

“My Nine-Digit American-Dream”:
Undocumentedness and Unwelcomeness
in *Do You Know Who I Am?*

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Abstract

The community-based performance *Do You Know Who I Am?* (2013; Motus Theater, Boulder; dir. Kirsten Wilson) relates the lived experience in the U.S. under the DACA (Deferred Action for Child Arrivals) programme, told by an undocumented Mexican cast. By reclaiming the label ‘undocumented migrants’ whose residency on American land without legal authorisation implies a dehumanising dimension of the ‘illegal alien,’ the cast defines the state of *undocumentedness* as the lived conditions of vulnerability, exploitation, displacement and perpetual fear determined by living under ‘illegality’ and non-citizenship. My purpose is to analyse the stylistic and thematic oratorical components of the dramatic performance in line with the ontological construction of its performers as undocumented – undocumentedness itself becomes a “space of legal nonexistence” in Susan Coutin’s understanding –, unwelcome (by virtue of Derrida’s theorisation of the standards of *hostipitality*), as well as subjects/objects of racial hatred. Immigrants become collective projections of criminality, a threat to the nation within a “we” against “them” horizontal conflict (Ahmed 51). Within this framework, the performance consolidates an ontology of the Mexican migrant rooted in social stigma and the constructedness of labels, and undocumentedness becomes the locus of a collective imaginarium with repercussions on the immigrant’s survival in society.

Keywords: immigrant experience, undocumentedness, hospitality, community-based theatre, DACA, unwelcomeness, Mexican immigrant, hostipitality, *Do You Know Who I Am?*

In his essay “Hostipitality,” Jacques Derrida outlines the limits of hospitality as inherently bound to its linguistic and semantic double, hostility. As Derrida writes, the Latin origins of the word ‘hospitality’ are traced back to a state parasitised by its contrary, hostility, thus bearing the mark of a contradiction (3) capable of self-destruction since it can “only be possible on the condition of its impossibility” (5). In other words, the act of granting access and asylum into a personal space – the house of the master – to a guest implies a promise or a right to non-hostility in welcoming the guest. However, the impossibility of unconditionality underscores a hostile “law of the household” (Derrida 4) which restricts the rightful welcome. This conceptualisation bears testimony to the lived experience of the immigrant within a new national home, the guest unwelcomed by virtue of the legal conditionality of their welcome. In the community-based performance *Do You Know Who I Am?* (2013; Motus Theater, Boulder; dir. Kirsten Wilson), the focus is on the awareness of the hostility of borders, thresholds, and closing/closed doors. The many setbacks narrated by the performers are punctuated by the materiality of their disappointment and suffering, resounding as solid and startling bangs of a closed door, and under the form of the set design of ‘closed road’ signs and boxes. For Derrida, too, the inimical dimension of hospitality is symbolised by the rigidity of a threshold or door, “determinable because it is self-identical and indivisible” (6). When a man steps forward during the performance to relate the cancellation of his scholarship due to his undocumented status, his pain becomes embodied by the sharp sound and the dynamic visuality of shut doors, thresholds that refuse full entry: “All I could see were those doors closing on my face,” followed by a loud thud (Wilson). The existence of a road, too, implies a hospitality of visitation, but the

restricted access reveals it as a legally-regulated invitation (Derrida 14).

My purpose is to uncover the thematic and oratorical components of the dramatic performance which consolidate the ontological construction of its performers as undocumented and unwelcome subjects. Undocumentedness itself becomes a “space of legal nonexistence” (Coutin 32), whereas unwelcomeness (by virtue of Derrida’s theorisation of the standards of *hostipitality*) ties in with the conceptualisation of migrants as subjects – or rather, objects – of racial hatred. According to Sara Ahmed, hate as an object of passion leads to the accumulation of affect through mass-circulation, whose generator is the understanding of the other as “a threat to the object of love” (43). Immigrants become collective projections of criminality and they come to represent a threat to the nation within a “we” against “them” horizontal conflict (51). Within this framework, the performance consolidates an ontology of the Mexican migrant rooted in social stigma and the constructedness of labels, and undocumentedness becomes the locus of a collective imaginarium with repercussions on the immigrant’s survival in society. However, through their dramatic performance and self-narrativisation, performers achieve empowerment and advance a call for social and legal change.

To begin with, *Do You Know Who I Am?* is a community-based one-act performance scripted by Kirsten Wilson and staged at the Motus Theater in Boulder, Colorado. It is based on the autobiographical monologues written by the undocumented Mexican cast (Juan Juarez, Victor Galvan, Hugo Juarez, Oscar Juarez, and Ana Cristina Temu), who relate their lived experience in the U.S. under the DACA (Deferred Action for Child Arrivals) programme. Implemented by President Barack Obama in 2012, DACA provided the executive framework against deportation for undocumented people who were brought into the United States as children. The renewable two-year period of protection from deportation included an eligibility for a work permit, but it did not provide a legal path to citizenship, unlike the legislative proposal known as the DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education

for Alien Minors Act). In a study conducted by the Brookings Institution in 2013, the average applicant for the program was revealed to have been 20 years old at the time of application, with the consequence that older applicants faced a significant chance to be denied protection under the DACA (Taurel). The study largely confirmed the long-held belief that young illegal immigrants to the U.S. deserve a better chance at being legally acknowledged, due to their being brought to and raised in the United States from an early age, as these aspects render them “essentially American in all but legal status” (Semple). Similarly, the absence of the conscious choice of immigration provides a moral leverage in the case of children. As one of the performers explains, “people say I’m a criminal because I broke the law when I crossed some border. I didn’t choose to be here. I didn’t sit at the table with my family and take a vote on where we were gonna go on vacation” (Wilson). A chant follows, suggesting Disneyland, Jamaica, Florence, and Paris, as possible ‘vacation’ destinations that could have replaced the United States (Wilson).

The backbone of the performance is the first-hand narrativisation of the experience of undocumented immigrants living ‘illegal’ lives in the U.S. The structure of the performance highlights acts of witnessing and direct experience. As each performer narrates stories of social exclusion and legal anxiety, the candid manner of their telling draws degrees of empathy from the audience without commodifying their vulnerabilities based on the receiving endpoint, and without relying on a permanent dialogue that might validate their hardship. Additionally, the focus of the narration is less on an innocent sense of vehement hopefulness or an expression of forced gratitude, but rather it reinforces the urgent call for social change and the ongoing struggle for an appropriate legal framework. The stage becomes a testimonial site that resists a single and unitary story of ‘being an undocumented citizen in the United States.’ The performance intertwines stories that are superimposed or derive one from the other, in order to problematize different ontologies inherent to the discourse of undocumentedness: a man and a woman grapple with the implications and

consequences of reporting a car accident to a policeman that would inevitably demand to see a driver's license, a summer of selling burritos and *tamales* alongside his overworked mother in a what he calls a 'two-person burrito factory' leads a young man to reconsider the existing academic opportunities for an undocumented migrant, while a teenager's life through high school reveals the unequal footing between himself and his peers.

By reclaiming the label of 'undocumented migrants' whose residency on American land without legal authorisation implies a dehumanising "illegal alien" dimension, the cast defines the state of undocumentedness as the lived conditions of vulnerability, exploitation, displacement and perpetual fear determined by living under 'illegality' and non-citizenship (Guterman 2). Gad Guterman introduces the term "undocumentedness" in an attempt to untangle the "tricky nature of immigration law," given the interdependence between matters of identity and law, and to remove the criminalising component of the language of "illegal aliens" (2). As Guterman explains, "illegal alien" has been legally employed since the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 to refer to a "a real legal entity . . . in statutes, executive orders, and court cases" (2). More specifically, Roberto G. Gonzales and Leo R. Chavez discuss the concept of *abjectivity* (first introduced by Sarah S. Willen) as the embodied position of Latino immigrants, blending the process of othering inherent to Kristevan abjection within the necessity of enabling subjectivity and agency in the understanding of "illegality" as a "juridical status, as a sociopolitical condition, and, finally, as a mode of being-in-the-world" experienced by real subjects (256). Susan Coutin defined the "space of legal nonexistence" as a "physical presence" that amounts to "legal absence" unfolding in "a space that is not actually 'elsewhere' or beyond borders but that is rather a hidden dimension of social reality" (qtd. in Guterman 258). Their status of illegality is determined by Foucaultian practices of biopolitics, in which citizenship becomes a "rite of institution" in Pierre Bourdieu's understanding, capable of constructing identities, regulating belonging, and enclosing social opportunities and living conditions

through surveillance, control and withholding of documents that would ease the life of Mexican immigrants in the U.S., notwithstanding the permanent threat of deportation and the necessity of living an invisible life (Gonzales and Chavez 256).

Do You Know Who I Am? ascribes to a complex tradition of both Latina/o theatrical performances and stories centering the lived experience of subjects who are legally undocumented inhabitants of the United States (Guterman 2). Most of the performers are “1.5 generation Latinos” – that is, people “who migrated at a young age” and whose education and “social and cultural development” unfolded in the host country (Gonzales and Chavez 257-258). Oscar Juarez relates his night-time border-passing during childhood: “All I remember was being asleep in the car, in the front seat where you put your feet. . . . And now, you still think I’m a criminal for breaking the law when I crossed the border *when I was asleep?*” (Wilson). These young people experienced childhoods that were not significantly different from those of U.S.-born children: “I don’t even know what Mexico is like. I’ve been here since I was a little kid, singing the pledge of allegiance, saluting the American flags since I can remember” (Wilson). Similarly, they did not experience the effects of illegality during childhood because they were not yet bound to the necessity of identification practices, and their American-born friends were not yet inculcated with the culture of racial difference, as one performer confesses that “kids didn’t care if you spoke English or not” (Wilson). However, reaching adulthood prompts the coming to an awareness of their illegality, their differences and available opportunities, which did not match those of their American friends, with one interviewee comparing it to “awakening to a nightmare” (Gonzales and Chavez 262), the same metaphor being employed in Wilson’s performance as well: “Being undocumented wasn’t only a status. It was a nightmare.” Coutin emphasises the substantial anxiety that marks the moving into adulthood (65), specifically the period preceding graduation, when students with excellent results and dreams of an academic path are faced with their inability to produce identification documents for attending a public college or

university and obtaining scholarships: “I am a Coloradoan, and an excelling student, and I deserve to go to college at the same rate as the students who will graduate with me” (Wilson). High school, too, was “hell” when one did not speak or understand the national language – the word ‘*English*’ gets repeated during the performance in a harassing and haunting chorus, a symbol of linguistic insufficiency –, and when one could not hold any “decent-paying job” that would allow financial security, these being some of the “emotional obstacles of being undocumented” (Wilson). When Juan Juarez’s grandfather died – “who[m] I was determined to go back to Mexico to see one day” – he understands the depth of their social and legislative alienation, since going to Mexico implied never returning to their American home: “for a piece of paper with numbers that we didn’t have, I had to see my mom suffer” (Wilson).

Regulation of immigrant lives imposes the necessity of leading a “bare life” in Giorgio Agamben’s understanding, an embodiment of “states of exception, their lives bracketed as in the nation but not part of the nation, which allows them to become the object of laws and other techniques of regulation” (Gonzales and Chavez 257). The necessity of laws that control the admission of immigrants within the country, as well as the reduced prospects for the acquisition of citizenship are narratives rooted in emotions of hatred and hatefulness, which can be seen as extensions of the Derridean hostility of hospitality. Ahmed discusses these narratives as founded on the imagined nation and its imagined subjects, which are perceived as threatened by imagined others whose access to the nation-state does not only enable them to “take something away from the subject (jobs, security, wealth), but to take the place of the subject” (43). Leo R. Chavez analyses the specific dimensions of the “Latina Threat Narrative,” originating in the Mexican-American War and its historical enabling of a discourse in which Latinos are renowned for being different from other ethnic groups in their social isolation, which signals their plan of reconquering the American Southwest (4). The imagined American community regulates its standards of belonging through the circulation of “media spectacles” – defined as any “productive acts that construct

knowledge about subjects in our world” – which actively strive to objectify and dehumanise Latinos for a political agenda (Chavez 5-6). If the imagined others can be successfully *framed* – in Judith Butler’s connotation of the term, understood as a political operation of power which by *framing* accuses and perpetuates hegemonic conditions of recognisability – then the imagined subject is entitled to protecting itself and its object of love (the nation). Media spectacles and their narratives of ‘illegal aliens’ and the ‘migrant crisis’ are capable of commodifying hateful emotions and turn them into capital, with the effect that its very circulation and exchange among the masses will increase its value and solidify its relevance and the urgency of its threat as an *affect* (Ahmed 45).

The name of the performance – *Do You Know Who I Am?* – poses a direct question to the audience, and its answers are given in two modes, by stating what *I am* – “I am undocumented” – and what *I am not* – “I am not a criminal” (Wilson). What is sought is the de-criminalisation of undocumentedness as a mode of being that poses a threat to the nation, in preference to rendering it as a locus of vulnerability and fear. Similarly, referencing the origin – being a lawful *documented* citizen – is an unstable comparison, since positions can be inverted and they restrict the identification of any “temporal or logical priority of either term” (Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 313). In his *Peace and Proximity*, Emmanuel Levinas advances the concept of the *face* as that which is “not exclusively a human face” but rather a rendering of the “extreme precariousness of the other” (167). The performers are exposed in a dimly-lit open stage decorated with a minimal and utilitarian set of props – boxes and closed road signs that are moved around throughout the scenes – that embodies a sense of vulnerability and, quite notably, personal suffering at the hands of a collective sense of legal injustice. The former is shared by performers who take turns in telling parts of their story, at times in a dialogue of shared yet individualised hardship, as they strive to overcome the prevalent conflation of undocumentedness with criminal activity. The performers perpetually address themselves to the audience, a dramatic choice that renders them the *face* of legal

and social injustice, a reality that must be reflected back onto those who do not inhabit it:

I am not a criminal. I am not here to steal money or take anyone's life for no reason. I am here to help, help anyone who needs my help. That is why I was born, . . . I was born to help, that is simply who I am. There are so many people dying of hunger, living in the streets with no help. And yet, people think I'm here to have a lot of kids . . . without paying any taxes, or so I can get a check from the government and spend it all on myself. Well, guess what, I am not here to take advantage of you, the U.S. government, or anyone else. I am here to help those little kids that need toys to play with, I am here to put a smile on their face when they eat a good meal before they get into bed. I am here to help those parents keep moving forward in life. But somehow, people think I am here to sell drugs, they think I'm part of a gang because I have tattoos, or that I'm out there stealing cars. Is that why people turn on their alarm systems when they see me? Well, I don't have a fancy car and I don't want to steal yours. Mine takes me to places, like my soccer games, music classes, it takes me to the woods where I take pictures of birds, trees, mountains. I would love you to see that, but when I try to show people who I am (BANG) they still see a criminal. (Wilson)

The narrativization of injustice creates, according to Butler, “a sense of political community” based on “relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility (*Precarious Life* 22-23). In the same way that one becomes ethically responsible for the other, so does the self become aware that its own vulnerability is enmeshed in a relational web. Butler emphasises that bodies have an “invariably public dimension,” because “constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine,” since it is “given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life” (*Precarious Life* 26). The performance ends with Ana Cristina Temu's soliloquy that touches upon her privileged position as American citizen and her responsibility towards her undocumented relatives and friends, as

well as the societal stigma faced by those who are deemed to lead ‘unlawful’ lives:

My mother’s husband, my husband, my mother, my father, friends from high school. I could go on and on about all the people I love who are immigrants and undocumented, and the daily injustices, obstacles and threats, the way they could be taken advantage of simply because the law doesn’t protect them. Some days, I feel so overwhelmed, that simply bc they weren’t born in the U.S. like me, they have to face so many more obstacles and threats. It’s not fair. Sometimes, I just want to hand someone my social security number, just take it, take it because that’s all it is, a nine-digit number holding this country’s people back from their full potential. I have to wake up in the morning and witness the hard work put into this country. And then I watch us, the *privileged*, judge, hate, blame, and criticise when we forgot the struggle that our great-great-great-great-grandparents had to go through, their fight and their courage when they immigrated, the same fight and the same courage we witness in the people today [that] we say don’t belong? As a citizen, I feel the responsibility to fix the problem. Because I can vote and because I can walk out that door without the fear of being sent to an unknown country, or being ripped apart from my family. Do you want to know what my dream is? What my nine-digit American dream is? I am going to make sure that *their* dreams are realised. Will you help me? (Wilson)

In an exclusive variation of the performance, the cast performed alongside police representatives who read the monologues alongside immigrants, thus restructuring the politics of victimhood and oppression. In the original performance, the targeting of immigrants took the shape of familiar and cruel police demands such as “Show me your papers!” or “Let me see your driver’s license!” (Wilson). In 2017, for a one-time special performance of *Do You Know Who I Am?*, it was the police force – the district attorney from Boulder County, alongside the county sheriff and police chiefs of Longmont and Louisville – who took on the role of undocumented immigrants. Wilson explained that the exclusive twist on the performance was inspired by a desire to

assist undocumented subjects through a stressful post-election period, and to contribute to the “law enforcement conversation” by short-circuiting the “association between being undocumented and being a criminal threat” (qtd. in Barge).

Guterman signals the interdependent connection between law and identity, with “legal identity” materialising as a new marker with as much relevance as gender or nationality (14). However, Linda Bosniak draws attention to the fact that legal identities do not always form cohesive or homogeneous communities, but that alienage – the participation of legal practices to the subalternisation of individuals, often incorrectly understood as “mere proxy for other forms of oppression” (134) – is a defining characteristic of the experience of noncitizens. As she contends, since undocumentedness is tied with the ever-present threat of deportation for ‘illegal’ immigrants, its looming possibility “arguably structure[s] their experience in this country more than any other single factor” (135).

When policemen perform the narrativisations of undocumentedness and vulnerability, the horizontal opposition of ‘us’ against ‘them’ breaks down, since it reveals the constructedness of the threat, and it returns the affect of the imagined subject back to themselves, rather than extended onto the Other. Through the propagation of discriminatory discourses, bodies become imprinted, and it is this “materialis[ation] [of] the very ‘surface’ of collective bodies” (Ahmed 47) that justifies the criminalisation of the undocumented. Similarly, a reversion of position occurs: the body of the oppressor becomes the site of victimhood, a land under threat by the re-imagined immigrant oppression. The reinterpretation of the performance, in which figures of power replace victims, becomes a heterotopia that allows multiple cultural sites to be “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault and Miskowiec 22). The stage, too, enables the accumulation of incompatible sites “that are foreign to one another” (Foucault and Miskowiec 25), a site of empowerment, resistance, and reclamation of narratives.

As Galvan recounts his early childhood mornings spent wrapping *tamales* and the “summer[s] of selling burritos,” he confesses to have protested to his mother about their situation: “Why can’t you get a real job, like my friends’ mother? A teacher or a secretary?” (Wilson). His mother’s reply – a reminder of their distinct status in America – becomes the trigger of his realisation of difference, and later the site of empowerment. What was previously experienced as shameful and degrading becomes a source of strength, testimony to the Galvans’ resistance. As the son declares that “I’m gonna be a great man one day. I am and I will always be my mother’s son” (Wilson), he expresses his pride in his mother and her life-long sacrifices, and he relocates the blame to the system, all while promoting social justice by means of an immigration reform, “so that work of every immigrant working so hard in this country will finally be rewarded and let our dreams come true” (Wilson).

In conclusion, hospitality extended to immigrants remains marred by the hostility and the conditionality of its welcome; one can cross the national threshold and enter into the master’s house, but the host regulates the guest’s stay. Mexican immigrants, in particular, inhabit a space of stigmatisation which is widely circulated and commodified, and its roots in an imagined threat to the nation justifies legislative practices that would protect American land. Thus, theatre offers the means of reclaiming dangerous labels and expressing degrees of empowerment in one’s vulnerability and activism.

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