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## Speaking up, rising above: Latina lived citizenship in the metropolitan US South

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### ABSTRACT

Based on original ethnographic material, this piece explores the relationship between legally precarious Latina migrants and the co-ethnic activists serving as their advocates and mentors, treating this relationship as generative of a dynamic process of being and becoming political for migrant women and youth in the metropolitan US South. I adopt an intersectional and intergenerational feminist lens to analyze Latino educational and civic engagement programs in suburban Atlanta, Georgia, showing how migrant mothers, daughters, activists, and educators inside these programs became variously implicated in cultivating and performing new right claims to the local community. Overall, the piece contributes to theorizing the intertwined normative and subversive dimensions of lived citizenship, showing how intersubjective processes and radical acts of care are central to the ways racialized migrants re-imagine citizenship and belonging in hostile new destinations.

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## Introduction

Sitting across from me at a small table in the school hallway, Lupita and Helena<sup>1</sup> write down words and numbers on their notebooks as we speak: *servicios de inmigración* (immigration services); Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights; *educar a los padres* (educating parents); *donaciones* (donations); \$100; \$5,000; beautification. What started as an interview has quickly turned into a brainstorming session on how to grow the local Parent Teacher Association (PTA),<sup>2</sup> which the two women, along with other Latino parents, have started during the 2015–2016 school year. The school hosting the PTA, Mill Creek Elementary, is located in a largely white, upper-middle class neighborhood in Sandy Springs, a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia. Yet it overwhelmingly serves students of color: 94% of them are Latino, 4.5% Black, and only 2% white, non-Hispanic, all of them economically disadvantaged.

In the past two decades, suburban schools in new destination cities like Atlanta have become home to various initiatives targeting newcomer immigrant populations (Frasure-Yokley 2015; Jones-Correa 2008; Singer, Hardwick, and Brettell 2008). Some of these initiatives stem from the efforts of Latino activists and educators to create paths of civic and social inclusion for migrants and their children, helping them navigate the daily

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realities of discrimination and illegalization in a regressive anti-immigrant state like Georgia (De Genova 2002; Lovato 2008). In this piece, I suggest that these Latino-led educational programs constitute key sites for experiences and enactments of ‘lived citizenship’ among Central American migrants in hostile new destinations (Kallio et al., 2020; Hall and Williamson 1999; Marrow 2020).

Drawing on rich ethnographic material, I shed light on the intersubjective processes and everyday relationships through which Latina women and youth, in particular, came to constitute themselves as new political subjects, claiming membership and belonging to a majority-white and affluent suburban community. I adopt an intersectional and inter-generational feminist perspective that accounts for the situated agency of mothers, daughters, activists, and school employees, showing how they responded to widespread racism and marginalization by engaging in both radical and ‘obediently-performed’ acts of citizenship, while also encouraging and empowering others to do so (Kallio et al., 2020, 721). By focusing on the networks, relations, and responsibilities that bound these people together, while teasing out their different imaginaries and enactments of local citizenship, I contribute to a new understanding of how undocumented migrants *become political* outside of traditional urban contexts and ‘beneath the radar of public expression’ (Kallio et al., 2020, 723; Bauböck 2019; Dickinson et al. 2008; Isin 2002).

### Rethinking Latina lived citizenship in hostile new destinations

In the past decades, anthropological and interdisciplinary analyses of citizenship have moved beyond a narrow focus on abstract legal rights to attend to ‘those acts when, regardless of status and substance, subjects constitute themselves as citizens or, better still, as those to whom the right to have rights is due’ (Isin and Nielsen 2008, 2; Bloemraad 2018; Gonzales and Sigona 2017). I especially build on scholarship showing how racialized migrant women and non-status migrants enact cultural and political membership through practices and performances developing outside the realm of formal politics (Carau 2018; Coll 2006; Erel and Reynolds 2018; Flores and Benmayor 1998; McNevin 2006; Nyers 2008; Reed-Danahay and Brettell 2008), often within rescaled local and urban contexts (Holston 1999; Varsanyi 2006). In fact, while national laws and border regimes remain key in determining who belongs to the nation, local and regional governments are often important sites where demands for inclusion and claims for basic rights and services are forged and negotiated (De Graauw 2014; De Graauw and Vermeulen 2016; Mollenkopf and Pastor 2016; Williamson 2018), as are institutions such as schools, churches, and nonprofit organizations (Galvez 2009; Jones-Correa 2016; Karthick and Bloemraad 2008). At the same time, local politicians and law enforcement officers can also support measures that lead to heightened policing and discrimination of migrants, as it has been the case in Georgia and across the US South (Coleman 2012; Marrow 2020; Varsanyi 2011; Varsanyi et al. 2017).

This context calls for in-depth ethnographic attention to the ‘spaces, experiences, and moments’ in which migrants respond to these interlocking systems of exclusion and inclusion (Gonzales and Sigona 2017, 6), by enacting claims to local membership and belonging. I advance this research agenda in three directions. First, by dissecting the affect- and power-laden relationships between legally precarious migrants and the

co-ethnic activists serving as their advocates and mentors, I shed light on the dynamic nature of citizenship as a process that is ‘lived, practiced and shaped interpersonally and intergenerationally’ at the intersection of different temporal horizons (Kallio, et al., 2020, 717; Wood 2013; cf. Oboler 2006) – including lifelong experiences, moments of rupture and political awakening, future demands and recognitions of citizenship as ‘yet-to-come’ (Isin and Nielsen 2008, 4). This intersubjective approach moves beyond the state-citizen dyad (Bloemraad 2018, 14) to show how Latina women and youth became political by acting with and reacting to others in their communities and, in the process, negotiated and unsettled normative framings of citizens and outsiders, rights and duties, beneficiaries and benefactors imposed upon them (Isin 2002, X, Isin, 2008, 38–39).

Second, I contribute to feminist rethinking of citizenship by focusing on the mundane acts and affective relational stances that flourish within everyday informal and institutional spaces, such as schools and school-based nonprofit programs. While being at the forefront of community responses to the recent influx of migrants to the US South (Jones-Correa 2008; Marrow 2009), public schools have also relied on non-profits and ‘non-classroom-based support professionals’ (family coordinators, bilingual parent liaisons, etc.) to address the needs of these newcomer populations (Flores 2015; Bartlett et al. 2002; Hamann 2003). I hereby engage with this context by, on the one hand, interrogating the role of Latino nonprofit activists and school professionals in *speaking for* migrant families and enabling their civic (dis)engagement trajectories; and, on the other, showing how women’s and youth’s own performances of citizenship transcended the boundaries of political participation that activists had set for them.

Third, scholarship on migrant activism and claim-making has largely focused on organized protests, labor right struggles, voter registration, and acts of civil disobedience (Carasus 2018; Meyer and Fine 2017; Nyers 2008; Varsanyi 2006). The Latino migrants featured in this piece, however, did not take part in any of the mobilizations connected to Atlanta’s growing immigrant rights movements. In order to understand how their struggles for recognition unfolded in a hostile legal and political context, I argue, we must attend to ‘unfamiliar acts of citizenship’ (Ní Mhurchú 2016) and less ‘glamorous’ political acts emerging from people’s – especially women’s – efforts to ‘take responsibility for and caring for one another’ and help each other cope with multiple crises related to eviction, threats of deportation, and so on (Spade 2020, 136).

This focus acquires particular salience in the historical juncture of my fieldwork, which took place during the 2016 US Presidential campaign. In those months, Donald Trump’s hateful rhetoric depicting all Latinos as ‘rapists’ and ‘criminals’, combined with a local intensification of ICE immigration raids, contributed to exacerbating experiences of illegalization, racialization, and criminalization already pervasive among Atlanta’s Latino communities, with especially troubling effects for students and children (Costello, 2016; Hamann and Morgenson 2017). While showing how educational activists grappled with the urge to ‘speak out’ politically in support of migrant families (O’Connor and Figueroa 2017), my analysis ultimately centers the feminist relational ethics of care that led migrant women and youth to mobilize in support of their communities during these critical times (Lister 1998a, 2007; Tronto 1994; Hobart and Kneese 2020).

## Methods and overview

The material presented in this paper is part of a larger research project carried out between 2010 and 2016, including eighteen months of participant observation in different formal and informal settings; 70 semi-structured interviews with community activists, school personnel, administrators, and residents from different class, ethnic, gender, and generational backgrounds, recruited through a snowball sampling method; and content analysis of online media and public documents.<sup>3</sup> For a year, I also volunteered for the two Latino-serving nonprofit organizations featured in this piece, serving as homework tutor and mentor for Latino middle and high schoolers, and helping organize annual fundraising events. These experiences, along with my own positionality as a young non-American woman and Spanish speaker, and my collaboration with local activists on issues of affordable housing, proved essential to building rapport with Latino families and understanding the internal workings of the organizations.

I begin by providing an overview of the research site, socio-legal contexts and community responses shaping the lives of Latino populations in suburban Atlanta. The three central sections explore different dimensions of lived citizenship through ethnographic material focusing – respectively – on Latino educational activists, mothers, and youth. With an eye to Isin’s (Isin, 2008) tripartite model of citizenship as status, habitus, and acts, I herein show how activists sought to offset migrants’ lack of status by encouraging and cultivating ‘good’ civic behaviors, while mothers and youth transformed these behaviors into radical acts of citizenship. I conclude by discussing this intertwining between normative and subversive dimensions of citizenship in the context of the Trump era.

## The latinization of Atlanta: state and local responses

Between 2000 and 2015, Georgia had the fastest-growing Latino population of any US state, bringing its share of Latino residents from 1 to 10% in the span of two decades (Atlanta Regional Commission 2018). A large percentage of this population was undocumented (Pew Research Center, n.d.). While initially concentrated around carpet weaving and poultry processing industries, migrants from Central and South America were soon attracted to Atlanta by a booming service economy and the demand for cheap labor in preparation for the 1996 Olympics (Odem 2008).

In the 2000s, as economic growth began to wane, Georgia joined the trend of other US Southern states that ‘transform[ed] their political and institutional receiving contexts from neutral, ambivalent, and sometimes even welcoming to decidedly hostile’ (Marrow 2020, 101; Odem and Lacy 2009). This changing climate culminated in the passage of a series of restrictive state measures effectively limiting the rights of undocumented migrants in the realms of employment, housing, education, and healthcare. Between 2009 and 2013, Georgia responded to the Department of Homeland Security’s 287(g) and Secure Communities programs by passing laws (most notably H.B.87) that invested local police with the power to demand immigration papers during routine policing, detain and report individuals to ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement).<sup>4</sup> Suburban counties around Atlanta with fast-growing immigrant populations were among the first to cooperate with ICE, leading to increasing arrests, detentions, and deportations of

undocumented migrants, many with noncriminal backgrounds, which reached record-high numbers during the Trump presidency (GLAHR and NIPNLG 2017; Southern Poverty Law Center 2016; Wessler 2020).

In those same years, Georgia witnessed the emergence of new immigrant rights coalitions fighting against this deportation regime as well as to overthrow the state's decision to ban undocumented students from attending its top-five public universities and from in-state tuition rates (Burciaga 2016; Rodriguez, McDaniel, and Bisio 2019). These activist movements have a strong presence in urban university campuses and majority-Latino suburbs, however, they struggle to keep up with the highly fragmented geography of migration in metropolitan Atlanta, where Latino presence has grown as much in outer metropolitan counties as in majority-white suburbs like Sandy Springs.

Located just north of Atlanta, Sandy Springs is home to over 100,000 people, among which are growing numbers of working-class Black (20%) and Latino (14%) residents (City of Sandy Springs 2017). Most Latinos in Sandy Springs hail from Mexico, specifically from the poor, war-torn state of Guerrero, although Salvadorans, Brazilians, and Venezuelans are also represented among this group (City of Sandy Springs 2017, 33). Reflecting these broader trends, my Latino interlocutors had arrived in the area in the 2000s, many directly from abroad, others from traditional gateways like Texas and California. They were employed in low-wage construction and service sector jobs (landscaping, house and hotel cleaning, restaurants, etc.) and were only able to afford rent in a small number of apartments located at the edge of town.

Along with churches (Odem 2004), schools were the first institutions to develop initiatives for newcomer migrant populations. This occurred both at the regional level when, in the 1990s, Georgia was forced to comply with federal legislation by funding ESOL classes for students whose native language is not English (Wainer 2011); and in Sandy Springs, where local charities and community-based organizations joined forces to develop programs for Latino students. These interventions must be understood in the context of the highly unequal educational landscape of Atlanta, where a 'rich legacy of segregationist practices towards African Americans', including more subtle strategies like redistricting and white flight towards private schools, 'enables the continued abandonment of immigrant populations' and their relegation to underfunded schools with inadequate ESOL programs (Rodriguez 2018, 5; Tarasawa 2009). These programs often adopt a deficit framing of Latino cultures (Villenas 2001), approaching migrant families as an uneducated, under-resourced 'problem population' lacking knowledge on how to properly educate their children (Dyrness 2011, 61).

Mariela and Felipe, the leaders of the two nonprofits featured in this piece, departed from these approaches in that they recognized parents' and children's own agency and ability to shape their personal and political futures.

### **'They don't feel like they have rights:' cultivating Latino civic engagement**

In 2001, Sandy Springs saw the creation of two educational nonprofits working specifically with Latino populations, *Juntos con Los Niños* (JLN) and the Sandy Springs Fellowship (SSF). JLN's founder and leader was Mariela Beltrán, a child psychologist and middle-class immigrant from Venezuela who had worked for one of the first bilingual school outreach programs in Sandy Springs, teaching English to Latina

mothers. Through storytelling and hands-on activities, Mariela had gradually brought the women to share their migration stories and struggles inside the US education system. These experiences had informed her subsequent decision to partner with a local church to create JLN. While primarily focusing on bilingual pre-school education, the organization offered various leadership and extra-curricular programs for older youth and parents, with the goal of keeping them connected to the organization and making them ‘feel at home’ in Sandy Springs.

A similar commitment to building a ‘lasting legacy’ for Latino families characterized SSF, a faith-based organization run by the young Afro-Dominican pastor Felipe Diaz. Affiliated with an evangelical Baptist church, SSF combined after-school with spiritual development programs to ‘walk with’ children (*caminar con los niños*) from elementary up until their high school graduation. Both nonprofits served two to three hundred students every year, yet their paid staff comprised only a few people, leaving Felipe and Mariela to stretch their roles to help families with the most disparate issues, from a child being bullied to urgent legal matters (deportation hearings, DACA applications,<sup>5</sup> etc.).

This constant availability and deep involvement in the youth’s lives made Felipe into a figure that my interlocutors described as a mix of a spiritual guide, educator, and friend. ‘If I have a problem with the school, or a teacher, I talk to Mr. Felipe’, Miriam, a bookish, upbeat high school senior told me, ‘He’s been like my counselor in everything that has to do with my future, and with my education.’ Octavia, a mother who had known him for twenty years, saw this attitude reflected in broader forms of advocacy: ‘Felipe really wants the Hispanic community to stand out [*sobresalir*]. He has helped and supported many families, included my own’.

As the founders of the first ethnic nonprofit organizations in Sandy Springs, Mariela and Felipe had become de facto representatives of the needs and interests of Latino residents vis-à-vis the local administration. For instance, when, in 2016, the city approved a new redevelopment plan threatening to displace thousands of Latino renters Lanari, 2019), the two activists took to attending city council meetings, leveraging existing alliances with local power brokers to try to influence municipal decisions (cf. De Graauw 2016).

They also encouraged some of the families directly affected by these policies to attend the meetings. Most of them did not, however, for reasons that ranged from transportation issues to language barriers, to fears of accessing security-guarded buildings and interacting with government officials. Many simply trusted Felipe and Mariela to act as their advocates on these matters. In the following excerpt, Araceli, a JLN and SSF alumna living in one of the neighborhoods threatened for renovation, explains this relationship of ‘civic surrogacy’ in light of Latino residents’ lack of status and condition of deportability (Flores 2015):

No one has ever taken charge and said, you know, let’s make a meeting and see what we can change. Because they’re “illegal,” you know, they’re scared! They’re never going to go to City Hall and complain about this and that. They’re scared that they will be asked for papers and . . . get deported. That’s why they don’t do that. *They have rights but they don’t feel like they have rights* . . . That’s how people like Felipe and Mariela come into play. *They speak for us*. They’re the ones who fight for this community. They go to all the meetings.

While conscious of the structural limits to Latino political participation, Felipe and Mariela believed in the importance of providing youth and parents with various leadership and volunteering opportunities, so as to prepare them for exercising their rights and duties as members of the local polity. Every year, Mariela and her team nominated a group of parents as point persons or ‘coaches’, who became responsible for maintaining regular communication with families and organizing an annual Latino-themed event that served to raise money for parents’ programs by showcasing their contribution to JLN’s activities. ‘The prejudice is that Latinos take advantage of the services that America offers’, Mariela explained, alluding to widespread anti-immigrant sentiments, ‘but that’s not true. Latinos want to contribute, and our program gives them the opportunity to do so.’ Thanks to Mariela’s help as mentor and gatekeeper, some of these mothers were eventually able to access better jobs in local schools and nonprofit bureaucracies. This was the case of Liliana, a former ‘mom coach’ who was eventually hired to work as bilingual parent liaison at her daughter’s middle school, where she helped other Latino parents navigate English-only school bureaucracies and instances of discrimination that she herself had experienced as a mother.

By emphasizing regular attendance to programs, expecting parents to take charge of fundraising, and spotlighting those who ‘gave back’ to the organization through donating and volunteering (Gast and Okamoto 2016), JLN seemed to encourage behaviors that fit normative standards of the ‘deserving’ immigrant and ‘good’ suburban citizen (de Koning, Jaffe, and Koster 2015; Rodriguez 2018). Felipe and SSF operated along similar lines, regularly featuring high-achieving, college-bound students as role models in pep talks and public campaigns. And yet, even when engaging in ‘good’ civic behaviors like volunteering and joining PTA boards, Latina mothers like Liliana managed to invest these practices with a transformative political potential, using them to build and claim ‘counter-spaces’ for the support and empowerment of their own communities (Dyrness 2011). I now turn to analyze Mill Creek’s PTA as one of the counter-spaces where these collective acts of citizenship emerged.

### Latina mothers’ activism and radical care

At Mill Creek elementary, another woman and co-ethnic activist helped migrants feel emboldened to speak up against a racist and exclusionary institutional context: Yolanda, the school’s bilingual community liaison. As a Venezuelan immigrant, single mother, and resident of one of the neighborhoods that fed into the school, Yolanda was especially well-positioned to gain the trust of other Latino parents, whom she helped learn the ropes of PTA management and encouraged to take ownership of the organization.

At the time of my fieldwork, the PTA included three fathers and eight mothers, among whom were Helena and Lupita, the two women I have introduced at the beginning of this piece. Helena initially felt comfortable performing only small tasks, like making photocopies and preparing games for the children, until, one day, the school principal invited her to join the school governance council, offering to accommodate her erratic job schedule.<sup>6</sup> ‘That made me feel like an important person’, she narrated, ‘and that the school took my opinions into account’.



While proud to see their efforts recognized by administrators (including a special prize from the national PTA organization), however, both Helena and Lupita were still hesitant to take on too many responsibilities related to the school's management, for they believed their priority should remain that of 'helping and educating *their own* community'. Another PTA member, Maribel, connected this hesitance to the difficulties of reconciling school volunteering with her household and paid labor (cleaning other people's homes). 'We don't work office hours, it's different for us,' she told administrators during a meeting, hinting at the differences in class and privilege between Latino parents and the mostly white, middle class mothers who usually populated PTA boards. 'I can't leave my work to be at the school at 3. And once I do get here, I still have to work for the PTA and I don't have time to enjoy [school events] with my family.'

The words of Maribel, Helena, and Lupita remind us of how PTA involvement was only one among the many layers of carework that Latina women – as other women of color – performed inside their homes, neighborhoods, and family networks, through their paid employment and volunteer engagements, to ensure the well-being of their children and other community members in a context of widespread racism and oppression (Caballero et al. 2019; Hill Collins 1994). Scholarly analyses of carework as a form of political citizenship have centered on the relationship between migrant mothers and their children (see for example Erel and Reynolds 2018; Kershaw 2010; Lind 2019; Longman, De Graeve, and Brouckaert 2013). Here, I suggest that the PTA women's efforts to support and empower their communities, *while resisting the institutional co-optation of this labor*, can also be seen as radical acts of citizenship that reject liberal frameworks of 'integration' and responsabilization by 'implicitly ask[ing] questions about a . . . responsibility towards others' (, ; Isin, 2008, 39; Isin and Nielsen 2008, 4). These acts stem from experiences of precarity and marginalization (cf. Turner 2016), and are characterized by an 'audacity to produce, apply, and effect care' as a way to contest and transcend these socio-historical conditions (Hobart and Kneese 2020, 3).

Let us return to the conversation foreshadowed in my opening vignette to see how this 'radical care', mobilized in situations 'when institutions and infrastructures break down, fail, or neglect' (Hobart and Kneese 2020, 3), served as the ground on which Latina women collectively claimed and imagined a different future. At a first glance, Mill Creek elementary seemed to lack some of the most common signs of disinvestment that I had noticed in other schools – the poorly kept grounds, the labs missing basic equipment, the trailers in the backyard. But this appearance concealed a deeper history of structural racism: 'Mill Creek was built to remove Latinos from the other public schools in the city', Lupita told me, alluding to the controversial redistricting decision that had led to the construction of the school in 2008. Back then, white homeowners had managed to influence the redrawing of attendance zones to ensure that their children would attend a school with more resources and a more homogeneous racial makeup than Mill Creek. Lupita trenchantly commented: 'All the nice houses you see around

here, these kids go to a different school. I know that they built a nice, new building for us, but it's still racism. It was like a rejection for Latino families, we felt rejected.'

While denouncing the institutional mechanisms behind these feelings of abjectivity, Helena and Lupita also re-focused their narratives to emphasize *their own agentic responses* in these contexts. For instance, they started listing all the initiatives that they had taken, as PTA, to support Latino parents' participation in decisions about their children's education. Helena pointed to small details in the school's outward appearance – the grass freshly cut, the signs repainted, the flowers blooming in the garden – as a testament to the success of these efforts. 'Have you seen the other school, how dilapidated it looks?' she asked me, referring to the school that Latino children attended before the redrawing of attendance zones. 'Americans don't like manual labor. Have you seen our school now? We have parents coming here every Sunday to do gardening work. We will continue to plant flowers and make it nice, to show the Americans who gave it to us that this school is not going to fall apart. *We will continue to rise above* – always.'

These efforts to 'rise above' discrimination through sustained care for people and places constituted the basis for broader forms of activism, which prioritized tending to the needs and crises in the local Latino community over performing regular PTA tasks. In early 2016, after a series of ICE raids generated panic and anxiety among migrant families, many parents stopped attending school-related events for fear of being approached and arrested by ICE; some even kept their children home from classes (cf. Abrego and Menjivar 2011, 15). A few months later, the PTA was still grappling with the practical and psychological reverberations of these events, amplified by the nativist rhetoric of Trump's campaign. Lupita, who was closely following national and local news, saw these events as a call to action. She reached out to a leading immigrant rights organization, asking for help in educating parents about their rights as undocumented migrants. Meanwhile, her fellow PTA members focused on finding ways to support and communicate with families who had found themselves in a condition of 'forced immobilization' due to fears of deportation (Stuesse and Coleman 2014) – be it by intensifying the use of social media and group messaging platforms; or by enlisting their sons and daughters for help in organizing a ride-sharing system.

For PTA mothers, these ways of enacting citizenship through radical care thus formed part of the cultural values and bodies of knowledge that they hoped to transmit to the next generation (Kershaw 2010). Some brought their teenage sons and daughters along to volunteer at the school. Others, like Helena, strove to pass the sense of pride and strength they had gained from experiences of school activism down to their children, countering internalized feelings of shame (deriving from their status as undocumented migrants) with claims to a common humanity:

After I first sat in a meeting of the school governance council, I felt like the people at the front office started treating me differently, and I also started looking at them in the eyes. Now I tell my children, "you always have to keep your gaze high," because we are all equal and you are not a lesser human than others. Never look down, or else people will think that you are not confident enough.

With their mentorship and programs, Felipe and SSF contributed to these efforts of providing children with a sense of belonging and self-esteem ‘in a society where they are excluded and/or mis-recognized as (potential) future citizens’ (Longman, De Graeve, and Brouckaert 2013, 388). Yet their approach sometimes departed from that of PTA mothers, shaping and constraining youth’s creative displays of citizenship in different ways.

### From speaking for to speaking up

These tensions and ambiguities surrounding different modes of “speaking up” were especially evident in the case of high-school and college-aged youth, who saw themselves as having ‘grown up in the Fellowship’ and referred to it as a *familia* sustained by both biological and fictive kinship ties (many of the children enrolled in the programs were, in fact, related). Older students were also more likely to be undocumented and thus grappling with the effects of Georgia’s regressive education policies, which often led them to quit their studies and take up low-wage jobs before graduating. Felipe’s attempts to support these youths as they slipped from a condition of partial inclusion (through schooling) to one of heightened ‘illegality’ (Gonzales 2011) included organizing college tours, finding private donors willing to cover out-of-state tuition fees, and assisting students with applications and online college classes. These efforts however appeared to be largely disconnected from local undocumented youth activist movements. While celebrating every small victory related to DACA legislation, Felipe did not participate in any of these mobilizations, and the Fellowship’s students seemed largely unaware of these broader networks of activism.

This aspect became evident when I helped sixteen-year-old Lucía, a sweet, introverted girl whom I had met while she volunteered at Mill Creek along with her mother, carry out a school project on the effects of DACA. Lucía was herself DACAdocumented and thus very passionate about this topic. For weeks, she and I worked together to collect information for her project, which was eventually selected to be showcased at the annual school fair. We were in the midst of the Presidential campaign and Lucía, inspired by her mother’s PTA activism and inflamed by Trump’s statements about ‘illegal Mexicans’, saw this as an opportunity to *speak out* on behalf of ‘Sandy Springs’ Latino community’. On the day of the presentation, she wore a blue T-shirt with the acronym ‘DACA’ printed in bold letters, ‘coming out’ as undocumented in front of a largely white audience, her mother proudly standing by her side. Later, she confided to me that she was making plans with her boyfriend to attend Hillary Clinton’s rally in Atlanta.

While visibly happy for Lucía and eager to celebrate her achievements, Felipe appeared uncomfortable with these public displays of citizenship, and repeatedly warned her against ‘getting into politics’. This attitude was partially rooted in fears of compromising the organization’s nonprofit status and already tenuous funding stream, deriving from a combination of municipal grants and donations from conservative-leaning charities and corporate sponsors. In an attempt to balance the ‘dual service-advocacy function’ that their nonprofits had come to serve in the community (Chung 2005), Felipe and Mariela largely abstained from engaging in partisan politics. Their programs

encouraged *only certain modes* of being political, providing parents and youth with opportunities to infiltrate local school and nonprofit bureaucracies and formally participate in decisions about their city (such as by attending planning meetings).

And yet, even when following these normative paths of civic engagement, youths sometimes came to a newfound awareness of their political subjectivity through acts of *speaking up* publicly against injustice. In the last few years, Mariela and Felipe have nominated their most outstanding students to take part in a prestigious youth leadership program, whose participants are mostly upper-middle-class, private school students. In 2015, Miriam was chosen to take part in this program – or, as she put it, ‘to be the voice of the Latino community’. This year-long experience was transformative. She especially remembered the meeting where participants were asked to discuss housing issues in the city. Sitting in a largely white crowd, Miriam was the only person to raise her hand to object to municipal redevelopment plans on the grounds that they would result (and in fact, did result) in the displacement of many Latino families. Reflecting on the collective future potential of this act of citizenship, she told me: ‘I liked it. I learned a lot about Sandy Springs. I learned that we have to show up to these meetings about the apartments. We need to tell them that they are taking away our homes, and that it is not fair. *Because even if we are Latinos, we are still part of this community*’.

## Conclusion

This piece has probed the relationship between Latino migrants and the co-ethnic activists serving as their advocates and mentors, treating this relationship a generative of a dynamic and at times contradictory process of being and becoming political for undocumented migrant women and youth in the metropolitan US South. While refraining from direct political engagement, Latino educators like Felipe, Mariela, and Yolanda encouraged youth and parents to volunteer, attend meetings, and join school bureaucracies, providing them with the knowledge and support necessary to *access* and *practice* their rights to local resources and civic participation (Flores 2015). At the same time, they pointed to these performances of ‘good’ citizenship to convince the local government of its obligations towards Latino families in realms such as housing and education (McThomas 2016). When performed collectively by mothers, daughters, volunteers, and school professionals in response to shared experiences of oppression, these normative behaviors turned into political acts that centered radical care and community empowerment as the basis for reimagining citizenship and belonging ‘on the margins’ (Lister 1998b).

These findings alert us to the ways normative and subversive dimensions of citizenship are deeply entangled and dependent upon one another, while always articulated as creative responses to legal and political exclusion. At different moments and historical conjunctures, some dimensions may prevail over others, as people fluidly ‘move in and out of different subject positions’, implicating others in this process (, 19). The Trump era saw Mariela speaking out publicly to denounce the deleterious effects of anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric on Latino children. Felipe, in turn, clung to his approach of quiet political (dis)engagement. Both activists stepped up to help Latino families access

healthcare and financial relief during the Covid-19 pandemic. Older youths deepened their connections to the organizations by returning as part-time staff, eager to ‘give back’ to their communities by contributing to the labor of educating the ‘next Latino generation’. Some of the former ‘mom coaches’ were hired by JLN as permanent coordinators for parent programs, and have become instrumental in growing Latino school advocacy by connecting JLN parents with Mill Creek’s PTA.

Alongside and through these more established initiatives, the informal work of activism and radical care performed by the PTA mothers has also continued, tackling various community emergencies – from raising money for families torn apart by deportation, to spreading awareness about the importance and availability of Covid-19 vaccines. Meanwhile, the role of these informal, women-led networks in supporting mothers arrested and detained by ICE has been acknowledged by Georgia’s immigrant rights organizations (Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR), and National Immigration Project of the National Lawyers Guild (NIPNLG) 2017, 7).

In conclusion, future studies should harness the potential of ethnographic and feminist approaches to engage with migrant communities and their co-ethnic advocates over a sustained period of time, observing how they navigate the contradictions of belonging in the everyday, enacting their (im)possible agency in contexts of deeply entrenched racism, legal precarity, and political marginalization (Turner 2016, 143). In particular, focusing on schooling and education can offer precious insights onto the relational components of lived citizenship, shedding light on its temporal, cross-generational and gendered dimensions. Forms of mentorship, carework, and support binding people together along the life course and across informal and institutional spaces, in fact, can engender new horizons of political possibility, sowing the seeds for those ‘insurrectionist moments’ (ibid.,145) when marginalized groups claim space and voice for their own communities.

## Notes

1. I use pseudonyms to refer to individuals and organizations to ensure participants’ confidentiality. References to documents and websites connected to these organizations have also been removed.
2. In the United States, most schools have a Parent Teacher Association (PTA) whose goal is to foster engagement and collaboration between the school and the local community.
3. Interviews conducted in Spanish were translated for the purpose of citation in the text.
4. Together with H.B.87, other state laws were responsible for unleashing a new era of anti-immigrant policing in Georgia. These were S.B. 170 (passed in 2013), which prohibited undocumented migrants from obtaining a driver license; and S.B. 350 (passed in 2008), which criminalized minor traffic offenses, sanctioning that whoever is found to be driving without a license can be imprisoned and fingerprinted in a county jail.
5. Signed by Obama in 2012, the ‘Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals’ (DACA) is a temporary measure that grants protection from deportation and temporary legal status to certain categories of undocumented migrants who came to the US as children. The program came under severe attack during the Trump’s presidency but has been gradually reinstated following 2020 court rulings (Dickerson and Shear 2020; Liptak and Shear 2020).

6. Within Sandy Springs' charter system, all schools have a governance council that includes representatives from teachers, parents, and community members.

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