Tint Journal

REVIEW

From Individual Voices to a Political Project — A Review of "DREAMing Out Loud: Voices of Undocumented Writers"

by Filippo Bagnasco

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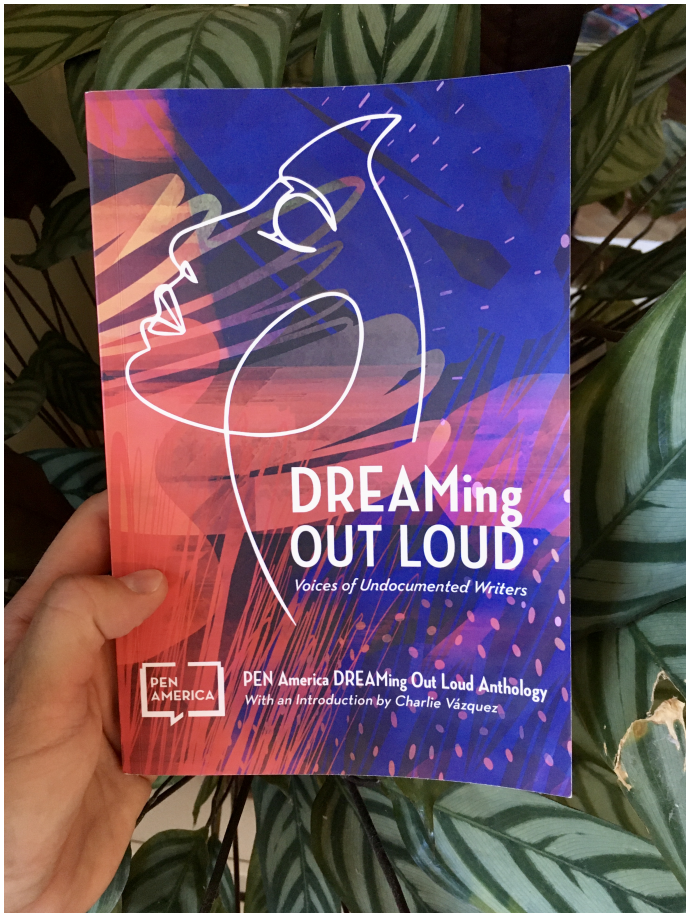

DREAMing Out Loud ©? Filippo Bagnasco

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***DREAMing Out Loud: Voices of Undocumented Writers* is the 2020 annual anthology of the eponymous writing workshop for undocumented immigrants in New York City. It offers a bright, diverse, and engaging view over the struggles and dreams of a large group of people in the US who fight for rights and recognition in a country that continues to treat them like second-class residents.**

From NYC to the rest of the US and to the world

What is 'politics'? According to one of the definitions found in the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, politics is comprised of "activities … that are aimed at improving someone's status or position and are typically considered to be devious or divisive." The anthology being reviewed here, *DREAMing Out Loud*, is both a literary and political achievement.

Reading through the website for the project — which was founded in 2016 by Álvaro Enrigue, who is also one of the teachers in the program — we discover that "DREAMing Out Loud is a PEN America's tuition-free creative writing workshop series for young immigrant writers, primarily those who are undocumented, DACA recipients, and/or DREAMers who came to the United States when they were children." One of its main goals is to provide "community and professional support to the next generation of immigrant writers" and, specifically, "the program seeks to counter anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S. and to amplify the voices of many living in this country who are marginalized because of their immigration status." This is the second annual volume of the *DREAMing Out Loud* anthology that collects the efforts of these writers, with a third one that just came out in 2021.

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This anthology is different from what I usually read, because it consists of mostly short contributions (1–2 pages each, although some are longer) from a wide variety of writers, all writing about the larger theme of immigrant life, but all in different ways and with different voices, in forms that range from the short story, to the personal essay and the poem. And yet, all of this difference in some way becomes one, each element and each writer sharing something with all the others. They are all undocumented immigrants living in NYC, but there is also more to it. These are stories of fear and yearning, of community and isolation, of dreams and misery. What links all of the pieces together is that they come from writers with pressing, urgent stories to tell. They communicate the feeling that behind the few pages that they contributed to this

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anthology there is a mountain more of writing waiting to come out. These are outpourings. They are not stories and essays pulled out of barren souls; they are massive leaks trickling through a crack in the dam, waiting to burst out. These are stories deserving to be heard and they make one want to know more and hear more and read more, way more, by every single one of these writers.

It would be hard to pick out single contributions or even single writers. I believe that one of the points of this book is to offer a mosaic of voices and experiences, and to pick out single tiles from a mosaic is not to know how a mosaic works. The point, I believe, is to step back and study what the totality of the image created by countless little acts of creation offers to the eye.

A political manifesto for undocumented immigrants in the US

This is a literary/political manifesto. It is a motley collection; the themes are varied and often the ideas that emerge are in contradiction with one another. But at the same time, the core message and the very scaffolding that supports it and makes it possible are unified and deeply political. The introduction by Charlie Vásquez, the editor of the 2019 issue of this anthology, makes this abundantly clear, rich with tensions between words like “terror,” “hatred,” “resentment” on one side and “hope” and “future” on the other.

This little book is about the work, lives, and the rights of undocumented immigrants in the United States, people who contribute an astonishing amount to the US culture and economy and yet they are, legally and practically speaking, second class residents. Giving them a voice is to bring every new reader closer to their experience, their thoughts, their daily life and their dreams. It means to cause distant people to hope, suffer, feel, and fear with an often silent class of non-citizens.

I believe that *DREAMing Out Loud* is best understood as a form of activism. It is hard to find a workable definition of this loaded term in an age where everything seems to be defined as such, but I believe that a product like this anthology would enter even the strictest definition. Telling a story is not activism. Confronting the reader with a reality that refuses to go unseen and unheard, with a political/creative mass that dreams of normality, safety, and basic rights, this can be safely called activism.

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Álvaro Enrigue ©? CC Andrew Lih

Politics is also the power to enact change in the world around us and in the people around us. This anthology explicitly aims to give a voice to the often unheard, to the people that are routinely reduced to statistics or pawns in power games they have no control over. Giving them the possibility to share their experience means giving them a blank canvas on which to express themselves, whatever might come out. I don't know how the actual workshop is organized, but the variety this anthology contains tells me that the individual voices are supported and allowed to express themselves in the modes and themes that naturally flow from the experiences that fuel them.

The political nature of this little book is also expressed by Álvaro Enrigue himself, who writes that the point of this anthology and of the program was not simply "a way of helping someone to find their voice" but, especially, it was "a way to produce social conscience about a very actual problem in America," the problem of being an undocumented immigrant.

The writers spell out this problem and its difficulties in clear, sharp language, making the reader a witness in their daily quest not for generic social justice, but for an everyday life that is not only bearable, but positively meaningful — an everyday life that can fully participate in the society around them, without legal and bureaucratic impediments, and with the reassurance of being fully part of the world they already belong to.

The power of language

I loved reading this edition of *DREAMing Out Loud.* I strongly support the project and I believe that it is a valuable, immensely important undertaking to give people a creative outlet for their voices, which would otherwise remain unheard. The fact that the contributions are so short and personal helps bringing the reader straight into the life and experience of the characters, without too much literary scaffolding standing in the way. The barriers drop and the texts become intimate conversations, a sharing of secret experiences, late-night dialogues with fellow humans with nothing in-between, the writers' words and our reflections freely mingling in an exchange of attentive thoughts and thunderous feelings.

What in the end matters is that this book exists and I encourage anybody who feels even remotely interested in it to procure themselves a copy and to embark on a journey through a multitude of experiences, frontiers, foreign tongues, and familiar sights to in the knowledge

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that, no matter who or where we are, the power of language to connect us remains our greatest asset in the fight for a more equitable world.

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