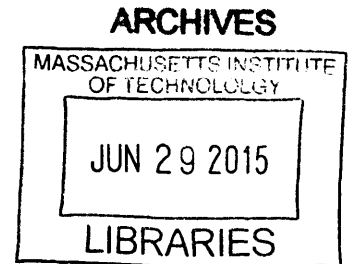


# Healing Centered Organizing: What Side Are You On?

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Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning  
on May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015 in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master in City Planning

## ABSTRACT

Many youth today grew up with narratives about reaching for the American Dream and working hard to reap the benefits. Yet over 2 million people have been deported under President Obama's administration and over 2 million people live encaged in the U.S., both world records. Millions of youth, especially youth of color, have undergone criminalization, economic crises, and systemic family separation as a result of the American nightmare. This research identifies "healing" as a new priority arena for organizers in movements today. Healing means "to make sound or whole; to restore to health." Social justice organizing is about human relationships, and if we acknowledge hurt people hurt people and healed people can help heal people, we begin to understand the significance of building power with love through healing our individual and collective humanity. Queer, feminist author and activist Audre Lorde said, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." *Healing is a political act.* My research asks, What does healing look and feel like as an explicit part of youth organizing today?

Through my personal organizing and interviews with young organizers, I find accordance with the definitions and significance of healing within organizing. For them, healing is "restoration," "remembrance," and "returning to justice"; and the act of making ourselves and each other *whole* again by organizing based on love. Healing is "working towards freedom with chosen family." Contemporary youth-led movements are evolving a new organizing approach by melding different traditions including those from Miss Ella Baker, Paulo Freire, and Saul Alinsky. At times, this appears in the form of honoring Baker's legacy or aspiring to practice Freire's pedagogy, while Alinsky's impact is seen in inherited organizational structures. As young organizers implement healing practices central to their movement culture and way of organizing—some more explicitly than others—they struggle to integrate healing work and sustainability into organizational structures. However, this does not deter them from trying, and reminding themselves and each other that, "We on the Freedom Side!"

Thesis Committee: Phillip Thompson and Alethia Jones

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Para mi Ma, Gladys Campos y mi Pa, Juan Campos.

Para mis hermanos, Juano y Gloria.

Para mis abuelitos, en la tierra y en el cielo.

Para mi familia, en Peru and in the U.S.

Para mi comunidad, en mi corazon and around the world.

For my chosen family, my Freedom Family, in the grassroots and in the ivory towers.

For all the womyn in me and before me.

For my loving committee, Alethia Jones and Phil Thompson.

And for us, because our stories are worth sharing.

It takes a village, a community's love and we move forward step by step, paso por paso.

I have purpose and I work for love and freedom because my village is filled with love and resilience.

Sigo indocumentada: Sin papeles, sin visa, Recien Graduada.

I am learning, I am blessed, I will always give Thanks.

Undocumented, Unafraid, and Unapologetic.

Sin Papeles, Sin Miedo, Sin Verguenza.

Isang Bagsak: One Rise, One Fall.

I rise because we rise. We are the collective.

## List of Abbreviations

BAJI	Black Alliance for Just Immigration
BYP100	Black Youth Project 100
CCA	Corrections Corporations of America
DD	Dream Defenders
DACA	Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals
DAPA	Deferred Action for Parental Accountability
DRC	Dream Resource Center
DREAM Act	Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act
FS	Freedom Side
GEO	GEO Group Inc.
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
IAF	Industrial Areas Foundation
IDEAS	Improving Dreams, Equality, Access, and Success
LGBTQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning
MTC	Management and Training Corporation
MST	Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Movement of Landless Workers)
NIYA	National Immigrant Youth Alliance
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
OSA	Ohio Student Association
PICO	People Improving Communities through Organizing
QUIP	Queer Undocumented Immigrant Project
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
UWD	United We Dream

## Introduction

Youth “have been deeply important to every progressive social movement, including the United States Civil Rights movement, the transnational LGBTQ movement, successive waves of feminism, environmentalism and environmental justice, the labor, antiwar, and immigrant rights movements, and more” (Constanza-Chock). Likelier to feel the urgency towards change and impatience for the status quo, young people play a key role in pushing social transformation, culturally and politically. This is why social movements that change the world are often propelled by young people. From undocumented and unafraid immigrant youth who transformed the immigration debates to the black youth leadership at the forefront of #BlackLivesMatter protests, youth-led (under age 35) organizing has significantly increased in the last decade of U.S. politics.

By setting up for the next generation and translating changes for older generations, youth hold a central role in generational bridging. In 1964, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organized Freedom Summer to register black voters and desegregate the South, bringing mostly white, college-educated young people from the North to experience blatant racism in the South. They communicated their experiences to their families and friends back home, thus spreading consciousness and moving people to action across the country. Similarly, undocumented parents and workers, as well as allies, moved to action when undocumented youth risked arrest and deportation in civil disobedience actions pushing for the 2010 DREAM<sup>1</sup> Act. In both cases, youth brought generations together to fight for justice by highlighting the urgency and injustice of their environments.

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<sup>1</sup> The DREAM Act was the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act first introduced in 2001 and again until 2010. It would provide a pathway to citizenship for certain undocumented youth in college or the U.S. military.

Furthermore, young people are uniquely positioned and impacted by their historical circumstances. They face particular struggles, raised with social narratives that sometimes conflict with their environments and experiences. Many youth today grew up with narratives about reaching for the American Dream and working hard to reap the benefits, yet the U.S. holds over two million people incarcerated and deported another two million people under the current Obama administration, both world records. Millions of young people, especially young people of color, have personally undergone criminalization, economic crises, and systemic family separation as a result of the American nightmare. But it takes time to become numb to injustice and, as waves of freedom fighters have done before them, the undocumented and Black youth movements of our time are rising against injustice alongside each other.

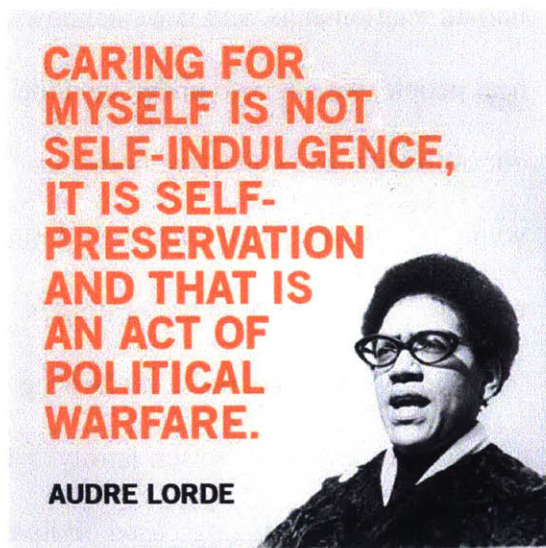
This research identifies “healing” as a new priority arena for organizers in movements today. Healing means “to make sound or whole; to restore to health” and comes from the old English word for *whole*, according to the Webster dictionary. Social justice organizing is about human relationships, and if we acknowledge hurt people hurt people and healed people can help heal people, we begin to understand the significance of building power with love through healing our individual and collective humanity. Through my personal organizing and interviews with young organizers, I find consistent definitions and accordance with the significance of healing within organizing. For them, healing is “restoration,” “remembrance,” and “returning to justice”; “mending the wounds without allowing interference or infection from the world” and “working towards freedom with chosen family.”<sup>2</sup> Healing is the act of making ourselves and each other *whole* again by organizing based on love. My research asks the question, *What does healing look and feel like as an explicit part of youth organizing today?*

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<sup>2</sup> These quotes are how interviewees answered the question, “How do you define healing?” See Appendix A.

In her book, *A Burst of Light*, queer, feminist author and activist Audre Lorde says, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”<sup>3</sup> ***Healing is a political act.*** Lorde explains how the struggle for survival is a life struggle and a political struggle. Some of us are not meant to survive according to socio-economic standards and political circumstances we live in. To be with some body, to be a member of some group, to be, can come to mean inherent death due to race, gender, sexuality, or religious, citizenship, and economic status. Lorde notes, when you are not supposed to live, as you are, where you are, with whom you are with, then survival is a radical action. Existence becomes resistance because we are forced to figure out how to survive in a political socio-economic system that decides life or support for some and requires death or removal of others. For the latter, to survive in a system is to survive a system and one must be creative to live.<sup>4</sup>

Lorde intentionally uses militant language to describe this situation *as warfare* and compares her experience battling cancer to her experience battling anti-black racism. She demonstrates how racism can be an attack on the body’s cells and immune system; how “a world against you can be experienced as your body turning against you.”<sup>5</sup> You may be worn down and worn out by what you are required to take in. Thus, to learn to care for oneself is to learn how to live for and be for one’s body while under attack. Social privilege is a support system offered to some and inaccessible to others. Lorde says



<sup>3</sup> Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light*. Firebrand Books, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Feministkilljoys, “Selfcare as Warfare.” August 25, 2014. <http://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



self-care is *not* self-indulgence but self-preservation. She speaks to a particular self-care implemented by those who must look after themselves because they are not looked after; their being is not cared for, supported, or protected. Heteronormativity, white supremacy, and patriarchy are elaborate social support systems offering numerous broad and detailed privileges to its beneficiaries. Those excluded must imagine different ways to support themselves or face potential destruction, physically and spiritually.

Planners are essential for developers to create in the built environment because planning is connecting goals to implications and practice on the ground. Here, I research healing not as an ideology or theory, but as a practice that can aid values-based planning toward just, equitable communities. Today's youth-led movements evolved a new approach to organizing and melded different traditions. In my personal organizing experience and interviews with young organizers, I find consistent definitions and accordance with the importance of healing within organizing. I also observe living strands of organizing from various historical organizers including Miss Ella Baker, Paulo Freire, and Saul Alinsky. At times, this appears in the form of honoring Baker's legacy or aspiring to practice Freire's pedagogy. At other times, their legacies can be seen in Alinsky-modeled structures these youth organizations inherited, and in some cases eventually negated. These youth organizations and organizers implement healing practices central to their movement culture and way of organizing—some more explicitly identified as healing than others. Moreover, they struggle to integrate healing work and sustainability into their organizational structures in various ways.

Background: Key Trends for Social Organizing

Social justice organizing has a long, dynamic lineage, internationally and in the United States. This country was founded on organized, colonial resistance against the British; slaves like

Harriet Tubman resisted their oppressors by revolting and struggling for freedom through organizing infrastructures like the Underground Railroad; nonviolent civil resistance reached a peak in the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement, Farmworker's movement, anti-war protests, and more. These stories of humans strategizing, building, and fighting for liberation paint a complex, interconnected tapestry of a living organizing legacy and at the root is a battle between the forces of love and freedom and those of hatred and fear. Healing is a major thread throughout this organizing legacy, transforming hate and fear into love and growth every time a slave fought for freedom, a Black student protested for dignity, or a farmworker organized for a fair wage.

We live in a dynamic era with diverse organizing models and efforts, offering a spectrum of practices and tools. Some organizing methods are more formulaic than others, and some are much more visible or "mainstream." For example, Occupy Wall Street in 2011 was a social disruption which attracted masses of disenfranchised and discontented individuals, many young and white. While Occupy ushered the topic of economic inequality into mainstream U.S. politics and sparked relationships and initiatives that outlived itself, it lacked sustainable structure and strategy. One longstanding source has been faith-based organizing, a major component of the Farmworkers and Civil Rights movements which lives on through some local religious organizations and national entities like Clergy and Leity United for Economic justice (CLUE) and People Improving Communities through Organizing (PICO).

Though Black churches played an integral role in the structure and culture of the Civil Rights Movement—from leadership and infrastructure to spiritual gospels and community care—it is difficult for youth, especially LGBTQ or friends with LGBTQ youth, to engage or even approach overly religious spaces today when they view the church as strictly conservative. Most recently, online organizing has grown with technological advances and increasingly

supports social justice movement by facilitating mass outreach and attracting momentum. Though it is an integral component of 21<sup>st</sup> century organizing, it is not enough on its own—physical connection for the sake of relationship building is an irreplaceable building block of effective, long-term organizing.

While some of the organizing approaches above apply healing through their organizing, none explicitly center “healing” in organizing as a growing number of today’s youth organizers are beginning to do. In recent decades, the prevalent narratives and models of organizing prioritize reaching quotas of signatures and bodies at marches. Terms like, “evidence based,” “big data,” and “funder deliverables” have become commonplace in nonprofit organizations (INCITE! WCAV). This heightens emphasis on action and deliverables over the heart and soul of organizing: growing movement, or chosen family, by moving hearts and minds into action. Organizing action and strategy have been put in conflict with healing and sustainability, rather than as complementary. By looking at drivers of the “action and deliverables” approach, we can see why it has come to dominate organizing culture and eclipsed “heart and soul” organizing work in recent decades.

One key driver of the data-centric approach is the exponential growth of the nonprofit industrial complex, which refers to the symbiotic relationship between the private industry and philanthropic foundations that fund nonprofit organizations. According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) there are over 1.5 million nonprofit organizations in the U.S. Foundations control most nonprofit funding, designing a system that forces nonprofits to professionalize and focus on sustaining their funds rather than fulfilling their mission (INCITE!). Organizations compete for funds through grant application processes with specific requirements and, if awarded, must deliver on preconfigured outcomes and measures of success. In 2008, over

75,000 foundations granted over 45 billion dollars to U.S. nonprofits. Critiques of this system include encouraging foundation dependency, unsustainability, and band aid solutions. Expansion of the nonprofit industry comes in the second half of the twentieth century, alongside the devolution of the federal government and decline of the Civil Rights movement. The number of service oriented non-profits increased while labor organizing declined, and many organizers from the 1960s and 70s were murdered, exiled, or burned out.

Another driver of the action and deliverables approach is the propagation of one-sided history, which facilitates the prioritization of funder deliverables over grassroots organizing. By deepening misconceptions about how change occurs and nourishing false comfort in lies and half-told truths, many, including those in the nonprofit sector, do not understand the grassroots people power it took to achieve the social equities of today. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and others are not known as the organizers they were, but solely as grand spokespeople and symbols. Schools teach superficial versions of organizing history--if any—mystifying stories that misplace faith in glorified leadership and plant hopes to await the next Martin Luther King Jr. or Cesar Chavez. Meanwhile, movement leaders who emphasized collective leadership like Ella Baker and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) are largely forgotten, or erased from history.

Systems of oppression including white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism frame our current social and economic U.S. landscape by uplifting values of violence, unlimited growth, and competition. How these systemic forces interlink and work together to promote the wealth of a few and the suffering of others evolves over time. Today, they show up through the growth and invisibility of structural racism proven by widespread beliefs in a “post-racial America;” the slow gains in marriage equality through a primarily white-led LGBTQ movement alongside

rising LGBTQ homelessness and assaults on transsexual lives of color; and the explosion of corporate power and economic inequality globally whereby profit at the expense of people crosses borders that dehumanize and criminalize communities of color through world records of mass incarceration and deportation.

**WHO WILL  
SURVIVE  
IN AMERICA**

**#NEVERLOVEDUS**



It is worth reviewing political and socio-economic policies that inflict pain on so many to understand the severity and potential of our current social situation. 1 in every 31 adults is under correctional control in the U.S. One in every three Black men born will serve time in jail. While 5 times as many Whites in the U.S. use drugs as African Americans, African Americans are sent to prison for drug offenses at ten times the rate of Whites. Two-thirds of prisoners will reoffend, demonstrating our system of incarceration is designed to further wound rather than heal. Undocumented immigrants or non-citizens make up about one third the prison population. Through the immigration detention bed quota, Congress requires Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to lock up an average of 34,000 immigrants in detention centers “at any given time (close to half a million immigrants annually) in a network of over 250 county and state jails, private prisons and federal facilities.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Detention Watch Network: <http://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/EndTheQuota>

Together, African Americans and Latinos comprised 58% of all prisoners in 2008, while making up approximately one quarter of the US population.<sup>7</sup> At least 6 in 10 female offenders in state prison have a history of physical or sexual abuse, and 69% of assaults occur before the age of 18.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, 1 in every 6 transgender people is incarcerated at some point in their life.<sup>9</sup> The statistics go on and on, though the stories those impacted and their families rarely made headlines until recently with names of young Black people like Rekia Boyd, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice brought to light by their families and Black youth organizers.

The number and kinds of people jailed, detained, and impacted by prisons is driven by webs of institutions including government agencies, corporations like Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and GEO Group Inc. (GEO), and policymakers like those who propagated “Tough on Crime” and “War on Drugs” policies. Policies including the Three Strikes Laws, Zero Tolerance, and Stop and Frisk are facilitated by punitive public narratives and fear-driven political discourse. It is worth noting the inextricably intertwined policy creation and implementation with public perceptions of what is necessary and just. Our systems of [in]justice and the policies produced are driven and allowed for by our collective social morality, or lack thereof.

Today, the State bids government contracts to private prison companies who compete for greater profits. According to the Detention Watch Network, “companies have emerged to compete for government contracts not only in detention operations, but in peripheral industries

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<sup>7</sup> NAACP Fact Sheet. <http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>

<sup>8</sup> “Statistics on Women Offenders.” Feb. 6, 2012. <http://www.corrections.com/news/article/30166-statistics-on-women-offenders>

<sup>9</sup> Prison and Detention Reform:

[http://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/resources/NCTE\\_Blueprint\\_for\\_Equality2012\\_Prison\\_Reform.pdf](http://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/resources/NCTE_Blueprint_for_Equality2012_Prison_Reform.pdf)

such as prison construction and correctional officer services.” Private prison companies are responsible to their shareholders, not the public, and maximize profit by cutting expenses such as keeping facilities constantly understaffed leading to greater human rights violations and violence, and paying significantly less than their public counterparts. Moreover, “All the big private prison companies—CCA, GEO, and the Management and Training Corporation (MTC)—try to include occupancy requirements in their contracts,” a common practice within the private prison industry mandating local or state government keep prison beds between 80 and 100 percent full regardless of changing crime rates (Mother Jones).

In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman writes, “There is a conspiracy of silence about hatred, its function and its meaning...The logic of the development of hatred is death to the spirit and disintegration of ethical and moral values” (88). He describes how hatred starves the human needs for creative expression by consuming mind and spirit. This, Howard states, is why Jesus rejected hatred and affirmed life by embracing love.

As described, affirmation of life is not apparent in our current social systems. Beyond incarceration, the U.S. continues to rank as one of the most expensive and least effective health care systems in the world.<sup>10</sup> In June of 2013, the Supreme Court gutted the 1965 Voting Rights Act by invalidating Section 5 of the law and opening the path for local and state governments to implement past and new voting restrictions. Since then, there has been a rise in states with a history of racial discrimination implementing voter ID laws, ending same-day voter registration, stricter photo identification requirement, and much more.<sup>11</sup> While educational institutions are

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<sup>10</sup> “Once Again, US Has Most Expensive, Least Effective Health Care System in Survey.” June 16, 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2014/06/16/once-again-u-s-has-most-expensive-least-effective-health-care-system-in-survey/>

<sup>11</sup> Dana Liebelson, “The Supreme Court Gutted the Voting Rights Act.” April 8, 2014. <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/04/republican-voting-rights-supreme-court-id>

increasingly privatized or under resourced, student debt continues to climb nationally. In 2013, 69% of graduating seniors at public and private nonprofit colleges had student loans and owed an average of \$28,400 in federal and private loans combined.<sup>12</sup> Millions of individuals and communities face these pressures of inaccessibility to basic rights like health and education, suffering the socio-economic consequences as well as deepening socio-emotional wounds. Communities of color, in particular, face these challenges atop one another multiple times over across generations, across time and space.

Thus, mobilizing youth towards civic action needs to look and mean something very different than how it did in the 1960s. Manufactured social narratives have forced young people to question their own lived experiences, leading to disempowerment, assimilation, and disenfranchisement. Intentional storytelling is a key tool in growing empowerment and dispelling social lies many of us grew up with. Additionally, the need to rebel against the reign of longstanding activists or organizational heads wanting to “hold on to the torch” within the rising nonprofit industrial complex has led to inter-generational assumptions and mistrust. Genuine multigenerational movement efforts will continue to be essential for strengthening youth and overall movement building. Younger generations have much to teach older generations, just as older generations have a great deal to teach those who are younger.

Healing through organizing is not new. As I mention earlier, healing is weaved throughout every organizing legacy and is a key part of organizing. The Civil Rights Movement largely depended on its practice of spirituality and care to heal its members internally as the dominant society punished them harshly for standing up for equality. A spiritual, healing based framework promoted by a strong infrastructure of Black churches had preachers inspire many

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<sup>12</sup> Project on Student Debt <http://ticas.org/posd/home>



towards protest and action, communities organize themselves and their resources, and organizers find spiritual resilience to keep them going in the face of doubt and evil. But healing through organizing is not limited to organized religion. Many gospel and freedom songs central to the culture and spirit of the Civil Rights Movement date back to slavery, and were sung by slaves to foster a collective spiritual strength even when they were not allowed to organize, religiously or otherwise. Organized religion is one possible frame to promote spirituality and healing; social justice organizing is another. The Feminist Movements implemented healing as a tool and uplifted self-love through womyn's talking circles and support networks, creating space for womyn to speak their story and strengthen their voice. Though healing occurred in these movements to great extents and was used to organize, the organizing was not explicitly healing-centered as I believe it must be today.

I wish to explore healing as a major component of today's youth-led organizing to mend mounting political, socio-economic inflicted wounds on individuals and communities. Through interviews with contemporary youth-led organizations, I will explore current forms of movement building attempting to incorporate transformative, healing practices into their organizing cultures. By using my personal field work in the immigrant youth movement and Freedom Side, I will describe ongoing efforts by youth-led organizations to practice sustainable, community healing within their organizing work. Furthermore, I will point to the importance of building alternative organizational models as opportunities for further research.

## Literature Review

As there is not much academic writing on the role of healing within community organizing, it is important to define this socio-emotional healing I refer to. While Webster's definition of healing does not limit restoration to health in only physical terms, mainstream

thinking fails to acknowledge the great need for socio-emotional healing because it dismisses what it cannot plainly see. The degradation of human worth and relationships inflicts mental and emotional wounds rather than immediate physical ones. The psychological and emotional pain caused by structural violence like family separation and imprisonment is augmented by common sayings like “Get over it. Slavery was a long time ago,” or “You need to pray the gay away.” I utilize literature like *The Soul of Justice* and *Political Emotions* to show how such pain leads to deep socio-emotional wounds which distance us farther and farther away from justice and freedom. Moreover, society’s overemphasis of reason over emotion, logic over compassion, and the individual over relationships deepens such wounds and are structural, ideological, and socially constructed—making them open to social transformation.

Using lessons from Greek tragedy and classical scholarship, Cynthia Willett states, “When we mess with our relationships, we mess with ourselves. This is a moral message we have trouble understanding today” (15). In *The Soul of Justice*, Willett argues liberal theory makes it difficult to see and understand the contradictions of modern liberal states. Self-identified Democratic countries in the West and North claim values of equality and human rights, yet participate in an economic system that bases high standards of living for upper classes on sentencing masses of workers and their families to lives of poverty, despair, and degradation. The United States pledges allegiance to principles of “liberty and justice for all” while maintaining the world records of incarceration and deportation, both over two million people each.

While Enlightenment liberalism—liberalism based on the Enlightenment interpretation of the person through a binary scale between autonomy and dependence to measure moral maturity and justice—claims to promote equality, liberalism actually perpetuates mass social inequalities.

Willett asks, “Could it be that we modernists have misconceptualized the very notion of freedom? Could it be that we do not even know ourselves?” (2) As I lay out the healing practices led by youth-led organizations to respond to socially inflicted wounds on the physical, economic, emotional, and mental health of communities and families, I answer a resounding yes to Willett’s question.

While explaining human needs for intimacy, Willet investigates “how our fleshy connections might be scarred by wounds from past relationships or weighed down by the politics of skin” (121). Beliefs like racism are social constructions that result in significant mental and emotional wounds for all persons and relationships implicated. Such wounds require healing or can worsen over time, and can even get passed on over generations. Willett references Cornel West’s call for “A love ethic” that “is a last attempt at generating a sense of agency among a downtrodden people” because white supremacy and capitalism have driven European societies to nihilism, “a disease of the soul” (122). By overemphasizing the importance of reason in individual lives and the capacity to make choices, the moral psychology of liberalism undervalues the only remedies for such a disease—love and care. The greater need “to cultivate diverse relationships based on friendship, emotional intimacy, and economic cooperation” is overlooked, dismissed, and even forgotten (Willett, 3).

Willett explains how liberalism aims to minimize the social, environmental, and economic interdependency of the human situation. Liberal framework categorizes individuals into those who are responsible for their own lives and those entangled in relationships of dependency, a basic tenet of the dominant American Dream narrative and “Pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality. This model of the self as the rational decision maker excuses social

and economic constructions like racism and capitalism from blame while shaming and devaluing individuals who do not make “responsible” choices, regardless of varying circumstances.

Additionally, it sets up carework, such as connections with children and elders or immersion in nature, culture, and history, as different from and less than work based on autonomy. Our current capitalistic economic systems values human worth based on productivity of human labor. Thus, rather than nurturing and restoring relationships with ourselves, our pasts, and others to better navigate morality and justice, care-focused work is not valuable because it is not considered to create value. In addition to devaluing maternal and female-association work, community organizing also falls into this inferior category as it is based on building relationships between people.

I drew various connections between Willet’s promotion of social bonds towards social transformation and Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Willet claims, “The fantasy of privileged suffering conceals a desire to be the Master. Master narratives of all kinds need to give way to slave narratives, and these narratives must join together for a vision of democracy across political and racial borders (229). Likewise, Freire states, “It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors...It is therefore essential that the oppressed wage the struggle to resolve the contradiction in which they are caught” (56). He goes on to state the goal of becoming fully human cannot be achieved by reversing roles and having the oppressed become the oppressors; full humanity will only be achieved if the contradictions are “resolved by the appearance of the new [wo]man: neither oppressor nor oppressed, but [wo]man in the process of liberation” (56). Just as Freire argues for inner and interpersonal transformation, Willett states, “The collaborative venture that joins old school leftists and new liberals can only work if there is mutual transformation and even...mutual accommodation” (229).

According to Willett, the reformulation of an individual rights doctrine must shift “the center of identity away from monotonous discourses of ownership and merit toward the diverse discourses of the lover, the working family, and the cosmopolitan friend” (4). As “black critical theory teaches...the goal of freedom must be in the inviolability of the individual-in-relationship-to-others. The primary bearer of rights and opportunities is not the self-interested and rational person...” but the social person, which these rights must protect (163). Willett highlights African American thinkers like Frederick Douglas, bell hooks, and Toni Morrison for their explicit focus on the “social eros” of human relationships. To them, “freedom...should not be theorized in terms of autonomy. Freedom lives or dies in the relations forged between persons.” Moreover, rather than defining freedom in legal or political terms, “Douglas portrays freedom in terms of a social and ethical force that he calls spirit” (190).

In *Political Emotions*, Martha Nussbaum claims instituting democracy is at its root “a problem of hearts and minds,” and that political stability is only possible with an emotional involvement that has both particular and principled components. She states national sentiment is “a transitional instrument of universal brotherhood [and] an ongoing principle of its organization” (56). The two primary tasks for the political cultivation of public emotion are to elicit commitment to worthy projects that require effort and sacrifice, and to limit or regulate tendencies to protect the self at the expense of others (3).

In describing core values of a just society, Nussbaum argues just societies would aim at goals of human development “for each person, considering that *each person is an end*, and none a mere means to the goals or ends of others...the distribution of entitlements and benefits matters greatly” (119). At the heart of just societies, Nussbaum claims, is equal human dignity, where dignity is “understood as a member of a family of conceptions and principles that hang together

and are justified as a whole.” Nussbaum clarifies the only important good things in human life are not always perfectly secure, as humans are not stoic beings. People are “active beings who pursue aims and seek lives rich in activity, fully capable “of being augmented or diminished by the interventions of fortune or other people” (120). Thus, “The conception of the human being that lies at the heart of the political conception involves both *striving* and *vulnerability*” and to deny people suitable support and care is deeply damaging as it denies them of the ability to live lives worthy of human dignity. Such intimate damage is not simply reversed; it calls for deep socio-emotional healing.

Nussbaum argues “the cognitive content of emotions is shaped by social norms and specific societal circumstances” and describes how countries understandably and justifiably practice emotion-driven politics (401). Emotions are valid, natural human parts of ourselves, and thus play an understandable, often understated, role in our socio-political and economic organization. Finally, Nussbaum argues that love matters for justice, not just as an emotional tool to build a just society, but as part of the overall goal toward which society is striving.

Books such as *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, and *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around* explore intersectionality and healing as key organizing tools for freedom. Most recently published, *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around* highlights the roots of today's identity politics and the term “intersectionality” by sharing the stories and reflections of Barbara Smith—a Black, queer feminist who co- founded the Combahee River Collective. Combahee was the Boston chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization and existed from 1973 to 1977. The term intersectionality is based on an analysis by Combahee, which “demands that we each account for our specific social location within interlocking webs of power and privilege and understand that different strands of injustice...are complexly interwoven”

(Eubanks and Jones, 5). This literature shares key insights about practicing solidarity and resistance, hand in hand.

*The Revolution will Not be Funded: Beyond the Nonprofit Industrial Complex* and *Color of Violence* by INCITE!, *Women of Color Against Violence* share insights into the development of the nonprofit industrial complex and the numerous forms of violence inflicted on womyn and communities of color in the U.S. *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology* also calls on the need for new strategies in cross-cultural dialogue and alliance building to build a stronger, transformational movement for social justice. This literary research supports my field work and interview findings with youth-led grassroots organizations currently leading work on the ground.

Literature including Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, Barbara Ransby's *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*, and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* help recount organizing principles that remain relevant in today's organizing ideologies and practices. Additionally, Celina Su's *Streetwise for Book Smarts* builds on currently dominant social movement theories, in particular those based on Saul Alinsky and Paulo Freire, by investigating how cultural norms within organizations contribute to the implementation of particular types of political strategies. Through five case study organizations in the Bronx, Celina offers a contrasting analysis of Alinsky- and Freire-derived norms inside these organizations and points to how such "cultural toolkits" are associated with differing capacities and preferences that emphasize certain political strategies over others.

#### Living Legacies

It is worth further investigating the lives and legacies of Miss Baker, Alinsky, and Freire as their stories and organizing styles are consistently present in organizing conversations and culture. They were also revealed through the interviews in various forms, whether they were

directly alluded to or in deep alignment with comments and aspirations of the organizers I talked with.

For Miss Ella Jo Baker, organizing was about leading by supporting others to lead. Her teachings and leadership were transformational for young organizers who worked with her and for the Civil Right Movement as a whole. Critical of the NAACP for caring more about its membership size than



Miss Ella Jo Baker

meaningful engagement with its members, she left her role as the NAACP’s National Director of Branches in 1946 and went on to lead the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) (Payne, 888). Her association with the SCLC positioned her to “help create and shape one of the most significant organizations of the sixties, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)” (Payne, 890). Miss Baker served as a key advisor to SNCC and played a critical role ensuring SNCC remained youth-led and independent from larger, older black organizations including the NAACP. She is most known for emphasizing collective leadership, or having many leaders with less hierarchy. Miss Baker’s collective leadership model and vision were critical to SNCC’s development and growth, and exemplifies the complex, relational nature of good organizing.

Ganz says, “Organizers engage people in interpreting why they should act to change their world – their motivation – and how they can act to change it – their strategy.” Good organizers build with others by helping them develop their motivations and strategies, not that of the



organizers. Miss Baker knew that in this way, the grassroots collective power flourishes and the movement's labor and spirit to fight for justice becomes increasingly sustainable. "Her entire adult life was devoted to building organizations that worked for social change by encouraging individual growth and individual empowerment" (Payne, 885).

She also deeply believed youth had to be at the forefront of the movement in order for our movement to succeed, and she understood how to promote this in practice by helping create space for youth to lead and supporting them in their leadership. This generally meant keeping a distance from the spotlight of media and microphones, despite her strong public speaking abilities (Payne, 887). Her leadership presents a stark alternative to charismatic leadership models that often go unquestioned because we are frequently not taught otherwise. One of the few documentary films about Miss Ella Baker is justly titled "Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker," whereas Fundi is Swahili for "a person who passes skills from one generation to another."

In *Rules for Radicals*, Saul Alinsky outlines a particular set of rules for community organizing. These include, "The first step in community organization is community disorganization" (Alinsky, 116), disrupting existing patterns of interaction to mobilize neighborhood residents into citizen participation, and focusing on "winnable" issues. Alinsky's rules emphasize practical organization-building over social movement-building. The Alinsky founded Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) is an official federation of dues-paying congregations and community organizations with their own paid organizers. Although the IAF has significantly changed over time, it continues to fit well within the Alinskyite model. Community organizations following this model tend to mobilize individuals rather than existing institutions. They generally have dues systems, well-defined bylaws, and official IRS non-profit organizational status (Su, 101).

Moreover, Alinskyite thinking revolves around the concept of self-interest, and focuses on delineating self-interest as a source of motivation and mobilization. Following this pragmatism, “no specific issue is guaranteed to be addressed by an Alinsky-descendant community organization” due to a determined absence of political ideology (Su, 102). Alinsky’s rules do not have an explicit grounding in the belief of shared human dignity; rather, there is a grand focus on the material over the spiritual. Additionally, there is a focus on demonizing an “enemy” in order to take power. Rather than transforming society or changing the rules of the game, Alinsky’s methods focus on winning the game as it has been set up for us to play. This can be a dangerous foundation for building organizational structures and ideologies.

According to Alinsky, local constituents should choose the issues and respective campaigns should organize around them. His writings indicate that education and leadership development are important aspects of organizing as a whole. Su defines the Alinsky style of organizing by its emphasis on the following: “activities and protocols that relate directly to organization campaigns, especially recruitment; a focus on developing the organization as a whole, rather than the individuals within them per se; and leadership development with the organizer as a guide” (Su, 102). The Alinskyite model is marked by cultural activities that emphasize traits and obstacles shared by all members and a focus on building the organization. In contrast, the Freirian framework is marked by cultural activities and norms that emphasize what is unique about each member as well as what is shared, with a resulting focus on the individual as well as the organization as a whole (Su, 102).

Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* describes the pedagogical model Freire used to concurrently teach literacy and mobilize uneducated poor in Chile and Brazil in the 1970s. Though exiled at one point, he later became Minister of Education in Brazil. Like Alinsky's

Rules for Radicals, Freire's literature is a product of lessons learned through experience. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire contrasts “banking” and liberating methods of education. The dominant “banking” method perpetuates a “culture of silence,” in which a teacher possesses the status of authority and “deposits” knowledge into the empty minds of students, or the “banks.”

As a way to resist this banking style of education and improve learning, Freire advocates a system of tackling illiteracy by teaching workers critical thinking skills as well as basic reading and writing. In this process, teachers and organizers do not rely on students to absorb information without question. Instead, students exchange information with the teacher as learning partners and experience *conscientizadão*, or consciousness-raising, which allows them to critically analyze causal forces in society (126).

Su’s research states cultural norms of the Freirian category are marked by leadership development that emphasizes the organizer as a partner rather than as a traditional teacher, rituals that focus on the individual member rather than the organization as a whole, and activities that tend to be unrelated to political campaigns at least at first glance. Unlike Alinsky, Freirian activities do not draw on traditional notions of self-interest. Rather, they rely on forming an informed sense of identity to achieve human transformation and liberation, particularly of the oppressed. This provides an inspiring alternative to the current standard U.S. educational system which alienates, excludes, and even criminalizes many youth of color through its curricula and educational environments. Freire is known for his popular education pedagogy, and serves to demonstrate a different, more empowering path of learning is possible and has been successful.

#### Methodology: Investigating New Trends in Youth Organizing

Through this research, I examine existing vehicles for healing and intersectionality practices within youth-led organizing work. The methodology for this project includes my

personal field work with the Freedom Side-- a collective of youth of color from around the country committed to building intersectional, youth-led movement-- and immigrant youth organizing. I have been part of Freedom Side since its beginning in September 2013, and my deep involvement in the immigrant youth movement began in 2007. In addition to participant observation, I conducted ten semi-structured interviews with ten youth leaders between December 2014 and March 2015. Interview times ranged from sixty minutes to two hours. The interviewees ranged in age from 23 to 34, five male, five female with two gender non-conforming and LGBTQ identified.

#### Interviews

After developing a set of topics and subtopics for my interviews, I sequenced questions to stimulate introspective, relational conversation between myself and interviewees. Topics ranged from how interviewees personally defined healing and intersectionality within organizing to how their organizations practiced healing through organizing. Additionally, I inquired about the challenges and opportunities they experienced building alternative organizational structures, and how they thought of incorporating healing into their organizational cultures through structural changes. I conducted a total of ten interviews with current young leaders actively engaged in the movement through various levels of involvement, from executive directors to member leaders and in between.

Interviewees included Imelda Plascencia, Dream Resource Center coordinator at the UCLA Downtown Labor Center and longtime mentor and friend since we organized through Improving Dreams, Equality, Access, and Success (IDEAS) at UCLA; Austin Thompson and Theodore Moore, fellow infrastructure committee members of the Freedom Side collective; and multiple youth leaders such as Cristina Jimenez and Greisa Martinez from United We Dream

(UWD), Sherika Shaw, Phillip Agnew, and Tim Harrell from Dream Defenders (DD), and James Hayes and Malaya Davis from the Ohio Student Association (OSA). I selected to interview these three organizations because they are leading organizations of rising youth movements in the U.S. and I hold close relationships with them.

UWD is the first and largest national network of immigrant youth organizations in the U.S. and has been instrumental in connecting undocumented youth across the country while pushing successful policy shifts for immigrant youth and families. The Dream Defenders is a Florida statewide multicultural organization led by Black and Latino youth that came to prominence after occupying the state capital for a month after Trayvon Martin's assassin<sup>13</sup> failed to be indicted. The Ohio Student Association is an Ohio statewide multicultural organization led by black and white youth organizing against rising student debt and criminalization. They organized around the death of John Crawford in late 2014, amid the Ferguson uprisings.

As a core member of Freedom Side and trainer with the Wildfire Project, which trains grassroots organizations across the country, I worked intimately with OSA and DDs for the past year and a half. I have close relationships with the Directors of each of these organizations, and with their staff and member leaders to varying degrees. Having served as Board Chair of UWD since 2011 and being a founder of Freedom Side provided me insider knowledge about the successes, challenges, and development of these spaces. Moreover, my knowledge about their organizational missions, theories of change, structures and personalities facilitated my research and helped me conduct more in-depth, open interviews (Hammer and Wildavsky).

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<sup>13</sup> George Zimmerman, neighborhood vigilante, shot and killed unarmed 17 year old Trayvon Martin in 2012. In 2013, he was acquitted of all charges.

From UWD, I interviewed Cristina Jimenez, co-founder and Managing Director, and Greisa Martinez, a lead national organizer for the network who used to organize locally in Texas. From the Dream Defenders, I interviewed co-founder Phillip Agnew, regional organizer Sherika Shaw, and member leader Tim Harrell. Lastly, from OSA I interviewed James Hayes, co-founder and political director, and Malaya Davis, Northeast Ohio Regional organizer.

Youth Organizing Today and the Beginnings of Freedom Side

There is a great need for more Ella Bakers today. Many youth want to lead, but too often older generations fail to see the importance of youth holding their place at the front or they do not know how to effectively nurture or support genuine, critical youth leadership. Instead, some fear and fight against youth leadership. The rise of the immigrant youth movement in the last decade exemplifies a modern network of advocates and organizers significantly based on storytelling, self and community empowerment, and policy advocacy. Largely led and built by and for those impacted by this issue most, undocumented youth, we developed our strategies, coordinated nationally, and built organizations from the ground up. Moreover, the immigrant youth movement was and continues to be predominantly led by women and LGBTQ youth.

In 1964, SNCC initiated the Mississippi Summer Project, which became prominently known as Freedom Summer and remains one of the iconic examples of youth-led organizing. For the last year, I've been involved in developing the Freedom Side collective, a group which is directly inspired by Freedom Summer. Freedom Side consists of various youth of color individuals and organizations aiming to build intersectional youth led movement for the sake of deep, social transformation. These organizations include United We Dream, the Dream Defenders from Florida, the Ohio Student Association (OSA), and many others.

In August of last year at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary March on Washington D.C., the three young people scheduled to speak—myself as board chair of UWD, Phillip Agnew as director of Dream Defenders, and Alayna Eagle Shield of the Lakota tribe-- were cut from the list to be replaced with older generational figures like Al Sharpton and Oprah Winfrey. Youth were once again dismissed, overlooked, and undervalued. Knowing great resources would be infused into an upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the 1964 Freedom Summer, a small group of us came together to ensure some of those funds were directed towards youth-led grassroots mobilization and movement.

Through our personal organizing networks, we convened young organizers of color in November of 2013 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and agreed to put forth a collaborative plan to seize the Freedom Summer commemorations as an opportunity for movement building. We aimed to build deeper connections between black and immigrant youth organizers and communities given our national and global crisis around criminalization (incarceration and deportation), and that first convening was hugely successful in doing so. This is how the Freedom Side collective came to be.

When planning our first convening, the infrastructure team had extensive conversations about identity factors like race and gender, as well as structural and organizational dynamics. These are important considerations within and between youth-led organizations so we knew to be intentional about who and how we brought leaders into a space together. For instance, we voted to not invite any white people to this first convening. Knowing we wanted to bring together youth-led organizations, we defined youth as less than 35 years old. In most of these organizations, there is no explicit age cap but the membership is generally between 18 and 28 and predominantly college aged.

Young womyn of color have a great presence and leadership within leading youth organizations and movements. UWD and BYP100 have female Executive Directors (EDs) and lead organizers. While DDs and OSA have male EDs, their core leadership is significantly female, and all of these organizations acknowledge to various degrees that gender and sexism as important parts of their identity and organizing work ahead. Moreover, #BlackLivesMatter was founded and is led by young, Black queer womyn.

In addition to race and gender, national and local organizational dynamics are well known among organizers. There is a tradition of institutionalized, mainstream organizations taking up too much space or taking credit and funding for the work of grassroots organizations. We wanted Freedom Side to consist of individuals and leaders committed to local, grassroots movement. DDs and OSA are state based organizations in Florida and Ohio, while BYP100 and UWD are chapter and affiliate based national networks.

We build our collective work as we go, step by step, planning for what we can and addressing needs as they arise. By making intentional use of healing practices such as storytelling, fostering personal relationships based on support and shared values, and explicitly continuing Miss Baker's collective leadership based model, we create brave spaces for and with youth of color organizers from around the country. We launched Freedom Summer 2014 as a manifestation of collaborative efforts between those living and organizing in society's gaps. Often dismissed as inexperienced, uneducated, and immature, we constantly experience systemic and relational exclusion due to our age, race, citizenship status, class, gender, and/or sexuality. Living in these gaps better equips us to build transformative culture, analysis, and vision that permeate existing categories, institutions, and borders.

Immigrant Youth Movement



In addition to highlighting the significance of the immigrant youth movement, I will utilize Freedom Side as a case study to encompass the network of organizations I interviewed and analyze how these communities of people interact, build, and learn from each other using transformative tools. Thus, it is worthwhile to review the origins and background of the immigrant youth-led movement here.

Improving Dreams Equality, Access, and Success (IDEAS) at UCLA<sup>14</sup> was my introduction into the immigrant youth movement, which I was privileged to join at a time of birth and growth. When I discovered my family's undocumented status, I thought I was the only person in the world going through this unjust experience. IDEAS found me as an incoming freshman and helped me understand I was not alone. They showed me undocumented youth could help each other fundraise, advocate, and build family. The year before, in 2006, the country experienced the largest May Day marches with millions of people, including my family, marching in the streets to protest the H.R. 4437 Sensenbrenner immigration bill<sup>15</sup> and advocate for legalization of undocumented people in the U.S. This was a peak in the immigrant rights movement and the first march my family and I ever participated in.

IDEAS was one of the first undocumented student support groups in the country and formed two years after CA Assembly Bill 540<sup>16</sup> was passed in 2001. Through them, I quickly learned advocacy skills, gained public speaking practice at rallies and protests, and, most importantly, felt the love and support from a community of people struggling alongside me. I

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<sup>14</sup> IDEAS at UCLA is the undocumented student support group at the University of California, Los Angeles. It was formed in 2003.

<sup>15</sup> The Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act, or H.R. 4437, criminalized those who helped undocumented people and increased penalties for undocumented people. It passed the House of Representatives in December, 2005, and later failed in the Senate.

<sup>16</sup> Assembly Bill 540 (AB540) allows undocumented youth who meet certain requirements to pay in-state college tuition at public universities and colleges in California. CA was one of the first states to pass such a bill. Now, at least 17 states have in-state tuition bills, making it possible for some undocumented youth to afford college.

experienced the power of good facilitation, storytelling, and vulnerability in addition to time management, mentorship, and leadership development. Overlapping networks advocating for similar issues led to my involvement in student government, the UC Student Association (UCSA), and the United States Student Association (USSA).

In 2010, undocumented youth organized nationally under UWD to pass the DREAM Act—we organized mass call ins, petitions, civil disobedience actions, marches, workshops, and more in various states. In December 2010, we succeeded in passing the DREAM Act in the House, but the Senate failed to pass it by five votes. After grieving our loss, we re-strategized and began pushing for administrative relief for undocumented youth from President Obama. On June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012, the same day of my UCLA graduation, we won Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) for over half a million eligible immigrant youth including my siblings and me. Since then, we continued to organize for DACA expansion to include our families, and in 2014, we won Deferred Action for Parental Accountability (DAPA) to benefit nearly five million undocumented people in this country. This executive action has been delayed by the courts and we have a long way to go in our fight for justice, but these victories are largely a result of immigrant youth organizing and the development of the immigrant youth movement continues to inspire many.

In the first decade of the 2000s when local undocumented youth support organizations began to form, there were few alternative opportunities for undocumented youth organizing development and agency. Longstanding organizations possessed youth programs without equitable youth ownership of the organizing work or organizational development. With the DREAM Act introduced in 2001, politicians and well established organizations frequently used “Dreamers,” or DREAM Act eligible youth, to share their personal story to an audience, with no

political agency. While such paternalistic models and approaches became commonplace, few entities like the UCLA Labor Center provided intentional mentorship and support to nourish a growing immigrant youth movement.

The Labor Center supported IDEAS at UCLA members in writing the book, *Underground Undergrads*, which launched the Underground Undergrads Project that would eventually evolve into the Dream Resource Center, a hub for undocumented youth organizers in Los Angeles within the downtown Labor Center. Before entering the Department of Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP) at MIT, I worked there leading the national book tour of *Undocumented and Unafraid: Tam Tran, Cinthya Felix, and the Immigrant Youth Movement* in addition to other projects.

The Labor Center provided meeting space for undocumented youth in Los Angeles organize and facilitating key connections with labor and civil rights leaders. In addition to supporting relationships between undocumented youth and the AFL-CIO<sup>17</sup> in Los Angeles, Kent Wong, the director of the UCLA Labor Center initiated relationships between undocumented youth and Civil Rights icons like Reverend James Lawson and Marian Wright Edelman<sup>18</sup>, president and founder of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF)<sup>19</sup>. These links facilitated greater connections between Black and undocumented youth through the 2013 CDF Youth summit, where I shared my story with thousands of youth leading Freedom Schools in predominantly Black neighborhoods across the country. The creation of the first CDF Freedom School<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) is the largest federation of unions in the U.S.

<sup>18</sup> Miss Marian Wright Edelman was the first African-American woman admitted to the Mississippi bar, and a prominent activist in the Civil Rights Movement.

<sup>19</sup> The Children's Defense Fund is an advocacy and research organization founded in 1973 to document the problems and possible solutions for poor children, children of color, and children with disabilities.

<sup>20</sup> Fabiola Inzunza and I co-directed this Freedom School in the summer of 2013 at the Miguel Contreras High Schools in Los Angeles, CA.

focused on exploring immigrant identity through popular education was a result of intentional movement and community bridging.

While peer organizations like the United States Student Association (USSA) provided support for national campus coordination, few programs or organizations offered mentorship or paid much attention to a growing immigrant youth movement like the Labor Center. In fact, many immigrant organizations belittled or disregarded youth leadership, which caused youth to rebel and form their own space. In part, this helps tell the beginning of UWD. UWD formed in 2009 after the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), a longstanding, representative organization for Latinos in the U.S., sent a group of undocumented youth looking to strategize and advocate for the federal DREAM Act to meet in the coat room during their annual conference. It is worth noting I experienced the Immigrant Youth Movement develop primarily from my involvement in California. Immigrant youth organizers in differing geographic locations have distinct experiences as regional differences between undocumented youth are particularly significant, though various points of the movement's development occurred simultaneously and in interconnected ways.

As I continued my involvement in the movement, I expanded my immigrant youth focused work to youth of color bridge building, particularly wanting to grow connections between Black and undocumented youth. In addition to sharing struggles and resources, I believe deepening our shared resilience and tools for healing allows us to better heal, organize more sustainably, and fight stronger. My personal experiences and field work allowed me to quickly see how incarceration and deportation is the same system making profit at the expense of black and brown communities. The consequences were similar—sustained poverty, family separation, and community disempowerment. Events like the CDF Youth Summit in 2013, the 2014 UWD

Congress in Arizona<sup>21</sup> where we hosted a powerful intersectionality plenary with the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI)<sup>22</sup> and the Dream Defenders, and many more, expressed and deepened opportunities for our movements to flourish individually and collectively. Such events, individuals, connections and more are further facilitated by spaces like the Freedom Side network.

### Case Study: Freedom Side



Freedom Side members at the 2014 HK on J Moral March in Raleigh, North Carolina (Feb. 2014)

Freedom Side began as a collective of youth of color and organizations aiming to build multi-state, intersectional, multicultural youth led movement in the U.S. With a collective narrative, values, and purpose, the Freedom Side emphasizes locally based organizing and that those most impacted lead. The few national groups who are networks consist of numerous

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<sup>21</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> Annual UWD Congress in Pheonix, Arizona convened over 500 immigrant youth from across the country.

<sup>22</sup> BAJI is an education and advocacy network comprised of African Americans and black immigrants from Africa, Latin American and the Caribbean founded in April 2006.

smaller, local organizations. This is the working vision statement from Freedom Side's first convening at M.I.T in November, 2013 in preparation for Freedom Summer, before the Ferguson resistance and #BlackLivesMatter gained national attention: "Freedom Summer 2014 is a local movement of a collective of youth of color rooted in love, grass roots organizing and action with a national sensitivity about the quality of life. It is a pressure point on the continuum of the fight for justice. We are an active resistance to protect the equality and lives of our families and communities. We seek to answer the question of "Whose life matters?"

Freedom Side (FS) serves as a space where youth of color facilitate and set the agenda, building structure and work as we go, free of foundation deliverables. FS functions outside the nonprofit industrial complex in that it is not institutionalized; it develops flexible, emergent structure generally composed of various working groups responsive to needs and goals of the group so far. While we have benefitted from foundation grants, we do not rely on them as the majority of our work is unpaid and coordination across our organizations and locations. The grants we have received so far lack stipulations beyond building youth power broadly, allowing us to maintain our flexibility. Rather than being driven by funding, FS is a space for experimentation across movement sectors and communities; it serves as an opening for youth of color to come together and genuinely ask themselves and each other how to build political power best. The willingness and humility to ask and struggle through such questions, learn while teaching, and support sister movements is unique and special.

Many who have attended FS convenings or joined with Freedom Side through relationships identify it as the "Freedom Side family." Thus, in addition to acting as a space for movement experimentation, Freedom Side serves as a political, cultural, ideological home for young people to freely organize in a way that is healing, empowering, and nourishing for us and

our communities. After Freedom Summer 2014 and convening ourselves in Cleveland, Ohio in March 2015 to reflect on the last year and a half and assess how Freedom Side should move forward, we have the following draft mission statement: “Standing on the shoulders of organizers like Miss Ella Baker and SNCC, Freedom Side is the cultural, political, and ideological home for *youth of color* committed to building a radical, new majority in the United States. We are a collective of young organizers from our respective communities building political alignment to stop profit at the expense of people. We organize against the criminalization of our communities, while fighting for better education, better jobs, and true democracy.”

One core member of FS, a brilliant Black, queer trainer and strategist who became a close friend of mine through FS, says “Freedom Side feels like church.” In every FS convening, we utilize various forms of storytelling and song and chant to cultivate a powerful spiritual and cultural space where we can effectively engage with strategy and collaborative work. Such tools facilitate relationship building and are part of an intentional balance between process and outcomes that attempts to restore the collective process-making often omitted from an “action and deliverables” approach of organizing. This contributes to healing work by allowing for greater time and dialogue to the process of getting to outcomes, and acknowledging that good process is not only part of the desired outcomes but embodies our outcomes as well. In other words, how we organize for social justice can embody justice or injustice itself.

By leading and facilitating our convenings, whereby youth of color speak to youth of color with support and without structural hierarchy also contributes to growing the Freedom Side family. Moreover, building and strengthening relationships outside structured agendas and tools is critical because family and support go beyond meetings and work. Communal, unstructured relaxing and socializing after the day’s agenda ends is where significant amounts of laughter,

dancing, and fun occur. At our most recent convening in Cleveland, we had an impromptu “Queen’s circle” on the second night of our meeting around midnight. This check in between the womyn of color who were still awake was a space to vent, offer support through listening and resonance, and just *be* around powerful sisterhood. Such spontaneous check-ins about love, life, sad and happy times, including but not limited to organizing, differ from traditional one on ones uplifted through Alinsky style organizing. Moreover, it is often during unstructured “hanging out” that we freely explore organizing questions and dreams, philosophical debates or identity discussion, and human comfort.

The Freedom Side is a unique youth-led space in part because it intentionally convenes individuals and organizations across issues and movement sectors to facilitate solidarity and collaboration. We believe this will help our generation and movement build power and heal wounds of our past and present so our future can be brighter. Solidarity and coordination through FS have ranged from small practices to actions of civil disobedience and more. Since our first convening, we practiced the art of sharing cultural gifts like song and dance by teaching each other songs from slavery, or freedom songs, and chants from our respective movements. These included “Undocumented and Unafraid! Queer, queer, and Unashamed!” “What side are you on, my people? What side are you on? We on the Freedom Side!” and “Chant down Babylon! Freedom Side is the bomb, We Ready! We Comin!” These lyrical statements were gifts to honor and respect, and felt as such. I still remember when Keron Blair, our FS facilitator support for nearly every convening, sang “Solid as a rock, Rooted as a tree” to bring us back into the meeting after a break during the first convening at MIT. It felt special to sing this historically meaningful and soulful song of resilience alongside young freedom fighters. The fact these tools were not structured or forced into the agenda is of note. The cultures brought by youth at these



convenings shined through because individuals felt inclined to honor the space with their full selves.

In addition to cross-cultural bridging, FS members participated in collective actions during Freedom Summer 2014 and beyond. In July of 2014, FS led its first public action by going to<sup>23</sup> the National Governor's Association in Nashville, Tennessee and five leaders were arrested despite following the rules laid out by the Tennessee Highway Patrol. Immediately, the collective flashed into action. The organized response included on the ground support, media and online communications outreach to raise public awareness of the arrests, and successful online fundraising to bail our FS family out. A month before, FS convened at the Mississippi Freedom Summer 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference in Jackson, Mississippi. Members from various FS organizations participated in the MS50 action on the Nissan plant to rally for worker's rights and a union election at the Nissan plant in Jackson.

On September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014 the Ohio Student Association (OSA) led a pilgrimage in protest of John Crawford's murder from the Walmart where police shot him to the courthouse in Xenia, Ohio that would hear his case. FS individuals, including myself, Theo Moore, and Nelini Stamp drove to Xenia to support OSA. Likewise, numerous FS members met each other in Ferguson to support the uprising there. These actions brought youth together while developing their leadership collectively through shared experience. More significantly, these actions showed many of us we had each other's backs, which is often the ultimate test for genuine solidarity and fraternity to exist.

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<sup>23</sup> Pierre, Kathy. "Freedom Side United People of Color in Collective Social Justice Organization." USA Today. August 2, 2014. <http://college.usatoday.com/2014/08/02/freedom-side-unites-people-of-color-in-collective-social-justice-organization/>

Other forms of solidarity occurred outside of actions and convenings which helped to foster and nourish individual and organizational relationships. Throughout 2014, UWD was in campaign mode pushing for DACA expansion to include our parents and family members. At the most recent FS convening in Cleveland, Ohio, Greisa Martinez shared that although the campaign limited UWD's active involvement in FS actions and most working groups, UWD leaders continued to feel supported by FS family. More specifically, Nelini as FS coordinator and other FS leaders would regularly check in with Greisa to hear how things were going and explore how FS and sister organizations could support. When Ferguson began to rise up, the FS network was ready to coordinate responses and national calls for individuals and organizations around the country to support. As FS coordinator, Nelini and others collaborated on a Ferguson toolkit for distribution as well as assisted in developing national demands with Ferguson leaders. Moreover, three of the young leaders who met with President Obama about Ferguson and the ongoing killings of black youth were representatives of FS member organizations: DDs, OSA, and Make The Road New York (MTRNY), an affiliate of UWD. Lastly, FS serves as a space for coordinated and intentional communications support to expand and deepen intersectional, cross-issue messaging.

In addition to significant success over the last year and a half, Freedom Side also experienced numerous drawbacks. Despite explicitly stating our objections and aspirations to reject the non-profit industrial complex, FS benefitted from foundation grants to carry out most of our convenings and relationships with funders and conversations about funding were nonetheless delicate. Thus, capitalism along with the nonprofit industrial complex impacted the collective. Additionally, there have been various disagreements as we have continued to exist and grow. In particular, our structure has posed significant unanswered questions and obstacles.

The infrastructure team has also struggled through a balancing of process and outcomes for FS work.

## Findings and Discussions

### My Leadership Development

As a leader within Freedom Side, recent Board Chair of UWD, and a commitment to social justice and youth-led organizing for the rest of my life, my personal story and leadership development are embedded in this research. By describing my origins, values, and personal framework as well as the organizations, individuals, and practices that helped shape me, I will engage in critical introspection. Thus, in addition to external analysis, this research allows me to reflect on my practice and ongoing growth within our movement for social transformation.

As I reflected on my origins, life paths, and those of people around me, healing as organizing became increasingly significant to me and my work. My migration story, both outside and inside the U.S., carries great struggles and growth born out of interlocked love and pain. Born in Lima, Peru, my family and I migrated to Los Angeles in 1996. In the 1980s and early 90s, Peru underwent massive terrorism under Sendero Luminoso, or Shining Path, which left the country in great economic turmoil. When my dad's software company went bankrupt, my parents decided to use their final savings on our tourist visas to the United States so my siblings and I could have better educational opportunities. After a lengthy, uncertain travel process, the five of us arrived to California and moved in with my aunt, uncle, and his brother into a two bedroom apartment. Spatial distance from our culture, homeland, and family significantly impacted us in distinct ways, especially when a relative became sick or passed away.

Growing up, my parents did their best to protect my siblings and me from our social struggles. They juggled work with prioritizing us and our education, and kept us in a home-school-church radius until I began high school. Still, many experiences, such as working alongside my family in a newspaper factory in Los Angeles when I was in middle school, were normalized; memories, like getting bullied for looking immigrant in elementary school, were blocked out. Other experiences like winning a scholarship to attend a private middle school and intensely feeling the class differences between me and other students there were vivid and confusing, as there was no one to help me understand why those differences existed. This confusion fed alienation and hurt, creating wounds I would need to heal.

I was six years old when we boarded the plane to the United States, and I was seventeen when I discovered we were undocumented in my senior year of high school. Becoming conscious of our family's social status sparked the beginnings of greater social and political consciousness that transformed my personal narrative about me and the world. Physical and economic struggles coupled with severe depression led me to question my dignity in my first year of college. Undocumented meant isolation, illegal, alien; being this equated to not being allowed the "normal" college experience, not seeing my abuelitas (grandmothers) before they died, and deep layers of lies and shame. IDEAS at UCLA helped me see the need and possibilities for support—this organized support facilitated empowerment through collective and individual healing.

I learned the power of story and vulnerability not by reading or learning about it in a curriculum, but by experiencing it personally through IDEAS, my first "movement family." Our first IDEAS general body retreat took place on an April weekend in 2008 in a friend's house in Palm Springs. On our second night, IDEAS Co-chairs facilitated a spider web storytelling circle

in which each person threw a ball of yarn as they shared any parts of their story, eventually creating a spiderweb that represented the connections between us and our stories. I never imagined it was possible to feel good from crying in front of, much less alongside, strangers until that night. In our circle, we shared stories about crossing multiple borders as children, confronting unimaginable obstacles, and still maintaining hope and determination to continue fighting and loving. More significantly, I saw a bit of myself in every person's story and gained empowerment from feeling less alone. In turn, I shared my vulnerable self with the circle and knew others would see themselves in me somehow. There existed reciprocity.

I began my advocacy because IDEAS at UCLA provided the opportunity to do so and because I did not want my younger sister to struggle through the same hurt I faced. I wanted to pass the CA DREAM Act so she could receive some financial aid and perhaps not struggle through the four-hour daily bus commute and depression I experienced. Moreover, I stayed in the movement because I discovered chosen family sharing love and support amidst deep hardship like dropping out of school intermittently due to insufficient funds, choosing to pay for food on campus or the bus fare home, and family separation due to deportation to name a few. As a member, leader, and later 2009-2010 Co-chair of IDEAS, I played various roles including mentor, academic and financial advisor, big sister, little sister, counselor, organizer, advocate, and more. As time passed and my involvement grew, my "undocufamily" grew from campus specific (IDEAS) to statewide to national/international family nurturing deeper knowledge, consciousness, and relationships.

By becoming illegalized and then empowered in a society claiming to be the land of the free, I became a living contradiction; by becoming aware of my situation as a systemic consequence impacting communities of people, I became socially and politically conscious; by

acknowledging existing wounds, and sometimes opening them to heal, I became enlightened to the power of my humanity and of others.. Time and time again, I learned vulnerability is a powerful method for sharing pain, love, and power and that this is core to building empowering relationships, which is at the core of organizing. Eventually, *I came to understand we all carry undocumented parts of ourselves* and healing through organizing can serve as a powerful process of transformation.

My personal development along with collective empowerment experiences and close mentorship from peers in older generations and my own helped me develop an explicit healing lens within my leadership. Key mentors and guides along my path led me towards particular trainings and retreats like the 2011 Healing for Social Change retreat<sup>24</sup> to cultivate more healing environments within movement spaces. These were rare as it is a constant struggle against normative organizing culture in recent decades to allow space for healing--mental, emotional, spiritual, or physical—much less devote an entire retreat in the mountains to it. In part, this is what made it so transformative and revolutionary.

As my involvement continued and my social justice circles grew, peer support and personal sustainability seemed less and less central to organizing, and would generally not be acknowledged in most existing organizations. At times, it even felt foreign. Instead, action, advocacy, and growth held center stage. Action and strategy conflicted with making space for building relationships and healing. Outcomes and numbers were constantly emphasized over achieving deeper social transformation *through* our social justice work. This disconnect, and sometimes conflict, between process and outcomes can result in miscommunication,

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<sup>24</sup> Healing for Social Change retreat was part of a workshop series sponsored by the Leadership Development in Intergroup Relations (LDIR) for activists and those in nonprofit, direct services, health care, advocacy, education, and public sector organizations.

organizational fallout, and disempowerment. Additionally, disregarding personal sustainability and decentralizing healing has fed an organizing culture of chronic burnout. In many organizations, whoever put in the most “work” and hours receives praise, while those who share a need to step back are ignored, dismissed, or shamed. I experienced this while interning for SEIU United Long Term Care Workers (ULTCW) in the Summer of 2010.

Though healing was made invisible within organizing, the few organizers who emphasized care and healing were womyn and queers of color around me. Imelda Plascencia talked fiercely about self and community care from the first time I heard her speak in IDEAS. She shared her story of having followed instructions to self-deport to Mexico to fix her immigration status. This led to her being kept there for years undergoing severe depression before she could return to the U.S., still undocumented. After serving on IDEAS Board together, we became coworkers at the Dream Resource Center, where she constantly reminded me and others to prioritize self-love by saying “Treat yo-self!” To this day, I hear her voice when hesitating to make certain self-care choices.

Along with other undocumented young womyn and womyn of color, we attended the Healing for Social Change Retreat together, which was coordinated and facilitated by queer, womyn of color. Imelda developed the Collective of Immigrant Resilience through Community Led Empowerment (CIRCLE) Project at the Dream Resource Center in 2012 and founded Talking Circles in various campuses and cities in Southern California where undocumented youth could take advantage of intentional dialogue for mental and emotional support. Some older mentors like Victor Narro, a project coordinator at the UCLA Downtown Labor Center, emphasized the importance of avoiding burnout and shared personal experiences. Moreover,

California's proximity and historical ties to Mexico meant indigenous practices like that of cleansing energy with sage were very accessible and present in cultural spaces.

Looking back, IDEAS cultivated cultural rituals such as ending every Friday general body meeting with an explanation and exercise of the Unity clap and Isang Bagsak ("One rise, one fall")<sup>25</sup> as well as annual IDEAS Ourstory days to honor our growing past, present and future. While such practices set an intersectional tone and formed part of our IDEAS culture, the organization did not make healing an explicit part of its structure until 2010 when we developed IDentity Circles, now Talking Circles, to intentionally discuss and share peer mental health and emotional support. This occurred after years of ongoing crisis response and peer to peer emotional support, and some bridge building with the UCLA Psychological services on campus. Every year, we had members and board members<sup>26</sup> experience a range of trauma including dropping out of school temporarily due to grades, money, mental and emotional stress, and/or deportation or trying to stay in school despite these same factors.

I began intimately working with undocumented youth since I became part of IDEAS in 2007 and for the last three years, I served as UWD Board Chair working with national undocumented leadership and traveling the country meeting with undocumented youth leaders in various states. This, along with my strong public speaking abilities and my role at the UCLA Labor Center leading the book tour for *Undocumented and Unafraid*, facilitated my participation in multiple local and national public speaking engagements across the country. In addition to helping me see the diverse circumstances in which undocumented people survive and live from

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<sup>25</sup> The unity clap and Isang Bagsak come from the Farmworker's movement for labor justice in the 1960s in California, led by Mexican and Filipino farmworkers. IDEAS learned these practices from sister campus organizations like Mecha and Samahang Pilipino.

<sup>26</sup> Board members serve as coordinators for IDEAS components. Though they sometimes shift from year to year, these generally include advocacy, membership, fundraising, the AB540 Project, and Co-chairs.



region to region, I witnessed the power of growing comradery and love. These combined experiences advanced my empowerment and growth as a person and leader; I learned healing practices and became effective at connecting people and building bridges between communities, ideas, and opinions. Countless mentors, personal and professional skills and critical thinking development, and wide-felt impact from our organizing allowed me to learn my purpose and pursue it.

Unique contributions of Immigrant Youth Movement

In addition to interviews with young organizers and organizational directors, I highlight the Immigrant Youth Movement as the first nationally coordinated youth-led community organizing in decades. Undocumented youth organizers preceded the most recent wave of black youth-led organizing and could amplify current youth organizing efforts by combining forces, as attempted through the Freedom Side collective. The Immigrant Youth Movement made significant contributions to youth organizing in the U.S. including its effective use of storytelling and counter narrative development, its female and queer leadership, and its organizational growth and sustainability.

Storytelling was required to overcome the imposed and internalized invisibility of being undocumented. There is no physical indicator—no skin color or accent—that can accurately signal whether someone is undocumented. This tool allowed us to build collectively, connect across socially-constructed borders, and bond through vulnerability. By sharing vulnerable parts of ourselves with other undocumented youth, we began to document our lives and reclaim our individual and collective dignity. Such healing work facilitated our empowerment as a rising movement. The intimately personal choice to “come out of the shadows” as *Undocumented*,

*Unafraid, and Unapologetic*<sup>27</sup> simultaneously requires and fosters deep courage, vulnerability, and love. Thus, storytelling became the basic unit of our Immigrant Youth Movement because it allowed us to build within and between people, undocumented and documented alike.

Releasing the power of our stories also enabled us to transform the national immigration focus in the U.S. from statistics to families and from “illegals” to human beings. We laid the foundations for a growing counter narrative; one in which the most marginalized, undesirable, and fearful gained collective empowerment to rightfully fight for their rights and those of their immigrant parents, sisters, and communities. Thus, in reclaiming our dignity and story one by one, we managed to reclaim the national immigration “debate.” We touched people’s minds and hearts—and more often than not, we discovered the path to people’s minds *was* the heart.

Another significant turning point occurred when many queer, undocumented youth owned their stories and whole identity. As more members of our community claimed to be *Undocumented and Unafraid, Queer and Unashamed*, it helped our organizing community see the need to heal from homophobia and strengthened our movement’s growing counter narrative. There is much more storytelling we must do to uncover the countless people and connections hidden, dismissed, and erased from this country’s past and our community’s present. #BlackLivesMatter and the recent wave of black youth resistance is a testament to this and helping uncover the anti-blackness and racism that exists in our society and in our immigrant communities. Acknowledgement is the first step towards healing, and while it is insufficient, it can often be most difficult and painful.

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<sup>27</sup> This became a power slogan of the Immigrant Youth Movement after the first Coming Out of the Shadows event in 2010. See *Undocumented and Unafraid: Tam Tran, Cinthya Felix, and the Immigrant Youth Movement*.

Another significant facet of the Immigrant Youth Movement is that it is womyn and queer led. The first undocumented youth to ever participate in an action of civil disobedience in the U.S. were all womyn and/or queer<sup>28</sup>; the founders of UWD, the first and largest national network of undocumented youth, were majority womyn and/or queer; and in most immigrant youth organizing spaces, womyn are the significant majority. It is also worth noting the importance of female family members in immigrant families: mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters play central roles and are honored for it, especially in Latino families. When talking with undocumented youth about their history or future, the mother tends to be the selfless, tireless pillar that held the family together through the act of migration and continues to do so through ongoing struggles. The visibility of womyn as leaders and organizers in the Immigrant Youth Movement is significant because it respects the role many past female leaders have carried out within the immigrant rights movement and countless others. Additionally, it uplifts the importance of womyn overall, and raises accountability for the way womyn are portrayed and treated in and outside the movement.

Gender and sexuality often take a backseat to other issues, as it did in the Civil Rights Movement where race was regularly prioritized over gender and queer issues. That womyn and queer leaders have been at the forefront of the Immigrant Youth Movement, and have demanded and received acknowledgment for their leadership speaks to the counter narrative and power building of undocumented youth organizers. It was no coincidence the queer and undocumented, or undocuqueer, intersectionality became a focal point in our movement with significant support from within our undocumented youth community. Though the gender and sexuality analysis

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<sup>28</sup> In May, 2010 five undocumented youth risked arrest and deportation by participating in an action of civil disobedience in Senator McCain's Arizona office to help pass the DREAM Act.

requires nourishment to grow, this undocuqueer intersectional focus along with visible womyn and queer leadership is a great source of power and resistance to patriarchy.

Another contribution of the Immigrant Youth Movement is its expansive local and national organizational development in addition to its significant policy wins by undocumented youth. Undocumented youth built the national UWD network by connecting existing local immigrant youth support groups in the lead up to the 2009 and 2010 federal DREAM Act pushes in Congress. By creating our own organizing space and no longer waiting for others to lead us, we demonstrated our youth power to the entire nation and strengthened the overall immigrant rights movement. The immigrant youth led push for the 2010 DREAM Act galvanized parts of the country that had not engaged immigration and passed the bill in the House of Representatives.

Though the bill did not pass the Senate, the DREAM Act was the closest it had ever been to passage since its initial introduction in 2001. This was the power of organized advocacy and grassroots mobilization pushed by local immigrant youth organizations who knew their targets (local community members and political officials uneducated or miseducated about immigration) best. Immigrant youth's organizing power showed locally and nationally through escalating tactics from lobby visits, town halls, and call-ins to civil disobedience actions and bird dogging from coast to coast, including but not limited to the halls of Congress in Washington D.C.

Moreover, after the final vote of the DREAM Act in December, 2010, UWD experienced a significant internal split due to personal conflict and burnout as well as differences in tactics and strategy. This led to the development of another national network, the National Immigrant Youth Alliance (NIYA). Despite the ongoing levels of in-fighting this caused, the split also helped diversify the Immigrant Youth Movement. This diversity of perspectives and organization helped

the Immigrant Youth Movement win Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)<sup>29</sup> in 2012, which eventually led to Deferred Action for Parental Accountability (DAPA)<sup>30</sup> and expanded DACA in 2014.

Lastly, immigrant youth's experience and perspective living on the borderline of multiple cultural identities is unique. In the U.S., they embody a global connection and local connection to U.S. culture. Thus, immigrant youth are literally from a different part of the world and from the U.S. at the same time. We are living consequences of connected themes of globalization, migration, economic treaties like NAFTA, and more. Though we are neither the first nor the last, we are the children of the most recent wave of day laborers, domestic workers, and forced migrants. We were promised the "American Dream" of going to college and getting good jobs if we worked hard, but we quickly learned otherwise through the undocumented experience.

#### Interviews

There were resounding similarities between definitions of healing in my interviews, as well as unanimous consensus it should play a more central role in organizing. Austin<sup>31</sup> describes healing as "restoration," "remembrance," and "returning to the source," which to him is returning to God, or justice. He states, "Healing is restoring what once was; I really believe that the origin of the universe, it was justice. And part of what we're supposed to be doing as healers is restoring it to that most profound beginning." Likewise, Phillip says, "Healing is...synonymous with justice. Whatever holes have been built...with a person in their soul, mind and body—

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<sup>29</sup> DACA is an executive action announced by President Obama on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012 and provides 2-year renewable work permits and safety from deportation for undocumented youth who apply and meet certain criteria. Over a million youth are eligible for this relief, if they can afford the \$465 application fee.

<sup>30</sup> Similar to DACA, but applies to undocumented parents of citizen children. This executive action is currently held up in a lawsuit, and its implementation is to be determined by the courts.

<sup>31</sup> See Appendix A for list of interviewees and short descriptions.

healing is a framework, or a community, or a container for that person or community to be made whole again; to a place where they felt complete, balanced, and centered.“ In a similar sense, Theo defines healing as mending socio-economic wounds “without allowing interference or infection from the world.”

James adds healing is “healthy thoughts,” which is significant because our habits and actions are tied to our thoughts; inversely and in connection with this, Malaya says healing is “working towards freedom with chosen family.” In accordance with the rest, Sherika define healing as the act of making ourselves and each other *whole* again by organizing based on love over anger. Greisa identifies healing as “a process” and “release” of things bogging you down emotionally or psychologically. Being able to name those things and say them out loud, or beginning to acknowledge and document the undocumented parts of ourselves, can serve as the beginning of a transformative healing journey. She goes on to state,

“When undocumented youth say they’re undocumented for the first time, you can see it’s a release and the healing begins when they say those words out loud. It doesn’t mean all your undocumented problems are done, but it means you can begin the journey. What I’ve experienced through the Freedom Side is another type of healing, like a human being healing.”

Greisa recounts the Freedom Side convening at the Musgrove plantation when we gathered after hours and “it just felt like a very spiritual place where people brought their most creative sides and the things that really hurt them. That felt like healing...it was more about ‘I’m a human. I’m suffering. And we have pain together.’” Here, she speaks to the power of healing across identities and strength that can be built by sharing vulnerability and compassion. Doing so with youth who are not undocumented, but share pain and suffering while showing love and creativity opens her heart to a different side of healing.

All interviewees said healing should play a central role within organizing, and each of them personally experienced healing to various extents in their lives, including healing through organizing. Thus, organizing is personal to each interviewee. One interviewee intimately shares, “I used to hate America. Because of the way I was treated in this country. George Bush, freedom and democracy, and America and all this kind of stuff...my teacher raising the confederate flag in class, and people telling me that Muslims deserve to be killed in Iraq. And I had my history—this is the best country in the world, and yet my ancestors, this is their oppressor.”

He goes on, “It wasn’t until recently that I stopped hating this country because I realized my ancestors built this country...*I always ask people is the goal to get America to see us as human, or is the goal to humanize America? I think we need to humanize America.*” This organizer presents a valuable lesson in the importance of possessing clarity around goals. Though not necessarily a dichotomy, he claims the arguably larger, more difficult goal of humanizing that which has dehumanized him and his loved ones for centuries. By referencing various books throughout his interview, including *Jesus and the Disinherited*, he demonstrates the significant role such literature played in his healing process. He concludes, “Not hating anymore healed me. It brought me to a place of restoration. *It really changed my politics, this healing I’ve gone through.*”

This deep, personal conflict with the nation-state is not uncommon, nor is it limited to Black individuals. After I discovered I was undocumented, my lowest point of depression occurred when I began questioning my own dignity because the U.S. government and many other institutions deemed me less than or not worthy. I began to think perhaps I should deem myself less worthy too, and I hated the U.S. system for making me feel this way. This hatred, both for another and for the self, is painful and damaging. Healing from it, as this organizer

describes, can help restore us into the love and justice we once had; but it is a process to get there.

Another interviewee states, “I’m coming to a place now where I believe [healing] is a primary role of organizing. I think organizing should be healing work.” He explains, “I think we’re in a very spiritual battle, and I’m starting to see...that everything done in our external, physical environment has very, very huge implications on our spirit, psyche, perspectives, and self-esteem.” As Thurman writes, fear and hatred are “persistent hounds of hell that dog the footsteps of the poor, the dispossessed, the disinherited.” Likewise, this organizer sees the hidden demons created by socio-political circumstances and toxic human relationships impacting the communities he is a part of and in his own family. He shares, “I was talking to my mom last weekend and she was talking about some things that happened when she was a little girl and how that affected her self-esteem; and how it still affects [her] some fifty or so years later.”

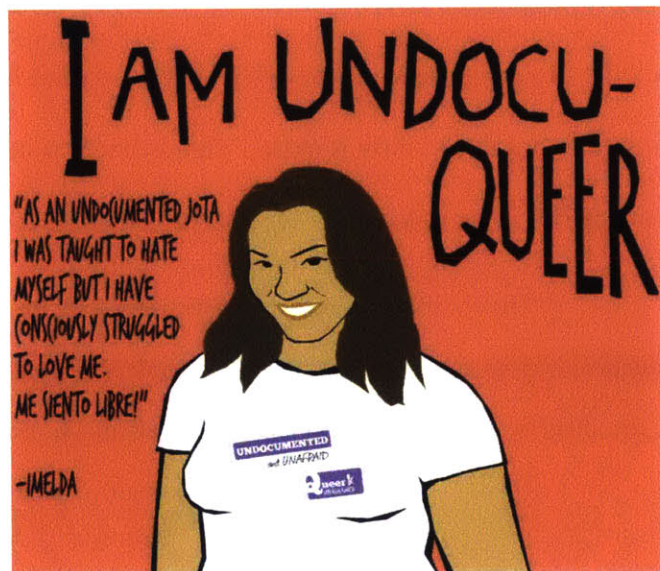
In reflecting on the beginning of his own journey, he says, “I wanted to fight and get into conflict, and challenge the power structure. *I wanted an opportunity to feel powerful when I had grown up feeling powerless.* As I’ve gotten older and more experienced in organizing, I’ve been able to see how that’s a shortcoming...and a battle mentality and a physical world mentality.” He goes on to describe his desire to reconnect with his spirituality, and how once he articulated this desire, people shared literature, tools, and guidance with him. While capitalism and other systems negate spirituality, he found ways to reclaim his spirit. Visiting the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), or the Movement of Landless Workers organization, in Brasil with other leaders from his organization exposed them to “mistica,” or mysticism: “the perception of a hidden nature that is not communicated by reality.” Communal mistica practices



nurture spiritual connection throughout their organizing spaces, and further inspired this organizer's deep desire for that which is beyond material.

Grounded in this realization and analysis, he states firmly, "Any time we do any organizing, we should be seeking to make a community whole again. If our organizing takes something away from the community, then we're not really doing a service to the community or acting with the community." In this way, he believes, personal transformation will lead to community transformation which will lead to the "worldwide transformation we dream about." For him, healing "looks like an opening of the heart." He equates personal healing with openness to love and care, which results in feeling powerful and more confident. Through healing and spirituality, he is less in his head and has more trust in his heart leading to less regrets in his choices. Healing helps you become radical "because you're not shutting off your heart to listen to your head. You're allowing them to communicate...and to guide your movements on that balance of a strong mind and a tender heart."

These organizers' indication of the impact healing has on their politics is significant. It drives the questions they ask themselves and others, as well as the answers they believe to be possible and true. Though they may have continued organizing, they would have radically different perspectives and methods of organizing if their actions were rooted in something other than love. In her interview, Imelda sheds light on the resistance to self and community care, as well as the



“misplaced anger and frustration towards people we love,” which should be directed at systems that oppress us. Not healing from such hate can become blinding and lead to greater pain as we try to spread that hate and look for reasons to grow it, over love. Furthermore, Theo explains the movement’s “purpose is to heal the wounds of society, but we because we are in the society we do a very bad job of healing each other and actually often cause harm to each other within.”

On mainstream organizing, Sherika critiques, “Right now healing is seen as the fuel to keep the car going while at the meeting or march.” Healing is neither a priority nor central theme of organizing. James claims “Organizing is focused on self-sacrifice” and “Martyrdom is a backdoor to victimizing.” This form of organizing runs contrary to Miss Ella Baker’s philosophies that “Strong people don’t need strong leaders” and organizers should focus on the leadership growth of others. As I mentioned earlier, all interviewees confidently believed healing should play a more central role in organizing.

One interviewee discusses the lack of acknowledgement of pain outside the movement, and the importance of “showing up for and with each other” in the movement. On one side, those who face constant exclusion and harm may consciously choose numbness over suffering; on another, those privileged enough to not have pain forced onto them can ignore the suffering of others or not even know it exists. This is partly what he means by pain lacking acknowledgement outside the movement. In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman states,

“The pattern of deception by which the weak are deprived of their civic, economic, political and social rights without its appearing that they are so deprived is a matter of continuous and tragic amazement. The pattern of deception by which the weak circumvent the strong and manage to secure some of their political, economic, and social rights is a matter of continuous degradation” (63).

This deeply embedded social deception, pretending, and hypocrisy can quickly become overwhelming, especially for those with consciousness of justice. Moreover, numbness is dangerous in that one can become numb to all emotions, even those that are good. Tim states, “You can’t give anybody something you don’t have,” especially care and love. Organizing is based on relationships reaching justice through love and vice versa. This process is not linear, it is cyclical and requires honest discussion about our pain and need for healing. Thus, we must do ourselves justice and centralize nurturing love within and between us to practice the kind of organizing we need towards the justice and freedom we seek.

One organizer put it well by referencing bell hooks’ *All About Love* in which she describes “True love as the will to enhance one’s own and another’s spiritual well-being.” Additionally, he shares, “I appreciate the Beloved Community concept that says there aren’t separate movements. There is one movement to make love the rule of the day; and to put people and community before anything else; and to put spiritual well-being and love of one’s self before anything else. And to break down those silos is going to be really important as we talk about it.” His experience growing up in his father’s church showed him what it looked and felt like to welcome anyone in through community doors to flourish.

Some of the organizers I interviewed do not believe this is happening enough in the movement. Some, they claim, are making organizing sectarian which is self-destructive to our cause of love and justice; to growing our Beloved Community. This organizer acknowledges “There does need to be a movement of the margins to the forefront. That doesn’t mean at the expense of everyone else. It means we have to make the room bigger.” Making the room bigger requires honest dialogue and engaging in that love bell hooks defines as action, never simply a feeling. He shares further insight by stating, “I think we all have to go through a process of

healing. And if we can all go through that process, at the end of that road is us being able to accept ourselves and other people.” Moreover, he adds, “If we’re not able to do that, then you will just get a bunch of sectarian...[because] a lot of what folks do is in response to trauma.” This acknowledgement of pain and social wounds as a source of community division is key.

While all interviewees agreed healing should play a central role in organizing, some expressed caution in proceeding with this intention. One interviewee shares her concern around the skills needed to practice healing. Though she believes relationships are the foundation for our organizing and we should have intentionality in growing our understanding of healing and intersectionality, she worries about not having sufficient preparation or qualified skills to adequately respond to significant mental and emotional traumas experienced by her community. This can and surely causes significant barriers to leaders who see the importance of healing, but keep away from integrating it into their organizational structure and culture due to perceived or experienced risks of opening certain conversations and wounds.

Healing is a process and our socio-emotional wounds lie on a long spectrum, each specific to our story yet connected to our larger social narrative and thus to other’s experiences somewhere. Thus, the tools we implement to address healing vary greatly. While a Western view of healing may call for greater medical intervention and isolation of the pain through methods like one-to-one therapy, indigenous or Eastern practices place greater emphasis on communal healing and the role of nature through various herbs.

One interviewee points further differences out by describing Western medicine as cold. She also points to the complexity of combining various healing practices in today’s society given political and economic limitations imposed on low-income communities and communities of color. Her lack of insurance as an undocumented person is a “lack of necessary care that can’t be

replaced.” Different backgrounds and personal experiences with understanding pain and methods to heal lead to valuing certain approaches<sup>32</sup> over others and perceiving particular risks and opportunities in trauma.

However, if organizing is centered on building strong, healthy relationships, we cannot fear ourselves and we should not fear each other. Healing requires recognition of pain and wounds, as well as the scars that will live on. Healing will hurt, but the point is this hurt will lead to restoration of the better parts of ourselves that once were. Additionally, our scars can serve as reminders of the continuity of life and the possibilities of living—we are not static, we are dynamic and always in motion and growth. Rather than signifying pain or weakness, scars can symbolize hope and perseverance. When we become vulnerable in movement spaces, I like to remind the room our tears are “tears of strength.” This is an important reminder Imelda taught me because we are socially ingrained to believe tears are a sign of weak femininity. If we can shift these narratives, we can much more easily shift our politics and those of this country.

Following James’ wisdom that our habits are tied to our thoughts, or personal narratives, our thoughts can eventually become tied to our habits as well. Doing something for a long enough time tends to impact thoughts and narratives about ourselves in relation to the world and vice versa. Thus, shifting narratives and shifting practices are intertwined. The practices these youth organizations implement are building blocks for their culture and how they shape it. Just like the values someone has are best demonstrated in action rather than words, the values of an organization are expressed through its external and internal actions and practices.

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<sup>32</sup> Western medicine is generally valued more because we live in a Western dominated society.

Through my interviews, I discovered numerous shared cultural practices among DDs, UWD, and OSA. Each organization emphasizes the use of chants and songs to guide their individual and collective energy, whether in a meeting, retreat, or while occupying the Florida state capital for thirty-one days.<sup>33</sup> Phillip remembers DDs at the “State of the State” event they organized while occupying the capital:

“I was watching Ciera and Sherika chant, and I started crying. We were chanting so much we went to a euphoric, crazy place. I almost collapsed. That was one of those times where I was like, ‘Oh man this is how I used to feel when I was in church.’ And we were going in. I can’t explain it, but somebody had to hold me up because we were chanting so hard.

All we were doing was just chanting and singing, but that was one of those moments when I realized we need to get back to that spiritual place—a place where we lose inhibition, stop worrying so much about process, and we just go for it. And it transformed the people around us too.”

Likewise, all three organizations value and uplift cultural practices by honoring ethnic history throughout meeting spaces, whether through dance breakouts or verbal honoring of older generations and past freedom fighters from their communities. They also enjoy practicing a family culture, where they call each other “Sisters, brothers, herman@s” and personally support one another beyond organizing actions or raising awareness. This includes celebrations of birthdays, graduations, and other milestones, including transitioning out of the organizations to pursue other paths. This is important beyond organizational culture. James shares his OSA family helps him “Combat isolation;” Malaya emphasizes the significance of finding “chosen family” and “creating community together.”

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<sup>33</sup> Dream Defenders occupied the Florida state capital for over a month when George Zimmerman was acquitted from killing Trayvon Martin in July, 2013.

Storytelling is also significant in each organization to varying degrees. Sherika from DDs describes storytelling as the act of “expressing with the hope of connecting.” Cristina and Greisa uplift storytelling as a key component of UWD’s origins and culture. Whether through formal activities that elicit specific parts of individuals’ stories or informal hang out sessions where stories are shared without timing or facilitation, each organization recognizes the importance of sharing parts of themselves through story. It is important to note such storytelling occurs within a certain container held by leaders or personalities in these organizations committed to promoting principles of vulnerability and community.

This intentional mode of storytelling is just as much about releasing your story and sharing a part of yourself with others to connect, as well as *listening* to another’s story and discovering connections. Thus, telling stories is not inherently powerful; how we *process* stories allows for the release and sharing of transformative power. Moreover, those who share deep, vulnerable parts of themselves are followed up with and shown explicit support so relationships and connections persist after stories are shared and wounds tentatively opened.

While these organizations share various practices and qualities, they also differ greatly. DDs and OSA frequently create cyphers, or freestyling rap circles. Malaya describes cyphers as “part of healing culture.” DDs also have a subculture of holding and wearing energy crystals. Members learn and teach each other about them, as well as recommend locations to find and purchase them. Tim states giving them as gifts is a way of “paying it forward.” Moreover, DDs is beginning to train healers, or leaders focused on developing healing practices and ensuring DD chapters place healing at the center of their organizing.

UWD leaders have led healing circles during retreats in the past where individuals share stories and feelings and engage in communal therapy. They are also starting a womyn’s space,

where womyn can support each other as well as build a stronger gender and sexuality analysis to bring to the larger organization. One of UWD's key programs is the Queer Undocumented Immigrant Project (QUIP) which serves as space for healing and support of undocuqueer, or LGBTQ and undocumented identified members in addition to a learning and advocacy hub for generating undocuqueer lens and policy. Moreover, dancing is a core part of breaks, energizers, and after hours. Greisa emphasizes salsa and merengue as key cultural healing practices she enjoys.

In one organization, drumming and smoking herb serve as healing practices. They have multiple leaders who are skilled drummers and facilitate their organizational advantage in "turning up," or elevating the energy in their spaces through rhythm and drumbeats. Moreover, one lead organizer discusses the need to "Fit the healing to the person," acknowledging the different circumstances and needs of each individual. This goes hand in hand with Miss Baker's principal philosophy of meeting people where they are at. This organization applies this principle in part through having a free weed-smoking culture. No one is judged or criminalized as they are in society for utilizing herb to decrease anxiety or facilitate relaxation. For them, this is a conscious political act.

There are difficulties integrating explicit healing work and personal sustainability into organizational structures and cultures, though significant attempts being made. In the SEIU Millennials program, which identifies and develops young members to become leaders in SEIU chapters and locals<sup>34</sup>, Austin shares his positive experiences implementing structures based on partnership rather than patriarchy, or dominance. He highlights the importance of transforming structures over substituting who is in power and advises, "Don't hate the player, hate the game."

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<sup>34</sup> SEIU Millennials Webpage: [http://www.seiumillennials.org/about\\_millennials](http://www.seiumillennials.org/about_millennials)



A greater focus on our structures, organizationally and systemically, is key to fight injustice and build strong foundations of love.

Dream Defenders (DDs) seems to move towards implementing large structural shifts to explicitly incorporate healing in their organizing practice. By having organizational leaders train as somatic healers, prioritizing a process of personal transformation in member orientations and mass meetings, and a reorganizing of staff structure, DDs aim to develop an organizational DNA with healing in its nucleus. “There’s going to be a process of personal transformation that precedes political education or campaign education or civic engagement,” Phillip states. “Before you learn about socialism, capitalism, patriarchy... before you put words to it, there’s going to be some personal examination and personal transformation. Taking stock of yourself and trying to heal yourself before you can go out and do the work of healing and working in communities.” He goes on to describe the radical differences this mentality and intention have on the vision and actions of the organization:

“A year ago, the conversations around the table would have been like ‘Who is the target? How do we get people to sign this petition or come to our meetings? What are our demands?’ And now the conversation is, ‘What does [this] community to feel whole? And what does the community look like in the next five years and how do we work with them to build that?’”

Whereas Phillip was the Executive Director of DDs, now he is the Mission Director responsible for ensuring DDs remains true to its mission, or approach towards a just society. At the time of my interviewees, another organization was also restructuring significantly, though not explicitly focused on healing. Concerns with healing methods and sufficient preparation related to ensuring safety despite socio-emotional wound and trauma is present. However, this organization initiated the development of a political consciousness program with a focus on

personal transformation and intersectionality. Lastly, another organization I interviewed practices healing culturally and organically, and is in the process of discerning its organizational structure. They desire to incorporate healing more explicitly and intentionally into their operations, and are attempting to figure out what would best fit them in their current state.

## Conclusions and Moving Forward

Healing work is critical to good organizing and planning. Intrapersonal and interpersonal healing cultivates and restores stronger spirits and relationships, allowing organizing and planning efforts to grow deeper and wider. Healing feeds movement growth and success. Mistakes, failures, and challenges that prevented more explicit visibility of healing work in past social movements hindered our present organizing landscape by contributing to a culture of burnout, blurred history, and minimal mentorship towards building a sustainable, radical pipeline of young leaders. But this history does not have to be repeated.

Structural, cultural, socio-political, economic systems like capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy pose significant challenges to integrating healing work into organizing and planning. Understanding certain organizing models and organizational structures can more easily integrate or reject healing from its culture, approach, and values is significant for concrete shifts to occur. Various configurations of organizing strands from Miss Baker, Freire, and Alinsky are present in youth organizing today, and will continue to evolve. We must reflect on such perspectives and practices around healing or lack thereof, and improve upon them to address the wounds of our times and uplift this human need for the spirit, as Douglas named it, in society.

There are limits to this study and my findings. I specifically interviewed youth of color organizations, and primarily focused on three youth organizations, largely based on my personal relationships and experiences. Though I am blessed to have interviewed some of the most

innovative, inspiring youth organizations in the U.S. today, I also hoped to interview organizations like Black Youth Project 100, a growing national network of local black, queer youth organizations. For future praxis and research, I would like to interview more queer-based youth organizations as well as social justice academic practitioners and movement elders like Joyce and Nelson Johnson of the Beloved Community Center in North Carolina. Moreover, healing within organizing is not a popular topic with extensive available research. More documentation and literature is needed on the subject, especially from practitioners themselves.

Movement Building: Intersectional, Dynamic, and Humane

From our places in the gaps, we possess various identities and experiences that shape our individual selves, which make up our larger communities and cultures. Though many spaces exist to elevate these identities and injustices in our organizing work, more intentional analysis must be practiced around healing to bring together our collective intersectionality. Within UWD exists QUIP, amplifying stories of undocuqueers as told and experienced by those who hold an undocumented and queer identity. BYP100 carries out intentional black and queer focused work, and BAJI brings to light connections between racial and immigrant [in]justice. Such organizations uplift what Freedom Side is grounded in—the reality that “there is no thing as a single-issue struggle because *we* do not live *single-issue lives*,” as Audre Lorde taught.

Organizing is building resilient, human relationships. Much literary material about organizing tends to describe straightforward, structured methods and practices to effectively organize. Saul Alinsky, often considered a key founder of contemporary community organizing offers clear and compelling advice for organizers in *Rules for Radicals*. But he oversimplifies the complex, socio-emotional organizing field based on human relationships. Moreover, he elevates the material along with self-interest, negating the significance and necessity of the spirit.

In contrast, Ella Baker's integral approach more fully acknowledged and responded to the dynamic complexity grassroots organizers often found themselves immersed in. Today, young leaders from various grassroots organizations hold a common understanding that community healing must be part of the organizing process as well as a product of it, i.e. cyclical healing. There is growing interest in planting and growing sustainable organizing practices individually and organizationally. Using the Freedom Side organizations including United We Dream, Dream Defenders, and the Ohio Student Association, I provided examples of this rising theme. Planners and the planning field could learn significantly from such a leadership approach.

On the Freedom Side, we largely based our methods and practices on Ella Baker's philosophies and leadership style. By building on her collective leadership model, we seek to contribute our additions as we grow. The mechanics of building intersectional alliances or relationships, conversations, activities, and priority issues have been part of one large, organic (grow-as-we-go) curriculum, so to speak. Thus, this may be an opportunity to redefine organizing. In other words, show that healing ourselves and our relationships along with the organic building of this work, with or without institutionalization, are critical components of successfully working towards social transformation.

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Appendix A. List of Interviewees

Austin Thompson, *Freedom Side Infrastructure Committee and past Director of SEIU Millennials*

Theodore Moore, *Freedom Side Infrastructure Committee*

Greisa Martinez, *United We Dream Field Organizer*

Cristina Jimenez, *United We Dream Managing Director*

James Hayes, *Ohio Student Association Political Director*

Malaya Davis, *Ohio Student Association Regional Organizer*

Sherika Shaw, *Dream Defenders Organizer*

Tim Harrell, *Dream Defenders Leader*

Phillip Agnew, *Dream Defenders Mission Director*

Imelda Plascencia, *Dream Resource Center Health Initiatives Coordinator*