

# Youth Activism and Community Writing by Latina Youth

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*In this article, we examine how Latinitas, a non-profit organization aimed towards empowering Latina youth through multimedia and technology, is a site of resistance. Latinitas provides linguistic, cultural, and technological resources as means to promote empowerment in the Latinx community, thereby creating and nurturing a space for Latinx youth. This article is written by two members of Latinitas: Jasmine Villa, Coordinator for the Youth Editorial Advisory Board, and Taylor Figueroa, a high school senior and Contributing Writer for Latinitas Magazine. Using personal experiences and testimonios, this article highlights how [Latinitas](#) sustains social justice efforts by providing an interplay of multimodal spaces (physical and digital) for Latinx youth to use as a platform for self-expression.*

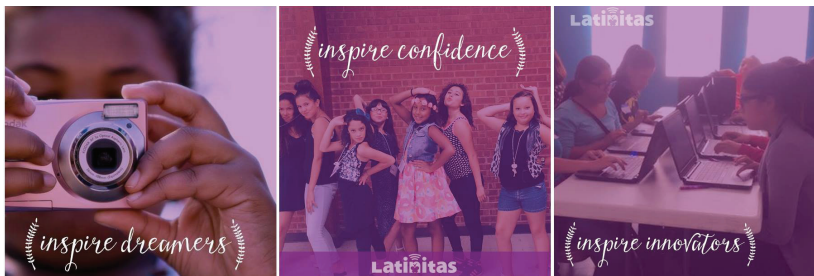
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Latinx<sup>1</sup> organizations serve as sites of resistance by creating and nurturing a space for Latinx communities. Latinx

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<sup>1</sup> The authors use Latinx to reflect the fluidity of identity markers, but may interchangeably use Latina to reflect content from/by the organization. Latina is used to represent the organization's targeted audience as listed in the organization's materials (website, social media, etc.).



*Photo Courtesy of Latinitas*

organizations highlight and contribute to the positive representation of Latinx communities, and this representation contributes to the dismantling of linguistic and cultural stereotypes. In this article, we explore how [Latinitas](#) incorporates a feminist tone as part of their outreach and civic engagement to curate culturally and linguistically sensitive content through its programs and *Latinitas Magazine*. The organization's multimedia initiatives construct an inclusive space that prioritizes Latinx voices within their social justice efforts. We begin by introducing the organization, the resources they offer, and the future the organization envisions for Latinx youth. Then, we focus on the organization's public writing, impact on self-empowerment, and the inventional practices used to affirm Latinx knowledge(s) and self-empowerment.

## INTRODUCTION TO LATINITAS

Latinitas, a 501 (c) 3 charitable organization based in Austin and El Paso, TX, focuses on empowering Latina youth by informing, entertaining, and inspiring "young Latinas to grow into healthy, confident, and successful Latinas." In 2002, Latinitas was developed as a project by a group of undergraduate students in a Latinos in Media course at the University of Texas at Austin. The founders saw a need for cultural, social, and technological outreach to promote positive representation of Latinx communities, which led Alicia Rascon and Laura Donnelly to spearhead Latinitas as an official student organization. As a volunteer-driven organization, Latinitas started as means to empower youth to see and express that they are no less capable of achieving success. Latina youth became the key stakeholders for the organization's outreach and civic engagement initiatives, and in 2002 the organization formed a Board of Directors and transitioned into a non-profit organization. Latinitas collaborated



*Photo Courtesy of Latinitas*

local schools, libraries, and Housing Authorities. The after-school enrichment programs are girls only, and the exclusivity promotes collaboration amongst girls/teens/women while challenging the lack of female driven platforms/spaces. The internships attract dedicated women seeking to mentor Latina youth and connect with other like-minded Latinas<sup>2</sup>. In addition to networking, a female driven and led environment forms an inclusive space where race, gender, and identity factors are celebrated.

with local organizations in Austin to further their mission in the Austin, TX community, and in 2008, the organization established new headquarters in El Paso, Texas. Currently, Latinitas offers a self-described “wheelhouse of multimedia production skills and technology training to design websites, do graphic design, produce video, record audio, blog, do photography, invent social media campaigns, develop video games and apps, coding and robotics, and lately, virtual reality and 3D printing” (Latinitas, 2017, Amplify Austin). The following infographic provides a 2016 snapshot of some of the resources and opportunities provided by Latinitas:

Over the years, the volunteer-driven organization has implemented internships and after-school enrichment programs, Club Latinitas, and workshops at

The organization uses a feminist tone as their outreach and civic engagement as a form of empowerment and increased representation of Latinx narratives and identities. While Latinx role models are often attributed to high-profiled celebrities or icons, Latinitas highlights the local “SHEroes” that are continuously active, and the younger

<sup>2</sup> The organization is predominantly run by and for Latinas. However, males are not excluded from volunteering or participating in activities. The exception is Club Latinitas, an after-school enrichment program, in order to maintain a more open space for self-expression.

“SHEroes” who need a platform for their voice. Ultimately, Latinitas “[envisions] a future in which all Latinas are strong and confident in their image” (Latinitas, Amplify Austin, 2017). The lack of confidence stems from the deficit perspective that often haunts Latinx youth. Low income Latinx students facing greater socio-economic, cultural, and language barriers for post-secondary enrollment than their peers.

In 2015, the Department of Education released a [study](#) that found:

- “One-fourth of Latinas live below the poverty line and more than half are living in near-poverty;
- Low levels of education lead to lack of opportunity in the job market where Latinas make only 56 cents for every dollar earned by white males.
- Latinas also have the least access to health care of any group of women.”

These gendered, class, and cultural barriers affirm the objectives of Latinitas and reflects the need for Latina resources. Multiple resources are available for Latinx youth, but there are fewer organizations that specifically cater to Latina youth. The female youth driven structure/curriculum distinguishes Latinitas from other Latinx organizations because the feminist tone is the epicenter of the organization. Studies like Dennehy and Dasgupta (2017) reflect that early female mentorship “increased belonging and self-efficacy were significantly associated with more retention and career aspirations.” The organization prioritizes female-led and centered learning experiences because they tend to be more positive, lax, and safe. Connecting girls with women who “look like them” creates a positive learning environment to boost the girls’ confidence, self-esteem, cultural identity, and sense of belonging.

*Latinitas “... [envisions] a future in which all Latinas are strong and confident in their image” (Latinitas, Amplify Austin, 2017).*

In an [interview](#) conducted by Rachel Reichard (2016) with Alicia Rascon, co-founder of Latinitas, Alicia explains how the organization’s feministic lens impacts the types of resources and opportunities from the organization:



*Photo Courtesy of Latinitas*

“At Latinitas, we want to connect young Latinas to role models and we want them to learn about her story. Our education and media systems rarely tell the stories of Latinos, and especially not the complete and real stories. Latina girls need to know that we have been in the Americas long before the United States was a country. They need to read about and see girls like them. They need to know where they come from in order to give them a better perspective of where they are going. Latinitas offers girls an opportunity to amplify their voices, tell their stories and be heard.... Too many politicians approach the Latino community as a problem that has to be fixed. But young Latinas have so much to offer; they are the solution. What affects young Latinas, affects our future. I think it is very important to encourage girls to celebrate their culture as an asset instead of deficit. We need to help them believe in themselves, so they can realize their full potential to lead this nation.”

The vision of Latinitas is to invest in the future of Latina youth by shifting the narrative **alongside** Latina youth. Working with Latina youth provides agency and critical reflexivity from both the organization and Latina youth. This collaborative act is essential for

the sustainability of Latinitas physical and online platforms as outlets for marginalized voices. The following video and testimonio reflect how the cultural and linguistic spaces fostered by Latinitas impacts Latinx youth: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaWMeYSihRA>

“Latinitas was the reason why I was able to work my way to becoming the person that I am today. Coming from a family that is considered lower class [in Austin], made me think that I wouldn’t be able accomplish much in life. But looking back, I feel that I have accomplished so much.... Being a Latinita brought my self-confidence up and has given me the drive to make a difference like Laura, the CEO of Latinitas Magazine. What sets me apart as a “Latinita” is that I am confident and although I know that I make mistakes, that will never bring me down. Being mentored by Laura taught me that many things are possible and that dreams do come true if you are strong enough to pull through all the hard obstacles that come our way. Being a “Latinita” is something important because wherever this life takes me, the lessons and experiences with Latinitas will always be with me and giving me the drive to make a difference.”

—Sarah Martinez, Latinitas alumni

The mentorship and experience described by Sarah is common, and is also evident in various outlets provided by the organization. Latinitas provides after-school enrichment programs (Club Latinitas), workshops, and internship opportunities at both locations. The Latinitas curriculum centers on multimedia initiatives, self-esteem, college preparation, coding, robotic, and cultural identity prompts (to name a few). In addition to the workshops, the organization also provides internship opportunities (editorial, photography, graphic design, social media, filmmaking, community outreach, club leader, etc.). The internships foster a network of like-minded Latinas who are interested in leadership, community engagement, and activism. The organization often serves as the agency for students interested in completing an internship for a course (service-learning). However, the service-learning model and requirements is based on the individual’s institutional/class requirements. As the agency site, Latinitas establishes institutional ethos by maintaining partnerships and a presence at local colleges and universities (presentations, volunteer

and internship ads, etc.). The partnerships are critical because they contribute to the growing network of Latina mentors within the organization. In addition to the physical spaces, the organization's multimedia initiatives also includes curating content for their online *Latinitas Magazine*.



*Photo Courtesy of Latinitas. Laura Donnelly, Co-founder of Latnitas, presenting at Las Voces: Austin Latinas in Journalism (2015).*

## **LATINITAS MAGAZINE: PUBLIC WRITING AND SELF-EMPOWERMENT**

While a diverse amount of organizations exist that cater to Latinx youth and representation of Latinx in media, Latinitas is unique in that the organization promotes that they started the first magazine to curate content for and by Latina youth. As the organization's first multimedia initiative, *Latinitas Magazine* represents Latinitas' inventional practice of creating a forum for Latina youth. The official launch of *Latinitas Magazine* in 2003 promoted the magazine as the first digital magazine written for and by Latina youth. *Latinitas Magazine* has two major sections, one for teens and the other for girls. The magazine first started for girls, and would later incorporate a teen section in 2004. Each section has 6 main categories (411, Fun Stuff, Latin Beat, Your View, Real Life/Get Real, and HerStory) with an assortment of subcategories. Writers are not confined to only write about their Latina experience. In fact, writers are encouraged to write and/or create multimodal content that "promotes leadership

development, goal setting, social justice advocacy and community service among girls” (Latinitas, “About Us”). Over the years, the magazine’s layout has changed and is expected to undergo another layout upgrade in late 2017/early 2018. The most notable change to the recruitment of writers outside of Texas was the launch of the Youth Editorial Advisory Board in 2012 by Alicia Rascon and Jasmine Villa.



*Photo Courtesy of Latinitas: Life as a Migrant Farm Worker (March, 2017)*

*Latinitas Magazine* serves as a forum of self-expression and self-empowerment for Latina teens to use as a platform to further their academic, personal, and professional achievements. The different writing, technical, and media skills are acknowledged and celebrated by having the girls reflect on the power of their voices, the multiliteracies and creativity they already possess. In a white-dominated feminist blogosphere, *Latinitas Magazine* illustrates how, as a bilingual magazine, the organization does not limit the linguistic practices of the writers. Rather than write the narrative for/about Latinx youth, Latinitas adopted the “created for and by Latina youth” mantra for *Latinitas Magazine*. Girls as young as 13 contribute to the magazine, and the editorial board is comprised of a mix of teens and undergraduate students.

Through her writing, Taylor, Contributing Writer for Latinitas, promotes the need to mobilize on environmental topics.

“My primary activist focus is [environmentalism](#), especially issues dealing with [animals](#). Until people treat nature with more respect

and care, every known living thing (and probably unknown too) will be in peril. Still, I like to touch up on other spots of advocacy because I believe that all things are connected in some way. The respect and care that I demand for nature should be facilitated among all people, for instance. Respect includes access to the natural rights. Beyond life and freedom, these rights should include the right to health, safety, and education. When any rights are violated, we have a responsibility to bring up the issue, no matter our age, race, or socioeconomic status. As humans, we borrow the land and society of future generations and must ensure that it is in the best shape possible. Some people use art to express their feelings towards society. Others prefer public speaking, music, or digital media. For me, writing and drawing are the best ways to get my point across.

I've always enjoyed creating characters and stories, which fueled my interest in writing and drawing throughout my childhood. As I approached my teen years, I noticed that the characters I chose to write about began to shift from embarking on fantasy-like journeys to real world missions, such as scuba diving down in order to research the effects of pH on coral, or trying to get inside information about Area 51. If I could give my characters the voice and determination of a scientist or journalist, why couldn't I give myself such a voice? I always planned on being an activist, and would get restless waiting to grow-up and get a job to start. So much could change during that waste of time! I knew I could act through my writing, but I wasn't sure how.

During my freshman year of high school, the answer came in the form of *Las Latinitas*, although I wouldn't realize it until two years later. That day, *Latinitas* representatives came to my school to discuss positive self-image with the girls. The message stayed in my head because it was personal to me, and years later, as I thought about how I could best start off as an activist, I remembered *Latinitas Magazine*. I looked up the organization and was thrilled to find positions open for an editorial intern, as internships were allowed for seniors at my school.

I've contributed over 30 articles and blogs to the organization. The writings range in topic and genre, from advice pieces on



environmentalism, to feature stories on Latina role models and their charitable work. The possibility that I have changed somebody's viewpoint and could possibly persuade them to do the same with others is huge. Changing the perspective and eventually behavior of society is my ultimate goal. Without the Latinitas, I don't know where I would've gotten such an opportunity."

Writers like Taylor contribute to the organization's inventional practices. The next section addresses how inventional practices reveals the interplay between technology and activism for Latinitas.

## **LATINITAS AND LATINITAS MAGAZINE: INVENTIONAL PRACTICES**

Conversations on an organization's inventional practices highlight the relationship between public formation and knowledge work (Grabill, 2007; Ryder, 2011). Latinitas, as a public, is transformed by their location and Latinx issues. Latinitas addresses complex Latinx issues through an interplay of technology and activism in both online and physical spaces, but contextualize the curriculum with the available resources and needs in their respective communities. The headquarters in El Paso, Texas provides more linguistic and cultural resources and public texts for a Spanish speaking audience due to the organization's proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border, whereas Austin's curriculum is heavily influenced by tech industry giants such as Google, Dell, and Facebook. Despite the differing audiences

and resources, both contextualize material to their key stakeholders and provide the necessary platforms (workshops, conferences, etc.) needed to enhance marginalized voices. The intentional practices for each organization differ and are important to note when examining the public rhetorics of each headquarters.

The magazine, for instance, reflects a prime example of theory and practice for public writing. As a shared public text for the organization, the varying identities and linguistic practices found within *Latinitas Magazine*, and the organization's programs, promotes an ideology that embraces difference as meaning-making activity to use as a strength when exploring what it means to be a Latina and other advocacy topics. The organization often applies code-meshing and code-switching strategies within their published content, and is used as a rhetorical strategy to promote Latinx voices and identities. For the organization, negating the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of the Latinx communities raises ethical implications. Ignoring and/or invalidating the language differences is a disservice to Latinx youth, considering that 76% of the Latinx population in Texas [spoke a language](#) other than English at home (Pew Research, 2014).

As a form of resistance, the organization views linguistic and cultural differences as meaning-making activities that lead to “constructing more grounded and actionable understandings” (Flower, 2003, p. 40). This leads to creating localized knowledge while affirming Latinx knowledge(s). To illustrate this point, Taylor Figueroa, a teen Contributing Writer for *Latinitas*, shares a testimonio of the impact of the organization using code-meshing and code-switching within their work:

“*Latinitas*, unlike the education system, allows Spanish speakers to use their full potential, mixing English and Spanish as needed. A student who is told in school that they ‘do not write well,’ can turn to the *Latinitas* and be praised. Praised and important! By writing in Spanish and retaining Spanish meanings, the Hispanic culture is better preserved than if filtered out by only English. While the United States doesn’t physically punish youth for speaking in foreign language, it’s template-like, test-based education system discourages anything that is not in “perfect

English.” Sometimes though, true meaning is lost in translation, and the only way to get your point across is to speak in your mother tongue. I myself don’t know a whole lot of Spanish, but when reading other articles by *Latinitas* authors, I find a lot of Spanish words that spark my interest in the culture as I look them up. One word often leads to another, and pretty soon, I’ve received a lesson in either culture or language.”

—Taylor Figueroa

As we mentioned earlier, the organization promotes *Latinitas Magazine* as being “for and by Latina youth.” The “for and by Latina youth” statement is a rhetorical act that, through an intercultural lens, can be also be interpreted as a meaning-making activity and performance by *Latinitas*. The strength of a public lies in its ability to enact to change, or at least convince their audience that change can be enacted (Ryder, 2011). Curating female-oriented and cultural content as a type of intercultural rhetoric and public writing for *Latinitas Magazine* emphasizes how “public rhetoric...shapes their interactions so that they recognize not only their own personal power, but the power that comes from being a part of a group that is bigger than they are, which includes people they know and people they don’t” (Ryder, 2011, p. 218). The organization does not speak “to” the Hispanic/Latino audience, but rather speaks alongside them and includes community voices to create what what Grabill and others describe describe as (community-based) knowledge work. The “for and by Latina youth” represents shared knowledge of the Latinx community. In particular, the statement capitalizes on the use of social/participatory media to create a culturally and linguistically sensitive space where multiple actors interact to foster advocacy and digital narratives of the Latinx community.

To illustrate this point, the following video describes the impact of *Latinitas* being a collaborative force: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEI5ulFZTOY>

The magazine is not solely used as a platform to share content by Latina youth, but is also an inventional practice of public formation and localized knowledge. Scholars like Elenore Long and Ellen Cushman (1996) emphasize the importance of including community

voices, or, in the case of Long (2009) situated and local knowledge, to explore the intentional practices of community members. As mentioned by Long (2009) in “Rhetorical Techne, Local Knowledge, and Challenges in Contemporary Activism,” elicited and shared, local knowledge informs participants’ realistic representations of complex social issues” (p. 14). The same critical reflexivity rhetoricians often find in their own work applies to an organization and their key stakeholders. For Latinitas, the critical reflexivity is tied with their mission and their overall vision of the future of Latinas. To dismantle the single-narrative that often perpetuates a universal Latinx identity and experience, the vision of Latinitas is to invest in the future of Latina youth by shifting the narrative **with** Latina youth. This collaborative act of public writing is essential for the sustainability of Latinitas physical and online platforms as outlets for marginalized voices and Latinx youth empowerment.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

In this article, we explored how Latinitas creates and nurtures a space for Latinx youth by providing linguistic, cultural, and technological resources as means to promote empowerment in the Latinx community. The writing practices of individuals within Latinitas reflects a collective and collaborative process of public writing. Public writing is a “site of rhetorical struggle located within ideological, historical, and material spaces” (Ryder, 2011, p. 63). For organizations like Latinitas, the impact, or rhetorical outcomes, is not reliant on how many people an organization serves, but also includes the impact of the sector in which the organization operates (Feldner and Fyke, 2016). Latinitas, as a public, has an organizational identity that is centered on bridging feminism with cultural identity as a process for self-empowerment. Their organizational identity is dependent on providing a platform for multiple Latinx identities to co-exist. So, what does this all mean? The outreach and civic engagement by Latinitas represent rhetorical interactions and affirms Latinx knowledge(s), which, ultimately, contribute to shaping the identity of the Latinx nonprofit sector. We did not explore the Latinx nonprofit sector as a whole, but found that the public writing created by Latinitas intersects with the much larger network of Latinx nonprofit organizations. Public rhetoric is critical to the mentorship and activism work being done with Latinx youth, both from an

organization's and researcher's standpoint. Latinitas, alongside other Latinx based nonprofit organizations, contribute to the Latinx diaspora that influence the narratives of Latinx communities. Therefore, in order to examine the inventional practices within public formation, then the role and impact of cultural identities on public writing must also be taken into account. The relationship between cultural identity and public writing as both a process and rhetorical act adds a new layer for emerging conversations about social justice and activism in community-engagement scholarship.

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**Taylor Figueroa** is a freshman at Western New Mexico University. She was born and raised in El Paso, Texas, but despite living in the city, always felt a connection with animals and nature. During her senior year of high school, Taylor joined the *Latinitas* in hopes to build a platform for environmentalism and other causes she is passionate about. Her ultimate dream is to open a sanctuary for endangered species.