualities, it can also serve as a mode through which to question the processes that create and maintain exclusionary norms.

Salgado’s use of the term “undocumented” highlights a relationship between immigrants and the state that is fundamentally bureaucratic and potentially discriminatory. The use of the term “undocumented” highlights the relationship of infrastructure and legislature in determining (and policing) citizenship, and it also references historical trends in the U.S. in which the state has used immigration policy to exclude immigrants on the basis of ethnicity, political affiliations, and sexual orientation (Hing, 2004). Suarez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, and Suarez-Orozco (2011) utilize the term “unauthorized” to emphasize the ways in which many immigrants actually do possess documentation but lack verification of legal outcome regarding their immigration status (p. 440). Both terms mark a specific move away from “illegal” as a descriptor for immigrants who lack either documentation or authorization, as “illegal” suggests a fixed identity, employs racist overtones, and shares a history with racially exclusionary policy and ideology, such as its U.S. origin in 1888 with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011, p. 465). The historical context of restricting immigration in the service of maintaining U.S. white supremacy in addition to the contemporary discourse around “illegal” immigrants as morally bereft and inherently threatening to U.S. social and economic security mark specific reasons why “illegal” is a dehumanizing term. When Salgado and others organize under the term “undocumented,” they enable a political lens that places the emphasis back on exclusive structures rather than criminalizing the people attempting to navigate them. “Undocumented” signals a relationship with the state apparatus that generates the need for and regulates the standards of becoming documented. It is possible to read “undocumented” as a form of waiting to be documented as well as a resistance to the prerogative to become documented at all. In other words, it is an ambiguous referent — explicitly different from “illegal,” yet potentially strategic, assimilationist, and/or resistant.

Salgado’s specific use of the term “undocuqueer” marks an unwillingness to separate undocumented and queer experiences and identities. He describes how, in a literal sense, the work of his project is to document people who are both “undocumented and a part of the LGBTQ community... two communities that are systematically oppressed by the conservative right” (Salgado, 2011, p. 26). To frame undocuqueer as a collective, rather than as two distinct (and mutually exclusive) groups between which members must pick an allegiance, also functions as a form of resistance to dominant ideologies that reify norms by framing undocumented and queer issues as singular and unrelated. Beyond the literal, the use of “undocuqueer” as a descriptor signals a theoretical and linguistic inventiveness born of the desire to have words that reference people’s lives and experiences. Anzaldúa (1987) describes this practice of stretching terms and mixing ideas as a product of the borderlands, in which people learn to speak with a “forked tongue” rather than conform to a Eurocentric monoculture (p. 77). In the case of undocuqueer, the forked tongue speaks in many directions at once — to heteronormative frameworks in undocu movements and mainstream culture and also to xenophobic and U.S.-centric sentiment in LGBT communities and the broader populace. Many of Salgado’s subjects reference the importance of emphasizing this

hybrid framework in understanding and communicating their experiences. For example, Tony (Figure 1) explains, “Undocumented and queer. These are my intersecting identities and realities.” Claudia (see Figure 6) adds, “Because I can’t be one without the other.” In these simple statements, Tony and Claudia not only reflect their own experiences, but open the possibility for others to understand themselves in these terms as well. Their claims are a microcosm of Salgado’s project itself, for by providing a platform for participants to share their understandings of themselves, Salgado reflects numerous, flexible possibilities for others (even those who do not appear in the project) to awaken and stretch their own critical consciousnesses (Seif, 2004). As is evident over the course of the series, “undocuqueer” becomes a sort of placeholder that can mean many things at the same time that it references a caring, resilient criticality in the overlap of sexuality, gender, race, and nationality.

Language and the Power of Resignification

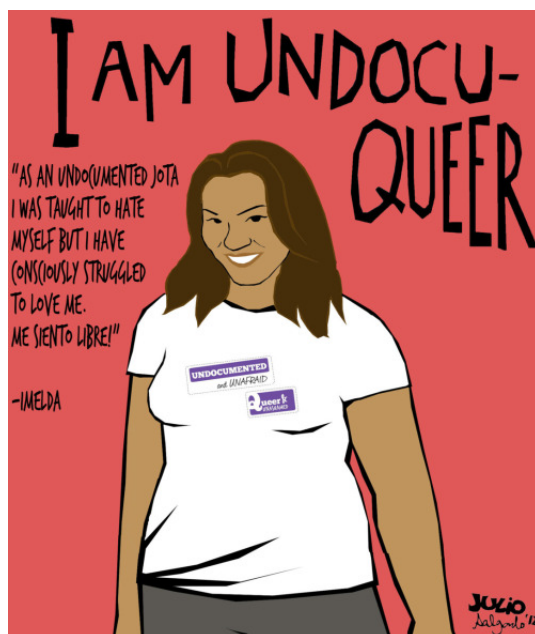


Figure 3. *Imelda*

In bringing “undocu” and “queer” together, Salgado and other activists who use it speak back to a doubled set of exclusions: that of queer people by undocumented movements, and that of undocumented people from queer politics. Regarding the latter concern of whitewashing within contemporary queer organizing, Barnard (1999) notes that although “work done under the auspices of ‘queer’ has tended to deploy mono-faceted categorizations that erase the localized presence of queers of color,” the term also “has the potential to work from and to an anti-essentialist understanding of sexuality that recognizes the historical and cultural specificity of and multiplicity within contemporary identities, including lesbian and gay identities (p. 199; p. 206). In other words, just because queer organizing has often reinforced white supremacy and U.S. centrism doesn’t mean that people are not also able to use it to challenge these exclusionary and oppressive power structures. For example, Imelda (Figure 3) describes herself in terms of the Mexican slur “jota,” a female version of “joto,” which is a highly offensive Mexican term for “homosexual.” In

doing so, she demonstrates a conscientious effort to overcome internalized oppression that is a product of both undocumented and queer status. As Pérez (2014) explains, “The act of reclaiming and resignifying a term that has historically been used to denigrate a group of people can function as a liberatory device in a variety of contexts, especially when appropriated by the subject the term was originally intended to marginalize” (p. 100). In this way, reappropriation is not only a form of inventiveness and creativity, but also an act of irreverence for and rebellion against oppressive systems that attempt to claim a monopoly on language and meaning.

While it is important to note that race and citizenship status are not synonymous, Salgado’s use of art to render the existence of specifically undocumented queer people visible is significant in light of the politics Barnard describes in which LGBT organizing often reinforces implicitly white modes of understanding sexuality.¹ Likewise, the project has the potential to speak to undocumented organizers who frame their work in heterocentric terms, overlooking, as one example, that legal marriage to a U.S. citizen is not always a viable pathway to citizenship, since same-sex partners cannot currently acquire marriage licenses in all U.S. states.

In light of the issue of documentation, it is worth noting that *I Am Undocuqueer!* itself functions as a form of documentation. Through the images of *I Am Undocuqueer!*, Salgado not only highlights the existence of people who identify as undocuqueer in general, but also specifically renders people who are involved in community organizing around undocuqueer rights. Salgado’s art exists as a way of honoring their work, promoting their visibility, and publicizing the concerns of undocuqueer people on a broader scale. As a political and creative intervention, Salgado’s series provides a form of documentation that grants a different kind of access than those affirming legal status – rather than gatekeeping opportunities, *I Am Undocuqueer!* provides an open place to identify and find community. Presumably, there are no gatekeeping mechanisms at play; all one needs to do to be represented is to opt in. As such, the project is informative to people outside of the group who may be underexposed to undocuqueer politics, but more importantly, it is potentially empowering to people within it. Despite the limitations of identity politics, it is still valuable for marginalized groups to be able to carve out an identity when dominant culture has rendered them invisible or pathological.

Art & Activist Collaborations

Salgado’s identification as an “activist” aptly describes the relationship between his artistic and activist work, for the two elements deeply inform and extend one another. This dynamic is clear in Salgado’s “I Am Undocuqueer!” series, which he began in 2010 as part of an ongoing collaboration between himself and undocuqueer community activist groups such as the Undocumented Queer Youth Collective and the Queer Undocumented Immigrant Project. The series has been exhibited in art galleries, street installations, on college campuses, and online. Salgado’s other projects include the online comic series “Liberty For All,”² the web series *Undocumented and Awkward*,³ and various illustrations of those involved in advocating for the DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act. He is also co-founder of DreamersAdrift, a media activist collective that describes itself as fostering creative projects “ABOUT undocumented youth, BY undocumented youth, and FOR undocumented youth” (<http://dreamersadrift.com/about>, emphasis original). Notably, all of these projects involve activist collaborations to some degree. Salgado explains his

¹ For further reading on whitewashed LGBT organizing, see Cathy Cohen’s (1997) “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” and Cherrie Moraga’s (1993) *The Last Generation: Prose & Poetry*.

² Salgado began writing *Liberty for All* as a Facebook project in 2010. Tina Vasquez joined as head writer in 2013. The two recently received a grant to turn the comic into a book in 2015 - 2016.

³ *Undocumented & Awkward* is a DreamersAdrift project. Salgado co-founded DreamersAdrift with Jesus Iñiguez, Deisy Hernandez, and Fernando Romero. The group met at Cal State as part of the undocu student group F.U.E.L.

inspiration for the project as emerging out of a desire to honor his fellow undocuqueer activists. In an interview on the racial justice blog, *Colorlines*, he explains:

When a lot of undocumented folks started coming out, I just had to document the folks that were at the forefront of this movement. A lot of them were fellow queer brothers and sisters that made me feel like I wasn't alone. (Salgado, 2012b)

Salgado initiated the *I Am Undocuqueer!* series with an invitation on his Tumblr that read, "If you want your own 'I am UndocuQueer!' image, message me a photograph from the waist up of yourself and a quote telling us what it means to be undocumented and queer to you" (Salgado, 2012a). To date, the project includes dozens of vibrant images of individual people proclaiming the meaning of "undocuqueer" in their lives.

Several of the people Salgado has profiled are involved in nationally visible aspects of undocumented political organizing. An especially notable event was a May 2010 sit-in, in which several undocumented organizers dressed in graduation regalia occupied Arizona Senator John McCain's office to increase visibility around and support for the passage of the DREAM Act. The target of extensive political activism and advocacy, the DREAM Act would expand educational access for undocumented youth in the U.S. if passed. Specifically, the act would grant conditional permanent residency to undocumented minors who graduate from U.S. high schools and make them eligible for eventual permanent residency upon the completion of college or military service. It is worth noting critiques such as that articulated by Nicholls & Fiorito (2015) that this proposed legislation creates unnecessary categories of immigrants who are "deserving" or "undeserving" of legal protections. At the same time, the political mobilization around the DREAM Act is also worth considering for the ways in which activists within it created visibility around issues of immigrant rights. Risking arrest and deportation, the activists who protested in McCain's office not only highlighted the ways in which existing legislation makes it difficult for undocumented people to access institutions of education but also embodied a political stance of increased visibility in the face of political and cultural pressures to remain unseen. Similar actions of undocumented advocacy took place across the U.S. – sit-ins in Atlanta and Washington, D.C., hunger strikes, and letter campaigns to President Obama. Morrissey (2013) notes the expression of coalitional subjectivity within these actions as "an orientation that understands agency, experience, and consciousness as collective and interrelated" (p. 147). As is evident in both these actions and Salgado's portraits, the relation of undocumented people to one another and to restrictive policy and discriminatory cultural attitudes is always an important part of understanding undocumented movements and demands. Rather than framing demands exclusively in terms of individual needs, the modus operandi of the organizers Salgado documents is to work on behalf of undocumented people as a whole, which inherently means acknowledging and honoring the presence of queer people within undocumented communities.

This collectivist approach is perhaps why the understanding of "undocuqueer" that Salgado references emerged within undocumented (rather than queer, or LGBT) organizing. While many (Alexander, 1994; Lorde, 1995; Puar, 2007) have critiqued LGBT advocacy efforts for focusing on middle-class, white issues and experiences to the exclusion of issues impacting poor people and people of color, others have also critiqued queer organizing for replicating these same exclusions, despite the purportedly more radical, anti-assimilationist politics from which queer organizing stems. Cohen (1997) posits that, in fact, queer organizers have often prioritized a focus on a queer/normative binary, and in doing so, have obscured the complex power relations involved in maintaining white supremacy. In order to more adequately attend to processes of oppression and marginalization, Cohen suggests that it is essential for queer movements to consider not only a diverse range of categories (e.g. citizenship, race, class) but also the ways in which the intersections of those categories can function as a means of understanding how they operate.

Salgado's series provides a clear example of just that — in speaking from the intersections of "undocu" and "queer," his subjects disrupt norms within both categories.

Hybridity of Undocuqueer

"Hybridity" is an idea that many post-colonial and critical race scholars (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bhabha, 1994) have used to reference the layered quality of experience that can characterize the meshing of multiple cultures. Specifically, the concept of hybridity allows people to note the failures of colonization or other forms of dominance to entirely subjugate and change the people, culture, and lands that they exploit. As a counterpoint to homogenization, hybridity points to the ways in which indigenous people mix elements of multiple cultures together as a form of survival. Hybrid politics are present within Salgado's work at many levels – notably, in his self-identification as an "artist," in his rendering of text alongside images, in his inclusion of both Spanish and English in his *I Am Undocuqueer!* series, and, of course, in his use of the term "undocuqueer." Salgado's identification as an "artist" serves as a way of acknowledging the inseparability of his art and his activism. By using it, he places himself in a historical context of Latin@ and Chican@ community artists and organizers who have explored the U.S.-Mexico border as "a particularly fertile site of artistic production... [from] 1965 to the present" with particular attention to the ways in which artists who work with and at the border "depart from canonical notions of aesthetic sensibility and become immersed in the aesthetic means of promoting a political cause" (Herrera-Sobek, 2006, p. 60; p. 61). For example, Sandoval and Latorre (2008) detail the work of Chicana activist Judy Baca and her collaboration with Latin@ and Chican@ youth at UCLA in a digital media project that enabled them to research and represent their communities through art. Sandoval and Latorre explain that Chican@ activism such as Baca's "expresses a consciousness aware of conflicting and meshing identities and uses these to create new angles of vision to challenge oppressive modes of thinking" (p. 83). In his digital portraits, Salgado is building upon a tradition of artists like Baca who use the combination of their art and activism to think outside of the bounds of dominant modes of representation in the interest of liberation for themselves and their communities.

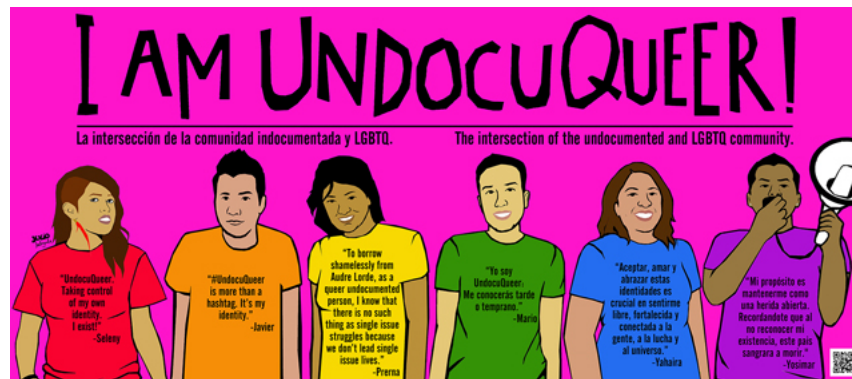


Figure 4. *I Am Undocuqueer!* Billboard

Another artist work in a similar vein to Salgado's is *Borderlands / la frontera: The New Mestiza*, a hybrid text in which Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) explores the figure of the mestiza in Chican@ politics by utilizing a variety of textual styles (e.g. poetry, historical description, lyrical prose). Through this multilingual text, she introduces the struggle over indigenous land by Mexican,

Texan, and U.S. policies, and she considers these struggles in terms of cultural identity, language, and land. She also often invokes the queer alongside and sometimes as the mestiza as figures similarly resistant to externally imposed borders. She speaks to the difficulty and the imperative of being and moving between cultures. Like Anzaldúa, Salgado makes use of dual language expression, troubling the capacity for undocuqueer identity to be expressed in only one language, and pushing against dominant ideological demands to comply to English only expression. For example, in a billboard installation⁴ of figures from the *I Am Undocuqueer!* project (see Figure 4), three of the images include text in English and three express the meaning of undocuqueer in Español.⁵ Salgado's visible renderings of subjects speaking both languages stands as a testament to role of language in undocuqueer politics, and also demonstrates his unwillingness to represent those politics in dominant modes (e.g. English only).

Anzaldúa's borderlands serve as a literal descriptor and a metaphor for the ways in which hybrid politics are both present and necessary for marginalized groups. In her portrait, Prerna (top) references the necessity of questioning and defying borders in order to live a free life. She implies that hybrid thinking and political action is important not only to understanding the forces that oppress undocuqueer people, but also to forming humane understandings of themselves and their communities. As Salgado (2011) implies, experiences of intersectional oppressions can make undocuqueer people especially attuned to the need to form complex understandings of justice that work for and acknowledge the lives of all people. Anzaldúa (1987) describes this phenomena as "la facultad," or the capacity to sense the workings of broad, complex systems within the seemingly unremarkable (p. 38). As Anzaldúa explains:

La facultad is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant "sensing," a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. (p. 38)

For undocuqueer people, la facultad can develop as both a survival mechanism when groups (even those already marginalized) make them feel unsafe, and a political intuition for envisioning routes to justice. As Anzaldúa suggests, la facultad is emotional, intuitive, sensory, and can fuel creative, specifically non-linguistic forms of expression. Since Salgado's subjects reference similar elements (e.g. love for self and community, connection, and resiliency), it is worth considering the ways in which the collective series functions as an expression of la facultad by presenting a range of visual references to an interconnected network of experiences with oppression and strategies for navigating it.

Visibility

In crafting the aesthetics of his *I Am Undocuqueer!* series, Salgado utilizes a popular social media style of incorporating text alongside images, thus requiring viewers to read interdiscursively to make meaning of the text as a whole. Each image in the series bears the phrase "I AM UNDOCU-QUEER" in distinctive lettering across its top. Salgado's rendering of each subject's photograph appears in the center of the image, sometimes looking directly at the audience, sometimes in

⁴ The billboard project was a part of Galeria De La Raza's digital murals project.

⁵ The three Español statements translate roughly as: Green: "I am UndocuQueer. You will know me sooner or later." Blue: "Accepting, loving, and embracing these identities is crucial to me feeling free, strengthened, and connected to the people, to the fight, and to the universe." Purple: "My purpose is to keep myself as an open wound. Reminding you that by not acknowledging my existence, this country will bleed to death" (translation provided by K. Street, personal communication, November 28, 2013). Notably, this last phrase directly echoes Anzaldúa's description of the U.S. / Mexico border (p. 25).

profile, and always wearing a white t-shirt with a label upon which is written “UNDOCUMENTED AND UNAFRAID.” To the left of each image appears the subject’s quote followed by their name. The images are individually distinct and, at the same time, they bear a clear stylistic resemblance to one another. Considered as a group, the pieces that comprise *I Am Undocuqueer!* do what is often difficult to do in identity politics – speak to a diversity of experiences under a unifying category. Visually, the images appear to belong together, but the differences in both the renderings of the people themselves and the statements they make speak to a range of possible ways to take up the undocuqueer label. Across the subjects’ differences, themes of pride and resiliency emerge, and the care that Salgado takes to render each person’s likeness is both stylistically striking and emotionally poignant.

In terms of distribution, the individual and collective images in Salgado’s series enable a visibility for undocuqueer people that can be both flexible and strategic, as their digital forms can be easily posted and shared on social media sites like Facebook and Tumblr. Sandoval and Latorre (2008) note that the link between activist praxis such as Salgado’s and digital technology platforms makes sense, given that both the content and the form that enable its production and distribution “[depend] on the simultaneous establishment of networks and links that work dependently, feeding on each other’s input” (p. 84 – 85). In this way, the particularly digital public-ness of Salgado’s series is conducive to both consciousness-raising and community-building around undocuqueer identity and political concerns. As the Dreamers Adrift collaborative explains on their website, visibility for undocuqueer people and movements is one of the main goals of their political project. They announce, “We are trying to document the undocumented. We’re putting our life on display through videos, art, music, spoken word, prose and poetry” (<http://dreamersadrift.com/about>). This tactic of rendering undocuqueer people and experiences visible in their own terms functions in several ways: to present counter-narratives to the discriminatory representations of undocumented immigrants and queer people that mainstream news sources often display, and to demonstrate defiance to oppressive structures that encourage undocumented and queer people to be less visible. The movement slogans “undocumented and unafraid” and “we’re here, we’re queer, we’re not going anywhere” utilized by undocumented and queer activists respectively both implicate political and social pressures on non-normative subjects to hide in such a way that restricts their freedom and/or justifies their fear of victimization by the state.

While it is important to note that legibility is neither universally coherent nor automatically liberatory, it is still valuable for undocuqueer movements to consider visibility as a political strategy for responding to the pressures to hide themselves in fear or shame. For undocuqueer people to get to distribute images that represent them positively, that are markedly different from dominant representations that either marginalize or stigmatize them, is a critical intervention directly aligned with what Anzaldúa (1987) describes as “the counterstance,” a political mode that “refutes the dominant culture’s views and beliefs, and, for this. . . is proudly defiant” (p. 100). While counter-narratives can function to sway dominant perception of marginalized groups, they are also important for those within those groups — as Salgado himself claims, learning about other undocuqueer people was vital to not only his well-being, but also to his politicization towards undocuqueer advocacy (Seif, 2014).

While Salgado displays *I Am Undocuqueer!* in both billboard and social media forms, he highlights legal forms of public art as particularly important to his status as an undocumented person. On using social media as a platform for public art, Salgado explains:

I mean literally, it’s my wall. I don’t know what I’d do without it. I saw that movie *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, about the street artists, and all I could think was, ‘yo man, I totally want to do that! But. . . these are all just white dudes!’ If I tried that and got caught, I’d have so much more at stake than just getting a ticket or being arrested. I

wouldn't see my family again for a very long time. Again, the question is who has access to do what. (Kennedy, *Colorlines*, 2012)



Figure 5. *Yahaira*

The public presence of Salgado's work is noteworthy both for the legal systems he navigates and also for the ways in which he employs visibility as a critical response to marginalization of undocuqueer people. Highlighting the political strategy of "coming out" in the context of "undocumented and unafraid" rallies organized in support of the DREAM Act, Salgado states, "Queer people like [DREAM activists] Carrillo and Abdollahi knew about the power of coming out; the act of communicating their presence to the world, even if people reacted with suspicion or disdain, gave them a sense of shared existence" (Salgado, 2011, p. 27). In this description, Salgado frames coming out as a skill that becomes useful for marginalized populations in both advocacy for their communities and critiques of oppressive institutions. As a tactic, this version of coming out is powerful because of the work it can do for and within communities. Though Salgado's series is named *I Am Undocuqueer!*, (rather than *We Are Undocuqueer!*), the project is implicitly collectivist. In rendering individuals, he also renders a group working for common liberation as well as relationships within it.

For example, Salgado's portrait of Yahaira Carillo (see Figure 5), one of the organizers involved in the 2010 Arizona sit-in, demonstrates the dialectical relationship between an individual subject and the collective to which she belongs. In speaking about what it means to be undocuqueer, Yahaira uses "we" rather than "I" to describe the process of potential liberation. Emphasizing the idea of harmony, Yahaira describes undocuqueer as the capacity to both acknowledge and love all parts of not only herself, but of the ways that she, as one person, is connected to others. In

envisioning a more harmonious existence, she implicates beliefs and practices that fragment people from parts of themselves and their surrounding environments. Her version of liberation inherently involves becoming more connected to other people and the ways in which their struggles for justice converge. Salgado's project itself functions as a representation of the relationship Yahaira references. While the image and text differ for each portrait, the style and graphic elements (e.g. font, composition, color palate) clearly mark the individual portraits as part of a larger group. At the same time, individual subjects still read as individuals within the series — their words and likenesses both index unique positionalities and appearances. As a collective, the series troubles any efforts to reduce institutional critiques to individual grievances or to make any one person stand in for all undocuqueers (tactics that often emerge in efforts to maintain an oppressive status quo).

Limitations

The politics Salgado references are not without their limits and critiques. A question that queer theory and organizing offers, for example, is whether visibility is always ultimately desirable or beneficial. Butler (2004a) interrogates the trope of the closet (which both LGBT/Q and undocumented movements employ) as necessarily freeing, positing that the prerogative to “come out” can form restricting parameters on what it means to be a liberated subject. Furthermore, she critiques the way in which the closet narrative reinforces norms by delineating normative from non-normative subjects – while non-normative subjects (e.g. undocumented immigrants, LGBTQ people) are understood in relation to the closet, normative subjects (e.g. heterosexual people, U.S. citizens), though implicitly defined by their marginalized “other,” are not expected to “come out” at all. White (2014) extends these concerns about the production and maintenance of norms in relation to Salgado's appeal to visual representation. She reads Salgado's stylistic rendering of undocuqueer subjects with bright colors and clean lines as cheerful and unthreatening — an aesthetic choice that she argues risks reifying a binary between some immigrants who are “deserving” of rights and others who are not (p. 990). In portraying undocuqueer people as ultimately hopeful, resilient, and compassionate, Salgado attempts to shift the discourse around undocumented and queer people as criminal and pathological. White argues that by doing so, he leaves open the possibility for the “bad” undocuqueer to exist in the unrepresented margins of his project. The paradox of the closet (undocuqueer or otherwise) is that it is never empty – in bringing some undocuqueer subjects out into the open and in linking their freedom to their visibility, the implication is that others remain hidden because they are not yet ready or able to claim their “freedom.” This conundrum does not necessarily indicate a shortcoming on Salgado's part, but rather points to a difficulty of the broader political discourse in which he operates.

However, this edge can play several ways. A quality worth considering is the way in which the multivocality of the series contributes to a sense that it is both unfinished and always becoming. As a series, the portraits give the sense that the project is ongoing, and inasmuch, that there are more stories to share. With each portrait comes a new nuance to the ways in which people understand themselves, their communities, and the political work that would be necessary for them to realize “livable lives” (Butler, 2004b) under the sign of “undocuqueer.” Unlike the violent tactics often employed by state bureaucracy's modes of classification, the series does not read as taxonomic, or as an archive with an imperative toward completion. Rather, the quality of personal narrative and the way that each person explains their politics points toward infinite possibilities of expression and agency.

Conclusion



Figure 6. *Claudia*

In order to be transparent regarding my own positionality as a researcher, I would like to note that I came to this project out of an interest in the potential of arts-based activism to reshape our current political landscape. While I have spent over a decade working in and thinking about queer activism, undocuqueer is a new framework for me. I approach this work with awareness that my privileges, both on the basis of race (white) and citizenship (U.S.), represent what may be significant blind spots in my ability to genuinely understand the struggles of those involved in *I Am Undocuqueer!* It is my hope that I have approached their efforts in a sense of support and solidarity. As a queer scholar and organizer who recognizes that oppressions are overlapping and intersecting, it is important to me to recognize and work toward liberatory queer politics that incorporate struggles around documentation and authorization *because* they impact other queer people.

Furthermore, considering Salgado's series as one that understand undocuqueerness as related but not limited to markers of identity is a helpful lesson in both exercises of and resistance to dominant institutions. As Barnard (1999) explains, that rather than being "disparate constituents of subjectivity or axes of power...sexuality [is] always-already racialized, and vice versa" (p. 200). While Claudia (see Figure 6) references this idea in terms of her own personal experience, within the broader context of the series, her narrative points to the ways in which none of the participants (and ultimately, no one) can reduce themselves to one descriptor or aspect of identity. In queer critiques of identity politics, theorists (Butler, 2004a; Foucault, 1978) have

argued that this complexity applies to everyone, not just marginalized populations (albeit with uneven implications and repercussions), because everyone functions within and through systems of discourse. Understanding the ways in which power is always present in the language used for constructing and reifying categories of citizenship and sexuality helps to consider the ways in which people experience violence and/or privilege within these categories.

While *I Am Undocuqueer!* attempts to address oppression within categories of sexuality and citizenship specifically, it is important to remember that neither “undocu” nor “queer” are innately connected to oppression (or are coherent as categories at all). Rather, it is a wider xenophobic, homophobic, and sexist context that makes the project (and the strategies that participants employ within it) necessary. Anzaldúa (1987) underscores this critical potential of hybrid, fluid understandings of identity politics in a border culture occupied by a mixture of more and less intelligible identity categories — “the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (p. 25). As occupants of these borderlands, Salgado and his participants continue in a tradition of Latin@ and Chican@ queer politics in which organizing around multiple coexisting identity categories is vital praxis. By refusing to separate elements of their identities and experiences into two single-issue political approaches (e.g. “undocumented” and “queer”), the subjects of *I Am Undocuqueer!* emphasize the legitimacy of their own experiences and shed light on the political elements that need to change in order to enable their collective liberation.

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