



Mediating resistance: Digital immaterial labor, neoliberal subjectivities, and the struggle for immigrant justice

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abstract

Social movements' increasing use of social media to pursue movement goals and objectives presents opportunities and complications for movement work. Social media use functions as digital immaterial labor, defined as the unwaged cultural contributions that generate value in mediated realms. I see digital immaterial labor as occupying a deeply ambivalent space. This labor can be harnessed towards cultivating spaces of livability for marginalized communities. Or, that labor can reinforce cultural practices that prioritize market logics over human life. This note interrogates the role that digital immaterial labor plays in cultivating neoliberal subjectivities, understood as the performance and promotion of neoliberal values (individualism, competition, personal responsibility) enacted through individual subjects. Using the contemporary immigrant rights movement as a case study, I examine how the performance of digital immaterial labor discursively constructs neoliberal subjectivities through movement discourse. The cultivation of neoliberal subjectivities holds powerful stakes for influencing policy and cultural attitudes about movements, as the framing of movement work emerges through the discourse and narratives used to describe it.

Introduction

Digital technologies impact various facets of a social movement, influencing who can participate, what that participation will look like, where activism springs up, and when action will take place. Following authors Mark and Paul Engler (2016), I conceptualize contemporary, mediated social movements as ecologies of change. Various branches constitute these ecologies. From an e-mail action alert issued by the American Civil Liberties Union, to a swarm of activists chaining themselves to Trump Tower in support of undocumented Americans, these various strategies, individuals, and organizations represent branches of a working social movement ecology. Engagement with digital platforms weaves these various ecology threads together, and functions as immaterial labor.

Italian autonomist Maurizio Lazzarato defined immaterial labor as that which ‘produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity’ – with cultural content being the kind of activities that shape cultural and artistic standards and norms (Lazzarato, 1996: 133). Immaterial labor shapes society and culture through how such labor’s value is extracted, circulated, and applied. Digital media scholar Kylie Jarrett builds on Lazzarato’s understanding of immaterial labor by arguing that it is mapped onto larger fiscal and non-fiscal exchanges that reproduce social norms, and such norms often reinforce oppressive and regressive forces of the status quo (Jarrett, 2014).

I fuse Lazzarato and Jarrett’s conceptions of immaterial labor to define digital immaterial labor as unwaged cultural contributions that generate value in mediated realms. My conception of digital immaterial labor’s production of value is centered on the cultural and social norms, values, and ideologies cultivated by this labor’s performance. Digital immaterial labor functions to create subjectivities that reinforce norms, values, and ideologies central to neoliberalism, a prevailing social and economic order that values markets over social welfare.

In this note, I interrogate how digital immaterial labor both produces neoliberal subjectivities within movement work, and enforces neoliberal

policy. Movements use digital immaterial labor to discursively create neoliberal subjectivities, which I define as the performance and promotion of neoliberal values (individualism, competition, personal responsibility) operating at the individual level. From movement participants' narratives to the discourse circulated by movements, neoliberal subjectivities emerge through varied modes of digital immaterial labor. This labor holds the power to reinforce neoliberal policy through its influence on movement discourse.

Notes on neoliberalism and positionality

Neoliberalism refers to the contemporary shift in American culture and politics towards a 'new vision of national and world order, competition, inequality, market "discipline", public austerity, and law and order' (Duggan, 2003: X). Cultural theorist Lisa Duggan understands these traits of neoliberalism as influencing economic, political, and cultural realms. Political theorist Wendy Brown interrogates how neoliberalism operates as a cultural logic. As Brown defines neoliberalism as a contemporary form of rationality that informs how we understand ourselves, I put Duggan and Brown's definitions into conversation for the sake of understanding digital immaterial labor's impact at the individual level (Brown, 2015). According to Brown, neoliberalism's monetization of the self applies a market metrics to all contemporary spheres of human existence, and I examine how this cultivation of neoliberal subjectivity operates within mediated social movements. Neoliberal subjectivities emerge through diverse modes of neoliberal governance: the policies, practices, and logics that reinforce neoliberalism. I focus on how digital immaterial labor operates as a mode of neoliberal governance that engages narrative and discourse to produce neoliberal subjectivities.¹

1 Neoliberal subjectivity gains definition through cultural and technological mechanisms beyond narrative or discourse. The logics of algorithms and the design of contemporary social media platforms plays a vital role in creating neoliberal subjectivities. Although an interrogation of algorithms and platforms is beyond the scope of this note, these mechanisms shape digital immaterial labor's production of neoliberal subjectivities in continuously evolving ways. See Safiya Umoja Noble for more on how algorithms reinforce systemic oppression

My analysis of digital immaterial labor's relationship to creating neoliberal subjectivities engages the narratives and discourse around contemporary immigrant rights activism. My personal involvement in political organizing led me to Movimienta Cosecha, a nonviolent movement seeking to win permanent protection, dignity, and respect for the 11 million undocumented people in the United States. While I see Movimienta Cosecha as a key demonstration of how neoliberalism complicates movement work, my perspective is inevitably shaped by my privileges as a documented white woman. I want to add my voice to the dialogue about immigrant rights in ways that recognize when my positionality calls for me to listen, and when I am called to speak up. As my observations contained in this article are rooted in deep admiration and support for immigrant rights work, my exploration of Cosecha seeks to enhance and deepen conversations about neoliberalism's influence on movement work. My aim is to trace how digital immaterial labor operates in Cosecha's work to understand both how this labor produces subjectivities and discourse that reify neoliberal logic, and how activists navigate facilitating resistance amidst neoliberal constraints.

Social movement ecology and actor-network theory

Tracing digital immaterial labor in a social movement ecology requires a nimble framework for navigating complications of neoliberalism. I now turn to a brief discussion of Actor-Network theory in order to articulate what digital immaterial labor looks and behaves like in a social movement ecology. Actor-Network theory, as interpreted by philosopher Bruno Latour, understands non-human and human actants' equitable role in facilitating change (Latour, 2007). The term actant is used by Actor-Network theorists to refer to both human and non-human agents' capacity to function as part of a complex web or network of innovation, as the term actor connotes an anthropomorphic, distinctly human essence (Latour, 2007). I conceptualize social movement ecologies as composed of not only diverse branches with varying goals and logics, but also constituted by non-human and human

and diverse modes of neoliberal governance. See Alexander Galloway for more on how the architecture of networks and platforms facilitate neoliberal control.

actants that shape these branches. I argue that both non-human, digital actants and human actants are continuously engaged in defining the heterogeneous network of the social movement ecology. Sociologists Michel Callon and Bruno Latour use the term ‘heterogenous network’ to conceptualize how non-human and human actants mutually participate in the ongoing work of defining the network through their interactions with one another (Callon and Latour, 1981). The relationalities shared between digital and human actants constitute the larger heterogeneous network of the social movement ecology.

Within this larger heterogeneous network, actants constitute smaller networked assemblages of relationalities. How grassroots organizers and nonprofits engage with digital realms manifests as a digital actant network unique to a given political and technological moment. These assemblages of digital actants constitute a larger heterogeneous digital actant network, and are a key force of the social movement ecology’s expansive heterogeneous network. Digital immaterial labor weaves through the social movement ecology in ways that can reify or challenge neoliberalism, and build active popular support.

In order to ground how digital immaterial labor operates within a social movement ecology, I analyze mobilizations facilitated by immigrant rights activists’ use of digital platforms. In these mass mobilizations, digital immaterial labor functions to both harness a resistance to neoliberal processes, while also participating in the production of neoliberal subjectivities unique to the movement’s work. Further, these neoliberal subjectivities can facilitate a strengthening of neoliberal policy that marginalizes immigrant communities. Through these examples, we see how mediated social movements occupy a complicated site of engagement with neoliberalism, wherein the movement can contribute to or challenge the very political order it seeks to rally active popular support against.

To explore how digital immaterial labor facilitates mass mobilization, I first turn to how immigrant rights activists responded to the 2016 election. I then examine how neoliberal subjectivities and discourse emerges through the

cultivation of such mobilizations by examining the circulation of activists' #Sanctuary and #WithDACA hashtags.

Digital immaterial labor and immigrant rights

On November 16th, 2016, students, workers, and faculty on over 130 campuses nationwide walked out of their respective schools to not only protest the recent election of the 45th U.S. President Donald Trump, but the anti-immigrant ethos that fueled the 2016 Trump campaign (Helsel, 2016). Over the course of Trump's campaign, Trump and his supporters demonstrated an unrestrained xenophobia, with anti-immigrant vitriol present in campaign speeches, tweets, and echoing through the crowds of campaign rallies. These walkouts sprung up as part of Cosecha's #SanctuaryCampus campaign to establish college and university spaces as 'sanctuaries' for the immigrant community, namely undocumented students (Aziza, 2016). Identifying schools as sanctuaries involved pressuring higher education's institutional leadership (university presidents, provosts, and faculty governance) to declare their university as a welcoming space for immigrant students, and demonstrate this inclusivity through promises of non-cooperation with *Immigrations and Customs Enforcement* (ICE) and displays of solidarity (such as public statements). Amidst a political climate rife with anti-immigrant sentiments, the #SanctuaryCampus mobilization sought to challenge this wave of oppression with renewed vigor for organizing local constituencies. By declaring their status as #sanctuarycampuses, educational spaces could offer a symbolic sense of inclusivity and demonstrable engagement with the immigrant rights movement.

Through Cosecha's (2016) digital network of student activists and organizers, the #SanctuaryCampus hashtag aggregated key updates for those interested in taking action against Trump's anti-immigrant platform. Cosecha organizers utilized Facebook groups, e-mail listservs, and infographics to make news of the imminent walkouts spread across digital platforms. Through the dissemination of #SanctuaryCampus calls to actions, we see how various levels of participation in the social movement are

necessary to foster mass mobilization. Cosecha organizers develop the strategy for how various digital platforms (Facebook, e-mail servers, Twitter, etc.) engage and recruit supporters to the cause. From there, Cosecha communicates with local organizers that have been identified at various campuses and in diverse regions to enable the swift and expansive dissemination of a call to action.

Those dispersed organizers ensure information about the upcoming walkouts reaches people in their various locales, and those supporters in each locale will hopefully further share the call to action and show up to the action itself. This network of organizers and supporters that spans multiple geographic locations, levels of activist experience, and modes of engagement in the immigrant rights movement function as a nimble assemblage central to the social movement ecology. Digital threads of communication constitute the relationships that bind this assemblage of organizers and supporters. These threads of non-human actants carry comparable importance to the human actants that organize supporters and get bodies to actually walk out of a classroom.

In this networked assemblage, the non-human agents binding our mass mobilization are the aggregated results of the *#SanctuaryCampus* hashtag on Facebook or Twitter; they are the chain of links one must follow in a Cosecha e-mail call to action in order to donate; they are the mass texts the e-mail listserv receives after opting in to Cosecha text action alerts. These non-human actants bind the Cosecha mass mobilization, yet the mobilization requires a significant amount of labor to remain cohesive. That labor takes the form of sharing a *#SanctuaryCampus* hashtag, clicking on the chain of Cosecha links to sign a petition, or filling out the digital form to opt-in for text action alerts. The labor of engaging with the non-human actants that bind this networked assemblage determines the vitality and growth of the mass mobilization. Effective non-human actants function to positively mold the public's understanding of the mass mobilization, while generating active popular support for the cause. With active popular support for a cause, the social movement stands to push society in the direction of uplifting movement values. In the case of immigrant rights, creating active popular

support means pushing society to collectively fight for the safety and livelihood of immigrant communities.

If digital immaterial labor manifests as movement supporters clicking on links, sharing hashtags, and opting-in to alerts, such labor would appear to serve a wholly beneficial purpose in facilitating the health and success of a mass mobilization. Yet, digital immaterial labor can be used for purposes that stand to support neoliberal governance, while potentially supporting the growth of active popular support. Digital immaterial labor occupies an ambivalent space when harnessed for both reinforcing power structures it seeks to oppose, and simultaneously working to shift public understanding of the movement to support immigrant justice. In the case of #SanctuaryCampus activism, students and activists offered their digital immaterial labor to not only raise digital media users' consciousness to the immigrant rights cause, but to also motivate individuals across the country to physically walk out of their educational institutions in protest.

Recognizing the power of digital immaterial labor to facilitate mass mobilization must also be paired with an eye towards how such labor may be manipulated by neoliberal logic. What does the neoliberal manipulation of social activism's digital immaterial labor look like, and how can analyzing the contours of this manipulation serve as a key movement strategy? Understanding how neoliberalism can harness digital immaterial labor for purposes that reify its own power structures enables social movements to remain vigilant to how neoliberal logic manifests in mediated contexts.

Neoliberal subjectivities and citizenship

We see neoliberal logic present in how we code the immigrant as valuable insofar that they are contributing to the productivity of a capitalist society. This designation of value occurs within the confines of neoliberal citizenship, which queer theorist Amy Brandzel argues functions as 'a violent gatekeeping mechanism that perpetually excludes non-normative others, while making space for those that are deemed acceptable for assimilation' (Brandzel, 2016: 5). In the case of contemporary immigrant rights, citizenship perpetually excludes those immigrants deemed as lazy,

criminal, or deviant – characteristics that render one in direct conflict with neoliberal values of individual competition, upward mobility, and law and order. Neoliberal citizenship functions to cultivate neoliberal subjectivities within the immigrant rights movement. As fulfilling the criteria for neoliberal citizenship performs and promotes neoliberal values, centering neoliberal citizenship informs the creation of neoliberal subjectivities produced through the circulation of neoliberal logic. This logic operates at the level of discourse, informing how we understand particular movement rhetoric. We see neoliberal logic present in how we support the concept of a ‘sanctuary’ for immigrant communities at an abstract level, but refuse to engage with what sanctuary means in practice. At an abstract level, sanctuary takes the form of public declarations of support from college presidents and mayors, identifying their institutions and cities as champions of diversity. At this abstract level, the promotion of sanctuary as an empty signifier uplifts neoliberal values as guiding principles for action. Figureheads declaring support for sanctuary at this abstract level embodies neoliberal subjectivities of immigrant rights.

On a practical level, producing sanctuary means refusing to cooperate with Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, as well as the local police who clear and blockade a street to facilitate an ICE raid of an undocumented family’s home. A rejection of ICE and police complicity stands in contrast to the neoliberal subjectivities produced through abstract conceptualizations of sanctuary. In order to further examine how neoliberal subjectivities emerged through the #SanctuaryCampus campaign, I turn to how digital immaterial labor was used to limit immigrants’ value to their capitalist productivity, and enable institutional leaders to recode the concept of sanctuary as a depoliticized tool for reinforcing the status quo.

#WithDACA: Neoliberal citizenship and the digital actants of a mass mobilization

Prior to the #SanctuaryCampus walkouts, immigrant rights activist Gaby Pacheco initiated a hashtag called #WithDACA in order to highlight the accomplishments of college students in the *Deferred Action and Childhood*

Arrivals program (DACA) (Latimer, 2016). DACA enables undocumented students who came to the U.S. prior to the age of 16 to stay in the U.S. without fear of deportation. In the wake of Trump's election, the fate of DACA grew unclear, inspiring anxiety and fear among many. The #WithDACA hashtag rapidly gained popularity, with various DACAdocumented students (also known as DREAMers) sharing personal narratives on Twitter. These narratives centered on showcasing the professionalization of DACAdocumented students, arguing that DACA made their career development possible. These Twitter users discussed their paths to becoming nurses, surgeons, and other professionals. One student named Maria Del Cielo argued for DACA's role in their upward class mobility tweeting, 'I go to school knowing that I'm working for something more in my future than just cleaning houses I'll never get to live in' (Latimer, 2016). These #WithDACA stories engage cultural ideals of an American Dream mythos, emphasizing the role that a 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' mentality can play in facilitating active popular support for the immigrant rights cause. To code DREAMers as hardworking individuals that overcame adversity and 'beat the odds' is to obfuscate the oppressive structures such individuals needed to navigate in order to achieve their successes.

Those unfamiliar with the contemporary immigrant experience in the U.S. can easily read these #WithDACA narratives as just another example of the American Dream, a myth of meritocracy, working. By focusing our attention on how some students beat the odds, we code certain immigrants as acceptable and good. Those immigrants that seemingly rise above systemic oppression are assimilated into the white Western imaginary as immigrants worthy of protections, value, and rights. Through using the narratives of professional success and upward class mobility as a litmus test for the importance of legislation like DACA, we continue to position neoliberal citizenship as a means of evaluating human life and dignity. Neoliberalism defines citizenship through the individual's capacity to contribute to capitalist modes of production and reinforce the logic of social stratification that characterizes a capitalist class system. The ideal neoliberal citizen is constituted through their demonstrable abilities to professionalize and their willingness to engage in competition for upward class mobility. As Amy

Brandzel argues, neoliberal citizenship ‘requires anti-intersectionality, that is, strategies that deny the mutuality and contingency of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation’ (Brandzel, 2016: 5). Investing in the notion that financial stability and socioeconomic opportunities are predicated on meritocracy denies how Americans’ experiences are shaped by structures of privilege and oppression, systematically offering benefits and advantages based upon race, gender, class, sexual orientation, citizenship status, and so forth.

While the #WithDACA hashtag contributed to ramping up the national conversation around immigrant-led resistance to Trump’s xenophobia, the narratives aggregated by the hashtag act to produce neoliberal subjectivities by reinforcing ideals born of systemic oppression. The #WithDACA hashtag increased dialogues that binded the digital actants of this networked mass mobilization, further cultivating the effective communication integral to facilitating active popular support. The hashtag grew viral in the weeks prior to the walkout, pointing to the public’s growing interest in and support for escalating activist mobilizations seeking to defy Trump. Yet, while the #WithDACA hashtag increased the sharing necessary to the growth of the mass mobilization’s digital actant network, the hashtag simultaneously worked to reify the bootstraps myth central to neoliberal values of individualism and competition. Thus, we see how a mass mobilization’s development of a healthy and robust digital actant network can utilize social media users’ labor for the sake of generating active popular support, while also reinforcing neoliberal governance. Digital immaterial labor can provide our digital actant network the transformative possibilities of galvanizing the public and pushing them to action. Yet, this affordance of digital immaterial labor can come at the cost of producing neoliberal subjectivities centered on obfuscating systems of oppression that produce the very conditions this social movement seeks to transform.

Declaring a #SanctuaryCity

Expanded pushes for sanctuary declarations further demonstrated the potential for digital immaterial labor to promote neoliberal governance.

Since the November 16th walkouts, cities and colleges faced pressure by activists to declare themselves sanctuary cities. Digital petitions calling for colleges and universities to declare themselves sanctuaries varied in their demands, with some petitions asking for more symbolic declarations of sanctuary, and others seeking an explicit commitment to non-cooperation with state officials. The rapidity of disseminating these petitions with various demands facilitated confusion about the exact definition of sanctuary. Lena Graber, an attorney at the *Immigrant Legal Resource Center* in San Francisco, told NPR that there is no ‘clear definition for what a sanctuary city means, with different places taking different approaches’ (Kaste, 2016). However, immigrant rights activists firmly assert that a sanctuary city is committed to the material welfare of immigrant communities. Tania Unzueta of *Organized Communities Against Deportation* (OCAD) and Mijente, two immigrant rights organizations working in tandem with Movimiento Cosecha, stated:

Sanctuary in Chicago today means a commitment not just to symbolically defy Trump but to actually transform our city’s policies to stop targeting us for imprisonment, risk of removal and state violence at the hands of police and aggressive immigration agents. (Lazare, 2017)

While activists remain firmly grounded in defining sanctuary as explicit non-cooperation with police and ICE agents for the sake of prioritizing immigrants’ material well-being, city officials and college administrators exploited the contested definition to reinforce the status quo. Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel declared Chicago a sanctuary city claiming that Chicago has always been a sanctuary city, and is a ‘welcoming space’ for all. However, Emanuel’s policies and practices tell a different story, with sanctuary protections extending to only some members of the immigrant community. Among those who are not protected by Chicago’s sanctuary protections are those with non-violent criminal convictions or listed on Chicago’s ‘gang database’, a document one can land on for having a ‘suspicious’ tattoo or being an activist in the Chicago area (Lazare, 2017).

Emanuel, alongside other politicians taking purely symbolic stances on sanctuary, represents the neoliberal cooptation of language in mass mobilizations. There is a strength in leaving the definition of a term open-

ended; activists can adjust their digital petitions and lists of demands to accommodate the material concerns of immigrant communities in their particular locales. What material support for migrant farmworker communities in south Florida looks like differs from protecting the rights of Muslim Americans to assemble and practice their religion in Chicago. While there is an affordance to providing conceptual wiggle room for digital calls to action and petitions, those grey areas can be exploited to uphold existing policies and ideologies. For instance, Emanuel's symbolic declaration of Chicago being a long-standing sanctuary city engaged the concept of sanctuary at an abstract level. The declaration supplanted tangible, material action taken to practically support and protect immigrant communities, highlighting neoliberalism's capacity to frame concepts and phrases in ways that support neoliberal logic. Through Emanuel's declaration, sanctuary is framed as a 'welcoming space' devoid of practical and tangible commitments to non-cooperation with state officials on behalf of all immigrants. To frame the sanctuary as simply 'a welcoming space' without policies and practices to support this assertion is to empty the concept of political significance and reify existing power structures that oppress immigrant communities. Emanuel's declaration evidences neoliberalism's capacity to manipulate movement language and concepts for the sake of both avoiding transformative change and reinforcing the status quo.

Framing sanctuary as a depoliticized tool, emptied of its exigency and practical applications, may contribute to further building active popular support. If the public opts to get on board with supporting sanctuary because it is molded into something legible by the status quo, how can this neoliberal manipulation of sanctuary be resisted? Framing sanctuary in neoliberal, depoliticized terms is not static, and those terms can be potentially broken down and changed. Through activists like Unzueta placing further pressure on officials to back up their declarations of sanctuary with tangible support, this neoliberal manipulation of movement concepts can be pushed harder in the direction of adhering to demands that materially and practically realize sanctuary for all. By winning policy changes such as decriminalizing non-violent drug offenses and remedying disproportionate policing in neighborhoods of color, activists can move politicians like Emanuel towards

actualizing promises of sanctuary, and away from the familiar contours of neoliberalism.

Conclusion

Mass mobilizations gain direction and shape through their digital actant networks. From the logic of hashtags to the manipulation of movement language, neoliberal governance holds the potential to hinder a movement's forward momentum. Yet, recognizing what neoliberalism looks and behaves like within a social movement ecology holds the potential to function as an activist strategy. Interrogating how neoliberal subjectivities and discourse emerge through movements pinpoints complications of organizing under neoliberal constraints. As the digital actant network is central to the growth of mass mobilizations, and the heterogeneous social movement ecology network as whole, understanding how neoliberalism seeks to anticipate and control movements through the cultivation of neoliberal subjectivities can enable activists to remain two steps ahead.

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