

DIARY OF AN UNDOCUMENTED DREAMER. UNDOCUMENTED VIGNETTES FROM A PRE-AMERICAN LIFE AND THE HETEROGENEITY OF AMERICAN LIFE

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on Alberto Ledesma's *Diary of an Undocumented Dreamer. Undocumented Vignettes from a Pre-American Life* (2017). Ledesma's graphic autobiography vividly illustrates his struggles to do justice to his story as, at some point in his life, an undocumented person while also presenting the story of undocumented students. This oscillation between singularity and the claim for broader representation is fully engaged in the *Diary* and constitutes one of its most important contributions, politically and culturally.

KEYWORDS: Undocumented; DACA; citizenship; illegality; Dreamer.

RESUMEN

El ensayo analiza el texto *Diary of an Undocumented Dreamer. Undocumented Vignettes from a Pre-American Life* de Alberto Ledesma (2017). La autobiografía

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gráfica de Ledesma ilustra con gran vividez sus esfuerzos por hacerle justicia a su propia historia en tanto indocumentado, al menos durante un período de su vida, al mismo tiempo que propone esa vida como un caso paradigmático en la vida de los indocumentados en general. Esta oscilación entre la singularidad y el reclamo de un grado mayor de representación se transforma en uno de los ejes del texto y constituye una de sus más importantes contribuciones en lo político y cultural.

PALABRAS CLAVE: indocumentado; DACA; ciudadanía; ilegalidad; Dreamer.

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“Just because you only value my arms and my back, it does not mean that I lack a mind with which to reflect on my condition. [...] But the kind of literacy I possess is not one you value, my voice is not one you can hear.”
(Ledesma, *Diary of an Undocumented Dreamer* 5)

“Today, I am a Mexican American citizen [...] Safety is no longer contingent on remaining silent and invisible.
[...] I want my citizenship to matter.”
(Ledesma, *Diary of an Undocumented Dreamer* 47)

This essay focuses on Alberto Ledesma’s *Diary of an Undocumented Dreamer. Undocumented Vignettes from a Pre-American Life* (2017). Ledesma’s graphic autobiography vividly illustrates his struggles to do justice to his story as, at some point in his life, an undocumented person while also presenting *the* story of undocumented students. This oscillation between singularity and the claim for broader representation is fully engaged in the *Diary* and constitutes one of its most important contributions, politically and culturally. Going from undocumented child arriving from Mexico with his parents to East Oakland, California in 1974, to documented American through amnesty in 1986, Ledesma explores the compulsiveness of the exemplary undocumented student story with its concomitant obligations to talk and to speak for others, and the political uses and limitations of that exemplary Dreamer story. In Ledesma’s book the identity of the undocumented is not simply the direct result of national origin or legal status, but, instead, a much more complicated mix of

multiple cultural identifications, mainstream American historical discourses, socially constructed illegality, and deep xenophobia and racism.

In order to analyze Ledesma's book, I will proceed in three parts. First, I will situate some of the issues presented by and affecting undocumented Americans. Then, I will study *Diary of an Undocumented Dreamer. Undocumented Vignettes from a Pre-American Life* along the lines of its emphasis on singularity/universality, the force of the Dreamer paradigm, and the obligations and uses of representability. Finally, I will focus on the graphic narrative adscription and the structure of Ledesma's book and its contribution to a proper understanding of the situation of undocumented Americans.

1. CONTEXTUALIZING UNDOCUMENTED AMERICANS

There are, as of 2020, at least 10 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. Many of them are what can be called undocumented Americans: people who have spent most of their lives in the United States, are fully part of their communities, and are inextricably linked to many US citizens as their friends, colleagues, relatives, spouses, parents, tenants, clients, etc. 2.1 million of them are children of school age. Five million kids in the United States live in a family with mixed status in which one of their direct relatives, a parent, a sibling, or they themselves are undocumented. All of them are part of the United States' marginals or informals, a full class of people who work daily but without the state's authorization or recognition. They have been waiting since at least 2001 for legislation that would bring them out of the shadows.

Undocumented American workers, who constitute 5% of the US labor force, cluster in sectors such as: farming (24%), construction (15%), production (8%), services, (8%) and transportation (6%) (Passel & Cohn 28).

Most obviously, the undocumented have an important economic impact. Through the work of millions of undocumented people in the United States, big, labor intensive industries such as construction, agriculture and services garner higher rates of profit, while consumers have access to goods, produce and services massively subsidized by the low paying labor of immigrants. The

undocumented also, however, have a dual politico-economical yield. Here their high political and economic productivity empowers dominant white sectors of the American population, as described above, while it disempowers immigrants and people of color. They have also functioned as the foil for a politics of white resentment and white reaffirmation.

Finally, the undocumented, insofar as they are immigrants, can be said to participate in what Bonnie Honig identifies in *Democracy and the Foreigner* as their key politico-philosophical role in American history. According to Honig foreigners and foreignness always perform a double function within and on the American national imaginary. On the one hand, they force social scientists to ask if the alleged equilibrium between social integration (homogeneity) and democratic system has been altered or could be threatened by the presence of foreign elements such as immigrants, who supposedly would not share the cultural principles that sustain the nation. On the other hand, the immigrant is central to that national imaginary insofar as immigrants choose freely and actively to belong to that community of citizens and, thus, confirm for the native born the many advantages of their belonging. Such imaginary also considers the country as the land of freedom and opportunity for anybody who, regardless of class, origin or religion, is willing to work hard. If the doors are closed for the immigrants, internal coherence is, at least hypothetically, reinforced. At the same time though, a central value to American self-perception is sacrificed. And if the doors are opened, the alleged identity of the *we* is questioned by its pluralization and widening.

The politically deconstructive and economically over-productive quality of undocumented Americans' work is matched by their capacity to question radical separations between formal and informal citizenship statuses, inclusion and exclusion, and belonging and non-belonging in and to the American polity. The case of undocumented American students further complicates this separation and highlights the political, economic and social stakes of thinking labor, citizenship and belonging in the current US situation.

In particular, undocumented students retrace and undo the time trajectory of immigrant assimilation by length of stay in the United States. In the narratives about assimilation it is often said that

time is what truly produces assimilation more than anything else. Thus, assimilation is what happens when you are doing other things in the country. The longer you are here the more assimilated you become. Immigrants, in these narratives, are always, and unavoidably, Americans in waiting and in the making, as Hiroshi Motomura has called them.

However, and moving in the opposite direction, undocumented students, who are included and protected while in K-12 school contexts, move out of inclusion into exclusion when they graduate from high school and need a Social Security number and government-issued form of identification to get access to all the forms of adulthood that define this new stage of life. They devolve, becoming not more, but less American in legal, and then in practical terms, as the levels of their exclusion broaden (Gonzales). This is a different and new sense of the American-in-waiting. This is a person, an undocumented American, who sees her American-ness erode, rather than grow over time. Time is playing against their assimilation. With the passing of time they, at least before the law, belong less. They are being robbed of a form of social life that they always deemed theirs. Their gradual and long-standing assimilation has been radically threatened with exclusion and criminalization. For undocumented Americans temporality has taken a negative and decisively un-American turn. What was formally recognized as a status becomes a dangerous form of informality.

And yet, as those few who manage to overcome their exclusion from higher education and do Dreamer activism have shown—often by embodying an ideal American model of educationally attained deservingness (more on this below)—it is possible to re-define, re-socialize and re-possess what society—after having implicitly granted it and recognized it for most of their lives—has now tried to steal from them. Responding to this theft, they insist on taking advantage of educational resources on which they have what they consider legitimate claims. They become deep questioners of immigration laws, the reality of the American dream, and deservingness itself as it affects the life chances of the poorest Americans (Gonzales; Truax; Dreby). They in fact question the Americanness of Americans by asking them to revisit their commitments to freedom and equality, their attachments to the United States as a country of immigration and upward mobility narratives, their sense of fairness, hard work, and family values.

2. *DIARY OF AN UNDOCUMENTED DREAMER.*
UNDOCUMENTED VIGNETTES FROM
A PRE-AMERICAN LIFE

Alberto Ledesma's book struggles with content, expression, and form in telling *his* own story as a former undocumented student while also unavoidably telling *the* story of the undocumented in the United States. And this honest and evident struggle is integral to the cultural and political value of his text. His own professional career is here illuminating. After receiving B.A. and Ph.D. degrees from UC-Berkeley, Ledesma landed a tenure track position in English at California State University-Monterey Bay. His doctoral dissertation, *Undocumented Immigrant Representation in Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Silence and Subterfuge*, was a study of the representation of the undocumented in Mexican American narrative. More specifically, he tried to show how the undocumented—often times present in such literature as a secondary figure, sometimes absent—was a powerful force in need of a certain degree of repression or control by the text, and especially, by the Chicano critics.

This intellectual pursuit, however, became a frustrating effort due to what the author came to see as the incompatibility between his expressive needs and desires and the format and audience of scholarly production. While there were also practical family factors explaining his decision to leave that tenure track position to become a student affairs officer at UC-Berkeley, it would seem appropriate to highlight how the change also involved both a transformation in Ledesma's understanding of how he would serve and honor the undocumented students he had been a part of until his family benefitted from the IRCA amnesty in 1986, and a search for a new medium through which a representation and communication platform could be established for the same purpose.

This evolution involved overcoming a series of well patrolled cultural and political borders: from undocumented immigrant to American citizen, from professor to student affairs staff, and from literature to non-fiction, comics and cartoons. This is how Ledesma arrived to the hybrid form of his *Diary*: half way between the graphic novel, the cartoon collection, the series of vignettes, and the autobiographical essay. The text, in fact, incorporates a number of different graphic art and discursive traditions in multiple, often time

one-page, efforts: among the former, sketch panoramas, muralist style scenes or portraits, caricature, cartoon-like sequences with multiple panels with images and captions using standard thought and speech bubbles; among the latter: the didacticism of muralism, the dictionary or glossary, the presentation of an intellectual or social hero, satire, artistic appropriations (as of Winnie the Pooh or Superman), personal essay, often illustrated too.

While some of these decisions clearly reflect time restrictions in the non-professional and on the side nature of Ledesma's graphic art career (see the section Lunchtime Sketches), what this hybrid form—a deeply personal artistic decision as well as a profoundly political one—is trying to guard against is the violence of mis-representations and mis-appropriations of the undocumented story. In the chapter “The Undocumented Alphabet”, he attempts to gain linguistic and conceptual precision by redefining some of the key terms used in both common undocumented and racist and xenophobic discourses. When he gets to the letter I, he states:

‘I’ stands for ILLEGAL, a term so well designed to dehumanize, that as soon as it is invoked, all empathy for suffering that compels immigrants to brave a dangerous border goes out the window. It is a term that perpetuates ‘epistemic violence’ on all undocumented kids whose families are, or who are themselves subject to it. (81)

Ledesma has a deep suspicion of this “epistemic violence” as it forces complex realities into political binaries useful for and prone to Manichaean deployments. One central such use is what we could call the force and danger of the Dreamer paradigm.

In his important book, *Lives in Limbo. Undocumented and Coming of Age in America*, Roberto G. Gonzales explores the paradox of two different but eventually interesting trajectories: that of those he calls ‘early exiters’ (who stop attending school at some point) and that of college-goers. The paradox is that while early exiters are, from early on, trapped in a life of low wages and few rights in the shadows, college goers see their relative acceptance and access to rights as college students, disappear as soon as they graduate with a degree they cannot exercise. Early exiters, with low expectations, adjusted to their level of exclusion, seem to adapt better and faster to the reality of their situation, while college-goers have a harder time

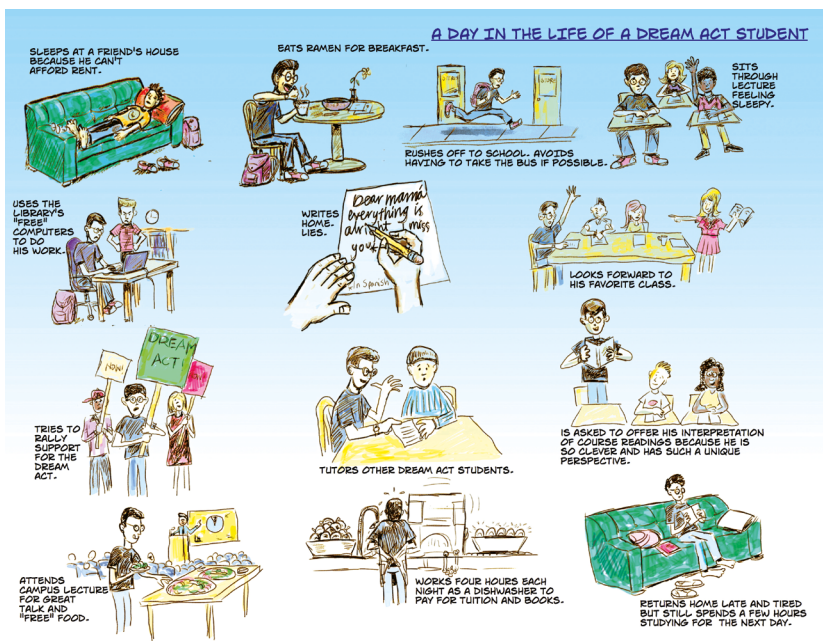


Figure 1. A Day in the life of a Dream-Act student.

Source: Ledesma. *Diary of an Undocumented Dreamer. Undocumented Vignettes from a Pre-American Life*, 2017, p. 8. © 2017 Mad Creek Books-The Ohio State University Press – Ledesma.

accepting that their rights were temporary and their accomplishments irrelevant to their labor incorporation. A *Dreamer* is, in this context, the undocumented student associated, first, with the Dream Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act) proposal of 2001 which was never voted into law, despite more than ten attempts to do so in Congress since, and, second, with DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) the executive decision of 2012 with which the Obama administration also attempted to protect young undocumented people. Many sympathetic media portrayals, “have profiled high-achieving undocumented immigrant youth—valedictorians, star athletes, Ivy League students—whose talents are wasted because current laws do not allow them to pursue their dream careers” (Gonzales 244, note 31). This meritocracy-infused accounts depend on the currency of the American Dream as seen

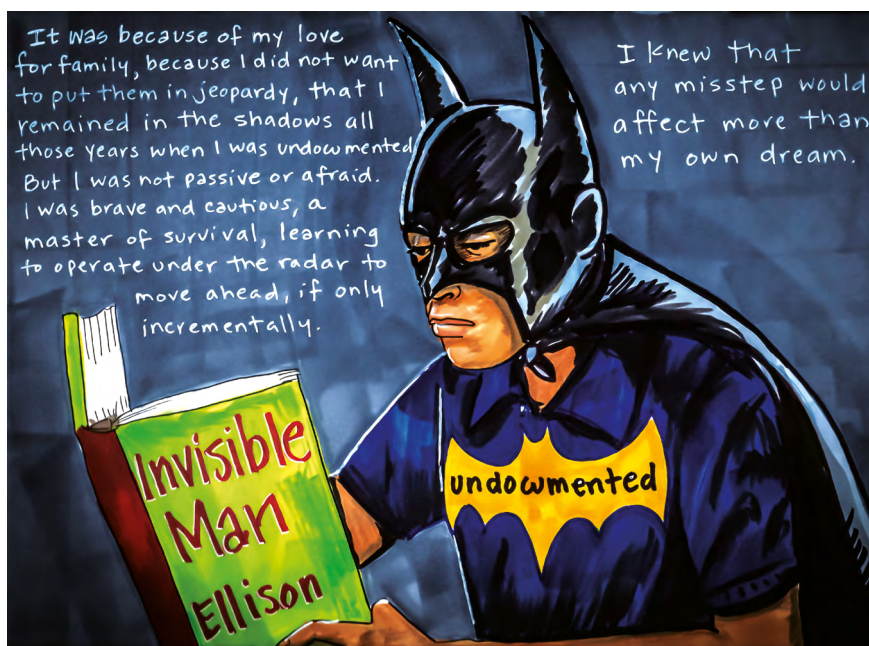


Figure 2. Source: Ledesma. *Diary of an Undocumented Dreamer. Undocumented Vignettes from a Pre-American Life*, 2017, p. 38. © 2017 Mad Creek Books-The Ohio State University Press – Ledesma.

from education. Here hard-working and high performing dreamer college students are presented as quintessential Americans and have become “the public face of undocumented youth” (53). The problem is, as Gonzales and Ledesma make clear, that the exemplarity standard is unreasonable and the respite it provides, temporary and, in the end, misleading. It functions to privilege less than ten per cent of the undocumented immigrants residing in the United States and further displaces and silences the case of the majority of them in the American mainstream’s consideration (Schwiertz). It also exerts enormous pressure on those forced to play “the brilliant while undocumented’ role” (52), in a process Aurora Chang has labelled “hyperdocumentation”, i.e. “the effort to accrue awards, accolades, and eventually academic degrees to compensate for [one’s] undocumented status.” (508)

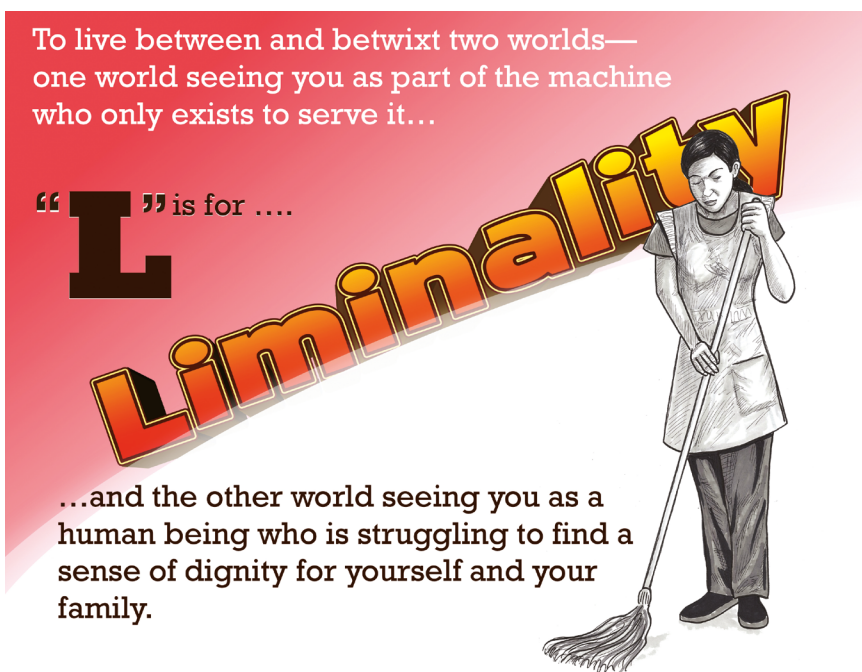


Figure 3. Undocumented Alphabet ‘L’

Source: Ledesma. *Diary of an Undocumented Dreamer. Undocumented Vignettes from a Pre-American Life*, 2017, p. 84. © 2017 Mad Creek Books-The Ohio State University Press – Ledesma.

3. BREAKING THE SILENCE THROUGH IMAGES AND WORDS

Ledesma emphasizes the degree of silence that affected the undocumented experience in the 1980s and 90s, even after amnesty, identifying two potential explanations: those stories were silenced by fear or the community of formerly undocumented—the three million who like himself benefitted from IRCA in 1986—did not have the language to articulate those experiences in writing. He also lamented the loss of a potential sense of community “that comes when you know that others have gone through the same things that you have gone through” (5) such silence had produced. Thus, he begins his *Diary* by reminding us of the therapeutic and transformative power of creativity: “These doodles represent a sort of therapy that helped me grapple with my shifting identities. In the process, what I found was a

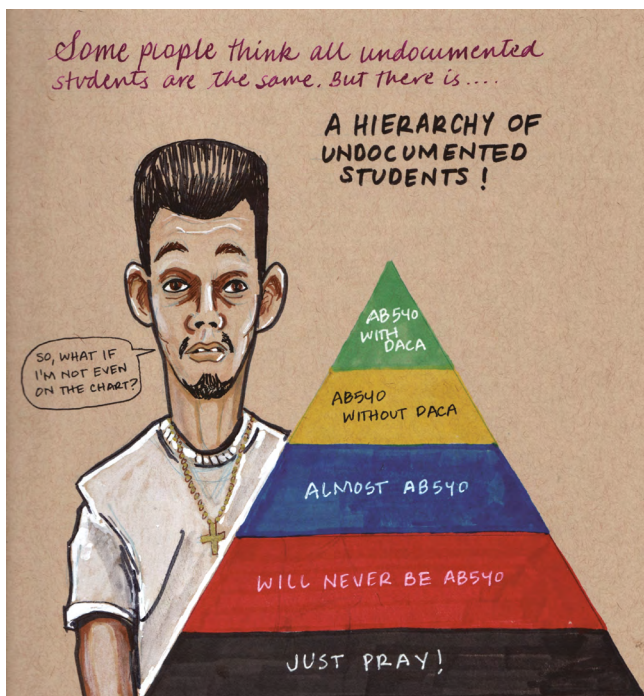


Figure 4. Source: Ledesma. *Diary of an Undocumented Dreamer. Undocumented Vignettes from a Pre-American Life*, 2017, p. 31. © 2017 Mad Creek Books-The Ohio State University Press – Ledesma.

way to help those who are still undocumented and who are afflicted, as I was, by a profound ambivalence about our Americanness.” (1) What the doodles help with is, first, the fear of undocumentedation and then, once, at least in Ledesma’s case, citizenship has been acquired, “the twelve years of conditioning” as an undocumented which, contrary to his hopes, did not immediately vanish after legalization. The doodles also keep the narrative bounded by scale and proximity, close to the intimate and autobiographical, while allowing for specific and contained historical or political forays into the broader context. Finding the right form to give material support to a voice, one capable of doing justice to both the conflicted but also privileged experience of going from pre-American to American and the need to be read and heard by intra and extra ethnic multiple publics, deeply shapes Ledesma’s book. Doodling and sketching

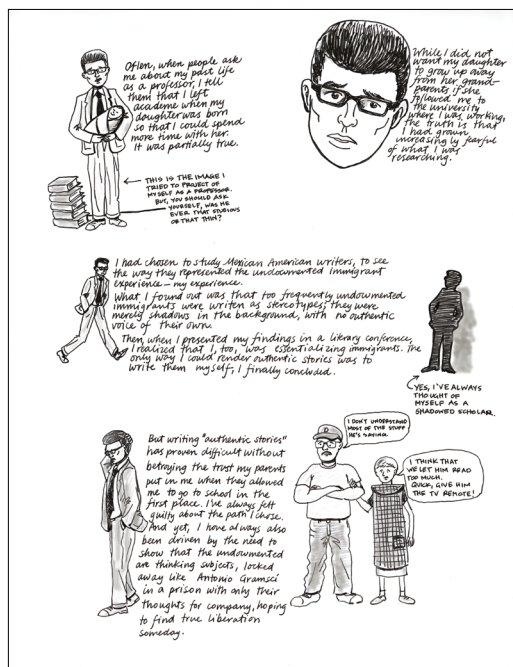


Figure 5. Diary of a Dreamer. Source: Ledesma. *Diary of an Undocumented Dreamer. Undocumented Vignettes from a Pre-American Life*, 2017, p. 6.

© 2017 Mad Creek Books-The Ohio State University Press – Ledesma.

become ways of solving, gradually, the problem of repression: the difficulty of expressing his own voice and the experience of being undocumented, both carefully suppressed for survival through twelve years of hiding and fear. Because “Grappling with the emotions of being undocumented [...] is an exercise in exorcising contradictions, in sharing the most vulnerable secrets.” (55) Sketching turns out to be then, an alternative form of hyperdocumentation, a way of producing a graphic/written testimony of one’s own thoughts and experiences, an attempt at communicating with others while claiming a voice of one’s own: “Hyperdocumentation generates a semivisible force field—however imagined and to whatever extent credible—that protects one from undocumented status. Hyperdocumentation can be used in an agentic way as a tool of resistance.” (Chang 519)

Historically speaking Latin American readers reading comics—*historietas*, *pepines*, *paquitos*, *monitos*, or *muñequitos*—have found



Figure 6. *Diary of a Dreamer*. Source: Ledesma. *Diary of an Undocumented Dreamer. Undocumented Vignettes from a Pre-American Life*, 2017, p. 20.
 © 2017 Mad Creek Books-The Ohio State University Press – Ledesma.

clues for a deciphering of their situation, characters with whom to identify, and a language with which to give form and meaning to the expression of their thoughts and feelings in their new, contemporary realities. Within this context, comics have often provided a sentimental and civic education attuned to the demands of a modern urban setting. They have frequently depicted the struggles of a heroine/hero in an unfriendly urban context while representing both the powerful and superior forces that she/he faces in this context, and her/his daily life, including the subversive strategies used to cope and survive in this milieu. Ledesma updates this tradition of production and consumption to the needs and specificity of the historical case of undocumented immigrants in the United States, finding in the double appeal of activist graphic art and deeply felt personal essay the right vehicle to represent, without misrepresenting or misappropriating, his people. If comics can be seen historically as

a way of mediating between two literacies, one based on orality and the image and another based on the written word, in the effort to represent new cultural and political subjectivities in the polis, then Ledesma's *Diary* is doubling down by using the comic as a vehicle to explore the bicultural, bilingual, and political complexities of undocumented Latinx life in an American context.

Form itself reflects Ledesma's transculturation and redefined assimilation process, his internality and externality to the American traditions of minority representation, his concrete belonging to and specific difference from and within American identity and political discourses. In that search for a proper medium and language—to make his voice audible and his ideas known by both an immediate audience of undocumented immigrants whose experience he is also trying to represent, and a more mediated mainstream audience he is trying to reach and convince—Ledesma is using the hybrid form of *Diary of a Reluctant Dreamer* as a mediation device. The graphic multiplicity of Ledesma's book and its combination of image and literacy have deep roots in the history of popular discourses in Mexico and, more broadly, in Latin America. His book connects the three basic spaces of concrete cultural mediation for Latin American popular culture: everyday family life, social temporality (when a stage of social capitalist production connects with everyday routine in the form of work schedules and leisure time), and, finally, a cultural competence based on an aesthetics grounded on repetition and recognition, that is, a set of forms known as popular genres. Its forms reflect, as is more often than not the case with US-based Latinx texts, a dual expected audience straddling diverse languages, cultural competences, cultural consumption habits, and, in this case, different legal statuses.

CONCLUSIONS

I have proposed elsewhere (Poblete) two hypothesis concerning Latino US literature that may help close this essay on Alberto Ledesma's *Diary of an Undocumented Dreamer. Undocumented Vignettes from a Pre-American Life*. The first one posits that the best Latino literature in times of globalization potentially forces both US national literature and Latin American literature to confront their

status as interconnected, complex and non-homogeneous literary formations, and thus to accept the unavoidability of cultural and linguistic translation as one of their constitutive elements. This constitutive heterogeneity becomes part of US national literature insofar the latter attempts to assimilate, by way of its incorporation to the national literary tradition, a literature such as the Latino one, which, written in at least two different languages and involving at least two cultural imaginaries, actively resists this nationalizing assimilation and must be understood as a counter story, always in critical dialogue with its two constitutive traditions.

My second hypothesis posits that the best Latino literature strives to transform the multicultural monolingual reading (and in fact, monocultural American reading), into a true intercultural encounter in which the end results have not been limited to the uniforming translation or assimilation of difference or to its purely commercial exoticization, but remain open to the true experience *of and in* otherness in a globalized context. Contrary to certain Latino literature still dominant in the US, its best examples attempt to actively question any effort to reduce the complexity of Latino experiences to the clichés of a textual economy specialized in the domestication of an ethnic alterity. In this way, Latino literature is part of a new form of national literature which implies the transition from the forms of cultural homogenization characterizing national modernization processes, to which traditional national literatures contributed so decisively, to multiple and, sometimes, contradictory forms of heterogeneization and re-arrangement of the national sphere in times of neoliberal globalization. The attempt to explain/refer/represent literarily the new dis/order of the nation occurs now, moreover, under conditions of high globalization of culture and in the midst of the culture of globalization. Those two forms of heterogeneity help explain the importance of Ledesma's book. As present in *Undocumented Vignettes from a Pre-American Life* they force us to see an American life as potential in every undocumented immigrant. The *Diary of an Undocumented Dreamer* is, on the other hand, written from the other side of an alchemic miracle: the Dreamer who could only dream of a better life, has now become a full American, his *de facto* Americanness is now fully backed by a *de jure* status. Nothing changed in him, only the law, to finally do

justice, around him. The pre-American is now an American who insist on not forgetting the other ten million Americans in waiting. He wants to show “how undocumented immigration is another kind of American experience.” (7)

The book is also, beyond what I had the space for here, a deep mediation on what it means to be a father while undocumented and formerly undocumented, and on how memories of a childhood in the shadows trace conflicted paths across and between personal identity and American citizenship.

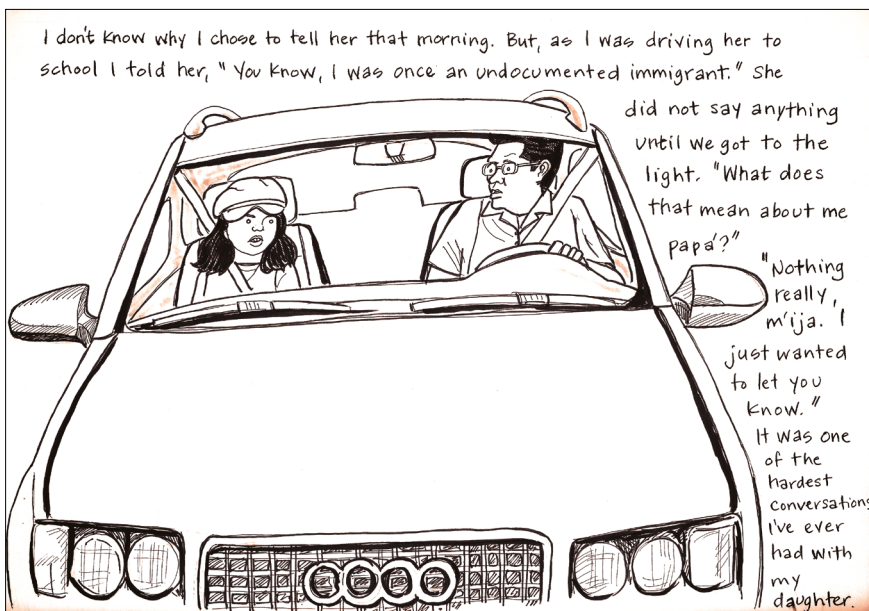


Figure 7. Source: Ledesma. *Diary of an Undocumented Dreamer. Undocumented Vignettes from a Pre-American Life*, 2017, p. 58.
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