

Learn From Children, Always: In Memory of Valentina Glockner Fagetti

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What happens when we center children’s perspectives, actions, words, play, and experiences in research? That was the question my dear friend and Mexican Anthropologist Valentina Glockner Fagetti asked me back in 2010 when we first met in New York City. I had just attended a conference where Valentina had passionately presented her work on *niños jornaleros* (child laborers). My first reaction to watching her present was to think that a public anthropology of childhood is possible. You can, in fact, have deep compassion and empathy while conducting the most heartbreaking work. Anthropologist Ruth Behar (1996) explained that feeling in her acclaimed book, *The Vulnerable Observer*. Valentina ran with it. She deconstructed the very idea of a separation in knowledges between adults and children, and saw herself not as a researcher, but as a learner and an advocate. She was relentless.

Valentina embodied the genre of rigorous public scholarship. From her earliest writings on migration and childhood, she covered topics like indigenous migration, forced displacement, children’s labor, and the children and families’ movement across borders. Her contributions were endless. At the very beginning of her career, her undergraduate thesis on the experiences of migrant and working Mixtec children won two of the most prestigious national awards in anthropology in Mexico and was published as a book in 2008: *De la Montaña a la Frontera: Identidad, Representaciones Sociales y Migración de los Niños Mixtecos de Guerrero*. I return often to this book. The stories of Maribel, Epifanio, and Griselda—who I came to know so intimately—have been the foundation for much of my own understanding of migration across the Americas.

Valentina wrote in the book’s opening statement, “For the first time in my experience as an anthropologist and as a human being, I had allowed myself to enter the home and heart of a family to which I did not belong. With them I came to create bonds so close that on many occasions they made me question - not without certain fear - if the work I had been doing could be considered anthropological or not” (2008, 14). She continued by asking herself more complex questions: “How do I report this data? How do I write about it?” Her strategy was to ask the children how they wanted their stories to be told.

As she sought to stay true to children as the experts of their life experiences, Valentina proved over and over her boundless ability to connect across cultures and countries. In a chapter of the book *Childhood and Youth in India*, edited by Anandini Dar and Divya Kannan, she brought together the experiences of Rajni and Reina—two girls, one in India and the other in Mexico—to show children’s work in a globalized neoliberal world. She wrote:

Both Rajni and Reina travel several kilometers daily. Countless times, they bend over, pick up what their small skilled little hands find, and put it in a sack that hangs at their waist. Their expert eyes search for what they recognize as valuable. For them, collecting vegetables or recyclable waste is not a choice, but a matter of survival. Despite living in two very different countries and regions of the so-called ‘Global South’, their work similarly takes place at the extreme ends of two multi-billion-dollar value chains that are essential to the global economy: the fresh food production industry and the recyclable waste industry (2023, 162).

Valentina had the distinct ability to connect the children’s everyday experiences with the macro social structures of our world. She was fearless in her capacity to advance arguments that exposed the role of neoliberal policies in children’s vulnerabilities and survival. It was as though she had more space inside of her to take in stories than any other human being I have ever met. How can someone hold so many stories of beauty and suffering inside their body? Valentina could. In another sharp piece of so many beautiful articles, *Children Crossing Borders*, edited by Alejandra J. Josiowicz and Irasema Coronado, she wrote about a concept I have used in my own work when speaking about migrant children’s experiences at the U.S-Mexico border, what she called “embodied experiences of the border.”

I state that the border as a regime and the experience of border crossing produce new individual and collective agencies, life trajectories, and meanings deeply felt and ingrained within the bodies, identities, and subjectivities of young crossers. Hence, posing the border as method, and as an “anthropological tool,” allows us to interrogate the ways in which the border and border crossing are crucial sites for the production of individual and collective experiences and knowledge (2023, 129).

Honoring the idea of a collective, Valentina brought together a group of women scholars from across Latin America in a team called [*Colectiva Infancias*](#). Her vision was to make our scholarship public, useful, and meaningful. With the support of the National Geographic Foundation, our team built a mosaic of stories that intersected with one another and showed the power of collective action. Often, I find myself re-reading her words and finding new meanings in her writing. Her descriptions were thick with details, her photos were portraits of childhood, and her analysis was always sharp and profound. Valentina was a teacher, mentor, and friend to so many.



Personally, I feel indebted to Valentina. She is the reason I was able to do fieldwork for the very first time in Mexico back in 2010. Her parents, Julio Glockner and Antonella Fagetti, took me in and taught me what it meant to do engaged anthropology. I often return to the last messages we exchanged over WhatsApp—voice memos and ideas that now exist in a suspended time. Whenever I complained about the work I chose to do as a researcher and how much it broke my heart, she used to say, “Our biggest rebellion is to try to be happy in this messed up world.” Trying to be happy was an act of resistance, a way to honor the children and youth who so lovingly shared their lives with her. Vale passed away suddenly in December of 2023. She left us too soon, but she left a legacy equal to a hundred lives lived. I can’t think of an anthropologist of childhood who has left a bigger mark on my work than Valentina did. But above all, she was a mother, a partner, a daughter, and the most amazing friend anyone could ever ask for. *Te extraño!*

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