Open Hand, Closed Fist: Undocumented Immigrants Mobilize in the Valley of the Sun
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Brief Description
This book explores the emergence of an unlikely social movement, in an unlikely place. Since the early 2000s, Arizona’s campaign of “enforcement by attrition” aimed to make life so miserable for undocumented immigrants that they would self-deport to their countries of origin. Its serial denial of state benefits was capped in 2010 by SB 1070, which criminalized authorized presence, penalized assistance from documented residents, and empowered police to demand papers of anyone suspected of being undocumented. This spate of legislation produced many of its desired effects: fear and confusion swept through undocumented communities; immigrants left the state or struggled to live further from public view. But it also sparked a surprising mobilization: immigrant neighborhoods organized copwatch operations; mixed status communities rallied, proclaiming “no human being is illegal”; undocumented women of faith led a 100-day vigil outside the State House, which began with prayer and finished by registering voters. These improbable activists lacked resources or infrastructure; their public identities had been corrosively framed by stigmatizing campaigns. Moreover, the youth and adults who were responding like citizens lacked any form of legal status; they could be subject to deportation if apprehended by state officials. How did members of a deeply disenfranchised group develop the sense of authorization necessary to make public claims? How did those who lacked the vote, or any formal relationship to state actors, persuade those actors and the public to view their claims as legitimate, as relevant perspectives rather than “illegitimate ‘noises’”?2

“Open Hand, Closed Fist” aims to answer these questions by analyzing a new form of social movement organization: organizations advocating for undocumented immigrants, that center the perspectives and cultivate the leadership of those “most affected” by immigration policy. (I refer to such organizations below as “undocumented organizations”). This book draws on more than four years of qualitative empirical work, including ethnographic observation with organizations in Phoenix and close to 100 semi-structured, recorded interviews with activists, organization leaders, and allies.3 It examines the

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1 This (tentative) title is taken from expressions used by activists I’ve worked with. “Open Hand, Closed Fist” is a phrase used by Puente (see below) to capture their solidaristic, oppositional approach to organizing. It also corresponds to some of the important practices I identify as authorizing and legitimating a movement of non-citizens. “The Valley of the Sun” is a term used by some residents to describe the greater Phoenix area.

2 This phrase, which is used to capture a view its author does not share, comes from Walter Nicholls, Making Undocumented Immigrants into a Legitimate Political Subject: Theoretical Observations from the United States and France, 30 Theory, Culture & Society 82, 89 (2013).

3 The primary period of my fieldwork extended from April 2012-April 2015, with follow-up work in the summer of 2016, and then intermittently between January 2017 (following the election of Donald Trump, the announcement of new executive orders on immigration, and the implementation of new strategies of enforcement), and Fall 2019. My observation and interviews focused most closely on the work of three organizations: the Arizona DREAM Act Coalition (ADAC), an organization that has pursued a broad agenda of change on behalf of undocumented youth; Puente-Arizona, a community-based organization that has focused primarily on anti-deportation work and
interactions through which these organizations helped to form a new group of activists, and engaged with state actors and institutions, over time, to effect change. The book argues that the most distinctive challenges faced by these organizations – the internal authorization and the external legitimation of undocumented activists – were addressed through three practices. **Experiential storytelling** countered the stigma of “illegality” and helped each activist see how she could contribute to the emerging movement. **Emotion cultures** also contributed to the authorization of activists: ending isolation and mitigating fear by fostering solidarity, preparing activists to withstand emotionally demanding campaigns. But if storytelling and emotion cultures helped to authorize new activists, and allowed them to present their message in the field, the movement’s legitimating function was achieved largely through tactics of “performatively citizenship.” Through these tactics undocumented activists took on visible, familiar political roles, that were not strictly prohibited to, but had not previously been performed by, undocumented people. From pro-system roles such as registering voters to oppositional roles such as direct action or civil disobedience, tactics of performative citizenship used shared cultural understandings to convey the message that participants contributed and belonged. Variation in these roles, like the shifts in narrative and emotional stance that activists performed over time, enabled them to adapt to wide-ranging state responses and counter-strategies.

Emergence in the crucible of “enforcement by attrition” has produced a distinctively resilient, multigenerational group of activists; yet the greatest legacy of the Phoenix movement may be one that it shares with immigrant-friendlier jurisdictions: enabling confident, resonant activism by those without legal status. This achievement could reshape the political landscape, and revise scholarly understandings of social movements and political membership. Moreover, the practices that have shaped it – storytelling, emotion culture, and performative citizenship – may contribute to “challenger” movements that face persistent inequality despite their formal citizenship, in an era of unmatched governmental hostility.

Outline and Contents of the Book

**Introduction (“Unlikely Activists in an Unlikely Place”)** considers the unlikely emergence of undocumented activism in Phoenix. It frames organizations that have advanced the well-being and the perspectives of undocumented immigrants as social movement organizations; and it highlights those features that make them surprising or atypical, in light of widespread public assumptions, or predictions of the social movement literature. These distinctive features include the circumstances under which they emerged, the non-citizens whom they mobilize, the strategies and tactics developed specifically for these participants, and the unusually varied state counter-measures to which they have been subject. After describing the methods through which I studied undocumented organizations and on resisting immigration enforcement by local officials in Maricopa County; and **Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA)**, an organization that has combined pro-immigrant with broader anti-poverty work, focusing on civic engagement, housing issues, and minimum-wage campaigns. It also includes two other organizations: **Promise-Arizona, (PAZ)** a civic engagement and youth empowerment organization that I observed primarily in the early stages of the research; and **Aliento**, a new organization that emerged as I began follow-up work in 2016. Because portions of the book analyze organizational activity in the period before my fieldwork began, or analyze other groups of activists, the book draws as well on a media and social media database created over the course of the project, and on secondary research
activists in Phoenix, I preview my central claims about how these organizations have accomplished their improbable work, and outline the chapters to come.

**Chapter 1** (“Attrition by Enforcement and Early Mobilization”) describes enforcement by attrition in Arizona. It explains that immigrant communities and local allies responded first by developing discrete practices of resistance and activating local networks, and then by forming dedicated social movement organizations. A “barrio defense” and copwatch program focused on the incursions of Sheriff Joe Arpaio became the nucleus of Puente; and a group of ASU students struggling to continue their education after losing in-state tuition and public scholarships to Prop 300 became the founders of the Arizona DREAM Act Coalition. These new organizations sought to protect and advocate for Phoenix’s undocumented communities; they also sought to give voice and leadership to those “most affected” by the state’s anti-immigrant agenda.

The chapter also argues that early immigrant organizing in Phoenix both defied and conformed to predictions of leading theorists of social movement emergence. Noting the conspicuous political “closing” created by attrition by enforcement, it asks whether the failure of positive political opportunity might be met by theories of “negative political opportunity,” such as Chris Zepeda-Millan’s notion of “double threat” to the individual and collective dimensions of identity. It suggests that organizers in Phoenix, while lacking in material resources, had access to other resources that enabled mobilization, including informal networks, and support from a large, pre-existing Latino community. Moreover, the unanticipated extremity of SB 1070 sparked a flow of financial and infrastructural resources into the state, enabling the formation of more durable organizations. These resource enabled the founding of LUCHA, a group working at the intersection of immigration, labor, and anti-poverty politics, and Promise-Arizona, a civic engagement organization aimed at the empowerment of youth.

**Chapter 2** (“Practices of Authorization and Legitimation: Storytelling, Emotion Cultures, and Performative Citizenship”) asks how undocumented organizations respond to the challenge of authorizing, and legitimating activism by participants without legal status. These demands, particularly acute under enforcement by attrition, give rise to three prevalent practices. The first two, experiential storytelling and the creation of organizational “emotion cultures,” foster the sense of political authorization that enables participants to engage in outward-facing activism.

**Storytelling** fights shame and fear by supporting new, empowering understandings of what it means to be undocumented; it also fosters a sense of solidarity among group members that motivates public action and makes it feel less daunting. The chapter identifies a set of “metanarratives,” or organizational stories about stories, that signal the centrality of stories in the movement and describe them as a resource that every undocumented individual can bring to activism. The demands of sharing experiential narratives -- in particular the need to be emotionally transparent about painful life experience -- point to the role of emotion culture in forming undocumented activists. Through a set of implicit and explicit understandings about what activists should feel, and when and how best to communicate it, organizations prepare activists for the challenges of life in the public sphere.

Both the storytelling and the emotional pedagogy of organizations have a subtly performative character: they encourage prospective activists to represent themselves publicly in ways that they may not yet have fully internalized, as a means of fueling that internalization. This strategy previews the final practice, *performative citizenship*, which shapes the tactics of undocumented activists as they turn outward to engage public actors. Performative citizenship addresses the second challenge facing a
movement of non-citizens: the need to establish their legitimacy as political actors. This strategy places undocumented activists in roles that are strongly associated with citizenship, both historically and in contemporary political culture: from registering voters, to lobbying legislators, to engaging in civil disobedience. This practice brings undocumented activists closer to the status they publicly perform not simply by shaping the expectations of observers, but by enabling activists to learn these roles from the inside. This experience fosters a sense of institutional knowledge, investment, and authorization, and gives rise to new expectations of accountability from public officials.

Chapters 3-5 trace the operation of these three practices, as undocumented activism and pro-immigrant activism more generally unfolded in Phoenix. Chapter 3 describes the early socialization of activists, as it occurred within four organizations in Phoenix. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on campaigns through which Arizona organizations engaged a series of public actors and institutions; they analyze change over time in the practices of organizations. These chapters underscore the centrality and flexibility of the strategy of performative citizenship, which serves as a kind of motor in these campaigns; and they highlight shifts in narrative and emotional stance, that work as rudders of movement effort, helping the movement to negotiate varied institutional responses. These chapters also illuminate relations of mutual constitution between movement actors and state actors: organizations press government actors toward new and bolder forms of relief; they in turn adapt their strategies to address varied audiences, and sometimes-frustrating forms of institutional response. These chapters finally trace a path from “contained contention” – social movement activity that may press against but generally respects the accepted limits of contention – to “transgressive contention,” which exceeds it.4

Chapter 3 (“From Vulnerability to Organization”) begins from the perspective of potential activists. It offers hypotheses, drawn from the interview data, about the factors that lead some undocumented adults and youth, through largely distinct paths, to seek out social movement organizations. Shifting the focus from the individual to the organization, the chapter then examines the ways that organizations use storytelling and the creation of robust emotion cultures to transform vulnerable targets of state law into increasingly confident, outward-facing activists. In youth organizations, such as ADAC and LUCHA, storytelling is at the core of a political and emotional pedagogy: hearing the stories of others, new participants overcome stigma by discovering what undocumented immigrants can achieve; sharing their own stories, they bond with others and learn the emotional transparency that will allow them to engage the public. Organizations focused on adults, such as Puente, present themselves less as social movement organizations than as community resources. Fostering a familial solidarity that persuades new participants that a community “has their back,” they invite members to engage in protest and resistance. They describe this variant of the practices described in Chapter 2 as “open hand, closed fist.”

Chapter 4 (“The Performative Citizenship of the “Undocumented and Unafraid””) explores three campaigns that demonstrate the malleability and providence of the strategy of performative citizenship. In the first, the long campaign for DACA – waged in Arizona as elsewhere -- youth activists drew on the credibility generated by their national role as paradigmatic “good immigrants,” but resisted the stasis first of Congress and then of the President, by positioning themselves as “undocumented and unafraid.” This meant not simply articulating a new, defiant strand of identity, but engaging in tactics that included public self-disclosure and civil disobedience. Activists from ADAC were leaders in this national effort, finding new ways to present themselves as undocumented, and engaging in civil disobedience in support

of the DREAM Act. In the second, the “Adios Arpaio” campaign organized by PAZ and hospitality union Unite Here, youth canvassers occupied a quintessential role of American citizenship – registering and encouraging voters. Going door-to-door in the searing Arizona heat, explaining to citizen-neighbors the stakes of the vote, 2000 largely undocumented youth registered 35,000 new (Latino) voters for the 2012 election. In the third campaign, The Undocubus, adults and families drawing inspiration from the “undocumented and unafraid,” and from the tactics of the Civil Rights Movement, staged a daring voyage of community organizing in anti-immigrant cities and states, en route to an act of civil disobedience at the 2012 Democratic National Convention.

Chapter 5 (“The Oppositional Citizenship of the “Not1More Deportation” Campaign”), which analyzes the “Not 1 More Deportation” campaign, in Arizona and nationwide, tells a more singular story of adaptation and transformation in the undocumented immigrants’ movement. It describes a dramatic, purposeful recalibration between legitimation and challenge, following the failure of Comprehensive Immigration Reform. The logic of this campaign united the previously separate youth and adult strands of the movement in Phoenix, as youth reconceived their identities as members of embattled families, and adults pressed into more ambitious and contentious forms of public appearance. Puente took its anti-deportation campaigns nationwide with a series of wrenching, innovative social media campaigns; its efforts were joined by leaders from ADAC, whose struggles with Washington politics and the detention of their own parents led them to challenge the narratives and tactics of the youth movement. This chapter explores not only the tactics that pushed the movement beyond the accepted bounds of political contention, but the substantive claims that began with the demand for “deferred action for all,” but pressed on toward open borders and the abolition of immigrant detention.

Chapter 6 (“The Political Consciousness of Undocumented Activists”) steps back from the focus on organizational and institutional actors, to examine the effect of movement participation on the political consciousness of activists. It asks whether activism engenders in the subjectivity of activists the de facto membership it publicly performs. Investigating subjective indicia of “membership” experienced by activists – from investment in particular institutions to perceptions of relationship with public actors – it finds that these elements have varied with the institutions and actors that activists have engaged. Face-to-face local engagement appears to have produced the strongest sense of membership, and of relationship with elected officials. Surveying the federal campaigns and examples of “legal mobilization” that have been more equivocal in their effects on participants, the chapter poses a final question: do tactics of performative citizenship require some level of formal recognition from their audience, in order to fuel ongoing participation? Does it become difficult for undocumented participants to persist, either in their activism or in their sense of authorization, when state officials fail to recognize or respond to the membership they perform? This chapter offers the tentative conclusion that failures of reception have led to disillusionment with particular institutions, but they have not appeared to diminish participants’ sense of authorization. Rather, they have led activists focus their energies on more receptive targets.

This final insight is confirmed in Chapter 7 (“Postscript: “America Woke Up in Arizona””), a postscript on Phoenix activism during the Trump administration. Facing resurgent fear in undocumented communities, and uncertainty about what strategies might succeed in the new environment, organizations have gradually refocused their efforts. Some strategies honed during “enforcement by attrition” have proved useful: organizations have used “know your rights” trainings, “barrio defense” practices, and solidaristic outreach to answer an upsurge of fear in undocumented communities. But the decreasing efficacy of Obama-era tools for addressing the federal government, from lobbying to direct
action and civil disobedience, have raised sobering questions. How do organizations of activists with few formal rights engage a President whose rhetoric and core supporters are starkly anti-immigrant, and who is not capable, as one activist put it, “of being shamed”? How do participants sustain their activism when they find the tide of national politics shifting against them? Phoenix organizations have sustained their internal sense of investment and efficacy by focusing, purposefully, on the longer-term futures of their communities, and on state and local political processes.

While working to calm and organize undocumented communities in the face of federal enforcement initiatives, organizations have engaged vigorously with institutions of state and local government and have begun to cultivate the next generation of activists. This pattern can be glimpsed in the post-2016 work of three organizations. LUCHA extended its empowering civic engagement programs through a focus on worker’s rights and the support of pro-immigrant candidates, it has also sought to create a new multi-racial membership. Puente has continued its efforts to inform communities and fight deportations, while cultivating a new focus on civic engagement through the successful campaign City Council campaign of lead organizer Carlos Garcia. Aliento, a new organization founded by ADAC leader Reyna Montoya, has used creative arts to address the continuing trauma of enhanced enforcement, and organized youth to press for educational access and tuition reform.