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SPECIAL ISSUE: MOTHERING PRACTICES IN TIMES OF LEGAL PRECARITY: ACTIVISM, CARE, AND RESISTANCE IN DISPLACEMENT

Latina M(other)work against racism: living with legal precarity in suburban Atlanta

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ABSTRACT
This piece explores the resistance strategies of Latina mothers grappling with racism and legal precarity in suburban Atlanta, Georgia, a "hostile" new destination with restrictive anti-immigrant measures. It draws on 18 months of ethnographic research to show how women derived a sense of empowerment from becoming involved in their children's schooling. They also turned schools into "counter-spaces" of sanctuary and support for fellow Latinx parents. The author sees this educational activism spanning both domestic and public school spaces as an expression of m(other)work. M (other)work is the gendered labor of care that supports Latinx children and communities as they fight against intersecting forms of exclusion. This labor, stemming from traumatic experiences of border crossing, is at the heart of emerging forms of immigrant activism in new destinations. In conclusion, the author urges educators to abandon traditional deficit framings of immigrant groups in favor of initiatives that support Latina mothers' educational activism.

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KEYWORDS Latinas; racism; legal precarity; mothering; education; new destinations

Introduction

> In the past, I used to feel more problems, life seemed more difficult. More than anything, because of this country, because one doesn't know about the laws and feels discouraged. People used to tell me, "you came to the most difficult state." Atlanta is very difficult for immigrants. […] But now I tell myself: as long as I have a job, and my children are in school, I just have to help them so that they can carry on and do well in their education. Because what I care about is that they don't quit school.

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Guadalupe[1] is an undocumented Mexican mother living in a suburb of Atlanta. At the time of this conversation in 2016, she was working full-time in a local laundromat and was the only caretaker of her two children. Having no other relatives in the area, Guadalupe worried that, if she was to be arrested or deported, her children would be left with no one to take care of them. This crippling fear of deportation, and of the consequences it would have for her family, shaped her quotidian choices as a mother. For instance, she never left her teenage children at home unsupervised, to avoid giving their absent father a reason to report her to the police, as he had repeatedly threatened to do. While feeling vulnerable and constrained in her opportunities—to learn English, access a better job, obtain a driver license—Guadalupe found strength and purpose in the conviction that she could play an active role in her children's education. Becoming involved in their schooling through volunteering and at-home activities had increased her sense of self-worth. She no longer felt powerless in the face of immigration enforcement and of her husband's abuses: "Now I tell myself, 'No. Even if I am illegal, the police can still help me.'"

Within the current US border regime, migrant mothers are not only subject to biopolitical violence as they cross borders, are apprehended and detained by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). They also experience the consequences of heightened immigration enforcement at federal, state, and local levels as a condition of existential precarity that reaches into every aspect of their everyday lives, causing them a great deal of emotional and psychological suffering (Abrego and Menjívar 2011). In this piece, I employ the concept of m(other)work, emerging out of Black and Chicana feminist traditions (Collins 1994; Caballero et al. 2019), as a lens to examine the individual and collective resistance strategies of legally precarious Latina[2] women in suburban Atlanta, Georgia—a hostile new destination with restrictive anti-immigrant measures (Marrow 2020).

Drawing on ethnographic material collected in a majority-white suburb with a history of institutional racism and segregation, I analyse women's experiences of gendered racialization as jointly shaped by these histories, and by contemporary processes of migrant illegalization (De Genova and Roy 2020). I focus on the context of schooling to show how Latina mothers' involvement in their children's education became an avenue for organizing against multiple forms of exclusion, creating "counter-spaces" of sanctuary and community support (Dyrness 2011; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz 2013). These findings contribute to existing scholarship on m(other)work and Latinx education by attending to emerging forms of Latina activism and political agency in new US Southern destinations.

Gendered and racialized legal precarity in new immigrant destinations

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, the state of Georgia, and in particular the city of Atlanta, emerged as new destinations for both foreign

and domestic migrants. Latinxs, who currently represent ca. 11 per cent of Atlanta's total population, were among the fastest-growing groups of newcomers to the region (Atlanta Regional Commission 2018). Mexican and Central American migrants, in particular, were initially attracted to the area by the demand for cheap labor in preparation of the 1996 Olympics. They continued to flock to Atlanta throughout the 2000s, finding employment in the city's booming service economy, and settling predominantly in suburban and outer metropolitan counties (Odem 2008). A large percentage of these newcomers were undocumented (Pew Research Center 2019).

While at first "neutral, ambivalent, and sometimes even welcoming," political and institutional responses to Latinx migration in Georgia became increasingly hostile in the late 2000s, as economic growth began to wane (Marrow 2020, 101; Odem 2008). This changing climate was marked by the passage of state laws severely limiting the rights of undocumented migrants in the realms of employment, housing, education, transportation, and healthcare, thus creating a "legal regime of distinctions between the rights of undocumented immigrants and citizens," which journalist Lovato (2008)—evoking the ever-present legacies of the Jim Crow system of racial segregation—has termed a new "Juan Crow."[3]

The most infamous piece of legislation passed during this period was H.B.87, which aligned with federal 287(g) and Secure Communities programs[4] by granting local police with the power to demand immigration papers during routine checkpoints, detain and report individuals to ICE.[5] Police in rapidly diversifying suburban counties around Atlanta were among the first to cooperate with ICE, leading to an increase in racial profiling, arrests, detentions, and deportations of undocumented migrants, including many with noncriminal backgrounds (Shahshahani 2010). The most recent immigration raids of 2016 and 2017 increasingly targeted single mothers with children (GLAHR 2017), some of whom have been detained in facilities that violate their basic human and reproductive rights (Olivares and Washington 2021).

As demonstrated by other scholars and shown here in the case of Guadalupe and others (Abrego and Menjívar 2011; Dreby 2015; Valdivia 2019), these intensified regimes of immigration control insinuate themselves into the most intimate spheres of women's existence, reaching beyond actual experiences of detention and deportation. In the climate of widespread fear that follows ICE's periodical incursions into homes and communities, in fact, even the most ordinary spaces of everyday life—roads, parks, apartment complexes, and even schools—can become associated with a "heightened sense of vulnerability to deportation" (Valdivia 2019, 110). These ever-expanding geographies of deportability limit women's ability to move, labor, and access social services for themselves and their children (Luibhéid, Andrade, and Stevens 2018; Stuesse and Coleman 2014).

By focussing on legal precarity, I draw attention to how these and other multi-scalar processes of migrant illegalization reverberate across women's daily lives, shaping their embodied experiences of abjection and insecurity and reflecting onto specific modes of being-in-the-world (Willen 2007). I see legal precarity as working together with other spatial, social, and economic arrangements that "subordinate[e] and dispossess" Latinxs populations and make them into disposable, racialized non-citizens (De Genova and Roy 2020, 353). With racialization, I refer both to institutional processes of differentiating and classifying individuals into specific "groups," arranged hierarchically and relationally within a white-dominated field of power; and to the ways people inhabit and internalize these logics and their real-life consequences (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Ferguson 2014). Here, I am especially interested in Latina women's experiences of racism and racialization as shaped by intersections with other axes of structural inequality, such as class, gender, and documentation status.

In recent years, the discriminatory enforcement of state and federal laws, together with rising xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments, have contributed to racializing Latinxs along the axis of "illegality" (García 2017; Menjívar 2021). These dynamics are especially evident in hostile new destinations like Atlanta, where a new homogenized racial category has emerged alongside the Black/white binary, one which conflates all people of Central or South American origin—regardless of ethnicity, generation, or legal status —with the stereotype of the "illegal Mexican," a potential criminal and threat to the nation (Browne and Odem 2012; see also Armenta 2017).

This racialization of "illegality," if on the one hand elides internal differences within Latinx communities, on the other is always experienced in classed and gendered ways (García 2017). While men have overall been the most targeted by US deportation regimes (Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013), women often had to grapple with subtler forms of othering and exclusion, such as deficit framings that construe them as incompetent parents lacking appropriate cultural resources and educational involvement (Villenas 2001). These racializing frameworks are especially pervasive in the realm of education (Valencia 1997). In what follows, I deploy the concept of m(other)work to develop an intersectional and transversal analysis (De Genova and Roy 2020, 353) of gendered and racialized legal precarity in this context, rendering visible women's labor of building community and sanctuary across both domestic and public (school) spaces.

Theorizing m(other)work in the context of Latinx education

In an essay published in 1994, Black feminist scholar Collins (1994) argued for the need to "shift the center" of feminist analyses to attend to the experiences of mothers of color as uniquely shaped by historical and economic conditions

and interlocking systems of oppression. For women who belong to historically marginalized, displaced, and enslaved communities, in fact, the labor of social reproduction cannot be limited to ensuring the well-being of the family, for group "survival, empowerment, and identity" are also continuously at stake (Collins 1994, 373). Seen this way, m(other)work is an inherently political act oriented towards both individual *and* community survival. As such, it blurs the boundaries between public and private spheres, and is articulated through both caring and "culturework." "Culturework" refers to the labor of equipping children with culturally specific strategies and bodies of knowledge that allow them to retain a sense of belonging and self-worth in a context of widespread racism, violence, and discrimination (Erel and Reynolds 2018; Longman, De Graeve, and Brouckaert 2013).

The work of Collins and other Black feminist theorists of intersectionality (e.g. Crenshaw 1991) has inspired a growing body of scholarship analyzing migrant women's mothering strategies and non-normative family arrangements as shaped by and responding to intersecting forms of oppression based on class, ethnicity, skin color, religious affiliation, and so on (Bloch 2017; Brouckaert and Longman 2018; Gumbs et al. 2016). Here, I especially draw on the US Chicana "mother-scholar" collective composed by Caballero, Martínez-Vu, Pérez-Torres, Téllez, and Vega (Caballero et al. 2019) in their definition of m(other)work as "a framework for collective resistance that makes […] various forms of feminized labor visible," particularly that which "promotes collective action, holistic healing, and social justice" for children and communities of color (Caballero et al. 2019, 1-2). Like these scholars, I also adopt the spelling m(other)work to be inclusive of "community other mothers" and account for the ways my interlocutors—in their various roles as friends, activists, school employees and volunteers—fought to ensure the well-being of other children and non-kin community members (Collins 1991).

I adopt m(other)work as a theoretical lens to understand how migrant women, who have been rendered outsiders by the intersecting forces of gendered racism, nativism, and illegalization, develop forms of political agency rooted in motherhood in its various public-private, cultural-biological instantiations (Gumbs et al. 2016; Vélez 2019). This framework holds great theoretical potential when applied to the context of education to show how Latina women resist and creatively respond to institutional racism and exclusion from their own subject position as illegalized migrant mothers. While different strands of scholarship have challenged deficit discourses by highlighting Latinx parents' own strategies of educational involvement (e.g. Manzo and Deeb-Sossa 2018; Rangel and Shoji 2021), here I draw in particular on the field of Latinx educational ethnography (Villenas 2012).

Integrating different theoretical approaches from borderland studies to Latinx critical race theory (Delgado Bernal 2002), Latinx educational ethnography centers the "stories and voices" of Latinx parents and students in

the US education system (Villenas and Deyhle 1999, 413). It starts by acknowledging the ways racism, power, and economics intersect in creating unequal educational infrastructures that fail Latinx students, all the while promoting "colorblind" policies that work to consolidate white material and educational advantages (Villenas and Deyhle 1999, 414).

Ethnographers have documented the process of individual and community empowerment whereby Latina mothers, in particular, begin to "collectively organize as parents to help each other make sense of the schools" (Villenas and Deyhle 1999, 437), creating "counter-spaces" to strategize and support each other against racism and marginalization (Dyrness 2011), and "counternarratives" that challenge the deficit framings imposed by schools and service providers (Villenas 2001). To this end, mothers draw on educational resources and "funds of knowledge" that are often devalued or misrecognized inside the schools—incorporating "emotional support, parent–child discussion, advice (*consejos*), dialogues (*platicas*), and autobiographical narratives in their strategies of parental involvement" (Manzo and Deeb-Sossa 2018, 353).

Both the scholarship on Chicana m(other)work and that on Latinx education are based in regions with long histories of Chicanx/Latinx presence and activism, such as California and the US Southwest. My analysis, in turn, focuses on Atlanta, a new US Southern destination where the growing influx of Latinx migrants has been met with restrictive legislation, intensified policing and—as far as education is concerned—a lack of policies and political will to address the needs of ethnically and linguistically diverse student populations (Beck and Allexsaht-Snider 2002). Taking this context into account, I follow a group of undocumented Latina women as they forged resistance strategies that extended from the domestic to the public sphere of the school, working towards the creation of "small sanctuary spaces in an otherwise hostile territory" (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz 2013, 253). The word "sanctuary" is usually associated with the actions undertaken by cities and other institutions to protect undocumented migrants. By repositioning this term in the context of Southern white suburb, I draw attention to Latina mothers' own labor of building counter-spaces that provide people with emotional support, social connection, and opportunities for social mobilization to help "alleviate the hardships and sufferings of illegality" (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz 2013, 246).

Methods

This paper is based on eighteen months of ethnographic research conducted between 2014 and 2016 as part of a larger anthropological project focussing on a majority-white and affluent suburb whose history of segregation and secession from Atlanta has been recently complicated by the influx of

working class Black and Latinx residents (Lanari 2019a).[6] Methods included participant observation, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, and content analysis of media and institutional documents aimed at capturing local discourses and representations about Latinx populations. A total of 26 Latinx participants were involved in interviews. Among them were second-generation youth, nonprofit leaders, and parents—16 of them identifying as mothers, 1 as father. This piece focuses on 9 of these mothers, with whom I had built a closer relationship through involvement in local schools and organizations (see below).

Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish[7], lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours, and took place in locations chosen by participants (usually a local coffee shop or fast-food chain, or their own homes). The majority of the interviews (20) were audio-recorded and transcribed, while the remaining ones (two of which are featured here) were reconstructed from detailed field-notes taken both during and after each interaction. Interview transcripts were coded inductively using MaxQDA and compared with field notes from participant observation so as to identify cross-cutting themes and concepts, which were further explored during subsequent research encounters. This iterative approach, combined with an extensive use of unstructured interviews, allowed me to create space for participants to actively shape the research process, letting unforeseen research topics emerge.

I recruited interlocutors largely through the contacts I established during participant observation inside local schools, neighborhoods, and Latinx-serving organizations, using both purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Careful considerations about ethics, social and political context shaped these methodological choices. Ethnographic research with migrant populations subject to illegalization, state surveillance, and exploitative labor practices, in fact, can easily turn into an extractive endeavor that uses people's "lives and experiences … as raw materials to fuel the academic engine," further contributing to their vulnerability (Bejarano et al. 2019, 8). Following the example of other anthropologists working with Latinx communities (e.g. Gomberg-Muñoz 2016; Stuesse 2016; Villenas 2012), I devoted a substantial part of my fieldwork—including earlier research trips (2010-2013)—to building relationships with participants, aligning with their priorities to improve their life conditions, denounce injustice, and enact social change. For a year, I volunteered regularly with two small Latinx-led organizations deeply rooted within the community, serving as after-school tutor and mentor for Latinx students, while also helping organize annual fundraising events. These experiences led to other spontaneous collaborations with Latinx parents and community advocates, such as those revolving around the issue of affordable housing (Lanari 2019b).

My dual role as a white researcher and volunteer posed specific challenges, heightening the uneven power dynamics between myself and my

interlocutors (see e.g. Goerisch 2017; Huisman 2008; Stuesse 2016, post-script). I often worried that some mothers might feel obliged to talk to me out of a sense of indebtedness towards the organizations helping their children; or that my visibility and "familiarity" as a volunteer might overshadow my role as an ethnographer, further complicating matters of research consent. While these imbalances and ambiguities can never be erased, I deliberately sought to interact with and recruit participants through other channels, accepting invitations to attend religious celebrations, school meetings, and community events, each time clarifying my goals and position as a researcher. These sustained engagements across multiple venues proved essential to building rapport with the women whose stories and voices are featured in this piece.

The majority (7) of these women hailed from Mexico, specifically from the poor, war-torn state of Guerrero, while the remaining two were from Venezuela. With the exception of these two, who were employed in the schools and held at least a high school diploma, the women had low education levels (eight grade on average). They had come to Atlanta in the early 2000s, finding employment in low-paying service sector jobs (restaurants, laundromats, house and hotel cleaning, etc.). Their migration trajectories sometimes included a brief period in other US immigrant destinations, like Texas or California. Most lived in mixed-status families where one or both parents were undocumented while children were US citizens or had temporary relief from deportation through programs such as DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals).[8]

In the next section, we will see how, in addition to grappling with this legal instability at the familial level, women had to navigate a suburban school system whose built-in racial inequities were further exacerbated by everyday forms of racism and discrimination. The following section centers the counter-narratives and home-based pedagogies mobilized by mothers as they educated their children to face these interlocking systems of oppression. Finally, the third section shows how women extended these strategies—and thus their m(other)work—into institutional spaces, focussing on school-based activism and the creation of "counter-spaces" of sanctuary. I conclude by connecting these findings to broader Latina-led mobilizations in Georgia during the Trump era, outlining future directions of research.

Racisms and racialization in educational contexts

Decades after Civil Rights legislation tackling racial discrimination in education, opportunities in the US public school system continue to be unequally distributed depending on race, class, and place of residence (Kelley 2020; NPR 2016). In Atlanta, the dismantling of court-ordered desegregation programs, along with housing discrimination and the systematic underfunding of public

schools have contributed to (re)segregating low-income Black and Latinx students into resource-poor districts (Tarasawa 2009), where they are unfairly disciplined and "tracked" into remedial classes at disproportionally higher rates (Freeman, Scafidi, and Sjoquist 2005; Wainer 2011).

My conversations with Latina mothers and youth were interspersed with stories of micro-aggressions and everyday discrimination taking place inside the schools. Alma, a Mexican mother and tireless worker in a local dry cleaner, had been forced to relocate with her family to a different part of the city after her apartment complex was demolished to make room for a new city-sponsored redevelopment project (Lanari 2019b). These experiences of displacement and dispossession were further amplified when Alma went to enroll her two high-achieving children in a new school district and encountered "some racism:"

> In the old school, my daughter was enrolled in advanced math classes. But there was a lot of confusion when she entered the new school. In all truth, I experienced some racism. First, they asked me if she was in ESOL [*English to Speakers of Other Languages*] classes before, and I told them no, that she had always communicated well in English […]. A week later, someone told me, why didn't you tell the school that she didn't need those classes? I made a face, and realized that they had still placed her in lower-level classes.

Feeling similarly undermined in their competence as mothers, other women responded by taking up paid positions that would allow them to help Latinx students and parents inside the schools. This was the case of Liliana, a Venezuelan migrant who, thanks to the support of other Latina educators (Lanari 2022a), had been hired to work as a "bilingual community liaison" in the same school where she had experienced discrimination as a mother. "One day, my daughter came home saying she could take AP [Advanced Placement] classes. So I went to meet with the school counselor," Liliana recounted. "But when I asked her to explain what those classes were, she shut me down immediately, saying: 'Google it!'"

The most blatant example of institutional racism in the field of education occurred in 2008, when hundreds of Latinx students from two schools with a more heterogeneous population were reassigned to the newly built Mill Creek Elementary, where 98 per cent of the students are non-white, most of them Latinxs. Even though the redistricting decision technically fell under the county's purview, white parents played a key role in steering the process of redrawing attendance zones to ensure that their children would attend a school with more resources, higher test scores, and a more homogeneous racial makeup than Mill Creek, even though many of them lived in close proximity to the new school. [9]

This episode—which we will later see retold through the mothers' own voices—is part of a longer history of white homeowner mobilizations to oppose federally mandated busing programs in the wake of school

desegregation first, and later, at the turn of the millennium, to contain the effects of demographic diversification through attempts at redistricting and white flight to private schools and outer suburbs (Lanari 2019a). These strategies of white avoidance of racially heterogeneous schools are still widespread today, particularly in racially heterogeneous suburban communities with the "greatest potential for diversity in public schools" (Tarasawa 2012, 665), like the one at the center of my study.[10]

In parallel with these trends, initiatives aimed at helping "at risk" students by "educating" and "involving" their parents (especially those from immigrant backgrounds) have also multiplied in the past decades, as part of broader efforts to improve public school "quality" to make the area more attractive for middle class families (cf. Jones-Correa 2008). Latina mothers taking part in these programs were often confronted with deficit framings and "benevolent racist" attitudes from part of white parents, funders, and administrators (Villenas 2001), who approached them as a population lacking education, language skills, and knowledge on how to properly educate their children. While seemingly more "welcoming" than other community responses to the arrival of Latinx migrants, these approaches deny agency to immigrant parents and reproduce colonial relations of cultural and ideological domination through the "normalization of white/Western middle-class cultural ways (including mothering practices) and the pathologizing of Latino cultures" (Villenas 2001, 9). These "benevolent" racist stances went hand-in-hand with laws and policies exploiting and excluding Latinxs in realms as various as housing, labor, and education. They were further exacerbated by widely circulating narratives portraying white mother-volunteers as "model citizens" dedicated to uplifting their less fortunate Black and brown neighbors (Lanari 2022b).

"If I am here, it's for you:" women's counter-narratives and pedagogies

My Latina interlocutors were extremely aware of the "controlling images" (Collins 2000; Dyrness 2011) created by school and government officials and felt a constant pressure to conform with white middle-class standards of "good mothering" and "parental involvement." Many responded to these dominant representations by insisting that they were not passive recipients of help, but rather contributed to schools' activities however they could. "I try to overcome whatever obstacle," Guadalupe told me. "If there is an event at the school, or a trip, I donate money and, if I can, I donate a little more. That's what it is about, if the school helps you, you try to help them too."

At the same time, mothers never failed to discuss the constraints they faced when trying to conform with these standards, be it through narrating their own experiences of racism and discrimination, as in the case of Alma and Liliana; or by reflecting on other barriers and power dynamics shaping their relationship with the schools—such as language, legal status, and unfamiliarity with the school system. Sofia, a longtime school volunteer, worried that her three children might start their educational careers already at a disadvantage and that, because of her full-time job and limited English proficiency, she might lack the time and knowledge necessary to help them fill that gap: "Anglo [parents] read to their children, they prepare them for school. By the time their children start school, they already know colors, letters, and numbers," she reflected, visibly anxious. Then, with a mixture of pride and embarrassment in her voice, she added: "I have also borrowed books from the school library. Sometimes I can't read them to my children because I can't understand [English]. But I still try."

Guadalupe felt "depressed" by similar linguistic difficulties. Nevertheless, she portrayed herself as an active agent in her children's education: "we can still motivate our children and tell them about the value of education. I, for instance, want to know everything that happens to them, either good or bad. I ask them things like, 'what do you like about the school?', 'What does the teacher say?', and they respond by telling me about this or that. And from there, we keep talking." Made to feel inferior because of their racialized positioning as undocumented Spanish-speaking migrants, women responded by centering their "culturally specific ways of organizing and teaching and learning" (Delgado Bernal et al. 2006, 114), which they saw as key to helping children navigate the effects of broader societal racism and illegalization. For Octavia, a mother of four, these "pedagogies of the home" (Delgado Bernal et al. 2006, 114) represented a necessary complement to formal schooling, especially when it came to forestalling the risk that youth "end up in the street" (*se vayan por la calle*) and become subject to "bad influences" (i.e. drugs, crime, etc.):

> You are your parents' daughter—you know what I mean? What your parents didn't teach you, you're not going to learn in the street. Yes, you can learn that in school, but if there's not a good foundation in the home, there will be even less outside. In sum, everything works together. We are a poor family, we have to work to survive. But this doesn't prevent us from teaching our children, from correcting or scolding them.

Because of their documentation status, Octavia and her husband were relegated to low-paying jobs in the service and construction sectors, where they worked extra hours to make ends meet. They often struggled to

reconcile the competing demands of parenting and paid employment. But "no one asked us to give birth to our children," she reflected, "it's us who made them. So we have to find a way not to leave them alone, to look after them, to lead them."

Some mothers explicitly stressed the transnational and cross-generational nature of their educational strategies, paying tribute to the rich body of "community and family knowledge" that was passed down to them in Mexico (Delgado Bernal et al. 2006, 114). Guadalupe felt deeply indebted to her parents:

> I sure don't come from a rich family. Well, maybe rich in terms of traditions, education and moral values. My mom and dad will soon celebrate their 42nd anniversary, and I really like seeing them, because they still look like lovebirds. Growing up, I never saw my father disrespect my mother or yell at her. What they taught me is that the secret to a good marriage and to good family is remaining united and facing problems together.

Mothers like Guadalupe believed in unfiltered communication with their children as a way to establish a relation of trust (*confianza*) with them. They were aware that their children would grow up exposed to the upper-class lifestyles of their white classmates. But rather than downplaying these inequalities, they preferred to share their financial difficulties with their sons and daughters, reminding them of the sacrifices they had to make to give them an education. Montserrat, mother of three and longtime community volunteer, explained:

> I tell my children, we don't have the kind of money that allows us to say, "don't worry, we're going to pay for everything." I tell them that we don't have money here, that we have to work, that money costs: "do you want to have nice things? Do you want to go to the mall? We all would like that!" We like talking to our children and telling them how much effort [their education] is costing us … They need to know that they have to apply themselves, that they have to study hard.

By "naming and recognizing the … enormous risks and fiercely difficult circumstances" that they had to endure in order to build a future for their children (Alexander 2018, 424, 416), Montserrat, Octavia, and other Latina mothers challenged normative understandings of "parental involvement" adopted by white families and school administrators (cf. Manzo and Deeb-Sossa 2018, 353–4). Instead, they framed their own involvement as inextricably linked to class, race, gender, and legal status, at times equating it with the very act of border crossing—or "bordermothering." Alexander (2018, 428) uses this term to stress the connections among mothering, migrant illegalization, and the "multiple ways in which [women] fight for their children's education," including by embarking on perilous migratory journeys. These themes are reflected in the words of Guadalupe, who extended her pedagogy

of *confianza* to making her children aware of the difficult choices she faced as an undocumented single mother:

> "I always tell my children, 'If I am here, it's for you. If I can't go back to Mexico to see my family, it's for you.' I tell them that, if I get deported, they'll have to stay here with other people, and I won't see them anymore. But at least they'll be fine."

Traumatic experiences of gendered migration and illegalization thus became the basis for building race- and class-specific mothering pedagogies. Unlike in the case analysed by Alexander (2018), in this instance border-mothering also led to broader forms of activism oriented towards the school and local institutions (Lanari 2022a). In the next section, we will see how women extended their pedagogies beyond the intimate spaces of their homes, taking up volunteering and leadership positions inside the schools.

"Always keep your gaze high": M(other)work against racism

Sitting around a small table in the school hallway, Lupita and Helena write down words and numbers on their notebooks, narrating each of them for me: *servicios de immigración* (immigration services), Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights; *educar a los padres* (educating parents)*; donaciones* (donations)*;* $100; $5,000; beautification. The monthly meeting between the school principal and the members of Mill Creek's Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) has just ended. Lupita, Helena, and other PTA members linger around the building to strategize about goals and priorities for the organization, but also to share common experiences of discrimination. "Mill Creek was built to remove Latinxs from the other public schools in the city," Lupita tells me, hinting at the controversial redistricting decision behind the construction of the school.

> "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 Latinx families, we felt rejected."

As the first PTA in the city entirely run and staffed by Latinx parents, the association stands as a testament to migrant mothers' efforts to create, within a hyper-segregated and underfunded environment, a counter-space of sanctuary and mutual support.

Contributing to these efforts were Latina school employees like Yolanda, a Venezuelan woman who made it her priority to help Mill Creek's parents learn the ropes of PTA management and eventually take ownership of the organization. As an immigrant and single mother herself, Yolanda was aware of the obstacles that prevented Latinx parents from participating in school activities

—limited financial resources, language barriers, fears of deportation, etc.—and believed that it behooved school administrators to acknowledge and remove these barriers. Rather than adopting a deficit framing of migrant parents like other educators, she started by recognizing their own pedagogies and cultural resources, so as to "instill in them the certainty that there is no one with more influence to inspire and motivate their children than themselves."[11]

This approach paid off as mothers gradually came to see the school as a "safe" space that could be partially tailored to their needs, linguistic skills, and preferred modalities of involvement. "The first time I came here for a meeting, I saw that they were all Latinos and that they spoke Spanish," Helena recounted, recalling her first encounter with Mill Creek's bilingual personnel. "So, I told myself: ok, I can get involved." She started with small tasks, like photocopying class materials and fabricating cardboard games for the children, until—one day—she was invited to join the school governance council.[12] She was especially surprised when the principal offered to adjust the meeting times to accommodate her erratic job schedule: "That made me feel like an important person, and that the school took my opinions into account," she reflected.

Both Helena and Lupita were proud to see their efforts rewarded by administrators, however, they also remained skeptical at the prospect of taking on additional responsibilities connected to the school's management. They insisted that their priority should remain that of "helping and educating their own community". In the way they and others described it, in fact, PTA involvement was only one among the many layers of m(other)work that women performed by educating their children, providing for them financially, and protecting them from the everyday consequences of illegalization. This labor also included supporting other Latinxs—friends, relatives, fellow parishioners, etc., as they went through difficult situations. Following Chicana and Black feminist scholars, as well as Helena and Lupita's own framings of PTA work as a response to institutional racism, I see all these different instances of m(other)work as "interwoven political acts" oriented towards empowering children and other community members vis-à-vis legal precarity, discrimination, and interlocking systems of oppression (Caballero et al. 2019, 3). As I document elsewhere (Lanari 2022a) and show here in the case of Yolanda, Latina school employees and nonprofit activists were also crucially implicated in this transformative labor of m(other)work and community empowerment.

Further, m(other)work served as the basis for mobilizing against heightened experiences of deportability in a rising nativist climate. This aspect became clear in the first months of 2016 when, as Donald Trump was making its way to the US presidency through hateful anti-immigrant (and especially anti-Mexican) speech, the news broke that a new wave of ICE

raids had led to the arrest of hundreds of Central American migrant women in nearby suburbs. In the following days, many Latinx parents became increasingly afraid of leaving their homes and stopped attending school-related events. Some even kept their children home from classes, fearing that ICE agents might try to approach them at the bus stop (cf. Abrego and Menjívar 2011, 15). The practical and psychological reverberations of this event lasted for months, so much so that when I attended one of the PTA meetings in April, the organization was still discussing ways to address disruptions to classroom and non-classroom-based activities. Lupita, who worried about the effects of a Trump presidency on Georgia's xenophobic climate, saw these events as a call to action, and reached out to one of Georgia's largest immigrant right organizations for help in "educating" parents about their rights as undocumented migrants. Sofia, who managed the PTA newsletter and sat in the school's governance council, hoped to intensify the use of social media and group messaging systems as a way to circumvent the condition of "forced immobilization" in which many parents had found themselves due to fears of deportation (Stuesse and Coleman 2014). These strategies worked towards the creation and valorization of alternative forms of involvement that did not necessitate parents' physical presence in the schools (Alexander 2018, 414).

At a broader level, they also revealed the deeply interconnected nature of women's pedagogies, political activism, and community work (Naples 1992; Pardo 1998). Some mothers, like Montserrat, used their volunteering experiences to teach their children that "it is important to give and help," especially to the benefit of one own's Latinx community. Others, like Helena, hoped to pass the sense of pride and self-worth they had gained from their PTA activism down to their children, so as to help dismantle internalized feelings of shame deriving from everyday racism and illegalization:

> 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.

Women recognized the devastating impact of racialized legal precarity on their families' well-being. At the same time, they saw these accumulated experiences as fundamentally shaping their labor of educating children and organizing collectively against these exclusions.

Conclusion: *Luchadoras* rising above

In the years of the Trump administration, news of migrant families separated at the border and of women with no criminal backgrounds detained and

deported without a chance to talk to their children filled the media sphere (Gramlich 2020; Preston and Calderon 2020). These same years have seen undocumented mothers in Georgia rising to the forefront of struggles against these revamped deportation regimes. According to a report published by the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (2017, 7), the traumatic experience of being arrested and detained by ICE contributed to an emerging sense of "sisterhood" among these "*luchadoras*" (fighters), who have started to organize with the help of their "babysitters, best friends, sisters, and daughters" (Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights 2017, 7) to get out of detention and take care of each other's children.

Taking this broader context into account, this piece has followed a group of legally precarious Latina women in the process of building networks of care and solidarity *beyond* these exceptional circumstances, through everyday acts of m(other)work that spanned across domestic and institutional spaces. I specifically focussed on education to trace how women took up volunteering and paid positions inside their children's schools. These experiences helped them feel empowered against racism and illegalization, and eventually became the basis for broader forms of community advocacy. Through this process, women unsettled hegemonic framings of "parental involvement" to foreground their culturally specific mothering practices and pedagogies, which were both shaped by their migratory journeys and responding to legal and institutional violence (Caballero et al. 2019, 10; Vélez 2019).

These modalities of involvement, I argue, should be supported and recognized by schools in ways that go beyond simply expecting Latina mothers to perform volunteer labor to the benefit of institutions that fail their children. Whatever their legal status, social and educational background, migrant parents should be put in the condition of shaping initiatives that address educational inequality, such as by joining school boards and participating in decisions about resource allocation, the redrawing of attendance zones, and so on. As I show elsewhere (Lanari 2022a), Latinx-led organizations and community advocates can also play a key role in encouraging parents to speak up and demand institutional change.

As an intersectional concept that bridges social and emotional, public and private spheres, m(other)work lends itself especially well to theorizing Latina women's resistance to the far-reaching effects of everyday racism and legal precarity. Latinx educational ethnographers have shown how school involvement can become an avenue for migrant parents to build networks of solidarity and advance right claims based on their shared experiences of marginalization. Future research should explore how similar dynamics emerge in new immigrant destinations, articulating with local regimes of immigration enforcement and entrenched patterns of educational inequality, while potentially feeding into broader immigrant rights struggles.

In particular, we should continue to attend to the gendered labor of transforming schools into spaces of sanctuary where experiences of migration, illegalization, and mothering across borders are integrated into new forms of collective agency. Mill Creek's garden represented one such counter-space, as Helena noted by pointing to small details in the surrounding environment: the grass freshly cut, the signs repainted, the flowers blooming. The garden's external appearance, she explained, spoke to Latina mothers' commitment to "rising above" discrimination to imagine a different future for themselves and their children. "Have you seen our school now?" she asked me, "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."

Ethics approval

Ethics approval for this research was granted by Northwestern University's Institutional Review Board on 03/06/15, study n. STU00201099, P.I. Prof. Micaela di Leonardo.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used to ensure participants' confidentiality. Names of places and other identifiers have also been removed.
2. I use the term Latina to reflect my interlocutors' own self-identification and recognize the gendered nature of their reproductive and care labor. However, I employ the gender-inclusive term Latinx when referring more broadly to the experiences of US Latino/a populations.
3. However, see Márquez (2019) for how this term elides the experiences of Afro-Latinxs and persisting legacies of Jim Crow in the US South.
4. With 287(g), the Department of Homeland Security entrusts certain state and local law enforcement authorities to act as federal immigration agents ("The 287(g) Program" 2012). Secure Communities is designed to facilitate the identification of people held in US jails who are deportable under immigration law ("Secure Communities" 2011).
5. Along with H.B.87, other laws contributed to unleashing a new era of anti-immigrant policing in Georgia, namely S.B.170, which prohibited undocumented migrants from obtaining a driver license; and S.B. 350, which criminalized minor traffic offenses. Georgia's H.B. 87 also required businesses with more than ten employees to check if their employees are eligible to work legally in the United States, thus limiting job opportunities for many of my interlocutors.
6. Both this manuscript and the publication "Speaking Up, Rising Above" (Lanari 2022a) are drawn from the same set of participant data and the same field research.
7. Interviews conducted in Spanish were translated for the purpose of citation in the text.

8. Signed by Obama in 2012 and reinstated in 2020 after coming under attack during the Trump presidency, DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) grants temporary legal status and protection from deportation to certain categories of undocumented migrants who came to the US as children.
9. These claims are supported by interviews conducted with one city councilor and with white parents who took part in the redistricting meetings. According to a recent study by the Urban Institute (2021) the boundaries between the attendance zones of the two schools are among the most racially unequal in Atlanta.
10. While the community is majority-white, 72% of its public school students are from minority backgrounds.
11. The source of the quote has been removed to ensure confidentiality.
12. Akin to school boards, school governance councils include teachers, parents, and community members and serve an advisory function related to the school's management. This example is especially significant given the role that school boards often play in delegitimizing migrant parents and excluding them from decision-making processes (Manzo and Deeb-Sossa 2018).

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