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The Season that Sparked Change

The Radical Imagination in ABC Spark's *The Fosters*

ABC Spark's television show The Fosters revolves around the unique life of the members of the Foster family. The family consists of two moms of different races with a mix of biological, adopted, and foster children along with the different extended families of each child. In the fifth season the primary focus of the show is on DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) children, immigration, and deportation. Coming at a relevant time, the show sought to raise awareness about the lived realities of migrant children and to spark political action. The storyline aired soon after Donald Trump announced his intentions to separate undocumented immigrants and their children. This is a great example of how radical political struggles can weave their way into mainstream television and how television shows can equally spark political action. I argue that by focusing on this storyline the show took advantage of the opportunity to reach an audience that could have been unaware of this social issue, informing and inspiring them to relate to and perhaps support people living in this reality. Through a review of the fifth season and analysis of articles on The Fosters and its impact on viewers, I analyze why and how the show's producers created a narrative that sought to move their audience to action in support of migrant justice.

Keywords: Migrant justice, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), The Fosters, television, political action

"It's not where you come from/ It's where you belong/ Nothing I would trade/ I wouldn't have it any other way/ You're surrounded/ By love and you're wanted/ So never feel alone/ You are home with me/ Right where you belong"

-Kari Kimmel, 2013

To any teenage television show aficionado or even just an average young adult on the cusp of millennials and Generation Z this song lyric may spark a sense of familiarity. This may be due to the fact that these are lyrics in the title sequence to an ABC Spark show called *The Fosters*, that ran from June 2013 to its finale last year in 2018 (Freeman 2014). The show is a rarity in the TV drama world, as it holds no qualms tackling specific social issues regardless of the controversy attached to them. In particular, *The Fosters'* last season explored the social turmoil caused by U.S. President Donald Trump's positions on DACA, DREAMers, and America's immigration policies, as well as the movements that resisted his policies. It is one of the pioneering examples of mainstream television mirroring real-world issues into relatable and personable storylines with the desire to inform and inspire its viewers around issues of social justice.

The Fosters which premiered in June of 2013 was written by Peter Paige and Bradley Bredweg and their executive producer was Jennifer Lopez (Freeman 2014). According to an interview by Freeman with Paige, the show emerged to address a lack of diverse family dramas with alternative family forms dealing with real and complex issues (2014). Specifically, it wanted to give a spotlight to lesbian mothers, and the problems of the US foster system that the 400,000 children in care face (Freeman 2014).

The show revolves around the unique family members in the Foster family, consisting of two moms of different races with a mix of biological, adopted, and foster children along with the different and varied extended families of each child. The show centres around the latest and newest member of the Foster family named Callie, whose years of experience in the foster care system made her feel as though she had no worth. During the season, she begins to learn that this once strongly held belief is untrue with the help of her loving foster family, the Fosters, who later become her forever family (Bennett 2018). Throughout the series, each family member goes through trials and tribulations that comes with having a multi-racial, non-heteronormative, non-biological family form, and their interweaving issues with the foster care system, consent, gun control, addiction, eating disorders, immigration etc. (Gunderson et al. 2018). At the core of this family melodrama is the idea of family being what you make it. What makes it resonate with its audience is the way it effortlessly emphasizes the universal message of accepting people's differences and promoting the feeling of belonging (Brunton 2017).

The creators of *The Fosters* never shy away from touchy topics and its fifth and final season was no different. What made it stand apart from the rest of the series, however, is the storyline coincided perfectly with the current political climate and responded by way of its episodes titled: *Prom, Sanctuary, Invisible, #IWasMadeInAmerica, and Line in the Sand* (Paige & Bredeweg 2013). Those five episodes follow the subplot of Callie's friend Ximena whose expired DACA status became known through a broadcasted protest, which led to ICE taking action against her family before her status renewal had the opportunity to get approved. The five-episode stint starts off with ICE showing up at prom intending to detain Ximena, who escapes with Callie to claim sanctuary in an open church (Netflix, 2017, ep. 9).

The storyline continues in the church with the Fosters helping Ximena's family, the Sinfuegos, with their status while fostering her younger sister who was born in the United States (Netflix, 2018, ep. 10). While hiding out in the church with Ximena, Callie decides to post her story on social media to gain traction, attention, and support from people online (Netflix 2018, ep. 11). In the next episode, the girls attempt to pressure ICE at an anti-immigration protest with a counter protest, to give Ximena a special hearing in order to leave the church without fear of ICE attempting to detain her like her parents (Netflix 2018, ep 12). This storyline ends with Ximena's family being granted a stay without deportation while her DACA status is pending to be approved (Netflix 2018, ep. 13).

It is not certain whether the timing of the season was a coincidence or if it was purposeful, but the airing of the first episode with Ximena's storyline coincided with Donald Trump's announcement of his intentions to end DACA (Bennett, 2018). DACA stands for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals and supports nearly 800,000 young people by allowing them two-year permits for either school or work without the threat of deportation (Colvin & Gurman 2017). Many of the recipients of DACA were brought in as young children and only know America as home. In an article assessing the effects of DACA status on latinx students, it mentions how there was a liminality of being neither here nor there, and it was remedied with the DACA status as the feeling of belonging was felt once again (Benuto et al. 2018). The same sense of belonging that *The Fosters* tried to create in the series through subplots like Ximena's.

This sense of belonging to DACA recipients is the one Trump was moving to end. According to Colvin & Gurman (2017), the Trump administration saw the implementation of DACA as an "act of abuse" by Obama, and it sought to preserve the "well-being" of born and bred Americans. Similarly, the government was to begin deporting DREAMers (those who benefit from the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors act) six months after the original announcement and the air date of the episode titled Prom (Bennett 2018).

This notion of protecting the born and bred American is a problematic mindset in and of itself. Why are there such negative attitudes towards immigration as a whole? Chacón & Davis' (2006) book, *No One is Illegal: Fighting Racism and State Violence on the U.S.-Mexico Border*, explains how historically people were always on the move and how in today's day and age we see immigration as a result of wanting more in life. Somewhere along the line there was a shift in the way we view those who move also known as immigrants. In Walia's (2013), *Undoing Border Imperialism*, it points to colonialism as the root cause of displacement, through the shifting of the concept of land as belonging to no one to becoming one's private property. Walia argues the immigrant, or the one who travels, is deemed as a person who no longer belongs, and that the only place you can truly call home is the area you were physically born in. This completely disregards the definition of home many have come to operationalize. Home is not simply the location of where one was brought into the world. More precisely, home is the place in which they feel they belong. Trump and the current government, however, are clinging to a narrow and xenophobic definition of home and although the courts have decided against the end of DACA, it does not mean it will not be rescinded or at least attempted to by the Trump Administration later down the road (Kendall 2018).

The Fosters did a great job in displaying the very real fears DACA students have because of the threat of having their protections and safeguards ripped away from them, especially when they are a person of colour and/or a person who is part of the LGBTQ+ community. Cadenas et al (2018) examine how race and ethnicity affects one's DACA status and argue that racialized students are most likely to be impacted if DACA ends. In *The Fosters*, the centrality of the DACA subplot was intentional and strategic in spurring the audience to consider the realities faced by DACA students.

Notably, this topic was briefly touched upon in the first season with the deportation of a friend of the adopted twins in the family, but the writers wanted to address the political climate more clearly in the final season. The rumours of Trump wanting to end DACA and deport DREAMers was proven to be more than a simple rumour. The reward that the writers of *The Fosters* experienced was well worth the risk as their show reflected the political climate in a poignant way. One of the writer's family members was detained because of ICE and the writer was shortly detained herself soon after. It was an issue that was close to the writers of *The Fosters* and they wanted to make sure it reverberated with its audience in a personal sense (Turchiano 2017). The fact that the show and its writers had the courage to speak out and to take a political stance through the show was well received and it seems to speak volumes as to how successful it was in its reach. In a mission statement that the show likes to go by it states:

Families raising children and youth of different races, cultures, and ethnicities must have resources available for helping them to understand those differences, and to help their children and youth to learn about, embrace, and thrive with a strong sense of who they are... (Children's Voice, Magazine, 2013).

This not only pertains to what the creators of *The Fosters* hope to convey in their show, but it also can be attributed to their proximity to those affected by the rescinding of DACA and the deportation of DREAMers. They see how the US immigration system is tearing families apart and urge viewers to advocate for the passing and the permanence of the *DREAM Act* (Heurto 2018). *The Fosters* develops a heartwarming and engaging story line while linking it to socio-political issues that racialized, adopted, and blended families have to face daily. I believe that the final season in particular seeks to inspire viewers to emulate Callie in her passion for doing what is right while also, "finding a balance between being socially responsible and socially engaged" (Bautze 2017).

By centering the storyline of immigration, *The Fosters*, took advantage of the opportunity to reach an audience that could have been unaware of this social issue and sought to inform and inspire them. These five episodes were the centre of many praising articles, tweets, and pins of the show.

The convenient hash-tagged titles provided good taglines for articles and tweets to start trending. People were talking about the show and discussing the issues they addressed in these episodes and this can inspire social change. It sparked a conversation that was unlikely to have happened on its own. Viewers who might have been unaware of the depth and reality of immigration issues now were made aware and perhaps started staying on top of the news related to immigration which made the difficulties of DREAMers and DACA children more known. *The Fosters*, in this respect, went beyond just the TV or laptop screens in people's homes. While viewers came for the drama, they stayed for the family, and were confronted with the boldness and unapologetic way in which *The Fosters* approaches politically charged issues. Incorporating real, relevant, and relatable storylines into mainstream television has already proved to make waves in terms of social justice and *The Fosters* demonstrates it nicely with this particular subplot.

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