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Chicana/Latina Undergraduates as Atrevesadas y Testimoniadoras in the Transition to College

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education Studies  
Specialization in Critical Gender Studies

by

Brianna R. Ramirez

Committee in charge:

Professor Frances E. Contreras, Chair  
Professor James Soto Antony  
Professor Samuel Museus  
Professor Lindsay Pérez Huber  
Professor María Rendón  
Professor Daphne Taylor-Garcia

2022

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University of California, San Diego

2022

## DEDICATION

Para todas las mujeres en mi linaje que no tuvieron la oportunidad de escojer.  
Para todas las mujeres en la universidad que dan su mejor esfuerzo cada día  
And for all the mujeres that are still to come.

## EPIGRAPH

"I believe that most students like me enter higher education through its windows,  
only to find that all around us are walls that keep us secluded and marginalized"

(Rendón, 1992, pg. 59).

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#scholarsistersforever

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Chapter 4 was submitted to publication to the *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education*. Mariana Carrola is co-author of this article. Gracias Mariana for being such an important part of my doctoral journey.

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- Ramirez, B.R. & Puente, M. (2021). Avanzando Juntas: Chicana/Latina Pedagogy of Sisterhood in Graduate School. *About Campus*.
- Ramirez, B. R. (2021) Racist Nativism in the College Access Experiences of Undocumented Latinx Students. *Journal of College Access*.
- Puente, M. & **Ramirez, B.R.** (2021). Relearning Self, Recentring Comunidad, and Reidentifying within Academia: A Culturally Relevant Approach to Summer Bridge Programs for Incoming Latinx Undergraduate Students. *About Campus*.
- Ramirez, B. R. & Carrola, M. (2021). Chicana/Latina Immigrant Undergraduate Mujeres and the Survival and Prosperidad of their *Familias*. In *Empowering Student Researchers: Critical Contributions by Emerging 21st Century Scholars*. Consortium for Educational Development, Evaluation, and Research (CEDER) Yearbook: Texas A&M University.
- Camargo Gonzalez, L., **Ramirez, B.R.**, Burciaga, R., Pérez Huber, L., & Solórzano, D.G. (2021) Chicana/Latina /o Education (In)Opportunity. In *Handbook of Latinos and Education: Theory, Research, and Practice*.
- Ramirez, B. R. (2020). The Hypervisibility and Disciplining of the Young Brown Mujer Body in School: A Counternarrative of Mother-Daughter-Sister Pedagogies for Survival and Resistance. *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, 16(2).

## FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Education Studies

Critical University Studies  
Critical Race Studies  
Chicana Feminisms

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Chicana/Latina Undergraduates as Atrevesadas<sup>1</sup> y Testimoniadoras in the Transition to College  
by

Brianna R. Ramirez

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

Specialization in Critical Gender Studies

University of California San Diego, 2022

Professor Frances E. Contreras, Chair

Through testimonio methodology (Pérez Huber, 2009) rooted in Chicana feminist epistemologies and situated within Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit) (Delgado Bernal, Pérez Huber, Malagón, 2019) this three-article dissertation reframes the college transition experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduates at a Research 1 (R1) public university by taking a race,

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<sup>1</sup> Atrevesadas is the feminine conjugation of *atavesados*. Los *atavesados* are “those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal,’” (Anzaldúa, 1989, pg. 3) existing as the abnormal and outsider to white, colonial, heteropatriarchal culture.

gender, class, immigration, and intersectional centered understanding of the Chicana/Latina college transition. 15 second-year Chicana/Latina undergraduate testimonios at this Emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (eHSI) were explored through Chicana/Latina /o critical race theory (LatCrit) and Chicana feminist methodologies and frameworks. This dissertation centers the Chicana/Latina undergraduate transition testimonios to uncover the systems and structures of marginality Chicana/Latina undergraduates navigate as they experience the transition to college through their embodied identities. The central data collection method in this dissertation are pláticas, a Chicana feminist method that is rooted in Chicana/Latina ways of knowing and everyday talk within Latinx communities (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Testimonios are crafted in this dissertation through the braiding of a series of individual pláticas, a set of group pláticas, journaling, and visual representations of the transition. The testimonios will contribute to capturing the complexity and intricacies in the Chicana/Latina transition experience, through a race and gender centered exploration of the Chicana/Latina R1 college transition situated within the systems of marginality that underlie the lives of Chicanas/Latinas in the United States. Therefore, this dissertation contributes to one of the first explorations of a mujer centered theorization of the transition to college that draws from the braiding of LatCrit and Chicana feminist epistemologies and frameworks to theorize about college processes.

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

Laura I. Rendón shares her testimonio in "From the Barrio to the Academy: Revelations of a Mexican American Scholarship girl" (1992) and speaks to the marginalization that Chicana/Latina students experience as they transition to higher education and navigate the university. Chicana/Latina college student experiences began to appear in research publications in the early 1980s when the first articles about Chicana/Latina s, particularly the Chicana experience were published. During the 1980s, Chicana/Latina college students were considered an "invisible minority" who were given little attention by institutions of higher education or research on higher education (Casas & Ponterotto, 1984; Escobedo, 1982; Gándara, 1982; Holguín Cuádriz, 2005). The Chicana/Latina experience continues to be hidden and minimized through research that homogenizes the Latinx experience, the Black, Indigenous, Student of Color (BISOC)<sup>1</sup> experience, and the women experience in higher education. Yet, higher education data for the U.S. indicates that college enrollment has increased for Latinx students, with Chicana/Latina enrollment surpassing Latino men enrollment (NCES, 2019a). This three-article dissertation contributes to a re-framing of how Chicana/Latina undergraduates transition to college. This research can inform how higher education can intentionally support their Chicana/Latina students as ideologies and structures of racism, sexism, and intersecting forms of marginality classism underlie the experiences of mujeres in the university (Holguín Cuádriz, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> I use the language of Black, Indigenous, Students of Color in contradictory ways in my writing. I often critique it for being used and applied too broadly within higher education research that does not consider the particular ways in which students from different racial/ethnic identities experience race and racism in education. In addition, I also utilize this language because it can be useful for collectively naming how institutions of higher education reproduce coloniality and white supremacy that function against a collective of students who are othered because of their racial/ethnic identities. I name this contradiction as transparency and reflection into my own writing and interrogation of the field.



## **State of Higher Education for Chicana/Latina Students**

The following data captures part of the story of Latinx higher education enrollment in the United States and Chicana/Latina college enrollment and attainment across the country. It then moves into California, the specific state context of this dissertation, to situate the Chicana/Latina college enrollment and attainment within Latinx and larger California higher education patterns. Together, the data highlights the historical and structural inequities in higher education, or the educational debt, as Ladson-Billings (2006) argues, which recognizes the systemic and systematic context that shapes these enrollment and attainment figures. There continues to be systemic challenges and practices that result in consequences and result in unequal opportunities to learn and succeed for Latinx students (Camargo Gonzalez et al., 2021)

### **Latinx Higher Education Enrollment in the United States**

Higher education data indicates Latinx college enrollment has increased throughout the United States (NCES, 2019a). Yet this increase is largely due to population shifts and increased enrollment in open enrollment institutions and is not reflective of equity centered systemic change (Camargo Gonzalez et al, 2021). There was an increase in Latinx enrollment in 2018, with 36% of Latinxs in the traditional college aged range<sup>2</sup> were enrolled in college, from 2010 enrollment (32%) and enrollment in 2000 (22%) (NCES, 2019a). In 2019, the Latinx community comprised 18.3% of the total U.S. population, at 60 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Increases in Latinx college enrollment throughout the U.S. are shaped by demographic shifts and growing Latinx population, rather than systematic changes in supporting students through the pipeline, highlighting the continued higher education debt within Latinx communities continues

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<sup>2</sup> College age has traditionally described a person that is within the range of 18-24, the normative age in which students traditionally attend higher education.

(Pérez Huber, Vélez, & Solórzano, 2014). Still, Latinx students continue to enroll at a rate lower than other racial groups comparable to their demographic numbers in the United States, including white<sup>3</sup> students (42%), Black/African American students (37%) enrollment, and Asian/Asian-American students (59%). The Latinx enrollment surpasses the Indigenous, American Indian, and Alaskan Native enrollment, which was only at 24% in 2018.

The racial stratification in higher education is also evident in the types of institutions of higher education that Latinx students attend (Reddy et al, 2022). Latinx students are more likely to enroll at a 2-year public institution than white students and Latinx students are more likely to enroll at a 2-year public institution than a 4-year public university. Enrollment and attainment gaps across the U.S. continue to find that African American and Latinx students are underrepresented in more selective institutions that cannot be explained by demographic shifts (Monarrez & Washington, 2020). This data indicate that institutional selectivity continues to structurally keep Latinx students from bachelor's degree-granting institutions (NCES, 2020). Women undergraduates surpass men enrollment across all racial groups (NCES, 2018), with women undergraduates specializing in psychology, human service-centered, while undergraduate men are more likely to major in a STEM field (NCES, 2019b).<sup>4</sup> Degree attainment rates are also shaped by race/ethnicity as in 2018, as Latinx students earned 14.2% of the total conferred bachelor's degrees (U.S. Census, 2020a), in comparison to white students that received 64% of bachelor's degree (U.S. Census, 2020b).

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<sup>3</sup> Following the writing of some critical race theorists (CRT), I capitalize the terms Immigrants of Color, People of Color, and Students of Color to engage in a project that moves towards empowerment and racial justice. I do not capitalize the term "white" in my writing to acknowledge and reject the standard grammatical norms and power represented in the capitalization of the term "white."

<sup>4</sup> Indigenous/American Indian/Alaskan Native enrollment data was not included in the major/disciplines data set.

## **Chicana/Latina Higher Education Enrollment**

Now focusing in on the Chicana/Latina college enrollment indicates that 41% of Chicanas/Chicana/Latina s of traditional college age enroll in higher education, the lowest of all women across racial groups (NCES, 2020). The U.S. Department of Education's Educational Longitudinal Study also indicated that among the Chicana/Latina women who enroll in college, only 39% enroll at a four-year institution, the lowest of all racial groups of women captured in the data, indicating that Chicana/Latina college enrollment has increased, yet, access to more selective campuses across the U.S. remain structurally inaccessible to Chicana/Latina undergraduates (Gándara, 2015). The Fulfilling America's Future: Chicana/Latina s in the U.S. report (Gandara, 2015), a partnership through UCLA's *The Civil Rights Project* and *The white House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics*, presents an in-depth analysis and context into the increase of Chicana/Latina college enrollment, along with an increase in the percentage of Chicana/Latina s completing a two- and four-year college degree over the last decade.

## **Chicana/Latina Higher Education Attainment in the United States**

The intersection of race/ethnicity and gender are evident throughout the educational pipeline (Gonzalez et al., 2021; Pérez Huber et al., 2015). In 2018, Chicana/Latina mujeres received only 8.1 % of total bachelor's degrees across the county (U.S. Census, 2020b) while white males (26%) and white women (34%) significantly surpass Chicana/Latina bachelor's degree attainment (U.S. Census, 2020b). This higher education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) persists in graduate education across master's, professional, and doctoral degrees. In 2018, 65% of master's degree awardees were white students (U.S. Census, 2020c), 13.5% to African American students, while only seven percent of the total master's degrees were awarded to

Latinx students. Chicana/Latina s earned 5.7% of this total master’s degrees awarded in 2018 (U.S. Census, 2020c). Additionally, Chicana/Latina s made up 3% of doctoral degrees awarded in 2019 (U.S. Census, 2020d). On the other hand, white men 44% of doctoral degrees awardees, while white women 32% of doctoral degrees in 2019 (U.S. Census, 2020d). The graduate degree debt within the Latinx community is evident along with the intersection between race/ethnicity and gender in shaping the educational debt in higher education.

### **California Public Higher Education Systems**

The following data and figures focus on Chicana/Latina California enrollment and attainment. California’s public system of higher education includes 112 community colleges (CCC), 23 California State Universities (CSU), and 10 Universities of California (UC). The California Master Plan differentiated the purpose of each these three public systems, the UC is the state's primary academic research institution, CSU centers professional and teacher education, and CCC is the academic and vocational education system in California (UCOP, n.d.). The UC system is the Research 1 (R1) public university system in California, with 9 of the 10 campuses serving undergraduate students. R1 universities are defined by the Carnegie Classification as doctoral degree granting institutions that have “very high research activity” (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions, 2017). Each public higher education system in California has defined eligibility requirements ranging from an open admission policy at community colleges to course and test score requirements at CSUs and UCs. The presumed intent of the California master plan is to serve California students, yet has also contributed to the hierarchal stratification within California public higher education that is inequitable to historically racialized and marginalized students.

## **The University of California**

This dissertation is situated within the University of California (UC), in particular within an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (eHSI) context in the UC. When considering gender and enrollment across the public systems of higher education in California, inequity gaps are also revealed. In 2019, within the UC undergraduate enrollment, Latinx students represent 29% of the UC system enrollment, while white students represented 40% of the undergraduate student enrollment. Across the UC system, 17.8% of undergraduates were Chicana/Latina women, 12% Latino men, while white women were 21% and white men 19% of total enrollment (UC, 2019a). The three highest racial/ethnic groups of women enrolled in the UC include Asian women, white women, and Latinx women. Chicana/Latina women are the lowest enrollment of the three racial groups of women and continue to be underrepresented in the UC enrollment based on the state's demographic and the state's K-12 enrollment. Additionally, there continues to be an underrepresentation of both Chicana/Latina women and Latino men in the UC compared to their white peers, particularly as the Latinx students comprise the largest racial/ethnic group of students in California's public K-12 system (CDE, 2020). Chicana/Latina women in the UC surpass the Latino men enrollment, yet continue to be severely underrepresented in comparison to white students and the Latinx demographic numbers in California. The Chicana/Latina enrollment data in the UC is further disaggregated by national identity including Mexican/Mexican American/Chicanx (78%), Latin American/Latino (24%), Spanish American and other Latinx (14%), Puerto Rican (2%), and Cuban (1.2%). Additionally, the Chicana/Latina women enrolled in the UC are largely of Mexican descent.

## **College Transition**

To address the racial, gendered, and class inequities that Chicana/Latina students experience in higher education, I center the Chicana/Latina transition experience in research 1 (R1) universities as defined by the Carnegie classification, as the focal point. Higher education research and frameworks about student experiences in college are either race-neutral, broadly focused on BISOC, or homogenize the Latinx experience without considering the identity intersections that shape their lives collegiate experiences of students. Chicana/Latina s embody various intersecting identities of marginality, including race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, migration, first-generation college status, and more. Yet, understandings about Chicana/Latina student experiences within the university are limited, and theorization about the Chicana/Latina transition experience or their processes in higher education is not available.

Additionally, research has traditionally understood the transition to college to occur during a student's first year of college that centers on student "adjustment" into higher education norms and culture within a student's first-time college attendance after high school completion (Carter, Locks, Winkle-Wagner, 2013). Scholarship about the transition to college has undeniably centered on the first-year experience and assumes that students "adjust" or "integrate" into the university within their first year. Yet, Chicana/Latina scholars argue that existing understandings of the transition to college of BISOC and Latinx students continue to present a linear, systematic, progression experience that does not do justice to the complex experience (Rendon et al., 2014; Rios-Aguilar & Marquez Kiyama, 2013). This gap is mostly a result of a peripheral or absence of understanding that all college processes, including the transition to college, are underlined by racism and intersecting systems of marginality that will always be present in the college experiences of BISOC. By unapologetically approaching the

transition experiences of Chicana/Latina s from a lens that understands universities were founded on the racist, colonial, and sexist intent and mission that did not include the education of BISOC or Women of Color, I situate the collegiate experiences and transition of Chicana/Latina students within these systems and ideologies of marginality. University structures and practices continue to uphold the legacy of racism and colonialism in the establishment of higher education in the United States (Wilder, 2014). It is essential to understand this legacy and the permanence of racism and colonialism in BISOC's daily lives in the university. This perspective can contribute to a more nuanced, complex, and holistic understanding of collegiate experiences than a colorblind approach or limited critique of white dominance in higher education. To address this gap, I center the experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduates to attend to the systematic absence of research in higher education focused on an intersectional lens through a race and gendered framework to understand the collegiate experiences of students situated within racism and intersecting marginalities that contribute to a complex, nonlinear, and fluid understanding of the transition and collegiate experiences.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Feminists of Color have called for theorizations about the experiences of Women of Color to embody the intersection of marginality that shape our lives and challenge traditional, deficit, and assimilationist frameworks that center on the experiences of males and white women (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 1989; Combahee River Collective, 1983; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Villenas et al., 2006). Through this dissertation, I build on the scholarship and contributions of Feminists of Color by exploring the experiences of Chicana/Latina s mujeres in the university. To do so, I center their narratives, embodiments, lives, and agency and intentionally and unapologetically relocate Chicana/Latina mujeres as deserving of the focal

point (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Through this dissertation, I respond to the call from Feminists of Color that recognize that gender alone, which has primarily been the focus of much feminist scholarship, cannot determine how power and marginality shape a Women of Color's identity, status, and lived realities (Collins, 1986; Delgado Bernal, 1998; hooks, 1989; Hurtado, 1989). Black feminist scholars such as the Combahee River Collective (1983) proposed an intricate understanding of the lives of Black women and the interlocking systems of oppression that shape their lives. Black feminist legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) also argued the importance of drawing from an intersectionality framework that situates a Black women's reality within race and their multiple marginalized identities to understand how systems of oppression tied to those identities shape and underlie an individual's and collectives' existence in society. Specifically, intersectionality complicates and challenges previous scholarship that has simplified the experiences of Women of Color through a single-issue lens. Centering questions that explore how Chicana/Latina women experience education contributes to understanding how Brown mujeres exist and navigate between nations within a society structured by race and other intersecting marginalities (Villenas et al., 2006).

Through this dissertation, I contribute to an intervention in higher education scholarship by exploring a theorization of the transition rooted in understanding how white supremacy, patriarchy, and other ideologies of marginality underlie and overlap in the transition experiences for Chicana/Latina undergraduates. In doing so, the intent is to capture a holistic and complex narrative of their college transition and contribute towards a theorization of college transition that is also multifaceted and fluid, as the lives, identities, and contexts in which Chicana/Latina mujeres exist and navigate. This study aims to explore an understanding of the transition that



allows for race and gender centered perspective, mujersita centered, intersectional, and nonlinear.

Through this dissertation, I interrupt the treatment of the experiences and knowledge of BISOC within the academy as insignificant or illegitimate by white eurocentric theorizations and curriculum (Gay, 2004). The ways of knowing of low-income Black, Indigenous, Women of Color (BIWOC) continue to be invalidated in a white supremacist, capitalistic, and heteropatriarchal society and university (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014; la paperson, 2017; Wilder, 2014). Academia continues to silence, exclude, and ignore racialized knowledge, ultimately contributing to an "apartheid of knowledge" (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002) that reinforces the white, eurocentric epistemology as the only source of accurate and legitimate theorization. I challenge the exclusion of racialized epistemologies and Brown body embodiments, characterized by Cruz (2001) as knowledge construction from how Brown bodies experience, exist, and are read in academic spaces. In this dissertation, I theorize from Brown body embodiments through the knowledge rooted, manifested, and created through Brown mujeres that exist, experience, and navigate in academic realms.

### **Overview of Study**

I address the following research questions:

- 1) How do Chicana/Latina mujeres experience the transition to an Emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (eHSI) in the University of California?
- 2) How does racism, sexism, and intersecting systems of marginality shape the transition to college for Chicana/Latina mujeres?

3) How does the application of Chicana feminist epistemology and methods contribute to the critical understanding of the lives and experiences of Chicana/Latina mujeres in their transition to the university?

This dissertation contributes to college transition, methodology, epistemology, and research as pedagogy in the following ways. First, I expand college transition scholarship by challenging the linear, systematic, eurocentric understanding of college transition and instead explore a cyclical, liminal, fluid understanding of the transition. The second contribution of this qualitative study is regarding *pláticas*, an emergent Chicana/Latina feminist method. The third intent was to explore the pedagogical implications of

My fourth intention through this research was pedagogical. By invoking the racial and gendered liberatory legacy and mission of critical race theory and Chicana feminisms in my research through the testimonio methodology (Pérez Huber, 2009; Delgado Bernal, Pérez Huber, Malagón, 2019), I aimed to understand and practice the pedagogical capacities and potential for research. As critical race feminista methodology aims to creatively and intuitively use methodology for the benefit of our communities, I built on the scholarship of Chicana/Latina scholars that have aimed to use research as a site of nurturing empowerment, resistance, and sisterhood (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2013). Research question 3 also contributed to this goal.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

To bridge the current content and theoretical gaps in the current transition and Chicana/Latina undergraduate mujer scholarship, I braid together frameworks that draw from Chicana/Latina /o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009) and Chicana feminist theories (Keating, 2006) to understand the experiences of Chicana/Latina

undergraduates in the university. LatCrit and Chicana feminist scholars have previously interwoven these frameworks to understand the race and gendered experiences of Chicana/Latina mujeres (Anzaldúa, 1987; Delgado Bernal, Pérez Huber, & Malagón, 2019). I give an overview of LatCrit and Chicana Feminisms next and identify the particular frameworks I apply in each article.

### **Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Chicana/Latina /o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit)**

Critical race theory unapologetically brings race and racism into education as a tool for critique, analysis, and practice. This theoretical framework comes from legal scholarship that employed this lens for providing a racialized analysis to legal cases (Bell, 1995) and was applied to the field of education that aimed to uncover racism in spaces and experiences of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). CRT aims to challenge dominant ideologies in educational structures, practices, discourse from the experiences and perspectives of People of Color (Yosso, 2002). LatCrit is an extension of Critical Race Theory (CRT) that is Chicana/Latina /o/x centered. CRT The following are the five tenants central to LatCrit as described by Solórzano and Yosso (2001):

1. Unapologetically examines race and racism in education as it intersects with other forms of marginalization
2. Challenges dominant ideologies and discourses benefit the dominant group and contribute to domination over People of Color
3. Commits to working and fighting for social justice
4. Recognizes and centers the experiential knowledge of People of Color
5. Draws from interdisciplinary perspectives and methodologies for a historical and contemporary contextualization and analysis of the experiences of People of Color

CRT provides a framework to discuss and uncover racial, educational inequalities that might otherwise go unnoticed. LatCrit centers the Latinx experience with immigration, language, ethnicity, and culture into conversation with the CRT framework (Pérez Huber, 2010). CRT and LatCrit understand white supremacy's functioning in higher education (Ladson-Billings & Tate,

2006). In higher education, CRT and LatCrit have been used to explore the campus racial climate and racial microaggressions for Black students (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, T. (2000) and Latinx students (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Additionally, CRT has situated the continuous affirmative action debate within a legacy and rhetoric of Jim Crow laws (Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, Lynn, 2004). LatCrit has been particularly useful for understanding and supporting Latinx success in higher education (Villalpando, 2004) and appropriate for understanding intersecting identities of marginality within the Latinx experience around migration and immigration in the United States (Pérez Huber, 2009, Romero, 2008).

Through this dissertation, I build on previous applications of LatCrit and CRT within a higher education context by drawing from LatCrit, particularly to unapologetically situate the college transition experiences of Chicana/Latina mujeres within a white supremacist context that intersects with additional systems of marginality including patriarchy and nativism. Higher education is understood with critique and skepticism as the intent is to challenge white, meritocratic, individualistic, and eurocentric culture and structures that are upheld by institutions of higher education and shape the transition experiences of Chicana/Latina mujeres. Additionally, I center the perspectives, voices, and lived experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduates, with the intent to recognize, affirm, and theorize with these mujeres.

### **Chicana Feminist Theories**

This dissertation is also informed by Chicana feminist perspectives that unapologetically centers the experiences, identities, and histories of Chicana/Latina s within research, as the researchers and as the collaborators of knowledge construction (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Collectively, LatCrit, CRT, and Chicana feminist theories critique traditional research paradigms and instead cultivate methods that disrupt eurocentric research paradigms (Delgado Bernal et al.,

2019). Chicana feminist theories challenge the western ways of knowing that fragment mindbodyspirit, and splinter the embodied intersecting marginalities that results in dehumanizing and objectification of the racialized body (Cruz, 2001). Chicana feminist scholars draw from Chicana/Latina centered ways of knowing to question and disrupt western research paradigms that have been utilized to engage in epistemological racism to produce deficit narratives and assumptions about our communities and have therefore cause harm to Latinx populations. Similar to LatCrit, Chicana feminist theories acknowledge the intersectional marginalities Chicana/Latina experience, including the racialized and gendered oppression, yet Chicana feminist theories also aim to embrace the complexity and contradictions in our histories, experiences, and realities of our lives (Delgado Bernal, 1998).

To address the gap in the literature regarding mujer centered understandings of the transition to college, I draw from a braiding of methodology rooted in LatCrit and Chicana feminist epistemologies through the use of a testimonio methodology (Pérez Huber, 2009). These frameworks inform my epistemological and methodological approach in this study. I begin this chapter by discussing how positionality and cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998) shape every part of this dissertation process, including the critical race feminista methodology (Delgado Bernal, Pérez Huber, & Malagón, 2019) approach I employ through testimonio methodology.

### **Positionality**

To write, to be a writer, I have to trust and believe in myself as a speaker, as a voice for the images. I have to believe that I can communicate with images and words and that I can do it well. A lack of belief in my creative self is a lack of belief in my total self and vice versa- I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one (Anzaldúa, 1987, pg. 95) [emphasis added].

Throughout this dissertation, my positionality as a Chicana Mujer from a Mexican immigrant family currently navigating academia during a heightened racist nativist (Pérez Huber, 2009; 2010) political and social climate as a graduate student and my various experiences within the university will inform every stage of the dissertation and research process, even the writing of this proposal. As Anzaldúa (1987) describes, my understanding, interpretation, approach, and writing about this topic and how I experience the world are all one. As a Chicana researcher, my intent is to do justice to the narratives I have the privilege to share by always making space for the complexity, co-existence, and contradictions in our lives as Chicana/Latina mujeres. In this work, I acknowledge the trauma and pain that we experience, yet also the community and solidarity that we further strengthen and build through college, all while continuing to align my efforts in challenging epistemological racism and sexism in research (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2001). My cultural intuition informs all parts of this dissertation. Delgado Bernal (1998) has articulated that a Chicana's cultural intuition "is achieved and can be nurtured through our personal experiences (which are influenced by ancestral wisdom, community memory, and intuition) ... Thus cultural intuition is a complex process that is experiential, intuitive, historical, personal, collective, and dynamic" (pg. 567). My experience as a Chicana mujer in the U.S., the historical and collective narrative of my family and community in the U.S. and México, and the embodiment of various categories of marginality that have shaped my own lived experiences brings an authenticity to this research. I have the privilege to make in this dissertation. I invite and bring my whole self- including personal experiences and emotions to resist the "disembodied nature of research" (Saavedra & Nymar, 2008, pg. 13). I do this work in comunidad and on the shoulders of previous Women of Color and Chicanx/Latinx scholars, many of whose love, labor, and knowledge make up this proposal. I see them, and I

honor them for being central to why I presently have the opportunity to engage in this current dissertation.

### **Testimonio Methodology**

Through this dissertation, I aimed to capture and center the experiences and narratives of Chicana/Latina undergraduates in their transition to college and their ways of knowing. To do so, I applied testimonio as a methodology, a type of critical race feminista methodology (CRFM) (Delgado Bernal, Pérez Huber, Malagón, 2019) that braids together LatCrit and Chicana feminist epistemologies to guide the data collection, analysis, and dissemination of the research.

Testimonio has roots in oral cultures and communities and Latin American activist history (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). Chicana/Latina scholars use testimonios as methodological, pedagogical, and social justice tools that challenges academic apartheid or the silencing and delegitimization of knowledge and theorizations that are rooted in racialized, gendered, and marginalized ways of knowing. Testimonios in academia have been applied within the field of education to politically capture the narratives of marginality within the Chicana/Latina community by Chicana/Latina scholars (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012).

The central intent of testimonios is to center the narratives, experiences, and ways of knowing of those that experience marginality in their daily lives. Testimonios are not a retelling of experiences, but a critical reflection, resistance, and healing through telling and bearing witness. Testimonios are told by an individual, or *testimoniadora*, and guided by how they see, understand, and experience underlying and intersecting systems of marginality (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). When rooted in Chicana feminist methodologies, testimonio as a method, differs from traditional qualitative interview methods, as testimonios go beyond simply capturing the narrative, and instead, are a tool that challenges oppressive entities and provides a

voice to the marginalized and a space for healing and resistance (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). Yet, testimonio is also a process, through which collective and collaborative knowledge sharing, meaning making, and healing can occur. Testimonio as a methodology is a “verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, class, gender, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more human present and future” (Pérez Huber, 2009, p. 644). I apply testimonio as a methodology and a method in this dissertation rooted in LatCrit and Chicana feminist epistemologies which guides the type of data centered, how the data is collected, and guides the collaborative data analysis in this study.

Testimonio methodology is a form of CRFM (Delgado Bernal, Pérez Huber, & Malagón, 2019) contributes to "the knowledge produced by Chicana feminist scholars who are guided by the awareness of permanent, indestructible racism" (Bell, 1991; Delgado Bernal et al., 2019, pg. 112). Methodologies rooted in CRT aim to uncover race and racism in the lives of People of Color while doing so through the perspectives and narratives of People of Color. Chicana feminist epistemology diverges from CRT methodologies by centering and exploring the necessity for research that honors the researcher of color and those we engage in research. Methodologies grounded in Chicana feminism serve as "a bridge that merges the brown bodies in our communities with academia" (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). Chicana/Latina scholars draw on their ways of knowing and their cultural intuition to expand methodologies and current understanding of Chicana feminist epistemologies (Calderón et al., 2012). Decisions about the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis were intentional with the hope to affirm the knowledge possessed by Chicana/Latina undergraduates who will be collaborators of this study, as we together explored their racialized, gendered, and intersectional experiences as Chicana/Latina students in transition to higher education.



Testimonio as a methodology rooted in Chicana feminist epistemology centers the ways of knowing and embodied experiences of Chicana/Latina researchers and collaborators and supports a co-construction of knowledge through collaborative data analysis (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Pérez Huber, 2009). Situating a Chicana feminist approach to testimonio methodology within LatCrit, facilitates an uncovering of systems of oppression that underlie the life and educational experiences of Chicana/Latina women (Pérez Huber, 2009). In particular, testimonio situated within LatCrit aims to 1) uncover and capture the injustices experienced by Latinx peoples, 2) challenge the dominance of eurocentric research paradigms in academia, 3) validate, affirm, document, and theorize from the knowledge and experiences of People of Color 4) center the importance of collective agency, resistance, and healing, and 5) abide by a commitment to social justice and liberation of People of Color (Pérez Huber, 2009).

The application of a testimonio methodology that is rooted in Chicana feminisms and situated within LatCrit, positions the Chicana/Latina undergraduate testimoniadoras and collaborators as the experts of their transition and college experience. This methodology also challenges hegemonic dynamics in higher education research by situating the testimoniadoras also as collaborators and pensadoras, alongside the researcher. Using testimonio in this study also presents space for Chicana/Latina undergraduates to share their truth and contribute to the co-construction of a culturally, racially, gendered based knowledge that is rooted in how they envision their experiences being shared and theorized about. I applied CRFM through a testimonio methodology within higher education informed by Chicana feminist epistemologies, and guided by the underlying belief of the perpetuity of racism and endemic nature of intersecting systems of marginality in the United States and institutions of higher education.

## **Pláticas Method**

I engaged in a pláticas method or capturing “everyday talk” of Chicanas/Chicana/Latina s as a data source (Gonzalez, 2008; Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) rooted in Chicana feminist epistemologies (Delgado Bernal, 1998) within an overarching critical race feminist testimonio methodology (Delgado Bernal et al., 2019). Through a braiding of critical race, LatCrit, and Chicana feminist paradigms, Gonzalez (1998; 2001) included pláticas y encuentros as a method within their multimethodological approach with Mexicana high school students. These pláticas were individual and group conversations rooted in cultural, gendered, and racialized knowledge. Importantly, these pláticas were rooted in everyday forms of talk among Mexicana high school students and analyzed as a data source within her study. Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) theorize pláticas as a methodology within the context that “we both grew up platicando,” (p. 98) highlighting the cultural, racial, ethnic, and gendered traditions and histories centered in the theorization of pláticas methodology and method. Pláticas as a process provide space for a more fluid discussion that welcomes the mujeres to bring their whole selves, histories, and experiences to data collection and provides a more holistic and complex understanding of their educational experiences (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Pláticas as a method are different from a traditional interview because they are a two-way conversation between the researcher and collaborator, shifting from a researcher driven and hegemonic methodology to one that involves reciprocity and vulnerability from the researcher (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016).

There are five central principles within a pláticas methodology outlined by Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016), including 1) pláticas are rooted within Chicana feminist thought and theory, 2) pláticas honors participants as co-constructors of knowledge with participants viewed as contributors to the meaning-making process, 3) pláticas aim to make connections between the

everyday lives of Chicanas/Chicana/Latina s and research inquiry, 4) pláticas are a potential space for healing, and 5) reciprocity, vulnerability, and researcher reflexivity are centered (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Fierros and Delgado Bernal theorize pláticas as a methodological approach rooted in Chicana feminist epistemologies. In this dissertation, I consider the use of pláticas as a method, utilized as a data collection tool as conducted by Gonzalez (1998; 2001), yet guided by the principles articulated by Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) within a critical race feminista testimonio methodology.

### **Advancing a Testimonio Methodology with Plática Method**

Various methods and tools have been previously used by critical race and Chicana feminist educational scholars to engage with a testimonio methodology and method. These include interviews (Pérez Huber, 2009; 2012), dialogues (Urrieta & Villenas, 2012), written reflections (Delgado Bernal, 2018), pláticas (Flores & Garcia, 2009), the intersection of these tools, and others. For example, Urrieta and Villenas (2012) documented their testimonios as Chicana/Latina /o faculty and pedagogues through hours of dialogue, past interviews recorded of them, personal testimonios documented in published scholarship, and email correspondence. Saavedra and Pérez (2012) also shared their testimonios as Chicana and Black feminists through an intersection of tools, including online communication, writing, and a literature review of Chicana and Black feminist thought. Situated within an ethnographic study, Cervantes-Soon (2012) captured the testimonios of high school aged girls in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico through formal and informal interviews, ethnographic conversations, and observations. Furthermore, Flores and Garcia (2009) collected their testimonios as Chicana/Latina faculty in a predominately white institution through pláticas, which they defined as “informal sessions where [they] discussed issues faced by Chicana/Latina s,” and documenting their stories in written

form. Therefore, testimonios have been captured and crafted through the use of various methods and data collection tools.

Student testimonios in this dissertation are narratives rooted in the urgency of telling, uncovering, and addressing how racialized and gendered bodies experience university contexts in the United States. I drew from pláticas in this work as a method for data collection that is rooted in Chicana feminist epistemologies that 1) affirms Chicana/Latina ways of talk, communicating, and language, 2) situates knowledge production within cultural, racial, gendered traditions of truth-telling in the everyday and 3) challenges the hegemonic and eurocentric paradigms that underlie traditional data collection tools. The student collaborators and I documented their testimonios through a series of individual and group pláticas, rooted in shared Chicana feminist epistemological foundations as testimonios methodology. Pláticas provided a data collection tool for documenting and capturing the student narratives about the necessity of addressing issues of racism and systems of oppression within the university context and experience.

Critical race testimonio methodology engages the act and process of recovering and centering papelitos guardados (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Pérez Huber, 2009; Urrieta & Villenas, 2013) the “protected documents, guarded roles, stored papers, conserved roles, safe papers, secret roles, hidden papers, safe roles, preserved documents, protected roles” (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 1). Through engaging in pláticas method within a testimonio methodology, I argue that process of re-centering and uncovering papelitos guardados, the very act of testimoniando, could be facilitated and in some cases, necessitates the employment of methods that affirm, acknowledge, and center testimoniadoras’ ways of talking, linguistic diversities, communicating, and transmitting knowledge. Therefore, recognizing how

testimoniadoras engage in recounting, telling, and uncovering their testimonios through their everyday forms of talk is legitimate for documenting their narratives.

In addition to validating ways of talk and communicating, drawing on a pláticas method for engaging in the process of re-centering the hidden, uncovered, and subjected experience situates the site of testimoniando within the everyday practices of Chicana/Latinx people. In many ways, the pláticas in this dissertation described feeling that they were in community, talking among friends, and feeling understood by each other because of the shared entry point as Chicana/Latina women in higher education. Cervantes-Soon (2012) similarly documented how exchanges between testimoniadoras centered the “confessional nature of their testimonios...through them the [testimoniadoras] shared truths about their own experiences and taught and learned from each other” (p.22). This is important for demonstrating that testimoniando, the uncovering, and documentation of the experiences, thoughts, memories, and emotions that are often kept secret, hidden, and unspoken within institutions of higher education, can and often, are recovered, shared, told, and uplifted within spaces of community, sisterhood, and deep and intimate trust. This telling and sharing of experiences that are often marginalized and kept silent are rooted in the sense of survival, navigation, and resistance.

Furthermore, pláticas as a methodology and method are rooted in shared power and reciprocated vulnerability between the pláticas, including the researcher. This method presents possibilities for the student collaborators to lead the plática in the direction they feel is important to them, highlighting the experiences and memories that they believe are important to document within their testimonio. Pláticas challenge researcher hegemony that is upheld through traditional methods and data collection tools that require the researcher to focus, prompt, and facilitate what is shared during data collection.

In this dissertation, the student collaborators engage in telling their testimonios as testimoniadoras, and also as pláticas, those who engage the pláticas method. When writing about the testimonios captured through this research, I refer to the students as testimoniadoras. When referring to the engagement in pláticas method and highlighting the contributions of this data collection tool, I refer to student collaborators as pláticas. Both refer to the same group of student collaborators, yet are used and applied in different ways depending on the focus of the particular piece.

### **Testimoniadora and Plático Sampling**

The testimoniadoras and collaborators for this dissertation are Chicana/Latina undergraduates attending a UC campus who are in their second year of college. The student collaborators engaged in this study on a voluntarily basis. This purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2012) of Chicana/Latina students at a UC campus will support a theorization about the Chicana/Latina transition experience at this campus and within and between students across the campus. A purposeful, homogeneous sampling approach is appropriate because it supports the selection of people with similar characteristics or identities that can best help to understand a phenomenon (Creswell, 2012).

Undergraduate testimoniadoras and collaborators were in their second year of college with the intent to capture the first year and emerging second-year college experiences. The transition has traditionally been understood to end in the first year of college. Yet, through this dissertation, I aim to explore how the transition continues in many ways beyond the initial year as "integration" to the university never completely occurs for Chicana/Latina mujeres as racialized and gendered others in the university. The Chicana/Latina undergraduates also served as collaborators of this study, which is central to testimonio methodology. Therefore, I aimed to

center the knowledge that mujeres carry and cultivate in their everyday lives to "construct knowledge from the bottom" that prioritizes the everyday lives and resistance of people that have been historically marginalized (Saavedra & Nymar, 2008).

### **The Testimoniadoras and Pláticas**

Appendix 1.1 presents a demographic table of the pláticas, the Chicana/Latina undergraduate collaborators, in this dissertation. All students were Chicana/Latina undergraduates in their second year at UC San Diego. Students named their Latinx identity in various ways including Chicana, Latina, Latinx, Latine, Salvadoran, and Mexicana. The majority of the students were Mexican, were first generation college students, they identified as immigrants or child of immigrants, and were from undocumented and mixed status families. Students ranged in their majors, with many in the natural sciences, social sciences, and applied sciences. Students also grew up in different counties, yet majority were from San Diego County and Los Angeles County, and all were raised in working class neighborhoods. Many of the Chicana/Latina undergraduates were the oldest daughter, first to be born in the United States, and/or first in their families to pursue a university education.

### **UC San Diego**

The pláticas all attended UC San Diego, the southernmost UC campus in the state, and closest to the U.S-Mexico border. UCSD is located in La Jolla, with predominately White (46 percent) and Asian American (34 percent) residents (San Diego Regional Planning Agency, 2021) UCSD's fall 2021 undergraduate population included only 3 percent Black students, 20.9 percent Latinx students, 0.4 percent American Indian students, .2 percent Pacific Islander, 37.9 percent Asian, and 19 percent white students (University of California, 2022). UCSD is an eligible, but not yet designated, Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving

Institution (AANAPISI) with over 10 percent enrollment of AANAPI students (U.S. Dept of Education, 2016). In addition, UCSD is an Emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (eHSI) as they strive to enroll a 25 percent Latinx undergraduate population (U.S. Dept of Education, n.d), even though located less than 45 minutes to the U.S.-Mexico border. An eHSI is an institution that has between 15 and 24.9 percent Latinx undergraduate enrollment (Excelencia in Education, 2022).

### **Data Collection**

Data collection was completed via zoom due to remote learning and safety measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection decisions are rooted in Chicana feminist epistemology (Delgado Bernal, 1998) and critical race feminista methodology which calls for the bridging, expanding, and imagining methodologies and methods that can contribute to research that centers liberation through education (Delgado Bernal et al., 2019).

### **Data Sources**

There are multiple data sources and data points in this dissertation that captured the complexity and layers in the transition experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduate mujeres. These data sources include: 3 individual pláticas with each student, 2 group pláticas, and papelitos guardados journal entries (written, typed, or audio recorded). These multiple sources of evidence support a convergence and triangulation of the data that will be braided together to co-construct student testimonios. The analysis for the three-article dissertation centered on individual and group pláticas data.

#### **Individual Pláticas**

Three individual pláticas were conducted with each student via zoom. These pláticas centered on student experiences during their first and second year in higher education, highlighting the racialized and gendered experiences in their transition within an R1 institution.



The first individual plática served as an introduction to the project and centered on the first-year undergraduate experience, the second plática focused on their second-year experiences, and the third focused on the end of the year reflection and comparisons between their first and second years in college. A plática protocol ensured these goals are met, yet the student guided the plática through the centering of their experiences and topics that matter most to them. Each plática built on the previous, contributing to the construction of each student's transition testimonio.

Pláticas are inherently a collaborative and collective method as the researcher and participant both engage in a two-way conversation centered on confianza, vulnerability, and the sharing of their realities. This collaborative nature of pláticas is appropriate for the underlying co-construction of testimonios method and methodology. Ultimately, pláticas are designed for the participants to direct the flow of the conversation. As the researcher, I have the privilege to bear witness to the testimonios of each student during these individual pláticas, and I therefore actively engaged and also participated in this method through the two-way conversations and through the listening, learning, and collective confianza and healing that the method of plática and testimonio methodology can cultivate.

### **Group Pláticas**

The data in this dissertation includes two group pláticas. These group pláticas were conducted via zoom and served as the space for engaging in collective data analysis components across the undergraduate students. All 15 testimoniadoras and collaborators were invited to the group pláticas, yet due to student availability, about 8 collaborators attended each of the pláticas. The 8 platicantes varied for each plática, with 2 students attending both of the group pláticas. The group pláticas invited the mujeres to dialogue about their individual and collective experiences as Chicana/Latina s at the R1 university campus and reflect on their experiences

throughout different points of their transition to college. The first group plática included introductions, racialized, and gendered transition experiences, and emergent themes from the first round of individual pláticas. The group pláticas were guided by a protocol that will primarily informed by the emergent codes from my preliminary data analysis. Previous critical race and Chicana feminist scholars have used focus groups as collaborative meaning-making spaces (Calderon et al., 2012; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Pérez Huber, 2009). The purpose of the meaning making group pláticas are further discussed in the analysis section of this proposal. Pláticas grounded in Chicana feminist epistemologies aim to honor participants as co-constructors and contributors of knowledge and can cultivate community, sisterhood, and collective healing. As Chicana/Latina s, we will create a space that invites the testimoniadoras to share their testimonios with each other, hold space for each other, and engage in a conversation about patterns emerging in the sharing of their experiences. These group pláticas ultimately contributed to the data analysis and findings.

### **Papelitos Guardados Journaling**

The third form of data collected for this study includes a series of journal entries that were completed individually by each student. Students were given the option to complete journal entries in written, typed, or audio recorded formats. Engaging in journal writing is intended to center time to reflect and document their lived experiences and rooted in generations of holding, carrying, and documenting through papelitos guardados (Flores Carmona & Luciano, 2014; The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Papelitos guardados are the “protected documents, guarded roles, stored papers, conserved roles, safe papers, secret roles, hidden papers, safe roles, preserved documents, protected roles” (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 1). Papelitos guardados are often written in journals, scraps of paper, or marked in one’s mind for safe keeping. Through

journal writing, the testimoniadoras engage in the embodied tradition of papelitos guardados, that intend to capture the intimate, the vulnerable, the precious, and the protected thoughts and feelings they experience in their transition to college. These papelitos guardados are brought to the forefront through journaling and through the individual and group pláticas in this study (Flores Carmona, 2014).

The undergraduate testimoniadoras were asked to write themselves down in the pages of their journal, to write about their experiences, and take time to reflect on their emotions, reactions, heart, and spirit in their everyday transition. Each testimoniadora began keeping a journal after their first individual plática was conducted. Each student completed 8-10 journal entries by the end of data collection. There was no length requirement for each entry. During the first plática, I provided students with instructions and guiding questions for the journals. There are two sets of journals writing questions, one focused on transition experiences, and the other included method reflections on engaging in individual and group pláticas. Students were invited to use these journal questions, but was not a requirement. I was also engaging in papelitos guardados journaling by sharing updates with the mujeres through writing about how I was doing during with my courses, research, and personal life during the data collection period. I shared my papelitos guardados with the platicantes via email as a way to build community and reciprocate their vulnerability.

### **Collaboration in Data Analysis**

A value and underlying component in this dissertation are the centering of Chicana/Latina undergraduates as pensadoras and constructors of knowledge of their own experiences. Therefore, this research is not conducted for Chicana/Latina undergraduates, but *with* Chicana/Latina undergraduates, bringing confidence to the findings that will emerge from

this research. Collaboration in data analysis and research is not new within Women of Color centered research and is a central component of testimonio methodology. Collective meaning contributes to *convivencia* in research, which disrupts power dynamics and the binary of researcher and participant (Delgado Bernal et al., 2019). Inviting Chicana/Latina students in data analysis supports research in serving as a pedagogical tool as "I am interested in the transformative nature and meanings of this work not only in my life as a researcher and teacher but in the lives of others (Dillard, 2008, pg. 6). Rooted in Chicana feminist epistemology and critical race methods, I understand students as holders of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002) and invite their knowledge to inform how the data is understood, approached, and interpreted. I believe research can be "humanizing and healing" (Dillard, 2008) if we disrupt eurocentric approaches to the research process and cultivate reciprocity, *confianza*, and vulnerability between and among all contributors (Acevedo-Gil, 2020; Dillard, 2008). As the researcher, I guided the collaborative analysis components and ultimately weaved the students' analysis with my interpretation of the data. Therefore, the collaborative analysis components do not replace the analysis that I conducted, but instead enhanced the data analysis I completed by ensuring that the testimonios and findings do justice to Chicana/Latina undergraduates' lives and experiences.

### **Buena Voluntad**

As a Chicana researcher, approaching this work with *buena voluntad*, the intent to do good and have a positive impact, is central to any project or work with students (Acevedo-Gil, 2020; Figueroa & Sanchez, 2008). *Buena voluntad* situates research as an activist praxis, collective thought and action underlined with the spirit of social justice that includes intentional actions in support of community and "beyond solely research theorizing" (Dillard, 2008, pg. 4). I therefore approach research, and the possibilities invoked through research as cultivating a

"practice that serves humanity" (Dillard, 2008). Through this dissertation, I am accountable to the Chicana/Latina undergraduates that chose to collaborate with me and opened their journeys to me. I therefore follow Dillard's (2008) belief that "research is defined as a responsibility, answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities engaged in the inquiry" (pg. 5). As a small way to show my appreciation, each student received a gift card to a store of their choosing, as a form of monetarily compensating students in a small way for their time, labor, and investment in this study.

A central part of this dissertation is affirming the student collaborators and cultivating a community space through which the mujeres can vent, share, and heal together as they experience their second year in college and hopefully beyond this year. As a Chicana doctoral researcher, I invite student collaborators in this dissertation with the intent to serve as their femtor beyond this study.

### **Contribution to the Field**

Through this dissertation, I expand on higher education scholarship through the application of critical race and Chicana feminist methodologies and frameworks to offer a re-framing of the transition to college for Chicana/Latina undergraduates. I make three central offerings to the field of higher education that are theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical. First, through centering the experiences of Chicana/Latina mujeres through a race, gender, and intersectional analysis, I present a theorization of the transition to college that considers how Chicana feminist borderlands can contribute to transition and success scholarship by situating the transition within the historical and contemporary colonial, white supremacist, and heteropatriarchal ideologies that underlie the college experiences of Chicana/Latina students and other BISOC. This rooted the theorization I offer in this dissertation to be fluid, nonsystematic,

and nonlinear as the everyday lives of *atrevesadas*, outsiders who crossed into the university and must daily navigate the intersection of these marginalities in this context.

The second offering of this research considers the application of critical race feminist methodologies in higher education that contend with the eurocentric paradigms and power differential in research by centering student participants as collaborators and constructors of knowledge in higher education research. This dissertation engages in a *testimonio* methodology through *pláticas* to engage in *mujer* centered conversations of the transition experiences of Chicana/Latina students situated within a racial and gendered frame of analysis. The collaborators, who I refer to interchangeably as the *platicantes* in this research, were engaged in meaning making of their own experiences throughout the *pláticas*, in particular the group *pláticas*, where collective theorization took place. In doing so, this research explores contributions to methods scholarship by understanding the use of *pláticas* as a tool for capturing student *testimonios*, and centering student collaboration.

By drawing from the racial and gendered liberatory legacy and mission of critical race theory and Chicana feminisms in my research through the *testimonio* and *pláticas* methodology (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Pérez Huber, 2009; Delgado Bernal, Pérez Huber, Malagón, 2019), the third offering of this dissertation is insight into the pedagogical capacities and potential for this research. As critical race feminista methodology aims to creatively and intuitively use methodology for the benefit of our communities, I build on the scholarship of Chicana/Latina scholars that have aimed to use research as a site of nurturing empowerment, resistance, and sisterhood (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2013).

## **Organization of Dissertation**

The goal of this dissertation is to center Chicana/Latina undergraduate embodiments in higher education transition scholarship that attends to the histories and contemporaries of coloniality, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy of the university. In doing so, this dissertation aims to challenge race-neutral, linear, systematic, and non-intersectional understandings of college transition by re-framing the college experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduates who are first generation college students from immigrant backgrounds. In each of the chapters that follow, I draw from the individual and group plática data collected through this critical race feminista study.

To ground this dissertation in the broader field of higher education scholarship, chapter 2 is situated at the intersection of higher education transition and retention scholarship and Chicana feminist border studies to consider a re-framing of the transition to college for Chicana/Latina undergraduates through a Chicana feminist lens. In particular, chapter 2, “A Chicana Feminist Borderlands Reframing of the Transition to College through Travesía” considers how Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s theorization of Travesía can contribute to understanding the liminality, fluidity, and cyclical nature of the transition that is rooted in the histories and contemporaries of colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy in the university. In this chapter, I present a new theoretical possibility for centering Chicana/Latina undergraduate embodiments in transition literature that recognizes that Chicana/Latina students, including other Black, Indigenous, BISOC, will always be confronted by racism and other ideologies of marginality through systems, culture, and practices in higher education, and I situate this theorization of college transition from these margins.

A central theme that emerged in Chicana/Latina undergraduate testimonios was the constant straddling of familial responsibilities and intersecting contexts with an underlining commitment to family and self. Chapter 3: “The Spiritual Activism of Chicana/Latina Undergraduate Daughters from Mixed Status Immigrant Families,” considers how familial labor, responsibilities, and roles are created and situated within the intersecting forms of marginality that Chicana/Latina undergraduate daughters and their families experience in their everyday lives. As Chicana/Latina undergraduates engage in this labor and familial support, they challenge, interrupt, and position themselves against the systems of marginality that restrict and limit their family’s wellbeing and livelihoods. That is, the familial labor Chicana/Latina s contribute to their families are a form of spiritual activism, as they engage in this labor from a consciousness and intent of interrupting the marginalities that shape their family’s lives in the United States. This chapter is written to be included in a special issue for a high school and undergraduate audience and includes opportunities for further discussion, reading, and learning at the end of the piece.

Chapter 4 considers the methodological and pedagogical impact of pláticas, a method rooted in Chicana feminist epistemologies. “Creating a Third Space with Chicana/Latina Undergraduates through Platicando,” is a co-written chapter with Mariana Carrola. Mariana was my undergraduate research femtee during her time at UC San Diego and is now a first-year doctoral student at UC Davis. In this article, we consider how pláticas are a pedagogical tool for engaging in research that challenges eurocentric research paradigms and practices, while also cultivating a third space that embodies the knowledge, contradictions, intersections, and liminality in the lives and educational experiences of Chicana/Latina students. Third space builds on scholarship of critical race counter spaces by considering how these spaces can be cultivated,



sustained, and locating the presence of these spaces within and outside the university margins through a Chicana feminist lens. This chapter presents a model for situating pláticas as a pedagogical tool within and in contestation to the university.

Chapter 5 synthesizes the findings across the articles and provides final recommendations for theory, practice, and future research with Chicana/Latina undergraduate pensadoras.

Appendix 1.1. List of Testimoniadoras & Plàticantes

<b>Collaborator</b>	<b>Race/ Ethnicity</b>	<b>County</b>	<b>College Generation</b>	<b>Migration Generation</b>	<b>Discipline</b>
Alex	Mexican	Imperial County	First Generation	Child of Immigrants	Natural Sciences
Bella	Chicana/Latina	Los Angeles County	First Generation	Child of Immigrants	Social Sciences
Carmen	Mexican	Riverside County	First Generation	Undocumented Immigrant/Child of Immigrants	Social Sciences
Denise	Latinx	San Diego County	First Generation	Child of Immigrants	Social Sciences
Dianna	Chicanx	San Diego County	First Generation	Child of Immigrants	Social Sciences
Esther	Mexicana	Los Angeles	First Generation	Undocumented Immigrant/Child of Immigrants	Natural Sciences
Guadalupe	Chicanx	Los Angeles County	First Generation	Child of Immigrants	Applied Sciences
Jacqueline	Chicana/Latina	Los Angeles County	First Generation	Child of Immigrants	Natural Sciences
Maria	Latinx	Merced County	First Generation	Immigrant	Natural Sciences
Maritza	Salvadoran	Imperial County	First Generation	Immigrant	Applied Sciences

Michelle	Latinx	Los Angeles County	Second Generation	Child of Immigrants	Natural Sciences
Natalia	Chicana	Los Angeles County	First Generation	Child of Immigrants	Natural Sciences
Norma	Chicana/Latina	San Diego County	First Generation	Immigrant	Natural Sciences
Olivia	Salvadoran and Mexican	Los Angeles County	First Generation	Child of Immigrants	Social Sciences
Vanessa	Mexican	Kern County	First Generation	Child of Immigrants	Natural Sciences

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## **CHAPTER 2**

### **A Chicana Feminist Borderlands Reframing of the Transition to College through Travesía**

## **Abstract**

By drawing from higher education transition scholarship and critical feminist border studies, this article considers how a Chicana feminist borderlands perspective can support a reframing of the college transition that centers Chicana/Latina undergraduates. In this theorization, I apply Gloria Anzaldúa's conceptualization of Travesía, a migration or crossing, to attend to the experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduates as atrevesadas, who have crossed into higher education as racialized and gendered outsiders in the university. This theorization is rooted in 45 individual pláticas conducted alongside Chicana/Latina undergraduates in their second year of college and provides an intersectional feminist and border studies perspective to college transition and experiences that challenges race-neutral, linear, systematic, and normative assumptions of the college experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduates.

*Keywords:* Transition to College, Borderlands, Chicana Feminisms, Chicana/Latina Undergraduates

Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again.” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera*, pg. 71)

### **Introduction**

In *Borderlands: La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa considers *travesía*, a Spanish word meaning crossing or passage, in reference to the migration of Mexican immigrants to the land we refer to today as the United States. *Travesía* aims to encompass the cyclical, complex, and intersectional journeys migrants experience during and after their initial “crossing.” Anzaldúa describes Mexican immigrants as the “*atavesados*” or those that have crossed and are unwelcomed, prohibited, and outsiders of socially constructed boundaries, cultures, systems, and values. This feminist border studies perspective has been applied within the context of Latinx education and schooling (Acevedo-Gil, 2017) that recognizes Latinx students “navigate colonial schooling structures which were not established for their academic success” (Conchas & Acevedo-Gil, 2020, 27). Therefore, Latinx students are *aravesadas/os/x* who experience an education system that was not designed for them as schooling is a microcosm of social marginalities. As *atrevesadas/os/x*, Latinx students experience schooling contexts as Educational Borderlands, the “nexus of deficit and marginalizing practices, policies, and ideologies present in the education system that Chicana/o/x students confront” (Conchas & Acevedo-Gil, 2020, 23). Wilder (2013) documents how American schools, colleges, and universities were “not innocent nor passive” in the conquest of Native peoples and the rise of African slavery (pg. II). Therefore, American universities are entangled in settler colonialism, bondage, and oppression. Critical race theorist, Derrick Bell (1991), argues how race and racism are a permanent part of U.S. society, as white supremacy and coloniality are founding ideologies of the United States. Through the racial realist perspective, Bell supports us in considering what it means to be perpetual *atrevesadas/os/x*

within the United States and U.S. institutions, as race and racism, are perpetual. In this article, I consider how the framework of *travesía*, can support a Chicana feminist re-framing of college transition that centers the understanding of the perpetuity, fluidity, and intersectional ideologies and marginalities Chicana/Latina undergraduates experience in higher education. This paper moves towards a review of scholarship on the transition to college, highlighting the gap in intersectional understandings of the transition, and moves towards situating *travesía* as a framework that can attend to the experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduates through an intersectional feminist perspective.

### **Higher Education Literature**

Research on the transition has centered a traditional understanding of the transition that is solely focused on "adjustment" into higher education norms and culture. Carter, Locks, and Winkle-Wagner (2013) define the transition to college as a student's first-time college attendance post-high school completion (pg. 111). Without explicitly naming the transition as the first-year college experience, the scholars focus their analysis of "students' first year experiences" (pg. 111), hence, inscribing the transition as taking place in the first year. Though not often explicitly defined as occurring in the first year, scholarship about the transition to college has undeniably centered on the first-year experience and assumes that students "adjust" or "integrate" into the university within their first year. The focus of this scholarship has inscribed the transition to college as solely part of the first-year experience, yet this research builds by exploring how students continue to navigate the university as they never fully "adjust" or "integrate" into a campus reproducing whiteness. This section discusses transition scholarship from the following four perspectives: 1) white centered transition and deficit approach of Black,

Indigenous, Students of Color (BISOC)<sup>5</sup> experience, 2) the transition is shaped by race and racism, 3) considerations of culture in higher education experiences and 4) intersecting contexts underlie the transition.

### **white Centered Transition and Deficit Approach to BISOC Experience**

The history and legacy of college transition theorizations are rooted in race neutrality and deficit thinking. Tinto's (1993) "Rites of Passages" claims that all students experience three chronological and linear stages in their early years in the university: separation, transition, and incorporation. Tinto's theory assumes that students will separate from their homes, families, communities, and cultures and experience turmoil and challenges during their arrival and transition to college, yet will ultimately incorporate or adapt to their new academic context. Critiques of Tinto's framework widely exist due to its misalignment with the experiences of Black, Indigenous, Students of Color (BISOC) (Cabrera et al., 1999; Nora et al., 1996; Nuñez, 2009; Tierney, 1999) and its support for a more traditional college and assimilationist approach to the transition to college. Yet, this assimilationist framework's legacy is still present in institutions that continue to advocate for the acculturation of BISOC. Bean (1980) also intended to understand white student adjustment to college by theorizing why students left college. Bean's model applied work turnover and organization fit model to institutional fit and student attrition in higher education. This management centered framework found that commitment to the institution or the level of loyalty to the university shaped student attrition. Yet, this study was

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<sup>5</sup> I follow the writing of Chicana feminists and critical race theorists in education, including Dolores Delgado Bernal, Daniel Solórzano, and Lindsay Pérez Huber, who capitalize the terms Students of Color and Women of Color to engage in a project that moves towards empowerment and racial justice for historically underrepresented racial and gendered groups. I apply this practice to Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and different iterations including Black, Indigenous, Students of Color (BISOC), and Black, Indigenous, Women of Color (WOC) I use in my writing. We do not capitalize the term "white" in our writing to acknowledge and reject the standard grammatical norms and power represented in the capitalization of the term "white."

conducted with a solely white student sample and is not relevant to Students of Color experiences.

When referring to student transition the language of “adjustment” or “integration” is heavily used. This language comes from a line of assimilationist thinking (Tinto, 1993; Bean, 1980) that for BISOC would require the leaving behind parts of their own culture and values to accommodate their new higher education context (Rendon, 1992). When this "adjustment" to higher education does not occur within BIPOC communities, the blame is placed on students and families (Rios-Aguilar & Marquez Kiyama, 2012), disregarding the institutional reproduction of whiteness that does not make space for BISCO. Yet this scholarship has yet to consider how students with historically marginalized racial and gender identities may never truly “adjust” or “integrate” into a system that is undeniably white, heteropatriarchal, and classist.

Therefore, scholars argue that existing understandings of the college transition, such as those mentioned previously, are insufficient to understand and capture the complexities within the transition experience and process for Latinx students (Cabrera et al., 1999; Nora et al., 1996; Nuñez, 2009; Rios-Aguilar & Marquez Kiyama, 2012; Tierney, 1999). White centered transition theorizations result in a white norm and expectation of the transition that BISOC may not experience. When Latinx students do not experience the transition in the way that white centered theories understand, deficit assumptions are made about Latinx students instead of problematizing the framework and its misalignment to the Student of Color transition. This scholarship ascribes to deficit perspectives of Latinx students and their families by assuming that they do not possess the capital, resources, and knowledge to succeed in college (Rios-Aguilar & Marquez Kiyama, 2012). In doing so, this transition literature only highlights the challenges Latinx students experience while situating students and their families at fault and does not

acknowledge the role of institutional barriers in shaping opportunities (Rios-Aguilar & Marquez Kiyama, 2012). As Latinx students draw from their community cultural wealth to navigate the transition, success in higher education is framed as an individual responsibility, as the institution does not support students in thriving (Duncheon, 2018). Institutional supports that draw from normative college transition frameworks reproduce a color-blind approach to supporting students regardless of race/ethnicity or other marginalized identities, which can be harmful to Students of Color.

### **Race and Racism Shapes the Transition**

Importantly, other scholars have identified the role of race and racism in the college experiences of BISOC and Chicax/Latinx students has been identified as salient by various scholars (Cabrera, 2014; Sonu & Bellino, 2018). Yosso (2006) proposed a transition model that centers on how race and racism underlie Chicax/Latinx undergraduate students' experiences as they navigate their transition to college. Yosso explicitly challenges assimilationist and race-neutral understandings of the transition through the first year in college. Yosso's model includes three mostly linear stages: culture shock, community building, and critical navigation between worlds. Yosso theorizes that Chicax students begin their college experience and are confronted with the whiteness of the institution, experiencing culture shock from the clash between their own racial and cultural identities and practices and those of the university. Yosso also argues that in the next stage Chicax students seek and find spaces of community, friendships, and support in their college context. After building this community of support, Chicax students navigate between various worlds including the academic, racial, cultural, and familial. Yosso's framework contributes a theorization of the transition that is rooted in racism and other systems of marginality that Chicax students experience, yet it's largely linear understanding of transition

assumes that experiences with culture shock and marginalization will end once a student builds community on campus and draws from their critical navigational strategies. I draw and expand on Yosso's theorizations to address the misalignment between the theorizations and the actual experiences of Chicana/Latina students, by proposing a transition model that centers Chicana/Latina mujeres and does not assume linearity.

While perceptions and experiences with the campus racial climate and student sense of belonging to the university shape the college transition for Chicanx/Latinx students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado, S., Carter, D. F., & Spuler, A. (1996); Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008), there are scant race-centered college transition frameworks and considerations for an intersectional identities approach to understanding the college transition have yet to be conducted. Chicanx/Latinx students experience the campus racial climate in various ways, one is through the culture shock that results from entering higher education institutions that uphold whiteness and white supremacy (Cabrera, 2014). The campus racial climate is also experienced through racial microaggressions, verbal or non-verbal insults that target People of Color and remind Students of Color of their outsider status on campus (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015; Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009), and discrimination within the campus racial climate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Solórzano et al., 2000; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Yosso et al., 2009).

### **Culture Shapes the Transition**

Questioning and challenging Tinto's theorizations of student transition and departure, scholars have considered how culture shapes college transition and retention (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus and Quaye, 2009; Tierney, 1999; 2000). In particular, Tierney (2000) offers a framework that acknowledges that hegemony within higher education works against BISOC and



requires individual student to assimilate or adapt to the institutional culture. Instead, Tierney argues that the institutional culture must adapt to students to support their success by considering 5 components that aims to attend to the ways in which 1) power can be re-directed, cultivated, and transformed to support students, 2) connections are established and sustained across home, community, and schooling, 3) considerations for nuanced and intersectional identity politics, 4) challenging practices of remediation that work against students, and 5) academic support from an asset perspective on student success.

Additionally, Kuh and Love (2000) present a cultural understanding of student departure that centers the institutional context and culture in student experience. Belonging and involvement on campus for first generation students is shaped by the dominant culture of the university. Kuh and Love (2000) offer eight cultural propositions that shape student departure, which consider how the distance and incongruence between the institutional culture and a student's cultural backgrounds require students to acclimate to the dominant culture or instead become involved on campus to persist in higher education. This model aimed to center institutional culture and collective responsibility in student success, yet their propositions center on how students make meaning of the campus culture, and do not consider how the dominant culture of the university is in itself rooted in upholding coloniality, whiteness, and heteropatriarchy. Museus and Quayle (2009) qualitatively consider Kuh and Love's (2000) cultural framework and offer an intercultural perspective on persistence that considers the multiple, intersecting, and emergent cultures that students are immersed in and interact with while experiencing and navigating the dominant culture of the institution. Museus and Quayle attend to individual cultural agents, rather than just collective agents, who are also important for

BISOC academic retention and achievement through cultural affirmation, validation, and identity.

Present cultural theorizations of college transition importantly recognize the dominant culture of institutions as incongruent to the cultures of students, and situate centering and affirming cultural identity as a possibility for supporting BISOC belonging, retention, and success. These theorizations must continuously consider how the dominant culture utilizes and manipulates power rooted in ideologies and mechanisms of marginality that function against BISOC success in higher education.

### **Intersecting Contexts Shape the Transition**

As Tierney (2000) suggests through the inclusion of home, community, and schooling in their cultural model, student's experience higher education at the intersection of various contexts and spaces in their lives that converge and overlap with the new academic context students enter. Perna & Thomas (2006) argue that students in higher education simultaneously experience intersecting contexts at all times. Their interdisciplinary conceptual model of student success proposes four overlapping and nested contexts that shape student success during critical transitions in their higher education journeys, including: the internal, familial, school, and societal contexts. The scholars argue that attending to all the nested contexts is necessary to support student success. Yet, this model assumes transition to be a linear process and does not center a racial analysis to capture the experiences of BISOC or specific racial groups of students, nor does it center an intersecting racial and gendered analysis to capture the nuances for Women of Color.

Current scholarship on college transition and student success has intended to move away from assimilationist frameworks that call for BISOC to leave their cultural identities and

backgrounds and instead adopt those of the institution. Yet, there continues to be a focus on how students should “adapt” to higher education, through linear and systematic assumptions that are not rooted in the realities of BISOC in higher education. In particular, these theorizations do not consider how students with intersecting marginalized identities, such as Chicana/Latina undergraduates from immigrant families who first generation college students experience their transition and navigation of higher education. Feminists of Color have called for theorizations about the experiences of Black, Indigenous, Women of Color (BIWOC) that embody the intersection of marginality that shape our lives and challenge traditional, deficit, and assimilationist frameworks that center on the experiences of males and white women (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 1989; Combahee River Collective, 1983; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Villenas et al., 2006). To attend to the current gaps in transition and college experience literature, I draw from Chicana feminist Borderlands scholarship that center the body in theorizations of how coloniality, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy that underlies the lives of Chicana/Latina s and BISOC at the intersection of multiple margins.

### **Chicana Feminist Borderlands**

The U.S.-Mexican border es *una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab form it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country- a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los atrevesadas live here. (Anzaldúa, 1987, *Borderlands: La Frontera*, pg. 3).

In *Borderlands: La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa, Chicana feminist who theorized the borderlands as the transitory site of a “border culture” that is created by systems and histories of marginality that los atravesados inhabit, as they navigate hegemony in multiple worlds. Los

atavesados are “those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal,’” (pg. 3) existing as the abnormal and outsider to white, colonial, heteropatriarchal culture.

Chicana feminist borderlands have been previously applied in higher education scholarship to understand how Chicana students are atavesadxs in these institutions and navigate intersecting contexts, spaces, cultures, and therefore, experience multiple, intersecting, and divergent worlds at the same time.

In particular, higher education scholars have drawn from Chicana feminist conceptual framework, nepantla, to understand higher education processes, including Latinx college choice (Acevedo-Gil, 2019) and the Latinx college transition (Rendon et al., 2014). Nepantleras draws from the concept of Nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning "torn between ways" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 547) that was theorized by Anzaldúa as part of her *conocimiento*, or the journey of coming to knowing framework (Anzaldúa, 2002; Keating, 2006). Nepantla is the second stage within the path of *conocimiento*, which is as liminal and "transitional in-between space" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 544), including "a space of struggle between borders" (Anzaldúa, 1987, pg. 100). Nepantleras are "threshold people" that are "simultaneously inside and outside a number of groups...and move within and among multiple, often conflicting worlds" (Keating, 2006, pg. 6). These multiple worlds include cultures, identities, and systems in complementary, conflicting, and overlapping ways (Anzaldúa, 2002). Nepantleras include Chicanas, Chicana/Latinas, and other people that have been historically marginalized that experience the physical, social, and metaphorical borderlands due to histories of colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity (Saavedra & Nymar, 2008). Anzaldúa has even suggested that Chicanas/Chicana/Latina s may be in an almost constant state of nepantla, naming it a "home," as they are on a search for wholeness while navigating multiple contexts, roles, cultures, and

systems of marginality in their daily lives. Chicanas/Latinas are, therefore, nepantleras, as they straddle within, between, and across the margins of society, culture, systems, and institutions. Nepantleras navigate a realm of pain and possibility through their liminality (Keating, 2006). As a transitory space, Anzaldúa argues that Chicana/Latina mujeres, embodying various layers of marginality, will experience throughout their life because of the constant straddling, negotiation, and contradictions that exist in their lives within a white supremacist, colonial, and patriarchal society.

In particular, Rendón et al. 's (2014) college transition model, *Entre Mundos*, contributes to filling this gap by exploring the Chicana/Latina college transition through the application of nepantla. This model argues that Chicana/Latina students navigate entre mundos as they straddle multiple contexts of family, peers, work, spirituality, community, and country of birth. The authors theorize that Chicana/Latina students enter higher education and experience nepantla, a liminal, transitory space. Students experience culture shock and mismatch between their home and cultural ways of being and knowing that conflict with the university culture and climate. The scholars offer a central understanding that the college transition is not linear for Chicana/Latina students.

Furthermore, Conchas and Acevedo- Gil (2020) offer the *Framework of Atravesada/o/xs Nepantleando* (FAN) to consider how intersecting identities support Chicana/Latina students in navigating structural inequities in the educational system through a Borderlands perspective. This framework situates education within colonial roots, frameworks of deservingness, and the physical and psychological borderlands, arguing that U.S. educational institutions were not designed for the Chicana/Latina student success. Therefore, Chicana/Latina students that enter higher education are atravesadxs, outsiders that crossed into territory in which they were unwanted.

*Atravesadaxs Nepantleando*, argues how *la facultad*, the ability to deeply see, understand, and critique ideologies and structures of marginality (Anzaldúa, 1987) supports *atavesadxs* in navigating the liminal spaces that straddle their multiple worlds, cultures, roles, and contexts while in college. Conchas and Acevedo-Gil offer a perspective to understanding Chicana college student experience that is intersectional, non-linear, and rooted in the perspective that Chicana students will never fully “belong” in the institution, identifying *la facultad* as central to Chicana navigation and success in higher education.

This paper builds on Conchas and Acevedo-Gil’s theorization, by further considering how Chicana feminist border studies can challenge normative understandings of the college transitions and educational experiences of *atavesadas*, in particular through Anzaldúa’s (2013) conceptualization of *travesía*. This theorization contributes to the growing scholarship that moves us away from understanding college transition as largely race-neutral, systematic, linear, ends in the first year of college and instead moves us towards intersectional and fluid understandings of the transition rooted in Chicana/Latina embodiments and their everyday lives.

Anzaldúa (1987) defines *travesía* as “a crossing” (pg. 70) or a beginning of a voyage. *Travesía* was theorized within the context of feminist border studies that considers the journey or passage Mexican immigrants begin in their migration to the United States. Anzaldúa states, “For many Mexicanos del otro lado, the choice is to stay in Mexico and starve or move north and live.... En cada Chicano y Mexicano vive el mito del tesoro territorial perdido” (32). Through *travesía*, Anzaldúa does not just center the movement of people across nation-state borders, but also considers how the *atavesadas/os/x* experience the crossing of borders that are physical, cultural, systemic, and spiritual. Central to *travesía* is the perpetuity of this journey. Anzaldúa argues that during the crossing, “I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again” (pg.

70). Therefore, Anzaldúa powerfully demonstrates how the journey of crossing extends beyond the moment or process of crossing a nation-state border, and instead continues through the perpetual contradictions, challenges, and fragmentation.

Critical and feminist border studies has considered borders as a process of bordering, as borders function as a physical and figural separator and divider of people based on power (DeChaine, 2012). Similarly, Anzaldúa also theorized that borders “distinguish us from them,” highlighting how borders and bordering are rooted in power that upholds the fluid and yet rigid constructions and demarcation of outsider and nonbelonging. Therefore, borders include the sites and practices that classify and treat people based on their position within socially constructed systems of marginality and privilege. Bordering takes on a central role of determining and treating racialized and non-normative bodies as outsiders within the United States and its institutions.

Additionally, Ono (2012) argues that bodies carry borders, as conditions of exclusion exist wherever migrants move, and their bodies are forever marked by their initial border crossing. The migrant body is marked by borders and bordering processes at all times, as power is exerted on particular bodies in all parts of the country and in institutions in the United States, regardless of the physical proximity to a nation-state geographical border. It is also important to note that migrating to the United States is not the only manner in which a racialized person experiences the power exerted and produced through bordering, as all people assumed to be outsiders to the white, colonial, heteropatriarchal construction of belonging in the United States are marked by bordering. Similarly, Pérez Huber and colleagues (2009) argue that racist nativism, the racialization of immigrants as outsiders, can be experienced by all BIPOC in the United States as only white people are presumed to be entitled to the United States identity,

culture, and resources, and all BIPOC, regardless of immigration status are presumed and treated as foreigners. As children of immigrants and descendants of migrants, the histories and experiences of parents, families, and ancestors also mark one's body. Additionally, as bordering is a process of exclusion and othering, crossing a geographical nation-state border is not the only type of border present, therefore, there are *atradesadxs* who cross into sites, spaces, and institutions not designed for them and that treat them as perpetual foreigners.

Anzaldúa also argues that Chicana/Latina *s* are *atradesadas*, who migrate and cross into the United States, spaces, and institutions that deem them as “alien” or “outsider.” Ono's argument of embodied borders supports an understanding that Chicana/Latina undergraduates, as *atradesadas* in the university, are “suspect bodies” wherever and whenever they are present in the university, regardless of how much time has passed since their initial crossing. Further, Ono argues that “if the border signifies a site of contestation over inclusion, access, rights, employment, and future for oneself and one's family, the body may serve as a border that prevents these aspirations from being attained” (30). Situating the body as embodying bordering, Ono highlights the material liberties that particular bodies experience through bordering processes and practices in the United States.

### **Emerging Hispanic Serving Institution in the Border Region**

This theorization brings Chicana feminist borderlands studies to attend to the gaps within higher education scholarship on the transition to college and offer a re-framing of the college transition and experiences for Chicana/Latina undergraduates through a Chicana feminist bordering perspective. As bordering is an embodied experience, this theorization is also rooted in the testimonios with 15 Chicana/Latina undergraduates attending UC San Diego (UCSD), an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (eHSI) in California. The Chicana/Latina undergraduates



in this research are from mixed status and low-income immigrant families and the majority are first generation college students (Table 1.1). To capture the higher education experience, I applied testimonio as a methodology, a type of critical race feminista methodology (CRFM) (Delgado Bernal, Pérez Huber, Malagón, 2019) that is rooted in LatCrit and Chicana feminist epistemologies. Testimonios has roots in oral cultures and communities and Latin American activist history (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). Chicana/Latina scholars use testimonios as methodological, pedagogical, and social justice tools that challenge academic apartheid or the silencing and delegitimization of knowledge and theorizations that are rooted in racialized, gendered, and marginalized ways of knowing. To craft testimonios of Chicana/Latina undergraduate students, this research draws from a series of pláticas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) with each of the undergraduate collaborators. Pláticas is a method rooted in Chicana feminist epistemologies that aims to affirm and draw Chicana/Latina ways of knowing and communicating.

As undergraduates at UCSD, the campus served as a shared context across the student testimonios. There are physical markers and physical landmarks that serve as geophysical boundaries or marks one “entry” or crossing into the physical space of the university. Much like the Mexico-U.S. border wall, these physical and visual markers are indicative of “crossing” into the university. Within the context of UCSD, this could include UCSD signage, banners, and campus buildings that serve as physical markers and indicators of one’s presence on the campus, and also of one’s position on that campus. But these are not the only geospatial markers of bordering that marks Latinx students and other BISOC as outsiders in these institutions. Figure 2.1 locates UCSD on the map in La Jolla, California (marked in yellow) and also shows the San Diego county jurisdictions that are home to the largest Latinx residents in the county (marked in

purple). Chula Vista (marked in green) is estimated to be home to 157,862 Latinx residents and San Diego (marked in red) is home to 441,621, the two jurisdictions in the county with the largest Latinx population (San Diego Association of Governments, 2022).

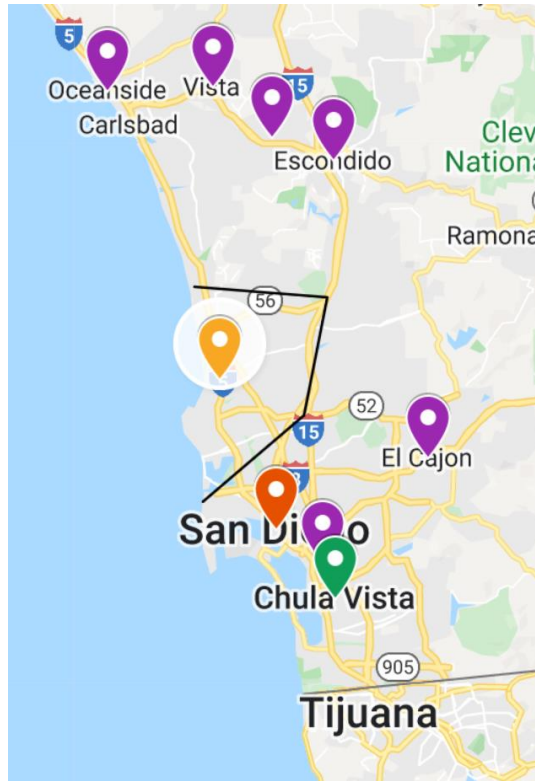


Figure 2.1:  
UC San Diego in relation to San Diego Jurisdictions with the largest Latinx populations  
Yet, the location of UCSD is in La Jolla, with the smallest Latinx population, creating a boundary (marked as a line in Figure 2.1), one marked by location and distance, between the campus and Latinx populations. Though part of the city of San Diego, with the largest number of Latinx residents, UCSD is located in La Jolla, where only 8% of the residents are Latinx (San Diego Association of Governments, 2021). This geopolitical and social boundary, created by the lack of proximity to Latinx populations in the county, serves as a fortified border zone (El-Tayeb, 2011). El-Tayeb (2011) argues that spatial segregation creates and upholds borders

throughout urban areas. El-Tayeb discusses that fortified border zones within a state, city, or neighborhood function as “divided sections” that house working class, migrant populations of color, individuals that hold “radically different positions and prospects in national hierarchies” (20) as “their racialized difference permanently bars them from full membership” (22). The geospatial boundary serves to mark Latinx and other BISOC students that enter the university as outsiders, with the community and neighborhood surrounding the university serving as a continuation of the institutional climate and context that upholds whiteness. It is no surprise then that UCSD’s fall 2021 undergraduate population includes three percent Black students, 20.9 percent Latinx students, 0.4 percent American Indian students, .2 percent Pacific Islander, 37.9 percent Asian, and 19 percent white students (University of California, 2022). Though the only UC located closest to the U.S.-Mexico border, UCSD has repeatedly failed to enroll the 25 percent minimum needed to meet HSI eligibility requirements (Excelencia in Higher Education, 2022). The racial/ethnic demographics of the undergraduate population indicates how a university upholds and reproduces systems of marginality within higher education.

Importantly, fortified border areas support an understanding that *atrapesadxs* do not necessarily need to be on the physical campus to feel they are entering the institution of higher education, as its location and surrounding area also serves as an extension of the bordering process that “protects” the university from outside bodies. This indicates that the geographical locational and space surrounding the university serve as part of the bordering process, reflecting and upholding the power that frames particular bodies as nonbelonging. For Latinx students who do enroll in higher education, their racialized and intersecting identities of Latinx students bars them from “full membership” in the university that was founded through settler colonialism and slavery (Wilder, 2013). Therefore, the geophysical features and spatial locations of universities

uphold physical and figurative boundaries through which *atrevesadas* experience otherness and marginalization in the university.

Through *travesía*, Anzaldúa also captures the experience of gaining a new consciousness as Chicana/Latina s navigate through life, which results in a crossing from a previous knowledge to a new place and state of knowing. Chicana/Latina s must “work twice as others to meet the standards of the dominant culture” (pg. 71). For Chicana/Latina undergraduates entering higher education, this experience includes the contradictions and differences between their culture and ways of knowing and those of the white, colonial, classist, and heteropatriarchal university. This is one of the first theorizations of college transition through a *travesía* perspective. Yet, it is appropriate to conceptualize the Chicana/Latina transition to college as “crossing” and “new life beginning” as *mujeres* engage in a journey or passage in higher education and must repeatedly “try to make sense of it all” while simultaneously seeing “things in a different perspective” (p. 71).

What follows is Jacqueline’s *testimonio*, through which I highlight the ways in which the Chicana/Latina undergraduates experience the *travesía* in higher education, indicating how *travesía* can serve as a conceptual tool to inform an intersectional and embodied understanding of student transition and college experience. Though we are centering Jacqueline’s experience, *testimonios* are critical reflections of the collective and community knowledge and histories (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001).

### **Jacqueline’s Travesía**

Jacqueline is a first-generation college student who grew up in Los Angeles County. She is the oldest daughter of a Mexican immigrant family and as the oldest, is the first of her siblings to pursue higher education. Jacqueline was in her second year at UCSD where she majored in a

natural sciences discipline. Jacqueline's testimonio is centered in this article as an individual, yet collective example of how Chicana/Latina undergraduates from immigrant backgrounds experience *travesía* in higher education. It was evident in Jacqueline's testimonio that Chicana/Latina s traverse higher education, they embody the physical and figural borders (Figure 2.1) that exists between universities that is rooted and upholds whiteness, coloniality, and heteropatriarchy and communities and people marked by intersecting identities of marginality in their everyday lives. Therefore, through this experience, *atrevesadas* are "always in flux, always shifting" (Ono, 2012, pg. 31), as Anzaldúa refers to this constant state of transition, a perpetual state of *nepantla* (2002, pg. 544). Jacqueline shared the following when describing her initial *travesía* to the university through a summer bridge program at her institution:

During the summer program I came, I remember the first night, I just stayed in the dorm myself. I had no idea what to expect. I didn't even bring a pillow. So, I was like laying on my sweater. Yeah. And I was like, oh my god, like what did I get myself into? And I was like, just thinking about that throughout the workshops, like I was noticing that like yeah, there was like, like other like Latino kids, but some of them were like, the rich Latino kid. *And I felt like we really didn't share the same similarities. And I was like, I don't know if I fit in here. Like, had a little crying session in the dorm room by myself.* I was like, Oh my god, like, what am I gonna do? And where am I gonna go to college? And I felt like I couldn't call my mom or my dad because I was like, what am I supposed to? Like? How are they gonna help me? What would I ask them? What would I tell them?

Jacqueline shows us through her testimonio how her university journey first began through her five-week summer bridge program. She describes feelings unprepared for starting college, since she did not know what physical things, she needed to bring with her for her stay in the dorm. Andrea also shared her emotional response to entering the university and feeling that she couldn't identify with the students at her campus, even other Latinx students who she felt were different than her because of class differences. This led Jacqueline to experience the initial

travesía as one of isolation, emotional and mental distress, and questioning of her belonging on campus.

As Anzaldúa states, “every step forward is a travesía,” reflecting the cyclical, fluid, complex experiences of being on a journey as an outsider of a country, institution, and space. Jacqueline’s testimonio shows us that as mujeres experience their time in college, beyond the temporal characteristics that identifies the first travesía to the university, there are three ways in the student testimonios that highlighted how the travesías are experienced. These include 1) feeling “alien” in higher education, 2) experiencing la facultad towards conocimiento, and 3) the perpetual atravesada in the university.

Through their testimonios, various Chicana/Latina undergraduates shared feeling “crazy” and “weird” in the university. These feelings were tied to their intersecting embodied identities that shaped how they experienced the university. The mujeres described feeling “crazy” as they see students around her experience the university in very different way then she does as a first generation, Chicana/Latina student from an immigrant family. When she feels a sense of isolation or when she does not perform well as she hoped on an exam or in a course, she attributes the source of that negative experience or underperformance in herself. Anzaldúa described that “feeling alien” is characteristic of travesía, where your bodymindspirit sense and experience the divergence, contradictions, and mismatch within a space that is bounded by intersecting systems of marginality that function against your presence, survival, and success. Feeling “crazy” is one way in which the students “felt alien” in the university campus. Jacqueline shared the following about how she experiences the university:

Once school started, so my roommates my first year, one was Latina, her name was Miriam, she was like tall, pale skin, blondish hair, greenish eyes. And the other roommate, Amina, also had pale skin, she’s Asian. My other roommate was from South Africa, she was white. And so, in my head, I was like, I don’t even

know what to expect living with these people. So often I was in my room by myself and them (her roommates) were like, laughing it up and stuff like that. And I was in my room crying. I was like, Oh, my God, like, this just *feels so weird*. Because even the week we were moving in and like, I would see, like, all these different kids, and they're like, they're all white or Asian. I was like, and I'm not. I'm like, *chubby. I get really tan in summer, like a lot more tan than my usual color*. So I was there with my little *brown* arms, and I look nothing like these people. I'm also 5'1'' or maybe 5' 2'' on a good day, so I was *just feeling like I'm just the short brown women here*.

Feeling “alien” for Jacqueline was rooted in how she experienced the university through her “short brown women” body. She described feeling “weird” as her physical body marked by race, ethnicity, gender, height, and body size in the university regarded her body as deviant from normative bodies in the institution. As Jacqueline experience the university through their intersecting embodiments, though socially constructed and fluid, will always mark them as outsiders throughout their college experience.

As students navigate the higher education context, they develop a deep, intuitive understanding of the university and how systems of marginality operate within this context. Anzaldúa (2013) refers to this growth in critical consciousness and navigation of intersecting marginalities as *conocimiento*. Through *concomineto*, Anzaldúa centers critical self-reflection, intuition, and the learning that one develops when navigating marginality (Keating, 2006). In reflecting on her aspiration to become a science teacher for racially and ethnically diverse students, Jacqueline also shares with us how she has grown in her critical understanding and uncovering of her own educational experiences and hopes to interrupt those systems in her role as a teacher. Jacqueline shared:

I'm interested in social justice, for people of color like myself, so I'm just learning, little by little, you know its hard-to-find examples of social justice teaching in my classes. And so I have to go outside of my field to find it and learn about issues I see come up and then since I've been learning more I feel like I've been trying to understand my own experiences and keep learning, I also tell people that I hear or see do things, like I know they didn't expect me to call them

out, but after learning and knowing now, I feel I have to. And even in my own education, I felt I couldn't speak Spanish, even times right now too, I feel uncomfortable speaking Spanish in classes for example, like uncomfortable being myself, and I don't want my future students to feel that way. I want us to be proud of our culture and proud of who we are, who are families are, but they don't teach us that in schools and rarely do they teach it in college. So, like I recently learned about critically responsive pedagogy in one of my education classes, and I'm trying now to like learn more about that, see how it would help me with my own experiences now to better understand the challenges I have experienced so I can also make sure I don't do the same harm with my students.

Jacqueline shared how her interest in teaching for social justice are rooted in her own experiences as a Chicana/Latina student navigating a STEM discipline. She describes how she is deepening her understanding of ideologies and systems of marginality that support her in critically reflecting on her own schooling experiences and prepare her to be a social justice minded science educator in the future. Conocimiento is an ongoing, fluid, and perpetual experience of growth, understanding, and evolvment, as Anzaldúa argued that "Every time she makes "sense" of something, she has to 'cross over,' kicking a hole of out of the old boundaries of the self and slipping under or over, dragging the old skin along, stumbling over it" (Anzaldúa, 2013). As Jacqueline makes sense of her own educational experiences, she crosses over to a new understanding of her lived experiences and a deepening understanding of educational inequities. Conchas and Acevedo-Gil (2020) center la facultad, the sixth-sense intuition and understanding that Latinx students develop as they experience higher education as *atrevesadxs* that supports them in navigating. This *conocimiento* supports her in navigating her time in college, as she can name the challenges that she faced, connect them to the struggles of other Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and continue learning about practices to disrupt those systems in her own teaching. Jacqueline is therefore, continuously learning and transforming "little by little" while she navigates the university. This critical learning and consciousness that Jaqueline experiences reveals that she does not adapt to the university context, but instead continuously must engage in



critical reflection, deep recognition, and creative thought that supports her in surviving and navigating her time in college.

As students experience their time in college through their embodied intersecting identities, it is important to therefore recognize that being an *atrasada*, marked through their initial *travesía* to the university, remains with them throughout their time in college. Being a perpetual outsider of the university is experienced “again, and again” (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Jacqueline shared the following in our *pláticas* together, highlighting the perpetuity of feeling like an *atrasada* and constant reminders of her outsider status in the university:

I feel like there's always imposter syndrome going into classes like especially stem ones. Each time I have to take a class I really feel it. Like next quarter is going to be kind of rough and like just I don't know I feel like I haven't come across actually now that I'm thinking about it, I feel, like the majority of people that I've made friends with and classes have not been like Chicana/Latina or Latino because there are not really a lot of them in those courses. So, there's that feeling always there, but I think it's just kind of like personally tied to being Latina or being from like a different area than San Diego or La Jolla, and all tied to how it effects my overall self-esteem.

Jacqueline demonstrates how each new quarter brings a new set of classes and a new set of experiences that underlie her continuous experience of imposter syndrome. She believes being largely underrepresented in STEM as a Chicana/Latina student in the natural sciences from Los Angeles County shapes the constant navigation of underrepresentation, questioning her belonging on the university and in the STEM field, and results in fear and worry for the next quarter that will come. Jacqueline teaches us the cyclic, non-linear, manner in which Chicana/Latina undergraduates experience the university as perpetual *atrasadas*, feeling “alien” throughout their college journeys. As students whose lives are shaped by numerous identities- race, ethnicity, gender, immigration, class, colorism, language, and others- they carry these markers of marginality with them throughout their time in higher education.

Jacqueline's testimonio demonstrates how she as a Chicana/Latina student from an immigrant background experienced the *travesía* to the university, as the initial *travesía* to the university and the perpetual *travesía* that is experienced thereafter. The initial and perpetual *travesía* are experienced in three particular ways by Jacqueline: 1) feeling "alien" in higher education, 2) experiencing *la facultad* towards *conocimiento*, and 3) the perpetual *atavesada* in the university. The initial *travesía*, or crossing, is discussed in connection, yet separate from the perpetual *travesía* to consider the temporality that marks the first *travesía* into the university as the beginning of the college journey, much as border crossing marks the beginning or entry into a new country or land. Future writing will document how *travesía* is experienced across and between student testimonios.

### **Conclusion: "Every Step Forward is a Travesía"**

Through this theorization, I propose an understanding of the transition college as *a travesía*, or *a journey*, which begins when a student enters or crosses into higher education, yet continues with "every step" as an emergent, fluid, complex, and cyclical journey for *atrevesadas* in the university. Therefore, *travesía* to the university, begins with the entering into higher education, yet continues throughout the time in college, as Chicana/Latina s are marked by higher education, some would argue, even through and beyond graduation. This theorizations challenges assumptions of "adaption" or "integration" into the university for Chicana/Latina undergraduates who will never fully belong within institutions rooted in histories and cotemporary coloniality, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy.

As Bell (1991) teaches us racism is an endemic and permanent part of United States society, we must also theorize about higher education from the assumption that racism will continue to be part of the fabric of these institutions, as educational systems function as a

microcosm of social inequities and marginalities. As racism and intersecting systems of marginality underlie the experiences of BISOC in higher education, for BISOC to be fully part of the university would require that racism and intersecting marginalities no longer exists in higher education. Therefore, understanding that our BISOC students will always be confronted by racism and other ideologies of marginality through systems, culture, and practices in higher education, we must situate our theorizations of college transition and retention from these margins. I propose in this article a theorization of college *travesía* for Chicana/Latina undergraduates that attends to the permanence of racism and intersecting systems of marginality, and recognizes that students navigate and confront these marginalities (and will continue to do so) on a daily basis, regardless of temporal constructions scholars attribute to student experiences in higher education.

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## **CHAPTER 3**

Collective Survival, Love, and Resistance: The Spiritual Activism of Chicana/Latina

Undergraduate Daughters from Mixed Status Immigrant Families

## **Abstract**

In this empirical piece, I consider Chicana/Latina undergraduate daughters' experiences in mixed status<sup>6</sup> immigrant families in the United States to document how Chicana/Latina undergraduates navigate United States systems and institutions on behalf and alongside their family. This analysis is rooted in 45 individual pláticas conducted with 15 Chicana/Latina undergraduates from mixed status families. I argue that Chicana/Latina undergraduate daughters' familial responsibilities and roles are shaped by intersecting systems and structures of marginality that they and their families experience in the United States because of their intersecting marginalized identities. The student testimonios show that Chicana/Latina daughters contribute to how their family collectively navigates to survive and thrive in the United States. This familial labor is understood as a form of spiritual activism rooted in survival, love, and resistance marked by race, ethnicity, gender, nativism, immigration, and language for Chicana/Latina undergraduates and their mixed status immigrant families.

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<sup>6</sup> Mixed status family is a family with members of different immigration statuses such as citizenship, permanent resident, undocumented, and/or a temporary presence or work visa.

## Introduction

The deficit and racist perspectives on Latinx<sup>7</sup> families are still with us today, as questions and doubts continue regarding the intellectual capacity of Latinx children, the level of nurturing of learning and development of children in Latinx immigrant homes, and the value for education by Latinx parents who did not have an opportunity to be formally educated in the United States. Research has challenged these racial narratives of Latinx families and communities by demonstrating how Latinx parents and families their children's educational aspirations (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Chicana feminist scholars have also captured how Latinx families and households possess, create, and transmit knowledge that supports children in navigating their educational experiences (Delgado Bernal, 2001).

The Latinx family is often understood through the framework of familismo,<sup>8</sup> a strong attachment and connection with family and considered a core value within Latinx culture (Smith-Morris et al., 2013; Vega, 1990). Familismo is a commitment and obligation to family, and prioritization of familial interests before personal interests. Familismo is often tied to expected gender norms, values, and behaviors. Machismo is the masculine values Latino men are expected to perform within Latinx culture and families. Marianismo is the expectation of self-sacrifice, purity, and devotion to family from Chicana/Latina women (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Both machismo and marianismo are produced and reinforced by whiteness and heteropatriarchy<sup>9</sup> that marginalizes Latinx people. Marianismo contributes to the gendered roles and

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<sup>7</sup> Latinx is a gender-neutral term that aims to be inclusive of the various gender identities within the Latinx community.

<sup>8</sup> I do not italicize Spanish in my writing to interrupt English dominance in academic writing and affirm my reality as a Chicana who experiences and interprets the world around me through the braiding and intersection of both Spanish and English.

<sup>9</sup> Heteropatriarchy is the ideology or beliefs that cisgender and heterosexual males have authority over females and folxs with marginalized sexual and gender identities.



responsibilities within Latinx families that most often falls on Chicana/Latina girls and women to carry (Cammarota, 2004).

Chicana/Latina s may engage in familismo through housework, caretaking, financial obligations, translating, and staying close to home (Espinoza, 2010). Familismo can feel contradictory and challenging in the lives of Chicana/Latina s, such as for mujeres who pursue higher education and take time away from family commitments to focus on their studies. Research about familismo situates family and education as competing demands in the lives of Chicana/Latina students, with family responsibilities and labor framed as disrupting educational aspirations and success, and vice versa. Yet, Chicana/Latina students develop strategies to negotiate their multiple roles and responsibilities in their educational and familial contexts (Espinoza, 2010). This constant negotiation is part of the everyday lives of Chicana/Latina students. Martinez (2013) also argues that the importance of familismo in Latinx families is shaped by structures outside of the family. Yet, the dominant narrative continues to reproduce beliefs that Latinx families are a burden to Chicana/Latina aspirations, growth, and success. This is in part due to scholarship that does not recognize how Latinx families, including responsibilities and labor, are shaped by intersecting inequities that are collectively experienced.

In this writing, I consider how the labor within families is performed by Chicana/Latina undergraduates from mixed-status immigrant families is underlined by the systems of marginality that their families experience in the United States. The intent is to present a structural perspective that understands how these beliefs and gendered forms of responsibilities or labor are produced, and some may even say, made necessary, within the intersecting marginalities that Chicana/Latina s and their families experience and must navigate for survival.

## Theory

This empirical piece draws from a braiding of Chicana/Latina /o critical race theory (LatCrit) and the Chicana feminist theorization of spiritual activism. LatCrit (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000) is an extension (or the prima/o/x or cousin) of critical race theory (CRT) which unapologetically brings race and racism into education as a tool for critique, analysis, and practice. This theoretical framework comes from legal scholarship that applied this lens to provide a racialized analysis to legal cases (Bell, 1995) and was applied to the field of education to uncover racism in spaces and experiences of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). LatCrit considers how race and racism are experienced by Latinx people (Pérez Huber, 2010).

There are five central tenants or guiding principles of LatCrit described by Solórzano and Yosso (2001): 1) unapologetically examines race and racism in education as it intersects with other forms of marginalization, 2) challenges dominant ideologies and discourses that benefit the dominant group and contribute to domination over People of Color, 3) commits to working and fighting for social justice, 4) centers the experiential knowledge of People of Color, and 5) draws from interdisciplinary perspectives for a historical and contemporary understand of the experiences of People of Color. LatCrit is applied as a lens to identify the systems and structures of marginality that Chicana/Latina undergraduate daughters in mixed-status families experience and navigate in their daily lives on behalf and alongside their families.

Additionally, I draw from spiritual activism theorized by queer Chicana feminist, Gloria Anzaldúa (2002), to understand how Chicana/Latina undergraduate daughters navigate social institutions and spaces on behalf and with their family, contributing to the safety and survival for their families and interrupting the systems of marginality that their families experience. Spiritual

activism is defined by Anzaldúa as "the ability to recognize and endow meaning to daily experience (spirituality) furthers the ability to shift and transform" (pg. 568). Through reflection and consciousness of the one's social, cultural, and political realities, one can engage in making mundo nuevo/new world, through advocating, challenging, and resistance for change and justice. This perspective allows us to think about the labor undergraduate Chicana/Latina daughters engage in situated within and against the intersections of their personal and familial experiences and positionalities to promote collective support, survival, and resistance.

## **Method**

Through this empirical piece, I center the experiences and narratives of Chicana/Latina undergraduates in their transition to college and their familial contexts while in college. To do so, I apply testimonio as a methodology, a type of critical race feminista methodology (CRFM) (Delgado Bernal, Pérez Huber, Malagón, 2019) that is rooted in LatCrit and Chicana feminist epistemologies. Testimonios has roots in oral cultures and communities and Latin American activist history (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). Chicana/Latina scholars use testimonios as methodological, pedagogical, and social justice tools that challenge academic apartheid or the silencing and delegitimization of knowledge and theorizations that are rooted in racialized, gendered, and marginalized ways of knowing.

The application of a testimonio methodology positions the Chicana/Latina undergraduate testimoniadoras and collaborators as the experts of their transition and college experience. This methodology also challenges hegemonic dynamics in higher education research by situating the testimoniadoras also as collaborators and pensadoras, alongside the researcher (Pérez Huber, 2009). Using testimonio in this study also presented a space for Chicana/Latina undergraduates to share their truth and contribute to the co-construction of a culturally, racially, gendered based

knowledge that is rooted in how they envision their experiences being shared and theorized. In drawing from CRFM through a testimonio methodology within higher education, this study is informed by Chicana feminist epistemologies, and guided by the underlying belief of the perpetuity of racism and endemic nature of intersecting systems of marginality in U.S. higher education.

To craft testimonios of Chicana/Latina undergraduate daughters, this research draws from a series of pláticas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) with 15 Chicana/Latina undergraduate daughters attending an a 4-year emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (eHSI) in southern California. The students are all first-generation college students from mixed-status families. Pláticas is a method rooted in Chicana feminist epistemologies that aims to affirm and draw Chicana/Latina ways of knowing and communicating. The pláticas were analyzed through open-ended and thematic coding (Saldaña, 2014) to identify key patterns that emerged within and across each students' experiences.

The experiences of three students are shared in this writing as testimonios (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012), capturing the central themes identified in this research. The three students are from low income, mixed status Latinx immigrant families and first-generation college students in their second year at a University of California (UC) campus. Collectively, the three testimonios capture how the Chicana/Latina undergraduates from mixed-status immigrant families in the United States contribute to their families and engage in spiritual activism.

**Esther's** testimonio describes her experience as an undocumented student and the first in their family to go to college. Esther is responsible for guiding her younger sister's

education as the only one in her family to have experienced the K-12 system in the United States.

**Maria's** testimonio centers on her experience as the first in her family to be born in the United States and the eldest daughter with citizenship privileges. Maria describes her responsibility in successfully being a "good overall citizen" to be eligible to sponsor her undocumented parents in applying for permanent residency.

**Natalia's** testimonio describes how she navigates institutions alongside her parents to ensure they receive equitable care and services.

Collectively, the testimonios highlight the often marked as trivial or invisible familial roles and responsibilities of Chicana/Latina undergraduate daughters and how they move across and through systems of marginality and U.S. institutions on behalf of their families. The support and roles they enact are a form of spiritual activism that challenges the marginality their Latinx mixed-status immigrant families experience in the United States.

### **Esther's Testimonio**

Esther is an undocumented Mexicana who grew up in Los Angeles County. She is the oldest daughter of two children and was raised by a single mom. The first thing that came to mind when Esther was thinking about pursuing higher education was her family and how this transition would impact her family. Esther lives four days out of the week near her university, and comes home every weekend to be with her partner, mom, stepdad, and sister. Esther experienced different forms of challenges growing up including attending various different K-12 schools, her mom experiencing losing jobs, and always living paycheck to paycheck. Her family is a central reason she is in higher education, "with my education, I have to do this, not only for me, but I have to do this for my family. And every decision and every step, everything I do, it is

for me of course, but its for my family, and my future family." In pursuing higher education, as an undocumented, first generation, Mexicana from a low resourced schooling system, Esther challenges the ideologies, structures, and practices in education and society, for her and for her family.

Her sister, Graciela, is a ninth grader in the same school district Esther attended school. As the first in her family to attend K-12 schools in the United States and the only member of her family to pursue higher education, Esther is responsible for Graciela's schooling and education. Esther shared,

I am pretty much in charge of my sister's education, my parents value education, they know its important, but they don't know what steps you need to take, how the processes work. So, every day I'm away from home I call my sister and I have her read her current book to me aloud on the phone, I make sure she is reading well and comprehending while I have her on speaker doing my homework.

Esther's testimonio demonstrates the roles and responsibilities she takes on within her family in guiding her sister through the K-12 schooling system in the United States and preparing her for the rigor of higher education. This role is situated within Esther's experiences as the first in her family to pursue education in the United States and rooted in the challenges she faced in higher education as an undocumented Chicana/Latina student attending a low-resourced schooling system. From personal experience, Esther understands the different forms of inequities that her family faces every day and face in pursuing their aspirations for higher education and a better life for their family. As the oldest daughter within a mixed status family, Esther takes on a form of labor that directly interrupts the systems of marginality that her and her family navigate, including, the challenges faced at the intersection of racism, classism, sexism, and immigration.

## **Maria's Testimonio**

Maria's testimonio centers on her experience in a mixed status Mexican immigrant family, the first in her family to go to college, and the eldest in her family to be born in the United States and possess citizenship privileges. Maria's parents and older sister are undocumented, and Maria and her younger sister and younger brother were born in the United States. As the oldest in her family to have citizenship privileges, Maria has the responsibility of navigating various institutions on behalf of her mixed status family. Maria shared the following about her responsibility to support her parents in obtaining residency in the United States:

With my parents, I actually play a very large role. Because since I am the first to be born here, basically, I could petition right for them to get residency in the United States. Two months ago, my older sister and I actually put their applications in. That was so huge, it was very monumental and exciting, beautiful moment for us. Because, they've been waiting for me to turn 21.

As the oldest U.S. born daughter of undocumented Mexican parents, Maria can support her parents in obtaining residency once she turns 21 years old. Permanent residency would grant her parents lawful status to live and work in the United States. Maria describes that submitting the residency application on behalf of her parents was "monumental" as her parents have been undocumented for almost 25 years. Maria further described what it means to her to have citizenship privileges and how her responsibility to her parents shapes her everyday life:

As one of the few people in my family that has citizenship privileges, I just try to take advantage of resources. So pursuing higher education, I have to do it because I know my older sister didn't have access to the same educational opportunities as me because she is undocumented. I have to go to college for me of course, but for my parents and my sister who didn't get a chance to go. I will be able to contribute to my family financially with a college degree. And well overall, I just feel I have to be a good overall citizen. Like just not getting into trouble in any way, always doing my best to follow the rules wherever I go. And just trying to paint a good picture on myself. So doing well in all my classes trying to get straight A's. It's knowing that what I do is a reflection and shapes, the chances for my family to get residency, so it's necessary.

Maria speaks to the responsibility in pursuing opportunities that she has access to and pursues higher education cognizant of the systemic and structural barriers others face due to legal status. Maria shared being a "good overall citizen" as part of the labor she takes on within her family, understanding that U.S. immigration policies and practices aim to criminalize immigrants to prevent them from qualifying for residency and other possible protections. Part of Maria's spiritual activism is consciously navigating institutions on behalf of her undocumented family members and part of her everyday choices to lead a life that would not bring any negative scrutiny against her parents' petitions for residency in moving forward. A year and a half after I connected with Maria, she shared with me that her parents received their permanent residency cards, and she was preparing to accompany them to Mexico to visit family her parents had not seen in person in over 25 years. Through Maria's testimonio we learn that Chicana/Latina daughters engage in activism that contribute to the possibility of their families leading lives that are in some ways, a bit freer than they were before.

### **Natalia's Testimonio**

We next turn to Natalia's life and educational experiences to gain further insight into how mujeres engage in negotiating labor and advocacy within their families. Natalia grew up in Los Angeles and was a second year as a social science major. As the oldest daughter of Mexican immigrant household, she described having three siblings, a younger brother and two younger sisters and shared, "I'm the oldest daughter, which means I'm also like a second mom to my siblings." Natalia continued living in campus dorms during the COVID-19 campus closures to have the opportunity to continue working at the campus bookstore, which remained open with limited hours and staff. She visited home a few times during the 2020-2021 academic year, ensuring she tested negative before and after visiting home. These visits home were necessary



for Natalia to ensure her family was healthy and safe. On one of her visits her mother had a medical emergency and Natalia had to extend her visit to be physically present to attend to her mother's medical needs. Natalia shared:

I went to visit because I knew my mom had not been feeling well. When I got there, she said she was feeling a little better, so I planned to stay the weekend, until Sunday night. I wanted to make sure she was going to the doctors if she needed to because she doesn't like to go by herself. While I was there, she had an appointment with her own doctor and she's like oh, you know, take me to my doctor's appointment first, and then if they tell me I need to go to the hospital, then we will go to the hospital. Luckily, they let me in with her for her appointment because I know many hospitals were not because of COVID, but I told them I needed to translate for her, so I think that helped let me in. So, the doctor said you definitely need to go to the hospital, just so that they can run and more tests. So, we go to emergency and they're like we can help you, but you have to wait to be seen. And were waited outside the hospital for like hours just hoping they were going to see her. I had to go back to the check in counter and ask what was taking so long, that my mom was not feeling well. And finally, they took her in but I couldn't go in with her, and I felt like very helpless. What if they didn't take care of her as best as they could? It was hard to wait. She would facetime me when visiting hours were over if she had to talk to the doctor and to translate to her what they were saying. She kept telling me she wanted to come home already that how were we going to pay for them to have her in the hospital all those days, and I kept reminding her she needed to wait it out so they could help with whatever she needed.

Natalia takes on the labor of ensuring her parents medical and basic needs are met. In this particular instance, Natalia had to ensure her mother received appropriate medical care. This included accompanying her mother to her doctor's appointment, filling out intake forms and questionnaires, waiting with her at the emergency room to ensure she was seen, and translating throughout the entire process. It is clear that this responsibility is important to Natalia, as she described feeling "helpless" when she was not permitted to enter the hospital room with her mother. Yet, Natalia was still able to support her mother by talking with her and translating for her through facetime. Natalia questions if her mother will receive appropriate medical care, a

concern she has for her mother who is an undocumented Mexican immigrant woman that only speaks Spanish.

Natalia's weekend visit turned into a two week visit that involved visiting her mom in the hospital. As the oldest daughter in her family and the only one in college, she had prior experience filling out important financial and medical insurance paperwork and grew up translating for her parents who only speak Spanish at hospitals, stores, and parent-teacher conferences. For Natalia, ensuring her family's needs are met requires that she advocate and challenge structures as she follows up, asks questions, and translates within U.S. institutions that are not designed to serve her family or community. She engages in these intentional forms of labor from a hope that her actions will support her family in receiving services and care that is at least a bit more equitable than what they would have received otherwise.

After ensuring her mom was "fully 100 percent" regarding her health, Natalia returned to campus and starting "catching up with like school and work." She described having a "hard time" as different assignments and deadlines were approaching. She shared

Well, I didn't email any of my professors that I was gone because I knew they were all going to be like honestly the lecture is recorded and that's all we can do. And it was hard to catch up, especially because it was kind of hard, especially because, like, I had a meeting yesterday, and I was like barely catching up this Monday night, and had to watch so many missed lectures. I didn't have time to study for upcoming tests, but I'm like you know, like it's fine I have like more test and have more assignments, and my grade didn't drop that much, and it's not the end of the world. I had therapy that same week I got back, and my therapist also told me to do the best I could possibly do and reminded me that my mom's health is important, and that school could wait if it needed to. My therapist reminded me that no one is superwoman (laughs).

Natalia's testimonio highlights the difficulty in balancing family and academic responsibilities. Yet, Natalia recognizes the importance of these different roles she manages to meet them at the best of her capacity based on current circumstances. Natalia also shared that seeking support

from therapy on campus is one of her strategies for ensuring that she is also taking care of her wellbeing while also supporting her family's needs and meets her academic responsibilities. Natalia's testimonio teaches us that for Chicana/Latina undergraduates, various priorities are always present, yet they focus their efforts on addressing the day-by-day challenges they and their families are presented with as a mixed status immigrant Family of color in the United States.

## **Discussion**

Chicana/Latina undergraduates engage in various forms of responsibilities and labor within their families. Esther, Maria, and Natalia teach us that for their families, this labor is necessary to their collective survival and presence in the United States. The intersecting systems of marginality that these mujeres and their families face shape the challenges and barriers that Chicana/Latina daughters respond to alongside of and sometimes on behalf of their families. Chicana/Latina undergraduates have a complex and structural understanding of their personal and familial experiences and the opportunities and skills they've had an opportunity to access in their educational preparation. This deep understanding and consciousness of society and the world around them is necessary for engaging in spiritual activism. Spiritual activism supports us in thinking about how the responsibilities and labor of Chicana/Latina undergraduates within their families are rooted in a consciousness of social inequity and driven by social justice and advocacy for their families and communities. This perspective moves us away from only situating families as burdens to Chicana/Latina undergraduate wellbeing and success, and instead situates the labor Chicana/Latina s engage in as a direct response, challenge, and resistance to the barriers produced by the intersecting systems of oppression that they and their families experience.

The labor Chicana/Latina undergraduates engage in is important to the navigation and survival of their families, yet, within a capitalistic society, this labor is devalued as capitalism resulted in the gendered division of labor and inferiority of women's work (Federici, 2004). It is therefore not surprising that institutions of higher education, as microcosms of social ideologies and systems, do not recognize the labor Chicana/Latina students engage in within their families and communities, and frame this form of labor as a burden and contradiction to student success. Student testimonios show us that gendered labor is not institutionally recognized, yet is central to how they and their families survive and is counter to capitalistic logic that centers individualism and meritocracy.

In this research, Chicana/Latina undergraduates are also framed as agents of change in their lives and the lives of their family members, which challenges the framing of Chicana/Latina students solely as victims of gendered roles and expectations. A closer look into the particular forms of knowledge Chicana/Latina undergraduates possess, create, and utilize in their spiritual activism including their home, cultural, gendered, experiential, and academic knowledge can contribute to a fuller understanding of how Chicana/Latina daughters advocate for their family's right to live full and free lives.

## **Conclusion**

The experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduates from mixed status immigrant families are underlined by intersecting systems of inequity that shape their lives and the lives of their family members. The mujeres in this research are all first-generation college students and often the first in their families to experience the U.S. educational system, the oldest daughter of immigrant parents with fluency in English, and the first in their families to have citizenship privileges in the United States. As they are the firsts, in many ways, Chicana/Latina

undergraduates hold roles and responsibilities that are shaped by their intersecting marginalities and skills they have attained that were passed down from family and from lived experience and navigation of U.S. education systems and higher education.

It is clear from the experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduates that the social, educational, language, legal, and familial contexts are intertwined. Their familial context and responsibilities are marked by intersecting systems and structures of marginality as members of mixed status immigrant families from low-income neighborhoods. Students navigate processes and institutions, such as housing, medical, financial, legal, and educational, with and often on behalf of their families. These contributions are a form of labor that is situated in the lived realities and challenges that Chicana/Latina undergraduates and their families experience and are ways in which Chicana/Latina students support their family's survival, success, and possibilities.

In navigating and advocating for their family within various contexts, process, and institutions, Chicana/Latina undergraduates engage in interrupting the social structures and systems that are set up to work against their family and other immigrant families of color in the United States. These mujeres engage in advocating for themselves and their families, from a complex understanding of social inequities and a critical uncovering of how U.S. institutions reproduce discrimination, marginality, and oppression. Therefore, their familial responsibilities and contributions are a form of spiritual activism, as they engage in advocacy and resistance with the intent of achieving social justice for their families and communities.

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## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Cultivating a Third Space with Chicana/Latina Undergraduates through Pláticas**

## **Abstract**

Drawing from 45 individual pláticas and 2 group pláticas with 15 Chicana/Latina undergraduates at an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (eHSI), this paper theorizes the connections between pláticas method in cultivating a third space for Chicana/Latina undergraduate collaborators and Chicana/Latina researchers in higher education. This paper considers how third space, a liminal space of disidentification and resistance that Chicana/Latina s embody in higher education, can theoretically support an understanding of the impact of pláticas method in the lives of Chicanas/Chicana/Latina s in the academy. Secondly, this paper highlights particular ways in which pláticas contribute to building a collective third space for Chicana/Latina pláticas, presenting the methodological and pedagogical contributions of this research.



We are ready for change.  
Let us link hands and hearts  
together find a path through the dark woods  
step through the doorways between worlds  
leaving huellas for others to follow,  
build bridges, cross them with grace, and claim these puentes our  
“home”  
si se puede, que asi sea, so be it, estamos listas, vámonos.

(Anzaldúa, 2002, pg. 591, indentation from original version)

## **Introduction**

In this paper, we center the experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduates and researchers who engaged in pláticas methodology rooted in Chicana feminist epistemologies, to consider the pedagogical and healing possibilities through racialized and decolonial feminist research methods that aim to challenge the racist, sexist, and colonial university. The purpose of this paper is twofold, first, the paper considers how third space (Perez, 1999), a liminal space of disidentification and resistance that Chicana/Latina s embody in their every day in higher education, can theoretically support an understanding of the pedagogical possibilities of pláticas in the lives of Chicana/Latina s in the academy. Secondly, this paper highlights particular ways in which pláticas contribute to building a collective third space for Chicana/Latina platicantes, presenting the pedagogical contributions of this method. Through this paper, we center the experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduate student collaborators and Chicana/Latina researchers to understand the pedagogical implications and contributions of research methodologies rooted in Chicana/Latina ways of knowing, talking, and living. Queer Chicana feminist, Gloria Anzaldúa’s words from *This Bridge We Call Home* (2002), considers healing, empowerment, and liberation through collectivity. We argue that pláticas can serve as a tool to cultivate a third space, a liminal and fluid space rooted in Chicana/Latina embodiments and ways of knowing that straddles the university, yet exists outside and in contestation to white

supremacy, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy within this context. This third space is where Chicana/Latina s in the university exist, learn, thrive, succeed, and resist while navigating the university context.

## **Literature**

Latinx students are a rapidly growing population in the United States (U.S) colleges and universities. In California, where 40% of residents and more than half of K-12 students are Latinx, 4 in 10 undergraduate students are Latinx. Chicana/Latina s specifically make up more than half of all Latinx undergraduate students (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021). As a historically underrepresented population in U.S higher education, Chicana/Latina s face various challenges to complete their college education and have some of the lowest college completion rates of all women (Gandara, 2015). In the past decade, there has been an increase in college enrollment rates for Latinx students, yet Latinx college students continue to face inequitable access to Research 1 (R1) institutions (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021) and continue to experience the racist, colonial, heteropatriarchal roots and contemporaries of the university (Wilder, 2013). This research is situated within scholarship that has captured the challenges Chicana/Latina undergraduates experience while in college. Additionally, this research largely draws from theorizations of spaces/margins that locate Chicana/Latina s and other *atrevesadxs* in the university, students, faculty, and staff with socially constructed marginalized identities, who exist within the university, yet navigate, thrive, and resist in contention with the academy.

The college experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduates are underlined by the intersection of multiple marginalized identities as women from a racialized ethnic group with multiple roles and responsibilities. Studies have found that Chicana/Latina s navigate higher education with multiple and sometimes conflicting roles and responsibilities as college students

and members of their families (Sy & Romero, 2008; Espinoza, 2010). General expectations within the United States are that college students become increasingly independent from their families and prioritize academics over other domains in their lives (Sy & Romero, 2008). These individualistic expectations of the college experiences conflict with the family-centered and collectivist cultures that many Chicana/Latina college students come from. One qualitative study that took a closer look at the college experiences of Chicana/Latina students found that Chicana/Latina college students discussed self-sufficiency in a way that connected to their families (Sy & Romero, 2008). Taking care of themselves financially while in college and after was viewed as helping their families by relieving their parents of a financial burden. Sy & Romero (2008) also found that financial contributions to the family were largely voluntary. Chicana/Latina s in this study shared that they did not feel obligated or pressured by their parents but willingly chose to help their families out of a “culture of concern” and respect. The literature on Chicana/Latina college students has established that family is connected to educational aspirations and motivation for this student group (Sy & Romero, 2008; Espinoza, 2010; Espino, 2016).

bell hooks argues that “marginality is much more than a site of deprivation...it is also the site of radical possibility, of resistance” (1990, pg. 341). We consider how marginal sites of possibility and resistance within higher education have been considered through scholarship on critical race counterspaces, the undercommons (Harney & Moten, 2013), and the third university (la paperson, 2017). Counterspaces in higher education are important for Black, Indigenous, Students of Color (BISOC) for surviving, navigating, and thriving in college. Counterspaces have been theorized as spaces where BISOC students build community and bring their full selves along with the multiple/contradicting identities they hold (Morales, 2017; Nuñez, 2011).

Counterspaces can also be understood through the work of education Critical Race Theory scholars (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) which identify race and racism as endemic and part of everyday life in the U.S. Counterspaces are theorized as student response, agency, and resistance in educational contexts within the reality of racial permanency (Bell, 1991). It is not uncommon for Latinx students to experience feelings of isolation when navigating college, especially in institutions that are predominantly white and have lower enrollment rates of Latinx students (Hurtado et al., 1996). Counterspaces provide sites for deficit perspectives about BISOC to be challenged and interrupted. An example of a counterspace in the literature comes from students participating in ethnic studies courses (Nuñez, 2011). These courses typically include the history of people of color which is often limited or missing through the core curriculum. They provide students with a place of familiarity within the potential alienating environment of universities (Nuñez, 2011).

Morales (2017) draws from Chicana feminisms to attend to how critical race counterspaces are formed, cultivated, and sustained by considering the tensions and contradictions that were present in co-creating a counterspace with Brown elementary school students. Morales offers a critical race feminista understanding of counterspaces as “dynamic sites where people on the margins engage with one another in critical discourse, bring their whole (and multiple) selves, challenge each other, and make sense of the multitude of contradictions they embody, which are always present, as a means of undergoing moments of transformation” (Morales, 2017, pg. 1). A Chicana/Latina space has also been theorized by Chicana/Latina scholars (Flores & Garcia, 2009) to consider the centrality of race, gender, and intersectionality that takes into account how perceived and claimed identities that Chicana/Latina s hold as well as external institutional and familial factors shape the educational experiences of

Chicana/Latina college students. The Chicana/Latina space described by education scholars Flores and Garcia (2009) was cultivated by and for Chicana/Latina faculty and students at a predominately white research university who needed a space to freely engage in conversations about their experiences as mujeres in the university. This space exists within and in contradiction to the university that overlooks everyday racism that Chicana/Latina s and other Women of Color encounter.

Critical university studies scholars have also considered the existence of spaces within and counter to the white, colonial, heteropatriarchal university. Harney and Moten (2013) consider this space, the undercommons, “maroon communities,” secretive, isolated, covert, unwanted spaces of opposition and possibility within the university that considers “abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society” (pg. 42). The undercommons are always present, yet always in hiding, which includes “maroon communities of composition teachers, mentor-less graduate students, adjunct Marxist historians, out or queer management professors, state college ethnic studies departments, closed-down film programs, visa expired Yemeni student newspaper editors, historically black college sociologists, and feminist engineers” (30). Harney and Moten argue that those whose positionalities, thought, and labor simultaneously exists within and in contrast to the university, can contribute to an understanding of spaces BISO students cultivate for their survival and success within the university, which leverages institutional and community resources for their agency and resistance.

la paperson (2017) offers us the theorization of the third university, a university whose assemblages work towards decolonial liberation, which is “itself against the first and second but probably made up of their scrap metal” (37). The third university is therefore a “third reality”

that already exists within and in contestation to the first and second university, yet is constantly present and sustained through scyborg labor, the individuals and collectives who disrupt and challenge the ideologies, systems, and processes that uphold and recreate settler colonialism and situating counterspaces as part of the undercommons or the third university, as an in-between space that straddles, is already present, that exists within the university, yet puts colonial and racial liberation into action.

Our research is situated within this legacy of scholarship that considers the spaces in which marginalized peoples within the university exist, engage in counterhegemonic labor, and aspire to succeed as they navigate within and against the systems and practices of the university that are intended to push them out. We build on Morales' critical race and Borderlands approach to counterspaces by centering third space, a fluid and liminal space of possibility, re-imagination, and new knowledge formations. In this paper, we center this contribution by exploring how *pláticas*, a Chicana feminist method and methodology we engaged with alongside Chicana/Latina undergraduates served as a tool, towards creating a third space within the PWI, presenting possibilities for healing, *conocimiento*, and resistance with Chicana/Latina undergraduates. This third space is rooted in the embodiments of Chicana/Latina undergraduates, which exist within, yet whose presence, success, and resistance are simultaneously in contradiction to the university.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper considers the connections between *pláticas* methodology in cultivating a third space for Chicana/Latina undergraduate collaborators and Chicana/Latina researchers in higher education. A third space has been conceptualized by women of color feminists as the “interstitial space that third women occupy” (Perez, 1999, xvi) that exists within and between patriarchal and white dominant ideologies, discourses, and practices. Meaning, that the third space is not

bounded by socially constructed systems of marginalization, yet exists within and outside of these systems that are part of the daily lives of women of color.

Black feminists consider how they cultivate a third space in which they collectively acknowledge and recognize the invisible labor they engage in and their experiences as Black women in academia. They collectively theorize third space technologies or “the new alternatives and possibilities that defy and transcend the oppositions and polarities” (King, Barnes-Wright, & Gibson, 2002, page 411). In particular, they consider the third space technologies or tools, procedures that they engage with as they “bring the kitchen table to academia” (page 405). Third space technologies are therefore tools, practices, rituals that support creating and sustaining a space of liminality, contradictions, affirmation, and resistance for bodies that experience the university as outsiders.

The university is rooted and reproduces white, colonial, and patriarchal norms that Chicana/Latina students and researchers must navigate. Anzaldúa states, Chicana/Latina s navigate duality, liminality, and convergence, “los intersticios, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits” (42). For Chicana/Latina s in academia, these include existing at the intersection of normative, cultural, gendered, and decolonial selves and ways of knowing and navigating in higher education. A third space is also where agency and resistance are present through disidentification with normative systems and transformation (Perez, 1999, xvi). In this paper, we consider how pláticas can serve as a method that moves us towards a practice that cultivates a third space for Chicana/Latina undergraduates. Drawing from Black feminist theorizations of third space (King, Barnes-Wright, & Gibson, 2013), we consider how pláticas can serve as a third space tool that supports the survival, affirmation, and success of Chicana/Latina undergraduates. Therefore, we approach research, "beyond solely research

theorizing" and consider the possibilities invoked through research as cultivating a "practice that serves humanity" that is rooted in knowledge produced through the body (Dillard, 2008). We consider how pláticas can serve as a pedagogical tool for cultivating a third space that contributes to cultivating a collective space in the university that tends to bodymindspirit, community, and sisterhood in higher education.

## **Methods**

A plática, charla, or conversación, is an everyday, fluid conversation between at least two people that “grew up platicando” and are marked by race, culture, language, class, and other intersecting socially constructed identities and systems. Though the terms are specific to particular Latin American histories and contexts, they all invoke a fluid, everyday form of talk between people with shared experiences and previous experience engaging in this everyday practice. As a research method, pláticas draw from these cultural and collective forms of communicating. Pláticas include at least one collaborator and researcher who engage in discussion and collective construction of knowledge (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). pláticas provide space for a fluid discussion, welcoming collaborators to bring their whole selves, histories, and experiences to data collection (Fierros and Delgado Bernal, 2016). As a research methodology, pláticas challenge the eurocentric perspective that research has to be neutral and unbiased (Fierros and Delgado Bernal, 2016).

Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) outline five principles of pláticas rooted in Chicana feminist epistemologies. They argue that pláticas methodology 1) draws from Chicana/Latina feminist theory, 2) is relational and honors participants as co-constructors of knowledge, 3) makes a connection between everyday lives and research, 4) provides potential space for healing, and 5) relies on reciprocity, vulnerability, and research reflexivity. The everyday lives of



Chicana/Latina students are important to their academics and school life and pláticas allow for the inclusion of the everyday lives of Chicana/Latina college students. This provides a more holistic and complex understanding of their educational experiences. In this study, pláticas capture the narratives and experiences of undergraduate mujeres through a culturally, gendered, and ancestral way of knowing and communicating.

Drawing from a set of individual and group pláticas, this paper highlights the ways in which pláticas as a methodology rooted in Chicana feminist epistemologies and theories can have not only implications for inquiry but also for pedagogy and practice. The pedagogical implications of Chicana feminist methods and methodologies have also been considered, such as the possibility for testimonios to support theorization, teaching, and learning that centers how bodies experience oppression, resistance, and navigation. Testimonio has roots in oral cultures and communities and Latin American activist history (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). The central intent of testimonios is to center the narratives, experiences, and ways of knowing of those that experience marginality in their daily lives. Testimonios are not a retelling of experiences, but a critical reflection, resistance, and healing through telling and bearing witness. Testimonios are told by an individual, or testimoniadora, and guided by how they see, understand, and experience underlying and intersecting systems of marginality (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Testimonio as a pedagogical tool involves intentional listening, learning, and reflection stemming from the body that contributes to cultivating awareness and consciousness (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). As a pedagogical tool, testimonios support us in acknowledging the fragmentation our bodies, minds, and spirits experience and attend to healing, reconstructing, and humanizing ourselves and each other. In this paper, we build on previous considerations of Chicana feminist methods and methodologies as pedagogical tools and

consider the pedagogical possibilities of pláticas, in particular to serve as a tool for cultivating a third space, as a space of healing (Fierros and Delgado Bernal, 2016) rooted in Chicana feminism that considers, embraces, and affirms the liminality undergraduate Chicana/Latina students experience at predominately white institutions (PWIs) (Figure 4.1).

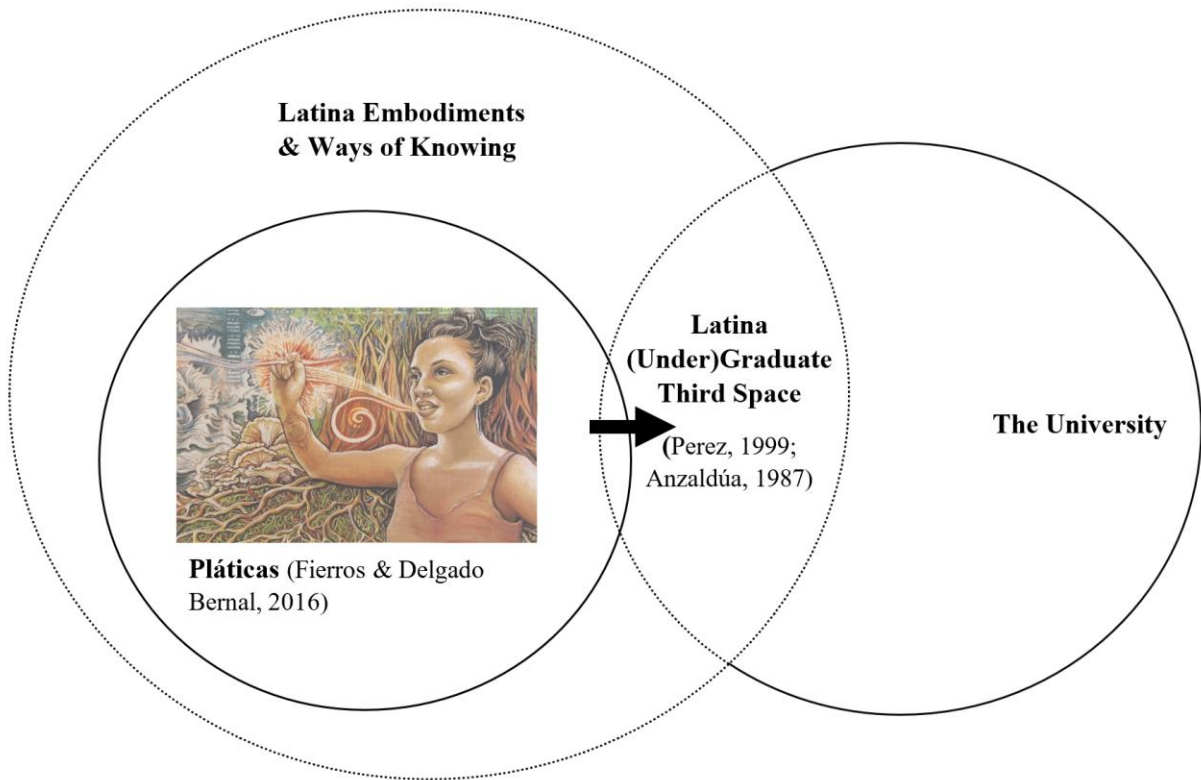


Figure 4.1:

Pláticas as a Pedagogical Tool for Cultivating a Chicana/Latina (Under)Graduate Third Space

Figure 4.1 illustrates our central argument in this paper that considers how pláticas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016), which are rooted in Latinx everyday forms of talk and communication, serve as a legitimate method and methodology that challenges eurocentric research paradigms and serve as a pedagogical tool that supports the creation of a Chicana/Latina (Under)Graduate Third space within the context of higher education. The Chicana/Latina

(Under)Graduate third space is a liminal and permeable space that straddles fluid Chicana/Latina embodiments and ways of knowing that Chicana/Latina undergraduates bring, carry, draw on, and transform to navigate the rigidity of the intersecting systems of marginality that underlie the university. This third space is the in-between space of transformation, one in which Chicana/Latina embodiments and knowledge, ways of talking, are affirmed, centered, and applied as students navigate the university context. Therefore, this third space exists within the university, as Chicana/Latina undergraduates aim to navigate, thrive, and graduate from this institution, yet simultaneously exists outside and counter to the university.

The set of pláticas includes three individual pláticas with 15 Chicana/Latina undergraduates and two group pláticas with these 15 students. All students were attending a University of California (UC) campus and most students were first-generation college students from immigrant families who attended low-resourced K-12 schools. We center on students attending a UC campus because of the continued structural inaccessibility to these institutions, as Black and Latinx students continue to be “left out” of four-year, public universities, particularly at R1 campuses (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021).

Individual pláticas were conducted with one of the researchers and one of the student collaborators. Due to safety concerns and precautions, all pláticas were conducted on zoom and all were audio-recorded and transcribed. These pláticas included a fluid protocol and were largely driven by the student collaborator. Pláticas were framed as conversations, where we both would be sharing our experiences and could use the time and space to talk about our experiences as Chicana/Latina s in higher education. For each plática, we started with a check-in, sharing updates about how school, family, and life were going since the last time we chatted. These check-ins guided the rest of the conversation, with consideration for central themes. The

individual pláticas were a back-and-forth conversation, building on each other's thoughts, and connecting about similarities and differences in our experiences in higher education. Students described feeling that they shared their “whole life experiences” during these individual pláticas and also shared appreciating the time to “vent and just check in with someone.”

The group pláticas included 8 students and a researcher on one zoom call. For the group pláticas, I had a list of central themes that came up during my preliminary review and analysis of the individual pláticas. These themes were used to guide the large group plática, which did require more guidance in the conversation compared to the individual pláticas because of the number of people in the conversation. Yet, the plática largely facilitated itself, with student collaborators unmuting themselves to speak, taking turns to share, and dropping reactions and comments in the chat box. Like any conversation with multiple platicantes, there were moments when multiple students began speaking at the same time, which was also complicated in part by the nature of being on zoom. Yet students excused themselves for interrupting each other and kept the conversation going, just as one would in an everyday conversation. After a few seconds of silence to allow students to come into the conversation, I would also share my experiences, thoughts, and connections to what they shared. Once it seemed that a particular topic or stand of conversation was cycling out of the conversation, if a student collaborator didn't seamlessly propose a new topic or question for the group, I would bring in another theme or ask a follow-up question about what was previously shared. Student collaborators also built on what others shared in the space and we often heard things like, “oh what [student name] said reminded me of...” or “I had a similar experience as what you just shared...”.

## **Cultivating a Third Space Through Platicando**

In this chapter, we center the knowledge that is shared and produced by Chicana/Latina undergraduate mujeres as they engage in pláticas together within a higher education context. In considering how pláticas can serve as a tool to cultivate a third space with and for Chicana/Latina student collaborators, we identified that pláticas cultivate a space that 1) centers conversations that challenge university and cultural normative expectations and contexts rooted in the body, 2) invites self-reflection, and *conocimiento*, 3) tends to *bodymindspirit* that is fragmented through disidentification and marginalization within higher education, and 4) cultivates *comunidad* among platicantes that defies temporality, space, and rigidity. Together, these findings highlight how pláticas can contribute to cultivating a third space for Chicanas/Chicana/Latina s in higher education that exists in contention with the colonial and white dominant society and university they navigate in their everyday lives. The third space demonstrates the convergence of various parts of the lives of Chicana/Latina undergraduates, along with the contradictions that exist between socially constructed systems of marginality, and the bridges Chicana/Latina s build and sustain to thrive in higher education. This paper argues that Chicanas/Chicana/Latina s embody a third space in higher education and pláticas can contribute to the sustaining and building of a collective and shared third space.

### **Centers Conversations that Challenge University and Normative Expectations and Contexts**

Mujeres participating in the pláticas shared stories about their mental health and healing journeys, struggles they faced as students and daughters and defying gender norms within their families and college institutions. They recognized the challenges and barriers in having conversations about these topics with their family members and at the university. Despite the reality that Chicana/Latina college students do not usually get to talk about these topics in other

spaces, these conversations remain important within the higher education context. The college journey is not isolated from other events occurring simultaneously in student lives; the way students show up to academic spaces is interconnected with what they are experiencing/processing outside of the classroom. Through the telling and retelling of their stories and college experiences, pláticas allow for space to challenge university and normative expectations.

College in the U.S is perceived as an individualistic endeavor and achievement. Students are expected to be students first and foremost; there are clear boundaries between academic life and everything else. These norms and imaginative boundaries do not fit the reality of Chicana/Latina students' lives. The core curriculum of a college education as well as leadership and faculty have limited inclusion of Latinx people and histories. The pláticas gave mujeres a space to “have these kinds of conversations” and center critical discussions. Through pláticas, mujeres not only share their educational experiences but also learn and find commonalities from the experiences of other mujeres. These exchanges help expose the struggles that students face and challenge the individualistic expectation of U.S colleges and universities that challenges are processed and overcome alone. This can be seen through Guadalupe, a first-generation college student majoring in an applied science field, who shared the following:

We don't really have chances to have these kinds of conversations. I really like being part of this group, I feel lucky honestly, because it was nice to see that, like I'm not the only one, like were like not that we're all the same struggle with like we're all going through like the same things and like we're not alone. And I feel like showing like this side like it is very nice are all very like intimate things that you don't really talk about, or you don't have the chance to talk about them. So, I feel like really kind of like exposing and making it aware that, like these are like struggles that people go through like. And it's a very unique struggle, especially being like a move ahead, like in education, like it's not something that's like really talked about like oh they're just hard workers and like they like stick to their school but it's not just that simple like there's a lot of other things that go behind

it. So, I feel like these pláticas really like helped me like analyze like all the things that I've been through and like, it's not just me individually like I'm like a lot of us are going through it and I'm like very proud. I'm like oh my God like I overcame that like they overcame it to look at how hard they're working like I look at them like they're doing really good things, and despite all these adversities so it's been a great experience being in these.

Guadalupe's sentiments are also described by other mujeres, highlighting their importance.

Universities do not make room for or welcome the lived experiences of students and how they process and cope with challenges while in the academy. Including the personal and everyday aspects of student lives through pláticas with other mujeres and within the university context, challenged the cultural normative expectations of the college experience. Several students also shared after the "formal" plática was over and the voice recorder was stopped that they appreciated being able to talk about aspects of their lives such as family, mental health, and healing because they are not given many opportunities to do so in their college experience.

### **Invites Self-Reflection and Conocimiento**

The pláticas provided space for platicantes to take the time and space to check in with themselves, engage in self-reflection and collective reflection internally, silently, and verbally, while also intentionally and actively listening and learning from other platicantes' experiences. Olivia shared, "I appreciated having this time to reflect on what I've been through, because I don't usually have the time to reflect, and sometimes I do forget everything that has happened, that has led me, that has led us here." platicantes brought their whole selves into the pláticas, cultivating the space together through their bodies, minds, senses, and emotions. Together, the mujeres engaged in a journey of conocimiento, a spiritual journey of transformation, shifts in perception, understanding, and extension of consciousness (Anzaldúa, 2002, pg. 541). During the pláticas, the mujeres often shared, "I can relate to that" and "I definitely feel that" in response to

another pláticas story and experience. Anzaldúa states that one can engage in *conocimiento* through “consciously inhabiting your body and decoding its symptoms” (pg. 542).

The pláticas also opened themselves to learning from each other and challenging their own previous understandings. Michelle, a U.S. born Mexican *mujer* that grew up in Los Angeles County and was majoring in natural sciences shared the following during one of the group pláticas:

I feel I have created a community here, that we that like I kind of figured out okay I'm not the only one that's kind of struggling through it and it's great to hear, like everybody else's stories too. So, I got to hear like a lot of y'all who were like the oldest sister going and like your struggles. So, it kind of gave me a perspective like what my sister kind of had to go through, and learning from you that are undocumented or immigrated here, like I was also like amazed at all the great things y'all are doing. These are experiences I knew about through my parents for example but not with students. And like it kind of makes me proud that, like we're like we're really doing this like we're making it into higher education, I'm grateful to be a part of this space.

Michelle, as the youngest daughter in her family and a U.S. citizen, described learning from the experiences of the pláticas who were the oldest daughter or had a different experience with migration and immigration status. Michelle shows us how she reflected on her own positionality, while also intently and critically listening to her fellow pláticas' experiences. Through the centering of her body, mind, and senses in this plática and the embodiments of other pláticas, *mujeres* re-learned themselves, while also expanding their self-awareness and consciousness. The pláticas created space for *mujeres* to understand different experiences with systems of marginality and interrupt their previous ways of knowing and understanding. The *camino de conocimiento* necessitates deep reflection, unlearning, and a reconstructing a new understanding that can be uncomfortable, difficult, and even painful. Therefore, this third space cultivated



through pláticas, is one that also embraces the discomfort and flux that is experienced in deepening oneself and collective awareness.

### **Tends to bodymindspirit**

Through the pláticas, the undergraduate mujeres reflected on different ways in which they have experienced psychological harm and violence in higher education. The pláticas described a fragmentation of their bodymindspirit through the disidentification with the whiteness of higher education and marginalization they experienced as *atravesadas*<sup>10</sup> in the university. Anzaldúa argues that “after dismantling the body/self you re-compose it” (Anzaldúa, 2002, pg.560). The pláticas cultivated a space through which Chicana/Latina pláticas could engage in this healing and transformation. In an individual plática, Alex, a Mexican mujer from the Imperial Valley shared:

I feel like I've noticed that it's so easy to feel like you're alone basically, like there's so many things that we kind of think about in our heads and I don't know why it's so easy to think that you're the only one that's ever like going through what you're going through. Like *it makes you feel like you are crazy*. But here we see and learn that there are people like you, going through similar things, and it's a good reminder like you are doing fine, you are not alone, we learn that *there are people like you here and these people are going through similar things as you*.

Alex describes the feeling of isolation that she experiences in higher education and the toll this isolation takes on her mental, emotional, and social wellbeing, to the point that “you feel like you are crazy.” This state of “feeling crazy” was described by many of the pláticas in this research and is indicative of the disruption, confusion, and complete disidentification mujeres experience within the university. The white, colonial, heteropatriarchal ideologies within the university context situated the source of their experiences with marginality within the mujeres’ own minds

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<sup>10</sup> In *Borderlands: La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa defines los *atravesados* as “the prohibited and forbidden...those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of ‘normal’ transgressors...whether they possess documents or not, whether they’re Chicanos, Indians, or Blacks” (pg. 25).

and bodies, leading students to feel that they were the problem, or it was them misinterpreting how they felt and experienced the university. Yet, Alex also highlighted the importance of being in community with other mujeres through the pláticas and the reminder that she is not alone in how she experiences the university.

Bella, a Latina who grew up in Los Angeles County shared how the pláticas contributed to a space where platicantes could unashamedly share and discuss their concerns for their mental health:

I do look forward to seeing you [referring to the researcher] and the other mujeres. Like it makes me feel like I'm not alone, if that makes sense. Like my experiences are not unique, which I'm glad about, because then I have a community to like okay, they're all feeling the same thing *I'm not crazy*, you know. And these talks, like people talking about mental health, even being on medication, we can share that with each other and feel like it's okay to get support, and that *we are not crazy, that's an experience I've never had before*.

Similar to Alex, Bella also expressed how the pláticas created a community that reminded her that “I’m/We are not crazy.” Bella also highlighted that the pláticas included open and honest conversations about mental health, seeking professional support, medication, and other spiritual techniques students engage in to support their navigation of the university and prioritize their healing. The pláticas cultivated a space in which the mujeres could openly share about the marginalization they have experienced in higher education which contributed to the fragmentation and harm to their minds, bodies, and spirits. For most of the mujeres, their experience in the pláticas was the first time openly sharing about their mental health and therapy journeys, as access to mental health services and information continues to be systematically kept from their families and communities, and mental health services necessitate a shift towards

culturally relevant supports. The pláticas supported a space in which mujeres could individually and collectively address, heal, and transform the harm they have experienced in the university.

### **Cultivates Comunidad among Pláticas that Defies Temporality, Space, and Rigidity**

Sharing and listening to other mujeres in the context of higher education helped cultivate comunidad among pláticas. Through this space, Chicana/Latina s saw that they are not alone in struggles and triumphs. In contrast, creating community within the traditionally individualistic and competitive environment of academia can be challenging, especially when only looking to tools of socializing accepted/ normalized in academic spaces. pláticas as a research tool allow for going beyond the traditional function of research interviews. A plática is not solely about extracting information from mujeres, it is about including Chicana/Latina participants in the construction of knowledge and perceiving them as collaborators.

Beyond their value to research, pláticas are beneficial for developing a third space for Chicana/Latina undergraduates in the academy. Through platicando, we created a space for Chicana/Latina collaborators to speak openly about their experiences and how they make meaning of those experiences. As Chicana/Latina researchers we shared some cultural and educational experiences with collaborators. These similarities in different positions contributed to cultivating communication amongst one another. Carmen, an undocumented and first-generation college student pursuing her degree in a social science field, helps demonstrate this point in the following statement:

I have appreciated having a space dedicated to talking about school, our life, our identity as Latina women, and what's important to us. This space has influenced everything for me this year, especially because we couldn't see anyone in person, and just like it's so hard to find a space where there is no judgment, and it's helpful *when you, like me, share similar experiences or obstacles*. Like it's definitely easier because sometimes like I'll talk to my Latino men friends and *like*

*there's just certain things that they're not going to understand, you know it's like I feel like this was a space I just always left feeling like I enjoyed and felt some kind of peace from.*

Carmen shares her appreciation for having the individual and group pláticas, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning. College years can come with various challenges for all students. Having a support system/group can help ease how students process and address obstacles. For the Chicana/Latina s that participated in the two research studies, pláticas provided an outlet to share and listen to other mujeres. Carmen's quote connects to Anzaldúa's quote "Often it is only with another Chicana Tejana that I can talk freely" (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 78) because they both highlight the significance of being in space and having conversations with other mujeres. The way Chicana/Latina s talk to and express themselves to one another (this includes mannerisms, listening cues, behaviors, and everyday topics covered in conversation) is different from how they may talk and engage with other peers. This difference in language is contextual and cultural based on their lived experiences within their families and communities. For Anzaldúa, a Chicana Tejana is someone with whom she can speak freely. Fully expressing her experiences, ideas, and feelings may not be as easy with someone who does not share similar cultural experiences. Similarly for Chicana/Latina undergraduates, having a plática with another Chicana/Latina (that can relate) in higher education is distinct from having a conversation with someone else.

The aspects of speaking freely, feeling understood, and feeling "some kind of peace" have not been readily available within the traditional, competitive, and male-dominated environment of U.S colleges and universities. Chicana/Latina s' educational experiences are affected by gender, race/ethnicity, culture, and class in forms that may not be experienced the same by other student groups. The intent of pláticas is to validate the experiences and knowledge

of Latinx people in the research process. They make space for different Chicana/Latina experiences and create a community that is a third space. This community exists within the university and in defiance of the university.

## **Discussion**

We consider pláticas as a counterhegemonic method and tool that can cultivate a third space with Chicana/Latina undergraduates within an R1 university context. We particularly highlight the ways in which this method embodies pedagogical possibilities through platicando that centers on healing, learning, and community among Chicana/Latina students. Mujeres engaged in this space and method through listening intently to each other, reflecting on their positionalities, histories, and experiences, learning from the lives of other pláticas, verbalizing their lived experiences with each other, recognizing their emotions and reactions to other mujeres' lives, creating space, recognizing, and affirming each other when sharing verbally or in the chat, and allowing their previous ways of knowing to be interrupted, challenged, or expanded through this space. Pláticas are therefore a spiritual act that allows pláticas to connect with each other with an open heart and mind, recognize each other's embodiments and humanity, and also engage in expanding their awareness and consciousness. It was evident from the set of pláticas we engaged in through this work, that our shared identities and experiences shaped the possibilities present in the pláticas in cultivating a third space. Our bodies, identities, and histories served as a powerful entry into the pláticas, we actively sustained and expanded this connection into confianza through our shared vulnerability, contribution, and openness among the pláticas.

Pláticas as a pedagogical tool shares similarities with pedagogical applications of other methodologies and methods rooted in Chicana feminist epistemologies. The shared principles,

values, and beliefs about knowledge construction contribute to the similarities we find in the possibility of healing, *conocimiento*, and *comunidad*. There are clear connections between the pedagogical possibilities of *pláticas* and how Chicana/Latina scholars have used *testimonios* as pedagogical tools for teaching, learning, and consciousness-raising through the centering of embodied collective knowledge that are rooted in racialized, gendered, and marginalized ways of knowing (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Yet, there are specific principles of *pláticas* that make this method its own and contribute to the possibility of creating and sustaining a third space. Though the third space pedagogical model we propose in this paper is rooted in *pláticas* because of the present method applied in our research, we believe this model would also be applicable with other Chicana feminist methods and methodologies, such as *testimonios*. This is due to the shared principles of Chicana feminist methods and methodologies that hold pedagogical possibilities for cultivating a third space with Chicana/Latina students, staff, and faculty in the academy, though through its own unique mechanisms rooted in each particular method and methodology.

Though the possibilities and applications of *pláticas* are quickly emerging, we consider that the current application of *pláticas* involves two or more *platicantes*, at least one collaborator and researcher who engage in discussion and collective construction of knowledge (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Therefore, the role of the researcher in *pláticas* shares the role of an interlocutor in *testimonios* that involves deep listening, reflection, and learning, yet also requires the researcher to serve as a *platicante*, a present and active contributor to the conversation, in this method. With individual and group *pláticas*, the multi-way conversation invites collaborators to critically reflect and share their lived experiences and histories, their *testimonios*, through an intimate conversation between *platicantes*.

The centering of embodied knowledge, with attention to everyday forms of talk and conversation among Latinx people, shapes how pláticas are invited to bring their whole selves to a conversation and space that not only recognizes and affirms their embodied knowledge, but also recognizes how they share, talk, and transmit that knowledge is itself powerful. In this way, pláticas affirm the linguistic capital (Yosso, 2014) of pláticas, centering their social and communication capacities and the knowledge they have learned from their homes, neighborhoods, and communities. Anzaldúa argues “If a person...has a low estimation of my native tongue, she also has a low estimation of me...So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language” (pg. 81). Therefore, linguistic capital is personal, as it is reflective of embodied identities, the contexts in which we grew up, and our familial and cultural histories. The ways in which Chicana/Latina students talk or engage in communication verbally and through their bodies are often viewed as unacademic or unprofessional in educational contexts because of their divergence from eurocentric and colonial ideologies that underlie communication, talk, and language. Yet, pláticas disrupt these linguistic contradictions that Chicana/Latina s experience in the university, and invite, affirm, and embrace pláticas as their full selves, including their everyday ways of talk. Pláticas cultivated a space that straddles the whiteness of the university and the racialized, gendered, cultural, and linguistic embodiments of the pláticas.

## **Conclusion**

The use of pláticas as a pedagogical tool in education is rooted in the embodied knowledge possessed, shared, and produced by Chicana/Latina pláticas through this method. In this paper, we considered how pláticas served as a pedagogical tool that created a third space, one of liminality, affirmation, and contradictions, that Chicana/Latina undergraduate pláticas

cultivated through their engagement in pláticas. This space exists within and in contestation of the university and is not restricted by normative understandings of temporality, space, or boundaries. Our application of pláticas alongside Chicana/Latina undergraduates cultivated a space of reciprocal sharing, confianza, vulnerability, affirmation, learning, and conocimiento that was possible through the principles of pláticas guided by Chicana feminist epistemologies. Cultivating a third space would not have been possible through eurocentric methods and methodologies that are rooted in white and colonial logic and paradigms that do not recognize the embodied knowledge of *atrasadas* in the university and in other white, colonial, heteropatriarchal institutions in the United States.

Chapter 4 is being prepared for submission to *Qualitative Inquiry*. Mariana Carrola is co-author of this article. Gracias Mariana for being such an important part of my doctoral journey.



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## **CHAPTER 5**

### Conclusion & Implications

This study explored the college transition experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduates attending an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution in the University of California (UC) system through the intersection of critical race, Chicana/Latina /o critical race, and Chicana feminist theories, epistemologies, and methodologies. In drawing from testimonio methodology, rooted in critical race feminist epistemologies (Pérez Huber, 2009), the Chicana/Latina testimoniadoras shared their embodied experience in higher education through a series of pláticas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Three individual pláticas were conducted with each student, along with two group pláticas that supported collaborative analysis, and papelitos guardados (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001) that contributed to vulnerable and reflective written insight into student experiences. Testimonios were centered on individual student experiences, yet are reflective of political, historical, and collective experience. In this chapter, I present a summary of findings and revisit foundational research for this dissertation. Followed by a synthesis of implications and recommendations for future research and institutional policy and practices. I conclude this dissertation with remarks and reflection

### **Summary of Findings**

This dissertation centered on addressing three overarching questions:

- 1) How do Chicana/Latina mujeres experience the transition to an Emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (eHSI) in the University of California?
- 2) How does racism, sexism, and intersecting systems of marginality shape the transition to college for Chicana/Latina mujeres?
- 3) How does the application of Chicana feminist epistemology and methods contribute to the critical understanding of the lives and experiences of Chicana/Latina mujeres in their transition to the university?

The three articles in this dissertation attend to these questions in various ways. In chapter 2, I apply Anzaldúa's (1987) theorization of *travesía*, to consider how this framework supports a re-framing of the transition to college for Chicana/Latina undergraduates that bridges college transition scholarship with critical feminist border studies perspectives. In this chapter, I offer a theorization of the transition that is rooted in the embodied identities of Chicana/Latina undergraduates, the racial realist understanding of the perpetuity of race and racism in U.S. society and institutions, and the endemic nature of ideologies and systems of marginality.

Through chapter 3, I consider the familial responsibilities and labor of Chicana/Latina undergraduates through spiritual activism perspective. In this chapter, I argue that the familial responsibility that is often framed as a burden or in contradiction to academic success, is very much rooted in the intersecting marginalized identities of families, parents, and students. Therefore, a structural understanding of familial responsibilities, indicate that this familial labor is racialized, gendered, and marked by other systems of marginality. By engaging in central roles in their families, Chicana/Latina undergraduates, take on the role of supporting their families' survival, navigation, and resistance within U.S. society.

Finally, in chapter 4, I explore the pedagogical possibilities of *pláticas* (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) rooted in Chicana feminist epistemologies. *Pláticas* are a legitimate data collection method and methodology that is rooted in the everyday talk of Latinx people. In this chapter, I consider how engaging in *pláticas* with undergraduate students cultivates a *comunidad*, a third space, which exists within the university, and simultaneously outside the norms of the university. In particular, I build on critical race counterspace scholarship through the application of Chicana feminist theorization of third space to situate and locate how *pláticas* can cultivate a space of affirmation, *conocimiento*, and resistance that is not bounded by the normative norms

and expectations, and straddles Chicana/Latina embodiments and ways of knowing as Chicana/Latina s navigate the university. Collectively, this dissertation offers a theorization of college transition for Chicana/Latina undergraduates that aims to recognize the perpetuity of racism and endemic nature of marginality that does not result in the “integration” nor “adaptation” of Chicana/Latina undergraduates into the university.

### **Revisiting Foundational Research**

The college transition scholarship draws from four perspectives including 1) white centered transition and deficit approach of Black, Indigenous, Students of Color (BISOC) experience, 2) college adjustment is shaped by race and racism (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado, S., Carter, D. F., & Spuler, A.,1996; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Yosso, 2006), 3) considerations of culture in higher education experiences (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus and Quaye, 2009; Tierney, 1999; 2000) and 4) intersecting contexts underlie the transition (Perna & Thomas, 2006; Rendón et al, 2014).

Rendón et al. 's (2014) college transition model, *Entre Mundos*, contributes to filling this gap by exploring the Chicana/Latina college transition through the application of nepantla. This model argues that Chicana/Latina students navigate entre mundos as they straddle multiple contexts of family, peers, work, spirituality, community, and country of birth. Furthermore, Conchas and Acevedo- Gil (2020) offer the *Framework of Atravesada/o/xs Nepantleando* (FAN) to consider how intersecting identities support Chicana/Latina students in navigating structural inequities in the educational system through a Borderlands perspective. This framework situates education within colonial roots, frameworks of deservingness, and the physical and psychological borderlands, arguing that U.S. educational institutions were not designed for the Chicana/Latina student success.

In this dissertation, I respond to the call from Feminists of Color for theorizations about the experiences of Women of Color to embody the intersection of marginality that shape our lives and challenge traditional, deficit, and assimilationist frameworks that center on the experiences of males and white women (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 1989; Combahee River Collective, 1983; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Villenas et al., 2006). I consider how LatCrit, and Chicana feminist epistemologies, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks challenge normative understandings of the college transition and educational experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduates as perpetual *atrevesadas* of the university.

### **Implications for Future Research**

In this section, I offer four central implications for research that considers Chicana/Latina undergraduate experiences and higher education scholarship that aims to attend to race, gender, and intersectionality. These implications consider theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical considerations of critical race and Chicana feminist research in higher education.

#### **Theorize from a Racial Realist Perspective in Higher Education Transition and Retention**

Critical race legal scholar, Derrick Bell (1991) argues that racism is an endemic and permanent part of United States society, and that we must theorize and work to disrupt the functioning of white supremacy, though irradicating it is not possible. Therefore, we must also theorize about higher education from the assumption that racism will continue to be part of the fabric of these institutions, as educational systems function as a microcosm of social inequities and marginalities. Various forms of oppression underlie the experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduates, as institutions of higher education are microcosms of broader societal and ideological systems. As *mujeres* that embody various marginalized identities produced by these larger systems of oppression, higher education scholarship must contextualize student

experiences within these larger systems of marginality that also are present in the university climate, culture, and context. Understanding that our BISOC students will always be confronted by racism and other ideologies of marginality through systems, culture, and practices in higher education, we must situate our theorizations of college transition and retention from these margins.

### **Center the Chicana/Latina College Student Experience and Attend to Intersectionality**

This research highlights the importance of centering Chicana/Latina undergraduates as the focus of higher education explorations through an intersectional lens. It is crucial to unapologetically center Chicana/Latina undergraduates as the focus of our scholarship if we are to understand how mujeres exist, experience, and navigate the university. Other scholarship does exist that more broadly explores the experiences of Chicanx/Latinx students in higher education and/or Students of Color. Yet, we must bring into conversation race, gender, and intersecting identities is necessary to do justice to understanding student experiences. The restrictive traditional college student narrative does not make space for the Chicana/Latina experience, as these mujeres embody various marginalized identities, various roles and responsibilities, and various ways of navigating, negotiating, and thriving in higher education. For institutions of higher education to support their Chicana/Latina students, they must be able to acknowledge how their structures and practices harm students, embrace the complexities of the lives of Chicana/Latina undergraduates, and identify actions that do justice to their lives and capacities.

### **Develop Theory Rooted in the Experiences of Chicana/Latina Mujeres**

Within the scholarship about Chicana/Latina s in higher education, there continues to be a need for theoretical and conceptual models rooted in the daily lives of Chicana/Latina s for interpreting and understanding their experiences in higher education (Holguín Cuádriz, 2005).



Though I offer theorizations in this dissertation, we must continue to capture the experiences of Chicana/Latina undergraduates should support the critique, expansion, and new understandings of higher education processes and theories. Engaging in this line of research includes bridging student experience scholarship with college choice, transition, retention, and graduation, to create possibilities for developing new frameworks that do more justice to Chicana/Latina mujeres in the university. These new frameworks can also support a reimagination of institutional action as we produce new knowledge, theory, and models that support Chicana/Latina undergraduate students in a culturally, racially, and gender-affirming ways.

### **Towards Collective Research Epistemologies and Methodologies in Higher Education Scholarship**

Chicana/Latina undergraduates are carriers of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2001) and holders of their cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998) as mujeres embodying intersecting identities of marginality in academic realms. Research and theorization should center the knowledge and skills that Chicana/Latina mujeres create, produce, and transmit in higher education spaces. Epistemologies and methodologies applied in Chicana/Latina undergraduate research must be mujer centered that innately draw from Chicana/Latina 's everyday racial, cultural, and gendered ways of knowing, being, and existing. This means that research must center reciprocity, should be approached with the intent of affirming and expanding intergenerational knowledge, and requires collaboration that supports the affirmation, empowerment, and resistance of Chicana/Latina researchers and their collaborators (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Villenas et al., 2006). Chicana/Latina scholars have begun to challenge and disrupt traditional epistemological beliefs by including undocumented Chicana/Latina student collaborators in their meaning-making and theorizations (Muñoz, 2013; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Pérez Huber, 2010). Reimagining how research can transition from including

Chicana/Latina students as participants to students as collaborators in research, moves us towards implementing research as possible liberatory pedagogy that can contribute towards the affirmation, empowerment, leadership, and a pathway to graduation and graduate school for Chicana/Latina undergraduates.

### **Implications for Institutional Policy and Student Support Services**

When considering the implications of this research with Chicana/Latina undergraduates, it is important to center institutional responsibility for student success. I offer five implications for institutional policy and practice that can interrupt the systems that work against Chicana/Latina undergraduate success. This research argues that Chicana/Latina undergraduates do not “transition” or “adjust” to their college or university during the first year of college. Instead, Chicana/Latina undergraduates experience the university through the intersecting systems of marginality that shape their lives. Therefore, my central recommendations center on expanding and building student support services that intend to serve Chicana/Latina undergraduates.

### **Student Support Beyond the First Year**

Many institutions right fully focus on the transition, through summer bridge, orientation, and first year retention and persistence support. Yet in addition to these onboarding and first year supports, it is necessary that there are structures in place for second year and beyond support for all Chicana/Latina undergraduates and BISOC, that recognizes how hegemony, whiteness, and systems of marginality operate within U.S. society and in the university. For example, the Office of Academic Support and Services (OASIS) at UCSD has a cohort of summer bridge program that are tied into an array of structured first year support services. A smaller cohort of students is part of 2 Excel, a 2-year program that recognizes the continual challenges students experience

beyond their first year in college. These are all important efforts for retaining BISOC students at UCSD. These resources must be equitably expanded to Chicana/Latina undergraduates and BISOC students in their first year until graduation, with equal prioritization to students beyond their first year.

### **Race, Gender, and Intersectional Student Support**

In acknowledging the institutional role in perpetuating systems of marginality and the need to meet various needs of Chicana/Latina students, institutions can begin by investing in the academic, social, cultural, and emotional wellbeing of their Chicana/Latina undergraduates through supports that are racial, cultural, and gendered centered efforts. These actions could include establishing formalized space on campus for Chicanas/Chicana/Latina s and other Women of Color undergraduates to build community as these women navigate institutions at the intersection of various systems of oppression. I recognize the lack of culturally relevant support services at most campuses that do not consider cultural and racial/ethnic identities of their students, and therefore, do not equitably serve their students. If student support services are to justly engage in attending to the needs and success of Chicana/Latina undergraduates, these supports must be rooted in interrupting the systems of marginality that work against Chicana/Latina students that also attends to the intersections, fluidity, and differences that exist between students.

### **Invest in Chicana/Latina and Intersectional Student-Centered Community Spaces**

Institutions must invest in Chicana/Latina centered spaces, programs, and events on campus. There are already Chicana/Latina student groups on campus that serve as the only spaces that consider the intersectional experience and needs of Chicana/Latina undergraduates. These are often small in scale as they are student run with little to no institutional backing. It is

important to recognize that institutions should be responsible for supporting Chicana/Latina undergraduates and BISOC, but it is often student led efforts with little institutional investment that engage in this labor. Institutions must invest in already present and expand these spaces, programs, and events on campus. This could involve setting up additional annual funding opportunities for student organizations and student groups that are committed to serving Chicana/Latina s and BISOC on campus. These spaces require institutional investment, through hiring of individuals that center on support Chicana/Latina students or provide resources through financial contribution for the labor of the Chicana/Latina faculty, staff, and students engaging in this work on their own time. Other campuses have Chicana/Latina centered spaces and events.

### **Supports Should Tend to Bodymindspirit**

A central part of the experiences of all the Chicana/Latina undergraduates in this research indicate the importance of holistic wellbeing that prioritizes their mental and spiritual wellbeing through an ethnically, culturally, and spiritually relevant perspective. To support the academic success of Chicana/Latina undergraduates, requires that students are emotionally, mentally, and spiritually well. Mental and spiritual wellbeing for Chicana/Latina undergraduates is underlined by racial/ethnic, cultural, religious, spiritual, and gendered practices, rituals, and nuances that must be attended to within mental health supports. The Latinx community has a history of mistrust of western medicine, including mental health services. Yet, there is also a long history of the Latinx community drawing from community, Indigenous, and religious traditions, and practices to support their mental and spiritual wellbeing. Part of the efforts to attend to the bodymindspirit of Chicana/Latina undergraduates must be to expand Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) by hiring Chicana/Latina and BIWOC therapists and psychiatrists that can welcome and attend to Chicana/Latina undergraduates and the various

facets that inform their holistic wellbeing. This includes hiring therapists that engage in challenging eurocentric understandings of the mind, body, and spirit and engage in decolonizing psychological services.

### **Hire and Retain Chicana/Latina & BIWOC Faculty**

Systemwide and campus specific hiring policies must attend to the hiring of Chicana/Latina faculty and Black, Indigenous, Women of Color faculty and put in place accountability structures that ensure these policies are being applied in hiring practices. This could include requiring all departments to submit a diversity, equity, and inclusion plan that indicates how they will diversity their faculty along with a five-year review of the implementation of these plans. Additionally, it is important to ensure that search committees include a required percentage of racial/ethnic diverse committee members and that all faculty complete a diversity, equity, and inclusion workshop training for faculty hiring on an annual basis. Once hired, institutional structures must be in place that retain Chicana/Latina faculty and BIWOC faculty members. Recognizing the labor of BIWOC faculty, compensation to BIWOC faculty for their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts through course buyouts, and addressing the racial, sexist, and discriminatory climate are necessary actions to retain BIWOC faculty.

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation offers a theorization of the Chicana/Latina undergraduates' college transition as perpetual *atrevesadas* within U.S. society and in higher education. In doing so, this research challenges assumptions of assimilation, adaption, and integration that are normatively embedded within transition models and processes. It is important to situate our theorizations within the historical and contemporary manifestations of coloniality, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and intersectional ideologies that are embedded in the fabric of U.S. higher

education institutions and shape the everyday experiences of students. Doing so, presents the possibility to do justice to student experience and engage in action that attends to interrupting the systems, policies, and practices that work against student success.

In drawing from Chicana feminist thinking and theorizations, I aim to challenge essentialism within-subject formation in that Chicana/Latina identities and understand experiences are always fluid, shifting, and can be in contradiction (Delgado Bernal, 2001). An intent of this work is not to make claims or assumptions that every Chicana/Latina undergraduate will experience the transition exactly the same as each of the testimoniadoras and collaborators of this work, because doing so would be contradictory to the values and intent of embracing the complexity and fluidity in the lives of Chicana/Latina s. Instead, through this dissertation, we collectively move away from rigid understandings of the transition towards bearing witness to the transition experience through the testimonios of the Chicana/Latina undergraduates, shaped by the intersection of their positionalities and histories, systems of marginality and contexts. This research and political intent focus on highlighting the similarities across Chicana/Latina students and doing justice to the differences that make this journey unique and different for each student.

As a Chicana researcher, I believe educational spaces can rupture systematic oppression and institutional racism, if we unapologetically repurpose research, theories, and tools for disrupting the campus climate, university culture, institutional policies, and higher education practices that have historically marginalized our communities. Through supporting Chicana/Latina undergraduates across universities, we invest in the aspirations of these mujeres, the futures of their communities, and the sacrifices and commitment of their elders and families to the prosperity of current and future generations. Through scholarship and practice, we co-create possibilities and pathways that support the Chicana/Latina undergraduate mujeres that are

currently in universities and those that are to come, by envisioning and cultivating an educational context that is accommodating, nurturing, enriching, and empowering for Chicana/Latina mujeres and supports them in thriving, manifesting, and reaching their full intellectual and life capacities and potentials.

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