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## The Transformation of Self in Everyday Life: How Undocumented Latino Youth Perform Citizenship

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The Transformation of Self in Everyday Life:  
How Undocumented Latino Youth Perform Citizenship

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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To Red Hook ESL, for teaching me why this is important

To my new friends and allies in Georgia, for inspiring me

To my friends, professors, and advisors, for supporting me in everything I decided to do

To my family, for bringing me to this country so that I *too* could have a better life

Thank you.

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this extended case study is to determine what institutional, social and cultural factors contribute to undocumented Latino youth identity formation. Based on one month of qualitative interviews and participant observation at Peachtree University, a modern day freedom school for undocumented youth in Georgia, I examine how undocumented Latino youth identity evolves within state and societal pressures, and the formation of a commitment to activism through these youths' experiences. Taken as a whole, this study traces the transformation undocumented Latino youth make from a position of social and political exclusion to actively claiming rights, recognition, and inclusion in the public sphere. Furthermore, this study examines post-national conceptions of citizenship and human rights. Through political activity and the formation of a collective identity, undocumented Latino youth at Peachtree University critique the limits of citizenship as state membership through the construction of a post-national political community in which they perform citizenship as an identity.

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## INTRODUCTION:

### WELCOME TO PEACHTREE UNIVERSITY

It's a typical first day of school. I sit in the classroom, watching as the students slowly trickle in and exchange glances with one another. Some students walk in confidently, taking their seats and smirking at their friends sitting across the circle from them. Others walk in with the same wide-eyed overwhelmed expression that every new student experiences as they walk into a room full of unknown peers on the first day of school. Students who know each other quietly chat while the professor prepares her materials at the front of the room. The chatter dies down, and a buzzing excitement fills the air.

Professor M turns around, widely grinning at all the new and returned faces, "Welcome to a new semester at Peachtree U! Let's begin by going around and introducing ourselves. Could you please say your name, what high school you went to and what you're excited about for this semester?"

Students begin to stand up and nervously introduce themselves. As each returning student speaks, they make the point of letting the new students know that they should feel free to approach them if they need help with anything, or have any questions. As one new student introduces himself, he mentions he is currently taking online classes, but wanted to come to Peachtree U to get a feel for the "real" college classroom experience.

Professor M asks, "If you don't mind me asking, can you tell me your status?"

The new student quickly blurts without hesitating, "Yeah, illegal. I'm illegal."

This is followed by an awkward pause. "Uh, no you're not," says Professor M with an

awkwardly tense grin, "You're undocumented." The room fills with voices as other students chime in with the same enthusiastic supportive response, "Yeah! You're undocumented!"

Peachtree University (PTU) is not your typical school: it is a freedom school for undocumented students, founded on the belief that “no human being is illegal.” At PTU, students learn that the term “illegal,” is not a synonym for “undocumented,” but a stigmatized term tied into the historical constructions of race, criminality, and citizenship in the U.S (Soltis 2015). PTU’s mission statement is, “to empower undocumented youth and fulfill their human right to education.” Modeled after the Southern Freedom schools of the Civil Rights Movement, the tuition-free non-accredited school provides college level classes, scholarship assistance, and movement leadership training to undocumented students in Georgia. PTU first opened its doors in 2011, in response to two new discriminatory policies in education designed to deny undocumented students admission to select public universities and access to in-state tuition. In the freedom school tradition, the creation of PTU was a symbolic act of civil disobedience. In bringing undocumented students together in a space to learn, it symbolized undocumented student solidarity, equality in education, and an act of resistance against the discriminatory policies implemented by the state of Georgia (Peña 2012).

The circumstances undocumented students face in Georgia today represent only a part of the much greater, yet widely untold, story of undocumented immigration in the United States. Since 1965, there has been a dramatic increase in immigration from Latin America, as the Latino population living in the U.S has risen from 4% in 1965 to 18% in 2015 (“Pew Research Center” 2015). Today, Latinos are not only the largest minority ethnic population in the U.S., but are also the largest undocumented population (De Genova 2004). There are approximately 11.3 million



undocumented people living in the U.S., 77% of whom are Latino (Passel and Lopez 2012; Passel and Cohn 2015). Additionally, the number of undocumented adults who have been living in the U.S. for at least a decade has nearly doubled (Passel and Cohn 2015). The population remains relatively young, as approximately 4.4 million of the undocumented population are under the age of 30 (Passel and Lopez 2012).

As of 2011, there were 2.1 million undocumented youth living in the U.S. since childhood, at least one million of whom have now entered adulthood (Gonzales 2011). “Undocumented youth” refers to the population of young people who came to the U.S. without authorization before the age of fourteen, most often accompanied by their parents. This population has become known as the 1.5 generation, to categorize the experience of being born in a different country than the one they were raised in (Portes and Rumbaut 2006). As a result of the U.S. Supreme Court case *Plyer vs. Doe* (1982) decision, undocumented immigrant children were granted the right to receive K-12 public school education (Gonzales 2011). Consequently, the 1.5 generation learn English, attend public school, and are socialized along side their American peers. Many undocumented students are unaware of their immigration status until they attempt to apply for a job, a driver’s license, or financial aid for college. While some states now permit undocumented students to attend college, not having a social security number denies them access to financial aid in most states. Given the current state of the U.S. economy, educational attainment has become crucial for upward social mobility. Each year, approximately 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school (Gonzales 2007) only to be faced with a transition into uncertain futures (Gonzales and Chavez 2012).

For the purposes of this study, I utilize De Genova's (2004) definition of "illegality" which is: "a specifically *spatialized* socio-political condition. 'Illegality' is lived through a palpable sense of deportability—the possibility of being removed from the space of the US nation-state" (161). In addition, "illegality" has become intertwined with the racialization of Latinos, as it has historically functioned as a socio-political construction used by the state to maintain Latino migrant vulnerability through their deportability (De Genova 2004:161). Today, the term "illegal alien," dehumanizes and racializes Latinos to be foreign trespassing criminals, attempting to corrupt the nation-state from within (De Genova 2004:162).

Thus, undocumented students are not only confronted with legal and socioeconomic barriers to their future aspirations, but are faced with the transition into "illegality." All of these factors combined take a great emotional toll on individuals (Abrego 2006; Gonzales 2007; Gonzales 2011; Gonzales and Chavez 2012). Yet despite the endless barriers they are confronted with, undocumented youth across the country are mobilizing for social change. Since the introduction of the DREAM Act in 2001, the undocumented youth movement has transformed from a campaign to gain residency status into the demand for human rights and citizenship within the country they call home (Nicholls 2013; Costanza-Chock 2014).

First proposed in 2001, the DREAM Act would provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented youth who met certain requirements. For eligibility, one must (1) have entered the U.S. before the age of 16 and remained in the U.S. for a minimum of 5 years; (2) be a person of good moral character with no criminal conviction under federal or state law; (3) earned a high school diploma or GED; (4) have been enrolled in a college or serving in the military; (5) and be under the age of thirty ("Congress.gov" 2010). Essentially, to be eligible for the DREAM Act

undocumented youth would have to prove that they identified as “American.” While the federal act failed to pass, it mobilized undocumented youth across the country who became known as the DREAMers. Undocumented youth activists were successful in getting DREAM Act legislations passed in many states (Nicholls 2013; Nicholls and Fiorito 2014).

The mobilization of undocumented youth also worked to pressure the Obama administration into passing the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012. While DACA does not provide a pathway to citizenship, it provides a temporary 2 year relief from deportation, for undocumented youth who meet the qualifications (Nicholls and Fiorito 2014). On November 20, 2014 Obama took executive action by expanding the DACA program and announcing that the U.S. would no longer deport unauthorized parents of U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents (LPRs) through the introduction of Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA). Obama’s executive action would have provided temporary relief to approximately 405 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. However, due to a federal district court in Texas issuing an order to block Obama’s executive order from proceeding, DAPA and the expanded DACA programs are currently on hold (“National Immigration Law Center” 2014). Despite this setback, the passage of DACA created a legal and political precedent, bringing attention and recognition to the precarious position that undocumented youth (Nicholls and Fiorito 2014), and the entire undocumented community find themselves in across the U.S.

Many Americans still strongly oppose any immigration reform that would grant amnesty or a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. This is due to the current “illegal” framing of the immigration debate, in which undocumented immigrants are labeled as the root of

the problem and the government is at fault for failure to control the issue. This construction is reinforced and perpetuated throughout the media and in public discourse, in which undocumented immigrants are assumed to steal jobs, lower wages, live off of public benefits without paying taxes, and weaken the country's national identity and security (Drachman 2008; Pérez Huber 2009). As a result of this framing, the larger issue of what is causing hundreds of thousands of people to leave their homes to come to the United States has been largely unaddressed (Pérez Huber 2009). Consequently, opposition to passage of the DREAM Act legislation and the broader contemporary immigrant rights movement stems from a long history of nativist racialized discourse and exclusionary immigration policies, particularly towards Latino immigrants.

When I first began this study, I thought I would be able to portray an accurate representation of the experience of undocumented youth within the movement across the U.S. The further I delved into my research, however, I began to discover that there is not *one* undocumented youth movement but *multiple*. The creation of the DREAM Act mobilized localized undocumented youth movements across individual states. Each undocumented youth movement is dependent on the socio-political and historical context in which the movement takes place. I chose to focus my research on the experience of undocumented students in activism in the state of Georgia, as Georgia has some of the most restrictive anti-immigrant policies in the U.S. towards undocumented students (Shahshahani and Washington 2013).

The undocumented student movement fully mobilized in Georgia after an undocumented student who attended Kennesaw State University (KSU) was arrested by campus police for a traffic violation and the lack of a driver's license. When the police discovered she was

undocumented, she was immediately transferred to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and deportation proceedings began to return her to Mexico. Following this event, student demonstrators and immigrant rights groups held protests at the Georgia capital in outrage, and the president of KSU wrote a letter to the Alabama detention center to plead for her release. In response, ICE permitted the undocumented student a one-year deferral in order to complete her senior year at KSU (Peña 2012; Muñoz, et al. 2014; Soltis 2015).

This case sparked a great deal of political controversy over undocumented students in Georgia. While immigrant rights activists used the case to advocate for the passage of the DREAM Act, anti-immigrant activists and Republican lawmakers advocated for more restrictive policies in higher education. They argued that by permitting undocumented students to attend public state universities and pay in-state tuition, they were taking advantage of tax payers money and taking away seats in the classroom from *deserving* citizens (Peña 2012; Muñoz, et al. 2014; Soltis 2015). This plays into the criminality discourse of undocumented immigrants “taking from citizens,” as the assumption was that, “undocumented students were taking the seats of citizens in the public university system” (Peña 2012:246). To address the publics’ concerns, the Georgia Board of Regents implemented the Residency Verification Committee to analyze the effect of undocumented students on public state universities. The committee determined that out of the 310,000 students enrolled in the University System of Georgia, only 501 students were undocumented, and only 27 students were enrolled in the state’s top five public universities. It was further determined that all 501 undocumented students paid out of state tuition to attend university and were thus subsidizing their documented peers education (Shahshahani and Washington 2013; Soltis 2015).

Despite the committee's findings, in 2011 the Board of Regents implemented Policy 4.1.6., which bans undocumented students from admission to the top five most competitive public universities in Georgia; and Policy 4.3.4., which denies undocumented students in-state tuition. Currently, 21 states permit undocumented students to receive in-state tuition. Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina are the only states with admission bans to public universities, and Georgia happens to be the only state with a ban on select public universities and colleges (Soltis 2015). Following the implementation of these three policies, an immigrant rights movement was born in Georgia. Four different social justice organizations popped up across the state of Georgia fighting for the rights of undocumented youth to higher education (Peña 2012), one of these being the site of my research, Peachtree University.

### **Rationale of Study**

*So I went from a high school graduate class of 2015 to an undocumented student activist getting arrested (Facebook post, April 5, 2016).*

This was a recent Facebook post from one of the PTU students that came up on my news feed. Below the post are two photos. The first photo is of a young Latina woman dressed in a white cap and gown embracing friends and family. The second photo is of this same young woman, her back to the camera, right arm held high in defiance, as she is escorted by two cops into a police van. In essence, the juxtaposition of these two photos lies at the crux of my research. How did this young woman's identity transform from "just-graduated-high-school-student" to "undocumented student activist" over the course of one year?

Following in the footsteps of the DREAM Act, a growing body of literature has developed around undocumented youth activism (Seif 2011; Nicholls 2013; Costanza-Chock

2014; Nicholls and Fiorito 2014; Weber-Shirk 2015; Gonzales 2015), considering the effects of undocumented youth on the immigrant rights movement. Much of the literature focuses on how the escalating visibility of undocumented youth in the public sphere has come to challenge dominant conceptions of undocumented immigrant criminality. However, in focusing on undocumented youth activism as a new socio-political phenomena, the literature largely fails to address how a socially stigmatized and politically excluded group of noncitizens is able to mobilize to make claims to rights and inclusion in the public sphere. In the rare cases where this is addressed, the literature tends to overcompensate for the amount of agency undocumented youth “naturally,” possess. For example, Seif (2011) claims that undocumented youth become mobilized into activism out of a sense of responsibility to help their parents who made sacrifices to bring them to the U.S. I assert that such a generalization fails to account for the role of institutional, social, and cultural factors that shape undocumented youth identity and their consequent involvement in activism.

For the purposes of this study, I spent 5 weeks conducting ethnographic fieldwork with undocumented Latino students at Peachtree University, within the anti-immigrant climate of Georgia. In this extended case study, I examine: a) how the formation of identity among these youth evolves in the context of state and societal pressures, and b) the formation of a commitment to activism through the processes experienced at PTU.

On a theoretical level, this study further contributes to the discussion on post-national notions of citizenship and human rights. In its most broad definition, citizenship can be defined as “membership in a political community” (Joppke 2010:3; Román 2010). In this, citizenship has been conceptualized as a status, a set of rights, and an identity. While citizenship as “status” and

“rights” has become synonymous with state membership; citizenship as “identity” represents how individuals behave, act, and perceive themselves to be part of a political community (Joppke 2010). The construction of the nation-state led citizenship to be understood solely as state membership, as it serves the interests of the state to have an institutionalized form of state membership (Sassen 2002). However, with the onset of globalization and the human rights regime, traditional notions of citizenship as state membership have been highly criticized as limited and exclusionary, ignoring forms of civic participation and collective belonging. This issue is especially pertinent to noncitizens who reside within the nation-state but lack access to formal membership (Getrich 2008; Jayal 2013).

To address this, traditional notions of citizenship are being re-imagined, as scholars have begun to explore citizenship through “sites, settings, and forms that are not those of nation and state” (Clarke et al. 2014:105). Conceptions of post-national citizenship arose from the proliferation of practices and experiences associated with collective cultural identities and political and civic participation that are no longer confined within the boundaries of the nation-state. The human rights regime has further strengthened conceptions of post-national citizenship through international norms, discourse, and theory that suggest that membership in a political community can exist outside or across nation-state borders (Bosniak 2001; Sassen 2002). In this study, I consider how, though the formation of a collective identity and political participation at PTU, undocumented Latino youth perform citizenship as an “identity” within a political community that is not bounded by the nation-state.



## Chapter Overview

To organize this extended case study I have divided it into four chapters. I begin by providing the context of my study, followed by three empirical chapters that highlight undocumented Latino youths' identity transformation from "illegal" to "undocumented student," to "undocumented activist."

In Chapter 1, I present the context of my study, including my literature review, theoretical framework, and methodology. In the literature review, I synthesize the literature on exclusionary immigration policies and practices that contributed to the construction of a racialized discourse of "illegality" in the U.S., which has negatively impacted the lives of undocumented immigrants. I go on to discuss the theoretical literature on social movements as it relates to historical Latino movements, the contemporary immigrant rights movement, and undocumented youth activism. Following this, I present my theoretical framework, which incorporates Goffman's work on identity formation (1959; 1963) within the broader theoretical concept of Latino cultural citizenship. I conclude with a description of my methodology.

Chapter 2 examines the construction of undocumented Latino youth "illegality," in the context of state and societal pressures. I analyze how institutional, cultural, and social factors influence undocumented Latino youth identity from childhood through adolescence. My findings highlight the formation and performance of a distinct "Latino" social identity that represents both a "reactive identity," due to the cultural stigma and exclusion they face in mainstream society; and an "in-between" cultural identity in the absence of national belonging. As undocumented Latino youth do not feel a sense of national belonging to either nation, their Latino identity provides them with a sense of cultural belonging. Next, I examine the formation and

performance of a stigmatized “illegal” identity amongst undocumented Latino youth. I emphasize the internalization of a “discreditable” stigma that leads to their performance of “illegal.”

In Chapter 3, I explore the identity formation of undocumented Latino students at PTU, a school designed to empower undocumented students into “agents for social change.” I begin by presenting a brief historical overview of freedom school pedagogy as it relates to the pedagogy used at PTU. I go on to discuss how the students became involved with the school, and the subsequent formation of a collective identity that worked to empower students. Next, I analyze the classroom environment, focusing on how the incorporation of culturally relevant curricula and a focus on self-initiative empowered the students, leading to the formation of critical consciousness. As a result, the students were able to reject their “illegal” identity, to perform the role of “undocumented student” as empowered and critical thinkers, motivated to get involved in undocumented student activism. This chapter also highlights the performance of cultural citizenship, as the students form a collective identity and claim educational space for themselves.

In Chapter 4, my findings refute Seif’s (2011) claim that undocumented Latino youth are motivated into activism due to a responsibility they feel towards their families and communities. Rather, I argue that PTU students develop a commitment to activism through their experiences at PTU. To begin, I highlight how the students’ initial empowering experiences in activism led them to realize that they possessed agency and were capable of overcoming their fears. I move on to discuss the influence of collective identity in PTU student activism, emphasizing that the presence of peers helped to maintain enthusiasm and support, which lowered students’ sense of fear in order to perform the role of “activist.” The shared experience in activism further

strengthened the students' sense of community, leading to feelings of responsibility to continue activism. I end with an analysis of how students perform the role of "activist" as self-driven individuals, determined to stand up for their communities. In sum, this chapter illustrates the performance of cultural citizenship as a political activity.

To conclude, I present a summary of my argument and findings from my chapter analyses. In this I illustrate how the formation of identity among undocumented Latino youth evolves in the context of state and societal pressures, and how a commitment to activism is constructed through their experiences at PTU. Finally, I connect theories on post-national citizenship and human rights to my empirical case study to illuminate how undocumented Latino youth perform citizenship as an "identity," through the formation of a post-national political community.

## **CHAPTER 1:**

### **CONTEXT OF STUDY**

This chapter synthesizes different bodies of literature to provide the historical and socio-political context of undocumented Latino presence in the United States. I begin with a historical overview of the exclusionary immigration policies, practices, and nativist racialized discourse that created the hostile environment that undocumented Latino youth find themselves in today. Next, I explore theory on social movements and collective identity formation in connection to historical Latino social movements that fought for recognition within society. I then relate the historical movements to literature on the contemporary immigrant rights movement and undocumented youth activism. I go on to present my theoretical framework, in which I incorporate Goffman's work on stigma(1963) and identity performance(1959) into the broader concept of cultural citizenship. Lastly, I include a methodology section, in which I describe my research site, participants, and methods.

#### **Literature Review**

##### ***Exclusionary Policies and Practices***

Nativism and xenophobia has existed since the beginning of U.S. history. Nativism represents a form of nationalism, in which people fears the effects of foreign influence on American identity and culture (Hingham 2002). Within nativist discourse, there is an assumption that immigrants will weaken national unity by refusing to assimilate to American society and thus transform American culture into something entirely different. Foley (2014) writes, "deep somewhere in the American national psyche resides an almost primal fear that immigrants will continue to come in such numbers that America will be transformed into something radically

different, alien, and fundamentally un-American”(6). Since the conquests of the Mexican War, this form of nativism and xenophobia was especially directed towards Mexicans. It was also influenced to some extent by the color-based racism that originated in the American South during and since slavery (Foley 2014).

To fully consider the circumstances that shape the experiences of undocumented Latino immigrants in society today, it is important to recognize that they have not experienced the assimilation narrative of white European immigrants, in which economic success was largely based off of work ethic. Instead, undocumented Latino immigrants must be situated within the process of racial formation in the U.S., where historical constructions of race, criminality, and citizenship, have largely constructed their position within the social structure of society (Soltis 2015). The following section provides a brief historical and contemporary overview of exclusionary immigration policies and practices directed towards Latino immigrants, to illustrate the condition of “illegality” that undocumented Latino immigrants are faced with today.

In the aftermath of the Mexican American War (1848), the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo granted the U.S. nearly half of Mexico’s territory, forcing Mexicans who resided on the territory to leave or renounce their Mexican citizenship for U.S. citizenship (Cisneros 2014; Foley 2014). At the time, naturalization as an American citizen was viable only to immigrants from Europe. However, under the terms of the Treaty, the U.S. formally granted full citizenship to all Mexicans who chose to remain in the conquered lands. Realities on the ground were another matter. As Anglos settled in the newly acquired territory, cultural tensions and discrimination increased (Cobas et al. 2009; Cisneros and Watson 2014). Mexicans became racially stereotyped as inferior, characterized to be “backward, lazy, cowardly, fatalistic, superstitious, violent,

dangerous, and cruel” (Cobas et al. 2009:5). Conditions at least reminiscent of the Jim Crow South existed in some places, and many Mexican Americans experienced a racialized second class citizenship.

In the 1920s, the exclusionary laws against Asian immigrants and the Quota Laws that drastically reduced the number of southern and eastern Europeans allowed into the country left the Mexican migrants untouched. When it came to the Southwest, the agricultural interests in Congress prevailed over the restrictionists. Rather, Mexican migrants were managed through fluctuating visa requirements and border control policies, placing them in an uncertain and vulnerable legal position within U.S. borders. Following this came the Great Depression, in which there was a repatriation of 400,000 Mexican-born and Mexican Americans, many of whom were U.S. citizens (Ngai 2004; Foley 2014). Not long after, the demand for laborers increased again during WWI and WWII, which led to the creation of the *bracero* program. The program allowed up to 100,000 Mexicans to work in the U.S. every year, but also resulted in increased unauthorized permanent settlement. Then in 1954, Operation Wetback was implemented as an immigration enforcement effort under President Eisenhower, resulting in mass deportations. Similar to the repatriations of the 1930s however, many Mexican American citizens were abducted and approximately two million Mexicans were deported. Following this, the demand for labor increased once again, and the *bracero* program was reinstated until it was terminated in 1964. The contemporary H-2 guest worker program follows a similar model to the past *bracero* program (Gonzalez 2000; Foley 2014).

During the first half of the twentieth century, American found itself stuck between nativist discourse and a demand for labor; illustrated U.S. immigration practices that reflected

this internal conflict of priorities. In practice, the result tended to be a policy of recruiting temporary Mexican labor (Foley 2014). Today, the contradictory immigration practices of the past have been replaced with a militarization of the border. For the most part, as in the past, it is the Mexicans who are affected, however a smaller fraction of Central American migrants are part of the same migration patterns and experience the same undocumented status and criminalization.

While the Immigration Act of 1965 was designed to restrict migration from Latin America, it had the unintended effect of increasing unauthorized immigration due to the ongoing demand for labor (De Genova 2004; Passel 2011). Moreover, the heightened border security in the 1990s made it more dangerous for migrant workers to make the trip back and forth, causing many migrants to decide to settle permanently in the U.S., and bring their families with them (Gonzales 2011). From the 1980s through today, Americans have continued to advocate for stricter border control and immigration reform. Not unlike Operation Wetback, the 1990s were characterized by a number of restrictive operations: Operation Gatekeeper (California, 1994), Operation Hold-the-Line (Texas, 1994), and Operation Safeguard (Arizona, 1999). All of these operations functioned to militarize the border between Mexico and the U.S. in order to secure the borders from unauthorized crossings (Foley 2014).

Some contemporary state legislations are also aimed at criminalizing the undocumented, such as California's Proposition 187 (1994), Arizona's Senate Bill 1070 (2010), and Georgia's House Bill 87 (2011)—modeled after Arizona's SB 1070. Collectively, these bills have created a hostile and unwelcome environment that racializes all Latinos. Proposition 187 was designed to deny undocumented immigrants state welfare, education, and medical services. Arizona's bill SB

1070 and Georgia's HB 87, permit police to arrest suspected undocumented immigrants and turn them into ICE. These bills were highly criticized as legal permission for racial profiling, as it is unclear how else "reasonable suspicion of immigrant status," would be determined ("National Conference of State Legislatures" 2010; Foley 2014). Recently, Georgia put forth three new anti-immigrant bills: SB 6, which would take away driver licenses from all DACA recipients; SR 675, which declares English the official language of the state; and HB 781, which would prohibit non-U.S. citizens from participating in local and state governing boards ("Asian Americans Advancing Justice" 2016). Although all of these legislations do not overtly state that they are targeting Latinos, through their focus on language acquisition, control of "illegal" immigration, and covert racial-profiling, it is evident that they aim to exclude Latinos from society.

### ***Construction of "Illegality"***

To understand the nativist racialized discourse that exists behind these exclusionary policies and practices, this study delves into scholarship on the construction of undocumented Latino "illegality." Latinos are racialized on the basis of their national origin and assumed "illegality." Perceived "illegality" does not solely racialize undocumented Latinos, but places all Latinos at a relative social disadvantage in which they are viewed as foreign and inferior within the nation (Cobas et al. 2009; Chavez 2013; Ponce 2014). Pérez Huber (2009) claims that racialized "illegality" is rooted in a history of "racist nativism," in which she describes how the U.S. has maintained a legacy of perceiving whites as natives and non-whites as non-natives. She writes, "[The] legacy of racism rooted in notions of white supremacy has created negative constructions of undocumented immigrants historically and Latina/o undocumented immigrants in the contemporary moment" (705). The racialization of Latinos as "illegal aliens," is rooted in



exclusionary nativist discourses and practices throughout history that are continuously reproduced within society (Ponce 2014).

The border itself has been theorized as a “spectacle,” or symbolic boundary, that constructs the divide between those who belong and those who do not. This is reflected in the heightened militarized security and surveillance at the border and through mass deportations (De Genova 2004; Cisneros 2014; Chávez, Lavariega Monforti, Michelson 2015; Gonzales 2015). Ngai (2004) writes, “Immigration restriction produced the illegal alien as a new legal and political subject, whose inclusion within the nation was simultaneously a social reality and a legal impossibility—subject barred from citizenship without rights” (4). In this, Ngai references how the U.S. economy relies on migrant labor while simultaneously denying them citizenship and conducting mass deportations.

Furthermore, the construction of Latino migrants as “illegal” provides the state with a mechanism for asserting power and control over the population (De Genova 2004; Ponce 2014). De Genova (2004) asserts that Latino migrants are racialized as “aliens,” so that their “deportability” can maintain Latino migrant vulnerability and inferiority in society (161). From this perspective, Latino “illegality” can be viewed as a governing technology that allows the state to police those considered to be an illegitimate part of the nation. Oboler (2006) defines this as “tolerated illegality,” as she suggests that the U.S. does not actually want to rid the population of undocumented immigrants, but aims to include them conditionally as a labor force without rights (Oboler 2006:15; Negrón-Gonzales 2015).

Moreover, Hing’s (2006) conception of “de-Americanization” describes how racial profiling is used by state and non-state actors to define what characteristics are *non*-American.

He states, “De-Americanization is not simply xenophobia because more than fear of foreigners is at work. This is a brand of nativism cloaked in a Eurocentric sense of America that combines hate and racial profiling” (163). Supporting this, Chomsky (2014) asserts that contemporary intolerance towards overt racial discrimination has resulted in the legalization of racial discrimination through the criminalization of Latinos.

In examining exclusionary immigration policies and nativist racialized discourse, it becomes apparent why the DREAM Act, as well as expanded DACA and DAPA, have yet to pass. Contemporary legal framings are being used to uphold historically-rooted constructions of difference. Having explored how undocumented immigrants are constructed by society, this literature review shifts focus towards relevant literature on social movement and collective identity formation in relation to undocumented student activism.

### ***Social Movements and Collective Identity***

A social movement can be described as an organized collective action that challenges authority, or cultural beliefs and ideologies, through non-institutional channels (Goodwin and Jasper 2003). New social movement theory suggests that contemporary post-industrial social movements emphasize identity politics in order to gain public recognition of a group’s collective identity and values (Gamson 1990; Pichardo 1997). Gamson (1990) asserts that collective identity, the process of creating a groups’ self-definition, must be mobilized within a movement in order to maintain participant involvement. Supporting this, Castells (2012) outlines this process through what he calls, “emotional mobilization.” Emotional mobilization occurs when an event causes multiple individuals to experience outrage and fear, leading to the formation of a collective group. In this, collective identity is formed through shared experiences, lowering

individuals' sense of fear. This allows for collective mobilization to take place, as the collective group experiences feelings of enthusiasm and hope for social change.

Collective identity can also be deployed within social movements. Bernstein (1997) outlines three different forms of identity deployment within social movements: 1) *Identity for empowerment* is the creation of collective identity and the belief or sentiment that collective mobilization is possible; 2) *identity as goal* of collective action describes how activism can either challenge stigmatized identities or seek recognition for new identities; and 3) *identity as strategy*, where identity deployment can exist to confront the dominant societal and cultural values or challenge the dominant culture's perception of a minority. Thus, it becomes apparent that the role of collective identity is vital to the functioning of social movements.

Having outlined some of the more relevant theories on contemporary social movements, collective identity formation and deployment, I will contextualize the theories through the Chicano movement of the 1960s, the immigrant rights protests of 2006, and the undocumented youth movement. In each case, a collective identity was formed and deployed to seek rights and inclusion within an exclusionary environment.

The undocumented student struggle for rights and inclusion within the nation reflects a similar historical struggle by Latino citizens during the Civil Rights era. The historic mobilization of Latinos in the U.S. was in response to many of the same issues of discrimination and marginalization that undocumented students face today. Beginning in the 1950s through the late 1960s, marginalized immigrant communities inspired by the Civil Rights movement began to mobilize around social and political issues to fight for self-determination and minority rights (Foley 2014; Mora 2014).

In the Southwest, the Chicano movement formed in response to racist stereotypes and discrimination against Mexican Americans in housing, employment, and segregation in public schools. Mexican Americans did not want their identity to be defined by Anglo Americans but wanted to establish a unique Chicano identity as American citizens (Mora 2014). Prominent leaders of the Chicano movement such as Cesar Chavez, Reles Tijerina, Hector Garcia, and Rodolfo Gonzales, used a combination of militant and nonviolent strategies to fight for human dignity and civil rights (Foley 2014).

Chicano youth also played an active role in the movement. Chicano student activists formed a variety of prominent youth organizations such as the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) and United Mexican American Students (UMAS). These groups came together at The National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference to form a coalition called el Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA). MEChA became a national Chicano student organization that worked to advocate for Chicano representation on college campuses. Through their work with MeCha, Chicano activist youth engaged in various direct actions, like mass walkouts from high schools, sit-ins, and protests to fight for Chicano student rights and representation in schools. Among the more militant groups, the Brown Berets engaged in radical and nationalistic strategies inspired by the Black Power movement (Foley 2014).

Contributing to the movement, Puerto Ricans mobilized in the Northwest because they faced many of the same problems as Mexican Americans; including urban poverty, segregation, discrimination from employment and housing and racial stereotypes. Puerto Rican communities mobilized and formed civil rights organizations, especially within the student sector of the population. One of the best known groups, The Young Lords Party, was also inspired by black

nationalism. It protested and campaigned against impoverished conditions of inner city neighborhoods as well as for Puerto Rican self-determination. The Young Lords engaged in direct action and occupations of public spaces to advocate for urban renewal and an expansion of public social services for those living in poverty (Foley 2014; Mora 2014).

While student activism was rampant during the late 1960s in both the Chicano movement and Young Lords Party, by the 1970s Spanish speaking communities began to lose hope in effecting policy change through the streets and began to turn to the courts to enact change. Latinos shifted their strategy towards working *within* the power structure of mainstream society, as opposed to the radical *external* strategies previously used. As a result of their ongoing fight for recognition, Hispanic pan-ethnic identity was officially recognized by the federal government in 1980 and the “Hispanic” category was added to the census. Thus, disassembled Latin American immigrant communities including Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans, were acknowledged as a minority pan-ethnic identity with shared experiences, characteristics of language, origin, ethnicity, and culture, opening up the potential for collective mobilization across shared experiences of exclusion. Overall, the strategies and discourses used in the pan-ethnic identity movements of the 1960s, as well as the influential role of students, laid the groundwork for the contemporary immigrant rights movement.

During the spring of 2006, 3.5 to five million people mobilized on behalf of immigrant rights across the U.S. in protest of a federal anti-immigration bill, HR 4437. If passed, the bill would have increased restrictions on the undocumented, as well as criminalizing those who assisted them. The mobilizations took the form of mass demonstrations, marches, rallies, and school and labor walkouts. The mass mobilizations were the largest in U.S. history, earning the

title the 2006 *Mega Marchas* because the vast majority of demonstrators were Latino. The demonstrations consisted of undocumented immigrants and citizens who objected to the criminalization and dehumanization of immigrants (Bloemraad and Trost 2008; Barreto Manzano Ramírez, Rim 2009; Beltrán 2009; Gonzales 2009; Cisernos 2014). The 2006 *Mega Marchas* united a unique constituency, as most of the demonstrators had never engaged in protest before, and at least a quarter of the participants were estimated to be youth (Bloemraad and Trost 2008; Gonzales 2009:44).

Moreover, the demonstrators were not solely protesting the anti-immigration bill, but were claiming membership within the public sphere. Beltrán (2009) proposes that the mass demonstrations represented the formation of an immigrant *counter public*, a “relation of strangers defined by active participation rather than ascriptive belonging”(598). In this, Latino immigrants were able to confront nativist narratives of their “illegality.” Likewise, Sandoval (2008) suggests that the 2006 marches illustrated an act of *social* disobedience, as undocumented immigrants openly claimed their “illegality,” and demanded rights for non-citizens.

The *Mega Marchas* have further been conceived of as a “counter-hegemonic moment.” Gonzales (2009) argues that the mass demonstrations of Latino migrants and citizens shifted national discourse on migrants away from criminalization and towards humanization; briefly confronting the hegemonic structure of society. He proposes that this represents a counter-hegemonic *moment* and not a movement, as it was unsustainable. Although the mass demonstrations were successful in halting HR 4437, in the following years, anti-immigrant policies and practices were increasingly called for at the local and state level. That being said, the 2006 *Mega Marchas* demonstrated the potential to mobilize millions of Latinos and their allies in

solidarity and resistance across the nation, opening up the space for the undocumented students to step into the public sphere (Barreto et al. 2009; Gonzales 2009; Ponce 2014).

In the case of immigrant activism in the 1960s and the 2006 immigrant rights protests, mobilizing occurred in response to a catalyst that generated a collective response. Individuals were angry about the discrimination and exclusion they faced and consequently deployed their collective identity within the movements as both a *goal* and a *strategy*. The goal was to achieve recognition and rights, while the strategy was to assert their collective identity as different from the dominant culture's perception of who they were. Latinos, both citizens and undocumented, did not want to be seen as inferior or "illegal" through the eyes of the dominant culture; they wanted recognition as human beings.

A lot of the literature written on undocumented students primarily focuses on barriers to post-secondary education, patterns of assimilation, academic motivation, and emotional and mental health (Abrego 2006; Gonzales 2007; Gonzales 2011; Gonzales and Chavez 2012). While this scholarship is important in illustrating the challenges that undocumented students are confronted with, it has the tendency to present undocumented youth without agency. One of the objectives of this study is to counter this problem, by bringing to light the different forms of agency used by undocumented Latino youth.

While the factors that lead to one's participation in a social movement varies by context, the most common factors include the influence of family, friends, community, and lived experience. Participating in mass mobilizations like the immigrant rights protests of 2006 also influenced whether an individual would become more involved in activism in the future (Constanza-Chock 2014). Studies depict a direct correlation between political participation and

socio-economic status. Given that undocumented Latinos maintain a low socioeconomic status (level of education, income, and occupation) their high level of political participation in both the immigrant rights protests and the undocumented student movement is an anomaly.

Seif (2011) claims that immigrant youth exhibit higher levels of civic engagement because they are aware of their limited life chances, causing them to become motivated to be agents of change for themselves and their families. He suggests this is especially true of immigrant youth, who recognized that their parents made great sacrifices to offer them a better life in the U.S. Further, Seif argues that undocumented immigrant youth “retain a sense of community obligation that contrasts with the U.S. celebration of individualism and nuclear family” (72). The sense of community obligation that undocumented youth feel towards their families and the greater undocumented community may be based on a cultural upbringing that embraces family and community, more than the ideologies of individualism and the nuclear family that are prevalent in American society. However, other scholars such as Gonzales (2008) theorize that civic engagement amongst youth with low levels of human capital is motivated primarily by positive political socialization and mobilized through formal and informal networks.

The political socialization of undocumented youth has occurred through transmedia organizing tactics that include a combination of social media, face-to-face presentations, civil disobedience, and direct action campaigns to develop a broad-base of participation, greater visibility, and a strong sense of collective identity (Constanza-Chock 2014). Castells (2012) suggests that long-term social movement participation leads to the construction of shared “resistance identities,” or collective identity formation (Costanza-Chock 2014). This commonly



occurs through social media networks where undocumented youth converse about their shared experiences.

The undocumented student movement has made considerable shifts in framing since it began in 2001. Initially, the movement was built in association with organizations and institutions advocating for the passage of the DREAM Act. DREAM activist groups were primarily connected to high schools, universities, and nonprofit organizations that then expanded to form local, regional, and national networks. Some of the most prominent networks were United We Dream, The California DREAM Network, New York State Youth Leadership Council, Student Immigrant Movement in Massachusetts, and DreamActivist.org (Seif 2011; Nicholls 2013). While the networked organizations served to support and empower undocumented students, their main priority was to pass DREAM Act legislation. Undocumented students who advocated for the passage of the act were called “DREAMers,” they participated in training sessions that prepped them in strategies for advocacy. In essence, the organizations wanted to frame the “DREAMer” stories as a universal narrative that could be positively received by the public. Over time, this led to a division within the movement as many undocumented students accused the organizations of treating them as “puppets” (Nicholls 2013:94). By 2010, many undocumented student activists decided to disassociate themselves from the networked organizations in order to create an autonomous undocumented student movement.

The framing of the undocumented student movement shifted with the change in leadership, as the students were finally able to take ownership of their movement. When the movement first began to mobilize, the public discourse was focused on presenting the DREAMers as exceptional, hardworking youth, who deserved to become citizens. This framing

aimed to appeal to the public through the American Dream narrative, working to disassociate and humanize undocumented Latino youth away from the image of the “illegal” migrant worker. However, many undocumented students felt this to be exclude the majority of the undocumented community. It reinforced a division between deserving and undeserving immigrants, presenting a “bounded” image of the DREAMer that did not leave space for the inclusion of difference (Nicholls 2013; Nicholls and Fiorito 2014).

Consequently, the movement has since shifted it’s framing towards an all-inclusive “unbounded” framework, under the slogan, “Undocumented, Unapologetic, Unafraid.” The “unapologetic” framing is crucial in the current framing of the movement because it is a reaction to the criminality discourse. Undocumented youth distance themselves from prevailing opinion, making it clear that they refuse to accept blame or experience guilt for their presence in the U.S. (Nicholls 2013; Nicholls and Fiorito 2014). In embracing difference, the undocumented student movement has also discovered intersectionalities with the LGBTQ rights movement. The leadership of the movement disproportionately identifies as queer, and a parallel has been made between “coming out” as queer and “coming out” as undocumented. This has led to the creation of the term, “undocuqueer” as well as the national Coming Out of the Shadows Week ( Seif 2011; Nicholls 2013; Costanza- Chock 2014).

As a result of the shift in framing, undocumented students have become more engaged in civil disobedience tactics and *testimonios* in order to challenge the dominant discourses and framing of their “illegality.” Gonzales (2015) suggests that undocumented student activism represents a “counter-spectacle,” as it works to deconstruct the “spectacles” of society that hide social realities through the production of cultural images (94). Civil disobedience actions

continue to pop up across the country, in the form of sit-ins, protests, and mock graduations. Mock graduations gained a great deal of recognition, as undocumented students appropriated the cultural image of graduation caps and gowns to make a political statement about their uncertain futures (Nicholls 2013; Gonzales 2015).

In 2013, undocumented youth launched the Bring Them Home campaign, in which undocumented youth activists voluntarily left the U.S. in order to attempt to recross the border. Although ICE officials refused them entry, this act of civil disobedience signified a direct challenge to state power policing the border. The Bring Them Home campaign was enacted twice more, and in the third campaign a multigenerational group of undocumented people presented themselves at the U.S.-Mexico border. This final act made a clear statement that all undocumented people deserve rights, recognition, and human dignity.

Public *testimonios* have also become a prominent strategic tool used by the undocumented youth movement to contest dominant narratives. Originating from Latin American resistance movements, *testimonio* describes a practice of “telling one’s story in one’s own words in order to make meaning of it and reclaim its power” (Gonzales 2015:102). Undocumented students have specifically used *testimonio* to challenge the discourse that blames their parents for bringing their families to the U.S. Through the use of civil disobedience and *testimonio*, undocumented youth activists are shifting mainstream society’s perception of who undocumented people are (Gonzales 2015).

In many ways, the Chicano movement and the 2006 immigrant rights demonstrations set the precedent for the strategic identity deployment used in the undocumented youth movement. Similar to the self-determined construction of Chicano identity, and the humanization tactics in

the 2006 protests, undocumented students claim to be Americans *in spite* of their “illegal” presence.

Through an examination of the exclusionary immigration policies and anti-immigrant practices that have adversely impacted the lives of undocumented immigrants in the U.S., this literature review serves to provide historical and socio-political context to the life circumstances that undocumented Latino youth face in the U.S. today. By synthesizing the literature on Latino-based social movements, I illustrated how undocumented Latino youth are capable of constructing a voice for themselves in civil society, despite the many challenges they face.

### **Theoretical Framework**

First proposed by Rosaldo (1994), the concept of cultural citizenship developed to address the problematic nature of dominant ideology in society.

Too often social thought anchors its research in the vantage point of the dominant social group and thus reproduces the dominant ideology by studying subordinated groups as a ‘problem’ rather than as people with agency— with goals, perceptions, and purposes of their own (Flores and Benmayor 1997:37; Benmayor 2002:98).

Rosaldo defines cultural citizenship as “the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense” (402). He suggests that the lack of citizenship as rights and status does not limit the social and cultural value of the *performance* of citizenship. The notion that citizenship can be “performed,” is supported by Joppke’s (2010) definition of citizenship as “identity,” in which he claims that citizenship not only exists as a status and a set of rights, but that it can also be applied to how individuals behave and perceive themselves to be part of the national community.

Flores and Benmayor (1997)'s definition of cultural citizenship is: "a broad range of activities of everyday life through which Latinos and other groups claim space in society and eventually claim rights" (15). As a theoretical concept, cultural citizenship brings light to the failure of the institution of citizenship. It proposes that groups who have been excluded from formal citizenship are capable of making claims to identity, space, and rights, in spite of their excluded status. Criticism of cultural citizenship discusses its failure to address the influence of state power and regulation on immigrant minority groups. Ong (1996) expands the definition of cultural citizenship to state that it is: "a dual process of self-making and being made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society" (738).

For the purposes of this study, I define cultural citizenship as a *process of contestation*. Under this definition, excluded immigrant subjects are constructed by state and societal pressures, only to use their sense of cultural belonging to make claims to space and rights within the nation-state. Cultural citizenship provides a framework through which to view how undocumented Latino youth at PTU perform citizenship as an "identity," by claiming educational and political space for themselves in the public sphere. Further, in applying the concept of cultural citizenship to this study, I aim to draw attention to how undocumented Latino youth embody a form of post-national citizenship as both a "collective identity," and "political activity" (Clarke et al. 2014).

Cultural citizenship functions as a broad theoretical concept to explore the agency possessed by disenfranchised immigrant groups. However, it lacks the theoretical explanation as to how a marginalized immigrant group develops the ability to claim recognition, rights, and belonging within society, given the structural constraints of state power and civil society. To

address this, I incorporate Goffman's writing on identity performance (1959) and stigma (1963) into my analysis, to provide insight into how undocumented Latino youths' identity is transformed from a place of stigma into the performance of citizenship as an "identity."

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman constructs an analogy between socialization in everyday life and performance in theater. Goffman suggests that social interactions involve individual "actors" performing roles in front of an audience. The audience also performs a role in response, so that the social interaction serves to define a given situation or the "performance" being enacted. He claims that an individual's presentation of self before others acts to stimulate a particular response that affects how a situation is to be defined. Sometimes the individual will be acutely aware of one's presentation of self in order to obtain a certain response, while other times the individual presents one's self in a particular way based on one's social group, status, or setting. "Performance" is defined as, "all the activity of a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (15). Goffman elaborates on performance further to include:

When an individual or performer plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions, a social relationship is likely to arise. Defining social role as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status, we can say that a social role will involve one or more parts and that each of these different parts may be presented by the performer on a series of occasions to the same kinds of audience or to an audience of the same persons (16).

Here, it is important to acknowledge that both the audience and the actor must believe that the social role being performed is real. Through this analogy, Goffman alludes to the fluidity of social identity. Identity is not isolated within one's self, but constructed and altered through social interactions in different social settings.

Moreover, in Goffman's *Stigma: Notes On the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), he identifies "stigma" as a personal attribute that is socially perceived to discredit the individual, transforming one's social identity from "normal" to "discredited." He goes on to claim that stigma can either be "discredited," if it is publicly visible on the person; or "discreditable," if the stigmatized person can hide the attribute from others to be perceived as "normal." That being said, the stigmatized person cannot avoid the influence of the societal standards that has labeled their attribute a stigma. Thus the individual internalizes the stigma and often isolates themselves, becoming ashamed and depressed.

Goffman suggests there are three different forms of stigma: 1) it can exist as a physical deformity, 2) a "blemish of individual character," such as being perceived as dishonest, weak-willed, or immoral. A stigma of individual character arises from an inferred record, such as a crime committed. 3) A personal attribute can also exist as "tribal stigma," which is transferred through families as it encompasses race, nationality, and religion (1963:2). Nonetheless, Goffman claims there are mechanisms to overcome one's stigma. He writes, "The stigmatized individual can also attempt to correct his condition indirectly by devoting much private effort to the mastery of areas of activity ordinarily felt to be closed on incidental and physical grounds to one with his shortcoming" (1963).

To conclude, Goffman's writing on performance and stigma function to fill the gap in the cultural citizenship framework, as it addresses how identity is constructed through social interactions and setting. In the case that an individual is exposed to new settings and audiences, there is the possibility of identity transformation where an individual can overcome one's stigma. Thus, I incorporate Goffman's writing on identity into my theoretical framework, to explore how

undocumented Latino youth are able to overcome their stigma to claim space within the public sphere, despite their marginalized and stigmatized position in society.

### **Methods**

This study acts as an extended case study, in which I used qualitative methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews to investigate the identity transformation that undocumented Latino youth undergo through their experiences at Peachtree University in Georgia. Below I present a description of my research site, fieldwork methods, participants, and limitations.

#### ***Research Site***

The state of Georgia is estimated to have the seventh largest undocumented immigrant population in the U.S., at approximately 400 thousand (Passel and Cohn 2014). The vast majority of the undocumented population arrived between the early 1990s and the early 2000s. During this time, the Latino population in the South increased exponentially, experiencing a population growth between 200% and 400% (Kochhar, Suro, and Tafoya, 2005; Muñoz, Espino, Antrop-González, 2014).

The increased migration of Latinos to Southern states has been attributed to many different factors. For one, immigration policies became increasingly restrictive and enforced in the Southwest. This contributed to greater fear of deportation amongst the undocumented population, and led to increased migration East. Along with this, employment opportunities for labor-based jobs had decreased in the Southwest, while they had increased in the South. As a result of the civil rights movement, there were more opportunities for marginalized African Americans in the South to achieve greater socio-economic mobility. The undocumented Latino



population essentially replaced the marginalized African Americans workforce, who had previously worked in the manufacturing, construction, meat processing, oil refinery, and forestry industries of the South (Muñoz et al. 2014).

There was a demand for labor in Georgia when the economy was booming during the 1990s, only to make undocumented workers the scapegoats when the economy hit a downturn in the early 2000s. Anti-immigration advocates in Georgia believe that the Latino population is a threat to economic viability, labeling undocumented immigrants, “aliens, cheats, and criminals” who create anxiety and panic amongst Georgia’s “lawful” residents (Muñoz et al. 2014:5). As Latinos begin to shift the cultural and ethnic make-up of the South, a large sector of the population of Georgia believe that the population poses a threat to their state’s “American identity.”

### ***Fieldwork***

Beginning in early January 2016, I spent five weeks living in Atlanta, Georgia where I worked with PTU conducting fieldwork through participant observation and interviews with students. Most of my participation revolved around attending classes with the students every Sunday, as this was the only day during the week they are able to meet. I also worked one-on-one with the executive director and a handful of students to prepare for the upcoming act of civil disobedience that I also participated in. I spent four to eight hours each week outside of the classroom working with the students and the executive director to prepare for the upcoming civil disobedience action. This provided me with ample opportunity for participant observation in combination with the classes on Sundays. It also provided me with insight into the two interconnected yet distinguishable parts of the organization: PTU class vs. PTU activism.

Participant observation in the classroom was useful in learning about classroom dynamics, teaching pedagogy and material, and student-teacher social dynamics. On the other hand, my participation outside of the classroom, (planning meetings, small group activities, a 3 day overnight student conference, and a 15 hour civil disobedience sit-in) allowed me to establish a rapport with the students and the executive director. I was able to learn more about individual students' lives, the inner-workings of PTU, and the freedom school's history and politics within the context of Georgia.

### ***Participants***

When I was not involved in participant observation fieldwork, I spent the rest of my time conducting interviews with PTU students. For the purposes of my research, I wanted to speak with students who had been involved in at least one PTU action already. While there are some students at PTU who choose not to participate in activism, I was focused on examining how PTU shaped undocumented "student" *and* "activist" identity, so I chose to only interview those who had participated in at least one direct action. I spent the first couple weeks of my time with PTU working to develop a rapport with the students, and asked them if they would be interested to participate in an interview.

The only students I asked to participate were students I had had previous conversations with, in an effort to establish trust with my informants in the hopes that it would contribute to more informative interviews. After establishing a rapport, I informed the students about my research and asked them if they would be interested in being interviewed. All students that I approached agreed to interview. I then gave them the IRB consent form to read on their own time, and we scheduled a time to interview. I gave participants the option to meet in person or

conduct a Skype interview. Given that the majority of my participants worked full-time jobs, lived 30-45 minutes out of the city, and did not always have access to transportation, I wanted to make the interviews as convenient and comfortable as possible for them. 6 of my 10 interviews were conducted on Skype, while the other four participants preferred to meet in person at a cafe. Each interview ranged between 40-50 minutes in length.

Before beginning the interview, I gave each participant an overview of why I was conducting the interviews, the types of questions I would be asking, and I read the consent form aloud. I then asked if they had any questions for me as the interviewer. I also reminded the participants that the interview was entirely voluntary, and they were permitted to skip a question or end the interview at anytime during the conversation. I further asked each participant if they were comfortable with me audio-recording the interview so that I could later transcribe it. I also told the participants that the interview would be entirely confidential, as I would use pseudonyms to protect the participants' identity. A list of my interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

Overall, I interviewed 10 students: 4 women and 6 men between the ages of 18 and 27 (the average age was 21). All participants identified as Latino or Hispanic, and every participant was from Mexico, with the exception of one from El Salvador. All participants had arrived in the U.S. between the ages of 1 and 8 years old, and all were covered by DACA with the exception of one, who was ineligible for DACA. Every participant had completed high school. One participant had taken some college classes online, one had been able to attend one semester at a technical college, and one participant had been enrolled in a technical training program for some time. There was some variation in how soon after high school graduation students became involved with PTU, and the length of time involved with PTU ranged from 1 semester to 4 years.

Below, I have created a pseudonym chart of each participant and his/her background information. I have listed each participants gender, age, home country, age of entry into the U.S., immigration status, level of educational attainment, high school graduation year, and year they started at PTU.

### Pseudonym Chart

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Country of Origin	Age of entry into the U.S.	Immigration Status	Education Attained	Year of high school graduation	Started at PTU
<b>Amanda</b>	F	21	MX	6	DACA	K-12	2012	Spring 2014
<b>Alexa</b>	F	21	MX	2	DACA	K-12	2012	Fall 2012
<b>Michelle</b>	F	21	MX	2	DACA	K-12	2012	Fall 2012
<b>Emilio</b>	M	21	MX	2	DACA	K-12	2013	Fall 2014
<b>Sebastian</b>	M	21	SV	7	DACA	Online college courses	2014	Fall 2015
<b>Samuel</b>	M	21	MX	4	DACA	K-12	2012	Fall 2012
<b>Jessica</b>	F	20	MX	3	DACA	K-12	2014	Fall 2012
<b>Andres</b>	M	21	MX	1	DACA	1 semester of college	2013	Fall 2015
<b>David</b>	M	18	MX	3	DACA	K-12	2014	Fall 2015
<b>Isaac</b>	M	27	MX	8	Undocumented	Some technical training	—	Spring 2015

### ***Limitations***

The limitations of my study are primarily the result of the limited time frame I had to conduct fieldwork. As I only had five weeks to work with PTU, my anxiety over the need to complete many interviews in a short time frame pushed me to conduct interviews early on in my fieldwork. Thus, I had limited time during the first 2 weeks to establish a rapport with students prior to their interviews. I believe if I had conducted my interviews after the 5 weeks of fieldwork, and my own participation in activism with the students, they would have felt more comfortable with me during the interviews, which may have enhanced my findings. However, given my limited time frame I worked to the best of my ability to establish trust and transparency with my participants. If I had had more time, I would have liked to interview a greater number of students to examine why some of them had chosen not to become involved in activism. I also would have liked to interview PTU students who did not identify as Latino to hear from students of other ethnic backgrounds. However, there was a very small number of students at PTU who were not Latino, and I was unable to connect with them in time. If I were to expand on this research, I would expand my sample size to be inclusive of a greater number of PTU students of all gender identities and ethnicities.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented an overview of historical and contemporary literature on immigration policies, practices, and discourses that have largely shaped the experiences of undocumented youth in the U.S. I provided literature on social movements, relating relevant theories to the Chicano movement, the contemporary movement for immigrant rights, and undocumented youth activism. The literature review offered a thorough overview of the

structural constraints that have impacted Latinos over the past century, and the different forms of agency that Latinos have used collectively to claim recognition, inclusion, and rights in society. I also included a theoretical framework that provides a lens through which to view my empirical findings on undocumented Latino youth identity formation in the subsequent chapters. To conclude the chapter, I presented the methods I used to conduct an extended case study of undocumented Latino students at Peachtree University. Overall, this chapter serves to provide the necessary background context for my extended case study, which will be revealed in the following three chapters.

## **CHAPTER 2: PERFORMING “ILLEGAL”**

“Immigrant identity is not a primordial sentiment passed down through the ages or inherited from a ‘pure’ national cure abroad, but a dynamic repertoire of practices, beliefs, and behaviors that are subject to constant readjustment and reorganization in changing circumstances” (Massey and Sanchez 2010:24).

This chapter examines undocumented Latino youth identity formation in the context of state and societal pressures. It reveals how institutional, social, and cultural factors including school, friends, family, language, and ethnicity, have influenced the experiences of being Latino and undocumented. To begin, I highlight the formation and performance of Latino identity amongst undocumented youth. I emphasize that Latino identity is “reactive” in the face of adversity, as well as an “in-between” cultural identity that provides undocumented youth with a sense of cultural belonging in the absence of national belonging. Following this, I analyze the construction and performance of a stigmatized undocumented identity through the internalization of “discreditable” stigma. This chapter draws attention to cultural citizenship being a *process of contestation*, illuminating how undocumented Latino youth are confronted by state and societal pressures that label them as criminals. This results in their performance of “illegality.”

### **Latino Identity Construction**

The concept of “national belonging,” has become a highly contested topic in recent scholarship. Some scholars claim that the onset of globalization has diminished the significance of borders, which has caused the nation to become in many ways obsolete. However, scholars suggest that those who maintain the greatest sense of national belonging are members of the dominant group; those who are entitled to benefit the most from the nation (Aronczyk 2013).

This suggests that it would then be the most marginalized groups in society who would experience an absence of national belonging. Undocumented Latino immigrants fall into this category, as their undocumented status has left them greatly disadvantaged within the nation-state.

According to Massey and Sanchez (2010), the exclusion Latino immigrants face in American society has led to the formation of a distinct Latino identity, “that explicitly rejects self-identification as ‘American’”(2). This process of identity formation is known as “reactive ethnicity,” in which identity is formed in response to “shared perceptions of exclusion and exploitation”(15). This theory contrasts “emergent ethnicity,” which proposes ethnic identity arises from socio-structural factors that create in-group solidarity.

Forms of cultural belonging have been theorized to compensate for the absence of national belonging experienced by Latin American immigrant groups. Chicana scholar Gloria E. Anzaldúa writes about the identity formation of Latin American immigrants who find themselves split between two different cultural identities. She applies the word from the Nahuatl language, “nepantla,” meaning, “in-between space,” to conceptualize how Latin American immigrants experience a cultural identity caught between their American upbringing and Latin cultural roots. In other words, “nepantla” describes the experience of people who live on the threshold of two different cultures and refuse to tie themselves exclusively to either one (Keating 2006). In the following section, I stress the importance of Latino identity as a “reactive” and “in-between” cultural identity that provides undocumented Latino youth with a sense of cultural belonging within an exclusionary environment.



### *Early Transition*

Michelle and Alexa are twin sisters who arrived in the U.S. with their family when they were only two years old. When I asked them to describe their earliest memories in the U.S, they both described feeling a lack of attachment to Mexico when they first immigrated that made their initial transition into American society relatively unmemorable.

I don't really remember a lot of things about when I first moved to the U.S. because I was so young. So to me, it wasn't that weird, I was like, "Oh we're here in the U.S." But I feel like I wasn't super attached to Mexico where it seemed really weird to live here. So it was like my transition to living here in the U.S. was not that hard at all (Michelle).

I mean it was really easy for me to adapt. I mean like obviously I was really young, so it wasn't really different for me (Alexa).

More than half of the students I interviewed arrived in the U.S. during the first four years of their lives. They were too young to experience the common emotions of sadness or excitement that often accompany leaving one's home behind and moving to a new country. That being said, the transition that many of the students recalled being the biggest challenge was integrating into the "English-only" Georgia public school system. Regardless of their age of arrival in the U.S., all of the students expressed their earliest memories in school being extremely disorientating and alienating.

Samuel, who came to the U.S. at four years old, recalled being confused and distraught during his first day of Kindergarten. He did not know where he was or what "school" even was. Samuel remembered speaking Spanish to the teacher and was confused by his inability to communicate with her. Sebastian, who came to the U.S at age seven, recounted a similar memory of his first day of school:

The first day of school I started crying on the bus, I didn't even know what a bus was...I felt isolated, I felt I was alienated...So I spent most of my day at the school crying as opposed to learning. I didn't speak any English, but I had my personal translator, he was like another seven year old! (Sebastian).

The experience of having a “personal translator,”— another student in the class who was bilingual— being placed in ESOL class, or having an “exceptional” teacher who took extra time to teach them English, were all common memories expressed by my informants. Fortunately, the language barrier was only a problem during the first year or two of school, as all of the students eventually learned the language.

The age of arrival in the U.S was not a factor in English language acquisition amongst my participant sample. As a result of close-knit immigrant family networks, undocumented Latino children were only exposed to Spanish at home, so their first extended exposure to English was in school. Andrés, who arrived in the U.S at one years old, explained why he never learned English until he started school.

At home, no one spoke English. Everybody speaks Spanish. It was so hard for me that when I was in Kindergarten I had to get held back, because I wasn't able to read as a normal Kindergartener. And I had nobody teaching me about it (Andrés).

This phenomena is not unique to undocumented children but occurs in first and second generation immigrant enclaves across the U.S. (Rong and Grant 1992). It is possible that undocumented children are less likely to learn English before entering school than lawful immigrant residents, as their undocumented status keeps families further isolated from integration into public life.

Andrés' inability to speak English when he entered school placed him at an educational disadvantage within the system. Studies show that cultural differences, such as language barriers

and social interactional conflicts that occur between home and school, disadvantage the educational attainment of immigrant youth (Rong and Grant 1992). Students growing up in non-English speaking families lack resources at home that could help them in an “English-only” education system. This is particularly problematic within Georgia, as anti-immigrant sentiment has resulted in a number of “English-only” educational policies and practices that contribute to educational disadvantages for English learners. There are little to no resources for non-English speaking parents to foster relationship and communicate with their children’s teachers, and the “English only” curricula taught in the classroom fails to be inclusive of socio-historical, cultural, and political issues (Muñoz et al. 2014). Taken as a whole, Georgia’s “English-only” educational policies work to foster an educational environment that is not inclusive of cultural difference. This can have lasting effects on immigrant student social integration and identity formation. This supports Massey and Sanchez (2010)’s argument that claims exclusionary policies and anti-immigrant sentiment amongst the native population constructs brighter ethnic boundaries and results in less social integration of immigrants.

Two informants, Isaac and Emilio, recalled how their initial inability to speak English and their Spanish accent set them back socially in school.

Maybe I would say it with a Spanish accent, because whenever my mom spoke English I would copy what she would say, so people would get confused as to what I was saying (Emilio).

I just felt like I needed to be quiet. Like when you start to learn English, I still have an accent, but my accent was a lot heavier and a lot of times people would make fun of that accent and so I came to talk very little (Isaac).

Isaac’s trouble learning English affected how he presented himself socially in school and his overall confidence level. His Spanish accent set him apart as “different” from the other American

students and caused him to be made fun of. In this regard, Isaac's accent acted as a marker of stigma, as it discredited his Latino identity as something different from "normal" in the educational space (Goffman 1963). Although not all of my correspondents expressed the same level of difficulty learning English as Andrés, Isaac, and Emilio, others recalled being very "shy" in school, alluding to similar insecurities in how they appeared "different" from their American peers. This draws attention to the barriers to social integration that undocumented Latino youth experience in school as a result of the exclusionary behaviors enacted by native students. Overall, the institutional failure to create an inclusive environment caused many undocumented Latino students to perform their social identity in school as shy and unconfident (Goffman 1959).

### ***Making Friends***

Based on the low socioeconomic status of most undocumented Latino families, it was not uncommon for undocumented youth to grow up in low-income neighborhoods and attend adjoining underfunded public schools. Six of my informants recounted growing up in low income neighborhoods which were often trailer parks made up of different ethnic immigrant enclaves. Below, Amanda and Samuel described the neighborhoods they grew up in:

The part of the area where I live, I was very lucky that it is the most diverse part of Georgia. So there's a lot of Hispanic people and a lot of Asian people and it's actually equally divided by race like white, black, Asian, and Hispanic or Latino. There's just so much diversity I never had trouble finding friends, especially those first few years where I was improving my English (Amanda).

I think half of the neighborhood was divided into undocumented people living on one side of the trailer park and the other side was you know drug dealers, like you know all these other crazy people so. I kinda got used to it because we walk through there a lot so it wasn't a thing (Samuel).

Despite the potential dangers of living in a low-income neighborhood that Samuel alludes to, both students expressed a certain level of comfort growing up in diverse low income neighborhoods. While other informants described their neighborhood as “diverse,” made up of “minorities,” or predominately “Latino/undocumented,” all of my informants emphasized that their diverse neighborhood was a place where they felt comfortable. This highlights emergent ethnicity theory and social network theory, in which shared socio-structural and cultural factors lead to network formation and in-group solidarity (Massey and Sanchez 2010; Bankston 2014). Living near people who came from the same ethnic or socioeconomic background provided undocumented students with a sense of familiarity and comfort that they might not have received in their “English only” classrooms.

Similar to Amanda’s experience making friends, David also mentioned that having a Spanish-speaking peer group in school allowed him to improve his English:

I remember, I would definitely lean towards the Hispanic kids. Like definitely become friends with them. But then again, I was in a low-income area, so there was a lot of Hispanic kids... A lot of them only spoke Spanish as well. So it was like easier to learn the language with them (David).

In reaction to the “English only” curricula, non-English speaking students supported one another in learning English. According to David and Amanda, this was one factor that led Latino students to form friendships. This draws attention to reactive ethnicity theory (Massey and Sanchez 2010), as the Spanish-speaking students formed groups in *reaction* to the language exclusion they experienced in school. However, David also mentioned that the diverse friend groups in the neighborhoods were reflected within the schools. This illustrates emergent ethnicity theory, as it highlights how socio-structural factors lead to in-group formation.

When I prodded students to elaborate more on the ethnic makeup of their friend groups in school, most students told me that their friends had always been minorities, predominately

Hispanic/Latinos or African Americans:

The thing is with the cafeteria, I remember it being really— like there was white people here and Hispanics over here, and then some black people over there (Emilio).

Most of my friends were predominantly African American. I did have some white friends, some Latino friends, some Asian friends, but it was a very small percentage (Jessica).

As a kid in elementary, I usually stayed with the Latinos. [It] made me feel comfortable as a kid. But then when I got to high school I usually just made...friends with the minorities (Andrés).

Emilio, Jessica, and Andrés' recollections emphasize the bright ethnic boundaries they experienced growing up. Emilio also recalled the memory of sitting in the cafeteria and having each table divided by race and ethnicity, which illustrates patterns of social interaction that reinforce ethnic group distinctions (Jimenez 2010).

On one hand, these findings highlight social network theory and emergent ethnicity theory because my informants mentioned becoming friends with those in their neighborhoods and bonding over their shared language. However, on the other, the common sentiment amongst my informants of feeling more “comfortable” with minorities and having very few white friends, brings to light the formation of reactive ethnicity. In support of Massey and Sanchez's (2010) claim that Latin American immigrants develop a reactive Latino ethnic identity, there appeared to be bright ethnic boundaries between Latinos and their white peers within “English-Only” schools that were non-inclusive of cultural difference. While the formation of bright ethnic boundaries creates an in-group support network, it also leads to social isolation from non-Latino groups.

The social role undocumented Latino youth performed growing up was also reflective of who their friends were. According to Goffman, the “audience” is an influential part of one’s presentation of self. In a social interaction, the individual’s performance of a social role is dependent on their audience’s response. In this way, the audience helps to solidify and define the social identity being performed (1959). In the case of my informants, undocumented Latino youth were drawn to peer groups that they could relate to; whether that be through language, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, or life experiences. In befriending others who performed similar social roles to themselves, the students were able to confirm their Latino identity as a “reactive” identity within an exclusionary environment.

Furthermore, undocumented students who grew up in predominantly white middle class neighborhoods had a difficult experience making friends in school. Michelle and Alexa both described the alienating feeling they experienced when they realized they were two of the only Latino students at their school. Michelle expressed:

I felt kinda awkward making friends. Because I was like, “ah I’m different!” or something....there was always like that idea in the back of your head. That was always like, I don’t know, “the difference” (Michelle).

Michelle’s difficulty making friends supports my initial findings: Michelle felt “uncomfortable” making friends with white students because she saw herself as “different,” in the same way that my other informants expressed feeling more “comfortable” making friends with Latino students that they could relate to. In both cases, it appears that undocumented Latino students were aware of their difference from the white mainstream and the formation of bright ethnic boundaries kept them from making friends with their white peers.

However, over time, Alexa and Michelle were able to make friends with predominantly white students as a result of their circumstances. While this implies that ethnic boundaries may have become blurred over time, the sisters recounted how they were judged by their fellow Latinos in school for not acting “Latino enough.”

I wouldn't talk to a lot of the Latino people, because I just like, I guess we just have different interests. Like I wouldn't like to dance, I didn't like Spanish music, and I was really into art. So they were kinda just like, “Oh you're white. You're white Latino.” And so like they would pick on me because of that. But I'm just like, “That's how I grew up, it's not my fault!” You know? (Alexa).

Anybody who kinda acts differently... they kind of like get rejected. So people would see me as trying to step away from like Latino roots, even though I was totally not about that, I was so proud of being Mexican. But supposedly nobody saw that, and so I was like, “Latino people in my school didn't like me...”(Michelle).

Alexa's description of the activities that Latinos were supposed to like doing aligns with Goffman's (1959) description of “manners.” Manners are an individual's actions or behaviors that define the social identity that they are performing. As social interactions are an integral part of defining one's identity, manners assist the audience in confirming what social role is being performed. In this case, Alexa did not uphold the manners associated with performing “Latina,” such as dancing and listening to Spanish music. Rather, she performed the manners associated with performing “white,” such as being, “really into art.” Michelle recalled a similar experience of being called “white Latino” to that of her sister. Essentially, Alexa and Michelle experienced “intra-group boundaries,” (Jimenez 2010) in which they were excluded from their ethnic group because they failed to confirm the accepted behaviors for Latino group membership at their school.



While the other informants addressed their “different” Latino identity within their schools through the formation of a “reactive” Latino social group, Michelle and Alexa were excluded from the Latino group for “acting white.” This draws attention to how stigma can be applied to any individual that is different from the defined norm (Goffman 1963). It is not only white students who can stigmatize Latinos, but Latino students are also capable of stigmatizing members of their own social group if they perceive them to be performing an identity other than “normal.” Despite their social exclusion from the Latino group, both Alexa and Michelle maintained that they were “proud to be Mexican.” In doing this, the sisters claimed their inclusion with the Latino ethnic group, attempting to expand the ethnic boundaries of their Latino social identity.

### ***Family Traditions***

When I discussed family traditions with my informants, they struggled to identify themselves in belonging to one country over the other. Jessica explained the differences she noticed between the family traditions she carried out at home and the family traditions of her American peers:

We constantly joke that we're too Mexican to be American, and we're too American to be Mexican...even when I was younger I wasn't able to relate to a lot of stuff that my friends talked about amongst themselves...even during holidays, most of my friends have extended family over, they're excited for family gatherings, they have different foods, and they have different traditions...(Jessica).

The lack of relatability Jessica felt towards her friends' family traditions illustrates how her identity was stuck between being both Mexican and American. This form of self-division is characteristic of the in-between space of “nepantla,” in which the individual lives on the threshold of two different cultures (Keating 2006).

*Dia de los Muertos*, “Mexican” Christmas, and New Year’s, were the most common holidays mentioned by the students. Michelle, Alexa, and Amanda described “Mexican” Christmas and New Year’s as uniquely different from “American” Christmas and New Year’s:

On *Dia de los Muertos* she [mom]’d make an altar...And definitely like, the way you celebrate Christmas is a little bit different than traditionally here in the U.S. It’s more like, definitely towards the Mexican side I guess. It’s more religious in a way. Definitely more Catholic influences (Michelle).

I think we still have like, every time Christmas and Thanksgiving we still celebrate them in a very “Mexican” way. We have Mexican traditional foods like *tamales*, all that stuff. So we do definitely have Mexican customs (Alexa).

I mean there’s a lot of things that, are just Mexican... even like on New Year’s, there was — in Mexico they do this thing, we have traditions where we have twelve grapes, and you have to eat all of them and each grape is a wish for a New Year’s resolution that you want for the year you want to accomplish. So even that...New Year’s it was something that we still continue to do, that we’ve done every year (Amanda).

My informants descriptions of family traditions bring to light their experience living between two different cultural realities. They celebrate the traditional American holidays of Christmas, New Year’s, and Thanksgiving, yet they describe celebrating these holidays in a “Mexican way.” Moreover, while Christmas and New Year’s are traditionally celebrated in both the U.S. and Mexico, a few of the participants mentioned that they also celebrated Thanksgiving, which is a traditional American holiday. Jessica acknowledged this, as she later told me that celebrating Thanksgiving was a marker that her family had “assimilated a lot.”

David, Samuel, and Emilio, expressed that they did not participate in any Mexican holidays anymore. This draws attention to the integration of some of my informants’ families into American customs, suggesting that they have “assimilated” in the traditional sense, by shedding their cultural traditions over time (Alba and Nee 2003). That being said, the majority of

my informants told me that they still carried on Latin American traditions, even if they also participated in American holidays. When I asked if they would continue the traditions in the future, they all said that they planned to. Michelle and Andrés elaborated:

Definitely. I think it's really important. Like growing up I always—I feel like I identified with my Mexican side of my identity more so than my American side. Not that I'm, I'm not really like American. But growing up here you know. But I definitely identified with my Mexican side more, and that's definitely something I want to pass on to my future children. Especially growing up now, being older, I realize so much more the importance of it (Michelle).

Of course, it's like, it's what makes me. It's something that can't— you can't lose. It's your roots (Andrés).

The students' responses to my question emphasize that family traditions are predominantly tied to the “Mexican side” of the students' identities. Yet, American influences were also integrated into Mexican traditions, placing undocumented Latino youth somewhere “in-between” being Mexican and American. Michelle and Andrés maintained that their Mexican roots were important to their identity, drawing attention to how upholding Mexican family traditions is one manner that helped undocumented Latino youth define their Latino identity. In the following section, I analyze how undocumented Latino youth chose to self-identify themselves.

### ***Self-Identifying***

Chavez and Gonzales (2012) argue that the 1.5 generation possesses more similarities to the second generation of Mexican Americans than that of first generation immigrants.

“Undocumented youth are legitimated in educational settings and are able to learn the language, absorb the customs, and make the culture their own in ways that are not available to those who migrate as adults” (Abrego 2011:343). Since the vast majority of undocumented Latino youth migrated to the U.S. at a very young age, it is not surprising that they would possess similar traits

to Mexican Americans. The notion of Mexican ethnicity amongst Mexican Americans is largely constructed by upholding certain cultural manners, such as speaking Spanish, eating authentic Mexican food, and listening to Spanish music (Jimenez 2010). This analysis emphasizes that undocumented Latino youth experience their “in-between” cultural identity similar to that of Mexican Americans, in constructing a distinct Latino identity that provides them with a sense of cultural belonging.

When I asked participants which country they most closely identified with, the country they were born in, or the U.S., the general answer I received was: “Both.” Prying further, I discovered that most students had conflicting ideas over their nationality and sense of national belonging. Emilio and Alexa described how they thought about their identity as being both Mexican and American:

I consider myself Mexican, but also American. I think because, I was born in Mexico but when I left I was two years old. I don't have any memories from Mexico at all. So all my memories are from the United States, so I guess I could consider myself Mexican American, but you know, no documents (Emilio).

So I think I identify with both, like if anyone ever asks me I always tell them I'm Mexican, you know like that's my ethnicity and that's my nationality so. My culture and my personality are totally shaped by American culture and my American upbringing, but I'm still Mexican (Alexa).

Emilio and Alexa described an identity similar to that of a Mexican American, as they described their Mexican roots, not as a tangible memory, but as their ethnicity, nationality, and cultural heritage. Alexa claimed to be “Mexican” based on her ethnicity and nationality, yet acknowledged her American cultural upbringing as an influential part of her identity.

Amanda and Sebastian also struggled to identify themselves as belonging to either nation. The time they had spent away from their home country led them to self-identify as “American.”

Sebastian, who arrived in the U.S. when he was seven years old, said that he had now lived in the U.S. for thirteen years. This was twice as long as he had lived in El Salvador. Amanda, who came to the U.S. at the age of six, recalled the memory of her twelfth birthday when she realized she had now lived in the U.S. for as many years as she had lived in Mexico. Amanda concluded:

I am very proud of where I am from. I love Mexico...but at the same time, I have to realize that I grew up with American ideals and American thought processes, with American education. And so, I am American. I am an undocumented American citizen. I know the star spangled banner, the national anthem, I don't know the Mexican anthem (Amanda).

Although Amanda was the only informant to self-identify as an “undocumented American citizen,” other students mentioned their American cultural upbringing as an influential part of their identity. Where Amanda deviated from the norm was in her desire to perform her American identity. The emphasis she placed on her “American” manners, such as her ability to sing the national anthem, her American ideals, thoughts, and education, suggest that she desired to present herself in everyday life as an American citizen (Goffman 1959). While this was not expressed by other informants, it draws attention to the complexity of the “in-between” identity that undocumented Latino students experience. This also illustrates the performance of cultural citizenship, as Amanda identified as an “American citizen,” undeterred by her undocumented status (Rosaldo 1994).

Furthermore, Samuel conveyed a sense of frustration, resentment, and lacked a sense of national belonging towards both the U.S. and Mexico:

Personally, I don't feel tied to either. Because, one, I was born there and that's cool I guess. You know I just happened to be born there... But I don't really remember much from that place. I was just born there and that's where all my family lives. That's really the only tie I have to that place. And here, I was just brought here, and I grew up here, and the customs I have were I guess you know, “American.” But this is a place where I

grew up, especially in a state that's always rejected me, so I don't really feel any ties, like close ties to being "American" and stuff. So I don't really, if anything...there's a dash between Mexican-American and I feel like I'm in the middle of that dash. I don't belong to either (Samuel).

Samuel's frustration over the ways that both Mexico and the U.S. have done him wrong reflects Aronczyk's (2013) claim that the most marginalized groups are most inclined to experience a lack of national belonging. It is not surprising that Samuel would feel an absence of national belonging to both Mexico and the U.S. While Mexico was the country that his family had to flee from poverty, the U.S. was the country that has "rejected" him all his life; leaving Samuel somewhere on the threshold between the two countries. Consequently, a sense of strong cultural belonging may compensate for the failure of the national community to be inclusive of all its members. Through the performance of a distinct Latino identity, undocumented Latino youth were able to find cultural belonging within their Latino ethnic group; providing support within the exclusionary anti-immigrant environment they found themselves in.

### **Undocumented Identity Construction**

The subsequent section of this chapter explores the influence of undocumented status on the construction of undocumented Latino youth identity growing up. I draw attention to how family upbringing and socialization play a major role in the internalization of stigma.

#### ***Family Life Growing Up Undocumented***

All of the undocumented students I spoke with had always known something was different about themselves and their families growing up. They knew they were born in a different country, had heard the phrase, "sin papeles" whispered between their parents over dinner; some had even watched their mother use their younger brother's health insurance card at

the doctors office, claiming it was their own. Yet the full magnitude of what it meant to be undocumented did not become clear to the students until the end of high school, when they were faced with the immediate implication of their status: they could not go to college.

Undocumented parents did everything in their capacity to protect their children; both from deportation, and from knowledge of the real-life consequences of their undocumented status. Alexa recounted how her parents always avoided discussing their immigration status because they wanted to make her and her sisters' lives feel normal.

I knew that we didn't have legal status, I always knew, but it also wasn't something that we talked about. Well we did talk about it pretty frequently, but like I said, my parents tried really hard to make it seem like nothing was different about us, so...they always went out of their way to make it seem like, you know, nothing was wrong. We're just normal. Like if we were struggling financially, or if they had something with their job... they would never let us know. So to me, it was always like I knew, but it didn't affect me. And it was always something I knew was about myself, but like I said until high school it didn't really affect me personally I felt (Alexa).

Goffman (1963) claims that stigma can be concealed if it is not visible in public, making it a "discreditable" stigma. Alexa described this occurring in her family, as she mentioned that her parents liked to act like their family's undocumented status did not exist by not discussing it. The assumption about "discreditable" stigma is that if it is kept hidden, individuals can present themselves as "normal" without the public being aware. Alexa alluded to this being her parents intention, when she said her parents wanted her and her siblings to think, "we're just normal." In this way, Alexa and her sisters were able to grow up feeling as if their undocumented status was just another thing about them, relatively insignificant to their future lives or social identity.

That being said, no matter how hard undocumented parents strove to foster a "normal" life for their children, their undocumented status still influenced their children's life experiences

and identity formation in unexpected ways. For example, none of the informants I spoke with had been involved in extracurricular activities growing up because their parents did not have a license to drive them. While some undocumented parents still chose to risk driving out of necessity, they often limited their driving strictly between work, home, and school. Alexa and Jessica both recalled not being allowed to get involved in extracurriculars when they were in school, but Jessica said she did not realize the significance of this until much later on:

I didn't start to realize how much of a risk that would be for my parents to like drive and stuff. So, I think that was also a reason why I wasn't really involved outside of school (Jessica).

Jessica's response further illustrates how undocumented children could be aware of their undocumented status without fully understanding the implications of it. While Jessica knew her family was undocumented and that she was not allowed to participate in extracurricular activities, she had not understood the magnitude of the risk her parents faced, until she was older.

For some families, driving without a license had become too great a risk. David and Andrés shared memories of when they had witnessed a parent arrested for driving without a license. David described the memory of when his mother was hit by another car in an intersection. At the time, he was not aware of their family's status and he urged his mother to call the police.

And she just stared out into the distance and did not talk to me. And then the police was called, and came to my mom, and he asked her for her license. And that's when she told him that she doesn't have one. And I was so confused at that time, I was like... so yeah so seeing my mom put in handcuffs and taken away, that's when I was like, I kinda figured it out.... That's how I basically found out that not only was my family undocumented but so was I (David).



Andrés recalled a similar event, when his father was pulled over and arrested by a cop less than a mile away from their house. After his dad was arrested, his sister, without any driving experience, had to drive their family the rest of the way home. While his father was later released, Andrés said nobody in his family ever drove again; so they had to walk everywhere.

I had to walk, winter time summer time. Rain, whatever. Knowing I couldn't [drive]. It was a risk for me to take the car to go there, so I had to walk everywhere. You know, it was a pretty long walk. It took me like, almost 45 to an hour to get home (Andrés).

Regardless of how much undocumented families worked to protect their children and normalize their childhoods, families' undocumented statuses inevitably impacted their children's identity formation. Undocumented Latino youth's experiences growing up invoked a fear of the authorities and the formation of close-knit family dependency.

Sebastian and Samuel recalled that they were always told to keep their head down and stay out of trouble growing up. Sebastian described police check points in his neighborhoods, where cops would wait to pull someone over. After the passage of HB 87, the law that promotes racial profiling by granting police the authority to "ask for papers," communities and family members learned to alert one another of potential risks (Peña 2012). Sebastian told me that if he ever heard the police were nearby, he would leave his car and walk; even if it meant his car would be repossessed. He later elaborated:

You were trying to stay under the radar, trying not to make attention, trying to follow the rules and just be unnoticeable and get by (Sebastian).

Sebastian's fear of the authorities had become so ingrained in his consciousness that it led him to make extreme sacrifices to decrease his risk of deportation. Fear of authorities also intervened in undocumented students' social lives. Samuel explained how he had become alienated from his

friend group because they wanted to get into “bad things.” Samuel described how his friends would want to go on school grounds at night to tag school property. He expressed:

And you know, I’m not about that, I’m not trying to get arrested. So I kinda like disassociated with that. And I was always trying to stay away from police and getting in trouble (Samuel).

The fear Samuel had been raised to feel around the authorities created a divide between Samuel and his friend group. It appears that even if undocumented youth did not understand the consequences of their status, their parents had instilled in them a fear of the authorities that was undeniably linked to their families’ status.

Consequently, the element of fear also led families to become extremely close-knit and dependent on one another. Amanda described how her family was her main support network growing up.

We’re really close. We have to be when we’re undocumented. We don’t tend to open up about our situation to a lot of people, so we have to be in a good place. Because we all depend on one another...Even though the situation has a lot of stress and gives us anxiety, its made us stick together because if we don’t, we don’t have anybody else (Amanda).

Amanda was not alone in expressing her close connection to her family. When undocumented youth were not in school, they spent most of their time at home with their families due to their limited access to transportation and the element of fear their parents had instilled in them. As a result, undocumented youth grew up feeling extremely close to their families. Evidently, family appears to be one of the most influential factors that led students to hide their undocumented status from their peers in school because their parents had taught them their status was something that must be kept hidden.

### *The Hidden Stigma*

In conversations with informants, I quickly gathered— *in high school, telling people you were undocumented was just not something you did*. When I inquired why this was, the students told me it was what their parents had always told them. Amanda and Emilio recalled memories of their parents telling them not to open up to anyone about their status:

I remember my dad, he always said, “If anyone asks you, you were born here.” I mean, he never actually said to keep it hidden but I think I kinda got what he was saying (Emilio).

There was this one point in middle school where they [parents] sat us down and they told us not to tell anyone about it. But it wasn’t like the talk, “You’re undocumented, you can’t do this this and that.” It was more like, “You know what situation we’re in but you can’t open up to anybody about it because it has consequences for the entire family” (Amanda).

Although Amanda and Emilio both emphasized that their parents had not explicitly told them to hide their identity, it appears that their parents wanted their children to keep their status a secret for their own protection. Jessica disclosed to me that she had not opened up about her status in high school because her parents made her fearful of the social consequences.

I kept it to myself... our parents were really afraid of us telling anybody. Because they were afraid that we’d get bullied, or we’d be treated differently, or you know, like a lot of the friends we had would distance themselves from us. So they tried to protect us as much as they could in that aspect (Jessica).

Jessica suggested that the impetus for not discussing her immigration status came from a fear of becoming socially ostracized. This further highlights how undocumented status represents a “discreditable” stigma, as Jessica and other undocumented students chose to keep their status a secret in order to appear “normal” and not become socially outcast in school (Goffman 1963).

However, in hiding their status, students grew up believing their status was something to be ashamed of. David recalled how he had viewed his undocumented status in high school:

It was definitely kept pretty quiet. Like no-one discussed about it. I didn't either. Like, I don't know, people are so ashamed of it. I know I was. And nobody wanted to talk about it, or be open about it. They tried to ignore it as much as they could. I know I did (David).

This illuminates how the act of hiding one's status can eventually lead to feeling ashamed by it.

According to Goffman, it is inevitable that the stigmatized person becomes influenced by the societal pressures that label their attribute a stigma. Even in cases where the stigma remains hidden, the individual still internalizes the discredited part of their identity; often characterized by feelings of shame, depression, anxiety, and social isolation (1963). This draws attention to how undocumented students could internalize societal ideas about "illegality," that would cause them to feel ashamed to be undocumented.

In hiding their undocumented status, undocumented youth also had to lie to their peers about a part of their identity. Jessica recalled how bad it made her feel to have to lie to her friends and make up excuses about not having a job, a license, or why she couldn't attend R-rated movies. As a result, Jessica began to feel alienated from her friends because she could not participate in certain social activities or confide in them about what she was experiencing.

Samuel alluded to a similar feeling of social isolation and embarrassment when he was forced to ride the bus his senior year of high school.

I was the only senior on my bus. You know and like senior year everyone would question me, like "why are you on the bus?" I'd just be like, "you guys are the dumb ones because I'm saving on gas money. I guess. It's free..."(Samuel).

The unexpected social consequences that Samuel and Jessica experienced in high school highlight how a stigmatized attribute can further be internalized. Although they both tried to

present themselves as “normal.” By keeping their undocumented status hidden, their status still caused them to experience uncomfortable social situations. So even if their status was not publicly visible, it still discredited Samuel and Jessica’s identities; leading them to experience feelings of isolation and embarrassment.

While the majority of informants said they did not disclose their status to anyone in high school, a few mentioned they had told select friends. In the rare cases where students confided in their friends however, they were met with a lack of understanding. Andrés elaborated on this:

Even though you tell them you have like DACA work permit, they really don’t understand like what does that mean, that means that you’re really undocumented. They think it’s just a residency, that later on you could probably get, you could become a citizen or something (Andrés).

The lack of understanding that Andrés was confronted with emphasizes the social alienation that undocumented students experienced in high school because their friends could not understand or relate to their experiences. Surprisingly, Michelle described being faced with a similar lack of understanding when she would disclose to a fellow undocumented student about her status:

If I learned someone was undocumented I’d be like “oh me too,” and they’d be like, “what? you don’t look undocumented...” Yeah, people would say that. What they mean to say is that— so growing up a lot of people would always tell me that I acted like “white”... so people think that, if you’re trying to portray this culture that you’re not a part of that like, “how can you be undocumented, you don’t even act Mexican?” (Michelle).

Michelle’s explanation reveals the intersection of two forms of stigma that undocumented Latino students face in being both undocumented and Latino. Their Latino identity represented a visible tribal stigma, while their undocumented status was a “discreditable” stigma of character that they attempted to hide (Goffman 1963). When Michelle’s undocumented peer told her that she did not “look undocumented,” it draws attention to the interplay of these two stigmas. In today’s society,

the stigma associated with being Latino is largely constructed by the assumption that all Latinos are undocumented. However, this also leads to the opposite assumption: to be undocumented you must also be Latino.

As Michelle was perceived to “act white,” her undocumented peer did not assume that she would be undocumented. This relates back to Michelle and Alexa’s previous experiences being labeled “white Latino,” and ostracized from the Latino group in their high school for not performing “Latina.” By performing a social role associated with “acting white,” Michelle was better able to hide her undocumented stigma because she did not outwardly present herself with the assumed cultural characteristics of someone who was undocumented. This further emphasizes the power of performance through social interactions that define social identities and constructions of stigma (Goffman 1959; 1963).

### ***Realization of Life Circumstances***

When undocumented youth graduate high school they are confronted with legal and economic barriers to higher education (Abrego 2006). While some undocumented youth respond to these barriers by attempting to resist them; others find themselves discouraged by their lack of opportunities, which often leads to a sense of hopelessness (Chavez and Gonzales 2012). The students all recalled the moment towards the end of high school when they learned they would not be able to go to college. Most of my informants were not aware of the in-state tuition ban 4.3.4, or the select public universities admission ban 4.1.6. in Georgia, until they started applying to colleges and scholarships. Jessica and David recalled the moment when they first found out about the two bans:

And I had no idea, I had no idea that there were bans or anything, so, finding that out was sort of really discouraging for me.... But senior year was when I really, like found out that I couldn't attend any colleges, or any of the top five colleges. Because I tried applying... and when I tried to apply then, the website actually had a list of schools undocumented students couldn't apply to. So that was sort of like a slap in the face, because I had no idea (Jessica)

I found out my junior year. Yeah, when we were looking at colleges with our friends. And it really sucked because it brings down your self-esteem, and you feel like, "OK, so what's the point of even trying? What's the point in your AP classes and all these classes that you've tried so hard for?" (David).

The surprise and discouragement that Jessica and David experienced was expressed by all of the students, however their reactions varied. Some students responded by finding alternative outlets to prove the system wrong; others experienced the onset of depression, their motivation decreased, and their grades suffered.

Jessica recalled throwing herself into athletics her senior year because she wanted to find one area in her life that she could excel in without being held back. Similarly, David remembered that while his initial response was to give up, he later changed his attitude:

I think I just felt like I had to prove people wrong. Especially the parents of my friends. Who were like, "oh well." They were the ones telling me like, "oh there's really good jobs you can do." Or stuff like that. "School isn't for everyone." Yeah they were basically just telling me like, life sucks. But, I wanted to show them that I could work a full-time job and get straight As my senior year (David).

David and Jessica happened to be the exceptions to the discouragement and onset of depression that other students recalled feeling. Samuel remembered trying to convince himself that he did not want to go to college in the first place. Although, in retrospect, he knew it was something he had always thought about. Samuel's parents had always told him that he would go to college because he was supposed to have a better life than they did; that was why they had moved to the U.S.

When some students attempted to turn to counselors within their schools for support, they were met with further disappointment and discouragement. After Jessica disclosed to her guidance counselor that she was undocumented, she recalled the lack of support she received from him:

I remember him telling me he didn't think I was going to be able to go to college. And that was like a super defining moment for me... Like whenever he went into classes to help other students, to sort of help them stay on track towards whatever college they wanted to go to, I remember he went into one of my classes once and he just completely skipped me. And everyone looked at me, and I felt like, really terrible (Jessica).

Not only did Jessica's counselor refuse to give her support but he embarrassed her by making it known amongst her peers that she would not be going to college. In doing this, Jessica was made to feel that she did not deserve to go to college because of her status, increasing her feeling of shame and social isolation. This further draws attention to how societally perceived stigma was internalized by the students (Goffman 1963).

The accumulation of these discouraging experiences during undocumented students senior year of high school led to the onset of depression for many students. Samuel described his lack of motivation to do anything after graduation:

As soon as graduation was over I was like, "Now what do I do?" So literally I just sat home with nothing to do and no one to talk to so. I'd just literally be in my room like laying down staring at the ceiling or whatever like "Huh, this is life," or whatever. Yeah that was really it for like the longest, that was like a good year of that (Samuel).

Although Samuel did not explicitly say he was depressed, it was alluded to through the lack of motivation he described. While not all of my informants insinuated the onset of depression, they all expressed that they had experienced a sense of discouragement and hopelessness after high school graduation. These negative emotions can be attributed to the students' realization of the



barriers they faced in pursuing their futures, as well as the internalization of stigma (Goffman 1963).

In conversation with Isaac, he explained why he thought depression was so prevalent within the undocumented community:

The undocumented community it's, it's a community that is very, that is full of depression. Because when you see your friends driving, when you see your friends going off to college, and you're still stuck in the same thing that you were doing... some of them don't want to admit that they're depressed— and that's fine. But we all have some type of level of depression due to the fact that we're labeled criminals and we're pushed to the dark sides of society (Isaac).

Isaac's explanation highlights how legal and economic barriers, in combination with being perceived as “criminals,” contributed to the onset of depression at the end of high school for my informants. To be labeled a “criminal” stresses the stigma associated with being undocumented in the U.S. that is then internalized by undocumented youth.

The accumulation of experiences undocumented Latino youth grew up with caused their identity to be constructed in an assortment of ways. For the most part, undocumented Latino youth grew up in close-knit families where they were taught to keep their heads down, to fear the police, and to keep their immigration status hidden from their peers. While their parents were trying to create normal lives for their children, the stigma associated with being undocumented was unavoidably internalized by the students I spoke with. As undocumented students watched all of their friends go off to college, they were left to experience feelings of shame, inadequacy, and depression. In this way, the internalization of stigma associated with the students' undocumented status and Latino identity led them to perform the social identity of “illegal” post-high school graduation (Goffman 1959; 1963).

Lastly, the students' accounts of their experiences growing up as undocumented also draws attention to why they repeatedly told me they identified as such, even after the passage of DACA. In this study 9 of the 10 informants I interviewed were covered by DACA. This means that the vast majority no longer have to live with the same sense of fear that they grew up with, as they are now lawfully in the U.S. on a 2 year renewal basis. However, while the term "DACAmented" floated around the group I worked with, every student I spoke with self-identified as "undocumented" because they felt the term most accurately portrayed the experiences they had had growing up. This brings to light how being undocumented in the U.S. encompasses more than one's legal status. The hostile anti-immigrant climate made the status highly stigmatized, so it has a lasting impact on undocumented Latino youth.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I examined the institutional, social, and cultural factors that constructed undocumented Latino youth "illegality." I drew attention to how undocumented Latino youth performed their Latino identity as a reactive "in-between" cultural identity that stressed the importance of cultural belonging within an anti-immigrant climate that had largely disenfranchised them. Further, I emphasized that the experiences undocumented Latino youth had growing up caused them to internalize the stigma associated with being undocumented, due to the societal construction of the "illegal alien" as a criminal. As a result, undocumented Latino youth performed the role of "illegal," characterized by a lack of confidence and feelings of shame, isolation, and depression.

This chapter also illuminates how cultural citizenship exists as a process of contestation. While undocumented Latino youth have the capacity to claim space and rights for themselves in

society, their identities can also be greatly impacted by state and societal pressures that label them as criminals. In the following chapters, I explore how PTU transformed undocumented Latino youth identity from a place of stigma to a place of empowerment. My following analysis bring to light how undocumented Latino youth were able to claim educational and political space for themselves, effectively performing cultural citizenship.

### CHAPTER 3: PERFORMING “STUDENT”

Traditional American public schools have a history of teaching students how to memorize, how to copy, and how to obey the teacher— but they have failed to engage students in learning how to *think* (Hale 2011). Today, critics of the pedagogies and curriculum taught in public schools have said that it leads to “miseducation,” in which students develop a sense of false consciousness (Watson n.d.). Paulo Freire (1972) critiques traditional pedagogy using the “banking” metaphor that describes how teachers attempt to educate their students by filling their minds with knowledge as if they were mere empty containers.

In Georgia, only 13.2% of Latinos over the age of 25 have achieved a bachelor’s degree, in contrast to 40% of whites. Georgia implemented a number of policies that contribute to this educational disparity, including “English-only” curricula in public schools, an absence of culturally relevant pedagogies and curricula in the classroom, limited resources for non-English speaking parents, and a written English exam prior to high school graduation (Muñoz et al. 2014). Consequently, only one third of Latinos graduate from high school each year. While there are clearly many socioeconomic and structural factors at play, the absence of culturally relevant curricula and pedagogies in the classroom undeniably contribute to the educational disparity between white and Latino students in the Georgia public education system.

In this chapter, I explore how undocumented Latino youths’ experiences at PTU can lead to a commitment to activism. To begin, I present an overview of the relevant pedagogies that PTU was founded upon in connection to cognitive liberation theory. I then discuss how students first become involved in PTU and its initial effect on their identity formation. Here, I reveal how

the formation of a collective identity empowered the students. In this context, the term “empower” is used to describe the act of making an individual more confident in taking control of their life and claiming rights. Next, through participant observation, I examine the effects of the PTU classroom on student identity. I stress that the focus on student-initiative and culturally relevant curricula empowered students and developed their critical consciousness. As a result of these influences, students were able to discard their stigmatized “illegal” identity by performing the social role of “student” as empowered and critical thinkers. Through the performance of the “student” identity within an educational space, PTU students performed cultural citizenship. Lastly, I analyze student reflections on their experiences at PTU through the lens of cognitive liberation theory to show how PTU pedagogy successfully mobilized students into activism.

### ***Pedagogical Framework***

The overlapping transformative pedagogies used by Paulo Freire, “liberty education model” (1972), and Ella Baker, in the creation of freedom schools during the civil rights movement (Watson n.d.)— seek to transform the educational environment in an effort to empower students as agents for social change (Hale 2011; Freire 1972). Primarily, Freire and Baker recognized the importance of education for future social mobility and political freedom. Through the incorporation of culturally relevant curricula and pedagogies into the classroom, they believed that students would be able to directly engage in their lessons (Hale 2011). They also emphasized the importance of teaching through an anti-hegemonic lens, so students could think critically about history and be able to make the connection with their own position in society, expanding their critical consciousness (Watson n.d.).

Baker and Freire believed in equalizing the power dynamic between students and teachers in the classroom. The hierarchal role of teacher would be dismantled, allowing the students to learn through student-centered pedagogy (Hale 2011). Students would learn how to take self-initiative that would empower them to be future leaders for social change. Social and political activism were also treated as crucial components in freedom schools. In opposition to “banking,” students were encouraged to learn through engaging in protests, demonstrations, and boycotts. In these unconventional learning spaces students could learn through experiences outside of the classroom (Freire 1972; Watson n.d.; Hale 2011).

Following Baker’s freedom school model, PTU was created to motivate undocumented students to use their education as a means for political activism and social change. The school was founded on the principle of “education for liberation not accreditation,” so students come to learn, develop critical consciousness, and movement leadership skills. In line with this, Michelle reflected on PTU’s freedom school model as a mechanism to address the bans on higher education in Georgia:

When I first joined PTU it was more stressed that going to class was in itself a form of activism. Because, like the reason PTU started was to protest the ban. That undocumented students are banned from attending colleges, our way of protesting was gonna be that we’re gonna go to class. Go to the places or get the instruction that we’re being denied. So I feel like it was really stressed when I first joined that us even being in this classroom was pretty revolutionary. And so, activism and class was like one and the same I feel (Michelle).

The curricula used at PTU was also designed to achieve student empowerment and mobilization for social change (Soltis 2015). Through participant observation, I learned that the school aligned its curricula with the social movement concept of “cognitive liberation,” to establish cognitive

goals for student mobilization (Soltis 2015). In cognitive liberation theory, mobilization can only occur after the affected people have recognized their own oppression. There are three cognitions that must be experienced: 1) recognition of injustice through its systematic reoccurrence in history; 2) an assertion of rights; 3) the belief that change occurs through collective action (McAdam 1982). PTU worked to inspire cognitive liberation in the classroom through a combination of Freire and Bakkers pedagogies and a human rights framework. As part of my fieldwork, I attended a PTU panel where I learned that the school viewed its pedagogy and curricula as a mechanism to mobilize students through the process of cognitive liberation. Below, I have outlined what was presented on at the panel as to how PTU helps students undergo cognitive liberation.

First, the students experience a “recognition of injustice” through the development of a critical consciousness, connecting their own experiences and life circumstances to what has occurred in history. To do this, PTU incorporates culturally relevant material into the classroom that is relatable to the students. By learning about their personal cultural histories in a classroom environment, students are able to consider their cultural background as applicable knowledge contributing to their academic growth. PTU’s approach allows students to engage personally with the material, pushing them to think critically about the connection between history and the oppression they face in society today. In this way, the students develop a critical consciousness.

Second, a human rights framework in the classroom conveys to students that they possess inherent dignity and rights as human beings, regardless of the discriminatory actions of the state of Georgia. They learn that the U.S. constitutional framework is insufficient in addressing the

rights of undocumented people. The students are introduced to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and Article 26, the human right to education, which states:

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available, and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit (“United Nations” n.d.).

A human rights framework is used to transform the way undocumented students view themselves, teaching them that “no human being is ‘illegal,’” and that they possess inherent rights.

Third, the belief that things can change through collective action is cultivated in the classroom by learning about historical social movements. As PTU calls itself a “modern-day freedom school,” it emphasizes the connection between the contemporary struggle of undocumented students, and the struggle of African American students during the 1960s. Both inside and outside of the classroom, students learn and engage in direct action and non-violent civil disobedience that is reflective of the strategies and tactics used in 1960s Black Freedom Movement and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Some SNCC veterans have also established a relationship with PTU, allowing intergenerational knowledge and cultural traditions of the movement to be passed down to undocumented students (Soltis 2015).

In many regards, cognitive liberation theory relates to general consciousness raising that occurs in political activism. It is evident that PTU has objective goals in consciousness raising; through the construction of a new collective identity, PTU aims to spur mobilization within the student body. I address this only to emphasize that while PTU pedagogy implies self-discovery



and the development of agency, the organization has a set agenda for the students future political engagement.

### **Discovering PTU**

Post-high school graduation was an extremely difficult time for all the undocumented Latino youth I interviewed. Most of my informants occupied themselves working at low-wage service jobs that they viewed as largely temporary. The students appeared to be stuck in a state of limbo blocked from pursuing higher education. This time period for undocumented youth has been called their transition into “illegality,” as they are confronted with the constraints of their undocumented status (Chavez and Gonzales 2012). However, after the passage of DACA, many undocumented students were able to gain a work permit, a drivers’ license, and two years of lawful residency in the U.S. While DACA-mented students transition into “illegality” may not be as dire as it was pre-DACA, the discriminatory policies in higher education in Georgia caused undocumented Latino youths’ lives to become greatly stagnated. When I began my fieldwork, I hypothesized that students became involved with PTU to fight for their rights to the education they were being denied. This proved not to be the case. All of my correspondents found themselves at PTU, not because they initially wanted to get involved in activism but because they had nothing else to do.

Next, I examine what incentivized students to attend PTU, focusing on the role of external institutional, social, and cultural factors that shape undocumented Latino youth identity. Michelle, Samuel and Andrés expressed similar reasons behind why they began attending PTU:

I had no idea, like I had no thoughts of being involved in activism when I joined. I honestly just wanted to go to learn. And I was like, I’m not doing anything, I might as

well. So that's why I went... a lot of students come because they don't think they have any other options, or, they feel stuck (Michelle).

Well I had nothing else to do so, I was like, I mean it's something... I'd rather take that two-hour trip, you know at least I'm seeing something other than the walls in my room you know. So that kept me going... I guess I'll keep going to something school-related like PTU (Samuel).

I was just working all the time, two jobs, security, blowing paint. It was getting to me, I was like, very exhausted tired of the same routine. So I was like, what do I have to lose? I have a lot more to gain than lose. I've got nothing else to do, so just go see, check it out or whatever, it's only on Sundays, so I'll still be able to work. So I did go check it out and I was glad I did (Andrés).

PTU gave students something to occupy their time with. Michelle, Samuel, and Andrés all alluded to feeling “stuck” in the tedious routines of their lives. Whether it be the routine of working everyday, or sitting at home with nothing to do, PTU provided them with an outlet from the stagnant lives they had been living.

Some students disclosed that they chose to attend PTU in an effort to continue their education, in the hopes that it would help them be admitted into college. Alexa, who had been at PTU since it first began, explained this to me:

[Students] come because they heard PTU can help people get into school. And so they come mostly because of that. Because they would see like, “ Oh this person got to college after going to PTU, or this person...” I think they came into it kinda expecting just like, “We will get you to school, you know?” (Alexa).

Frequently, students misunderstood that PTU was a non-accredited institution and thought they would receive college credit by attending. They did not understand that PTU was part of the larger undocumented student movement. According to Michelle, once students realized how heavily involved in activism PTU was, they had to decide if it was something they wanted to be involved in:

A lot of students don't know exactly what to expect coming in, so if you're actually in class and then you realize like, oh it's part of a greater movement of student activism then a lot of students aren't into that. Because I totally see like, not everyone is gonna be into activism, and that's totally cool but it is something like, if you're gonna be in PTU, you should be, you should at least want to get involved in the student movement, in the greater movement that it's part of. And I feel like, that's why a lot of people don't come back (Michelle).

Michelle explained how if students did not want to become involved in activism, they inevitably left PTU. From participant observation, it was apparent that the older students were all involved in activism, and there was only a handful of new students who were not involved.

Students became involved in PTU because it provided an outlet from their daily routine, it was an opportunity to continue learning, and it brought the normalcy of school back into their lives. This highlights how undocumented student involvement was not a response to a desire to become an "activist," but a combination of many factors that led students to discover PTU.

### ***Collective Identity Formation***

Whether their mom saw it on Facebook, read about it in the newspaper, or heard about it on the radio, nobody learned about PTU through word of mouth. "Undocumented students don't hang out together," the students repeatedly told me. It had become some what of an inside joke. When I inquired what they meant by this, they told me that the fear of deportation was so prevalent amongst the undocumented community that it would be too great a risk to have undocumented people all grouped together in one place. Some of the students informed me that when they first heard about PTU being a school for undocumented students they thought it was a hoax. They joked that they had half expected to arrive at the location on the first day to see ICE waiting to begin deportation proceedings.

In opposition to social network theory (Castells 2012; Bankston 2014), the fear that drives the decisions and actions of undocumented families appears to keep them isolated from forming undocumented networks. The undocumented taboo led students to grow up not knowing any of their friends to be undocumented. To find themselves in a classroom filled with other undocumented students was a very surreal experience for all of my informants. Amanda described the surprise she felt when she walked into PTU for the first time and recognized some of her peers from high school:

To realize that everyone in the room knew the students in the room were undocumented — Which has never ever happened in my life. Like nobody ever says they're undocumented. But in a way, just sitting in that room you confessed to it— to being undocumented. And seeing that even some of my peers, like I found some of the peers that I went to high school were sitting in those chairs, and I was like, “oh my god! I didn't know you were undocumented!” (Amanda).

Jessica and David experienced similar surprise when they first walked into PTU.

However, while Amanda appeared excited to be surrounded by other undocumented students for the first time in her life, Jessica and David found it to be socially uncomfortable:

Because I had never, been in a classroom setting where so many people were alike to me. And it was really weird, like having everybody share I guess their undocumented stories and everything (Jessica).

I guess that, and another thing is you know everyone there is undocumented. So I guess like, I don't know, it's super awkward because you've never experienced that before (David).

Undocumented students were not used to sitting in a room where everyone knew each others' undocumented status. As Amanda said, “just sitting in that room you confessed to it, to being undocumented.” Goffman (1959) suggests that social setting and social interactions largely define the social identity that one performs. The setting of PTU allowed undocumented Latino

youth to perform a social role they had never performed publicly before: “undocumented student.” However, as students had internalized the stigma about their undocumented status, they felt uncomfortable to be performing it publicly (Goffman 1963).

Alexa experienced social awkwardness because she assumed her status was the only commonality she shared with the other PTU students:

I definitely think like that if we had met in a different setting, I don't know if we would have been friends. But there was this like, one constant that made us all the same which is being undocumented (Alexa).

Although undocumented students came from very similar backgrounds, there was an assumption amongst many of the students that their experiences being undocumented were unique to them.

Jessica described this:

For some reason I thought like I'm the only one going through this experience, or even though they're undocumented they might have had a different experience. So I didn't realize how similar our lives had been up until that point (Jessica).

As a result of the students' initial assumption that 1) undocumented people do not become friends with one another and 2) undocumented students' experiences are unique; forming connections with other students was initially difficult for all of my informants. Yet, over time, undocumented students began to realize that their experiences growing up were not unique to them, but shared by others in the undocumented community.

While it took most students time to open up, Amanda, Jessica, and David acknowledged how incredible it was to find themselves in a safe space for the first time in their lives. A “safe space” describes a shared space, often in an educational institution, where a marginalized group can avoid the stereotypes and the perceived stigma they face in mainstream society. The safe

space created in the classroom at PTU allowed students to speak openly about their experiences growing up undocumented and have it be validated by their peers.

So having that, I guess that safe place to let other people know about your situation. To make a community out of, a community that's hard to get together because we're invisible and try to stay that way. So I don't know, I was very moved by that, just by that thing that we were all undocumented (Amanda).

It was the first time I think I had told like a complete story of being undocumented. And being able to say like, "these are the thing I have to deal with on a regular basis as an undocumented student," and just having everybody nod their heads along like yeah, it was the first time I'd ever done that (Jessica).

At PTU, you can be open with each other and everyone will understand... you don't have to be ashamed of who you are or anything. So I feel like, that's what's different from like any other classrooms I've been in (David).

David and Jessica described the experience of having a group full of people "understand" and "nod their heads" when they told their stories. This illustrates how the students were able to receive recognition of their shared experience, something they had lacked from their peers in high school. David also mentioned that this experience was different than in high school because at PTU "you don't have to be ashamed of who you are..." In being surrounded by undocumented peers, students found themselves in a social setting where their identity was no longer stigmatized. This highlights the influence of social settings in constructions of stigma (Goffman 1959; 1963). While the undocumented stigma was constructed through dominant ideologies present in mainstream society, the safe space of PTU created a social environment where the undocumented stigma no longer existed.

Moreover, the presence of undocumented peers helped students to reclaim their undocumented status as an empowering part of their identity. Sebastian expressed how being

surrounded by his PTU peers was empowering because he stopped feeling ashamed of his undocumented status.

I mean they are great people they're awesome people. They're very inspiring, very filled with hope, so you know it's like a safe haven where you can say, "I am this, and I'm not afraid of being this."...being in PTU really helped me feel more comfortable to say, "I am undocumented," you know that's part of who I am. It's part of my character, that has somehow been able to get me to where I am right now (Sebastian).

In finding himself in a safe space surrounded by undocumented peers, Sebastian was able to publicly present himself as an "undocumented student," embracing the stigma he had always tried to conceal (Goffman 1963). In doing so, Sebastian transformed the previously discredited part of his identity into an empowering part of who he was.

Similarly, Amanda reflected on the moment when she first walked into the PTU classroom and the influence it had on how she perceived her own identity.

I remember when I first came into the class it was just these students who were extremely proud of being undocumented, and they were open about it. And, you see how much they've grown how much they love each other, more than the other, because they have embraced that "undocumentedness." That to take, this word that has burdened me my entire life and make it empowering. I don't even know how to describe the feeling... But coming out as undocumented also... I guess for me it was, a process of that empowerment. To unshamelessly, I want to say admit, but confess to my "undocumentedness." And make my experiences valid and known and not be invisible anymore (Amanda).

Amanda had never witnessed a group of undocumented students present themselves as proud to be undocumented before. However, in watching her peers embrace their status, Amanda became moved to perform the social role of proud "undocumented student," after confirming the social identity through her undocumented peers (Goffman 1959). Once students were able to realize the shared experiences they had with one another, a collective identity emerged within the student body. Students began to reclaim their undocumented identity; transforming it from a place of

internalized stigma to that of a tool for their own empowerment. This aligns with Goffman (1963), who claims stigma can be overcome by performing activities that the stigma was meant to deny access to. In performing the role of “college student,” the students acted out a role that their undocumented status was meant to restrict them from. Thus, through the formation of a new collective “undocumented student” identity, the students overcame their stigma. This also illustrates the performance of cultural citizenship, as the students claimed their right to belong in an education space in defiance of the bans (Rosaldo 1994). In this way, they contested state and societal pressures that had labeled them to be criminals by collectively performing an identity to that of American citizens.

### **Everyday Life at PTU**

As the majority of undocumented students work full-time jobs, PTU was only able to meet once a week on Sundays. When the freedom school first started, it consisted of one three-hour college-level history class. The school expanded its curricula to include three classes each semester. This semester, the PTU class schedule consisted of three blocks: Block I: Arts Elective, Block II: A People’s History of the United States, and Block III: Health and Well-being.

In Block I: Arts Elective, students were given the option to choose between three different electives: Theater of the Oppressed, Graphic Design, or PTU Singers, based on their individual interests. Every student participated in Block II: A People’s History of the United States, as the history class is the main focus of PTU pedagogy. In Block III: Health and Well-being, students were given the option to choose between Meditation and Yoga class, or the new PTU Track Team. Through a combination of informant interviews and participant observation of classes (theater, history, and meditation and yoga), I examine how the school’s pedagogical



framework is applied in the classroom in order to empower students and develop their critical consciousness.

***Block I: Theater of the Oppressed***

*“What do you want to be your dream job?”*

It’s the first day of the semester. The theater professor, Professor S, has asked all of the students to stand in a circle and share with the class what they want to do in the future. Most of the students said that they wanted to get an education, but they were not sure yet what they wanted to do after that. Inspired by Freire’s (1972) liberatory education model, Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1985) uses theatrical tools to address real-world collective struggles. Boal believed that theater could be used as a means to rehearse real-life actions for social change. The audience and the actors work collectively to come up with solutions to the oppression they face in real-life, as they seek to create their ideal world. The PTU theater class attempted to incorporate elements of Boal’s pedagogy into the class. Professor S’s opening question draws upon Boal’s notion of the construction of the “ideal” through theater. In asking the students to imagine themselves in their future jobs, Professor S prodded the students to consider their lives if they were not banned from attending college. By constructing their “ideal” reality, the students could begin to work collectively on ways to overcome their oppression and achieve their life objectives.

After the exercise, Professor S explained how theater could be used to to develop life skills that would serve them in their future careers. She claimed theater could be used to develop public speaking skills that would help students feel comfortable with their voices and bodies.

This, in turn, would help the students develop leadership skills. Professor S outlined the objectives of the theater class on the board:

COURAGE  
COMMITMENT  
Will lead to  
COMPETENCE  
CONFIDENCE

The *courage* and *commitment* that it takes to perform in a theater class leads to *competence* in their everyday lives, which consequently builds *confidence*. Next, Professor S described the connection between theater and activism. On one hand, the development of life skills such as public speaking and the ability to move people emotionally would help in their activist work. On the other, theater represents activism in how it has the power to change how people think and see the world. Professor S emphasized further that theater is a safe space for students to express their vulnerabilities and take risks that they would generally not feel comfortable taking in real life. This can even include playing a role that an individual cannot play in real life, and experience what the role can be like. Theater allows for real life skill development and experimentation without the consequences of real life.

Next, Professor S informed the class that this was not going to be a typical theater class where they would read and perform scripts from Shakespeare. Instead, the students would be using Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1980), and *To Write in the Light of Freedom: The Newspapers of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools* (2015), as primary and secondary sourced material to create a performance. Students would be expected to write their own performance pieces by incorporating the primary source historical voices from the texts.

The overarching goal of the class would be to make the connection between civil rights and the undocumented student movement. The students would put on a collaborative theater performance at the end of the semester that would function as a form of activism; they would engage the audience in the connection between the two movements.

One student suggested that they could create a performance that incorporated three different social identities: undocumented students, DACA-mented students, and allies. The narrative in the performance would be about how these three groups came together at PTU to fight for justice. He said excitedly, “There would be no ending because injustice never ends!” Without meaning to, the student alluded to Boal’s pedagogy, in which theater is always unfinished so that different possible actions can be rehearsed to address injustice. The student’s idea was greeted with enthusiasm from his peers. The following discussion revolved around what the end goal would be from the performance. The line that distinguished a theater class discussion from an action-planning meeting quickly faded away. “What would we like the audience to take away from this performance? How do we want to change their minds?” The students excitedly discussed potential goals for the piece of theater, as it had swiftly become another political action they would be performing.

The way that Professor S made the subject of theater relatable to the students lives and their own skill development, represents liberatory education in action. In helping the students make the connection between theater, their interests in activism, and their future skill development, Professor S sparked the students’ interest in theater. As a result, students began to take their own initiative in class. Student-initiative was apparent at the end of class when the students began their own action-planning discussion of how to create a theater piece. Boal’s

pedagogy was also incorporated throughout the lesson, as the students' sought to create a piece that would actively engage the audience in rehearsing possible solutions to their oppressive circumstances.

The students were also encouraged to use theater as a "rehearsal for real life," so they could perform vulnerabilities and take risks that they would not feel comfortable performing in real life. This directly ties into Goffman's discussion on performance of different social roles in different settings (1959). Students could use the space created in theater to perform social roles that made them vulnerable in public, such as performing the social role of "undocumented student." Finally, by making the connection between civil rights and the undocumented student movement today, Professor S prodded the students to realize systematic injustices throughout history and cultivate the belief that change can happen through collective action.

### ***Block II: A People's History of the United States***

"What class do you want?" said Professor M. By this she meant, what style of class do the students learn the best in: should it be majority discussion based, small group work, or activity based? Professor M told me she did not like to do discussion only because she worried it did not connect to enough of the students. She preferred to integrate fun activities into the classroom that the students could better engage with. This is reflective of the traditional freedom school model in which students become active participants in their courses, often given the opportunity to "role-play, dramatize, and reenact the lessons they learned" (Hale 2011:334).

Professor M explained to the class the course expectations. Weekly, the students were expected to read a chapter of *A Peoples' History of the United States*, and annotate it thoroughly. They were also expected to write down six main points that they took away from the reading.

The students would then discuss as a class what they believed were the main points of the chapter. Professor M treated the students as college-level students by placing high expectations on them that pushed students out of their comfort zones. Each time a student spoke up, Professor M responded positively to the student's input; either by asking them to explain something further or summarizing back to the student what they said. In this way, Professor M worked to empower the students by challenging them to think critically while simultaneously developing their confidence through positive reinforcements.

Professor M also made sure to check in with the students each time she summarized a point being discussed, "Am I correct?" In doing this, she shifted the student-teacher power dynamic to give students more agency in leading the discussion. Professor M's role became the role of the facilitator; making sure the students stayed on task, learned from one another, and were able to communicate effectively. She worked to keep the discussion moving forward but made sure to leave the critiques and interpretations of the text to be self-directed by the students. The equalization of the student to teacher power dynamic in the classroom is another pedagogical strategy characteristic of freedom schools and the liberatory education model (Freire 1972; Hale 2011). During class Professor M repeatedly mentioned that she would like to hear from the students who had not spoken yet; in an effort to make the classroom environment as inclusive of as many voices as possible. The class contributed to the discussion to reach a collective understanding of the chapter they had just read.

The first chapter discussed by the class was on Christopher Columbus. While everyone learned in high school that Columbus discovered the Americas, at PTU, the students learned how Columbus invaded America and massacred thousands of indigenous people. Focusing on this

subject area, Professor M provided a history through an anti-hegemonic lens. After establishing the historical discrepancies as a group, Professor M shifted the lesson towards thinking more critically about how the lesson related to human rights. She began by giving a brief overview of the UDHR and the International Criminal Court (ICC). Then she handed out a sheet labeled, “Office of The UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide.” The sheet defined genocide, followed by a list of seven factors and explanations as to what constituted a genocide. After the students read over the sheet, Professor M asked the students to decide if Christopher Columbus was on trial in the ICC, would he be convicted for instigating a “genocidal act?” After working in small groups, the class reconvened and decided he should be convicted. Through student-centered small group discussions, Professor M prodded students to consider historical injustice through a human rights framework.

To end the class, Professor M turned the discussion to the national holiday of Columbus Day, asking the students what they thought about it being celebrated. “Why is Columbus Day a national holiday yet we don’t have a national Indigenous Peoples’ Day?” In ending the class by connecting Columbus’s history to the present day, Professor M wanted the students to make the connection between the historical oppression of different social groups in the past and the current systematic oppression of social groups in the U.S.

Modeled after traditional freedom school pedagogy, Professor M worked to create a transformative educational environment for students. In the class, students were pushed to think critically about historical events and make connections to their own life circumstances to develop a critical consciousness. At the same time, Professor M worked to create a safe space in the classroom in order to empower students to participate and take self-initiative in their education.

This helped students to develop the confidence and critical consciousness needed to transform their social identity from “illegal” to that of an empowered and critical thinking “undocumented student.”

### ***Block III: Health and Well-being***

Freedom schools were known to incorporate extracurricular classes such as: dance, drama, art, music, and physical education, into their curricula (Hale 2011). This is reflected in the PTU curricula, as this semester included an acapella group, a graphic design class, a theater class, a meditation and yoga class, as well as a track team.

This was the second semester that the students had a meditation and yoga class, which was a huge success. While personal well-being and mindfulness practices are generally emphasized in meditation and yoga classes, the PTU class focused less on mastery of technique. Instead, the teachers placed emphasis on how students could use the exercises they learned in the class in their everyday lives. For example, learning about breathing and exercise techniques could provide them with a mechanism for relaxation amidst the anxiety and stress they experienced during the day.

The PTU Track Team was a new student-led initiative this semester. It was promoted in the schedule as a “Student-*Run* Initiative” (pun intended), so there was no outside involvement from faculty. The students were very excited to be starting a track team. There was lots of laughter and enthusiasm, as the group elected a team captain— Sebastian. While participating in the mediation and yoga class, I heard chants coming from the track team as they pumped themselves up before the run:

*UNDOCUMENTED!*  
*UNAFRAID!*

This was followed by cheers, hollering, and clapping as the students ran outside. In line with the student-initiative emphasized in the academic classroom, the PTU track team provided another outlet for students to become empowered through self-initiative. Being part of a team was also a great avenue for students to perform their new collective “student” identity publicly, as demonstrated by the chant above. Extracurricular activities allowed undocumented students to cultivate life skills to be applied in their daily lives.

### **Undergoing Cognitive Liberation**

PTU’s mission statement was, “To empower undocumented youth and fulfill their human right to education.” To achieve this, the PTU classroom was modeled after traditional freedom schools and liberty education pedagogy, in an effort to mobilize the students for collective action through cognitive liberation. In the following section, I highlight how students at PTU experienced the three stages of cognitive liberation. My analysis is based off of students’ reflections on their experiences at PTU.

#### ***Stage 1: Recognition of Injustice***

The first stage of cognitive liberation is “recognition of injustice through its reoccurrence in history.” This happened at PTU in tandem with the incorporation of course materials that was relatable to the students’ lives. By incorporating anti-hegemonic culturally relevant curricula, students were able to personally relate to what they were learning, animating student interest and enthusiasm in the classroom. As a result, students were better able to engage critically with the course material as they began to recognize historical injustice in connection to their own lived



experiences. Michelle reflected on her Mexican and American history class. She expressed that her interest in the course material came from learning about Mexican and American history in relation to her own identity:

Class that year was Mexican and American history, and how they're interconnected... So, it was basically just a history class... It might sound kind of boring, but honestly to me it was like super interesting, because I knew about Mexico, and some history about Mexico from what my mom taught me, and a little bit of what I researched just because I was interested. But not in any academic sense, not at school or anything. And actually being in a classroom and learning about Mexican history was the coolest thing to me (Michelle).

While Michelle had learned about American history in public school, this was the first time she had had the opportunity to learn about the other side of her identity—the Mexican side—in an academic environment. Michelle learned that her Mexican culture, something she could personally connect to and had a source of knowledge to draw from, was worthy of academic discussion. This represents a crucial element of liberatory education pedagogy: students become empowered by the realization that they possess sources of knowledge from personal experience that connects to their course material (Soltis 2015).

Moreover, having a personal connection with the material is what led David to take initiative and deepen his own understanding of an issue he had been learning about in class.

I think it's definitely the classes and the students but it's also yourself. Like going home and researching by yourself. That's definitely something I did. Especially on the PTU website, they have like a list of all these articles and things to inform yourself and I've read every single article I think, already. Yeah, so that's definitely the first thing I did to like, "get woke" (David).

The initiative that David took to educate himself outside of the classroom draws attention to the personal investment and interest he had in the material he was learning in his classes. David's use of the expression "get woke" further alludes to being woken up. While this is open to

interpretation, it is possible that David was describing the awakening of his critical consciousness. After developing a personal investment in the material being taught in the class, students were pushed to thinking critically about history through an anti-hegemonic lens. This caused students to have to “unlearn” much of what they had previously learned in high school.

Jessica elaborated on this:

I think just probably learning about— or rather “unlearning” everything that was taught to me in high school....and going into PTU, it was sort of like they made me question a lot of the stuff I learned. And they taught me a lot of stuff beyond what I thought I knew. So I think that was something very challenging for me in the beginning (Jessica).

Jessica’s description of having to “unlearn” everything from her past education emphasizes the way that PTU taught students to think critically about history in order to develop a critical consciousness.

In Andrés’ reflection, he explained how his experiences in PTU classes were helpful to him in his day to day life and consequently shaped the way he saw the world around him.

I felt like, they’re very helpful, especially in the real life. It helps you also being prepared for college. And then like, public speaking. It helps you, public speaking helps you any time! It can help you in classes that you can use out of PTU, not just PTU, is not just school— it’s real life things. I’m taking a theater class, I’m trying to be more comfortable in public, or PTU track team, I’m feeling more, being more healthy or more exercise is always good. Also, this track team! The... People’s History class. That’s also, learning the story, like the actual stories, that makes you more conscious of how history is. Of how some people might think how this is not a coincidence that I’m not going to school right now. It’s, history, history repeats itself. If you learn from history, you can better yourself now (Andrés).

Andrés description of the “helpfulness” of PTU classes illuminates how the skills he developed in his classes could be applied to his daily life and interests. In the theater class, he was working to develop life skills such as public speaking that would serve him in his life and in activism; he wanted to become more physically healthy through the track team; and his history class led to the

development of critical consciousness. As he said, “This is not a coincidence that I’m not going to school right now...history repeats itself.” Andrés made the connection between injustice in history and the reoccurrence of injustice that he faced in his own life; underscoring the first stage of cognitive liberation. In being exposed to different perspectives in the classroom, students began to recognize injustice, which allowed them to look critically at the world around them and their position in it.

### ***Stage 2: Assertion of Rights***

The second stage of cognitive liberation, “an assertion of rights,” was a part of PTU curricula through the incorporation of the UDHR into class discussions. This was previously demonstrated through participant observation in the history class. While the undocumented students are not guaranteed civil rights, the UDHR serves to empower students by proving to them that they are deserving of rights as human beings, regardless of their status. Michelle recalled the moment she first learned about the UDHR:

There’s no way I would have been involved in what I am now if I had not taken that class ...when I learned about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And that was kind of like, wow, in my life. Because I feel like I had no idea about human rights as like— I knew the words “human rights,” but I didn’t know that there was this declaration that people in all the world were able to, or they were afforded these certain rights for the simple fact that they were human. To me that was not a known thing in my life, so when I learned about that, that was just like OK, this is something I really believe in (Michelle).

This highlights an empowering moment for Michelle, as she had not perviously realized people possessed legitimate rights without citizenship. Michelle further alluded to this as a catalyst behind her current involvement in undocumented student activism.

Isaac described a similar moment to Michelle, when he had the revelation at PTU that he possessed inherent human rights:

Before I went to PTU I was an “illegal.” And I was like, it’s one of those terms, I didn’t have— my conscious was not as big...I did not believe education was a human right. I didn’t believe that I had many rights... So when I went to PTU I started learning... But I had to definitely change the way I thought about myself...because before that I just felt powerless, like I don’t have a right, like it’s better for me to keep quiet and not make noise. And then when I got to PTU, it was like no fuck that. You’ve gotta speak up... You have to drop the “illegal” word, you know? No human being is illegal. Every human being that’s born has human rights, from the time they are born (Isaac).

Isaac’s realization that he possessed human rights empowered him to disassociate from his stigmatized “illegal” identity, as he realized, “no human being is illegal.” He also described how PTU helped him change the way he thought about himself, transforming his presentation of self from “powerless” to empowered. For both Michelle and Isaac, their assertion of rights was a significant occasion that pushed them into activism, highlighting the second stage of cognitive liberation.

### ***Stage 3: Belief in Change through Collective Action***

Third, “the belief that change can happen through collective action,” was demonstrated at PTU through the incorporation of social movement theory and history curricula. In speaking with Sebastian and Samuel, they recalled how social movement class made them aware of how collective action and civil disobedience can be used to fight injustice:

You get to see what you learn on the text book come to life. You get to see how people in the 1960s were fighting for their educational rights. For their rights to higher education, and you get to see how it’s happening right now. And the ways that you can learn from them and implement those same policies, those same techniques that they use to try and get your point across and bring unity to the people. It’s great (Sebastian).

We had the, a class called Mass Incarceration and how we focused on the similarities between the civil rights movement and this movement... you look at tactics they used and civil disobedience was one of them. So we studied that, and how effective it is in changing polices and garnering attention.... I liked civil disobedience. It’s very effective

in history. It's been proven to provoke some sort of change. I think I like it, it's a good way to bring attention to a cause that needs attention (Samuel).

Sebastian and Samuel's reflections bring to light how they became enthused by the knowledge of historical social movements they acquired in the PTU classroom. Not only did it give them strategies and techniques to implement in their own fight for justice, but it gave them the motivation and belief that they could effect policies through civil disobedience.

Along similar lines, the combination of knowledge about how collective action works and a belief that it *will* work was what propelled Michelle into activism:

Going into another course and learning about how different groups throughout history have used their identity and used their collective power to change things for themselves and in movements...and learning about that in history— that gives you so much sense of self I guess. I don't know. The classes that I took at Peachtree U definitely made me realize like wow, I can be a part of something (Michelle).

To cultivate a belief in collective action requires cultivating a belief in a collective first. Michelle alluded to the importance of this when she said PTU made her realize she could “be a part of something.” At PTU, the combination of teaching pedagogy and classroom material helped students to become empowered and cognitively liberated for social action. However, a new found confidence and critical consciousness does not always lead to activism if it is not accompanied by the formation of a collective identity (Castells 2012). Collective identity is formed through shared experiences that lead to recognition of injustice and eventually collective mobilization. McAdam (1982) asserts that cognitive liberation relies on strong interpersonal ties and social integration, often in a “stable group setting,” to be successful (51).

In essence, cognitive liberation requires a *collective* critical consciousness, which is more likely to form in a “stable group-setting,” such as in the PTU classroom. The implementation of

anti-hegemonic culturally relevant material in the classroom helped students to relate historical injustice to the injustice they faced in society today as undocumented students. This helped to develop students' critical consciousness. In learning about the UDHR, students were empowered by the realization that they possessed inherent human rights, regardless of their status. This gave students something to believe in, creating a desire in some students to actively claim their rights. Students were also able to cultivate a belief in collective action through learning about historical social movements. The students' reflections draw attention to how the PTU classroom facilitated students' cognitive liberation in an effort to mobilize students for collective action.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, my findings highlight how students' experiences in the classroom at PTU had a transformative effect on their identity. PTU functioned as a safe space where undocumented students were able to form a collective identity. This became a tool for collective empowerment, as the students validated each other's experiences and social identity. In doing this, they transformed their stigmatized identity into the performance of "undocumented student," characterized as critical, engaged students, prepared to fight for their rights to education. At the same time, the pedagogy and material used in the classroom empowered students by pushing them to develop critical consciousness and leadership skills in preparation for future roles in activism.

This chapter also illustrated how PTU students perform cultural citizenship by claiming educational space for themselves. In doing this, the students asserted their right to belong within Georgia's higher education system in spite of the bans currently blocking their admission. This further draws attention to how undocumented Latino youth perform citizenship as an "identity,"

as they appeared to act, behave, and perceive themselves as part of the national community. In the final chapter, I move on to explore how undocumented Latino youth performed cultural citizenship through public civil disobedience actions at PTU, and the effect these actions had on their identity formation.

## CHAPTER 4: PERFORMING “ACTIVIST”

Undocumented Latino youth face limited socioeconomic, educational, legal, and political capital in the U.S., yet they exhibit higher levels of civic engagement than many other demographics of youth.

[Undocumented youth] are motivated to improve the lives of those around them because the needs are vast and their parents have sacrificed deeply to offer them better lives. Many retain a sense of community obligation that contrasts with the U.S. celebration of individualism and nuclear family (Seif 2011:72).

Seif (2011) claims that undocumented youth become motivated to engage in activism because: a) they feel a strong sense of obligation to help their parents who made sacrifices to bring them to the U.S. to have a better life, and b) undocumented youth’s cultural upbringing differs from their American born peers, in that it embraces family and community more than the individualistic ideologies prevalent in American society. While there may be some validity to these two claims, they make large assumptions given the limited scholarship written on undocumented youth activism.

This extended case study complicates Seif’s (2011) claims that undocumented youth become motivated into activism in order to improve the lives of their family and community out of a sense of obligation. My analysis supports Gonzales’ (2008) claim that suggests civic engagement amongst youth with low levels of human capital is primarily motivated through positive political socialization and mobilized through formal and informal networks. As I established in the previous chapter, my findings revealed that undocumented students had little to no motivation to become involved in activism before they became involved in PTU. Their



motivation to become involved in PTU arose from a lack of “anything better to do,” a desire to find normalcy in their lives again, and/or a commitment to continue their education by whatever means possible. It was not the case that the students became involved in activism because they experienced a sense of obligation to their families and communities.

Rather, my findings stressed that the students’ motivation to become involved in activism arose from the formation of a collective identity and critical consciousness in the PTU classroom. The development of these two decisive parts of their “student” identity empowered the students, which prepared them for their future involvement in activism. This chapter explores how PTU also worked to cultivate learning outside of the classroom through civil disobedience actions that empowered undocumented students to become movement leaders through their experiences in activism. Thus, while students’ *initial* involvement in activism was largely driven by the influence of PTU, their *continued* involvement was characterized by a responsibility they felt towards their communities.

In this final empirical chapter, I draw attention to the transformation of social identity that undocumented Latino youth experienced as they transitioned from performing “illegal” to “undocumented student,” to “undocumented activist.” First, I examine the transition students made from solely attending PTU classes to becoming involved in PTU actions. I highlight the positive socialization factors that pulled students in, emphasizing the sense of empowerment students received from their initial experiences in activism. I move on to analyze participant observations from the most recent PTU civil disobedience action to illustrate the influence of collective identity and community on student engagement. I emphasize that collective identity worked to maintain enthusiasm and reduced fear within activism, which resulted in a strong

sense of community amongst participants. Lastly, I examine students' commitment to activism through performing the "activist" identity. This chapter also brings to light the performance of cultural citizenship by PTU students as they claimed recognition, rights, and belonging in the public sphere in spite of their noncitizen status.

### **Empowering Initial Experiences**

#### ***The Socialization Factor***

There were many factors to consider before getting involved in PTU activism. Michelle and Alexa recalled how DACA had not yet passed when they first began attending PTU classes, so their parents did not allow them to participate in activism because they did not want them to risk public exposure. Jessica and her brother Samuel also reflected on how their parents had not allowed them to participate in PTU actions before DACA because of the risk. However, even after DACA passed, socialization played a role in whether students became involved in activism. Jessica recounted why she had initially stayed away from PTU actions:

I think last year was really when I began to get really involved in activism. When I first got into PTU I was sort of shy about getting involved in activism...I felt like everybody had been there for a while and I felt sort of out of place because I didn't really know what was going on (Jessica).

Jessica described how feeling shy around her new PTU peers, as well as a lack of knowledge about activism, caused her to "not really get involved in activism" when she first began at PTU. This highlights how the socialization process at PTU correlated with the time it took for students to become involved in activism.

Samuel also described how he had gradually become involved in PTU activism through socialization. He explained how in waiting for the bus after PTU class every Sunday he slowly

became involved in action-planning meetings with other PTU students, as many of the more involved PTU students stayed after class to plan actions and make posters. Samuel elaborated on his socialization experience:

Once I started getting a little bit more involved with the activist side of things, you know that was like a connection I think that most students had before I got there. Because they're like so involved that you know they'd always talk about the next action or how it went or things like that. And I wasn't really a part of it. So I guess once I started going I had a little bit more to converse about in that aspect (Samuel).

Samuel illustrates the correlation between activism and socialization at PTU. Through socializing with his peers, Samuel became involved in activism, and in becoming involved in activism he was able to establish closer relationships with his peers as they had “more to converse about.” This draws attention to how the socialization that occurred in planning actions also strengthened relationships between students, contributing to a stronger sense of collective identity; further emphasizing the importance of collective identity formation in mobilizing for action (McAdam 1985; Castells 2012). Over time, as the students began to socialize more and recognize shared experiences with their peers, they gradually became involved in activism. In support of Gonzales' (2008) claim that positive political socialization motivates activism, the students transition into activism appears to have been the result of everyday socialization more than a conscious decision. That is not to say that the PTU pedagogies used in the classroom did not factor into their involvement in activism, only that the transformation each student made in the classroom into a critical and engaged student set the stage for their future role in activism.

### ***Becoming a “Big Participant”***

Alexa, Michelle, and Andrés had not considered themselves activists in the initial few civil disobedience actions they participated in. They felt they could only consider themselves

activists after they had been heavily involved in the planning and execution of an action. The first civil disobedience action that Michelle and Alexa recounted participating in was a sit-in at the president's office of one of the 5 banned universities. Their level of involvement in the action planning affected whether or not they considered themselves activists:

The action that I just said, was in front of the President's Office. So PTU planned that, and I helped a little bit, but I feel like I didn't help that much so I couldn't really claim that I was much of a help in that action...I didn't really feel like I could claim to be an activist or anything. Because I didn't feel like I was doing that much (Michelle).

Because Michelle did not feel like she had greatly contributed to the planning of this action, she felt she could not consider herself an activist at that point in time.

In contrast, Alexa saw the action at the college president's office as her first real experience in activism. She described the moment prior to the action, where she became motivated to take on more initiative in planning the action:

I remember when it got to the point where the older students were kind of... some people had left or people had gone off to school, so I was one of the older people there and I kinda felt like I had to step up a little bit... And there was this one action where we were planning, and we were having a planning meeting. Professor M— we were at her house, and she was like, "OK we're planning this action and it's completely up to you guys," and I just kinda felt the need to be like, "OK. I gotta step up. I gotta do this" (Alexa).

Alexa's recollection of having to "step up," emphasizes the role that PTU played in motivating students to take initiative in actions. In placing the students in charge of planning actions, PTU helped students develop leadership skills through experience-based learning. While Alexa had been involved in actions before, it was not until this action that she took on a leadership position in the planning stage. The encouragement Alexa received from her professor, as well as her realization that she was one of the older students, led Alexa to take on more responsibility. This reveals how professors at PTU empowered students by emphasizing that PTU actions were

“student-run,” so that students could develop leadership skills by taking on greater responsibilities.

After the action, Alexa reflected on how it felt to be more involved for the first time:

So this other action was a lot more collaborate and a lot more planned out, and it just felt like even though nothing—like our goal for that rally or that action wasn't really, like it wasn't met—I still felt like it was really successful. So I think that one was our first... my first like, real taste of activism and how I got more involved... And I just felt really, I guess involved in the whole... planning of that action. And OK this is happening because we did this. And so it just felt this sense of pride and ownership, and... and so that's kind of what motivated me to get more involved. It made me feel like I made a difference being so closely involved with them (Alexa).

Despite the action not meeting their goals, Alexa expressed that she had a positive experience due to her high level of involvement in planning. This led her to develop a sense of “pride” and “ownership” in the work she had put into the action. The positive sentiment Alexa maintained in reflection of the action demonstrates how playing an active role in the planning and execution of an action was empowering for the students. As Alexa said, “this is happening because we did this.” Alexa realized that she and her undocumented peers possessed a collective capability to enact change through their involvement in activism. This is reflective of the final stage of cognitive liberation: the belief that things can change through collective action (Mcadam 1982).

Similarly, Michelle and Andrés expressed how they were finally able to consider themselves activists after being heavily involved in an action:

When we did this one action... I was all in. I was. I felt like I was actually a big participant in planning that, and I knew what was going on from the very beginning and everything... when we did that, I feel like that's when I was like, OK I dunno, I can say that I'm an activist now. I feel like I am (Michelle).

I feel like I can prove myself. It's a good experience. I feel like because I brought myself more to “activist,” I feel like I can act more, and do more things. It gives [me] more

experience to do more things. Now I have some knowledge, good knowledge of what it is like, and what to do (Andrés).

Michelle and Andrés' reflections on their involvement in activism draw attention to the empowerment students received from their participation. The students learned through their experience outside of the classroom that they were capable of making change through taking on more responsibility, which allowed them to finally consider themselves activists. This also highlights the students' need to play out certain "manners," such as becoming heavily involved in the planning of an action before they could define their social role as "activist" (Goffman 1959).

### ***Facing Fears (and the police)***

All of my informants shared similar memories of the overwhelming stage fright, uncontrollable nerves, and terror they experienced the first time they were expected to publicly speak on a panel or to lead a chant at a protest. Undocumented student activists not only have to overcome the fear of public speaking, but the fear of public speaking about being *undocumented*. Michelle recalled the first time she was handed a microphone at an undocumented student rally:

So I would see other students and they would be... just really bad ass honestly. Like proclaiming and yelling in a police officers face saying like, "undocumented unafraid," like I thought that was really badass. I was always really nervous, but then one day someone gave me a megaphone. And I started leading chants, 'cause I was like, I guess, I dunno, I'm pretty loud. I guess I'm pretty good at leading chants. They passed it to me, and I was like "I don't know what to say," and they were just like, "say something."... that was really an awesome moment 'cause... all these feelings, that you kind of have to hide. Especially having to hide the identity and then saying it out loud. I dunno, that was a really powerful moment I guess (Michelle).

In seeing her undocumented peers speak out about their identity, Michelle was motivated to do the same. This further supports Gonzales' (2008) claim that motivation to action occurs through positive political socialization. Although Michelle was nervous, the support she received from

the other students gave her the confidence to begin a chant, and in doing so she realized, “I guess I’m pretty good at leading chants.” In this way, the other students became Michelle’s “audience,” providing her with the necessary social interaction to perform the role of “undocumented activist” (Goffman 1959). Michelle also described this as a “powerful moment” in her life because she no longer had to hide her undocumented identity in public. By facing her fears in public speaking, Michelle became empowered by her undocumented identity.

Other students recalled similar stories of overcoming fears through PTU activism.

Sebastian described the challenge he faced in speaking publicly about being undocumented on panels:

It was a little challenging, especially because I had never come out to say I was undocumented. And so, once you get over the fear of saying that you just keep going. And the passion inside you, it fuels you and it keeps the momentum going. You are able to stand there and talk all night (Sebastian).

Sebastian explained how after he got past his initial fear of public speaking, the experience became empowering for him and he became driven to “keep the momentum going.” The technique of sharing one’s story in order to “reclaim power” is a technique called *testimonio*, popularly used within the undocumented student movement. The practice of *testimonio* originated in Latin American resistance movements as a way to reclaim power through telling one’s “silenced” personal narratives (Gonzales 2015:102). In the undocumented student movement, *testimonio* is commonly used to reframe the “illegality” narrative that has contributed to their stigmatized identity.

Samuel and Amanda recalled the first time they were confronted by the police in a civil

disobedience action. Both students were arrested at the action for refusing to leave at the police's "order of dispersal." Samuel recounted what it had been like to disobey authorities:

Yeah, I wanna say that probably the one that had the most impact on me, and who I am, was probably that action... That was one of the most life-changing experiences I've ever had because, you know, all my life my mom and dad and family and them were always like, our thing was to lay low and not draw attention to yourself that was you know, stay away from law enforcement. So to purposely get arrested and get attention on yourself... It was pretty nerve-wracking at first (Samuel).

Samuel acknowledged the internal conflict he experienced in disobeying authorities when he had grown up all his life being told to, "stay away from law enforcement," and "not to draw attention" to himself. However, in participating civil disobedience, Samuel found himself directly trying to draw attention to himself and his undocumented status. While Samuel described the experience as "nerve-wracking," he also said it was, "one of the most life changing experiences," he had ever had. This draws attention to how Samuel became empowered by facing his fears and making the decision to behave in opposition to how he had been raised.

Amanda also described her experience being arrested as an empowering experience because she was able to overcome her fear of the police and prove to herself what she was capable of doing:

My most fulfilling [action] would have to be when I was participating in civil disobedience last year... I got up the courage to stand up and say "no" to the entire state of Georgia... it had me face my fear of growing up always scared of the police... But I'm not scared of the policeman anymore... I can now finally stand up to a policeman... So for me, that was my personal growth... I feel like once you've done civil disobedience, like you've gotten arrested, you're just kinda like not scared anymore. And you're willing to participate... And I'm really glad, that's my proudest moment. I faced my biggest fear in the world and it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be (Amanda).

Similar to Samuel and the vast majority of the undocumented community, Amanda had grown up with the police being her greatest fear. Although the immediate fear of deportation was reduced



with the passage of DACA, undocumented students still experienced a fear of authorities that had been instilled in them as children. Amanda became empowered in her civil disobedience arrest because she realized she had overcome her fear of the police. The experience was also empowering for Amanda because she realized she was not only capable of standing up to the police, but of “saying ‘no’ to the entire state of Georgia.” In this regard, Amanda demonstrated the performance of cultural citizenship by claiming her right to belong in Georgia in spite of her differences (Rosaldo 1994; Flores and Benmayor 1997).

In both Samuel and Amanda’s reflections, they emphasized the self-transformation they experienced in activism. Samuel described the “life-changing” experience that led him to face his fears and disobey authorities; and Amanda described her self-transformation as she overcame her fear of the police and realized her ability to stand up against state and societal pressures. The notion of self-transformation was commonly expressed by students in regards to PTU actions. In reflection on a PTU action David said:

I thought it was a big life changing experience. Like PTU has really big life changing experiences all the time. After you feel like, “OK, I’m a new person.” (David).

Students underwent a self-transformation through their initial experiences in PTU activism as they were able to overcome their fears and recognize their ability to stand up and engage in the world around them. While this section has emphasized student empowerment through PTU activism, the following section examines the role that collective identity and community played in student involvement in activism.

### **“This Is What Community Look Likes!”**

On one of the last days working with PTU, I participated with them in an act of civil disobedience against the Georgia Board of Regents’ bans 4.3.4 and 4.16, which banned undocumented students from access to in-state tuition and admission to the top select public universities in Georgia respectively. In total, approximately 90 students participated in the action; a combination of undocumented, DACA-mented students, and their allies. Allies came from universities across Georgia and from a few prestigious Northeast colleges to participate. The day of the action was strategically chosen as it marked the 56th anniversary of the Greensboro sit-ins. The Greensboro sit-ins were a series of non-violent protests that brought a large amount of media attention to the civil rights movement in the South. Consequently, the protests placed pressure on the government to desegregate the South.

In the spirit of Greensboro, PTU staged sit-ins in three different Georgia universities where the the two discriminatory bans were in place. The students occupied a classroom at each location, where they held a college-level class in order to de-segregate the classroom. The students entered the three different classrooms late-afternoon, planning to stage sit-ins until the president of each respective university denounced the bans. Every undocumented student wore painted cardboard butterfly wings on their backs, which were symbolically chosen to represent undocumented students; they symbolized that migration was a beautiful and natural process. Thus, when the sit-in attracted media attention, there would be images of butterflies learning in a classroom with their allies, effectively illustrating an integrated classroom. Further, the presence of allies is important to acknowledge as it highlights that PTU students had moved past the social isolation of their past to foster relationships with non-Latino and non-undocumented groups.

The presidents refused to denounce the bans before the buildings were closed, so students who refused to leave when the police gave an order of dispersal were arrested for criminal trespassing. In doing this, the students made a public symbolic statement that in the state of Georgia: it is illegal for undocumented students and documented students to sit in a classroom and learn together. The fight to de-segregate the classroom in Georgia did not end during the civil rights movement but continued in the classrooms in Georgia today. The sit-ins also represented the performance of cultural citizenship as the students claimed educational space for themselves through political activity (Flores and Benmayor 1997).

As an ethnographic note, while I was primarily a participant observer within PTU, I was heavily involved as a “participant” during the 15 hour sit-in. By participating fully in the sit-in, I was able to gain insight into the emotional rollercoaster that 15 hours of civil disobedience can cause. I was also able to better understand the importance of having peers beside you throughout an action and the feeling of kinship created at the end. In the following analysis, I switch to the collective “we” at times, in order to best analyze and describe the role that collective identity and community played within PTU activism.

In the previous chapter, I established that the formation of collective identity amongst PTU students was one of the factors that motivated them to become involved in activism. This relates to Castells (2012) assertion that the formation of collective identity leads to mobilization because it functions to reduce individuals’ sense of fear and risk. Further, Gamson (1990) stresses the importance of a strong collective identity within a movement to sustain participant involvement. In other words, the sustainability of a movement is dependent on the strength of the community formed within the action to remain enthusiastic and committed to social change.

Given the diverse make up of allies, undocumented, and DACA-mented students who participated in the action, it's difficult to identify a "collective identity" defined by shared backgrounds and experiences. However, in activism, a collective identity arises through a shared objective. Everyone who participated in the act of civil disobedience had one thing in common: they were there to fight for undocumented students' access to higher education. In this way, we had formed a collective identity and were determined to support one another through the action until our voices were heard.

One way that collective identity was strengthened throughout the 15 hour sit-in was through singing and chanting. In line with historical and inter-movement solidarity that is promoted at PTU, chants from Black Lives Matter and the Chicano movement, as well as freedom songs from the civil rights movement played a large part in maintaining energy and reducing fear. Most of the chants used were call and response:

"El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!—  
—The people united will never be defeated!"

"Up Up to Education!—  
—Down Down to Segregation!"

"Show Me What Solidarity Looks Like!—  
—This Is What Solidarity Looks Like!"

"When our communities are under attack, what do we do?—  
— Stand up, fight back!"

The chants and songs were the driving force that motivated everyone to carry out the sit-ins for so many hours. There were many moments where the energy of the group would drop, the chanting and singing would die down, and a few students would go and sit on the floor to rest.

Then one student would decide to pick it back up, tentatively singing the opening verse of a freedom song:

*“Woke up this morning with my mind...set on freedom....”*

And the group would start to stand back up, regaining energy as they joined in:

*“Woke up this morning with my mind...set on freedom....hallelu, hallelu, hallelujah”*

This illustrates how the students supported and motivated one another to keep the energy up during the sit-in. Isaac reflected on the presence of chanting and its influence over the group’s energy during the sit-in:

I felt that energy. That union. Like everybody was chanting in unison, and even though they might have never heard the chant, they just felt, I mean I just felt it was so much energy... But at the end of the day, police started coming and... I stood up, everyone was sitting down but I stood up, and little by little people started standing up, and then... I started chanting because those are key moments where you chant in order to bring this energy out (Isaac).

Although Isaac’s description highlights the importance of establishing a strong collective group within activism to maintain energy, he also alluded to the presence of collective identity in reducing fear. Isaac described how the moment the police arrived he felt it necessary to start a chant. This likely reduced fear within the group, by establishing a collective identity through chanting in unison.

The sit-in that Isaac participated in also happened to be the most uncomfortable and hostile out of the three locations. The police cut them off from access to water, food, and bathrooms, and drowned out the students’ chants with an obnoxious siren. Despite that, the students remained in the building for 12 hours, chanting and dancing around to overcome the sirens. Eventually, due to biological necessities, the students were forced to end the sit-in around

two o'clock in the morning. By three o'clock, the entire group showed up in front of the glass doors of the sit-in that I was participating in. It was one of the low energy moments amongst my group, and everyone had stopped chanting to rest their voices. Yet the moment we saw our friends from the other sit-in congregate outside the glass doors, the collective energy rose up again and everyone began singing and chanting through the doors to one another.

Isaac reflected on his group's decision to leave their location and come to our sit-in:

At the end of the day I think it ended up working out, because I enjoyed having to go to where you guys were at. And to kinda back you guys up, and I felt that that was a lot more powerful when we got there because, I felt the energy of everybody saying, "oh we're so glad you guys came here!" (Isaac).

As Isaac recalled, seeing the faces of friends from the other sit-in gave everyone the motivation to continue the action, despite the pure exhaustion everyone felt. Even though the participants in the action were split between three different universities, everyone stayed connected to one another throughout the night to support each other and remain motivated. This brings to light the importance of having a united collective group in sustaining an act of civil disobedience.

Students also relied on one another to decide if they would risk arrest. David recounted repeatedly checking in with a fellow undocumented peer about whether she planned to "take the risk." He changed his mind many times throughout the sit-in, and his final decision to risk arrest was the result of watching many of his peers remain seated with him in solidarity. David reflected on his final moments before arrest:

They gave the order of dispersal and then I'm like "OK I'm going to do this." So I sat down. And I see my friend sitting down too... my heart was beating super fast. I was like, "OK I have to do this, I have to do this. I want to do this." No one forced me by the way, it was all me. I remember sitting down, and looking into the distance... thinking about my family, thinking about my mom, and about the accident. Thinking about our struggle, and thinking about why I'm doing this. So that's what definitely made me do this... thinking

back... And all our allies and friends were outside chanting and like banging on the walls. And I don't know, it was just like, breathe in breathe out. And then they came up to us (David).

In David's final decision to "take the risk" he was motivated by his PTU peers; both those sitting next to him awaiting arrest, and those he could hear chanting outside. David's peers represented the "audience," who provided him with the recognition and support he needed to perform "activist" (Goffman 1959). This draws attention to the formation of a strong collective identity and community within activism that helped reduce fear and provided motivation for students. Although David did allude to his family and the greater undocumented community in his decision to "take the risk," this was not the driving force that led him into activism, but a factor that characterized the social role he was performing. I elaborate on this in the following section, where I discuss the characteristics of performing the "activist" identity.

At five thirty in the morning the students were arrested. As each student was escorted towards the van, the emotions and energy that had built up throughout the night came pouring out in support of our friends in solidarity.

*Undocumented!*  
*Unafraid!*  
*Undocumented!*  
*Unafraid!*

This chant became the primary chant, as we tried to overcome the collective fear that everyone felt, as we watched part of our group be led into a police van. This chant was particularly effective in the moment as it delivered a strong message: *undocumented activists are unafraid of arrest*. So we continued chanting, trying to convince ourselves and our friends being arrested that we were "unafraid." In essence, we had created a stage for the performance of activism. The

students who were being arrested were able to fully perform the role of “activist,” as they had an audience cheering them on, telling them not to be afraid. In this, I further emphasize the important role that collective identity and community played in motivating students to fully perform the social role of “activist,” as social settings and interactions act to confirm an individual’s performance of an identity (Goffman 1959).

Finally, as the last students were led into the van, the chant quickly changed to the one that had been popping up across the country for over a year amidst marginalized communities fighting for justice—Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright,” chant:

*We gonna be alright!*  
*We gonna be alright!*  
*We gonna be alright!*

The “Alright,” chant delivers a clear message that works to bring marginalized communities together in solidarity. During the sit-in, intersectionality was incorporated through chanting and singing freedom songs to foster solidarity with other marginalized groups. The “Alright” chant was especially comforting to everyone who participated. David reflected on the comfort this chant brought him in his final moments before the police van door closed, and he was driven to jail:

And then we started singing “we gonna be alright.” Because we were going to be alright, we were just getting arrested that’s it, we’re not going anywhere. We’re going to be alright and we’re going to come back. And we’re going to fight just as hard as soon as we come out. And we’re going to be even better when the bans are lifted (David).

David was able to move past his immediate fears of arrest and focus on the broader movement he was a part of. It was only one day in jail within a much bigger movement to fight for justice. In this



way, the “Alright” chant worked to foster solidarity and hope amongst everyone involved in the action.

After the police van doors closed, we came together for one final chant led by Isaac:

*Every where we go  
People want to know  
Who we are  
So we tell them:  
We are the DREAMers  
The mighty mighty DREAMers  
Fighting for justice. And our families.*

Throughout my fieldwork, the students had always strayed away from identifying with the term “DREAMer.” Nearly every one of my informants told me they thought the term was exclusionary; it correlated with the DREAM Act, which had a moral clause; it focused on a “good student,” narrative that excluded everyone who was not considered “exceptional,” and it did not include students’ families. All of my informants also said they preferred to identify as “undocumented” because even if they were covered by DACA, they still had the experience of what it felt to be “undocumented” in the U.S. So I was surprised to hear the final chant after an action be one that included an identity label that I thought most students did not identify with anymore. The only possible explanation I have is that it was a strategic choice to notify the public that the sit-ins were connected to the undocumented student movement. While the students did not individually identify with the term, they were aware of its popularity in the mainstream media. If this was the case, then the DREAMer chant worked to bring attention to the undocumented student movement. Following the chant, the civil disobedience action came to a close.

In the days following the action, many students described feeling a sense of kinship with their peers who had participated in the sit-in. Jessica described the moment before the police arrived when she realized that PTU had become a second family to her:

Because at a certain point when we were in the room before police came in, all of us were going around saying how we felt at that moment. And I remember a lot of people cried. And I remember I got really choked up because I said that I felt like I had a second family, and that I had found that at PTU. So, it was a really empowering and out of my comfort zone experience which was awesome (Jessica).

Jessica was not alone in this sentiment. The rollercoaster of emotions experienced during the sit-in caused people to become extremely dependent on one another for support. It also reassured individuals that they were not alone, but had a community of people surrounding them who were also engaged in the fight for justice. The following two quotes were posted by PTU students on Facebook in the days following the sit-in. As some of the Facebook posts were made by PTU students who were not a part of my informant group, I have labeled them accordingly:

For a long time I thought I was by myself in the struggle to obtain access to higher education. I fought alone to obtain my access to a college education and I was able to obtain an Associates in Science. It was such a great accomplishment, but I felt empty. I was not fighting for my community but for myself. At Peachtree University I learned that my fight for higher access to education is not over. The bans imposed to undocumented and Dacamented students are still on effect. Policy 4.1.6 and policy 4.3.4 are still denying us the right to an education we deserve. This February, undocumented students and allies from across the United States came together to protest against theses bans...At the beginning of these event we were mere strangers but this event united us together. We are no longer strangers but family. A family that will continue to fight against injustice. Even though we went our separates ways, I will continue to fight because I know that my family will back me up because when our community is under attack what do we do? We stand up Fight back. I'm not alone anymore in this fight because I am fighting with family. I would not stop fighting until I hear my last heart beat (Facebook Post A).

Above all PROUD to call Peachtree University and it's allies my family. Because family does not stop at a common blood type. Family continues to grow as days pass and the trust is earned. "We must love each other and support each other." A phrase we took to heart and demonstrated threw actions. As well as the one that goes "Show me your

friends and I'll tell you who you are.” We are Dreamers Champions Warriors Students and believers of a new world (Facebook Post B).

These are only two of many Facebook posts that contained common themes of “family,” “community,” and “support.” The two posts above focus primarily on the creation of family through activism. Facebook Post A described feeling alone in the fight for some time, as the student tried to pursue their individual education. However, as they said, “I felt empty. I was not fighting for my community but for myself.” This draws attention to how students find fulfillment when they begin not only fighting for themselves, but fighting for their community *alongside* their community.

Facebook Post A also expressed that a family was created through participating in activism together. In reference to their new found “activist” family the student wrote, “I will continue to fight because I know that my family will back me up.” A similar sentiment was expressed in Facebook Post B in referring to their new “activist” family, the student said that they “love each other and support each other.” These posts stress the importance of “supporting one another” within the activist community, which is likely to have been what led students to identify their fellow activists as their family. Family does not only mean blood relations, but can represent a community that is there to support one another. The formation of an activist “family” supports the claim that continued activism is mobilized through the formation of networks (Gonzales 2008). These findings highlight that the empowerment students developed through their initial experiences in activism was not the only factor that caused them to continue activism in their futures. The strong sense of support within the activist community caused PTU students

to develop a commitment to activism on behalf of their undocumented peers and the larger undocumented community.

### **The “Activist” Identity**

In this section, I elaborate on the factors that motivated undocumented students to continue activism. I bring to light how the empowering experiences PTU students had in activism and the support they received from the PTU community, led them to exude confidence, self-initiative, and determination to stand up on behalf of their communities. PTU students’ performance of the social role of “activist” was legitimized through the activist community they had formed. The underlying elements that go into performing a social identity are the belief in the role one is performing and the presence of an audience to confirm the social role (Goffman 1959). As follows, I draw attention to the full transformation undocumented Latino students made at PTU as they metamorphosed into “undocumented activist.”

Through their experiences in PTU activism, students realized that they had to take self-initiative to fight for change. After their initial experiences in activism, Alexa and Andrés recognized that they had the capability to step up and make change happen.

So what motivated me was kind of just getting more involved with activism, and learned that like, OK if you’re not the one to step up and change these policies, or try to change these policies, no one else is gonna do it for you... if I don’t go, then there’s gonna be two less people, or one less person. So, I think it was just kinda like believing, OK what I do matters, and what I am doing, although it might not be showing results now, it’s gonna eventually (Alexa).

I really didn’t get into activism until seeing the fight, and how everything works with PTU. But kinda like opened my eyes a lot, like seeing everything, what can I do, what can I help, like not just sit around and wait for someone else to do it. Actually go and do something. That’s something that PTU has helped me out to work on (Andrés).

Both Andrés and Alexa expressed that they could not wait around for someone else to step up and make change happen, they had to take self-initiative. Andrés said that after his initial involvement in activism he realized how he, as an individual, could help out and “actually go and do something;” illustrating a newly discovered sense of agency. Alexa also described how her experiences in activism made her realize that if she did not “step up,” no one else would do it for her. While Alexa was aware that she was only one person, she acknowledged that her contribution to the movement was still important. She believed that over time, the collective power of everyone involved in activism would start to show results. In this, Alexa and Andrés performed the social identity of “activist,” as self-driven individuals who planned to use their new found capabilities to contribute to the movement.

While students motivation to activism arose from their experiences at PTU, their continued participation in activism was characterized by an obligation they felt towards their families and communities. After David’s arrest, he shared with me the reason behind why he would continue to be involved in activism in the future.

But I would definitely do it again. ‘Cause, 15 hours is a long time, but it’s not as long as, not myself, but a lot of students have waited to go to college. So I would definitely, I would rather spend 15 hours in jail than 15 hours waiting for something to happen. And like all these kids waiting to go to college. So that’s another reason why I did this... We’re doing it because of our families and that’s the reason why we’re here (David).

In line with Andrés and Alexa, David was able to view the nuisances of his experiences in activism as worthwhile because he would rather be trying to fight for change, than, “waiting for something to happen.” At the same time, he alluded that his role in activism came from a sense of obligation he felt towards his family and the greater undocumented community. As he said, “we’re doing it because of our families and that’s why we’re here.” This draws attention to how

students' performed the role of "activist" with a strong sense of responsibility to stand up on behalf of the undocumented community.

Moreover, in discussing their role in activism, students exuded a strong sense of determination and confidence in their opinions and thoughts on the movement. Below, Andrés discussed his thoughts on civil disobedience:

I feel like the civil disobedience part is more effective. It sends out a message, that we're not gonna wait. Like, wait until they make a decision. We're going to show up to your school and disrupt your classes and interrupt your class. And make you look bad. Until you screw up both of us. Understand that I know you know that this is not right. You see it. I dunno what else we've gotta do (Andrés).

Andrés firmly expressed that it was not that they wanted people to get arrested, but that they were doing civil disobedience because it was the only avenue left for a marginalized group to have a voice. Andrés' assertion strongly exuded a sense of confidence and determination that I had not previously been visible in our conversation. This brings to light how our discussion of activism caused Andrés to perform the role of "activist," which I, in playing the role of the audience, confirmed for him (Goffman 1959).

The PTU students' performance of activism was also prevalent through Facebook posts.

One student posted:

NO HUMAN BEING IS ILLEGAL.

We all have inherent and inalienable rights that we are entitled to by virtue of our humanity: the right to life, liberty, and security of person, the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law, the right to freedom from slavery or servitude, the right to freedom of movement, the right to seek asylum from persecution, the right to freedom of opinion, expression, thought, conscience, and religion, the right to work in fair conditions and for a living wage, the right to a decent standard of living, and the right to education, to just name a few! as we all know, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere".... LA LUCHA SIGUE!#UndocumentedUnafraid

By explicitly referencing human rights, this post emanates the determination to continue activism — “LA LUCHA SIGUE” literally translates to “THE FIGHT CONTINUES,”—expressed by PTU students. Similar posts constantly pop up on Facebook, creating another stage for PTU students to perform “activist,” amidst a responsive audience of online friends and allies. While this study does not delve into undocumented student online activism, Facebook was generously used by PTU students to express their views and opinions on the undocumented student movement. Additionally, this Facebook post illustrates the full transition PTU students made from when they first began at PTU; no longer were they shy or afraid to speak up in class, but had transitioned into the role of confident and unafraid “undocumented activist.”

Within this new found identity as “activist,” some students were able to embrace their undocumented identity as a significant part of who they were. Andrés and Alexa reflected on the role their status played in their identity today.

I feel like, it made me more the person I am today. Because I feel like if I wasn't undocumented, I might have been ignorant to some things. I probably would not have as much consideration knowing how my parents go through not having a license, not being able to do certain things...with that characteristic, has developed me as the person I am today...it did affect me. I feel like, if I wasn't undocumented I wouldn't be doing activism right now (Andrés).

I think my identity developed more after becoming involved in activism... before... I identified with being undocumented but I didn't feel like it was something I was proud of or would say. I mean obviously it's something about me, but... I don't know, it didn't really define me. And now, it still doesn't really define me, but it's something that I'm just like, it's a huge part of me now (Alexa)

While Andrés and Alexa both acknowledged that their undocumented status had become a crucial part of their identity, they viewed its influence in different ways. Andrés' reflection on his status described it as a personal trait or life circumstance that had greatly shaped his experiences,

contributing to the person he was today. Andrés appeared almost grateful for his status as a crucial element in his self-development and new found social identity. On the other hand, Alexa alluded to her status as something that she was not proud of before, but that had developed into a important part of her identity through activism.

When I asked Alexa if she could elaborate on this she said:

I think, when I go into settings where I have to you know rally and I have to demonstrate, I definitely think that there's this part of me that, I don't know.. when I'm not in my "activist mode" I'm just kind of like, "whatever!" You know, kinda shy. But when I'm there... I'm like the first person to grab the megaphone you know? Our whole movement is basically based on like a side, or a part of yourself... you know being undocumented. It's affected your whole life, it's made up who you are... so it definitely has a lot to do with your identity (Alexa).

Alexa emphasized that her undocumented identity became more significant to her through her involvement in activism because being undocumented is a significant part of the collective identity of the movement as a whole. At the same time, she alluded to the confidence she emanates in her "activist mode;" she described how she was typically shy except when she participated in an action and was "the first to grab the megaphone." Alexa's reference to her "activist mode," ties into the element of performance present in activism. While in her daily life Alexa might not present herself as an "activist," when she found herself amongst her PTU peers in a civil disobedience action, she was able to perform the social role of "activist" with confidence (Goffman 1959).

In opposition to Alexa, Isaac firmly claimed that his activist identity had always been a part of him, it just had not been able to emerge without the support of an activist community:

I'm not going through a phase. For some of us, this is our identity... Activism is an extension of who I am. Resistance has always been I guess, part of me. But I guess, the system some how fooled me into thinking different. But once you really get with a



community of people that believe like you, I mean it's so awesome. Like no matter where I go, I feel like I get a lot of love from the community (Isaac).

Isaac's assertion that resistance had always been in him, illustrates the way that PTU helped students transform their stigmatized identity into an empowered identity. In this, Isaac highlights the influence of the PTU community, not only in motivating him to participate in activism, but in providing him with the support that led him to fully believe in the role of "activist" he was performing. These findings illuminate how students continued to perform the role of "activist," characterized by a new found sense of self-initiative, confidence, and determination to stand up for their communities. Further, their performance of "activist," developed through the support and validation they received from their PTU community as the students' collectively confirmed one another's social identity as "activist."

### **Summary**

This chapter examined effects of PTU activism on undocumented Latino student identity formation. My findings bring to light how socialization influenced student initial involvement in activism. Students became empowered through their first experiences in activism, as they realized their full capabilities and overcame their fears. Further, the formation of a collective identity within activism provided students with the support they needed to carry out an action by reducing their sense of fear and creating collective energy. In the end, the students' empowering experiences in activism and the support they received from the activist community led them to continue to perform the role of "activist." Lastly, this chapter draws attention to the performance of cultural citizenship amongst undocumented Latino youth. Through their participation in activism, the students claimed space for themselves in the public sphere, asserting their right to

be different and yet belong within society. In doing this, the students demonstrated that they do not need formal recognition within the nation-state to perform an identity to that of citizens. In spite of their exclusion from formal citizenship, PTU students performed citizenship as both a collective identity and political activity.

## CONCLUSION:

### PERFORMING CITIZENSHIP

To conclude this study, I begin by summarizing the findings from my chapter analyses on how undocumented Latino youth become involved in activism, considering: a) how the formation of identity amongst PTU students is shaped in the context of state and societal pressures, and b) the formation of a commitment to activism through the students' experiences at PTU. Further, by tying in theories of post-national citizenship and human rights to this extended case study, I bring to light how undocumented Latino youth perform citizenship as an identity. Through the formation of a collective identity and their political participation in the public sphere, PTU students illustrate the creation of a post-national political community.

#### Summary and Findings

At the core of this study, I challenge dominant ideologies and discourses in society that dehumanize marginalized groups as a “problem,” as opposed to viewing them as groups of people who possess agency and goals of their own (Flores and Benmayor, 1997:37). Rosaldo (1994) claimed that as a theoretical concept, cultural citizenship proposes that not possessing formal citizenship does not limit noncitizens from the ability to “perform” citizenship as a cultural identity through which they can claim space and rights in society. However, my one critique of cultural citizenship is that it fails to address the influence of state and societal pressures on the construction of a marginalized groups' identity. Given the minimal level of educational, legal, and political capital possessed by undocumented Latino youth, how are they capable of claiming social, political, and cultural belonging in society?

In this study, I assert that cultural citizenship represents a *process of contestation* between

state and societal pressures and undocumented Latino youths' own sense of agency. While undocumented Latino youth are largely influenced by the dominant ideologies of society that construct them as "illegals," they possess the capacity to claim recognition and cultural belonging within society. Moreover, while there is a growing body of literature on undocumented youth activism (Seif 2011; Nicholls 2013; Costanza- Chock 2014; Nicholls and Fiorito 2014; Weber-Shirk 2015; Gonzales 2015), there is a gap in the literature in regards to *how* undocumented Latino youth become involved in activism. This study sought to rectify this gap, through an examination of the institutional, social, and cultural factors that shape undocumented Latino youth identity as they enter adulthood.

To gain insight into the lives of undocumented Latino youth in activism, I conducted an extended case study of undocumented Latino youth at Peachtree University, a modern day freedom school in Georgia. Over the course of 5 weeks, I participated in PTU activities both inside and outside of the classroom, and conducted extensive interviews with PTU students. Within my research, I sought to examine: a) how the formation of identity among undocumented Latino youth develops in the context of state and societal pressures, and b) the formation of a commitment to activism through these youths' experiences at PTU. Moreover, as a theoretical inquiry, I sought to uncover how, through the formation of a collective identity and participation in activism, undocumented Latino youth perform citizenship as an "identity."

To provide a theoretical lens through which to analyze my findings, I utilized Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and *Stigma: Notes On the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), to illustrate the transformation of self that undocumented Latino youth made as they transitioned from the social identity of stigmatized "illegal," to critical and

confident “undocumented student,” to unafraid and determined “undocumented activist.” Goffman’s theories on identity formation bolstered my argument, as they emphasized that identity is a fluid social construct that causes individuals to perform different social roles in divergent social environments.

In the second chapter, I found that undocumented Latino youths’ identity was greatly shaped by socialization in school, their Latino cultural upbringing at home, and by the many ways their undocumented status instilled a sense of fear and stigma in their identity growing up. As a result of state and societal pressures these youth experienced, they found themselves performing the social identity of “illegal.” Their “illegality,” caused the students to present themselves as discredited individuals, made to feel ashamed for having grown up in the U.S. without legal status. Further, this chapter highlighted how cultural citizenship is a process of contestation, as I emphasized that undocumented Latino youth identity became stigmatized as a result of dominant ideologies in society that labeled them as criminals.

In the third chapter, my analysis uncovered how PTU fostered the formation of collective identity and critical consciousness amongst undocumented Latino youth, in preparation for their future involvement in activism. The students became empowered through their experiences in the classroom at PTU, which allowed them to discard their stigmatized “illegal” identity. In its place, PTU students began to embrace their undocumented student identity collectively. Consequently, the students learned to perform the social identity of “undocumented student,” as critically-engaged students, ready to delve into activism on behalf of their right to higher education. Moreover, this chapter drew attention to the performance of cultural citizenship through the formation of a collective identity in an educational space.

In the final chapter of this study, my analysis refuted the claim that undocumented Latino youth activism arises from a sense of family and community obligation (Seif 2011). I argued that the students' experiences at PTU led them to develop a commitment to activism. The formation of a collective identity within activism empowered students to continue activism, providing them with the necessary support to perform the social role of "activist," as self-driven determined individuals. However, their continued role in activism came out of a sense of community obligation they developed through their experiences. Lastly, I stressed that PTU students performed cultural citizenship through their activism, as they claimed space in the public sphere through political activity.

Taken together, these three empirical chapters traced the construction of undocumented Latino youth identity as they transformed from a position of social stigma and political exclusion into activists fighting for rights and inclusion in the public sphere. Through the influence of social, cultural, and institutional factors, undocumented Latino youth at PTU underwent a transformation of identity from performing "illegal," to "undocumented student," to "undocumented activist." Further, through their formation of a collective identity and political activity, PTU students performed cultural citizenship by asserting their right to belong in spite of their differences. In the following section, I delve into theoretical considerations on post-national citizenship and human rights, in connection with undocumented Latino youth performance of cultural citizenship. I speculate that, through the formation of a collective identity and their political participation in the public sphere, undocumented Latino youth at PTU constructed a post-national political community through which to perform citizenship.

### Post-National Citizenship and Human Rights

A community is formed when people build social connections based on common interests, backgrounds, and identities (Bankston 2014:11). However, in the words of Howard Zinn, “Nations are not communities and never have been” (1980). That is, a nation cannot be a community for the sole reason that its members do not share any degree of comradeship. Rather, the members of a nation, its citizens, come from disparate positions within the social structure of society, faced with conflicting experiences of inequality and exploitation (Anderson 2006).

This being the case, American ideologies, or “imaginings,” perceive the U.S. as a national community that retains a national identity (Anderson 2006). By national identity, I imply a collective identity, beliefs, and values that have been decided upon to be distinctly *American*. The institution of citizenship is used as a means of social control by the state to maintain a particular notion of American values, upholding the belief in the existence of a national identity. The state defines who will be citizens through class, gender, and race based exclusion, in which those who are perceived to be *different* from the imagined national community are denied full access to membership (Cacho 2008). Exclusion has always been a part of the institution of citizenship, creating gradations of membership within the state between noncitizens, first and second class citizens. (Sassen 2002; Oboler 2006; Roman 2010). Thus, while citizenship is meant to establish an equally beneficial relationship between the individual and the state, the institution has largely failed to protect its members (Sassen 2002).

The emergence of human rights discourse and norms in international law were thought to act as a means to counter state sovereignty, as they guarantee the rights of the individual over the authority of the state (Barkin 1998). While some literature suggests that state sovereignty is

constrained and diminished under human rights norms (Barkin 1998), this has not proven to be the case in the U.S. The U.S. has a history of placing civil and political rights on a pedestal while denying the existence of social and economic rights as legitimate claims to human rights (Sooahoo, Albisa, Davis 2008). Consequently, the U.S.'s ongoing failure to address social and economic human rights demonstrates the inadequacy of international human rights norms to make nation-states accountable for upholding human rights and protecting citizens.

If the national community can be conceived of to be imaginary, so too are the borders that establish the nation-state as "limited" and "sovereign" (Anderson 2006). Although the institution of citizenship existed before the social construction of the nation-state, the construction of the nation-state led citizenship to become synonymous with state membership. The nation-state functions to centralize the institutions of warfare, economic development, education, and culture, to produce one sovereign centralized power (Bosniak 2001; Sassen 2002). The state then polices citizenship through these different national institutions (Clarke et al. 2014). Thus, in framing citizenship within the "nationalistic scale," the state constructs boundaries to control who has access to power, rights, privileges, and resources, and who does not (Clarke et al. 2014). This suggests that citizenship could be considered on a transnational level, yet it is in the interest of states to yield sovereign power over citizens (Sassen 2002).

The onset of globalization has led some scholars to muse over the deterioration of the nation-state. This is reflected in the rise in immigrant rights activism across the country, speaking out on the need to fix the out-dated immigration polices that do not reflect the complexities of migrations of people in our contemporary globalized world (Gonzales 2015). However, it is also possible that globalization does not signify the decline of the nation-state, as much as it



accentuates the need to reconfigure the social construction of it, and move away from the notion of the nation-state being both “limited” and “sovereign” (Anderson 2006; McNevin 2011). Conceptions of post-national citizenship consider how to disentangle the nation-state from citizenship, by conceiving of new forms of collective recognition and belonging in a political community that go beyond nation-state borders (Bosniak 2000; Sassen 2002; Clarke et al. 2014). This is not to imply that the territorial construction of the nation-state becomes irrelevant, but that new forms of citizenship could begin to blur boundaries, leading to the transformation of the nation-state in accordance with globalization and the transnational migrations of people (Clarke et al. 2014).

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of collective cultural identities and political activities associated with citizenship and belonging that extend beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Stronger allegiances are said to exist today within cultural and social groups than between the individual and the national community (Bosniak 2000; Sassen 2002). Consequently, contemporary notions of citizenship have expanded its definition, to consider citizenship as a legal status, a set of rights, a political activity, and a collective identity (Bosniak 2000:452; Oboler 2006:3). Alternative notions of citizenship are especially pertinent when considering forms of civic participation and belonging within a political community for those who do not hold legal status of citizenship within the nation-state (Sassen 2002).

The proliferation of human rights discourse and norms have strengthened the notion of post-national citizenship, as it guarantees the rights of all humans, disassociated from the nation-state (Sassen 2002). While human rights law has largely failed to make states accountable for upholding rights, human rights discourse and norms have materialized in the U.S. through an

emerging human rights movement. The contemporary U.S. human rights movement embraces an expanse of social and economic issues, constructing an effective framework to be incorporated into various social and economic justice movements (Soohoo et al. 2008).

I assert that collective action can be conceived of as a post-national political community. First, social movements develop out a failure of the state to provide recognition and protection towards marginalized groups within the national community. While this study has focused on locating the social, institutional, and cultural factors that mobilize a marginalized group into activism, the mere existence of a movement implies the failure of the state to address concerns made by its members. During my first history class at PTU, I recall Professor M saying:

*Why do we use civil disobedience? We turn to civil disobedience when the normal mechanisms for expressing grievances to those in power have been lost.*

In this way, the mobilization of a social movement becomes a last resort. For those who have been disenfranchised by the institution of citizenship, collective action becomes the only mechanism left to claim recognition, rights, and inclusion within society. This is especially evident within the undocumented community, as their status denies them access to political participation in any form besides that of direct action.

Second, in the absence of national recognition, rights, and formal citizenship, the use of a human rights framework within a movement functions to unite people around an ideology that states: “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” (“United Nations” n.d.). As I discussed in Chapter 3, the discovery of human rights was especially empowering to PTU students, as it gave them something to believe in and advocate for collectively. Human rights

ideology also helped to unite PTU students around a shared objective in their activism, which worked to strengthen the formation of a political community.

Third, I suggest that collective action embodies a political community to a greater extent than that of the *imagined* national community, as movements are made up of people with shared experiences, collective identities, and objectives. Within activist communities, members provide protection through shared recognition of collective belonging. This illuminates the performance of post-national citizenship as both a collective identity and political activity. This was evident in PTU activism, as the students demonstrated a commitment to support one another on the basis of their collective identity. As the PTU students continuously chanted throughout the 15 hour sit-in, “we must love each other and support each other,” they revealed themselves to be a political community that worked to protect one another and recognize collective belonging in the absence of national belonging. In this way, PTU students performed citizenship as a collective identity within a political community that was not tied to the nation-state.

In essence, this extended case-study illustrates the formation of a post-national political community at Peachtree University. Through the use of a human rights framework, PTU brought together a group of disenfranchised people to form a collective identity through shared experiences and political participation. Consequently, the proliferation of post-national political communities, like that of PTU, critique the limits of citizenship defined by nation-states within the contemporary globalized world.

**AFTERNOTE:  
PERFORMING “RESEARCHER”**

What is the role of the “participant” in participant observation? As I have never done ethnographic fieldwork before, I often found myself internally conflicted with the role I was playing at PTU. I have always been taught that *objectivity* is the goal of sociological analysis, yet I found myself wanting to be an activist, an ally, and a friend to all of the inspiring students I met. They were generous enough to welcome me into their community, what could I give back to them in return? Along with this, I found myself regularly hit with a sense of guilt during my fieldwork. There I was, a soon to be college graduate, writing my senior project on how a group of students *the same age as me* could not attend college in their home state. The juxtaposition killed me: who was I, to be using the stories of a group of students who could not attend college as my final requirement to graduate from my own?

Of course, I knew this was not a healthy perspective through which to view my senior project. I knew that everyone would tell me my research would help to expand public awareness on the circumstances faced by undocumented students, yet the cynic inside me could not stop picturing my senior project collecting dust on the Bard library shelf. I found myself searching for a way to advocate on behalf of the incredible students I had the opportunity to work with in Georgia. A glimmer of hope came when I found out that four of the PTU students had applied to Bard. I thought that if I could help just one student get into Bard, I might feel like my research had not been entirely one-sided.

Myself and a few other Bard students who had participated in the PTU sit-in, wrote recommendation letters on behalf of the PTU students who applied. Although I know the admissions office gave the PTU students’ applications fair consideration, I found out a few

weeks before this project was due that no PTU students were accepted. All of the cynicism I had been feeling before about the usefulness of my senior project overwhelmed me again. What was the purpose of writing about undocumented students' capacity to fight for social change, if we would not even accept one of them at Bard? A place where students are encouraged to rise above structural and institutional inequalities through their engagement in the world. But then, one of the PTU students who had applied to Bard reached out to me:

*Hello Caley! I want to thank you so so much for all that you did to advocate for PTU students to attend Bard. Unfortunately, I wasn't accepted but the thought of amazing people like yourself and others speaking out for PTU students, warms my heart:). Thank you so much! (personal communication, April 23, 2016).*

So, while I am sad that no PTU students were accepted, the student reminded me that ethnographic fieldwork does not occur in a vacuum— but in the real world through engaging with people. Even if my senior project goes on to sit on the Bard library shelf, I know that through my research I was able to touch other peoples' lives and maybe give them hope, in the same way that they inspired me. Above all else, Bard has taught me that my education does not just occur in the classroom but occurs when I engage with the world around me.

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**APPENDIX A:**  
**IRB INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Section 1: Background

1. Tell me a about yourself.
  - a. Age
  - b. Gender
  - c. Ethnicity
  - d. Place of birth
  - e. Years of schooling
  
2. How old were you when you first came to the U.S.?
  - a. What brought you?

Section 2: Cultural/ Social Construction of Identity

3. Tell me about some of your earliest memories living in the U.S.
  - a. What was exciting?
  - b. What did you find to be challenging?
  
4. What was your experience making friends in school?
  - a. Which social groups did you find you related the most to?
  
5. Were you part of any communities or groups outside of school growing up?
  - a. In what ways have the communities you were part of shaped who you are today?
  
6. On a typical day, what language(s) do you speak and in which settings?
  
7. Tell me about your family.
  - a. Has your relationship changed over the years living in the U.S.?
  
8. Tell me about cultural traditions that you and your family have (i.e. Celebrations, religious services, food, music, dance).
  - a. How do you feel these cultural traditions relate to you personally?
  
9. What's the first memory you have of living in the U.S. where you noticed "difference?"
  - a. Class, race, ethnicity, culture, language etc.

### Section 3: Effects of Immigration Status

10. At what age did you find out about your immigration status?
  - a. How did you find out?
11. Tell me about an experience that you've had where being undocumented has affected you.
12. What motivated you to come out publicly about being undocumented?
  - a. Did this cause people to treat you differently?

### Section 4: Activism

13. Tell me about how you became involved in PTU.
  - a. Do you remember your first impression of the school?
14. Describe the social dynamics of PTU.
15. Tell me about some of your most memorable experiences at PTU.
  - a. What have you found to be the most fulfilling?
  - b. What have you found to be the most challenging?
16. Tell me about your experiences in PTU activism.
  - a. How have your experiences affected you personally?
  - b. How have your experiences affected how you view the world around you?
  - c. Why do you believe direct action is necessary? (Or do you not?)
17. Since you became involved in undocumented student activism, have you witnessed any changes in the strategies and discourses being used in the movement?
18. What are your goals for the undocumented student movement in Georgia and/or the broader immigrant rights movement? (Thoughts on DREAM Act/ DACA?)
19. Is there something I didn't ask that I should have?

Date: November 7, 2015  
To: Caley Cross  
Cc: Joel Perlmann, Megan Karcher  
From: Pavlina R. Tcherneva, IRB Chair  
Re: October 2015 Proposal revision

**DECISION: APPROVED**

Dear Caley,

The Bard Institutional Review Board reviewed the revisions to your proposal. Your proposal is approved through November 7, 2016. Your case number is 2015NOV7-CRO.

Please notify the IRB if your methodology changes or unexpected events arise.

We wish you the best of luck with your research.

Pavlina R. Tcherneva  
tchernev@bard.edu  
IRB Chair