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The Descendant Bargain: Latina Youth Remaking Kinship and Generation through Educational Sibcare in Nashville, Tennessee

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Abstract

Older sisters in Latino, immigrant-origin families in the United States bear significant caretaking responsibilities for their siblings, especially regarding their siblings' educations. Young women in Nashville, Tennessee, frame their same-generation caretaking commitments and educational expectations for their siblings in intergenerational terms—what I term the descendant bargain. This intergenerational framing reveals how elder sisters position their siblingship—and their educational carework—as vital to forging socioeconomic mobility and kinship obligations, labor often understood as the domain of parents. Youthful siblings' educational carework is a critical kinship practice that demonstrates the central role of youth in making kinship and remaking genealogical generation in immigrant families.

"I'm doing this for my kids," eighteen-year-old Isabel explained when I asked about applying to college as a low-income, undocumented student.¹ Isabel was part of Succeeders, a nonprofit educational program for Latino youth in Nashville, Tennessee, where I was conducting research on the meaning of higher education for the program's participants.² I was surprised. Did she have children that I was unaware of after months of fieldwork? As I asked for clarification, Isabel interjected: "My little brother and sister. Those are my babies ... I raised them. I changed their diapers." Like many Latino immigrant families, Isabel's parents worked long days, had limited English-language abilities, and lacked familiarity with US schooling—making them reliant on their eldest daughter for childcare and educational guidance (Katz 2014; Orellana 2009; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001; Valenzuela 1999).

Isabel told me her efforts—cooking dinner and checking homework—were for her siblings' futures. Through her example and carework, Isabel hoped to ensure her siblings' educational access and the socioeconomic mobility she and her family assumed education would bring.³ Painfully, Isabel understood it would be easier for her "babies" to go to college and achieve middle-class status because of her carework for them and their US citizenship.

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¹All individual and organizational names, including Succeeders, are pseudonyms. Focal students chose their first names; last names were randomly assigned. I assigned all other pseudonyms keeping with local convention. When last names are not given, it is for stylistic reasons.

²Latino and Hispanic are meaningful identifiers; while my interlocutors used them interchangeably, I use Latinos/as.

³Higher education is not a forgone path to socioeconomic mobility; however, these youth conceptualized it as such (cf. Suárez-Orozco 1987).

Isabel, and almost all of the young women with siblings I worked with, engaged in sibling caretaking, or sibcare, defined as the “activities ranging from complete and independent full-time care of a child by an older child ... as well as simply ‘keeping an eye out’ for siblings” (Weisner and Gallimore 1977, 169). Practiced cross-culturally, in immigrant and low-income Latino families, elder sisters caring for younger siblings is common due to broader gendered and culturally specific norms of carework (Hafford 2010; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001; Valenzuela 1999). This labor also demonstrates that the experience of immigration uniquely reorients care, kinship, and daily life for youth (García-Sánchez 2014; Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013; Pribilsky 2001; Song 1997). For example, elder youth leverage their cultural hybridity and bilingual skills to “access concrete opportunities and material resources for their families” that adult family members otherwise could not due to issues facing adult immigrants, like limited English proficiency (Orellana 2009, 22).

This article explores elder sisters’ sibcare around education, their understanding of it, and its effect on their familial roles and kinship obligations. I found that Isabel’s intergenerational framing of her same-generation relationship with her siblings—or “kids”—was widespread among young women who provided significant care for their younger siblings.⁴ I argue this intergenerational framing reveals two ways that siblings, and their carework, uniquely remake kinship and forge a novel kinship obligation in immigrant families, which I term the *descendant bargain*.

First, by positioning themselves intergenerationally, elder sisters frame their gendered sibling carework—specifically around education—as equally important to the family and its future as parental labor. Educational caretaking is an “act” that makes the family’s future mobility and mediates its present kinship obligations (Lambek 2011, 3). Second, elder sisters use the framing to understand how uneven experiences of immigration and settlement affect kinship roles and siblings’ educational outcomes. In both ways, I argue that the young women extend the set of parent-child kinship responsibilities common in contexts of immigration that Smith (2006) terms the “immigrant bargain” to siblings (see also Katz 2014, 109). In Smith’s formulation, the children of immigrants are compelled—through a set of kinship “expectations”—to succeed academically to repay parental migration (2006, 125). Elder sisters see their care navigating educational systems as binding siblings to achieve even greater academic success in service of the family—the distinctive intragenerational descendant bargain. By marking themselves intergenerationally, youth position themselves as lynchpins in the story of the family’s hoped-for upward mobility, make sense of their parental role for siblings, and, most critically, create new family obligations and potentially new generations.⁵

The term generation is not without complications. I use generation to mean “a principle of kinship descent”—not age cohort or immigration wave (Kertzer 1983, 126). I do so to underscore the role of specific kinship relationships (sibling-sibling, parent-child) in

⁴Siblings who were at least three years younger.

⁵Globalization reoriented circuits of obligation and created new ones across the world, likely including sibling relationships in students’ familial nations of origin. (Cole and Durham 2007). The presence of new obligations elsewhere does not invalidate the distinctiveness of the descendant bargain. Immigration is a critical event demanding unique orientations to kinship obligations that are novel precisely because of immigration’s disruptive power (cf. Coe 2016, Pribilsky 2001).

immigrant families and in youth's life expectations. Most importantly, youth's intergenerational references to their siblings were based on genealogical, descent-based understandings, speaking to generation-as-descent's emic value. While generation's other valences remain significant, it is through generational obligations that these young women illustrate their familial value and understand their futures and the inequalities shaping them.

Young women's description of *intragenerational* sibling relationships as *intergenerational* has three broader implications for kinship and immigration. First, siblings—as youth—are central to directing kinship obligations and kin's mobility. Moreover, attention to elder sisters' gendered care demonstrates that young women are decisive familial actors, speaking to gender and kinship's coproduction and the feminine work of intergenerational mobility in Latino immigrant families (e.g., Carsten 2004; Collier and Yanagisako 1987; McKinnon and Cannell 2013; Strathern 1992; Valenzuela 1999).⁶ Examining siblingship demonstrates its standalone importance as well as the nature of the relationships siblingship echoes, like parenthood and conjugal dyads.

Second, kinship scholars have examined how kinship is produced through care (e.g., Borneman 2001; Carsten 1997, 2004; Weismantel 1995; for overviews, see Lambek 2011, 3; Thelen, Coe, and Alber 2013, 12–13). Attending to how these sisters care through educational guidance illustrates how education becomes a practice that makes kinship obligations, defines relationships, and reveals these relationships' fault lines (cf. Obendiek 2013). Youth's characterization of the sibling relationship in intergenerational terms complicates genealogical generation by pointing to how generations are created not just by descent but also by care practices, like education.

Finally, examining these women's experiences illustrates how the homogenously glossed “children of immigrants” have heterogeneous experiences of their progenitors' immigration and settlement. Beyond separation and the creation of mixed-immigration-status households, immigration destabilizes family relationships and necessitates new responsibilities (Coe 2016; Pribilsky 2001; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova 2008). Indeed, as youth strive academically, “the life-defining sacrifices of migration convert [schooling] into an urgent tale of moral worth or failure,” where educational success is understood as a critical kinship responsibility (Smith 2006, 126; also Pribilsky 2001, 260–61). The youth in these families are poised to supersede parents' educational attainments and are actively encouraged to do so by parents. It is, however, also evident that not all children of immigrants are equally positioned to enjoy the hoped-for benefits of immigration since “inequalities can exist and persist even among siblings raised in the same household” through differential interpersonal investments and structural differences, like immigration status (Katz 2014, 107; cf. Smith 2006; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova 2008).

Following an overview of my project, I describe how generational thinking was present across participating youth and further locate the representative cases of two elder sisters who

⁶Gendered care norms are not static. While females were over twice as likely to provide intensive care, young men did so too. Rather than an intergenerational framing, young men emphasized competitive bonds of brotherhood. Males' positioning of their carework is a phenomenon that I cannot explore fully herein.

provided intensive sibcare—Lupita Ortiz and Camilia Ramos—in terms of local context, their sibling caretaking, and their families' immigration. While providing context from the wider group, I focus on two cases to untangle how “social life and ethics are empirically worked out” by individuals vis-à-vis their specific family lives (Biehl 2007, 10). Following discussion of the connections between siblingship, inequality, and generation in immigrant families, I describe how Lupita and Camilia position their siblingship and educational carework as transformative for their family's futures and descent. I then examine how these two women repurpose the intergenerational framing to account for the limits and triumphs of their own life paths, revealing ambivalence about occupying this familial role and the shifting nature of generation. I conclude by discussing how youth's sense-making of siblingship and their ambivalences around it transform understandings of the role of youthful siblings and gendered carework in remaking kinship and genealogical generation in immigrant families.

RESEARCH DESIGN

These examples come from a year of fieldwork (2012–2013) for my research project conducted with Latino, immigrant-origin youth participating in Succeeders. This project examined how these youth, who aspired to college and received college-access programming, navigated the pathway out of secondary education and conceptualized the social, political, and individual value of their educational striving. While I did not set out to examine sibcare, it emerged as a fundamental theme from this broader inquiry with respect to how some youth understood their educations and motivations and how they spent their time.

Positionality

During 2012–2013, I served as a volunteer with Succeeders—someone able to discuss college given my endless schooling. This role, a cross between a staffer and program alumni volunteer, initially connected me with students through Succeeders programming. My background as a Latina with an immigrant parent was not always immediately obvious. One student laughingly told me she thought I was “just some helpful white lady” until we chatted about my family in Guatemala and Mexico. Students and I shared much in common—including younger siblings. However, I was raised in an upper-class household without the same obligations or obstacles as participants, which we mutually understood. With time and trust, I developed close relationships with students and was invited to participate in their personal lives, furthering my understanding of elder siblingship's role in students' lives.

Methodology

I used four data-collection methods. Most centrally, I conducted semi-structured interviews and participant observation. For the former method, the goal was gathering students' educational and personal histories and their views on their educational pathways, aspirations, and contexts. The latter was not simply a “check” on these reflections (though it was), but was a key means of seeing how students' understandings of education, family, and aspiration are produced, reproduced, and transformed in practice.

I interviewed twelve male and nineteen female students between sixteen and nineteen years of age. These youth were demographically representative of the program in terms of national family origin, academic achievement, and extracurricular involvement. Representativeness was determined through a demographic survey, students' reports, and my observations. Of the thirty-one youth I interviewed for the broader project, thirty had siblings. Of that thirty, whose experiences inform this article, 77 percent provided light to moderate caretaking for siblings (e.g., homework helping), and 25 percent served as primary, unsupervised caregivers for long periods with in-depth responsibilities, such as siblings' school enrollment. Those who did not provide care were the youngest child, lived separately from siblings, or were a middle child with older siblings fulfilling these obligations. In households with siblings, there was significant heterogeneity, which undoubtedly affected youth's positions in and feelings about their families. However, given that my project's focus was students' educational experiences and expectations, and not families, I did not systemically sample for different family compositions and cannot reliably discuss the impact of these differences.

I did not begin interviews until three months into my fieldwork to build relationships outside of the interview. Given the project's broader scope, interviews focused on home life, migration and educational experiences, aspirations, and social and work lives. Interviews (audio recorded and transcribed) lasted one to four hours and were conducted in English (with occasional use of Spanish) at a flex-office space near the program's office or in a location of participants' choice. These interviews most readily revealed students' reflections on their lives.

However, it is precisely in this way that interview data is limited. Interviews are a structured discursive mode undergirded by assumptions about the speaker and listener's subject positions (Briggs 1986). Clearly, what students told me in interviews was what they chose to share, perhaps curated for favorable impressions. Their remembrances, especially regarding siblings, are inherently partial. I attempted to mitigate these effects through waiting to interview youth until we had a more comfortable relationship enabled through sustained participant observation and sharing about my life.

Participant observation allows ethnographers to examine how everyday life unfolds and is interpreted by our interlocutors. The method enabled me to see how students navigated the college application process, the end of high school, and their personal lives. Throughout my fieldwork, I conducted participant observation with youth I interviewed and the larger program population at weekly two-hour club meetings at four secondary schools, biweekly weekend programming, school-vacation programming, occasional in-school interventions, and non-Succeeders-specific school events like soccer games/tailgates, plays, fundraisers, and graduations. This broader observation allowed me to situate learners in the context of their peers, Succeeders, and school communities. I was also present in the everyday lives of focal learners—including at dinners, coffees, drives home, family parties—on an equally regular basis.

In addition to these methods, I also conducted textual analysis of the program's curriculum and the "ephemera" that students collect and create in college admissions and a brief student

survey.⁷ These methods provided grounding in both the program's objectives and student demographics.

I do not describe how the women's siblings, nor any other participant's siblings, understood these relationships—a clear limitation of the present research that future research should correct. I did not interview siblings, but from observation it was clear that younger siblings relied on elder sisters and had close relationships. Young children are cogent interpreters of and actors in their social worlds (cf. García-Sánchez 2014; Orellana 2009). My lack of data from younger siblings stems from the conditions of my IRB protocol, not from disbelief in children as interlocutors. While there are IRB-approved studies with undocumented children, my local IRB was concerned about ensuring that potentially undocumented minors, seen as very vulnerable, were not under additional risk. To ameliorate that concern, it was agreed that I would only conduct interviews and observation of high-school-age youth, given my primary focus.⁸

ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

“Education with Her Family”: Siblings and Care in Succeeders' Lives

“School is important, but family is number one. What Elena did was put her education *with* her family,” Raquelina said from the back of Mrs. McCann's pleasantly decorated Spanish classroom, where Hickory Heights High School's after-school Succeeders meeting took place. Now that her mother had changed shifts, Raquelina's younger brother was in tow and snacking on Takis, his white polo shirt covered in the delicious red dust. Raquelina was responding to students' skits on effective communication, the day's topic. Following announcements about upcoming field trips, Succeeders staffers introduced the topic and instructions for the activity. Students were organized into small groups and given a scenario that they were to perform an effective and ineffective version of to the larger group. After each skit, staffers directed semi-structured, large group discussion about the scenario. The staff had come up with the scenarios aligned with their perceptions of challenges in students' academic and personal communication. Other scenarios were asking for tutoring, leaving a voicemail for a college admissions officer, and telling friends that you have to study. The final skit was caring for younger siblings while parents are working. The complication: you have to study and your sibling needs homework help. Alix, who had no younger siblings, whispered that this was a good skit for Elena since she cares for her younger brother and “doesn't respond well” to the responsibility.

In the ineffective version of the skit, the staid Elena yelled at her “mother” about having to watch her “brother,” her mother's indifference to Elena's studies, and the prioritization of her brother's needs over hers. Andres, who was often responsible for his special-needs brother, fake-cried as Elena's brother when she lashed out at him. Contrastingly, in the effective version, Elena lovingly explained to Andres that they could study and succeed together, hugging her “mother” before her shift.

⁷I surveyed fifty participants. The number of active participants, those who the program defined as attending at least three events, numbered around 150 students.

⁸I also had an NIH certificate of confidentiality.

At three different schools where I saw this activity, students' discussions of the skits—and their home lives—aligned around the supremacy of helping siblings for the good of the family. Indeed, at another site, the ineffective skit was ignoring your sibling and working behind a closed door. The discussions also demonstrated that students had major obligations to siblings that they accepted and expected, felt ambivalence toward, and, per Raquelina's comment and her brother's presence, negotiated in meaningful ways.⁹

Despite family variation, uniform among students was noting a "responsibility" to ensuring siblings' school success through carework and being a role model. Consider Neveah, age eighteen, a light caretaker in a mixed-status family. Neveah is the eldest, followed by Gina, seventeen; Daniel, ten; and Susanita, five. Only Neveah and Gina are undocumented. Despite limited caretaking, Neveah felt "responsible" for her siblings, though she sometimes resented her obligations, which made her feel like "a bad sister." She endeavored to set a "high standard" academically because of her role as the eldest and her sense of obligation to her parents' immigration. She also had high standards for her siblings: "I kind of expect it out of them to go to college too. I feel like they're more secure, like—about them going to college—because they were born here and everything like that and they have the help. Me and my sister [Gina], we can all help them. No excuses." Neveah suggests generational thinking—linking her success to her parents' migration, per the immigrant bargain, and her siblings' success to the descendant bargain in her care for them, example to them, and differential advantages from them (Smith 2006).

For youth more involved in caretaking, this sense of obligation and notion of one's familial importance became pronounced and embedded in inter/intragenerational time. Alignment around sibling obligations, ambivalence about these obligations, and acknowledgment about the centrality of elder sisterhood to forging kinship and inequality are visible in these brief examples and the more sustained examples explored later.

Latino Families in Nashville

Beyond where Lupita and Camilia "fit" with peers, their families' individual histories of settlement align with the broader terms of immigration to Nashville. Since the mid-1990s, the Southeast has been a destination for Latino immigrant families. What drew families to Nashville was its low cost of living, work opportunities, and the perception of a more peaceful lifestyle for childrearing (Odem and Lacy 2009, xii; Winders 2013, 16–21). Family settlement meant large numbers of Latino youth entered the city's public schools starting in the late 1990s. Nashville schools struggled to meet learners' needs, evidenced in English-language learners and Latino youth having lower high school graduation rates than their peers (Winders 2013; see also Wortham, Murillo, and Hamann 2002).¹⁰

⁹The Succeeders program likely influenced students' perspectives, including on siblings. However, this influence should not be overstated. First, there is alignment between these cases and others on Latinas' sibcare and their ambivalences about it outside of curricular interventions (e.g., Ovink 2014). Additionally, while Succeeders may have influenced parents, most youth—including Lupita—were tasked with educational sibcare before program participation, suggesting parents' reliance predated Succeeders.

¹⁰The Latino graduation rate improved from 43 to 76 percent between 2002–2013, whereas the ELL rate improved from 64 to 73 percent from 2011–2013 ("MNPS Way Ahead of the Curve for Graduation Rates," accessed 3/10/2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100619104613/http://mnps.org/Page58227.aspx>, "2012–2013 Report Card," accessed 3/23/2016, <https://www.tn.gov/education/topic/report-card>; "2010–2011 Report Card," accessed 5/2/2017, <http://edu.reportcard.state.tn.us/pls/apex/f?p=200:50:3064788027279807::NO>).

The struggle for equitable education is significant for Latino immigrant families' visions for their futures since they have conceptualized schooling as the "single most significant avenue for status mobility" (Suárez-Orozco 1987, 291). Increasingly, a gender gap in Latino educational attainment has emerged, with females achieving more success (Lopez 2003; Saenz and Ponjuan 2009; Valenzuela 1999). The gap's origins may be differential treatment of male minority learners (Lopez 2003; Rios 2017), but also gendered educational motivations and familial expectations (Ovink 2014; Sy 2006; Sy and Romero 2008). Ovink (2014) suggests that Latinas approach their educations as a pathway to individual mobility and as a way to care for their natal families. Thus, educational success, mobility, and migration become linked for Latino families through daughters. The Succeeders students, including Camilia, and Lupita, were part of this first wave of family settlement and most recent wave of high school graduates who hoped schooling would bring mobility.

When I first met Lupita Ortiz, age seventeen, she seemed entirely focused on getting into college. Our first conversation had been about her upcoming interview with an admissions officer. Her singular focus belied how Lupita spent her time. She lived with her mother, a homemaker; her older half-brother Juan, who was born in El Salvador; and two younger siblings, aged nine and seven, who, along with Lupita, were born in the US. Lupita's father had, after moving the family to Tennessee from the Northeast, moved back in search of lucrative construction work. It was hoped that his higher wages could enable a middle-class lifestyle in Nashville and the siblings' higher educations. Lupita was eleven when Mr. Ortiz moved, and she saw this as a turning point: "I feel like, when I was eleven, that's when I started filling in his role and I started taking over more of the house."

Her "taking over" involved paying the bills, serving as Mrs. Ortiz's "little translator," and directing her siblings' schooling. She felt pride in this role and saw it as how she built the skills that helped her scholastically; she "felt bad" that her siblings did not have the same opportunity. Lupita had recently enrolled her younger brother in the "feeder" middle school of a magnet high school that had high rates of admission to selective universities. She had plans to do the same for her sister. Despite her parents' hope that the Southeast would provide mobility, Lupita remembered her schools in the North as "more advanced" than those in Tennessee. This discrepancy in quality was a potential stumbling block she attempted to correct through her siblings enrolling in the magnet program.

Lupita knew little of the family's immigration history except that her mother and father came to New York from El Salvador and Mexico, respectively, in the early to mid-1980s. Later, they sponsored half-brother Juan's authorized immigration as an adult. Her father had not shared much except that "he crossed the border on a train that was filled with bananas. Now he can't eat bananas ... he just thinks they're horrific." Her mother had several experiences of crossing; the most taxing was the first, when she left toddler Juan behind. Juan attended college in El Salvador, but could not leverage his education and now worked as a landscaper.

Like Lupita, Camilia Ramos, eighteen, is a middle child, but the eldest girl. Eleven years older, Camilia had been the only daughter and initially felt displaced by Anita. In the intervening years, Anita had become Camilia's shadow. Camilia's weekday after-school

routine involved picking up Anita from school, helping with homework, going to after-school events, cleaning, and cooking dinner. On weekends, Camilia helped her mother prepare for, and clean up after, the extended Ramos family's boisterous gatherings.

Camilia was also directing Anita's education, like Lupita. Camilia had recently lobbied her parents to place Anita in a costly Catholic primary school, having read that high-quality early childhood education was beneficial. Camilia tried volunteering there but found it hard to balance against her own extracurricular activities. She often brought Anita with her to Succeeders, where sometimes Anita would join me in the back of the room as I scrawled notes and she colored.

In terms of immigration and settlement, Camilia's mother and father immigrated as teenagers in the 1980s to California from Guatemala and Mexico. When Camilia was ten, they reunited with her father's family in Nashville. While privileged with citizenship, Camilia's immediate family did not find resettlement easy. Her older brothers, Jaime and Alvaro, became involved in gangs, with costs to their educations. Alvaro dropped out of high school and began working. Jaime did finish high school and was attending a for-profit college.

Camilia also began to affiliate with a gang in middle school but stopped when she realized that Anita could be hurt. She saw Anita as "my savior" since, "because of her, I've gotten out of so many things... And it's like God only knows... Like, would I even be alive, would my brothers, or my family? And you know [it is] because of her—that small person." Thus, caring for Anita was central to Camilia's thriving. Camilia was poised to be the first to attend an accredited college, an example for her "savior" she found daunting.

Common in these experiences are the well-trod immigration pathways into the Southeast and the gendered labor and academic pathways of young immigrant-origin Latinas. However, there are familial differences that orient their obligations in different ways. It is to the social significance of these pathways and orientations that I turn.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF CARE, INEQUALITY, AND GENERATIONAL FUTURES IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

Camilia's and Lupita's understandings of their siblings as generationally distinct made sense when I considered the nature of siblingship, their carework as immigrant-origin Latinas, and generational futures. Siblingship is a relationship of lifelong resonance, serving as a blueprint for peer and romantic relationships (Joseph 1991; Maynard and Tovote 2010), interpersonal behavior (Gaskins 1999; Mead 1928), social and familial organization (Carsten 1997; de León 2007; Reynolds 2008), and self-concept (García-Sánchez 2014; Song 1997). Despite recognition of siblingship's importance, intergenerational dyads, like parent-child or uncle-nephew, and not the supposedly status-equal relationships between siblings, took analytical prominence in early anthropology because descent and alliance were seen as most critical to families' futures (Nuckolls 1993, 29–32; Thelen, Coe, and Alber 2013, 1–2).¹¹

Recent approaches to kinship account for siblingship's vital social and socializing role in childhood (de León 2015, Maynard and Tovote 2010; Reynolds, Dorner, and Orellana 2010; Rogoff 1990) and adulthood (Roth 2014; Thelen, Coe, and Alber 2013). Rather than focus on siblingship as status-equal, this work demonstrates how siblingship is fraught with inequalities across gender, age, and other differences (Thelen, Coe, and Alber 2013, 10–13). While status differences between siblings have been argued to be most visible at adulthood (e.g., Lambek 2011; Obendiek 2013; Roth 2014), processes of stratification, and contestations of it, begin in youth—seen in Neveah's and Isabel's understandings of their siblings' US citizenship as structural advantage (Reynolds 2007, 2008).

Another way that inequalities may further manifest is through caretaking. Evidenced in my discussion of Camilia's and Lupita's responsibilities, elder siblings—most often sisters—navigate educational bureaucracies, translate with teachers (Orellana 2009), close gaps between school and home (Volk 1999), provide academic support for younger siblings (Espinoza 2010; Stanton-Salazar 2001), and plan siblings' educational trajectories. In so doing, older siblings facilitate their siblings' educational attainment with potential positive effects on these siblings' mobility (Alfaro and Umaña-Taylor 2010; Katz 2014). Educational and everyday sibcare are equally consequential for caretakers. Sibcare and household labor endow older siblings with confidence, academic success (Dorner, Orellana, and Li-Grining 2007), and favored status (Song 1997). Recall Lupita's guilt that her siblings were not forming the same skills she had as a caretaker, or Camilia's belief in Anita as her “savior.” Providing extensive care for siblings can reduce caretakers' academic performances as they struggle to balance their own schoolwork against this care (Hafford 2010; Katz 2014). This balance is particularly fraught for Latinas, given culturally salient images of the “good daughter” as the one who provides sibcare (Espinoza 2010, 317; Sy 2006; Sy and Romero 2008). Thus, caring for siblings can at once be an advantage and impediment (Katz 2014, 97).

While sibcare results in some positive outcomes for elder siblings, uneven caretaking benefits younger siblings (see Katz 2014, 97).¹² Elder siblings' institutional knowledge from school success (and failure) is passed down to younger ones, advantaging those who “inherit” institutional knowledge (Katz 2014, 108). I contend that uneven educational caretaking relationships between elder, immigrant-origin youth and their siblings illustrate that inequalities between siblings can begin in youth and are not just the result of siblings' status divergences in early adulthood. While the work of advantaged adult siblings on behalf of their siblings and siblings' children clearly supports projects of mobility, the work of siblings for siblings as youth reveals how different forms of advantage are produced in youth and between youth (see Alber 2013; Coe 2016; Obendiek 2013). Status inequality is a product of caretaking relationships, family composition, and youth's different age- and gendered-based experiences of shared family hardship in immigration and settlement that

¹¹Many “folk” understandings of generation, including Latin American ones, emphasize intergenerational obligation (e.g., Leinaweaver 2008).

¹²Older sisters being tasked with more responsibility than brothers advantages brothers in free time, even as it advantages daughters with a favored position (cf. Song 1997).

position some youth as those who pioneer paths and others who follow them (see Katz 2014; Thelen, Coe, and Alber 2013, 12–13).

Thus, attention to the work of children in their families, like educational sibcare, reveals that siblingship's pivotal familial role begins through youth's labor. Rather than position youthful (mostly female) sibcare as labor in service of parental generations' work, or attend to that work only in the absence of parental labor (Evans 2012; Merten 2016), I demonstrate how intragenerational sibcare is vital even in the presence of intergenerational caring (Katz 2014). Beyond the work that educational sibcare does for mobility, educational sibcare creates new kinship obligations—in this case, the obligations of the descendant bargain toward greater academic success/mobility. Just as feeding, naming, and spirit possession are practices that create kinship bonds (cf. Carsten 1997; Lambek 2011; Weismantel 1995), so too does educational sibcare structure relationships between family members, bind kin in mobility projects, and create obligations.

It is important to recognize that it is through the mooring of intergenerational relations that people work “to manage the present and to reproduce desirable and livable futures” in contexts of socioeconomic and social changes, like immigration (Cole and Durham 2007, 3; see also McKinnon and Cannell 2013). Intergenerational family relationships are where changing macro-circumstances and inequalities are intimately translated “in decisions about specific relationships ... in the negotiations of people's everyday obligations and relationships” (Cole and Durham 2007, 6). For example, the family's future is often planned through intergenerational care: parents paying school fees (Sykes 2001), children circulated to older relatives (Leinaweaver 2008), or parental migration that prioritizes children's advancement (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova 2008). In such arrangements, generational status shapes the circuits of obligation—with elder generational actors seen as providers for younger ones.

These intergenerational obligations for families' futures are paramount in low-income immigrant families. As stated, in his analysis of Mexican migrant families in New York, Smith (2006) finds that youth succeed in school to repay parental migration—an “immigrant bargain” between generations (see also Katz 2014; Louie 2012; Nicholas, Stepick, and Stepick 2008). Central to the bargain is the suggestion that in immigrant families intergenerational ties are those that drive mobility and obligation.

By appropriating the recognizable frame of generational care, elder sisters mark their labor as sibling caretakers as equally important to the family as the more emically recognized work of parents. Additionally, by being more like their parents than like their siblings in generational status, elder siblings' potentially less-successful outcomes stemming from inequalities in immigration and settlement could become legible as success. Just as immigrant parents sacrifice for their children's mobility, so too do elder siblings sacrifice for younger siblings. However, younger siblings can bear the “burden of fulfilling the bargain twice—to redeem not only the sacrifices of their parents, but also those of elder siblings,” speaking to the descendant bargain's complexity (Katz 2014, 109). While kin-based obligations can be disrupted when “children provide for the material needs of adults” (Dahl 2016, 295), when youthful siblings provide for the needs of younger siblings and demand

recognition for it, kin obligations are remapped to account for new circuits of obligation. Here, those obligations layer the descendant bargain onto the immigrant one.

Caring between older and younger generations in a family braid past histories and deprivations with hoped-for better futures. I contend that examining care between siblings who are part of the same generation and cohort, but who have different social statuses (like nativity or gang membership) and opportunities (like educational guidance), reveals the contingent nature of the future supposedly shared by siblings as the “new” generation. While an intergenerational lens is a corrective to understanding youth as “the future” because of chronological age (Cole and Durham 2007), intergenerational approaches can obscure the importance of intragenerational ties, like siblingship, and labor, like educational sibcare. When female siblings take on greater—or even sole—responsibility for siblings, they reshape kinship obligations from largely vertical planes (parent-child, child-parent) to vertical and horizontal (sibling-sibling) planes, claiming their centrality (Dahl 2016; Livingston 2003; Roth 2014).

SIBLINGSHIP MAKING MOBILITY AND REMAKING DESCENT

Recall that for immigrant families, education is central to mobility (Suárez-Orozco 1987). However, with both families I described above, sons’ educational frustrations and parents’ lack of experience with schooling led to little institutional knowledge. High-achieving Lupita and Camilia were entrusted with both succeeding for themselves and navigating the school system that each family believes will uplift the family socioeconomically. Before they mark themselves as decisive family actors, Camilia and Lupita hold a familial role that is understood by all as socially transformative.

Consider the youths’ role in enrollment decisions. Reliant on limited firsthand knowledge of the educational system, Lupita saw magnet enrollment for her siblings as a corrective to her experiences in underperforming schools and her older brother’s inability to leverage his education. As she described the enrollment process, Lupita revealed that she wished she had an older sibling who could have done the same for her. She did not place the responsibility for garnering educational opportunity with parents but stated that this is a “wish-I-had-my-older-sibling-do-for-me kind of thing.” She believed that sibling-sibling care, and not parental-child support, was the labor necessary for educational success and mobility. It is also her labor that enables and obliges her younger brother toward success for his sister and parents. Lupita’s framing echoes Neveah, who asserted her and Gina’s help would be decisive for their siblings. Education becomes a practice that makes not just mobility but also one that creates and maintains a web of relations.

Similarly, by enrolling Anita in Catholic school, Camilia hoped to ensure that Anita would have a better education. Camilia was adamant that Anita would not attend the middle school that Camilia did because of fears of underperformance. Here, Camilia suggests a gap in her parents’ knowledge that only she, as sibling, could correct. Camilia never told her parents that she began gang affiliation in middle school. It would be her insider knowledge of the local middle school as a former student, and not parental guidance, that would lead to Anita’s success. The young women’s perceptions of the impact of their enrollment efforts,

and the importance of their insider knowledge, suggests an understanding of the sibling-sibling dyad as impactful for mobility and intra/intergenerational cycles of kinship obligation.

Furthermore, when Anita would excitedly jump up and down and tell Camilia about her love for school and her collegiate aspirations, Camilia saw success. She stated: “I’m like, ‘Well this is what I want to hear.’ You know she’s seven and she’s thinking of college... I don’t know if it’s because of me that she wants to go to college. Because I’m, like, if it is so, I think I’m doing my job.” Camilia’s description of her intervention into Anita’s schooling as a “job” suggests her understanding of her carework as a responsibility. Tied with her descriptions of herself as “like a mother” and “second mother,” Camilia sees siblingship as something more important to the family than what might be assumed as supplemental work.

Additionally, both young women framed their siblingship as shifting generational frames, suggesting that sibling labor is akin to that of parents and therefore as—or more—important to descent. Lupita shifts generation and marks her importance through a kind of Lamarckian inheritance. When her brother shows creativity, she stated: “I feel like I passed that onto him, because when I was young, I was very creative and I did a lot of stuff.” When her sister demonstrates intellectual aptitude, she “feel[s] like I passed that on to her too.” Not only is Lupita responsible for improved trajectories, but she argues that she is passing on intellectual capabilities. A kind of descent, a passing-on, is traced through her labor in molding her siblings’ intellectual curiosity vis-à-vis her knowledge, abilities, and educational sibcare. Thus, Lupita elevates her position in the family from sibling to progenitrix of potential, marking educational sibcare as the labor that creates both mobility and descent. This belief was not limited to Lupita; indeed, others saw their good (and bad) qualities passed along—from quick tempers to good study habits.

Camilia’s invocation of descent is rooted in a more intimate notion of generation than Lupita’s. Camilia was proud to be Anita’s “second mother” and would say that Anita is “like my daughter” or even “my kid.” Camilia and her best friend, Isabel, often chatted in ways that I, childless anthropologist, assumed veteran parents would. They compared notes about their siblings, homework help, and what they were doing for their “kids.”

In adopting parental talk, Camilia asserts that she is “like a mother” and redraws generation. Phrases such as “like a daughter” can be used to “structure a relationship of inequality” through applying a normative understanding of the family as inclusive to unequal relationships, like those Young (1987, 365) describes between Indigenous Peruvian maids and their white bosses. Camilia’s invocation of motherhood and daughterhood does the opposite. She uses “like a mother” to illuminate how the sibling relationship is one of horizontal and vertical hierarchy. While siblings are assumed to be equals to each other and hierarchical to parents, Camilia’s relationship to Anita is often parallel with her parents and hierarchical to Anita. While she is a sibling, being “like a mother” to her sibling/daughter recognizes that the sisters bear unequal burdens in the family, with Camilia engaging in mothering labor that separates her.

INEQUALITY, AMBIVALENCE, AND GENERATIONAL CHANGE

Immigration and settlement necessitated that the sisters take on responsibilities that are consequential for kinship obligations and individual educational pathways. While recognizing their value to their families, and the gains received through these roles, young women across my research distanced themselves from their roles—suggesting ambivalence about this responsibility and its impacts on life outcomes, kinship, and generation.

Most basically, youth recognized that their younger siblings were in some ways more advantaged than they were because of how immigration status, birth order, and gendered care norms positioned them in their families. For example, one chilly afternoon, as we marooned Northerners drank Dunkin' Donuts hot cocoa and tepid coffee, Lupita unceremoniously told me that she “knew if I had gone there [the magnet school], my life would be different and I would probably be going to Vanderbilt,” a selective private university. She would instead attend a less-selective public college. Lupita, as a first-generation college student, is likely on her way to a higher socioeconomic status than her parents and to a fulfilled immigrant bargain. Her mobility reference is not her parents, or her older brother, but her younger siblings. Believing her “life would be different” revealed she thought herself distinctly less advantaged relative to her younger siblings due to birth order and processes of settlement that rely on brokering elder daughters for familial advancement.

Lupita quickly pivoted from her self-perceived lack of high achievement and reclaimed her siblingship's value through the descendant bargain. She believed that through her educational sibcare she had “set them [the siblings] up” for middle-class status. Her siblings are obliged, based on Lupita's expectations, to achieve what she and their brother could not. Her perceived disadvantage becomes her siblings' advantage, remaking her failure to achieve elite higher education as a way to success for her siblings.

Lupita felt further ambivalence about her role, revealing the emotional difficulty of her gendered kinship role and its impacts on kinship obligation and generation. She stated:

The lines get blurred between being a sibling and being a parent. Sometimes I don't like to—I don't feel like it's my place sometimes to scold my siblings because I'm not their parent. I'm their sister. And sometimes I'll joke around with my siblings, and my mom will be like, “Well, stop joking around with your siblings. Act mature.” But they're my siblings. I'm not their parent.

Mrs. Ortiz expected Lupita to discipline the children, guide their educations, and share in the emotional labor of childrearing—essentially, what Lupita associated with a parental role. Her mother's mandate that she care for siblings like a parent shifts the generational order before Lupita does. Furthermore, Lupita acknowledged that “we have this dynamic in our house where I feel like, in a way, I'm sort of my mom's husband.” When I asked her to unpack this tantalizing statement, she clarified that she had assumed her father's outward-facing responsibilities, like bill paying, assumed by her to be a man's domain—making her a husband. While sibcare is often gendered, Lupita's care crossed gendered labor boundaries. She then remakes family obligation and gendered kinship roles—she is like her “mother's husband” and her siblings' father through her carework.

According to Lupita, her mother “messes up,” telling Lupita to “pay attention to ‘your kid.’ ... And I’m like, they’re not my kids they’re my siblings.” In this instance, in rejecting her siblings as her kids, but still caring for them that way, Lupita attempted to withdraw—linguistically—from a father/daughter/sibling’s obligations. Claiming sameness to her siblings is an attempt to reject the unequal burdens of sibcare and the inequality between siblings stemming from settlement that leaves an open parental/husband role. When discussing her feelings about this role, Lupita sighed and stated, “they need me.” She must do the carework, but tempers it by claiming that “they’re not my kids.”

Camilia’s pride in being recognized as Anita’s “second mother” conflicted with her educational transition. As she weighed enrolling at an out-of-state university, Camilia observed that her motivation was her responsibility for Anita’s education:

It hurts to say I don’t want that responsibility anymore. Or “Can you please take that responsibility away for at least a moment?” But, ultimately, I think that what was pulling me over there was that I sometimes just don’t want that responsibility of having to deal with my sister’s school stuff. And, you know, “Camilia come do this, or do that, or look she has to do this for school.” I’m like, “Okay”—sometimes I’m just, like, it’s too much. I shouldn’t even be dealing with this. I don’t have kids of my own, but then again, I don’t mind.

Camilia shows her ambivalence about sibcare, a settlement inequality that Camilia, as capable older sister, faces. She recognizes that her family relies on her to navigate the everyday process of “school stuff.” The discrepancy between expectations of Camilia and Anita with respect to navigating their own schooling reflects shifting attitudes about youth’s roles within their families in contexts of immigration (Pribilsky 2001, 260–61). Camilia is not akin to her sister, but is like a parent who must protect and help her sister. Like Lupita’s “they need me,” Camilia’s “I don’t mind” highlights that she does not want to pull away entirely.

As she justified her decision, Camilia returned to the intergenerational framing to make it legible: “You know, I want her to have the best. And she is like my daughter. So, if I succeed I can help provide for her education ... it seems selfish, but it really isn’t.” Since Anita is like Camilia’s daughter, her choice to leave Anita to provide for her future can be seen as not “selfish,” not a denial of responsibility, but an acceptance of it since Camilia’s educational success is for her sister. In invoking selfishness, Camilia reveals the fault lines of the inequality of immigration and settlement and its effects. With respect to the former, settlement inequalities make Camilia the caretaker and Anita the cared-for. For the latter, this bond makes Camilia feel selfish for prioritizing herself. Only in wanting to improve herself to improve her sister can Camilia pursue her goals legibly to her family, in keeping with the model of intergenerational sacrifice in the immigrant bargain.

Ultimately, Camilia decided to go to the commuter school. It was something she “gave up” for Anita. Lupita went away to college. Before leaving, she told her younger brother to “step up” and be responsible for their mother and sister—to be the sister/husband/father that Lupita was.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF SISTERLY LOVE

When Lupita's younger brother announced his intention to attend the University of Phoenix, an online, for-profit university, Lupita instructed Mrs. Ortiz to go to the nearest shop and buy both children Vanderbilt sweatshirts. Lupita attempted to model an educational trajectory that she believed would be more prestigious and impactful on mobility. While there are still years before their siblings attend college, and more before their families' mobility becomes visible, Lupita and Camilia's care for their siblings are consequential now.

Both women's gendered carework eased their families' settlement and educational trajectories, further supporting the importance of youth's labor to immigrant families (Orellana 2009). Opportunities missed for elder sisters, like private school, are accessed for younger siblings by elder sisters. This is not to say that elder sisters' educations were undervalued by their families; on the contrary, they were highly valued, evidenced in jubilant graduation parties. Elder sisters also benefited from their caretaking: confidently navigating unfamiliar settings, advocating for themselves, and gaining high status in their families. Additionally, the young caretakers' college enrollments already mark educational success for their immigrant families.

Beyond mobility, these youth's experiences show the centrality of youthful siblingship in constructing kinship, broadly, and in immigrant families, specifically. While sibcare is a cross-cultural phenomenon (Hafford 2010), youthful sibcare can be ignored as a driver of kinship obligations (though see de León 2007; Reynolds 2007, 2008). Contrastingly, these cases and the descendant bargain demonstrate how youthful elder sisters determine kinship obligations, marking siblings' roles in their families as vital to forging family relations and reframing our understandings of the roles like conjugal pairs and parents siblingship echoes. Attention to siblingship and (supposedly) lateral kinship relations corrects kinship studies' reinscription of the "Euro-American ideology of kinship as concentrated in biological reproduction" (Lambek 2011, 5).

My examination of the young women's siblingship elucidates how kinship and its hierarchies are produced outside of reproduction and inside a family's circuits of obligations by youth. Differential investments in children and different carework expectations sow social inequality in youth. Additionally, the vital connections between siblings—as "like" mother or daughter—contour youth's perceptions of themselves, their futures, and their siblings' futures. These cases show that siblingship is agentive and costly as a youth and not just when one becomes "a mother's brother" to a future generation (Radcliffe-Brown 1952).

Furthermore, drawing on the practice-theory approach of kinship studies (Lambek 2011, 3) and child-led socialization (Reynolds, Dorner, and Orellana 2010; Zukow 1989), I argue that youthful educational sibcare is a practice that cements kinship, especially in immigrant families, where education is perceived as required for settlement success. Like feeding and physical care, educational sibcare is done to secure kin's flourishing. Examining how immigrant youth care for their siblings through education surfaces how educational sibcare fastens horizontal and vertical lines of kinship.

Relatedly, Lupita's and Camilia's unique opportunities in comparison to their brothers and younger siblings illustrate how the "children of immigrants" have disparate experiences of immigration. In comparison to their elder brothers, the sisters are advantaged in settlement. However, in comparison to their younger siblings, they are, perhaps, less so. When examining the early life pathways within the two families, it is evident that "children of immigrants" is not a homogenous category, even within one family. These young women's use of intergenerational language suggests their understanding of structurally dissimilar positions between siblings. As a result of birth order, gendered responsibilities, and more-fixed mobility relative to siblings, the young women view themselves as akin to parents—though, given the heterogeneity of family formations, these perceptions of self through kin are likely variable. Further research on how this phenomenon varies in different immigrant family formations would reveal the tensions of familial power, the contradictions of that power embedded in fractious gender norms, and the mundane vulnerabilities immigrant families face as their members—young and old—are tasked with unfamiliar roles and responsibilities. In these cases, the perception of status mobility between siblings is distributed into more vertical relationships because of uneven responsibilities partially necessitated by the families' pathways (e.g., Coe 2016; Pribilsky 2001). In my conceptualization of the *descendant bargain*, I show that elder siblings account for this status differential inherent to immigration and settlement in locally sensible ways.

The descendant bargain also describes how siblings' new cycles of obligations suggest a remaking of generation. Ringstead argues, "the generation a person belongs to depends on negotiation within the family and society, and always on specific situations and contexts" (2008, 358). These young people's understanding of themselves as alike to parental generations—expressed through intergenerational language and seeing themselves as progenitresses of potential—suggests that the unique constellation of obligations and family history create contexts for generational differentiation within generations. In their refusals and ambivalences, we see maintained boundaries that position siblings as equals in descent. Inherent to these refusals is an acknowledgment that care creates inequalities understood as similar to generational difference. While structured descent is generation's hallmark, the everyday parsing of generation evidences its flexibility.

Kinship and relatedness are tracked through care; it may be that generational difference is tracked in similar, situationally contingent ways. Attention to when, why, and in what families siblings become "like a mother" or "like a daughter" complicates our understandings of the sibling role, generation, and families' imagined futures. As the young women see themselves as distinct from siblings and parents, they also see themselves as distinct from the imagined better future.

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