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From Vasconcelos to DeVos: Exploring *La Raza Cósmica* and its Legacy on *Educación* and  
*Mexicanidad* in the *Alta-Baja* California Borderlands

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction for the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts

in

Latin American Studies

by

Michael Ángel Rodríguez Vázquez

Committee in charge:

David G. Gutiérrez, Chair  
Makeba Jones  
Olga Vásquez

2018



The Thesis of Michael Ángel Rodríguez Vázquez is approved and is acceptable  
in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2018

Gracias, Mom & Dad!  
L@s quiero mucho.

“Estoy y estuve en muchos ojos. Yo sólo soy memoria y la memoria que de mí se tenga.”

Elena Garro, *Los recuerdos del porvenir*, 1963

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                   |      |
|-----------------------------------|------|
| Signature Page.....               | iii  |
| Dedication.....                   | iv   |
| Epigraph.....                     | v    |
| Table of Contents.....            | vi   |
| List of Abbreviations.....        | vii  |
| List of Figures.....              | viii |
| Acknowledgements.....             | ix   |
| Abstract of the Thesis.....       | x    |
| Chapter 1: Introduction.....      | 1    |
| Chapter 2: Literature Review..... | 7    |
| Chapter 3: Met(h)odologí(y)a..... | 22   |
| Chapter 4: No Soy de Aquí.....    | 29   |
| Chapter 5: Ni Soy de Allá.....    | 48   |
| Chapter 6: Encrucijada.....       | 67   |
| Chapter 7: Observations.....      | 83   |
| Chapter 8: Análisis.....          | 97   |
| Chapter 9: Conclusion.....        | 109  |
| Appendix.....                     | 116  |
| Bibliography.....                 | 119  |

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| AB     | Assembly Bill  |
| AP     | Advanced Placement   |
| COLEF  | <i>El Colegio de la Frontera Norte</i>                     |
| DACA   | Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals                     |
| DREAM  | Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors        |
| ELL    | English Language Learner(s)                                |
| HB     | House Bill   |
| LATI   | Latin American Studies                                     |
| LAUSD  | Los Angeles Unified School District                        |
| MEChA  | <i>Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán</i>            |
| MMFRP  | Mexican Migration Field Research Project                   |
| NAACP  | National Association for the Advancement of Colored People |
| NAFTA  | North American Free Trade Agreement                        |
| PROBEM | <i>Programa Binacional de Educación Migrante</i>           |
| SB     | Senate Bill  |
| SDSU   | San Diego State University                                 |
| SEP    | <i>Secretaría de Educación Pública</i>                     |
| UABC   | <i>Universidad Autónoma de Baja California</i>             |
| UC     | University of California                                   |
| UCSD   | University of California San Diego                         |
| XITO   | Xicanx Institute for Teaching and Organizing               |

## LIST OF TABLES

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Table 1: Student Pride Regarding Demographics..... | 93 |
| Table 2: Student Shame Regarding Demographics..... | 94 |

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

From Vasconcelos to DeVos: Exploring *La Raza Cósmica* and its Legacy on *Educación* and *Mexicanidad* in the *Alta-Baja* California Borderlands

by

Michael Ángel Rodríguez Vázquez

Master of Arts in Latin American Studies

University of California, San Diego, 2018

Professor David G. Gutiérrez, Chair

This investigation examines the roles that public schools in the Alta-Baja California borderlands play in constructing notions of identity, specifically *mexicanidad*. Living in the literal margins of their respective countries, neplanterxs, or those who find themselves living in the "in between," form a unique community. Not considered when national identities were constructed in Washington, DC and Mexico City, these students have had to forge their own identity and figure out how the physical border defines them. However, how do schools on each side impact how these students see themselves? Which historical perspectives do these schools teach, and which ones should they teach? In what ways have policies shaped identities, and what

steps should be taken to support these students? This multi-modal, mixed methods, bilingual, and binational research project explores these questions and more. Through historical research, this project seeks to shed light on the institutional role school systems have played in forming and disseminating Mexican and US American identities, as well as how many neplanterxs have sought to embrace both. Likewise, one-on-one interviews were conducted with college students from both sides of the border to learn more about their educational experiences, their social science curricula, and their understandings of who and where they are. Ultimately, this thesis aims to demonstrate how the concept of binationality has largely been ignored by the schools in this area, leaving students to navigate this conflict on their own. As the students expressed a strong desire for more course material focused on this particular region, regardless of the border's arbitrary placement, ideally this research project would be used to motivate educators and policymakers to implement culturally responsive teaching strategies out of respect for their needs and wishes.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### *'Mexicanidad' in Borderlands Schools: A First Glance*

Mexican American educator Curtis Acosta, among other teachers, launched the Mexican American Studies program in Tucson, Arizona in 1998. When creating this program, he explained the importance of learning about the history of one's own community. His curriculum made great strides; graduation, retention, and college matriculation rates among Latinxs in the program soared (Fifer & McGinnis, 2011, scene 2). Standardized test scores skyrocketed, and parent engagement reached a new high. More importantly, students reported feeling much more invested in the classroom material when learning about historical figures with similar backgrounds as their own (scene 2). Self-esteem was among the indicators in which students showed most improvement. All of that changed, however, when Arizona legislators passed House Bill 2281, banning all ethnic studies programs in K-12 education; the aforementioned rates again fell below the national average, and confidence levels plummeted (scene 4).

Students responded by organizing protests, delivering speeches to the Arizona Board of Education, and informing news outlets of the recent decision. Evidently, the student body was very receptive to these unique curricula; after three years of advocacy, a federal appeals court eventually overturned HB 2281 (scene 12).

The situation in Tucson, Arizona is not unique; all across the United States and Mexico, universities and K-12 institutions are implementing ethnic studies programs and bilingual education standards to promote culture understanding among different racial groups as well as affirm the identities of the students within those programs (Gándara, 2002, p. 476). Although these programs have overwhelmingly been embraced by the students and have had gains similar to those observed in Tucson Unified, various conflicts have arisen. While some districts in the

United States have proposed other ethnic studies bans or english-only legislation, many schools in Mexico have been ill-equipped to provide students with these new government-encouraged curricula (Serrano Nájera, 2014, p. 3). Furthermore, issues of authenticity and accuracy of ethnic groups, particularly with regard to Mexican and Mexican American history, have also been called into question. Lastly, much opposition to these curricula has focused on perceived negative affects on students as a whole, ultimately questioning the emotional value of these courses (Hidalgo, 2011, p. 112).

With these areas of tension in mind, this investigation seeks to answer the following questions: How are Mexican cultures and histories presented in social science courses on both sides of the border? What impact does the border have on these notions? How do these narratives of duality conflict with conceptions of national identity in each country? From the perspectives of students, what purpose does this pedagogy serve, and what is its value? Essentially, this proposed project will take into account past events that have shaped modern day understandings of *mexicanidad*, or Mexican national identity, and then go further to examine how the pedagogy regarding that identity formation has been applied or not in their classrooms. In addition, gaining student perspectives about how they perceive the program as well as themselves will provide insight about indicators related to self-esteem and academic and professional aspirations. Ultimately, should this analysis provide positive results, the goal would be to use this research to inform policymakers and educators about the value of ethnic studies in hopes that this discipline will be a central component—rather than a mere additional option—in classrooms nationwide. Should the results come back negative, this research should then be used to inform educators leading the ethnic studies movement on aspects to take into consideration when forming these curricula to ensure that they provide more of the desired outcomes.

For the purposes of this research project, the terms “Chicanx” “Latinx” will be used in place of the more commonly used ethnic identifiers “Chicano” and “Latino.” As Latin American identified youth continue delving into identity politics and reclaiming histories prior to European colonization, a movement to use more inclusive terms has emerged (Torres, 2003, p. 26). The terms “Chicano” and “Latino” retain capitalist, patriarchal and colonial attributes. Spanish language ties collective nouns and adjectives to the presence, or absence, of males (p. 28). Challenging that inherently sexist dialogue by feminizing the word is an act of resistance towards colonization, a purpose which ethnic studies also serves (Fifer & McGinnis, 2011, p. 8). Moving further, “Chicanx” and “Latinx” reject gender altogether, adding room for people who identify as trans and/or ascribe to a gender that does not adhere to the binary. As for the differences between “Chicanx” and “Latinx,” both terms will be used interchangeably to describe individuals of Latin American descent, with emphasis on those of Mexican heritage. The former is a derivative of the term “Mexicano,” or “Xicano,” while the latter has been used to group together the peoples and cultures of Latin America.

To conduct this investigation, various methods will be taken into consideration. First, participation in the Mexican Migration Field Research Project, or MMFRP, will take place through the Center for US-Mexican Studies at UC San Diego. Through this experience, middle school and high school-aged students, as well as educators and administrators, will be interviewed regarding their educational experiences. These interviews will take place between January 2017 and May 2017. Interviews will take place in schools located in Tijuana as well as the San Diego metropolitan area.

Furthermore, interviews with roughly seventeen university students will serve as the bulk of the analysis for the investigative process. Eight students involved in SDSU’s sociology

department will participate, as well as seven students from UABC's departments of social sciences and international relations, with eight interviews—four from each—going more in depth. These students will be asked to share what they learned in their social science courses. In addition, they will be asked to elaborate their own journeys with respect to identity development, particularly with respect to how their schooling shaped them.

Moreover, much historical research will be conducted as well. Using various historical accounts from other researchers, as well school textbooks and other materials, much of the thesis will focus on events and policies that attributed to certain notions of mexicanidad and national identity. Looking at perspectives from the United States, Mexico, and the borderlands, these accounts of identity politics and development will be examined while also evaluating the very formation and persistence of the educational institutions and systems found in each region.

Past ethnic studies curricula, such Acosta's Mexican American Studies program in Tucson, and recent literature on the topic inform initial hypotheses regarding these research questions. First, it is expected that students and communities will overwhelmingly embrace the culturally responsive curricula at their respective educational institutions. Following current trends witnessing a growth of culturally relevant pedagogy, it is believed that students will enjoy the shift in focus in their courses and strive to expand these courses further. However, despite this support, it is hypothesized that some reactions will be complicated. According to Alemán & Gaytán (2016), students partaking in these programs, whether by choice or as mandated by their institution, will undergo a period of critical reflection that can have negative initial effects (p. 2). As students reflect on power differentials established in the past that carry on to the present, students will face anxiety and other initial forms of resistance to the lessons before experiencing the positive outcomes.

Beyond the initial internal conflict as well as the eventual acceptance and support for these Mexican Studies programs, overall student self-esteem, classroom engagement, high school and college graduation and retention rates, parental involvement, and other important indicators are expected to rise as well. Gándara (2002) states that when Latinx students are given the opportunity to speak their own language—including Spanglish—and learn about contemporary and historical figures that look like them, their overall happiness, well-being, and academic and professional success will improve (p. 478). These results should be replicated in other culturally responsive programs on both sides of the border. In addition, it is also anticipated that teachers and educators in general will describe their students as having better critical thinking skills and having the ability to apply course material to their everyday lives.

Moreover, given previous studies, students observed in this study are expected to push for a critical lens while participating in their respective cultural program. Though learning about one's heritage is a large step forward, learning about other marginalized groups, both within our communities and outside of them, is important too, so students will likely recognize this need. McFarland (2013) describes how youth are challenging current notions of *mestizaje* by adding female, indigenous, queer, trans, Asian, and Black perspectives into the conversation (p. 47). Essentially, mexicanidad and Latin American identities as a whole encompass all of these demographics and more; these identities also intersect, and it is crucial to understand and explore that transcendence. Students are likely going to be interested in addressing the antiquated monolithic approach to ethnicity with a comprehensive, complicated, and modern one.

Furthermore, it is predicted that these students will undergo or will have undergone an intimate process of cognitive dissonance. A crucial component of identity development, cognitive dissonance enables individuals to think about themselves and their backgrounds given

the power differentials of the past, present, and future. Evidently, Mexican and US-born Chicana students will have different experiences given cultural dynamics and other factors. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that there will be unique distinctions between the responses to this cultural pedagogy and the subsequent processes of identity development.

Likewise, proximity to the US-Mexico border will most likely have a significant effect on student identity development and reception to ethnic studies. The international border inherently ties both countries together, and because many individuals on either side have family and friends from or currently in the other, a bi-national identity subsequently develops. However, interdependence among the two is evident, with a dominant edge to the United States. As such, much of how these students see themselves will involve this region's proximity to the other side, as well as the cultural customs and traditions that arise from living in a border city.

Taking all of this into consideration, it is evident that among youth of color of either nationality, there is a hunger for understanding one's origin. Given the complicated past of Mexican and Mexican American identities, as well as the competing ideologies and systems in the borderlands, that yearning is clear. Public schools in the borderlands have in many ways constructed the identities of the students for them, often identities that do not resonate with or fully explain their experiences. Conversely, they perpetuate notions of *nepantla*, particularly with respect to the ambiguity and disconnect. As such, it is imperative that schools take these identities and contexts into consideration; social science curricula should be modeled by the students' own interests, which should in turn commit to affirming their identities, no matter how complex or mixed they may be.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### *Identity, Education, Politics, and the Politics of Identity within Education*

Nearly fifty years after Rudolfo “Corky” Gonzáles first popularized modern conceptions of Aztlán, which he and other Chicana activists claim encompasses the ancestral homeland of the Aztecs in what is now the southwest region of the United States, many millennial Chicanas have redefined what it means to be mestizas. Challenging traditional conceptions of mestizaje, young Chicanas are redefining their heritage in a variety of manners; as such, this redefinition often places millennial Chicanas in conflict with Aztlán scholars and activists, as well as with each other. As Chicana students shift traditional misconceptions of their ethnicity to be more positive and affirming, much focus has been placed on schools and their roles in the process. Chicana groups and other ethnicity-focused collectives have taken on advocating for ethnic studies and culturally responsive teaching methods while calling for an end to the school-to-prison pipeline and restructuring under-resourced schools, among other issues regarding educational equity.

Darder & Torres (2013) recognize the complexities within Latinx communities and the nuances that arise when unifying these groups under one term. Because the western hemisphere is a mixture of African, Indigenous, Asian, and European races, “Latino” and “Hispanic” are not racial categories; they are ethnicities (p. 93). The term “Hispanic” was first introduced on the 1980 census and was used to identify people who have familial origins in a Spanish-speaking country (Mora, 2014, p. 86). This, of course, became complicated since this would omit the French, Portuguese, and Indigenous language speakers of Latin America. It also made matters difficult when factoring in Spanish colonized regions in the American Southwest as well as in Africa and the Pacific Islands. In the end, the terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” emerged from debates about unity among Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans, as well as intersecting political

and economic gains from various corporations, such as Univision, or candidates, such as Richard Nixon.

Moreover, identities have transcended conventional focuses on race and ethnicity and have gone on to include other aspects. In the case of Chicax students, queerness transcends the binary and the patriarchy in the Spanish language. For instance, González (2006) writes about how his identity is shaped by his parents' documentation status, his time spent living the California Central Valley and in Michoacán, his sexual orientation, his college degree, and his body size. All of these intersect and conflict; as a male he was still subjected to the *machismo* that his mother and other females faced. Though *mariposa* has historically been a derogatory and homophobic term, he reconfigures and reclaims it as it encompasses being queer and Mexican. Also, given more acceptance of queerness in schools and societies in both nations, much discourse is available to describe the queer Latinx experience among students as well.

Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa's research regarding the concept of *nepantla*, a Nahuatl word referring to ambiguity and living between two or more spaces, serves as a significant framework for this investigation. Essentially, Anzaldúa discusses how many people live in an often uncomfortable in between, whom she calls "nepantleras," or people who are "boundary-crossers" (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, p. 571). In other words, these people experience "tensions" and "contradictions," but understanding those areas of discomfort could be empowering through a journey through "understandings of selfhood" that includes "multiplicity of the self" as well as "oneness" (Ortega, 2016, p. 19). Seemingly contradictory, *nepantla* is a term that resonates with many students who reside within this region, so examining in conjunction with student experiences and within their respective concepts is crucial to understanding identity as a whole.

Like González, Anzaldúa brings into her form of *mestizaje* her sexuality, her womanhood, her experiences, and many aspects of her life to describe who she is.

Moving away from terms but still exploring *mexicanidad*, one crucial component of this research project is to discuss claims of Mexican American indigeneity. Prior to colonization, the Americas were inhabited by thousands of tribal groups. In Mexico specifically, various indigenous linguistic and ethnocultural groups existed for hundreds of years, and their legacies are visible all over the country. However, much emphasis is placed on the Aztecs, whose stories of migration and cultural customs have been popularized all throughout Mexico. But why, however, do Mexicans usually identify with *Azteca* instead of *Maya*, *Tarasco*, *Purépecha*, and other groups? Much literature describes that during the founding of Mexico as a nation as well as prior and during the revolution in the early twentieth century, the Mexican people were experiencing a sense of disunity. To combat this, the government promoted Aztec imagery to unite the people under one non-European heritage. Stories of the founding of Mexico City and cultural landmarks such as Teotihuacan were revered and are still so today.

However, at the same time, the government also promoted an education system that would strip people of their tribal affiliations and create a national sense of *mexicanidad*, whereas some politicians sought to create one national identity oriented around one indigenous background, schools eventually shifted to unite one collective heritage without regard to indigeneity.

When discussing *mestizaje* through a critical lens, particularly for Chicanxs and Mexicans living in the borderlands, Rafael Perez-Torres (2006) expands on these questions. He explains how in the minds of Chicanxs, there is always a “memory of invasion and colonization” (p. 118). He explains that when the United States took the land and restructured the border

region, racial identity changed along with it: “The moment the United States came to possess Mexican lands was the moment people of Mexican descent began to undergo an ideological realignment of identity” (p. 116). Chicanxs and Mexicans alike are regularly thinking about the position of the border, and how the border was moved for them, but not by them, removing any sort of agency they have over self-determination of identity. Moreover, Perez-Torres continues by saying that the relationship between land and identity for this population is “locate[d] within a complex third space neither Mexican nor American but in a transnational space of both potential and restraint” (Lionnet & Shih, 2005, p. 322).

In Mexico specifically, the construction of race and national identity was a complicated process. While certain notions of mestizaje were widely disseminated, those images simply did not resonate with everyone. According to Saldívar (2006), people living in the Northern provinces felt “isolated from the ‘nascent projects of national integration and state building unfolding in central Mexico’” (p. 26). The large proximity between them and “the central seat of power in Mexico City” perpetuated this feeling of isolation, leading them to “acquire a fiercely independent sense of local autonomy” (p. 26). Established and projected by elites, this initiative of imposing national identity from above did not necessarily encompass the feelings that these individuals had about themselves. They had “alternative forms of identity” that indicate that many Mexicans from rural areas “have little notion of what their nationality or country” ultimately mean (p. 27). That said, for those who lived just south of the border with the United States, that third space that Perez-Torres and Anzaldúa describe is still very much there. The government constructed their identities for them, but there was this desire for them to define it for themselves, especially given the physical and emotional space in which they found themselves.

On that same note, David Gutiérrez expands on how they often saw themselves as a “separate people residing in a third space” (Saldívar, 2006, p. 27). Again, given their complex situation, they were often forced to adopt an identity that was created for them but did not define their experiences well. On top of this dynamic, various tensions—whether they were related to war, economic turmoil, or immigration, among other topics—made matters even more difficult. In the United States during the 1930s, “the needs and interests of American citizens simply had to take precedence over the problems faced by the growing Mexican immigrant population” (Gutiérrez, 1995, p. 71). This, among other issues, led them to struggle with questions regarding national loyalty and cultural identification, specifically as there were “competing visions for the future of the ethnic Mexican population” residing in this third space (p. 71). As members of this third space, they needed to describe their experiences on their own terms.

Furthermore, this topic also requires an in depth look at research on multicultural education and cultural pedagogy in K-12 settings. When examining the literature available, a vast array exists from the last ten years on culturally responsive teaching. Sleeter (1996) describes culturally responsive teaching as a form of social activism. Ethnic studies courses, which have been around since the 1960s but have experienced recent challenges due to shrinking budgets and legislation to limit multilingual and multicultural education, exist to affirm students of their identities and shift away from traditional classroom dynamics that mainly focus on white history. They give students of color the opportunity to retell their own history from their own perspectives which, according to Pizarro (2005), has a profound effect on self-esteem and academic achievement.

*Precious Knowledge* is just one case where ethnic studies courses have affirmed student identities. By introducing a Mexican American Studies curriculum at a high school where

Mexican American students have historically witnessed low graduation rates, fewer educational opportunities, and more under-resourced classrooms, the educators, who are Mexican Americans themselves, sought to change the trajectory of these students. By focusing on their rich history as told by people from their own community, Mexican American students at Tucson Unified saw significant increases in self-esteem, college readiness and success, and other indicators (Fifer & McGinnis, 2011).

For those that do advocate for ethnic studies and multilingual and multicultural education, the vast emphasis is on restructuring how information is taught. Samudzi (2016) describes how students must be the agents in the discussion of race and ethnicity. Those from oppressed backgrounds must lead those lessons and white students must learn to merely listen from other perspectives. Expanding on this and referenced by many works, Freire was a pioneer for culturally responsive teaching and advocating for education as liberation. His rhetoric describes how those of oppressed backgrounds must not only be the ones leading the classroom discussions, but they also reconfigure the education system to work for them. This is in accordance with the Chicana movement.

Bonfil Batalla (1996) and Serrano Nájera (2014) both insinuate that among radical student activists, teaching Aztlán is crucial to providing an accurate portrayal of Mexican history. Historically, Mexican American history has been taught by the oppressor, meaning not by Mexicans or Mexican Americans themselves but by colonizers of the region. The Mexican-American War and Spanish colonization have moved Mexicans toward an “artificial” history and culture. While many customs still exist among Mexicans, their true roots and practices have been stolen. Serrano Nájera (2014) claims it is necessary for educators to teach students about

authentic histories. According to him, Chicax students soon recognize how their culture has been morphed after colonization and crave an opportunity to embrace their indigenous roots.

Tensions arise, however, when actually discussing issues of indigeneity with the students. Though Aztlán has been central to the Chicax movement, it often does not resonate with the students themselves. Alemán & Gaytán (2016), for example, describe that students will often have trouble conceptualizing race theory and will often be “deeply traumatized by their racially marginalized identity,” leading them to resist adopting terms associated with it (p. 15). Is it humane to make these students relive this trauma? Can we as educators teach the truth to develop critical consciousness without lowering self-esteem?

Furthermore, Vigil (2011) claims that education policies in both the United States and Mexico have indicated that classrooms have employed a colorblind focus. In doing so, students of indigenous backgrounds gradually lost those cultural components in an effort to adopt the dominant identity. This has caused a disconnect with students and indigeneity, which now seems to be a foreign concept after ties with that part of history have been severed.

Serrano Nájera (2014) adds to the nuance by explaining how Chicax students crave learning about their indigenous past, but often have trouble connecting to and identifying with any particular tribe. Hidalgo (2011) instead reflects that Chicax students are very interested in learning about how their race and ethnicity post-colonization intersect with gender, social class, sexuality, and other identities. This is in conflict with Corky González’s initial claims to Aztlán; all Chicaxs, and by extension the students, must assert their indigeneity, specifically represented by the Mexica tribe. That, however, does not resonate with everyone as many choose a general, unidentified indigenous group.

Theoretically, much preliminary research has been influenced by Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In it, he describes how pervasive oppression is in the world. Sustainable through various systems such as racism and sexism, oppression is able to persist by dividing humans into the oppressor and the oppressed (Freire, 1996, p. 26). Members of the oppressed group are faced to live in a society governed by the oppressor. While Freire encourages calls to action for liberation, many methods used among oppressed peoples still perpetuate the hegemonic structure; as such, a praxis, or an informed action, is required to evaluate the situation and make strides to address the components that maintain the oppressor vs. oppressed binary (p. 27). One way of doing so is acknowledging these systems of power and evaluating them through the concept of conscientization (p. 62). Through this process of critical consciousness, oppressed peoples are able to understand their world and society; after doing so, which is a long, arduous process, then people are able to fight against oppressive systems (p. 62).

Freire argues that education is one means to achieve social justice. However, the way education is structured, combatting oppression is nearly impossible. The classroom serves as a means to maintain the status quo (p. 53). Through what he coins as the "banking education" concept, schools currently suppress critical thinking "through a lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge" (p. 53). Instead of being liberating, communal, and shared, education is viewed as knowledge, and "knowledge is [seen as] a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those who they consider know nothing" (p. 53). Essentially, Freire states that the oppressors ultimately rule education, which then extends their reach to control over the oppressed. To combat this dynamic, oppressed groups must challenge current structures of education and teach themselves and their stories, paving the way for ethnic studies. Ethnic

studies curricula enable oppressed peoples, in this case communities of color, to evaluate structural dynamics of their societies and retell history from their own perspectives.

Another very important theory at play is Antonia Darder's concept of biculturalism. A Puerto Rican scholar, activist, artist and colleague of Freire, Darder (2012) argues that individuals "learn to function in two distinct sociocultural environments: their primary culture, and that of the dominant mainstream culture of the society in which they live" (p. 48). Applied to Latinx students living in the United States, this theory recognizes that the many ways these individuals are able to respond to racism in society is by their understanding of this bicultural notion. She believes educators must teach this concept because once students are able to identify the system with terms, they can better respond to "the dynamics of living in constant tension between conflict cultural values and conditions of cultural subordination" (pp. 48-49). Evidently, the discipline of ethnic studies in the United States fulfills that role to an extent. Normalizing student identities in a society that treats them abnormally, ethnic studies programs recognize cultural differences, celebrate them, and use that newfound sense of pride to affirm students and challenge the systems of oppression that Freire points out. As for students in Mexico, this is achieved by reversing the narrative in classrooms; rather than focusing on history from the perspectives of the Spanish, educators must look from the lens of the indigenous people, the enslaved Africans, and the mestizxs that have emerged from colonization. Recognizing this dichotomy in society and its pervasive effects today through colorism and other forms of racism would equip students with the tools needed to address the pattern of socioeconomic and racial inequality in Mexico.

As previously mentioned, there are various conflicts that arise in response to and as part of ethnic studies programs. These areas of tension will serve as lines of inquiry for the purpose of

the investigation, and they will inform approaches to student interviews (to be explored later) and other methodology throughout the entire process. The first tension is backlash. As observed in Tucson Unified, many school districts nationwide have resorted to ethnic studies bans as well as legislation limiting teaching to be conducted only in English (Gándara, 2002, p. 481). Much of this resistance has grown by challenging previously accepted history, since many of these curricula provide perspectives of historical figures, such as George Washington or Susan B. Anthony, that differ from the norm of reverence. In addition, in Mexico and in the United States, cultural curricula discuss issues of sexism, homophobia, racism, classism, and other power differentials that are deeply engrained in society but have been invisible to a privileged majority. Acknowledging such privilege and stepping down to listen to a diverse range of voices is difficult, and is often not received well by those in power (Samudzi, 2016). The same has been seen in Texas, where state officials have complied with mandated Mexican American Studies courses but have resisted by providing textbooks and materials that portray this culture from outside perspectives, which have called Mexicans “lazy” and having a “poor work ethic” in the reading material (Pérez, 2017).

Another area of tension is the internal conflict that students of color often experience when first participating in ethnic studies programs after having not been exposed to cultural pedagogy before. Just as members of the privileged majority will express resistance, the students who are the very focus of many of these curricula will also experience similar emotions (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016, p. 2). In a speech as part of a diversity series at the University of Southern California, Dominican American writer and literature professor Junot Díaz once told a group of young college students of color that his “race was raped into existence” (Díaz, 2015). Referring to the Spanish conquest of the Americas characterized by genocide, rape, and other atrocities

against indigenous peoples, Díaz's morbid account of history is unsettling for many students to comprehend. Grappling with the horrors of the past is difficult; understanding those horrors—which could include slavery and ethnic cleansing—as part of your own past complicates the issue further. Essentially, students face much anxiety when they learn about the harsh realities of their heritage, which includes centuries of systematic oppression (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016, p. 9).

That anxiety increases once students begin connecting events from the past with subsequent power differentials in the present. As students realize that elements from historical periods far removed from them are still very pervasive in modern society, the initial anxiety often deepens, and student self-esteem and self-worth experiences a dip. (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016, p. 5). On top of that, students participate in these classes with a call to action to address these systems of oppression, and that revolutionary component adds yet another layer to the hesitation and resistance (p. 8). Ultimately, all of these conflicts occur on top of the insecurities that students of color already feel about their own identities after years of living as minorities.

A third tension that informs this research as a line of inquiry is the issue of representation. Essentially, it is important to understand how historical figures of color are presented in common discourse, even in academic circles of color. In other words, not only should we be critical of how the oppressor represents the oppressed, but we should also ensure accuracy of how the oppressed represents other members of that same demographic. This is apparent with Cesar Chavez. Often credited for immigration-related achievements that were actually contrary to his own methods for workers' rights, Chavez is revered by many members of the Chicano movement (Rodriguez, 2014, p. 232). His legacy has been warped, and as such his representation in ethnic studies curricula should take note of that trend.

The final tension to be explored as an area of inquiry is authenticity. Within indigenous-focused Mexican studies curricula, much emphasis is placed on Aztec and Mayan cultures. Mexico as a whole was home to millions of indigenous people from diverse cultures and languages. As many customs were lost, Mexicans have sought to reconnect with their indigenous pasts in a form of resistance to modern acts of colonization (Ceseña, 2011, p. 242). When Mexico was founded as a nation, the government used Aztec imagery to unite the country under a collective mestizx background. Many images and symbols were romanticized and morphed for the purposes of creating this common identity. This method was repeated during the Porfiriato to combat foreign influence and create a national identity that was increasingly dividing. These same symbols were also used in the subsequent Mexican revolution, and have been employed for marketing purposes of Mexican products.

Returning to discussions of education policy, it is important to understand why specific support systems are needed for this particular population. According to Jensen & Sawyer (2013), the lives of these families including “cultural and linguistic hybridity”; millions of Mexican American school children, many of whom are first, second, or third generation, practice and identify this duality (p. 1). However, for them, the problem is that “this hybridity is not well understood or nurtured as a way to improve educational opportunities” (p. 1). In other words, these researchers call for a binational approach to education that employs cultural and social components as tools to foster better academic outcomes.

Unfortunately, according to Leal & Meier (2010), many education-focused policies are written without considering the impacts that they would have on Latinxs (p. 204). Policies are thus often drafted and implemented without their well-being taken into consideration, often placing these students in academically precarious situations. While in Mexico, the nation’s

arguably best academic opportunities exist now (Jensen & Sawyer, 2013, p. 2), there is still an absence of support specifically geared towards students who find themselves on either side of the borderlands. On the southern side, graduation rates and college matriculation numbers are still not ideal. On the northern side, Latinx students are faced with lower enrollments in gifted classes, higher concentrations in English language learning classes and special education, “and higher levels of corporal punishment, suspensions, and expulsions” (Leal & Meier, 2010, p. 4). As such, significant policy changes are “central to the amelioration” of these issues that disproportionately affect this community.

Moreover, it appears that many policies that do exist are built under misguided pretenses. For example, Jones et al. (2002) discusses how in California, “37% of high school graduates are Latino, whereas only 12% of the student population is eligible” for admission at the University of California; those same numbers for African-American students are 8% and 3%, respectively (p. 4). Clearly underrepresented, these groups must have support systems in place to address such a drastic disparity. However, barriers to change exist because of misunderstandings. That same study describes how there is a misconception about equity that is “particularly troublesome in California because it assumes [that] an adequate number of [underrepresented minorities] are currently eligible for UC admission” (p. 4). With mindsets like these, university officials make policies to address recruitment strategies, which are responsible to a degree but not systemic-based approaches, meaning that potential significant changes are hindered through a changed focus. Understanding root causes in education are essential to creating a meaningful policy.

One policy area that could be significant for student success is within language policy. According to Vásquez et al. (2007), there is a clear “interrelationship [...] between language, culture, learning, and knowledge“ (pp. 1-2). Language has a significant role within identity

development, but it also can serve as a significant tool for supporting students with their academics. Zentella (2009) describes how many borderlands regions, not just between the United States and Mexico, but also in other areas with high immigrant populations, often form their own ways of speaking. In some areas, forms of English like Ebonics may emerge, or in other cases, like in Barrio Logan, youths will often “maneuver between English and Spanish” depending on the situation, often merging the two entirely (p. 43). Students and their families, who live in these intersecting spaces, or third spaces, often create a local color by combining their cultural influences, with language serving as one of those mechanisms. As such, various researchers, including many previously mentioned, advocate for more bilingual education policies to foster hybridized form of learning and identifying.

Lastly, it is evident that within this binational, multicultural study on education and identity, it is crucial to call into question notions of citizenship and what that means for students in this region. What does it mean for students to be citizens in this binational region? According to Rosaldo (2003), citizenship itself has many meanings, ranging from formal rights to “recognition as a full member of a group” (p. 3). To him, many groups living in the margins struggle with “belonging,” which many strive for. This leads to his concept of cultural citizenship, which recognizes the differences among people but still validates their abilities to participate in society (p. 3). Ultimately, this indicates that national citizenship “does not always equate to cultural citizenship for all people in unequal and multicultural societies” (Darder & Torres, 2013, p. 113). This experience is important for these binational students, who have different ways of communicating, learning, identifying, and existing compared to their non-binational counterparts. Many binational Mexicans and Mexican Americans assert their nuanced identities within a seemingly homogenous national identity framework.

Evidently, this topic of discussion regarding identity, politics, education, and the politics of identity within education is nuanced because of past and current events and practices. According to Darder & Torres (2013), “schooling was undeniably a part of the conquering enterprise” (p. 114). That function still seems to persist today, so recognizing it is essential to systemic change. For binational students who find themselves in the literal margins, that sense of urgency is even greater as they seek to understand who they are, where they come from, where they are, and many other pertinent questions that answers with much potential for better academic, personal, and professional outcomes.

## Chapter 3

### Met(h)odologi(y)a

#### *Conducting a Mixed-Methods, Multimodal, Bilingual, and Binational Investigation*

An investigation focused on student identities in the borderlands, this project was conducted using a mixed methods approach. Primarily focused on a series of interviews with local students, some quantitative data was also analyzed using prior data sets compiled through the MMFRP at the University of California San Diego (UCSD). As such, data used in this study include information from one-on-one interviews with college students, focus groups with high school and middle school students, and independent research regarding previous investigations regarding race and ethnicity within education. All data included in this study, including from the interviews and from previously published texts, were acquired on both sides of the international border between Mexico and California, reflecting a binational approach to understanding these dual identities.

At first, most research was conducted via the MMFRP, a program offered through UCSD's Center for US-Mexican Studies. A yearlong course, the MMFRP is a joint effort between students and professors from UCSD, UABC, and *El Colegio de la Frontera Norte* (COLEF). Research via the MMFRP took place from September 2016 to June 2017. The program began in the Fall 2016 with the course entitled Latin American Studies (LATI) 222A: Field Research Methods for Migration Studies: Seminar. Involving students from all three campuses, this course mostly discussed US immigration policies within the last century. Led by Political Science Associate Professor Dr. Tom Wong, researchers in this program developed a context for contemporary migration trends and practices. In addition, much of the course was focused on preparing for the practicum, which would take place the following academic quarter.

Interview skills and data collection strategies focused on qualitative and quantitative methods were taught.

During the Winter 2017 quarter, research continued via LATI 222B: Field Research Methods for Migration Studies: Practicum. A 12-unit course focused on practice, researchers from all three campuses visited approximately 24 middle and high schools in the Tijuana and San Diego areas. At each school, researchers interviewed two school administrators—often a counselor and a principal—surveyed eight students via the MMFRP’s approved questionnaire, with select questions included in the appendix, and led focus groups of 8 students. Occurring from January 2017 to April 2017, these interviews were recorded using audio devices. Discussions with school administrators were mainly about the services offered at each school, especially with regard to its binational students.

Regarding the surveys and focus groups, classrooms were chosen randomly by the school administrators, with the appropriate grade level serving as the only criterion needed for selection. Once in the classroom, students, who opted to participate, were randomly assigned numbers. Students in group two were given surveys asking about their demographics, their experiences at their school, their personal, professional, and academic aspirations, and their overall well-being. These data were then recorded and compiled into various charts for analysis purposes. As for focus groups, eight students assigned a number three were invited to participate in focus groups. Held in a different classroom, these conversations discussed student aspirations as well as support services offered at their schools. They also discussed their understandings of binational identity, as well as the roles schools played, if any, in addressing those notions. Students in group one, as well as students who opted out of participating, continued classroom activities as normal.

During the third quarter, after using the same procedures at schools from either side of the border, researchers enrolled in LATI 222C: Field Research Methods for Migration Studies: Data Analysis coded the interviews and survey responses using a joint drive. Students also included their observations of the schools themselves, writing down any sort of descriptions of the surrounding area as well as the facilities on each campus. Comments from focus groups and one-on-one interviews that were recorded were transcribed, and notes and transcripts were all added to the joint drive. Various quotes and numbers from the drive were used during the analysis portion of this thesis.

Prior to conducting these procedures and before the analysis process, much of LATI 222B and LATI 222C, led by Dr. Adam Sawyer, an Adjunct Professor at both Claremont Graduate University and UCSD, focused on the culture, linguistic, and academic context of the borderlands. Jensen & Sawyer (2013) stress that, given the focus on binationality, a working “understanding of how Mexican schools tend to operate, particularly in communities most affected by Mexico-US migration, is crucial to these investigations (pp. 15-16). Studies like these involve schools of different types (public, private, charter, religious), as well as different educational ministries that may often complicate student experiences, particularly for those who have studied in both countries (p. 16). Likewise, these students have varying degrees of binational ties and language abilities, diverse experiences with regard to policies and mixed-status dynamics, and different upbringings and expressions of heritage, among other pertinent factors. As such, knowledge of all of these variables was necessary in order to carry out a comprehensive, multimodal, and binational study.

As for the historical aspect of the thesis, which examines an in depth account of how educational institutions on each side were established with clear racialized motives, much of the

study took place in San Diego and in Mexico City. In San Diego, various texts were compiled from the libraries associated with the University of California, primarily UCSD's Geisel library. Books and studies that were selected focused on Mexican and US American school systems and institutions. Likewise, in Mexico City, many texts were from the *Biblioteca José Vasconcelos*, a large library with a wide variety of historical records and texts. The bulk of this historical research was conducted and reviewed between May 2017 and August 2017, though texts from both regions were regularly reviewed up until May 2018.

Moreover, a significant portion of the investigation involved interviews with college students at UABC and SDSU. These one-on-one interviews took place between January 2018 and February 2018, which coincided with the Winter 2018 academic quarter. UABC is the public university of the city of Tijuana; much like the University of California system, with various campuses spread across the state, UABC functions the same, with its flagship location residing in the Otay region of the city. SDSU is a large public university located in San Diego, and it is affiliated with the California State University system, which has 32 sites across the state. Each of these universities was chosen because many of the students attending these schools were born, raised, and educated in the borderlands region. Their understandings of the school systems as well as their upbringing in this binational context were important for this investigation.

Among the reasons for selecting students at this academic level, one key decision concerned within the opportunity to reflect on prior schooling experiences. In other words, university students have completed their primary and secondary education, so interviewees at this level could speak to their memories from various grade levels. Additionally, students at the university level may have taken ethnic studies or diversity courses and have a working

framework of discussions of race and ethnicity, which could also influence their experiences, identities, and outlooks on education and other related issues.

Moreover, this demographic grew up in the borderlands and understands the greater meaning behind the tensions that come with these identities. According to Garrod, Kilkenny, and Gomez (2007), students of these backgrounds have experienced—both in schools and out of them—unique moments where they have reflected upon their identities (p. ix). Conducting interviews and case studies of Latinx college students in the United States, they sought to review the “students’ understanding of Latino history, politics, and public policy” (p. xi). Among this collection of essays, students talked about “struggl[ing] as a Latino student in a white community” (p. 75). Others discussed their parents along with their familial history. In many cases, some discussed their negative experiences as othered beings, while simultaneously explaining their exposure to affirming moments, such as when they first heard the term “Chicano” (p. 93). From reading this collection, it becomes evident that these students undergo an experience of cognitive dissonance, and many reference their schooling experiences, both prior to and during college, as significant reasons for developing certain beliefs and identities.

However, not much research was found examining these same dynamics for college students in Tijuana or in Mexico. They have, undoubtedly, undergone similar experiences of identity development, as well as have likely reflected upon their schooling experiences. As such, this group is crucial to understanding the full story of what it is to grow up in the borderlands, especially when much literature appears to focus primarily on the students who reside north of the border. Taking this into consideration, binational college students from either side of the border were asked similar questions in hopes of finding similarities as well as juxtapositions between their experiences and opinions.

Students involved in the study were asked about their educational experiences, as well as their understandings of their own identity and the identities of their peers. A copy of the questions asked is included in the appendix. Vang (2010) discusses the concept of cultural pluralism, where various identities coexist amongst each other (p. 64). Emphasizing the framework, he adds that “cultural pluralism is a movement to promote the manifestations and maintenance of all cultures without dissolution to form a macro-culture or a dominant culture” (p. 64). As individuals of the borderlands with diverse backgrounds and experiences, it appears that in both countries, pluralism exists, but a dominant culture still remains. As such, students were also asked to speak to this concept, given the many cultures present in each country juxtaposed with a strong sense of national identity. These students, often at the periphery, and in some cases literally, would then likely be subject to intersecting encounters with cultural pluralism and macro-culture, given their proximity to the border.

To conduct this study, key individuals from each school were contacted to make arrangements. At SDSU, a professor from the sociology department was briefed about the research. After receiving her permission, flyers were distributed to her to disseminate to students enrolled in her SOC (Sociology) 554 course entitled “Sociology of the United States-Mexico Transborder Populations and Globalization.” After an announcement and a flyer, interested students provided their names to the professor, who then passed on that information. Out of fourteen interested students, nine were randomly selected. Students were then contacted, and a time to realize the interview was determined. Throughout the discussions, which lasted roughly forty-five minutes each, notes were taken.

The same process was implemented to interview students at UABC. In this case, a professor from the Tourism and Marketing department was contacted. The investigation proposal

was described to her and, after she expressed willingness to participate, she accepted flyers and disseminated information regarding the student to her students in group 132, which focused on national geography and tourism. After she received a list of twenty-one interested students, eight were selected to participate in brief interviews on campus. Students were contacted via email and the interviews were scheduled shortly thereafter.

Upon completing all seventeen interviews, the notes were reviewed and analyzed. Use of certain terms and discussion of specific topics were grouped thematically so as to draw correlations among students based on their responses. Trends and findings are provided in chapter seven, while chapter eight analyzes and draws conclusions to these observations. This information was then used in conjunction with notes from the MMFRP and from the independent historical research as part of a mixed methods and multimodal approach.

## Chapter 4

### No Soy de Aquí

#### *Constructing Mexicanidad in Mexico's Public Education System*

The making of *lo mexicano* is nuanced for a variety of reasons, including the conquest, the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, the war for independence, the Mexican Revolution, and the geographical location of the nation, among other factors. As such, while for many Mexicans the annual reenactment of Miguel Hidalgo's *El Grito de Dolores* is a symbol of independence for the greater *pueblo*, others may feel there is much missing from the common narrative of nation building and identity formation. Seemingly severing the imperialist ties of Spain, *El Grito*'s legacy represents the rise of colonized peoples to take control and govern themselves. However, a critical examination of this period recognizes that independence, while a step forward to combating the lasting effects of Spanish colonization, merely reorganized power for the already dominant elites of the country, namely the *criollo* land owners. Essentially, those with wealth and power in New Spain no longer sought to be beholden to the Spanish crown but were comfortable in maintaining their social status over the indigenous and mestizx majority.

This dynamic, which fostered the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, fueled rampant inequalities in Mexico. Losing land and “colonial-era privileges” during “the growth boom,” the indigenous people were viewed as “backward-looking, vice-ridden impediments to national development” (Vaughn & Lewis, 2006, p. 178). In the Yucatán, for example, Mayans were subject to “chattel slavery” after their lands were seized and privatized by “a group of millionaire monopolists [who] banded together to deny all justice to the Indians” (Joseph & Henderson, 2003, p. 277). While spreading the message that the Porfirian government's laws defended those “withholding wealth,” revolutionary leaders such as Cipriano Ricardo Flores Magón, Francisco Villa, and Emiliano Zapata led cries inspiring common peoples—including indigenous and

African groups—to demand a wide range of reforms (Joseph & Henderson, 2003, p. 337). Nevertheless, echoing the sentiments that encouraged the independence movement, the same phenomena that occurred after 1810 seemed to occur a century later during the onset of the revolution; according to Flores Magón, the revolutionary efforts thus “serve[d] merely to substitute one president for another, one master for another” (Joseph & Henderson, 2003, p. 159), maintaining an inequitable status quo.

Social education, which was seen as a remedy to the problems of inequality, became widespread in Mexico as a result of revolutionary efforts. Seeking to provide schooling for indigenous groups, Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos and the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (SEP), or the Ministry of Public Education, which he lead, “produced massive quantities of inexpensive workbooks and textbooks” and “increased the presence of education in the countryside” (Joseph & Henderson, 2003, p.15). Recognizing socioeconomic disparities as a result of the revolution and the *Porfiriato*, Vasconcelos and the SEP introduced a pedagogy specifically meant to integrate Mexico’s indigenous population into the growing mestizx majority. Describing how *mexicanidad* was constructed using the “treasures of all the previous races” including indigenous, African, European, and Middle Eastern heritage, Vasconcelos sought to teach Mexican students about the cosmic race, which was “not united necessarily by a common genetic background but by a language,” specifically the tongue “of the Castilian conquerors of America” (Marentes, 2000, p. 35).

Through with what could be seen as good intentions, Vasconcelos, himself an elite who was not raised in a traditional indigenous home, represented those in power who spoke on behalf of marginalized populations. A contradiction to the revolution that sought to provide a voice for the oppressed, Vasconcelos’s methods during the revolutionary period merely recycled racist

sentiments during the conquest and the Porfiriato. Met with opposition by many indigenous groups, Vasconcelos's legacy brings up an important question regarding the perceived progress made during the world's first social revolution: to what extent has post-revolutionary education reform in Mexico fostered social mobility, economic equality, and national unity as it was originally proclaimed to accomplish? While initially promising, education reform in Mexico merely perpetuated systems of racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of social inequality that were prevalent prior to the revolution. Instead, these reforms strengthened capitalism and ultimately fostered liberal and neoliberal practices that continue to exacerbate the opportunity gap today. Essentially, Vasconcelos's efforts warped identity politics and the well-being of indigenous and African populations by creating new systemic and ideological barriers to ensure racial supremacy of elites over the more populous oppressed groups.

After the revolution, Mexican officials engaged in various nationwide efforts that reflected changes in leadership but no substantial systemic reforms. In the case of the SEP, the institution was created to reach out to rural communities and provide free education for Mexico's masses. As such, the SEP "produced massive quantities of inexpensive workbooks and textbooks" and "increased the presence of education in the countryside" (Joseph & Henderson, 2003, p. 15). However, contrary to the information that the SEP disseminated, these regions already had schools and teachers (Vaughn & Lewis, 2006, p. 157). Despite this, Vasconcelos attributed socioeconomic disparities to a lack of national unity and a minimal amount of educational opportunities. In response, he introduced a pedagogy specifically meant to integrate, or more accurately, assimilate, Mexico's indigenous populations into the growing mestizx majority. Describing how mexicanidad was constructed using the characteristics of different racial groups including those of indigenous, African, European, and Middle Eastern heritage,

Vasconcelos sought to teach Mexican students about “the cosmic race” (Marentes, 2000, p. 35). Essentially, one of the main purposes for creating the SEP was not to reach the marginalized masses of Mexico and allow for social mobility; rather, it was to popularize a uniform and very exclusive image of mexicanidad all across the nation.

Freire (1996) claims that in order for oppressed groups to truly achieve liberation, they themselves must lead and design their own educational institutions (p. 21). In Mexico’s case, the exact opposite occurred. As the representative of the SEP, Vasconcelos, like many other Mexican intellectuals of his time, was of an elite demographic. Raised near the US-Mexico border region, Vasconcelos attended schools in both countries, which influenced his views on Americans and Mexicans (Marentes, 2000, p. 4). His experiences living with Americans in the southern region of the United States negatively influenced his opinions of white European descendants; to him, they had poor attitudes and no virtues, but they also had “clear minds” and much revered power (Joseph & Henderson, 2003, 19). Likewise, Vasconcelos believed the indigenous people of Mexico were inherently “hardworking and resilient,” but that their seemingly primitive ways were holding them back from progress (Vaughn & Lewis, 2006, p. 179). This was a common ideology in developing nations at the time; as modernization theory goes, communities must shed their old traditions to modernize and thus foster more economic and political growth in an increasingly capitalist world (Collier & Collier, 1978, p. 595). Keeping this idea in mind, Vasconcelos, himself a mestizx, coined the phrase “the cosmic race” (Marentes, 2000, p. 37). Recognizing a mixture of Black, Indigenous, and Spanish blood, Vasconcelos claimed that Mexicans received all of the best attributes from these particular groups, making them racially and biologically superior. Building this ideology would elevate his own social status, since he

embodied these hereditary “treasures” of light skin and “sensual joy” without expressing any of the “Arabian melancholy,” the “unbridled lust” of Africans, the “mysterious slanted eyes” of the Mongols, or the “sickly Muslim sensuality” supposedly present in the ethnic and racial groups constructed to his own vision of *mexicanidad* (Joseph & Henderson, 2003, p. 19).

Evidently, popularizing this exclusive narrative of superiority would bode well for the wealthy *mestizxs* in Mexico; such an idea would not only maintain their status above indigenous and Black communities, but it would also elevate their identities over the historically privileged *criollx* elite. Aside from Vasconcelos, other white elites, who “claimed at least some indigenous ancestry” but did not retain certain phenotypical characteristics and still managed to be in power, had a large role in shaping *indigenismo* (Vaughn & Lewis, 2006, p. 180). Conceptualizing *indigenismo* and nationalizing it as an inherent identity among all Mexicans, these elites used “their own evolving understanding of the nature of indigenous peoples” but never “incorporated marginalized Indians nor elevated them in socioeconomic terms” (Vaughn & Lewis, 2006, p. 176). In some cases, elites like Vasconcelos went as far as to fabricate the histories of indigenous historical figures, introducing these ideas into national discourse as fact (Gillingham, 2011, p. 174). In other words, powerful *mestizxs* glorified and romanticized a collective and seemingly colorblind Mexican indigeneity—usually using Aztec imagery—to unite the country’s people but gloss over the harsh realities and conditions of the indigenous populations. As such, this identity construction in effect uplifted the *mestizxs* with significant European ancestry by severing ties to their roles in genocide, slavery, and the conquest of Mexico. Lastly, this also completely ignored Black Mexicans, a phenomenon that attributes to the modern day denial of the *mexicanidad* of *Afromexicanxs*.

Creating this dynamic of what is the accepted image of “la raza cósmica” had a significant impact on education policy. Because Mexican hybridization, or *mestizaje*, was constructed to favor the Spanish language over any traditional ones, schools established for indigenous communities were almost only taught in the European language. Though indigenous parents were often led to believe that their students would learn in their native languages, and thus preserve an integral part of their cultures, the SEP often sent “monolingual mestizos” who were “downright contemptuous of a people they considered uncivilized and barbarous” (Vaughn & Lewis, 2006, p. 180). With their “missionary spirit” these educators understood that to many groups, “language was the only characteristic distinguishing self-identifying mestizxs from Indians,” emphasizing the importance of the Spanish language to “incorporate” indigenous peoples into the accepted Mexican narrative of *mestizaje* (p. 180). Many indigenous communities opposed the SEP’s objectives, but the federal government did not provide them much autonomy for forming their own schooling systems; as a result, they had to participate through coercive practices.

In general, the establishment of the SEP, which had a key role in “creating the new Mexican [as a] rational, secular, modern, hygienic, and sober” mestizx, perpetuated pre-revolution norms. Indigenous and African peoples were often used as pawns for political and economic gains; they, the proletariat, witnessed their own “blood spilled” in a manner that actually “fasten[ed] anew the chain forged” upon them (Joseph & Henderson, 2003, p. 337). In other words, these working class ethnic groups were still being exploited for the benefit of another group, only this time the mechanism was more so through ideological construction in schools nationwide. Additionally, this new identity allowed wealthy criollxs—once vehemently

tied to Spain—to hide their supremacy under a uniform Mexican identity; they as “rich Mexicans [still] oppressed the people” in the same ways as before, only now with a nationalized cultural basis to justify such power differentials (Joseph & Henderson, 2003, p. 368). Not only were they now distinct from the *conquistadores* as well as from the elites prior to the revolution, but they now also had constructed identities to symbolize that the Mexican people who were in a common, nationwide struggle had finally gained control.

Furthermore, the propagation of this Mexican identity by the state nationalized and institutionalized disdain for Black and indigenous communities, only worsening the discrimination they felt prior to the revolution. To “legitimize and sustain its rule,” the Mexican state “seized upon some of the supposed elements of ‘mexicanidad’” (Joseph & Henderson, 2003, p. 9). This asserted its power over two main types of marginalized ethnic communities: those that wanted to live autonomously in their own established enclaves and reject unity under the powerful grab of Mexico City’s politicians, and those that had already invested politically and economically in order to successfully integrate into the new government. However, because of the educational reforms that penetrated their pueblos, they had to succumb to the notion of their ancestry’s supposed flaws. For indigenous people, they were inherently associated with *La Malinche*, the “mistress of Cortés [who allegedly] gave herself voluntarily to the conquistador” (Paz, 2002, p. 25). Still “not forgiven” for her “betrayal” to the Mexican people, La Malinche is juxtaposed against *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, who provides “refuge for the unfortunate and consolation of the poor” (Paz, 2002, p. 24). While the former ties indigenous peoples to a past of savagery, disappointment, irrationality, and an overall sentiment of a cultural group that cannot identify its own best interests, the latter venerates mestizxs as her images comply with the

accepted Mexican identity which includes hybridization, Catholicism, and patriarchy, all of which La Virgen embodies.

Moreover, the SEP's national campaign to create one unified Mexican identity served another important purpose that was contrary to liberating Mexico's oppressed communities; the practice strengthened capitalism as the economic system of the state. "The Westernization of the Indian," which was accomplished through the creation and fabrication of the history of Mexico's indigenous civilizations, served as an extension of slavery (Bonfil Batalla, 1996, p. 66). Though outlawed, slavery was created in other forms to produce cheap labor, which indigenous communities could provide under harsh conditions for the mestizx elite. One component of popular Mexican pedagogy in the countryside was to implement curricula geared towards equipping these communities for the workforce. Historically understood as "laborious, patient, submissive, and lamentably ignorant," indigenous groups were seen as the logical choice for labor as elites simultaneously established industries (Joseph & Henderson, 2003, p. 13). Their perceived characteristics as well as the desire to assimilate them in modern Mexican culture, which included capitalism, only fueled the educational practices sponsored by the capital-oriented government. Highlighting certain behaviors and skills, indigenous people were funneled to work for businesses and landowners. This "moral and cultural elevation of workers" was specifically accomplished through "vocational training programs" that essentially limited the financial potential of the students (Vaughn & Lewis, 2006, p. 318). As a result, this power differential helped to maintain the status quo of indigenous people working in the fields and light skinned mestizxs serving as their superiors. In hindsight, Freire would state that liberation for these oppressed groups was unattainable because education served to create a workforce; there

was no “cognition, only transferals of information” in this school system, which “fail[ed] to respect the particular view of the world held by the marginalized people” (Freire, 1996, p. 24). These reforms were in essence instances of a “cultural invasion” that enslaved them further as opposed to providing a means of social mobility (Freire, 1996, p. 41).

Likewise, creating a uniform Mexican identity among the indigenous and Black groups of Mexico played a role in curtailing opposition from diverse ethnic communities across the country. By “fomenting the development of a national identity,” the government was able to “function in a modern capitalist society” and strengthen as a result of it because it unified its people under one nationality (Joseph & Henderson, 2003, p. 34). While there were competing interests in Mexico throughout the revolution, creating an image that would benefit one united country would convince marginalized groups that the policies were for the greater good. A main goal was to no longer a separate people as Yaqui, Mayan, Mestizx, or Spanish. Instead, they were all Mexicans, so they were equal in rhetoric and under the law, albeit not in practice.

In addition, to create this national sense of mexicanidad, the SEP issued school materials that effectively erased certain aspects of history from many of Mexico’s diverse ethnic groups. While Aztec and Mayan imagery was common in these sources, Tarasco, Yaqui, Huichol, Purépecha, and other indigenous cultures were absent (Joseph & Henderson, 2003, p. 17). Their histories, traditions, and cultures were not included in the popularized national identity, attributing to a significant decline in individuals who identify with these groups and speak these native languages. The little that was presented, however, was negative. As is the case with many minority student communities, “youth internalize negative messages about their own culture” and try to detach themselves from it, effectively carrying out Vasconcelos’s plans (Kohli, 2008,

p. 186). Also, by not learning about these groups, the students of the mestizx majority received a limited, inauthentic view of Mexican indigeneity (Joseph & Henderson, 2003, p. 17). They were taught to identify with pre-Columbian Aztec traditions that were romanticized and fabricated by the SEP.

Another clear example of racial erasure involves Mexico's vast Afromexicanx population. Home to over 1.4 million Black citizens, Mexico's history is rich with African heritage and influence. In fact, in Mexico City, Black citizens made up roughly one fourth of the population, before the city expanded to its current size. According to Cunin & Hoffman (2014), most Mexicans are unaware of their Black compatriots, with many believing that they disappeared as a result of mestizaje (p. 81). Recently recognized by the Mexican government's census, Black Mexicans have historically been invisible in the country after slavery (Varagur, 2016). In general, their absence from the Mexican census indicates that this oppressed group was not acknowledged by the government and consequently not given special resources for its community. Not having this culturally responsive pedagogy in their schools or these culturally specific support systems perpetuated their absence in popular mexicanidad as well as an overrepresentation in poverty.

Moreover, compared to poor mestizxs, poor Blacks experienced even more systemic racism because the unspoken caste system placed them near the bottom of the racial social hierarchy. Though highly unlikely, social mobility for poor mestizxs was still possible, and among such examples is Yolanda Vargas Dulché (Sue, 2013, p. 153). The daughter of poor mestizxs, Vargas Dulché rose to fame when she first published *Memín Pinguín*, one of Mexico's first comic books. While ethnic studies proponents urge that students of color have the

opportunity to learn about historical figures and characters that resemble them to boost self-esteem, *Memín Pinguín* had the exact opposite effect. A mockery of Black features, Memín was made to look like a primitive monkey (Sue, 2013, p. 155). He was presented as “imprudent and funny, impetuous and smug,” as well as “lazy, ignorant, naïve, nosy, selfish.” He also displayed “big overdrawn lips, animalistic features” and “internalized racism when he complain[ed] about his skin color” (Barragan, 2016). Though already very popular, *Memín Pinguín* gained even more fame when the comic books were deemed required reading material in public schools by the SEP because the series allegedly “promote[d] respect and family and institutions in students” (González, 1999). By popularizing this minstrel character of Afromexicanxs, the SEP reinforced the absence of Blackness in mexicanidad. The masses who read this comic were taught to look down on Black Mexicans and Black people in general, exacerbating the systemic racism against them even more. Rather than include Black Mexican historical figures such as Vicente Guerrero, the second president of Mexico, and Gaspar Yanga, a former slave who helped liberate many other slaves, the SEP chose to focus on a negative portrayal of this racial group. This anti-Black rhetoric in effect contributes to the daily discrimination, including fewer job opportunities and racist monkey noises, that Afromexicanxs face all throughout the country (Bailey, 2017).

Regarding erasure, the movement by the SEP to construct a new Mexican national identity has had strong economic repercussions in the country. Tracing everyone to a common Aztec heritage, companies have propagated this already appropriated imagery to make better sales. Banco Azteca and the Estadio Azteca, for example, market this identity and use imagery created by the SEP to gain more customers because their masses can relate to them. In addition, among indigenous people who still live in poverty but seek to enter a market that is not made for

their participation, many have resorted to appeal to the mestizx gaze. In other words, because the mestizx majority and non-Mexican tourists have a distinct image of indigeneity including dream catchers and other forms of *artesanía*, many indigenous people have begun to assume these appropriated and fictitious traditions in order to sell their products. Similar to the dynamic that Native Hawaiians undergo with selling leis, straw outfits, and pineapple hamburgers, many Mexican indigenous groups have resorted to selling traditional garments that they do not wear themselves and traditional foods that have been adapted to a different palate. For Afromexicans, their invisibility in the mainstream limits their ability to sell any traditional products; the masses are unaware of their cultural traditions and, as such, they are not marketable, especially when they are viewed so negatively. Ultimately, the Mexican identity that the SEP popularized not only erased the histories of many ethnic groups, it changed the traditions of contemporary communities for capitalist purposes.

Aside from race, the SEP constructed and reinforced national perceptions of gender as well. Usually confined by society to the cult of domesticity, the “new revolutionary state envisioned a more passive role for women” (Joseph & Henderson, 2003, p. 301). Women were supposed to “be mothers who belonged mainly in the private sphere.” The state “aspired to transform traditional gender roles through civil and labor reforms” so as to not “upset patriarchy” (p. 301). The SEP continued this trend to “control women in both private and public spheres in the interest of national development” by introducing lessons in schools that reinforced these gender dynamics. Young girls were taught basic home skills such as cooking, sewing, and general housework. Internalizing this, women had “few professional options in that period” (p. 305). Whereas men could become politicians and business owners in an increasingly formal

capitalist economy, women were limited to the teaching profession if they wanted a career outside of the home (p. 305). In general, there were very few opportunities for women to enter the capitalist system, restricting their own social mobility as well (MacLachlan & Rodriguez, 1980, p. 237). Matters became even more difficult for indigenous and Black women, who were not only subject to the sexist ideals of capitalism but also to the racist ideologies that were pervasive in society at the time.

Adding on to the gender dynamic, women who were barred from the capitalist society but sought to find opportunities outside of the home often had to resort to illegal activities. All throughout Latin America, sex work was a common industry among highly mobile populations (Laite, 2009, 749). Because many men migrated to other parts of Mexico or to the US-Mexico borderlands in search of new jobs, a growing demand for sex work soon followed. Unable to mine, farm, or build in these areas where migrants settled on a seasonal basis because of gender discrimination, women often resorted to selling their bodies to make a living (Laite, 2009, p. 742). Though states and local governments would pass policies to make it illegal, sex work flourished because of limited law enforcement and a constant demand. For many women this was an act of resistance; they could not participate in the male-dominated economy through legal means and as such resorted to illicit measures. While some women went on to own their own brothels, most were subjected to sexual violence, abuse, and disease (MacLachlan & Rodriguez, 1980, p. 247). Overall, the SEP's focus on domestic work for women and young girls limited their economic opportunities and even fostered adverse health risks.

Similarly, the discussion of gender roles in public education painted women as submissive beings who would adhere to the word of their male partners (Joseph & Henderson,

2003, p. 301). Seemingly meek, pure, and obedient like the Virgin Mary, women across Mexico were expected to conform to restrictive expectations (Vaughn & Lewis, 2006, p. 204).

Juxtaposed against the teachings about men in schools, which painted them as rough, strong leaders, women were put at greater risks for domestic abuse. As the rates of alcoholism increased among Mexican men, the amount of physical and verbal abuse and neglect towards women and children increased, prompting the state to engage in campaigns to curtail this home-based violence (Vaughn & Lewis, 2006, p. 205). In any case, though inadvertent, reinforcing gender roles played a large role in sexist policies and practices. Barred from different professional positions, women also had concerns about life within the home. Discussions of consent and respect were noticeably absent in the Mexican education curriculum, and likewise repercussions against men who committed these acts were often too little, too late.

On the other hand, while Vasconcelos's efforts in many ways strengthened the status quo of racism and classism, the education reform of Lázaro Cárdenas did provide benefits to various marginalized groups. Of Tarasco origin, Cárdenas sought to address the achievement gap with respect to how it manifested as a marginalization of indigenous communities (Corse, 2016). Expanding social education by building more schools in the countryside, mandating that courses be taught in indigenous languages, and by "encouraging the study of Indian culture" through a new indigenous-focused curriculum as defined by the local communities, Cárdenas fostered the transition from promoting one national identity to encouraging diversity (Corse, 2016). In other words, Cárdenas signaled a change from educating the "Indian Problem" to truly using education as a tool for social mobility. In conjunction with his pro-Indigenous education policies, Cárdenas also created the *Departamento de Asuntos Indígenas* and the *Instituto Nacional de Antropología*

*de México*, among others, to promote cultural education programs about contemporary indigenous group and preserve their rich traditions (Corse, 2016).

Additionally, as women's groups in Mexico City and all throughout the nation mobilized for suffrage and more job opportunities, Cárdenas enacted other education reforms to specifically address the gender gap. In partnership with the United Front for Women's Rights, the Cárdenas administration opened up vocational education centers designed to teach women skills needed for manufacturing, agriculture, and other growing professions (Corse, 2016). As a result, more women were able to enter the workforce and become less dependent on their male counterparts. These centers also actively recruited indigenous women in order to bring them into the movement; among the most oppressed groups in Mexico, indigenous women were historically barred from most opportunities afforded to wealthy, light-skinned mestizx males, so this decision would significantly change that gender and racial dynamic in theory.

Moreover, coupled with his agrarian reform efforts, Cárdenas's education reform largely supported the rural masses. As the *ejido* sector grew, so did public school infrastructures in the countryside (Corse, 2016). Peasants suddenly had more options outside of Catholic schools, and the overall education became more secular. These reforms even included reproductive health programs in public schools, something that many public schools in the United States still do not have to this day. Overall, because the quality of education improved, literacy rates drastically improved nationwide during this period (Corse, 2016).

Although it is apparent that many of his own reforms yielded positive results, they did not last long. Towards the end of his presidency, Cárdenas slowed down with his social justice policies. At the same time, middlemen between the government and the people emerged and

inhibited the effectiveness of the ejidos, so local economies struggled. Also, Cárdenas's policies were not popular among his PRI colleagues, and subsequent presidents eventually dismantled his agrarian and education reform efforts. Education reform was promising for a while, but in the end previous trends from before the revolution and from Vasconcelos's initial leadership resurfaced.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, the SEP distributed many affordable, mass produced textbooks across the country in an effort to standardize nationwide curricula and educate students about Mexican identity and history. As seen with *Memín Pinguín*, these school materials distributed warped understandings of various Mexican demographics. In the fourth grade standards, for example, the topic of slavery is only given one paragraph in the entire textbook (Sue, 2013, p. 116). Slavery is said to have been a trend among all American nations, effectively justifying the institution's tyranny in Mexico while absolving the nation "via comparison to the United States" because of its abolishment over five decades earlier (p. 117). While this textbook does address this inhumane practice, unlike most grade level materials that do not require its discussion according to the standards, the abolishment of slavery is attributed to a false sense of progress; in reality, the institution failed for economic reasons instead of moral ones (p. 117). These same sentiments, which tie Mexican Blackness only to slavery and, in effect, to the past (Cunin & Hoffman, 2014, p. 86), reinforce notions that "'Black' and 'Mexican' are mutually exclusive," despite the fact that millions of Black Mexicans call the nation home today (Sue, 2013, p. 114).

According to the nation's nationalistic school standards, all students are required to learn about common figures such as Zapata, José María Morelos, Vicente Guerrero, Benito Juárez, the

Niños Héroes, and Venustiano Carranza, among others. While some figures are of indigenous and/or Black heritage, such as Zapata, Morelos, and Guerrero—the first Black and indigenous president of the Americas according to Rivera (2016)—are featured, notably absent from these figures are women and people of color. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Gaspar Yanga are visible in textbooks and in national symbols on a minimal basis compared to this group of men and, as such, their erasure from these materials limits the diversity that was present in the revolution, the founding of the nation, and even the presidency. A eurocentric and androcentric point of view in these standards and materials prioritizes light-skinned men like Vasconcelos over other key contributors to Mexico’s rich history, effectively ensuring that white mestizx male identities remain the focus of discussions of national identity.

One of the key effects that these school standards have perpetuated is the idea that Mexicans must *mejorar la raza*, or improve the race. As children learn about historical figures whose racial backgrounds have been erased, they conceptualize that many important Mexicans were white or light-skinned mestizxs. The figures on television and in children’s books, as well as old paintings of La Virgen or various Mexican presidents, which often have lighter skin than reality, only reinforce such beliefs. With this in mind, phrases like this one, according to Navarrete (2017), mean that the end goal is to whiten the population. Rich with indigenous and African heritage, Mexican identity still values and prioritizes whiteness (Navarrete, 2017). Many Mexicans celebrate the country’s rich indigenous past, but many of those same people also try to distance themselves from the phenotypical and social characteristics that these cultures possess. As schools continue to perpetuate these ideas, mexicanidad will continue to inch closer, at least theoretically, towards whiteness. Essentially, *la raza cósmica* relies heavily on “national identity

on one hand and Indian identities on the other”; mestizaje enables the country to unite under one national identity while simultaneously legitimizing itself with indigenous cultures of the past (Conin & Hoffman, 2014, p. 86). Adding to the nuance, this celebration still centers Spanish and European features, figures, and histories, which are still valued in the present.

Likewise, a common mantra among many Mexican citizens is that racism is absent in the country (Sue, 2013, p. 156). Because the concept of the “raza” seemingly homogenizes the population, issues of poverty, crime, segregation, and other factors are often not correlated with racial backgrounds. Additionally, given that Mexico does not have the same legacy of racist laws, such as Jim Crow, as the United States, racism as an institution often goes unacknowledged (p. 157). The same conversations about race and identity politics that happen in the United States do not happen in Mexico as a result of an unwillingness to acknowledge a very real problem of race that is hidden under conceptions of national identity (Navarrete, 2017). Until schools diversify their curricula—through ethnic studies programs, for example—and openly discuss the nuances of race and ethnicity, racism will continue to hide in plain sight as it permeates everyday life.

Contemporary economic trends indicate that after all of this education reform, Mexico’s indigenous and Black populations continue to be in the lowest income bracket, and sexism is still rampant in various systems. Because unemployment is high for so many communities across the country, particularly for the aforementioned groups, migration towards the United States has grown, especially after the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA. Ultimately, education did not solve the achievement and opportunity in Mexico. Instead, it merely recycled racist ideologies and diminished many indigenous cultures to fabricate a

romanticized Mexican national identity. In doing so, Mexico set it self up for neoliberal policies to develop its capitalist society that was still dependent on foreign powers, namely the United States.

Now, with the Mexican senate's recent passing of education reforms to promote stricter teacher evaluation criteria, standardized tests, and other market oriented methods similar to the charter and voucher movements in the United States, what is the likelihood that education will actually close the achievement gap? As world leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Michelle Obama regularly call education a powerful tool for major social change, how is it that Mexico has consistently under-produced despite significant investment? Ultimately, Freire may have the answer: "If the structure does not permit dialogue, the structure must be changed" (Freire, 1996, p. 89). Essentially, while Cárdenas may have had good intentions, and while Vasconcelos might not have been as manipulative as described, they and their actions do not account for the lack of progress. Ultimately, the educational institutions themselves are flawed, and mere reform is not enough. The whole system needs to be transformed because the way it stands now "the oppressors," or those who have historically been in power, "do not favor promoting the community as a whole, but rather selected leaders," so reforms will not do nearly enough to support the masses and achieve full equality (Freire, 1996, p. 117).

## Chapter 5

### Ni Soy de Allá

#### *Manifesting an Exclusive “American” Identity in K-12 Institutions*

Traveling westward, she illuminates the dark plains and guides the settlers to seemingly undiscovered land. As indigenous peoples and animals retreat, pioneers and patriots continue the long journey with faith that prosperity and freedom will arise through expansion. Destined to reach the west coast, her arm holds what appears to be the true path to progress for all those on the land: a book marred with the word “education.” With her clear white skin and her long blonde hair, this supposed bearer of knowledge in John Gast’s 1872 painting “American Progress” illustrates a turning point for “American” identity. Once dark Brown and rich with thousands of cultures and traditions, the new American begins to resemble her and her followers. For those that resist but survive such drastic and genocidal changes, the remedy for their defiance is simple: an education.

As Betsy DeVos, the forty-fifth president’s selection for the position of Secretary of Education, discusses her plans to expand school choice and further privatize the education system through charter networks and voucher programs, deliberations over how to address social disparities among different communities continue. An age-old dilemma, schools are often touted as the solution to achieve equity for all residents of the United States, henceforth referred to as “US Americans.” However, in order to understand how DeVos was able to assume her position in the first place, and even more pressing, how those inequalities in schooling and in other fields came to be—especially for communities of color—one must first examine the purposes that educational institutions in the country have historically served. What roles did schools play in different eras of the nation’s history, and what long-term effects arose from those intentions?

Likewise, various immigration waves asserted and, conversely, challenged notions of American identity. As settler colonists, European immigrants in the sixteenth century and beyond brought with them old world values of race, religion, education, and economics, all of which laid the foundation for a growing society. At the same time, these colonizers decimated and displaced indigenous tribes who called this region home for tens of thousands of years, egregiously devaluing their traditions and customs. Simultaneously, settlers forcibly brought with them 12 million imprisoned Africans—roughly 400,000 to the United States—delegitimizing their own cultures and beliefs and ascribing onto them a lesser racial value (Velázquez, 2011, p. 38). Regarding more recent trends, Eastern European migration through Ellis Island and Asian migration through Angel Island, with the latter severely restricted through legal means, significantly shifted demographics in the early twentieth century. These waves, along with influxes from Latin America and Africa shortly after, brought into question ideas of national identity for white US Americans. In contrast, US Americans of color were left with navigating their respective cultures within a Eurocentric homeland.

Generally speaking, school systems in the United States hold a dark legacy of restrictions against communities of color. Having barred slaves and freed Black people from an education for the first few hundred years of the nation's founding and then forcefully removing Native American children from their homes to attend boarding schools, the United States education system maintained oppressive stances towards these groups for generations. Even after these practices were deemed unethical, segregation of schools and disparities related to resource allocation for institutions serving communities of color persisted. Now, decades removed from the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, it is apparent that a significant achievement gap exists among students of color when compared to white students (Noguera et al., 2016, p.

17). Less likely to have qualified teachers, adequate school supplies, and higher standardized test scores, students of color typically fall behind their white counterparts in financial, educational, and professional terms (p. 17). While some may point to deficit-based approaches to assert that communities of color are less capable of academic success, a sentiment that helped elect the current commander-in-chief, others seek to reevaluate the educational institutions themselves as the causes for these discrepancies. Rather than close the achievement gap, how do schools perpetuate it?

In the previous chapter, a historical account of Mexico's *Secretaría de Educación Pública*, led by José Vasconcelos, illustrated that the purpose of the country's educational institutions was to create an exclusive image of *mexicanidad*. In a similar fashion, the education system of the United States, as seen through its historical legacy in conjunction with oppressive immigration policies, has existed primarily to produce a skewed image of what it means to be a US American. Founded on principles of white supremacy, the US education system has centered whiteness as the accepted image of the United States of America by fostering favorable conditions for white students at the expense of students of color. Hundreds of years after it was established, the US education system exists not to close the achievement gap but to perpetuate it, thus disadvantaging US Americans who do not fit the accepted mold in a variety of different social components.

Prior to discussing the ways in which repressive immigration policies fashioned a specific image of the quintessential US American or how the role of education in the United States solidified that limited scope, it is important to acknowledge the shameful history associated with the nation's founding. With the "well-known arrival of [the] conquistadores" to the Americas

from “the Iberian empires” (Foote & Goebel, 2014, p. 3) came centuries of oppression, genocide, and white supremacy in a variety of forms.

One of the most notable examples of colonization concerns the original inhabitants of the land; Native Americans of thousands of different cultures were almost completely exterminated as a result of the “diseases, dislocation, and starvation” and other state-sanctioned policies that came with the conquest (Madley, 2016). This annihilation, which the United Nations Genocide Convention of 1948 deemed a mass genocide, reflected the United States government’s “intent to destroy, in whole or in part,” a community based on racial and ethnic grounds (Madley, 2016). As land was forcefully taken and millions of lives—along with their traditions and languages—were lost, the United States was fashioning an ideal identity for its newly forming colonies and nation. Deemed inferior for their appearances and customs, Native Americans did not fit the accepted mold that the government was trying to create. As General Phillip Sheridan famously said: “The only real good Indian is a dead Indian” (Mieder, 1993, p. 38). Representing the United States, his sentiments reflected the exact intentions of Natives towards these peoples; not only would their deaths result in more land for the United States, but it would also ensure that “US American” would mean those whose heritage originates from Europe.

Long after rampant displacement, United States officials pondered existing peace policies with sovereign nations while formalizing an education system during the postbellum era. Building day schools on reservations via the Office of Indian Affairs, government officials suddenly shifted their approaches, unsurprisingly not “concern[ing] themselves with the views of the Indian people” or acting “in the best interest of Native children” (Trafzer, Keller, & Sisquoc, 2006, p. 12). Edward P. Smith, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, advocated for boarding schools over day schools to assimilate and “civiliz[e]” Native American children (p. 12). Expanding on

his proposal, Richard Henry Pratt—who infamously proclaimed a need to “kill the Indian [but] save the man”—established the first boarding school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania (Pratt, 1892). Alluding to Sheridan in his speech, Pratt’s rationale for founding this institution was to “destroy what he termed ‘savage languages,’ ‘primitive superstitions,’ and ‘uncivilized cultures,’ replacing them with work ethics, Christian values, and the white man’s civilization” (Trafzer, Keller, & Sisquoc, 2006, p. 13).

While some boarding schools were constructed on reservations, Pratt asserted that Native American children should be “isolated from their families, cultures, and languages” to allow “white teachers [to] indoctrinate them into nineteenth century American society” (Trafzer, Keller, & Sisquoc, 2006, p. 14). Teaching trade, farming techniques, and religion, Carlisle and subsequent boarding schools across the United States and Canada introduced Native Americans to “Christianity and the value of the dollar,” upending thousands of years of faith with a capitalist economy (p. 14). Outspoken about his methods to eradicate a perceived “Indian problem,” Pratt successfully encouraged officials at other schools—including ones on reservations—to adopt his approach in order to “mak[e] Indians useful” (p. 16).

Essentially, early educational institutions for Native Americans served one specific purpose: to remove indigenous heritage and customs from their identity and conform them into an accepted US American image, albeit still subjugated compared to their white peers. To implement such a brutal mission, instructors forcefully “anglicized” student names (Trafzer, Keller, & Sisquoc, 2006, p. 73). Similarly, gendered hairstyles and dress codes were fiercely enforced, preventing children from expressing and learning any sort of appearance-based cultural pride. Likewise, boarding school students were required to speak English; any resistance by speaking their native tongue resulted in demerits which included beatings or public forms of

humiliation (p. 81). Coupling all of these factors with mandatory courses focused on eurocentric history, compulsory attendance at church services, and obligatory participation in strenuous and unpaid labor, and it was no surprise that many traditional customs disappeared within a generation.

Rather than empower individuals to pursue more economic opportunities, educational institutions yielded the opposite results for Native Americans. Causing anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues among boarding school students, this system bred intergenerational trauma (Evans-Campbell et al., 2017, p. 425). Correlated with high rates of substance abuse, boarding school attendance doomed students and their families as these induced stressors prohibited social mobility in a hegemonic, westernized society. In other words, not only did the education system strip many indigenous peoples of their heritage, but it also limited their ability to find work and accumulate wealth. Instead, it led to exorbitant rates of suicide, incarceration, health disparities, and poverty that would last for generations.

Similarly, another atrocity of equal magnitude involves the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, an institution that enabled the United States to become the superpower that it is today. Forcibly removing Africans from their homeland and detaining and transporting them through egregious means, European settlers in the Americas brought to the region a race deemed inherently inferior. Settlers commodified slavery by importing African peoples in large numbers, dispersing them among plantations and industries across Europe and the Americas and resulting in immense wealth. Exploiting labor and land, “the business of the slave trade became increasingly regularized as colonial powers depended on a steady supply of Africans,” (Rodriguez, 2007, p. 80). Essentially, a free labor force comprised of a racial group that was not allowed to own wealth, retain cultural attributes, attend school, or have any sort of autonomy and freedom built

the foundation of the country and fostered the continued growth of existing institutions, though with no benefit for themselves.

Although the term “migration” would dangerously mischaracterize the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, Blacks, both freed and enslaved, were seen as foreigners. Before being brought to the United States, captured Africans were removed from family members and fellow tribesmen, stripping ties to their culture and preventing the formation of certain connections as a result of language barriers. Upon arrival to the settler-colony, more genocidal practices fostered the disappearance of thousands of customs and histories, leaving slaves and their descendants with only the English language and as well as an internalized justification for their enslavement (Barnet, 1994, p. 22). Unlike European migrant laborers of the Antebellum, Africans were not afforded the same freedom through cultural acts of resistance. Instead, they had to construct their own cultural identity within the confines of the few surviving African traditions and Eurocentric customs forced upon them. For Black women in particular, their family structures were constantly interrupted by slave auctions, rape, and other egregious acts. Motherhood was regularly the product of assault, and rearing one’s own children was rarely an option as they were often sold, preventing story telling and legacy building within the same familial line. Similarly, domestic work held a different meaning, compared with female European immigrants, as Black women had to serve someone else’s family, raise someone else’s children, and endure the lashes from someone else’s hand.

While enslaved, Black children were barred from attaining an education. Unable to attend schools, learn how to read or write, or engage in any academic activities like their white counterparts, slaves and their subsequent generations were not given the opportunity to adapt to the demands for social mobility in a growing nation (Williams, 2014, p. 5). Beaten and abused

for so little as attempting to read, Black Americans interested in learning had to do so discreetly (p. 7). Hoping to understand the Bible, learn about abolition movements, or read about the news, slaves interested in education had a yearning for knowledge like their peers, but were unable to receive one for hundreds of years, signaling an educational gap that grew out of centuries of systemic oppression that still persists today.

After the emancipation proclamation and the end of the civil war, with slavery gradually outlawed, the legacy of vicious legal practices and rampant racism persisted. Many Black Americans were incarcerated and doomed to continue as enslaved people, while others who sought an education or work were still unable to do so as the wealth they generated was not theirs, and none of the institutions were created specifically for them. As such, social mobility often required a distancing from Blackness. Just as Native Americans were stripped of their heritage and separated from their cultural traditions, Black Americans underwent the same system, leading to a difficult dilemma regarding identity politics. Among such cases involves labor activist Lucy González Parsons. Tasked with reconstructing labor dynamics along with her peers, she may have also had the unfairly necessary duty to reconstruct her own identity to fit a mold that still subjugated her as a Black woman, even among fellow anarchists. Though her racial and ethnic heritage is still debated, what is known is that as an act of survival, she had to deny her Black heritage, stating that her “ancestors are indigenous to the soil of America” (González Parsons, 1888). Ostensibly highlighting her Native and Mexican heritage, which is in question, González Parsons had to conceal her Blackness to gain credibility among the left, which had its own discriminatory issues. Ideologies that perpetuated slavery were still rampant all throughout the United States, indicating that her life as a Black woman was still given a lesser value compared to communities of virtually any other demographic in the healing nation.

Conversely, while González Parsons concealed her identity out of a necessity for advancement, other Black women took a different approach and celebrated their Black womanhood in order to move ahead. In 1887, with the first graduating class of Spelman College, various Black women embraced their identities as a means of empowerment. These women stressed the importance of creating their own spaces to their own foster socioeconomic success. An educational institution designed specifically for the social mobility of Black women, Spelman College's mission was meant to add new value to Black womanhood. Originally deemed a detriment, this demographic, too, had many assets, including resilience and unity. Taught by former slaves, these students presented themselves as reputable and scholarly, as demonstrated by their dresses and poise. Expressing their sense of dignity in a historically hostile world, these women affirmed themselves as Black women, but still towed the lines of respectability politics. Ultimately, the period of Reconstruction, including its limited labor opportunities, forced Black women to evaluate their own identities as a means of survival, leading them to either deny their backgrounds or assert within certain constraints.

As previously stated, Black Americans made significant contributions—though through inhumane practices—to the growth of the nation and its economy. With many “traditional markers of racial identity” erased, Black Americans in the antebellum were being detached from their original purposes in the country, which was to produce labor and wealth for white US Americans (Lawrie, 2016, p. 17). Relegated to the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, Black Americans were thus left in a precarious dilemma, one that was well defined by the philosophical divisions of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. duBois. An advocate for gradual change, Washington voiced a need for “accommodation,” calling for Blacks to accept discrimination in order to eventually win over the sentiments of whites (West, 2006, p. 26). To him, educational

institutions in Black spaces should teach practical skills in industry, agriculture, and other occupation-related areas. In contrast, W.E.B. duBois called against this approach to respectability politics; instead, he wanted whites to recognize their “unconscious prejudice and half-conscious actions” that perpetuate racism (duBois, 1996, p. 397). Proclaiming that a talented tenth of college-educated Black folks would help Blacks achieve parity, W.E.B. duBois saw education as a means of protest that would lead to social change.

Regardless of their function, however, schools were largely plagued by various outside factors, namely segregation. Adding to the terror of Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan, one of which was systemic racism at its core while the other was a militant approach to sustaining and worsening such discrimination, access to a quality education for Black Americans was largely hindered. Black students were more likely to attend underfunded schools, and in most cases, they were legally barred from receiving an education with white students. Challenged in the supreme court, school segregation was upheld in 1896 through *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which “legalized segregation of the races in all public facilities” through a “separate but equal” doctrine (Anderson & Byrne, 2004, p. 100). This decision forced Black Americans to “create and maintain their own communities of service and activity, including their own educational facilities”; given that they were severely under-resourced, Black schools could not achieve the same scores and rigor as white schools (p. 100). Overall, when discussing the American education system, schools were built without Black children in mind. Barred from schools for hundreds of years and then prevented from receiving a quality education for even more time, Black Americans were never the focus of this system; instead, education enabled whites to continue widening the opportunity gap.

Simultaneously, influxes of Eastern European migrants seeking work in the United States led to the country experiencing “the difficult task of industrializing whole cultures” in a manner that asserted values through acts of assimilation (Gutman, 1977, p. 540). Enforcing a “Protestant Work Ethic,” employers discouraged immigrants from retaining certain attributes of their own heritage (p. 543). Often prohibited from speaking their own languages or from embracing customs from the motherland, migrant communities demonstrated resistance through cultural and behavioral practices, including through mutual aid societies or by celebrating holidays. Women in these groups often negotiated gendered roles from the homeland and the new world; with some modifications, their roles as mothers and domestic workers would resume.

Prior to World War I, plenty of laws were enacted to attract immigrants from Western and Northern Europe. To do so, the United States ratified exclusion laws as well as Immigration Acts at the turn of the century. With a growing labor demand, officials reached out to these particular regions to attract seemingly intelligent and able-bodied people (Wong, 2016, p. 55). While many immigrants from other regions outside of Western and Northern Europe still made their way to the United States, their access was heavily limited through the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Scott Act. The Immigration Acts of 1917, 1921, and 1924, for example, all specifically limited immigration from all other regions while allowing generous numbers from desired regions to populate the country further (p. 54). Policy makers wrote these acts to specifically maintain a small percentage of people of color, with Europeans from barred regions being included in that percentage. Essentially, United States immigration policy makers were not only interested in making the country white; they were concerned with making it a certain kind of white. According to Castles, de Haas & Miller (2014), a large component of nation building among “settler societies” involved this blatant act of selecting migrants from certain countries

over others (p. 60). In other words, immigration laws were written to give preference to groups from highly-regarded ethnicities in order to shape US American identity, essentially limiting any sort of influence from migrants from countries that did not fit that selective, racist mold.

Among those Eastern European migrants who were successful in settling in the United States during the early twentieth century, various efforts to assimilate them into a growing US American society took place upon arrival. Most notably was the emergence of educational institutions' intent on teaching migrants and their children the English language as well as other accepted customs. Often labeled "Americanization Schools," these institutions charged migrants money in order to assist them, or force them through coercive means, how to fit a tolerable mold, discouraging Yiddish, Italian, and other languages as well as other old world traditions.

One such school was the Granite City Americanization Schools system, which was popular in the 1920s. Within its advertisements was included a strong focus on assimilation is evident in a variety of forms. For one, this advertisement stated that "everybody who comes to America from the old country ought to learn the American language and become an American citizen" (National Immigration Museum, "Granite City Americanization Schools," 2018). Further stating that those who "come to America [yet] do not become Americans" will cause this country to "be like the old country," the advertisement ultimately gives preference to US customs and practically vilifies those that do not fall within the accepted imagery. Most notably within this ad is the phrase "Keep America Great" in the bottom left corner, a phrase eerily similar to the current rhetoric, which was disseminated nearly one hundred years later. This claim, as well as the contemporary phrase "Make America Great Again," itself uncreatively adapted from recent presidential campaigns, exemplifies a notion of American exceptionalism.

The country itself was deemed “great,” but any sort of cultural attributes that could derail such greatness was to be heavily discouraged.

For Asian migrants and their descendants, similar harmful dynamics occurred that prevented their arrival to the United States as well as their participation in state institutions, including public schools. According to McKeown (1999), for example, Chinese migrants were legally barred from entering the country through various exclusion acts, including the first one in 1882 (p. 73). Initially targeting Chinese laborers and originally meant to be a temporary legislation, the law was renewed and enforced until 1943, when it was repealed. By this time, however, other laws were put into place to prevent migrants from bringing their spouses and children, essentially breaking up families and keeping them separated (p. 74).

Historically, many immigrant communities have formed ethnic enclaves in an effort to preserve culture and provide a support system, particularly in areas that deny them basic services (Dragojevic, 2014, p. 28). This scenario, which has been observed in many migration waves in the United States, as described by Mendieta (2012), provides an opportunity for better transitions into the destination regions. However, specific mechanisms have been enacted to disrupt these support systems for Asians and Asian Americans. Lee (2007) described how the idea of the “Yellow Peril” invigorated anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiments in the Americas (p. 546). These xenophobic ideas fueled anger and hatred towards Asian immigrants, often inciting violence and threatening their well-being. Though many sought refuge in ethnic enclaves, violence against these individuals was commonplace. As a result, across the United States, Rouse (2010) describes how social pressures led many children of immigrants and early arrivals to often reject traditional garments for attire that resembled that of host population. While many did eventually embrace their cultural heritage, these youth often had to experience a process that

included discrimination, cognitive dissonance, and self-perceived othering before reaching that point.

Adding to the concept of the “yellow peril,” various anti-Asian parades were staged across the country to spread terror and voice opposition to Asian migrants. Aside from the mass lynching of Chinese Americans in Los Angeles, CA, another significant event took place in Bellingham, WA, where in 1907 “a mob of 150 white men attacked” many South Asians, driving most out of town (Lee, 2007, p. 551). 10,000 more xenophobic protestors showed up a few days later to continue the riots and loot Chinese-occupied businesses and buildings. Unfortunately, these riots were not restricted to the west coast, as anti-Asian riots emerged all throughout the country (p. 552).

Moreover, these sentiments eventually reached school institutions. In San Francisco, for example, many Chinese and Japanese families settled into the region and made it home. However, in 1885, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed a resolution to bar Asians from attending schools with white students. To “defend” white students from “Mongolian barbarism” the school board excluded the first few generations of Asian Americans who were US citizens by birth (Anderson & Byrne, 2004, p. 109).

Shortly after, in the landmark *Tape v. Hurley* case, in which the Tape family sued the school district because all children residing in the district were legally allowed to receive an education, the plaintiffs won. Denying Asian children an education, especially those who were US citizens, was unconstitutional. As such, separate schools were created for “oriental” students (p. 112), meaning that Asian Americans were eventually provided schooling opportunities but only under the pretense that they would be in separate facilities, a precursor to *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

Rejected from quality schools and continuously exposed to anti-Asian rhetoric, racism eventually permeated Asian American communities. In other words, tensions among different Asian ethnic groups arose, creating a toxic “racial hierarchy” (Azuma, 1998, p. 165). For example, during the first half of the twentieth century, turmoil between Filipinos and Japanese was rampant, with latter having more financial power and claiming that the former posed a new “racial peril,” recycling terms that were used against them (p. 171). With neither fitting the mold of a quintessential US American, ethnic minorities were thus required to forge their identities to become as close to the archetype as possible, denigrating other groups in the process. Knowing full well that their ethnic and racial backgrounds disqualified them from achieving great opportunities on account of being white, ethnic communities were forced to minimize their oppressions as much as possible.

Moreover, these sentiments continued among different racial groups. For example, Allen (2014) explains how the Chinese were viewed as “industrious and productive people,” eventually giving them a preferential status over their African counterparts (p. 333). Though indirect, this idea alludes to the model minority myth, an idea that still subjugates Asian Americans but also places them on higher ground compared to other communities of color. It seemed as though that Chinese workers in California and in other parts of the country had a value to industry owners that was above the value of African workers and slaves. As such, they were often placed together so that Africans could supposedly develop their morals (p. 334). Foreshadowing much of the anti-Blackness among all sorts of immigrant communities in years to come, wealthy white laborers and policymakers not only decided who was allowed to be considered a US American, but their actions also left groups vying for a sort of secondary position, one which inherently belittled other people of color.

When looking at a contemporary lens, these demographics continue to face a growing impediment in their educational prospects. A self-proclaimed advocate for school choice, DeVos supports the privatization and charterization of public schools in the United States. In areas like Los Angeles, the District of Columbia, and New Orleans, where the charter school network has grown significantly, students of color are most affected by these structural changes. In the case of Los Angeles, LAUSD—the nation’s second largest school district—serves roughly half a million students, but its numbers have been declining. At this moment, charter schools are becoming more abundant, and a looming possibility of a donation of hundreds of millions of dollars from well-known philanthropist Eli Broad could potentially shift the makeup of the region’s school system.

In general, charter schools are “privately managed and mostly non-union,” and the city of Los Angeles “has more charters than any other school system” (Blume & Grad, 2017). Not bound by the same traditional oversight as public schools, charter schools use competition through test scores and other measurements to bolster student growth. They also have the advantage of using various marketing strategies, such as “slick movies like *Waiting for Superman*,” which ultimately “present charter schools as the panacea that can save poor children from the nation’s moribund charter schools” (Noguera, 2016). They also typically proliferate during and after moments of crisis, such as in the years after Hurricane Katrina, when charter schools nearly took over the entire infrastructure of education in New Orleans. This move in a city “with its high population of Black students” soon became a “site of contention for Black education nationwide,” with Black children serving unwillingly as subjects in a test on the effectiveness of these school models (Polier, 2016, p. 135). Essentially, these business-focused schools in many ways treat their students like large corporations treat laborers. Their personal

well-being eventually becomes secondary to the growth of the industry, or in this case, the charter network. When the majority of the students in question are students of color, the implications on race become troublesome, as the testing ground for these tactics disproportionality affects them.

One significant reason for DeVos's support for these schools is her belief that "school choice can lower absenteeism and dropout rates" (Vogell, 2017). A "champion" for charters and for-profit schools, DeVos encourages the privatization of schools, calling into question her position as the Secretary of Education, which primarily focuses on K-16 public schools. Noam Chomsky, among other influential thinkers, argues that a way to "destroy a government program" is to "first defund it so that it can't work and [so] the people won't want it, then privatize it" (Polier, 2016, p. 136). Then, "the next task is to shift the focus of public attention from a sense of civic engagement to a sense that schooling is someone else's burden" (p. 136). These schools ultimately boast higher attendance rates and higher standardized test scores, a statement that is not necessarily true, but they also engage in recruiting strategies that often marginalize students with disabilities and other factors (Vogell, 2017). However, compared to traditional public schools, which accept everyone within a local context, charter schools are able to pick and choose students that best fit and demonstrate their mission.

Taking this into account, it appears that DeVos is less concerned with closing the opportunity gap, which disproportionately affects people of color, and is instead more focused on corporatizing education. In other words, whereas high performing public schools could provide great results for students, the work seems to instead focus on either political gain or a higher profit. While charter schools continue to earn more money from the state or other public entities, public schools, as a result, lose more money in the process. Faced with special education,

students with certain accommodations, and more budget cuts, it appears that even if charter school networks prove to be a success for the students that participate, they still do so at the expense of students of color at traditional schools. Moreover, given the amount of wealth of the people who typically found and run charter schools, Rusakoff (2015) describes the process as “by definition undemocratic” (p. 65). Charter schools and other forms of philanthropy ultimately have their “priorities set by wealthy donors and boards of trustees, who by extension can shape the direction of public policy in faraway communities” (pp. 65-66). Evidently, the demographics of these donors do not match the same as the students who these schools are seemingly modeled for. As such, their best interests are not always taken into account, as they are not often defined by them in the first place. Furthermore, “Michael Lomax, president of the United Negro College Fund an ardent [education] reformer,” added that “education reform is not about its leaders and their prerogatives”; in other words, “education reform does not have to be force-fed to communities of color” and these same communities can lead and ensure what is best for their students (Rusakoff, 2015, p. 57). If charter schools want to help close the gap and empower communities, then there needs to be more home-grown efforts that also do not marginalize people within the same community, in this case the students of color not selected to attend the charter and instead stay within the local public school.

Overall, when considering the purposes educational institutions have historically served in the United States, it becomes clear that these facilities were made by and for white US Americans. As Native Americans, Blacks, Eastern Europeans, and Asians were barred from many schools, the ones that did exist for them were often of low quality. Segregated into their own often under-resourced schools, students of color were relegated to lesser opportunities, a practice that has had pervasive and generational repercussions for these communities. Beyond

that, many school facilities were created specifically to assist assimilate these people into society, often using physical and psychological abuse as a tactic for achieving such a horrendous outcome. That said, what other options did students of color have? In particular, how did Mexicans and Mexican-Americans fit into this equation? Given the complex dynamics of the border, mixed in with conflicting notions of race and identity, how then were schools constructed to foster these identities, and what schooling opportunities were afforded to them in the first place?

## Chapter 6

### Encrucijada

#### *Forming and Affirming an Identidad Nepantlera*

After federal governments in Mexico and in the United States established various institutions, including educational systems, to create, popularize, and maintain notions of national identity, rigid lines existed—both physically and figuratively—to divide citizens of both countries. Mexicanidad was formed under the pretense of mestizaje, indicating a mixture of indigenous, European, African, and Arabic blood, according to José Vasconcelos. That mixture, which inherently favored white Mexicans above all others by erasing and subjugating the contributions of the other three communities, spread across the country through approved national curricula. Likewise, US American identity was molded through its constitution and through various immigration policies; white men who owned property were deemed the original citizens, but years after that was decided, US officials heavily regulated and color-coded which communities could migrate and acquire wealth. Evidently, this tension meant these identities came into conflict with each other. What happened to the citizens of either country who resided near the borderlands? How did immigration policies regarding border locations affect those individuals? How did these federally designed identities influence mobile populations? Ultimately, these national identities were not created with *fronterizxs* in mind, nor were they meant to ever include those who identified in some way with both nations. As such, individuals who faced these dilemmas were faced with another predicament: How, if at all, would they form their own identity?

With the end of the Mexican-American war, during which one-third of Mexico's land included Alta California and Santa Fe, among other modern US states and cities, the identities of those who found home in this physical region of nepantla were in flux. Undefined due to this

concept, alluding to Anzaldúa's sense of ambiguity of borders, identities and spaces, the citizens of this region were little embodiments of the popular phrase "*no soy de aquí, ni de allá,*" meaning "I am not from here, nor from there." The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 set "a key legal precedent" that would grant "Mexicans in the conquered territories of the US Southwest citizenship" (Nájera, 2015, p. 23). With this distinction—a privilege that other communities of color did not receive—Mexicans were also declared "white," also adding to the complexity of their already nuanced identities. Despite this recognition and seemingly elevated status, citizens of Mexican origin "regularly experienced violent subjugation" and were subject to xenophobia, unfair policies, leaving them with "severely constricted citizenship rights" (Nájera, 2015, p. 23). Seemingly achieving whiteness and citizenship, both by law, yet still subjected to discrimination, also by law, what did it mean to be a US citizen of Mexican origin? What did it mean to be a US citizen of Mexican heritage? Likewise, what did it mean to be a Mexican citizen just south of the Río Grande? Essentially, Mexican and Mexican American identities were defined through this ambiguous struggle. An adversarial relationship with the government, a physical—yet artificial—border, and cultural ties, or lack thereof, ultimately determined how these frontier communities saw themselves.

Prior to discussing the nuanced identities of the borderlands region, it is necessary to discuss the formation of the region as well as the legal issues that arose from such a forced mixture. Before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Anglo Americans had settled all throughout the northern region of Mexico. In Texas, for example, "Anglo Americans outnumbered Mexicans there five to one," after both governments encouraged this movement for economic purposes (Hinojosa, 1983, p. 48). With both countries equally subjugating the Native American populations of the region, through increased settlements as well as violent interactions, the

borderlands became increasingly Mexican and Anglo, with a clear distinction between the two based on language, skin color, cultural attributes, and national allegiance. This distinction between these two coexisting communities is ultimately what Nájera calls (2015) a “culture of segregation,” a phenomenon that persists today among various communities (p. 35).

Though these ethnic communities found themselves within close proximity, their lives were almost exclusively spent apart from one another. Essentially, the culture of segregation ensured that there was a “purposeful spatial separation of Anglos who would run the town and Mexicans who would labor in the fields” (Nájera, 2015, p. 36). Observed long before and after the Mexican-American war’s end, general consensus among white US Americans was a “need” for Mexicans to be present in the fields as they were a cheap labor force that could provide large profits, but their “presence in society as a whole” was seen as a detriment (p. 37). Subordinate in a variety of factors, including political power, the Mexican population was clearly othered and devalued; the fruits of their labor were welcomed, but their sheer existence outside of the workforce designed for the accumulation of wealth among Anglos was condemned (Hinojosa, 1983, p. 71).

Moreover, to add to the complexity of these dynamics, treatment among and towards Mexicans based on race and skin color also varied. As stated in chapter 4, racial dynamics and Mexican national identity were still forming; mexicanidad had yet to be defined. As such, there were varying degrees of privilege and discrimination even among Mexican-born individuals. Mexicans with more European features and more land received better treatment compared to their working class, largely mestizx and/or indigenous counterparts (Nájera, 2015, p. 38). Likewise, the first generations of Mexican Americans, or individuals born on the US side to Mexican-born people, were emerging, complicating treatment and identity further. As Hinojosa

(1983) claims, during the 1850s, borderlands towns witness a blending of cultural groups as well as an emergence of new ethnicities. In Laredo, Texas, for example, the first Mexican Americans often “appeared more Mexicanized than mexicanos appeared Americanized” (p. 71). In other words, traditions, behaviors, and other cultural attributes persisted among these families that found themselves in US-centric institutions and societies, resulting in both the continuation of one’s heritage and the othering of these same people.

Revisiting the idea of the land, which was seized from one government by another, matters grew even more complicated as a result of this systemic subjugation. While Mexican labor was welcomed, Mexican culture and presence was not. For Mexican and Mexican American families who owned land in majority Anglo regions, their ability to compete with growing businesses became increasingly difficult. Their lack of political representation and support added to an increasingly adversarial relationship. Essentially a precursor to gentrification, Mexican and Mexican American land owners were often forced to sell their land to Anglo landowners, leading to a sharp decline in the number of Latinx land owners, regardless of national origin, in Los Angeles and other cities (Hinojosa, 1983, p. 106).

In some cases, Mexicans and Mexican Americans were able to retain their heritage and traditions as a result of this economic and social displacement. In the outskirts of many growing urban centers, Mexican communities often established their own cultural centers and school systems, and Mass was often led in Spanish (Nájera, 2015, p. 82). Celebrating Mexican national holidays, establishing crucial mutual-aid societies, and still operating within an Anglo-dominated society, Mexicans in this border region did navigate their segregated communities while also “proudly promoting their heritage culture,” an aspect of border dynamics and ethnic mixing that perfectly embodies Nájera’s (2015) coinage of a culture of segregation (p. 82). With few options

presented to them for integration, and largely ignored by labor unions, Mexican migrants and families established enclaves to preserve their heritage while also foster economic and social security (Mendieta, 2012, p. 320).

However, while stuck in this literal version of *nepantla*, Mexicans who asserted and fostered their identities in these regions still faced backlash, even within their communities. Negative terms used in various news publications painted a *bandido* trope, or the idea that Mexicans were thieves. Prominent political leaders even encouraged “vigilante reprisals against lower class mexicanos who violated the law,” though the definition of these laws were ambiguous, especially as much resentment grew as a result of opposition to their forms of education, religion, and business (Hinojosa, 1983, p. 106). As such, with the decrease in Mexican and Mexican American property owners in the borderlands, there was an increase in executions and lynchings against these communities, carried out through legal means (p. 107). Communities that were able to find solace in establishing their own enclaves could not escape the terror of those in power.

With these factors in mind, it is difficult to imagine the government coding these individuals as white, considering they did not enjoy the privileges associated with such a designation. Their subordination from Anglo Americans juxtaposed against the rights they enjoyed compared both to other communities of color in the US and Mexicans living south of the border made their experiences incredibly complex. In general, this was an ethnic group that had to define itself while also mitigating a variety of factors, a difficult task overall. As such, how did Mexicans and Mexican Americans fit into systemic narratives already established to marginalize other communities of color? Likewise, how were they affected by immigration policies and border laws designed to demarcate the two countries?

In the US South, where Jim Crow and other discriminatory systems existed to suppress Black citizens throughout the 1900s, laws seemingly based on biology and genealogy were established to determine one's race (Weise, 2015, p. 16). For Mexicans in the region, however, this came into conflict. A "race" built on the pretense of mixing—through notions of *la raza cósmica*—Mexicans would presumably violate the one drop rule and would be relegated to the back of the bus (p. 17). However, class and skin color allowed some Mexicans to enjoy whiteness, while others without those benefits were subject to segregation. Mexicans were barred from attending all white school districts, and all throughout the South, signs that said "No Mexicans' were rampant" (p. 70). Likewise, despite the establishment of consulates in places like New Orleans, which would help retain cultural and national ties to Mexico, campaigns were organized to assimilate Mexicans and Mexican Americans, leaving many to continue chasing whiteness, an improbable goal for most.

One of the biggest issues that Mexican families, and by and large immigrant households, face today is the discussion of their labor. As migrants seek work abroad, often in developed nations, their decision to do so is because of a lack of economic opportunities in the home country. This phenomenon, however, is nothing new. The United States has long been a destination for Mexicans, though trends to the country have changed significantly within the last century. Likewise, as how it happened immediately after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the value of Mexican labor was significant, but their very heritage and presence were not. As labor unions were growing, and as these same institutions barred people of color from joining, the ability to advocate for better working conditions while navigating exclusionary immigration laws became increasingly difficult.

During world war two, as many men were drafted into combat, the demand for labor among women and other communities grew significantly. Agricultural jobs, for example, exceeded overabundance and instead were a necessary gap to fill to sustain the economy. As such, temporary workers were an essential component, which led the governments of the US and Mexico to create the Bracero Program. “Highly successful in creating a readily exploitable workforce,” the Bracero Program “rarely protected the paltry rights accorded to workers,” putting these migrants in a precarious situation (Mize & Swords, 2011, p. 3).

Though the system lasted for decades, the Bracero program was ultimately dismantled, and Mexican labor was devalued after the war. Unsurprisingly, the United States government engaged in tactics to reduce the amount of Mexican laborers and families in the country. Among such were harsh border policies. Along with Canada, the United States government ended many temporary work programs for this particular demographic; even in informal situations, many families crossed between Mexico and the second country for work purposes on a seasonal basis. They would typically work in agriculture and raise money that would sustain their families for the remainder of the year (Mize & Swords, 2011, p. 219). However, as both governments began enforcing stricter policies, making it harder for migrants to reach the destination country for work, families and laborers chose to stay in the receiving nation for fear of not being able to return in the future.

Another trend with regard to labor involved economic treaties to foster the movement of products and money, yet miraculously limit the flow of people. During the 1990s, the United States and France both experienced similar economic struggles. Given the trends of privatization and neoliberalism in the United Kingdom and many parts of the United States under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, respectively, Mexico—after trying to recover from its own

recession—signed NAFTA with Canada and the USA. In doing so, the Mexican economy was tied directly with those of the other two (Massey et al., 2002, p. 49). Likewise, the United States actually increased the push factors from Mexico and increased the pull factors to the United States. NAFTA effectively allowed for the movement of goods and companies to and from Mexico but did not authorize the movement of people, which proved to be a point of contention for both countries. Further adding to Mexico’s economic struggle, more immigrants—not less—ended up making their way to the United States.

NAFTA empowered already powerful corporations to maximize profits while the latter two countries simultaneously revved up their immigration enforcement. However, prior to NAFTA was enacted, but becoming overabundant after it, various Mexican towns along the border saw a growth of *maquiladoras*, or factories owned by foreign companies, typically from the United States. With these factories, companies could “utilize cheap labor from underdeveloped nations to assemble (and sometimes produce) goods at low costs”; this was especially optimal for corporations that prepared their products in Mexico and then cheaply shipped and distributed them a few miles north of the border (Mize & Swords, 2011, p. 178). Emerging in 1965, *maquiladoras* helped large companies “fill the void left by the termination of the Bracero program” (p. 178). Movement of people across the border was restricted, but migrants from all over Mexico were drawn to this border region for job security, despite its exploitative conditions. Profits were maximized significantly, while this interdependent relationship maintained dominance by US corporations (Martinez, 1994, p. 9). The country made it clear that unlike in the past, their labor was finally attainable without their unwanted presence.

Given the negative treatment they endured, many Mexican households considered repatriation, a tactic used today, also known as self-deportation through attrition. Though this

was not necessarily the explicit goal of these laws, they were fairly effective. In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, US Americans struggled for jobs, and most had trouble making ends meet. As such, the US government deemed it imperative to “rid the country of workers who were no longer needed” (Balderama & Rodríguez, 2006, p. 120). To carry out this goal, the federal government encouraged local governments to enact strict work policies, often barring companies from hiring immigrants at all. With these policies came much danger, as resentment based on work opportunities and racism placed Mexicans—migrants and otherwise—in a precarious situation, as they were subject to danger from employers, police officials or their neighbors, who wanted them out (p. 121).

With the government relying on local municipalities to carry out their repatriation efforts, Mexicans were often rounded up in mass deportation raids. Without examining their papers—and often deporting US-born Mexicans, the United States government deported nearly two million Mexicans and Mexican Americans during the 1930s, with a significant portion of them US-born citizens (Balderama & Rodríguez, 2006, p. 302). Police officers were instructed to detain individuals who fit the profile as Mexican; despite their ties to the country or their legal status, as well as their contributions to their community, their forceful removal represented that mexicanidad was simply unwanted. Fanning the flames, this historical account was largely ignored and was only acknowledged by the state of California and other local governments till much later (p. 301).

In a similar fashion, Operation Wetback in 1954 involved immigration raids via the former agency known as Immigration and Naturalization Service, or INS. Staging various bus lifts and deeply surveilling Latinx and Mexican neighborhoods, INS apprehended and deported roughly a million Mexicans migrants, especially in California, Arizona, and Texas (Garcia, 1980,

p. 188). As with mass deportation in the 1930s, Operation Wetback, which specifically used a racist slur, was built on the idea of fear about a lack of job opportunities for Anglo Americans. Coupling those fears with the return of workers after serving in the second world war, and it became clear that Mexican labor and all cultural facets that came with it were rejected yet again. Interestingly enough, many Mexican Americans supported the government's efforts when it was mostly focused on Mexicans and undocumented migrants (p. 87). A clear sense of hierarchy existed between Mexicans born in the United States and those born in Mexico, with the former group further subjugating the latter. Yet again, Mexican and Mexican American identities became at odds with each other, complicating family dynamics and personal experiences.

In 1994, the state of California placed on its ballot Proposition 187, the "Illegal Aliens Ineligible for Public Benefits" initiative. Because California was in a recession, then-Governor Pete Wilson used the opportunity to place the blame for the economic woes on undocumented immigrants. Given that one-fourth of Mexicans who came to the United States through unauthorized means chose California to settle in, California received a poor reputation for its perceived immigration issues, allowing Governor Wilson and his supporters to justify the proposed initiative (Massey et al., 2002, p. 127).

Rhetoric used during the campaign was inflammatory; undocumented immigrants received total blame for the struggling California economy, despite Wilson's questionable decisions with the state's finances and taxes. Proposition 187, which overwhelmingly passed but was not enforced due to a judicial intervention, would have completely restricted this vulnerable from accessing essential public services including schools, hospitals. These restrictive immigration policies extended to within the classroom; proposition 187 would have criminalized

teachers for harboring undocumented students. Unable to receive important services, immigrants would be left without any social services.

Reusing this campaign model, California saw a similar sentiment during the 2003 recall of Governor Gray Davis. Davis, who during his effort to avoid the recall signed a bill that would grant undocumented immigrants driver's licenses, was often criticized for his immigration policies. An opponent of Proposition 187, Davis was subjected to constant attacks about his inability to protect the California borders and secure jobs for citizens. Also due largely in part to the electricity crisis at the time, Governor Davis lost to actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who was a vocal supporter of Proposition 187.

Likewise, Sandoval & Tambini (2014) describe in *The State of Arizona* how phenotype plays a large roll in immigration policies. Detailing the controversial SB 1070 passed in 2010, and following the many decisions made by Phoenix sheriff Joe Arpaio, the state of Arizona employed tactics that made life incredibly difficult for immigrants. With the intention that they would either self-deport or decide not to immigrate to the United States, severe oppression took place, and reasonable suspicion of undocumented status explicitly meant darker skin color. These policies, along with others such as Operation Gatekeeper, which sought to divert unauthorized immigrants through certain paths where detention would be likely (Nevins, 2010, p. 94), actually increased the stays of undocumented immigrants. Whereas many came to the United States for seasonal work, extreme measures led many to stay permanently, which is contrary to what these measures originally planned for.

Likewise, schools in the United States have employed similar tactics. As many Mexican high school students attend classes in the border region, Tucson Unified School District sought to represent these students' histories in the classroom. Featured in *Precious Knowledge*, this

culturally responsive pedagogy affirmed the identities of the students, going against the grain of ignoring people of color in history and english courses (Fifer & McGinnis, 2011). Progressing through the program, students experienced increased self-esteem. Test scores also rose, as did graduation and college retention rates. Parental involvement and overall student satisfaction also increased significantly. However, despite positive correlations in these indicators, the Arizona legislature passed HB 2218, which banned ethnic studies courses in the state. As a response, Mexican and minority students, many of who were immigrants or children of immigrants, protested, and graduation rates and standardized test scores eventually resumed to the same level as they were prior to the Mexican American Studies program. California passed a similar measure with Proposition 227, which made classes in the state english-only, even though much research showed that bilingual efforts lead to better dominance of english (Gándara, 2002, p. 476). As Latinx students make up roughly one-fourth of the student K-12 population, their representation in colleges, their income levels, and their graduation rates from high school lag far behind white students and other communities of color (p. 668). Promoting ethnic studies courses and bilingual approaches would actively combat this current statistic.

Similarly, in the United States, California passed Proposition 209, which banned affirmative action in public schools. On that same note, the country also has yet to pass the DREAM Act, which would grant undocumented students a pardon from deportation and receive federal funding to attend a post-secondary institution. These students, many of whom came to the United States as children, are left to find alternatives to funding, which are often scarce. Many are left with low-paying jobs and unskilled work, despite their interests. Like the hijab ban in France, these two initiatives in the United States actively keep certain students out of publicly funded education.

Furthermore, the act of a person of color—in this case Mexican Americans—merely enrolling in school became a very politicized concept. Predating the famous *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Mendez v. Westminster* combatted school segregation and notions of separate but equal. Prior to this court case, which was decided upon in 1947, the decision from *Plessy v. Ferguson* enforced a “fifty-eight-year-long practice of legal racial segregation in public schools” (Anderson & Byrne, 2004, p. 7). Students of different demographics were legally barred from studying alongside each other, leading to significant disparities between students of color and their white counterparts. Students from the latter were more likely to attend better-funded schools with more resources, correlating with higher college matriculation rates, among other factors.

For Mexican students in the borderlands, the differences were evident. Teachers and administrators in white schools made more money, which was the smallest concern. Many of the schools, such as in Santa Ana’s school district, were deemed fire hazards for the poor conditions they endured (Strum, 2010, p. 16). In addition, school hours were significantly reduced because of the assumption that most students would work in the fields after school was over; likewise, these students were more likely to repeat grades or be placed in special education classes, despite their academic records and perceived abilities demonstrating otherwise (p. 17). Fed up with these conditions, especially after their children were denied enrollment at white schools because of their heritage, Felicitas and Gonzalo Méndez sued the school district. With the help of various actors, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which would go on to use strategies in *Mendez* for *Brown*, school segregation in the state of California was deemed unconstitutional, leading the state to desegregate public schools.

Once integrated, Mexican and Mexican American students faced other issues. For one, their cultural background was deemed lesser; through what Carter (1970) describes as a cultural of deprivation, it was believed that Mexican customs “did not provide the necessary influences to make children successful in school or acceptable in the majority society” (p. 36). Clearly in conflict with Rosaldo’s concept of cultural citizenship, various school districts sought to assimilate students, or segregate them within lower performing classrooms. In their social science courses, Mexican history was often absent. Most discussions were focused on a white perspective of US American history. However, when Mexicans and other communities of color were mentioned, they were often through a racist lens. Mexican culture was often described and represented as mythical and “folkish” (Carter, 1970, p. 40). This evidently had significant effects on their self-esteem which, in turn, affected their social, emotional, personal, and academic progress.

Bedolla (2005) describes how Latinx migrants and their children often had to cross many unseen borders. Aside from the physical—yet imaginary—demarcation from one country to the next, there also existed “multiple boundaries that affected [the] socialization [of Latinxs] into the US political system” (p. 2). Not “empowered to cross” those boundaries, Latinxs have always had to form a collective identity while residing in the United States. Discussing concepts such as psychological capital, mobilizing identities, and personal agency, Bedolla (2005) also describes the importance of understanding a sense of one’s self within a larger group (p. 6). Identifying with a community, albeit a marginalized one, is crucial, as progress is a collective effort. For Latinxs, and in this case, Mexicans and Mexican Americans, finding and defining their identities on their own terms was necessary to improve their conditions along the border.

It is no surprise that the search for identity was closely associated with student movements. Among various groups, such as *El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán* (MEChA), identity development involved political consciousness, learning, and militant struggle (Muñoz, 1989, p. 80). This was especially important given the school conditions that Mexican and Mexican American students endured, even after desegregation. As such, student activism and identity-focused group efforts were often geared towards these very disparities. In 1968, for example, “thousands of East Los Angeles students walked out of school, denouncing the poor educational practices within the Los Angeles Unified School District,” (Berta-Ávila et al., 2011, p. 1). Berta-Ávila et al. (2011) argue that these walkouts, also known as “Blowouts,” exposed the “condemnable ideologies and practices of a *schooling for subservience* and educational exclusion that constrained Chican[x]s in American society” (p. 12).

This point about subservience is particularly salient in this discussion of identity, politics, and education. Given the conditions at these schools, students were less likely to be taught critical thinking skills. They were often funneled to remedial programs and vocational programs that are associated with lower wages. While perfectly acceptable, the fact that they were given little agency within their educational opportunities, and thus career choices, demonstrates that on a larger scale, these schools determined for Mexican and Mexican American students their trajectories. While questioning who they were, where they were from, and where they are, these students were vulnerable, meaning that a school system that was created to marginalize them essentially disrupted these lines of inquiry. This then begs the question: if you do not know who you are or where you are, and if you do not know where you are from, then how could you know where you are going? To what extent would one have agency in their future if they are unaware of the answers to these pertinent questions?

Ultimately, the education systems in the borderlands make up an array of institutions, not limited to immigration, economics, and social services, among others. When all of these factors intersect, as the identities of Mexicans and Mexican Americans do, matters become increasingly complicated with respect to one's ability to define themselves. As school quality and segregation intersected with discriminatory immigration policies and mass deportations; as school curricula negatively portrayed communities of color while members of those same communities internalized hatred for their roots; as Mexican labor was valued while Mexican culture was not; as corporations were granted free movement while humans were not; as an artificial line tears through communities, arbitrarily labeling some as US American and others as Mexican; and as walkouts happened alongside new assertions of identity, it is clear that life for *fronterizxs* is unique. Students have had to (and still have to) navigate through all these forces in order to finally create their own identities. Therefore, *nepantla* is alive and well in the borderlands, meaning that life in this area is always associated with a quest for figuring out who one is, and what factors influence that journey.

## Chapter 7

### Observations

#### *Student Responses and Historical Connections*

Various noteworthy findings were observed throughout this multi-modal, binational, and mixed methods investigation, which was conducted primarily through interviews and independent historical research. Regarding trends among all of the sources used, four main categories were identified. First, much data collected focused on content, specifically the concepts students learned and absorbed from their social science courses at their respective high schools or preparatorias. Second, students revealed their sense of place within the school environment, as well as the ways in which this space has shaped them. Third, connection to culture was another large area of focus, especially as the students had broadly related—yet unique—ways of defining this aspect. As for the fourth focus, much information gathered was oriented around educational outcomes and their relation to the previous categories.

Regarding the academic and cultural lens of the schools these students attended, most revealed that their curricula was predominantly focused on their national history, with minor focus on the other country. For students at SDSU, all reported that Mexican history was never discussed unless it was during Hispanic Heritage Month or any other cultural period when it was deemed relevant. These students revealed that their knowledge of historical figures of Mexico was minimal best, with many not knowing the history behind Benito Juarez, Miguel Hidalgo, Emmanuel Zapata, or other commonly discussed figures. One student recalled an instant when she was in Mexico and could not identify a single person on the country's currency, except for Frida Kahlo. All SDSU students mentioned learning about Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson throughout their school years. As for historical figures of

color, the most common names were Martin Luther King, Jr. and Cesar Chavez, with Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman, and Pancho Villa receiving some mentions as well.

Conversely, the students at UABC appeared to have a better understanding of US American history, though most claimed they did not receive much content; one student described his knowledge of history “superficial,” indicating that he only knew common facts. When asked about their own history, they discussed how much of the curricula emphasized the founding fathers of the country as well as the aforementioned revolutionaries. Two students described that their social science courses stressed notions of nationalism and the importance of pride for their country. When asked if any historical figures were omitted from their curricula, or if they felt that any groups in Mexican history were not brought up, most indicated indigenous groups from different parts of the country, such as the local Kumeyaay community, as well as women. As for US history, all students were able to name at least Lincoln and Washington; they also knew there were 50 states, and they noted that they had to learn this information given the country’s power as well as its proximity to them.

While participating in the MMFRP, some of that nationalism was evident. All schools had some patriotic symbols posted; one school had dozens of murals about Aztec culture, the conquest, and the revolution (Floca et al., 2017). This is consistent with the nation’s SEP. All over the building, many murals depict Mexico’s heritage and culture. Drawn by Diego Rivera, these images exemplify Vasconcelos’s themes of mestizaje as well as the institution’s initial purpose.

Regarding the attitudes the students had about the history they did learn, the SDSU students expressed extreme levels of discontent. All of them indicated that they wished their school had discussed more Mexican history, as well as history about Latin America and other

regions. Each mentioned that their school's focus was too eurocentric or "white." Only three, however, mentioned that they thought about this during high school. The rest indicated that they did not evaluate their school's curricula until they reached college, when they began to take sociology and ethnic studies courses. Only one student at UABC expressed extreme frustration with their curriculum; she stated that it was "*demasiado*," or "too much" with its focus on national identity. She did, however, indicate that her perspective was more in hindsight, after learning new ideas in college as well as online. The rest indicated that their curriculum was a bit repetitive with respect to the country's history.

All students interviewed expressed that they would have liked their schools to focus more on their neighboring country. One student from SDSU said that when he did learn about Mexican history, it was from a "very white perspective." To him, much Mexico's land was seized after the Mexican American war, but he was told that "Mexico handed over land." Aside from committing to a more binational focus, some students mentioned suggestions for their respective school system's social science courses. The Mexican American students at SDSU indicated they had a hunger for their history, as they felt they did not learn much about it. All mentioned a desire to learn about Mexico's history in particular, but also mentioned a greater focus on communities of color in the United States. As for the UABC students, one was from a different state, and she felt that she would have liked to have learned more about different regions and cultures in Mexico. Many of her peers agreed with her, with one stating that she felt the views she was presented were limited; she mentioned *La Malinche*, and how she was taught to despise her and view her as a traitor. However, she said that as she grew older and did more reading, she realized that this view of her has sexist and racist undertones, and she disputes that this historical figure actually chose to comply with the conqueror, but was instead coerced into it.

Furthermore, many of the themes discussed throughout this project involved a sense of place and space at school. At the school in Tijuana where the murals were posted, students in a focus group indicated that those images, while beautiful, did not resonate with them. When asked why, one student said that she is more concerned about the border wall, saying that this barrier was more of a powerful image than the murals (Floca et al, 2017). As for the UABC interviews, all students mentioned how the wall makes them feel unwelcome and unwanted, with some mentioning how Tijuana has a terrible reputation in San Diego. All UABC students, as well as most students in the MMFRP focus groups, mentioned the current administration in the United States, adding that his presence in the white house cements that feeling of inferiority.

A similar dynamic was prevalent among high school and college students in San Diego. One academic counselor shared that “the election has cause the counselors and students to be increasingly worried about the safe zones that schools can provide” (Floca et al., 2017). This indicates that while the main focus of the project was to look at how schools form a sense of place, outside factors play a significant role, with students indicating the current administration affects how they see themselves at school. Creating a safe space at schools is great, but what roles do spaces off campus as a result of recent nationwide policies play? In addition, that same counselor indicated that students who were interested in filing for the DREAM Act, which California provides, have stopped coming to her (Floca et al., 2017). Prior to the election, many reached out to fill the financial aid form; post-election, however, the numbers decreased for fear of having information leaked, among other reasons.

In addition, another key finding was that the high school students firmly believe schools have a role in identity development. One student said:

The school is welcoming to non-Hispanic students as well as other recent migrants. They say it is easy for students to transition, but there

might be a slight language barrier for some. They also have peer mediation, which is an elective class for students at risk of getting suspended or worse (Floca et al, 2017).

In this conversation, the student indicated that the school offers resources to help them feel welcome at the school. She also indicated in other parts of the conversation that the school must commit to serving students and fostering a positive environment. This directly translates to the school's commitment to a sense of place. In her case, she also mentioned that she enjoys the ethnic studies courses offered at her school. While the courses offered are not specifically for her demographic, she believes she has learned a lot from them, but she would like to see the school model a class after her own African American roots.

At SDSU, all students answered that they believed their schools shaped how they saw themselves. One student said she had a “very whitewashed past”; she added that she “was a registered republican and held conservative views about immigration and abortion.” She reflected on her high school years and stated that she felt pressure to be “one of the white girls,” which she attributes to her light complexion. She indicated she felt “ashamed” of her roots, and that her school “mader [her] feel this way.” Likewise, in Tijuana, some students in a focus group mentioned that they felt pressured to fit a specific mold that their school placed upon them. Within this conversation, these same students indicated that they wanted to explore their own creativity and different forms of expression. Some said they think the school should no longer require uniforms. Conversely, the counselor interviewed at this school stressed the need for a uniform identity at the school to foster a common culture of achievement. In both cases, there appeared to be a large disconnect between students and administrators.

Additionally, students who did not fit the mold of the local culture indicated a need to conform to the customs of the region. The SDSU student who felt too “whitewashed” is

Salvadoran. The child of immigrants, she grew up in the San Diego region. She mentioned having to “choose between the Mexican girls and the white girls,” and that she never “corrected people” when she was labeled as Mexican. This remains consistent with Zentella’s (2005) claims about Central American experiences. Subject to the “pain of invisibility,” these students often feel a need to assert their identities as not Mexican, but are still categorized as such, often adopting slang and customs (p. 99). On the Tijuana side, that same philosophy seemed evident at one school, at least from the perspective of one counselor. According to him, all indigenous Mexican students and their Central American and Haitian peers are now “*Tijuanenses primero*,” or from Tijuana first (Floca et al., 2017). He added that they need to learn the local language and traditions, and encouraged shedding some of their own in exchange for attributes in their new home. Again, this counselor appeared to stress a uniform identity among his students.

One trend of interest is the concept of *nepantla*, and its resonance with the students. Three SDSU students were familiar with this concept, but after it was explained to them, all respondents agreed that it defines their experiences well. They mentioned feeling othered in the United States, and they also felt pressure to choose between their Mexican heritage and their US American roots. Conversely, among the UABC students, one was familiar with the concept, but not all of them agreed with its overall notions. For the student who knew of the idea, he said that it does describe the region well, given the ambiguity surrounding the proximity to the border, but he did not feel that he himself is in an in between space within the United States and Mexico. Instead, he felt like he was in a space between Tijuana and the rest of Mexico. Another student shared that for her, there is no choice, that *nepantla* sounds one-sided. She said that she does not have the option of identifying as American, so *nepantla* seemed to fit more of the Mexican American experience. Two other students did agree that it describes the region and their

experience well; between them, one studied high school for a year in San Diego and spoke about her sense of feeling unwelcome there, which she says influenced her opinion.

When asked whether the students would define the borderlands as two separate regions or one whole space, the answers were almost evenly split based on residence. All SDSU students except for one said that they felt Tijuana and San Diego are the same region. One said he moves back and forth regularly, so to him, they were essentially the same place. Another SDSU student said she does not visit Tijuana often, as her parents discouraged her from going, saying it was “dangerous and scary.” She indicated that she herself does not believe the stereotype her parents have absorbed, but she has not explored much on her own. At UABC, all but one stated that they are two separate regions. One student said he cannot cross without his visa; his restricted and regulated movement defined his characterization. Another student said he only visits San Diego to shop, so for him it did not have much meaning beyond commercial excursions. In general, most students expressed these same sentiments. The lone student who did not see them as entirely separate said they were not quite the same either, and that there was a clear difference in economics, societal values, and appreciation when crossing the border.

As for unity among Mexicans and Mexican Americans, all UABC students mentioned some sort of division, while SDSU students were split. At UABC, one student said Mexican Americans generally display a sense of arrogance. He said he feels that Mexican Americans believe they are better because they have a higher quality of education, or because they have more money and resources. A few more students mentioned the same idea about education. One said she believes Mexican Americans can call themselves “*Mexican[x]/s*,” but they need to have a better understanding of the Mexican experience from south of the border. One student also mentioned having visited Chicano Park, a community space in Barrio Logan, a neighborhood in

San Diego, and he felt that their vision of Mexican identity is a bit different than what he has, though he said he could feel the enthusiasm in that space. When asked to elaborate, he said that many of their murals are about being Mexican in the United States, something that he does not relate to. Some SDSU students, on the other hand, indicated that they have family members in Tijuana, so they feel welcomed when they visit. They feel connected to them. One says he feels Tijuana feels more like home than Clairemont, where he attended school but did not live in. The student who mentioned her parents discourage her from visiting Tijuana, however, said there is a division. She and two others mentioned that they often struggle with the language, and sometimes they “do not feel Mexican enough.”

Moreover, these responses regarding possible divisions between both groups and regions were strongly related to answers about connections to binational and border culture. When speaking with the students at SDSU, all indicated that they feel strong ties to their Latinx and Mexican heritage. All said that they always felt Latinx, but their sense of pride about that background fluctuated. One student said he was not always proud of his roots, and that his sense of pride did not begin until college. All did indicate that they do feel a strong connection to the local border culture in San Diego, which is demonstrated by various Mexican restaurants, bilingual family structures, and other Mexican influences within a US American setting. The Mexican students, on the other hand, did not always identify with the binational concept, but they mostly identified with a sense of border culture. One said he feels very disconnected from Mexico City and other regions, and that the space he lives in is very distinct from the rest of the country. Another student said that she does feel a sense of binationality, but because she lived in the United States previously. She also said that she does wish there was more a binational atmosphere in Tijuana, but did say it is growing, with new coffee shops. Another mentioned that

Tijuana's image is changing to appeal to US American audiences, so businesses and restaurants seem to have this north-of-the-border influence.

One Mexican American student specifically said that she feels a need to "legitimize [her] mexicanness." This sentiment seemed to be a trend among SDSU students, who indicated that they felt a desire to prove to others, Mexicans included, that they are Mexican too. This idea is very relevant to Getrich's (2008) research on second-generation Mexican American identities. These students are exposed to "contradictory experiences of inclusion and exclusion," which they have "experienced in both locales [Mexico and the United States]" (p. 304). As such, they often feel obligated to "validate their Mexicanness" (p. 305).

One way to validate their heritage is through their language. According to Zentella (2005), individuals may feel empowered by knowing a second language, especially when that language is associated with a familiar cultural group. All SDSU students said that knowing the language is important, and while they had varying degrees of comfort when speaking Spanish, they all make an effort to speak it on a regular basis. One student said "speaking Spanish helps [him] stay Mexican," while another said she "speaks Spanish to make sure others know that [she] is Latina too." Conversely, at UABC, knowledge of the English language did not seem central to their identities, except for two students. Most said that it was important to know the language because of their proximity to the border; one said he feels obligated to speak it. One student who did say it is part of his identity indicated that he speaks four languages, so speaking new tongues is part of who he is. Another student, who studied in the United States, said that after having lived on both sides, speaking english is a big part of her life, especially when communicating with family members who do not speak Spanish.

Both groups did indicate some sort of discomfort about the other language. Among some UABC students, three said that they speak the language but not fluently. One said he can understand parts of the language, but he does not speak it well, while another said he does not know as much as he should. The other three said they were confident with their abilities. At SDSU, all indicated at least some knowledge of the language, with one saying she could understand it but not speak it. Members from both groups felt judgment from others about how they pronounce words or express themselves, which plays into Bejarano’s (2007) notions of anxiety around language.

At the high school level, pride in language and culture was also measured on the surveys via the MMFRP. Question 95 on the survey asked students whether or not they felt proud of certain aspects of their life, such as their sexuality, their gender, their race, and other demographic factors. While the vast majority did not mark that they were proud for any particular attribute, there seemed to be some discrepancies in the sense of pride among districts. In the chart below, provided by Floca et al. (2017), in which “Prepas TJ” refers to high schools in Tijuana, “Secund. TJ” indicates middle schools in the region, “SD” means San Diego, and “SW” means Sweetwater, sense of pride in language, place of birth, and ethnic heritage were observed:

Table 1: Student Pride Regarding Demographics

|                          | <b>Prepas TJ</b> | <b>Secund. TJ</b> | <b>SD Unified</b> | <b>SW Unified</b> |
|--------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Proud of Language        | 63               | 74                | 28                | 37                |
| Proud of Ethnic Heritage | 11               | 3                 | 4                 | 8                 |
| Proud of Place of Birth  | 33               | 8                 | 45                | 44                |

Looking at the figure, it appears that students in Tijuana were more likely to feel a sense of pride regarding their language as nearly double the respondents indicated a positive feeling

toward it compared to their San Diego counterparts. Regarding ethnic heritage, there appears not to be a significant difference, though most students responded that they were proud of it in the high schools of Tijuana. As for place of birth, it appears that more students were proud of their place of birth in San Diego compared with their peers in Tijuana. This could have serious implications about how the Mexican students view their own upbringing in light of the recent election.

Conversely, similar results, also provided by Floca et al. (2017), were yielded regarding the extent to which students felt ashamed of certain aspects of their identity. Again, only few students responded to this query, but the discrepancies were interesting.

Table 2: Student Shame Regarding Demographics

|                            | <b>Prepas TJ</b> | <b>Secund. TJ</b> | <b>SD Unified</b> | <b>SW Unified</b> |
|----------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Ashamed of Language        | 2                | 5                 | 11                | 4                 |
| Ashamed of Ethnic Heritage | 4                | 7                 | 28                | 14                |
| Ashamed of Place of Birth  | 23               | 18                | 3                 | 6                 |

Though these are preliminary results that still need to undergo further tests and analysis, a first glance indicates that students in Tijuana do experience a higher rate of shame with respect to their birthplace. 23 high school students in Tijuana marked shame of place of birth compared to only 3 in San Diego Unified and 6 in Sweetwater Unified. Also, it appears that few students reported a sense of shame with regard to language, though students in San Diego Unified were more likely to report feelings of shame for that demographic. Lastly, ethnic heritage saw high rates of shame in San Diego Unified, which was about double that of Sweetwater Unified, and 7 and 4 times more higher than the high schools and middle schools, respectively, from Tijuana. Once again, these results are pending verification, but if they hold true, these do indicate that

students have differing degrees of sense of place and sense of identity in each of the school systems, and all must be addressed.

As for educational outcomes, all but one SDSU students said that they believed the quality of high school education in the United States was better. The lone student who claimed the quality was better in Tijuana said that they “cover harder concepts at younger ages.” At UABC, students generally believed that the quality was higher in the United States as well, but some said that the discrepancy was not as significant as many would think. One student in particular said that higher education in the United States is costly and harder to access, so for him, the quality is ultimately better in Tijuana than in San Diego. Among high school students, nearly all of those interviewed in Tijuana stated that the quality is higher there than in San Diego (Floca et al., 2017). During one focus group, the students said they learn more advanced concepts in math and science than their peers in the United States. Another said they have stricter rules in Tijuana, so they are more disciplined and ready to learn (Floca et al., 2017). In San Diego, results were mixed. Many Mexican American students did say their curricula were more advanced, but migrant students who had studied in both regions said it was much harder in Tijuana (Floca et al., 2017). Beliefs about school rigor could be correlated to confidence, perceived student achievement, and cultural pride, among other factors.

Regardless of student beliefs about rigor, most interviewed—at both the high school and college levels—said that their respective high schools did not provide as many resources as they would have wished. Many indicated that they wanted more course options or extracurricular activities. Four SDSU students said they never saw their guidance counselors. One said that she was advised not to even apply to colleges, while another said he was placed into remedial courses. In Tijuana, most students in one focus group indicated that they felt their counselor was

not helpful; others from a different focus group but at the same school said they had minimal contact with him (Floca et al, 2017).

According to Floca et al. (2017), the vast majority of students, regardless of where they live, aspire to attend college and pursue a wide range of professions, many of which require years of education. However, that same study indicates major disparities between expectations and reality. Johnson (2003) says that “in the nation’s 35 largest urban districts, 50 percent or more of the entering ninth grade students do not graduate with a diploma four years later” (p. 9). She adds that “Latino youth have the highest officially recorded dropout [nationwide] at 29.5,” though the “true rater is probably much higher” (p. 9).

This immense disparity, according to one SDSU student, is partly because of a lack of self-confidence. She went on to say that students need to know themselves well before they can move forward. Without knowing who they are as a person, and how they fit into society, they are not going to have a “clear path.” Other SDSU students stressed the importance of understanding their roots and their heritage, linking it to positive outcomes related to self-esteem and academic achievement.

On a related note, during a focus group in Tijuana, a researcher from the MMFRP indicated that a high school student said “*aunque los demás no crean en ella, ella cree en sí misma y lo hará posible,*” meaning “although the others do not believe in her, she believes in herself and will make it possible,” with “it” referring to a bachelor’s degree. That said student indicated that she does not feel her school motivates her, and that she does not think she is set up for success (Floca et al., 2017). However, her perseverance significantly contrasts with what others expect of her, her belief is consistent with what other students have said, specifically about how they believe their identities and trajectories have been decided for them. The student

who was advised not to apply to colleges said she felt like she was placed in an “uncomfortable box” that she had little agency over. That box also meant that she would not have as many opportunities, because people in that box “weren’t given a chance to prove themselves.”

As these results shed light on issues related to course content, sense of place and space, connection to culture, and educational outcomes, it is crucial for educators to consider how to best support these students in each of these aspects. The next chapter will analyze these data, specifically in regards to what these points indicate about identity and place. In addition, this chapter will outline trends about schools on each side of the border, and it will offer policy recommendations to support these binational nepantlerxs.

## Chapter 8

### **Análisis** *Trends and Recommendations*

After reviewing various findings in chapter 7, it is clear that the students have a strong desire to learn more about their heritage. Striving for more unity, they firmly believe that schools have an obligation to shape their history accurately and positively, and they also call for their schools to share a more binational focus, given their unique positioning near the border. Taking these aspects into account, and drawing on previously mentioned theoretical frameworks, this chapter will use prior data to explore nuances regarding notions of identity and place. Additionally, analysis about what schools do and can do will be included, as well as a brief overview of how the current Secretary of Education's actions fit into the equation. Lastly, this chapter will also provide policy recommendations to best support these students and their overall well-being.

Reflecting on student responses regarding identity, one visible trend is this notion that the “box is already checked” for them, as one SDSU student explicitly pointed out during her interview. Shared by her peers, it appears that the students feel as though they have very little agency in defining their identities. Instead, outside factors and the perception of others seem to determine that for them, leaving the students in feeling distressed. Rosaldo's (1994) concept of “cultural citizenship” characterizes this feeling well; Mexican American students feel adamant about asserting their roots, but they also have to navigate a power dynamic that inherently subjugates them. A “deliberate oxymoron,” cultural citizenship affirms a “right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense,” but achieving that is incredibly difficult for these students (p. 402).

This lack of agency in defining one's background is problematic. Freirean philosophy would demonstrate that this lack of awareness with respect to who they are—and instead are told who they are by those in power—sets these students up for a difficult future. Not knowing their history nor their surroundings, and not comprehending their place in society, essentially leaves them vulnerable to being funneled into a lower class for the benefit of those in power. In other words, as schools push students into remedial courses, the military, and lower-paying jobs, the country ensures that it has an abundant, cheap labor force. Because capitalism thrives on the lack of questioning and critical thinking about the systems at play, students go on a path already chosen for them. Fueled by racism, sexism, and classism, among other differentials, it becomes clear how certain populations remain in precarious situations. As such, a pedagogical approach that sheds light on this very issue is needed in these spaces.

Among such instances of predetermined trajectories based on identities is Jonathan Kozol's *On Savage Inequalities*. Kozol discusses how many students of color who attend “utterly impoverished” schools, which often reek of “water rot and sewage,” have little autonomy with respect to course selection. (Scherer, 1993). He examines one student in particular, who was assigned to take a cosmetology course despite requesting AP English. An advocate for dissolving the tracking system, Kozol asserts that students who are effectively “tracked” are placed into their respective levels through problematic means. In other words, being “shoved into the low reading group in second grade” will have large repercussions for that student in middle school and beyond. This, compared with the fact that “Black children are three times as likely as white children to be tracked into special-needs classes but only half as likely to be put in gifted programs,” many students of color are given little chance for introspection or planning (Scherer, 1993).

Moreover, though the students were not explicitly asked about Gutiérrez's "third space," they all did acknowledge some sort of ambiguity that comes with living along the border. Simply put, national identity—made popular through the education systems of each country—does not resonate for the people living in this region. Washington led notions of American exceptionalism do not characterize the experiences of Mexican American students in Southern California, while Mexico City's nationalized mestizaje does not match how students in Baja California seem to view themselves. These national identities and standardized social science curricula were never meant to accommodate these communities living in the literal margins, accounting for the confusion that comes with these messages many generations later.

Furthermore, distress was common among all students when discussing the border as well as the current administration. Whereas all SDSU students indicated that they vehemently oppose current plans to militarize the region, UABC students and high school students across Tijuana expressed concerns over the existing physical barrier between both countries. Mentioning that they feel unwelcome and immobile, these students are already impacted by this hegemonic physical structure. As such, this third space sheds light on a new perspective; funneled to the margins by their respective countries, an ability to unify with those from the other side who feel that same ambiguity is diminished. In other words, the border in this third space has been carved in two, complicating the shared histories of this region even more.

In a similar fashion, the concept of *nepantla* resonated largely with the SDSU students, but it had different perspectives at UABC. Feeling as though *nepantla* was not for them, one student described that the wall makes it very clear where they are and where they stand, and where they are not welcome. Anzaldúa's concept is meant to encompass the ambiguities that come with this in-between feeling. The Mexican American students demonstrate a strong

resonance with that feeling because they may know what it is like to be of a different heritage within a society that constantly marginalizes them. However, they also can trace their history elsewhere, to south of the border, and at least for the students interviewed, they all had the option of moving freely within that space.

The sheer fact that movement among UABC students is severely restricted and surveilled could be the main reason behind their less receptive feelings towards the concept. They, too, experience discrimination in their home country, but they also experience a daily reminder of rejection, perhaps making them feel less in between and more pushed to one side. One necessary component for nepantla is to call this idea into question. The physical border has a profound impact on how these students describe their experiences; Anzaldúa would certainly sympathize with that feeling of exclusion in this conversation, so adding a layer about agency regarding being able to feel this ambiguity could add nuance to the concept for these nepantlerxs.

With regard to the roles schools play in constructing these concepts, as well as in perpetuating certain positive and negative effects of nepantla, one area of confusion may lie in the presentation of history among Mexicans and Mexican Americans themselves. In other words, certain historical figures and stories often have romanticized elements that conflict with authenticity. These misrepresentations have significant effects on self-image, and often do not account for legitimate experiences, nor do they accurately construct for students how they were placed into this position in society in the first place.

During the annual summer institute hosted by the Xicanx Institute for Teaching and Organizing (XITO), Georgina Pérez (2017), a Texas State Board of Education member from El Paso, described how outside forces have shaped the histories of communities of color. During her presentation, she discussed representations of *La Llorona* and how she is depicted as a

woman who drowned her children. Pérez (2017) explained how this story was used to sell products and tourist perspectives, but it is far from the truth. She offered an alternative to this narrative, illustrated in Anzaldúa's children's book, *Prietita and the Ghost Woman*. Shown as a *curandera*, Anzaldúa reconnects the legend of *La Llorona* to its original roots.

In a similar fashion, Cesar Chavez, whose namesake is celebrated across districts, states, and is even the title of many of schools nationwide, has a complex history as well. Credited for his work via the United Farm Workers, which advocated for better wages, support, and benefits for laborers in the Central Valley of California, Chavez's hunger strike is a story told in many textbooks nationwide, particularly in this region. Even depicted in Chicano Park, Chavez's image is engrained within Mexican American heritage. However, Pawel (2014) describes Chavez had an anti-immigrant approach to his labor organizing. Regularly in contact with immigration enforcement officials, his union under his leadership formed a group of quasi-border patrol agents who would monitor and detain migrants in passing. Known as the "Illegals Campaign," these actions were sparked after Chavez infamously said: "If we can get the illegals out of California, we will win the strike overnight" (p. 294). Staunchly xenophobic, Chavez regularly used the terms "illegal" and "wetback," terms that date back to his long opposition of the *Bracero* program (p. 294). The apparent canonization of figures like Chavez signals the artificiality that some students may feel with respect to their identities. Grasping with the conquest and its lasting legacy, communities are often faced to find leaders and role models, though sometimes those leaders are fabricated, adding to that sense that their identity is determined for them, even if aspects of it are flawed.

In 2016, uproar over an approved Texas-wide textbook, *Mexican American Heritage*, emerged after the book was found to be "riddled with factual errors, missing content, promoting

racism and culturally offensive stereotypes,” and depicted Mexicans as “lazy, not valuing hard work and bringing crime and drugs into the United States,” (Isensee, 2016). Though the book was ultimately not approved for circulation in Texas public schools, this example of construction of identity and heritage was clear; thousands of Texans of Mexican heritage were very close to reading about their history in another negative light, but under the guise of progress through and ethnic studies curricula not modeled by their own people.

Darder’s concept of biculturalism ultimately reflects how students are exposed to the values of the dominant society, but at the expense of those who are bicultural. In this case, it is evident that schools perpetuate the feeling of having to conform to an identity, or absorb ideas that have been written for them, but not by them. When referring to the student who said he was told that “Mexican handed over its land” to the United States, Darder’s framework would demonstrate that sheer representation still perpetuates a hegemonic way of thinking that these students internalize. Keeping this in mind, it also makes sense why one of the students indicated that she lived as “white” for many years, because in her own words, she understood that her Salvadoran heritage was lesser, but did not quite understand why.

Speaking of identities made for them, the SDSU students did indicate that they did not discuss issues of race and identity, nor were they exposed to ethnic studies, during their high school years. Instead, it was not until the college level when they were exposed to these critical perspectives. Likewise, both UABC and SDSU students did demonstrate that they had minimal coverage of their neighboring country, and both groups expressed interest—described as a necessity—to learn more about the other side. This demonstrates that these critical perspectives on race and identity are available in education, but those discussions come far too late. As the

SDSU students would state, these topics need to be covered much earlier; their high schools must make a point to challenge students to evaluate history at a much earlier age.

Similarly, language instruction on both ends seemed to be of interest for the students. Each demonstrated a desire to learn and speak fluently the language of their neighbors, but much anxiety about their abilities was observed. This, too, is consistent with Zentella (2005), who discusses a nationwide dismantling of bilingual education:

A consistent but contradictory Latino reframe claims pride in Spanish along with the fear that it holds Latinos back; Spanish is considered important for family cohesion and cultural identity, but not very useful for learning and writing and good jobs. These messages become part of Latino children's language specialization, along with shame about Spanish accents or nonstandard grammar (p 180).

Adding that many children go on to "ridicule their parents' English [and] stop responding in Spanish," especially in public, Zentella demonstrates a clear hierarchy of languages. Languages, in general, make many of these students uncomfortable, because they want to speak it well, as a sign of their binationality, but they fear ridicule from others. Also, the fact that the Mexican students indicated a sense of obligation to learn the language for future outcomes, while the main motivation for the Mexican Americans regarding learning Spanish was for cultural ties, reflects how schools should teach both, but not devalue the importance of the latter.

Furthermore, all college students, and many high school students, reported a sense of dissatisfaction with the support services offered at their school. While many stated that they rarely, if ever, spoke to a college counselor, a general feeling of different mindsets between administrators and students was observed. This appears to be an institutional problem. While support systems do exist, such as Mexico's *Programa Binacional de Educación Migrante*, or PROBEM, which seeks to support immigrants as they enroll in and adjust to new schools, these

services underfunded. According to Floca et al. (2017), PROBEM's staff in the entire state of Baja California is limited to seven workers trying to accommodate thousands of students.

Additionally, current requirements for enrollment include documents that may be difficult for families to obtain, such as apostilles and transcripts. Since many families migrate unwillingly, and often abruptly, their ability to acquire all of these documents is difficult. As such, Jacobo (2017) proposes an end to these bureaucratic barriers within the Mexican education enrollment system (p. 2). Working with legislators to reduce the number of required documents, Jacobo hopes that migrants students and families will have a painless process in order to receive an education.

As for the US American education system, much seems to be in flux under DeVos. Known for rescinding a law allowing transgender students to use the bathroom that coincides best with their identity, a decision she made immediately upon her confirmation, DeVos has a “decades-long record of undermining public schools by promoting taxpayer-funded vouchers for private and religious schools” (Rosales, 2017). A billionaire who advocates for privatization, charters, and school choice, DeVos also “fought for tax cuts for the wealthy at the expense of public schools” in Michigan (Rosales, 2017). Her decision not only fuel conflict as students undergo introspection with regard to their identity, she also appears to be influencing the institution in a manner that disproportionately hurts students of color.

According to Weingarten (2017), the president of the American Federation of Teachers, DeVos is also planning on passing legislation to deregulate and support for-profit colleges, even those deemed to have “predatory practices” with respect to lending. For-profit colleges prey on low income communities of color, who end up receiving “worthless degrees” followed with “unsustainable debt.” For Latinx students in particular, who made up a large portion of the

student body of the now defunct Corinthian Colleges network, having an education system that not only seeks to marginalize but actively exploit them puts them at odds with it altogether. How can border students be expected to look at these institutions for models of progress, equity, identity development, and so on, when they are specifically targeted for these scheming projects?

Also, given that the administration DeVos works under has decided to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, better known as DACA, her silence on the issue is telling. As DACA is “inextricably tied to education,” given the educational requirements to apply, the Secretary of Education must know that this decision will negatively impact a large portion of the students she is supposed to serve (Bryant, 2017). For DACA recipients, as well as undocumented migrants in general, their status makes them vulnerable, but it also adds another layer of an identity box checked for them, not by them. In other words undocumented nepantlerxs in this case are losing their chance to attain an education in the first place, affecting not only how they see themselves, but drastically changing how they fit in this society.

One final note about DeVos concerns her stance on English Language Learner (ELL) support. As many students indicated that language comprises a large part of their identity, Mitchell (2018) describes how DeVos plans to consolidate ELL services with another office focused on general elementary and secondary education issues. Taking specific attention away from ELL students, her move runs directly contrary to the demands students on both sides of the border explicated during their interviews and focus groups. High school students on either side, according to Floca et al. (2017), and all SDSU and UABC students asked about language instruction said their schools should do better to promote better learning environments. Language acquisition is central to their identities, so dismantling this department could have major

consequences for nepantlerxs who seek to strengthen their language-learning skills through their public schools.

From a policy perspective, it would be best to implement a few new initiatives to make matters better for nepantlerx students. First, while AB 2016 passed the California state legislature after a few attempts, schools across the state are still in the process of forming and offering courses. This law, while admirable, should go further by requiring ethnic studies courses to be shaped by the student demographics of the region. For example, if an area has a minority population of 40%, that ethnic studies course should place a large emphasis on celebrating the history of that heritage.

Also, even among school districts that offer ethnic studies courses, some changes need to be made. For example, currently, the Los Angeles Unified School District offers only 27 ethnic studies courses in the entire district (Caesar, 2014). Of those, only 27 are recognized as fulfilling the A-G requirements. This means that even though there are some ethnic studies courses, their academic weight still pales in comparison to AP classes or other courses deemed rigorous enough for admission at the University of California or the California State University systems. These courses must be incentivized in order to allow students to feel welcome to take them; to do so, the Board of Regents at the UC system and the Board of Trustees of the CSU system must approve an amendment stating that ethnic studies courses fulfill the social sciences component.

Furthermore, during the 1990s, when California's governor was Pete Wilson, various anti-immigrant initiatives took place. Among them was Proposition 209, a ban on affirmative action. Originally, created to "rectify the underutilization of women and people of color in public employment as well as public contracting and education," race and gender conscious admissions and hiring practices (Sumner, 2008, p. 3). Drastically decreasing Black and Latinx enrollment at

the UC system, this law adds to the complexities presented by Floca et al (2017). While students are largely motivated to pursue higher education, their actual matriculation and graduation rates are astonishingly low, especially in comparison to the overwhelming desire of these students to attend college. As such, it is highly recommended that Proposition 209 be repealed, as institutional barriers, combined with a variety of factors, disproportionately and directly affect these students, preventing them from obtaining a degree, and often from having a chance to engage in critical discussions of identity.

With respect to language-focused education, California recently repealed English-Language only education. Proposition 58, which undid Proposition 227 from 1998, allows California schools to provide dual language instruction. According to Gándara & Hopkins (2010), other languages are believed to be a “barrier to cultural assimilation and citizen participation,” which is why the original law was passed (p. 25). Using “anti-immigrant” and “nativist” rhetoric, the campaign deeply impacted students and their families (p. 26). Again, just as many students interviewed tied language to their ethnic heritage, it is crucial for these programs to be effective and student-centered. When organizing these classes, schools should model the vernacular taught after the demographics of the students involved. In many cases, foreign language classes have a eurocentric focus, often neglecting local color. This invalidates student experiences and backgrounds. Students explicitly want their heritage affirmed, so engaging in bilingual immersion, and embracing different forms of speaking—such as Spanglish—will not only resonate well with students but also be more effective in promoting a better learning environment.

Lastly, in Tijuana, it is strongly recommended that schools adopt a cultural studies course, both at the high school and college levels. UABC students mostly indicated that “ethnic studies”

is a bit of a new topic to them and, while they have learned about different cultures, there is a desire to learn about their heritage and their commonalities with Mexican Americans just north of the border. As such, perhaps modeling a binational ethnic studies course through a collaborative process between schools on each side could promote that sense of unity the SDSU and UABC students expressed a desire in having.

## Chapter 9

### Conclusion

#### *Adelante: Moving Forward*

Evidently, cultures and identities within the Alta-Baja borderlands are unique. Shaped by the border, schools, policies, languages, and sheer proximity to another country, this region is a reflection of the cultural dynamics prevalent among various other borders across the world. However, with these intersections come tensions. While many students embrace the multicultural, binational atmosphere that characterizes this region, others are met with a false dichotomy of having to choose. While some move freely across the border, many more only dream of such an opportunity. While some undergo introspection to identify themselves within this complex region, others embrace *nepantla* but also question if that nuanced approach is even open to them. While some schools foster this sense of inquiry, others miss the mark, with mixed results among their respective student bodies.

This investigation examined various complex ideas, as well as their intersections and conflicts with each other. The extent to which the aforementioned factors, among others, interact, particularly within the Alta-Baja borderlands, is difficult to quantify, but it is indisputably significant. Many nuances were explored while exploring the historical context behind development of existing popular identities, as well as the tensions they espouse, and correlating them with contemporary expressions among youth in the region. However, just as with any other research project, especially one that combines multiple methods, there are certainly areas for improvement for future studies.

Among potential new angles and improvements to this investigation, one involves the location in which the study was conducted. While the Alta-Baja region is important, it would be ideal to replicate this same framework in other regions along the borderlands as well. Because

this region is not monolithic and is instead made up of a variety of zones that intersect cultural and geographical differences, student experiences on either side, and in whichever state, may also differ. A sense of place and identity for a student in Tijuana may differ from that of a student who resides in the more rural setting of Mexicali-Calexico. Likewise, exploring the regions of Arizona, Sonora, Chihuahua, and Texas could also yield different results given local conceptions of race, identity, place, and the role of schools in areas like Nogales-Nogales or Juarez-El Paso. Vila (1994), for example, illustrates that the border culture in the El Paso-Juárez region is vastly different from the culture in Tijuana (p. 126). The population, the customs, the migration patterns, the school systems, and the movement between these regions all differ, likely resulting in a different dynamic with regard to identity development as well.

Likewise, repeating this study outside of the borderlands would prove interesting results as well. This investigation postulates that the border has a profound impact on the identity of these students; however, for most, mexicanidad exists outside of this zone. What does it look like in Denver or Dallas? How about in Durango or Zacatecas? How do they compare to the border towns? Similarly, how is mexicanidad conceptualized among students as their physical location moves further north? Vila (1994) adds that “regional classification,” such as *Norteño* or *Juarese*, also shapes “the construction of social identities” within Mexico, adding more nuance to how people describe their respective version of mexicanidad (p. 280).

Further, ideally this study could have more of an equal balance between attention focused on Mexican and Mexican American students. This investigation definitely looked more about the identity development and school system within the California side compared to the Baja California region. With respect to sheer numbers, more SDSU students were interviewed over UABC students. Policy recommendations and analysis were also more from a California-centric

lens. To allow for more parity, it is recommended to reach out to researchers of similar interests from Baja California; in doing so, there would be a better balance in terms of familiarity with the other region. With one investigator from San Diego and the other from Tijuana, each would bring knowledge sets about their respective country's notions of identity and understanding of school form and function.

Similarly, it is crucial to examine how documentation status and time spent in the new location influence one's performance in school as well as their sense of identity. Undocumented students, for example, are in a unique position because they are restricted to live in the north, just as Mexican students are often restricted to south of the border. This position as a non-citizen in one's own home poses many questions: how do schools support these students? How do these students identify? Similarly, for students who are born in California but for whatever reason relocate to Tijuana, and thus continue their education in Mexico, how does that change impact their well-being and identity development? Jensen & Sawyer (2013) point out that one community often overlooked is the "American Mexican" population (p. 173). Whereas Mexican Americans are predominant in the United States—typically described as US born but of Mexican descent—American Mexican encompasses those who were born north but move south. These two groups, undocumented students and American Mexicans, both have to adjust to new school systems, and their ability to move freely is severely restricted by various factors that would be necessary to explore at a policy level.

In addition, this investigation measured students from a variety of generation levels. Some of those interviewed are migrants themselves, while others are first or second generation US born citizens. Students who fit within these categories evidently have very unique experiences compared to those from different generations as well those within the same

generation. As such, it is recommended that a future study investigate how generation level impacts identity development. According to Jensen & Sawyer (2013), there are interesting patterns associated with educational attainment among Mexican Americans. While there are huge jumps in schooling from the first to the second generation, the increase afterward is only marginal. However, once students reach the fourth generation, they are likely “the first generation to not be exposed to immigrant relatives,” and also might have “ancestral ties to Mexico” only through their great-grandparents (p. 35). Similarly, given that most of Tijuana’s population is comprised of migrants from other parts of Mexico, it is likely that their experiences in this border region vary greatly as well. Keeping the family’s movement history in mind could best inform researchers about certain cultural customs and attitudes. More attention and subsequent education policy initiatives should be given to these two circumstances.

Moreover, with respect to logistics, using an audio recorder of some sort would be much easier for the investigator to review interviews. Throughout this study, no audio devices were used for any interviews conducted with college students. As such, only notes were taken during the discussion, so some components from these discussions may have been missed. Recording and transcribing interviews could enable for coding and other quantitative measures using historically qualitative methods.

Also regarding methodology, it is recommended that future studies make multiple visits to the school sites. Though comprehensive school observations were conducted, opportunities with students were limited. Discussions with each participant only occurred once, including interviews conducted at the colleges and those that took place at the high schools via the MMFRP. Instead, an ethnographic approach would allow for more interactions as well as a chance to witness growth, including any changes to opinion. In doing so, the investigation would

have a much more well rounded view. This view would also include access to textbooks specific to those students' experiences. Reviewing old syllabi, examining course schedules, and perhaps observing lectures and course discussions could add context to the theoretical framework that each interviewee has developed on their own prior to the study.

On that same note, the students selected for this research project were from courses of study that do require some sort of introspection. These social science classes discuss notions of identity as well as social issues and current events. As such, the investigation was heavily swayed toward students who have already thought deeply about power dynamics and the roles schools should play in development. In the future, diversifying student majors would address this bias; if students from science, business, art, or other fields outside of the social sciences participate, it is likely that there would be more variation in responses, which could lead to new findings.

As for age group, one recommendation would be to focus on high school students, as well as students enrolled in *preparatorias*, or the equivalent in Tijuana. One benefit of looking at this group, as opposed to college students, is that students would have had likely less exposure to social science curricula that challenge conventional notions of national identity. Various students indicated that it was not until college where they thought about privilege, societal dynamics, and other pertinent topics. Speaking with students in high school who have not yet taken ethnic studies courses would better reflect the mindsets that high schools are fostering. In other words, asking similar questions for the group during this same period of development as opposed to asking them to speak in hindsight would inform current teaching practices and curricula. Of particular interest would be the demands the students have regarding their schools' roles in their own journeys of identity.

Lastly, another potential angle for this research would be to examine language patterns within this border region. Given the language bans in public schools, the growing number of immersion programs, and an increase in bilingual television programs, a student's relationship to language within a school setting is always changing. Bejarano (2005) discusses how "criticizing and teasing someone about their language is the worst assault to one's identity" (p. 133). In this case, communication among students in the borderlands—especially conversations that cross that physical boundary—require some bilingual skills. However, everyone's relationship to the language is different. For some of these students, Spanish is foreign to them, while for others, the foreign language is English. One question in a future survey or interview could be about how students feel about the second language of the region; relationships with that language, as well as their abilities in it, could have implications about how they see themselves, especially since foreign language courses at high schools on both sides are now required for graduation.

Overall, this research project examined a variety of angles with respect to identity, politics, and education. Essentially, it appears that schools do foster a sense of nepantla among students. Though nepantla could come with a sense of pride, it also may include an uncomfortable dynamic for the students. Not knowing how to define themselves leads to much confusion, which could cause distress among students (Bejarano, 2005, p. 25). This indicates that schools might be perpetuating that negative side of nepantla, leaving them still questioning who they are. The historical legacy of each education system inherently conflicts with their upbringing near the border, so it is crucial for schools to take this into account.

Additionally, it has become very clear that the theory of mestizaje was never framed around those who live in the borderlands. Fronterizxs were at best an after-thought to construction of national identity in both countries, again contributing to that confusion. Students

who experience this tension may feel as though they have little agency in defining themselves on their own terms. Further, this lack of attention to this group fuels the hunger these students have regarding their desire to learn their unique history. These students want to know who they are and how their identities could encompass both sides of the border. These educational institutions should thus recognize their duty in providing a binational lens. Also, they should recognize the racial prejudice that is pervasive throughout US American history textbooks (Wang & Olson, 2009, p. 169). Schools need to first acknowledge existing flaws in representation.

All in all, this research should provoke new lines of inquiry. For example, how do schools in the northern Mexican border compare to schools in the southern region, bordering Belize and Guatemala? Do students down their experience nepantla, and do schools offer multinational perspectives in their social science courses? Also, how are minority students whose demographics are not represented by either border region affected? In other words, for Central Americans and Haitians who find themselves in Tijuana or San Diego, what roles do schools play in their identity development? What should they play? Hopefully, these questions will have answers through future studies in order to best support these growing communities.

## Appendix

### International Study of Urban Youth

This survey is directed at young students of various diverse countries around the world. In this survey we will ask you about your studies and your expectations on your future after finishing school. There are also some questions concerning citizenship and civic issues. This survey is not a test. We ask that you answer each question carefully and honestly so that your answers can represent your honest opinions. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers. If you do not completely understand a question or you are not sure how/what you are responding to, you can ask for help. All of your answers are confidential. Thank you for your participation.

[Truncated]

#### YOUR IDENTITY

95. Many people feel a connection to one country or more than one country. With which country do you most identify yourself with?
- Mexico
  - The United States
  - Mexico and the United States
  - Neither Mexico nor the United States
94. Which sports teams do you like more?
- Mexico
  - The United States
  - Both
  - Neither
95. There are different aspects that have to do with who you are. We are sure that there are things about you that make you proud and that distinguish you from others, which of these is most important for you:
- Language
  - The place you were born
  - Your religion
  - Your family and traditions
  - Your group of friends
  - Your gender
  - Sexual Orientation
  - None of the above

96. In some instances, there are people that can make you feel embarrassed or who make fun of you. If this has happened, could you tell us if it had anything to do with the following aspects? **IF THIS DOES NOT APPLY TO YOU, GO TO THE NEXT QUESTION**

- Language
- The place you were born
- Your religion
- Your family and traditions
- Your group of friends
- Your gender
- Sexual Orientation
- None of the above

97. Do you remember the place where it last happened? **IF THIS DOES NOT APPLY TO YOU GO TO THE NEXT QUESTION**

- At school
- On the street
- At my house
- At home or at the house of a family member
- When I play sports

[Truncated]

Floca et al. (2017)

## Student Interview Questions

Notes:

- Interview Number:
1. Tell me about your educational experiences.
    - a. Where did you go to school? What was that like?
    - b. What resources did your school offer? (clubs, tutoring, courses, etc.)
    - c. How do you feel about the quality of education?
  2. What did you learn in your social science classes?
    - a. Who are the historical figures you mostly learned about? Perspectives?
    - b. How do you feel about what your social science courses?
    - c. Was there anything missing that you would have liked to have learned about?
  3. How would you describe yourself?
    - a. How big of a role does your ethnic heritage/nationality play in how you see yourself?
    - b. What role, if any, did your school play in shaping this?
    - c. Should it play a role?
    - d. Do you feel pride in your heritage? Did you always feel that pride?
  4. What is your experience like living in the border region?
    - a. Does living here shape how you see yourself?
    - b. What role does the physical border play?
    - c. Are SD and TJ two regions or one? Why?
  5. How do you define what it means to be Mexican?
    - a. How does that look like in the borderlands?
    - b. Do you feel binational? How do you navigate that duality?
    - c. What role does language play in your identity?
    - d. Do you see a division between Mexican Americans and Mexicans?
    - e. What role does family life play?
  6. Did your school ever discuss this sense of binationality?
    - a. What do you know about history and politics of the other country?
    - b. What would you have liked?
    - c. Does your school make you feel binational? Does it make you feel like you have to choose between the two?
  7. Are you familiar with *nepantla*?
    - a. Does this idea resonate with you?
    - b. How could this look like if taught in schools?
  8. What do you recommend your school do to support future students, specifically with respect to their identity development in this binational region?
  9. Anything else you would like to share with me?

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