

# We Never Needed Documents to Thrive

Yosimar Reyes

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**Yosimar Reyes** is a nationally acclaimed poet and public speaker. Born in Guerrero, Mexico, and raised in Eastside San Jose, Reyes explores the themes of migration and sexuality in his work. The *Advocate* named Reyes one of “13 LGBT Latinos Changing the World” and Remezcla included Reyes on their list of “10 Up and Coming Latinx Poets You Need to Know.”

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I am powerful—and I’ve always known that.

When I was ten, my Abuela told me I was undocumented. She did this not to scare me but to convey that I would have to work twice as hard to make something of myself in this country. At an early age, I was forced to make peace with the fact that my life as an undocumented queer was going to be one filled with challenges. The biggest one being not allowing the limitations set for me by the government to stop me from living a life filled with joy.

Coming out of the Shadows™ was not a phenomenon for me. I grew up in Eastside San Jose, California, in a community with strong, established mechanisms for survival. We created our own rules to keep afloat and an underground railroad of resources. You’d know which coyote was reliable to cross your loved ones over and what jobs hired undocumented people.

I never saw my life as an undocumented person as anything worth discussing. I never imagined that there would be scholars forensically analyzing how we survive in the future. “Undocumented” has never been my identity. I have always known that just like growing up poor, it’s a social condition that influences my identity. When you sit down to think about it, nothing in my physique is undocumented; my status is not tangible.

Immigration became a topic of national conversation in 2006 with the Great American Boycott on May 1. Despite the fact that undocumented immigrants lived in the United States long before 2006, our little boycott gained us national visibility. Reporters and filmmakers became interested in our narratives. The media went wild looking for all the undocumented people they could showcase. Due to social media trends, the most immediately accessible were young people brought to the United States as kids wanting to pursue higher education. The stage became ready for us to become “Dreamers,” a term born out of failed federal legislation called the DREAM Act.

That same year, we saw a rise of undocumented people in news specials and documentaries. It was particularly interesting that we were repeatedly asked to relive our trauma. “How did you find out you were ille—I mean, undocumented?” However, instead of being asked to recount our pains to understand ourselves as undocumented people better, our narratives were weaponized to create a moral crisis for citizens—a bloc of people with actual voting power.

As a result, the very same autonomous, independent, undocumented people I grew up with were chopped and edited to become victims with no agency—none of this made sense. I never wanted to be showcased crying on camera. Being undocumented was an experience only to be shared with folks in my same predicament. We did not and do not need saving. We needed people to understand how this country reaps and exploits the (often literal) fruits of our labor so that we could move forward with creating practical immigration laws that made sense.

We needed them to see that immigration was not a people problem but one set forth by racialized policies. The immigration conversation has been framed as a social problem, but we need citizens to understand that immigration is a racial justice issue: certain immigrants are targeted as being problematic based on their race. Beyond being undocumented within the US border, we represent migrants globally forced to leave their homes because of the economic imperialist power countries like the US have over our homelands.

Since 2006, undocumented people have been positioned as subjects that constantly need to prove their loyalty to this country while simultaneously living up to the expectations of being a “good” immigrant. The good immigrant is law-abiding, taxpaying, and contributing. The good immigrants aren’t like the myths nativists promote, that undocumented people are lazy criminals who rip off the system. The good immigrant can win over the hearts and minds of every American! This would later be the framework from which nonprofits and progressive politicians would operate, using

the same tired talking points. Our narratives are funneled into three main frameworks:

1. Our academic accolades: stories of undocumented students with 4.0 grade point averages being accepted into prestigious universities.
2. Our economic contributions: stories about how much undocumented immigrants contribute to local, state, and federal taxes.
3. Our labor: stories of the jobs that would not get done without undocumented immigrants. Emphasis is placed on jobs that make the lives of citizens easier.

Our lived experiences' nuances and complexities are overshadowed by the sentiments of having to showcase us as "useful" people.

In 2008, then-Senator Barack Obama swayed the Latinx vote with promises to pass comprehensive immigration reform by the end of his first year. After completing two terms, Obama left with the legacy of being the "deporter-in-chief"; as the forty-fourth president, he deported more than three million people—a new record for any administration. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a form of administrative change in 2012 granting work permits and relief from deportation, is undeniably one of the biggest wins to come out of the immigrant justice movement in recent history. Many attribute it to Obama's goodwill, but immigrant youth remember otherwise.

Since 2008 and the death of DREAM, many young activists have shifted away from respectability politics and opted to demand action from the president. Although Democrats wanted undocumented people to have pride for this country by giving them American flags and calling them "Dreamers," many simply got tired. The expectation to continually prove ourselves and fit into the narratives set out for us was unrealistic, exhausting, and dehumanizing. So undocumented immigrants started disrupting Democrats and Republicans alike. They shut down campaign offices. They went rogue.

They were warned. They were given an explanation; nevertheless, they persisted. The reality is that undocumented people are not monolithic. There are eleven million undocumented people and eleven million complex narratives from different parts of the world. Now, more than ever, undocumented storytelling needs to disrupt the "good immigrant" and "criminal alien" dichotomy. It must consist of a spectrum of stories that allows undocumented people to be human.

Frameworks around the stories of undocumented people should take into account an undocumented audience. Our voices as undocumented people need to be the focal point instead of being edited for a citizen au-

dience. War was declared on undocumented communities when America handed Trump the presidency. What we needed then and still need now is to let undocumented people lead. We should edit the framework of our stories *for us*. From the undocumented Salvadoran nanny in upstate New York to the undocumented Kenyan doctoral candidate at UC Berkeley, it is time to build a bridge between our narratives and tell the true story of migration.

Let it be known that undocumented people have never needed saving. Let it be known that we are simply people who are caught in a game of political football. Undocumented people are powerful because waking up every morning to a country that vilifies you and choosing to actively participate in it is an act of resilience. Our energy is often spent trying to convince xenophobes of our humanity, but I argue that we have already given enough as undocumented people. Instead of repeating the same stories we have been telling for the last two decades, it is time that we tell stories of our strength. It takes a level of genius and ingenuity to survive as an undocumented immigrant in America.

In the future, I imagine an abundance of narratives that capture our joy, our magic. We are powerful—and it's time that the world knows that too. Stop co-opting our message. Let undocumented people create, let us dissent, let us lead.