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HorCHATa: A Counterstory about a Mexican-based Student Organization as a Counter-space at a Predominantly White University

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Abstract

This article utilizes critical race theory counterstorytelling to tell a story about ¡Poder Xicanx!, a Mexican-based student organization at a private, predominantly white university in the Northeast of the United States. Drawing on in-depth interviews, participant observations, *pláticas*, and document analysis, I document the educational experiences of 20 Mexican/Mexican American/Xicanx (MMAX) undergraduate students who participated in ¡Poder Xicanx!. Specifically, I argue that ¡Poder Xicanx! functions as a counter-space, which is a site or space where MMAX students can challenge stereotypes, deal with racism, and empower one another. Moreover, I also highlight the fact that ¡Poder Xicanx! allows for members to create a home away from home, sustain and practice their cultural ties, and collectively build critical consciousness.

Keywords: counterstorytelling; counter-space; Mexican; critical race methodology

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In the past few decades, scholars have documented that Latinx students suffer severely from climate-related minority status stressors at their respective predominantly white universities, which result in “racial microaggressions” that are emotionally, mentally, and physically straining (Harwood et al., 2012; Hurtado et al., 1996; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Solórzano et al., 2002; Yosso et al., 2009). For example, Minikel-Lacocque (2013) found that Latinx students experienced the following at their respective predominantly white university: getting stared at and feeling isolated; receiving online hatred; being ignored at a bus stop and having an angry bus driver; experiencing stereotyping; and encountering insensitivity and ignorance. Furthermore, Harwood et al. (2012) also discovered that even in residential halls at universities, Latinx students are not free from racial discrimination. Specifically, they identified four themes revolving around racial microaggressions: (a) racial jokes and verbal comments; (b) racial slurs written in shared spaces; (c) segregated spaces and unequal treatment; and (d) denial and minimization of racism. Even if not given structural support, Latinx students, along with other Students of Color, find ways to cope and manage a hostile campus environment (Delgado Bernal, 2001; Flores & Garcia, 2009; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). In particular, Solórzano et al. (2000) found that Students of Color created academic and social “counter-spaces,” which are “sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (p. 70) as a response to racial microaggressions and racism on and off campus.

Building on the notion of a counter-space, Morales (2017) suggests that counter-spaces are dynamic sites where people on the margins engage with one another in critical discourse, bring their whole (and multiple) selves, challenge each other, and make sense of the multitude of contradictions they embody, which are always present, as a means of undergoing moments of transformation. For example, as a result of an unwelcoming campus climate at a predominantly white university, Flores and Garcia (2009) documented the creation of a “Latina space,” where Latinas would gather for the purpose of letting out their painful experiences with oppression on campus. In this way, counter-spaces serve as an adaptive mechanism to oppression and “provide marginalized individuals security, solidarity, hope, respite, and healing” (Case & Hunter, 2012, p. 268). Thus, Latinx students rely on peers from similar backgrounds for support and preservation, further supporting Villalpando’s (2003) assertion to critically differentiate between “self-segregation or self-preservation.”

In this project, I used qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews, *pláticas*, and participant observations to examine the racialized experiences of 20 Mexican/Mexican American/Xicanx (MMAX) at a private, historically and predominantly white university in the Northeast of the United States.¹ Informed by critical race theory counterstorytelling, I created a composite story about the participation of MMAX students in a MMAX-based student organization to shed light on the various ways MMAX students affirmed and supported each other. Specifically, in this story, I argue that the MMAX-based student organization functioned as a counter-space because it created opportunities for members to create a home away from home, sustain and practice their cultural ties, and collectively build critical consciousness. Ultimately, the purpose of my study was to provide a better understanding of the relationship between MMAX students' experiences on a historically white university and their participation in an ethnic-based student organization. To better understand this relationship, this research project was guided by the following questions: How do MMAX students support one another at a historically and predominantly white university? In what ways does a MMAX-based organization embody characteristics of and serve as a counter-space?

Methods

Data Collection/Context/Participants

This story draws on data collected from participants who attended Snow City University (SCU), which is a private, historically and predominantly white university in the Northeast.² Out of the total undergraduate student population of 15,226 students, 56.9% of SCU's students are white. Latinx/Hispanic students comprised only 9.1% of the entire undergraduate student population. Faculty of Color made up less than 10%. In particular, Latinx/Hispanic faculty made up 2% of that 10%. In the three-year span of my study, there have been multiple student protests that resulted from videos of white students using racial slurs and multiple hate speech written on university property, which ultimately gave rise to major racial turmoil across campus.

¹ While Latinx encompasses a wide variety of people from Latin America and the Caribbean, including Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, Guatemalans, Colombians, Chileans, and so on, I decided to specifically use Mexican/Mexican American/Xicanx (MMAX) because the participants specifically identified as MMAX, and Latinx is too broad and doesn't consider the unique ethnic-based experiences of being MMAX.

² All names included in this manuscript are pseudonyms. Participant names were selected by participants.

From 2017 to 2020, I conducted a critical collaborative ethnography (Bhattacharya, 2008) at SCU. Critical collaborative ethnography is heavily grounded in and informed by critical ethnography (Madison, 2005). Bhattacharya (2008) defines critical collaborative ethnography as a practice of ethnography that is invested in questioning the boundaries and power relations between the researcher and the researched for the specific purpose of bringing about social action and social change (p. 306). In this way, research becomes reciprocal and thereafter beneficiary for both parties, so to speak. This collaborative approach also directly challenges the problem of speaking for others (Alcoff, 1991). Critical collaborative ethnography is politically motivated and emphasizes the need to affect social change. It often involves more than a single researcher; that is, the subjects of the study are actively involved. Even when there is only one researcher, they work in multiple nonacademic settings. In my case, participants were involved to whatever extent they were comfortable from picking their own pseudonyms to editing their responses and providing feedback on data analysis and writing, including this story. The social change aspect included me protesting alongside MMAX students, conducting workshops and teach-ins at SCU about cultural empowerment, and educating SCU students about cultural appropriation via *paletas* with accessible info-graphs.

A critical collaborative ethnography links academic scholarship with “real world” experiences and it must focus on researcher positionality and accountability (Alcoff, 1991; Bhattacharya, 2008). I strategically chose to conduct a collaborative research project because it is my priority to not only engage in research that empowers my community and others alike, but also to share my knowledge on how to do so with first-generation underrepresented students. During the data collection process, I mentored numerous participants not only through their community-based research projects, but also through their research grant, graduate school, scholarship, and work applications.

Through this critical collaborative ethnography, I worked closely with the members of ¡Poder Xicanx!³, a MMAX-based student organization that was recently established by a group of students who wanted to educate the university community about the richness and diversity of the MMAX culture through workshops, screenings, lectures, music, and so on.⁴ This

³ Pseudonym for name of organization.

⁴ While there was already an established pan-Latinx student organization on campus, there were also Dominican and Puerto Rican student organizations, which allowed for Dominican and Puerto Rican students to connect with each other drawing on their shared ethnic experiences via music, food, *dichos*, and so on. Similarly, MMAX

organization was very fluid in participation; however, core of members were very present and heavily involved. Thus, I used purposive sampling for this study in that the 20 participants were recruited based upon their affiliations with ¡Poder Xicanx!. A majority of the participants were core members, meaning they attended multiple meetings or were founding members.

Participants included 20 MMAX, specifically 7 who identify as males, 11 as females, and 2 as gender nonconforming. The class standing of these students was diverse: 7 were alumni, 1 fifth-year student, 4 four-year students, 4 third-year students, and 4 second-year students. Out of all students, only one transferred from a community college, while everyone else came to this university straight from high school. It is important to note that although 7 participants were alumni at the time of the interview, I had worked with them previously for at least a year.

The participants agreed to share their stories regarding their experiences at SCU and were subsequently interviewed one-on-one, with each interview lasting 45 minutes to over two hours. I conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant via telephone or in person to capture their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The semi-structured interviews included probing questions and focused on racial microaggressions, sense of belonging, and creating space(s) to challenge negativity. I also hosted multiple formal and informal *pláticas* to continue our familial traditions and naturally delve deep into conversations about resisting and navigating hostile academic spaces (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). The in-depth interviews and *pláticas* were digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Once interviews and *pláticas* were transcribed, I created an initial set of codes by going through the transcripts/notes, coded the major themes from the data, and then returned the codes to the participants for member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). To analyze the data, I used a critical race grounded theory approach, which allows themes to emerge from data. Additionally, by examining both the experiences of MMAX students and counter-spaces, a critical race theory lens reveals often unseen structures of oppression (Malagón et al., 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Interviews and formal/informal *pláticas* were supplemented by various forms of data, including SCU's student-run newspaper articles, student-led public forums on racism, participant observations (planning, attending, and participating in

students in the project expressed to me that it was important to focus on their unique experiences as Mexican, Mexican American, and Xicanx students since in the Northeast MMAX students were the minority among Latinx students on campus.

organization's meetings, conducting workshops and teach-ins, attending protests and townhalls, and so on), existing empirical research on racism in higher education, university-sponsored lectures and seminars with esteemed faculty and pedagogues, and my own personal experiences and cultural intuition as a first-generation Xicano student (Delgado Bernal, 1998).

Critical Race Theory, LatCrit, and Counterstorytelling

To better understand why MMAX students created a counter-space to resist the racially hostile campus environment at their respective university, we must use a theoretical framework that validates their experiences dealing with racism. Critical race theory (CRT) is a useful tool to help MMAX students “name their pain” (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015). In advocating for a CRT analysis in education, Solórzano (1997) suggested the following five tenets of CRT should and must inform educational policy, pedagogy, theory, and research. The five tenets are as follows: 1) Race and racism are an endemic and central part of society; (2) The dominant ideology, that is, notions such as meritocracy, equal opportunity, objectivity, etc. must be challenged; (3) There must be a commitment to social justice while also eliminating racism; (4) Experiential knowledge of people of color is valuable and must be taken seriously as it is legitimate and useful; (5) CRT utilizes interdisciplinary approaches to examine critical issues impacting underrepresented, marginalized communities. Thus, CRT is a framework that will not only allow for close examination of race and racism, but also works towards exposing subordination and racism in hopes of eliminating such barriers completely. Moreover, Yosso (2005) defines CRT in education “as a theoretical and analytical framework [that] challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses” (p. 74). In doing so, Yosso (2005) suggests that CRT in education centers and validates the experiences of People of Color while simultaneously refuting the dominant ideology.

Furthermore, to better focus in on the experiences and knowledges of MMAX students specifically, educational scholars have theorized and proposed extensions of CRT in educational research such as Latina/Latino critical race theory (LatCrit) (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Pérez Huber, 2010; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Particularly, LatCrit enables researchers to better comprehend the experiences of Latinxs by urging them to pay close attention to the unique forms of oppression this group encounters (Pérez Huber, 2010; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Villalpando, 2004). More specifically, LatCrit zeros in

on the ways Latinxs, in particular, experience race, class, gender, and sexuality, while also keeping in mind that Latinxs face unique experiences and barriers such as issues of immigration status, language, ethnicity and culture (Pérez Huber, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Thus, LatCrit helps to analyze issues that CRT cannot or does not, like language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality (as cited in Villalpando, 2004). In this way, Villalpando (2004) suggests that LatCrit is a more valid and reliable lens through which to analyze Latinxs multidimensional identities and experiences. Without a doubt, a CRT/LatCrit framework challenges traditional theoretical frameworks that have tended to under-theorize the voices and experiences of Latinx students (Pizarro, 1998). Because of this, CRT and LatCrit have worked their way into higher education to critically examine campus climate (Hiraldo, 2010; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Yosso & Lopez, 2010).

Undeniably, CRT methodologies and epistemologies help us better understand the experiences of Latinx students in higher education without undervaluing their voices, ultimately challenging traditional forms of research (Pizarro, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Specifically, storytelling as a research method is very important because it disrupts harshly misleading, oppressive stories, narratives, conventions, and understandings of People of Color that were established by empowered groups long ago (Delgado, 1993). In this way, storytelling becomes a useful tool for historically marginalized People of Color because “they invite the listener to suspend judgment, listen for the story’s point, and test it against his or her own version of reality” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2440). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) focus carefully on the usefulness of counterstorytelling in debunking myths about Communities of Color, which they define as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are seldom told (p. 32). Furthermore, Solórzano and Yosso posit that counterstorytelling in higher education exposes, analyzes, and challenges the majoritarian stories of racial privilege with the potential to further the struggle for racial reform. In analyzing higher education’s climate, the use of counterstories provides Faculty, Staff, and Students of Color an opportunity to tell their narratives involving marginalized experiences (Hiraldo, 2010; Yosso, 2006). Staying true toward a movement of a more just society, Yosso (2006) asserts that counterstorytelling does not simply reflect the lived experiences of People of Color, but it does so in a way to raise critical consciousness about social and racial injustice (p. 10).

It is especially important to note that counterstories are not just made-up stories to blow off steam by venting or ranting regarding one's own racial struggle (Ladson-Billings, 2013). For example, as noted above, this story draws on years of rigorous ethnographic research. To share my research findings, I use a composite story and characters, which I created in order to humanize the research data and ultimately recount the experiences of MMAX students at SCU (Cook & Dixon, 2013; Martinez, 2014; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).⁵ The composite story that follows is comprised of research findings via data collected from the research process itself. Far from "just a bunch of storytelling," this counterstory synthesizes actual experiences, observations, and responses. The primary point here is that this counterstory is about racial justice with a mission to directly inform broader educational policy issues (Ladson-Billings, 2013).

The Counterstory: The Setting and Context

Horchata is arguably one of the most popular *agua frescas* in the Mexican food game. Never in a million years would anyone imagine that one of the bests *horchatas* would be served biweekly at Snow City University, a historically white-serving university located in Upstate New York. It's unimaginable, especially because it's in a city where there aren't too many Mexicans around. Yet, it is true. As a matter of fact, ¡Poder Xicanx!, which is the Mexican/Mexican American/Xicanx (MMAX) student organization on campus, is responsible for serving this so-called "world's best *horchata*" at their events and get-togethers. Technically, this *horchata* doesn't quench peoples' thirst, and it doesn't complement the three tacos al pastor with its literal thirst-quenching ability. Like many of its consumers on this campus, this *Horchata* is non-traditional. This *horchata* rejuvenates *la alma y la cultura de lxs* MMAX students without any *azucar, arroz, canela, o agua*.

¡Poder Xicanx! members themselves can attest to this claim. Many of ¡Poder Xicanx!'s members' love for *horchata* and themselves grew bigger and bigger simultaneously the more they attended ¡Poder Xicanx! get-togethers. ¡Poder Xicanx! held a special place in their hearts. Through this organization, they had created a space for everyone to be themselves without having to worry about anyone else judging them. It reminded them of home, so it became their

⁵ See Martinez (2014) for more information about composite characters.

home away from home. Undeniably, ¡Poder Xicanx! became a prized asset for most students involved in it.

By far, some of their most memorable memories created at Snow City University came from consuming *horchata*. As mentioned earlier, this was no ordinary *horchata*. Sure, occasionally a few ¡Poder Xicanx! members would make traditional *horchata* and bring it to meetings, so that everyone could enjoy it. But, for the most part, the *horchata* that changed their college experience wasn't served out of a pitcher. It was served as food for thought. After attending ¡Poder Xicanx! meetings and events for over a year, many of the members' relationship to and understanding of *horchata* changed drastically.

Rest assured, whenever ¡Poder Xicanx! members found an empty room, they would take it over completely. Typically, Ximena, a second-year Xicana student from Inglewood, California, arrived early to set up the Mexican *serape* tablecloth on the table. To accompany the colorful *Serape*, Ximena also brought the *Virgencita* her *Abuelita* gave her right before she boarded her flight to Upstate New York. She would place the *Virgencita* on the *serape* to give the room a Mexican, spiritual feel. Other members also brought items that reminded them of home. Occasionally, someone would bring their stash of Mexican candies to share with everyone. Best believe, Hot Cheetos were always on deck. Aurora, a Xicana from Lennox, California, would get to meetings early, ready with the ¡Poder Xicanx! Music playlist that members co-created. *Corridos y Cumbias* were their go-tos. As more members arrived, the room would get Browner and Browner. Not just literally, but also culturally. Members brought their Spanglish, memories from home, and frequently told *dichos* once recited by their parents, *tías y tíos*. Implicitly or explicitly, these cultural items and references reminded the members of the importance of their Mexican culture and served as inspirations for them to be prideful of where they come from. At almost every meeting, ¡Poder Xicanx! members not only brought physical items, foods, or cultural heirlooms that reminded them of home to create a space of comfort, affirmation, and belongingness, but they were also intentional about being themselves by unapologetically practicing cultural and home traditions in the space.

A perfectly planned meeting that should have been a discussion to co-create a constitution for ¡Poder Xicanx! turned into a meeting in which members reflected on how much they cherished the space they had co-created. A little after 8pm, the meeting began. Per

usual, the meeting started with the burning of sage and an acknowledgement of Indigenous Land.

“Hi Everyone. I hope everyone is doing well. Everyone looks good,” Angel, a Xicano from the Mission District neighborhood in San Francisco, California, smiled as he complimented the other group members. “As always, we always like to start our meetings by acknowledging the fact that we are on stolen land. It’s very important that we acknowledge those who came before us and those whose cultural knowledges guide us in our everyday lives.”

In a fitting manner, the sage burned slowly next to the *Virgencita*. The smoke cleared out all the bad spirits.

“¡Poder Xicanx! would like to acknowledge with respect the Onondaga Nation, firekeepers of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Indigenous Peoples on whose ancestral lands Snow City University now stands,”⁶ Angel recited in a serious, yet welcoming tone.

After the land acknowledgement, Kona, a Xicana from Houston, Texas and co-founder of ¡Poder Xicanx!, thanked Angel and proceeded to ask all 20 members in attendance to share their “roses and thorns” of the week. The Roses and Thorns activity prompts members to share something good and something bad. ¡Poder Xicanx! starts off every meeting by asking its members to check in emotionally, and members open up about personal matters or negative experiences they have had on campus. In a matter of minutes, this gathering becomes a therapeutic space. After everyone shared their roses and thorns, Kona initiated the meeting.

“It’s nice to be around you beautiful *gente!* Thank you to everyone for sharing your roses and thorns of the week. I know it takes a lot to share, but we see you and we hear you. Much love to everyone in this space. Even through our highs and lows, we have to continue pushing forward. *Como dicen* our parents, we need to *seguir adelante,*” Kona said in encouragement.

¡Poder Xicanx! as a Counter-Space

“It’s a trip how this whole group was created,” Tlacaelel, a Xicano from St. Louis, Missouri and co-founder, digressed. “On campus, I was disrespected a lot by people. The moment I felt like someone disrespected me, People of Color, or Mexicans, I wouldn’t even look at them, I would just take off on them. So that’s how I always felt, and that’s why I helped

⁶ This is the Land Acknowledgement statement word for word. It is recited at the beginning at every meeting.

create ‘¡Poder Xicanx! Because I was just like, ‘How do others deal with this disrespect?’ Next thing you know, when we got together, we started talking. It was just like an understanding of like, I don’t know . . . Like you know, when you’re with the people in your community, you don’t even have to try. You just know.”⁷

“That’s right! In this space, there’s no need to explain what’s already understood. It’s people who have similar experiences you do. It’s easier to not have to explain all the bases for someone else to understand where your issues are coming from. I get what you mean,”⁸ Aurora affirmed Tlacaoel’s statement.

“Like, all these Beautiful Brown faces, you feel me? It’s like, I could tell y’all experiences, how I have to deal with so and so. What it’s like to be Mexican. Like, that’s pretty much it, when you actually get down to it, what we would do, we just get together and talk. Just be like, yo what’s new?”⁹ Tlacaoel elaborated.

“Oh, right, right, right. During our get-togethers, we just talk about growing up in the United States, as someone who identifies as Xicanx, Latinx, Mexican American, however you choose to identify yourself, but have a similar culture. We talk about racism, about stereotypes that we faced growing up. It’s more of a venting space, if you want to call it that,”¹⁰ Cesar, a Mexican American from New York City, contributed.

Martita, a Mexican American from Houston, Texas, smiled, “Este. Well, yeah. *Para mi*, ¡Poder Xicanx! is always about what we could do for *nosotros* outside of the school. To me, I felt *que esta organización* could provide the most it could to its membership by just our meetings because it’s all about like how do we, *como podemos continuar sobreviviendo* in this space. Right and this space meaning this institution that I label as toxic.¹¹ So, ¡Poder Xicanx! allows us to build on our collective wisdom to help us cope with and respond to negative experiences on campus, such as racial microaggressions (Grier-Reed, 2010).”

“Yeah!” Antonio, a Xicano from Homestead, Florida, added excitedly. “In ¡Poder Xicanx! spaces, we talk about cultural references, our family history, or talk about anything we want to talk about with people who you know you can connect on, but we also talk about the

⁷ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 22, 2019.

⁸ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 27, 2018.

⁹ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 22, 2019.

¹⁰ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 21, 2018.

¹¹ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted October 29, 2018.

setting that we're in, too. Like Cesar said, we talk about racism. We talk about things related to racism, other isms, sexism, classism, ableism, we talk about those things. Those things, it's more natural to come up in these spaces, whereas in my classes you can talk about it, but people aren't going to want to. ¡Poder Xicanx! has become that space where we can challenge the dominant ideology, like where we can talk about history, or what is considered mainstream history, and how that really doesn't apply to us (Yosso & Lopez, 2010)."¹²

"Hmmm hmmm," Sway, a Xicanx raised in the outskirts of Chicago, Illinois, hummed in agreement. "It's nice having a space where you can unfold your experience, right? Express it, let it go, and gain power over that. Before when it's just inside you, I feel like it has some power over you. When you have the space, when you have the room, when you have the people that listen, that care, when you let that go and you put that out, it no longer has that same kind of power over you."¹³

After no one said anything, they continued passionately, "I don't know about y'all, but in our conversations, in our spaces, I feel free. I feel free because I am connected to other people, and connected to their experiences in some ways. I also feel free because I feel heard, I feel a sense of belonging, and personally I know that I can say and share whatever, and that I want to continue to be a part of this organization, and that there is a space for my opinions and my thoughts in our chats."¹⁴

"That's it!" Kona shouted, happily. She walked over to the blackboard, grabbed a chalk, and then wrote '¡Poder Xicanx!' She underlined it and then wrote, "*horCHATas*" underneath it.

"I never said anything about '*horchata*,'" Sway said, while squinting their eyes in confusion.

Everyone else also wondered what *horchata* had to do with getting together and talking about racism and discrimination.

Kona double underlined the "CHAT" in "*horchata*."

"*hor-CHAT-as* . . . get it?"¹⁵ Kona announced slowly to ensure everyone heard the "CHAT" part.

¹² This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted February 6, 2019.

¹³ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted May 10, 2018.

¹⁴ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted May 10, 2018.

¹⁵ Conversations, teach-ins, and other get togethers by ¡Poder Xicanx! members were literally referred to as "HorCHATas."

“This foo,” Tlacaelel laughed alongside everyone else.

“From day one, our gatherings have been grounded in chats. We come to an empty room and chat. As a way to deal with this unwelcoming campus climate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), we gather for the purpose of letting out our painful experiences with oppression on this campus (Flores & Garcia, 2009). So, *horCHATas* is our main component for the ¡Poder Xicanx!. In the past, during our *horCHATas*, we have discussed amongst ourselves whatever issues are going on in today’s world, how it might affect us, and what we can do about it. Sometimes, all over some horchata to keep it casual, ‘cause the discussions can get really heated and horrible. It makes sense that we call it *horCHATas*,”¹⁶ Kona explained excitedly.

“Yasssss!” Luna, a Xicanx from the San Fernando Valley, California, encouraged Kona.

“Our *horCHATas* are very intentional, tho. During our *horCHATas*, we specifically challenge what the outside world thinks of us,” Alberto, a Xicano from Oxnard, California, reminded everyone.

Aurora grabbed another piece of chalk and wrote “counter-space” and then drew a one-sided arrow from “*horchata*” to “counter-space.” “Yeah, it’s called a ‘counter-space.’ In my racism in education class, I learned that even if we aren’t given structural support by our university, Students of Color find ways to cope and manage a hostile campus environment (Delgado Bernal, 2001; Flores & Garcia, 2009; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). It’s been documented by multiple studies that Students of Color often create academic and social ‘counter-spaces’ to survive messed up universities (Case & Hunter, 2012; Grier-Reed, 2010; Solórzano et al., 2000).”

“Counter-spaces meaning what?” Kona asked for clarification.

“Counter-spaces meaning sites or spaces where deficit notions of People of Color can be challenged and where a positive racial climate can be established and maintained by its members (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 70). Counter-spaces are dynamic sites where people on the margins engage with one another in critical discourse, bring their whole (and multiple) selves, challenge each other, and make sense of the multitude of contradictions they embody, which are always present, as a means of undergoing moments of transformation (Morales, 2017). Counter-spaces are established as a response to racial microaggressions and racism on and off

¹⁶ This response was paraphrased from an in-depth interview conducted May 12, 2018.

campus. For example, through ¡Poder Xicanx!, I believe I get family. I get support. I get understanding. I get a shoulder to cry on, even if it's not a physical shoulder. If I'm going through shit, I can always just text someone from this group. It's that simple. Because those are the kinds of natural and organic relationships that we need,"¹⁷ Aurora clarified.

"Counter-space..." Kona repeated slowly underneath her breath. "I like that. Because of our biweekly *horCHATas*, ¡Poder Xicanx! is technically a counter-space that we co-created. It's all making sense now. Let's include that in our mission statement for sure."

Kona drew a star next to both "counter-space" and "*horCHATas*."

"Basically ¡Poder Xicanx! does the work, which, for the most part, this white institution fails to do (Yosso & Lopez, 2010, p. 99)," Aurora rolled her eyes.

"When life gives you *horCHATa* with your homies, make a counter-space," Alma, a Xicana from Chicago, Illinois, joked, trying to make everyone laugh.

"Can't others make the argument that because we meet together to talk about issues that only affect us, then we are self-segregating ourselves?" Denise, a first-year Mexican American from San Diego, CA, asked naively, thinking she put forward a good point.

"Is it self-segregation or self-preservation? (Villalpando, 2003)," Kona suggested.

Denise didn't have an answer. She was stuck in her train of thought.

"It's literally self-preservation," Luna answered for her. "I think one of our meetings that really stayed with me was that time we all meditated together. I don't know if you were there, but we sat in that space and we all did a meditation and we kind of were open and honest about our anxiety, and I feel like I've never had that experience anywhere with other Latinx students. It was just a group filled with like ten people. So, I think it was nice to know that we addressed that, that anxiety exists in our community."¹⁸

Luna took a deep breath to maintain their composure, "Our conversations really helped me out . . . literally. It's just an important organization that really helped me during that time in my life, where it's like, I just needed my community to be around me.¹⁹ I needed a space to gather to let out my painful experiences on this campus (Flores & Garcia, 2009)."

¹⁷ Everything except the first three sentences was taken from an in-depth interview conducted February 1, 2019.

¹⁸ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted June 2, 2018.

¹⁹ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted June 2, 2018.

“Building off that, I know for a fact that Latinx students rely on peers from similar backgrounds for support (Villalpando, 2003),” Alma insisted matter-of-factly.

“It’s true,” Alberto chipped in. “We turn to one another for reaffirmation, encouragement, and support. This is especially true when it comes to responding to an environmental stressor like racism (Tatum, 2003, p. 63). I’m speaking from personal experiences participating in our *horCHATas* during ¡Poder Xicanx! meetings. ¡Poder Xicanx!, as a counter-space, can be seen as an adaptive mechanism to oppression, which provides us security, solidarity, hope, and healing (Case & Hunter, 2012, p. 268).”

Home Away from Home

To alleviate the tension in the air, Kona interjected, “Well, that’s why Tlacaelel had always suggested that I should start ¡Poder Xicanx! I really liked the idea of it, having a space like this on campus gave me a warm feeling. I’m just like that would be such a nice home away from home to have. I know that most of college I felt isolated, or like I didn’t relate to a lot of people, even though I had my friends here and there. And while I liked the work that other orgs were doing, there was just a sense of home that I wasn’t getting there. Most people joined organizations ‘cause they were looking for something to make them feel connected and while I liked the work they were doing, but I didn’t feel that. So, I wanted to create ¡Poder Xicanx! ‘cause I knew that was something I could’ve used in the beginning of college. I wanted ¡Poder Xicanx! to become a home away from home.”²⁰

“We should add ‘home away from home’ to the board,” Alberto suggested, building off Kona’s statement.

Kona waited for Alberto to write it on the board, “Did you want to write it or want me to?”

“It’s best if you do ‘cause my handwriting will confuse everyone, including myself,” Alberto said, halfway joking.

Kona proceeded to write it on the board.

“In all seriousness, that’s a good point,” Luna said. “Every time I stepped in a ¡Poder Xicanx! place, I felt at home again. It felt like L.A., it felt like the San Fernando Valley all over again.”

²⁰ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted May 12, 2018.

“Some people may not get that feeling from it because I feel like you have to be at the meetings to get a better understanding of what you get out of it,”²¹ Cesar insisted. “You definitely get information, of course, but you also get a sense of familiarity, or a sense of belonging. For me, New York City is a five-hour bus drive, and I could just go home . . . it’s only \$80 for me. But for some, it’s a \$600 flight back to California or back to Texas. Wherever they may come from, it may not be financially affordable . . . This organization is somewhere that’s a little more accessible, because it’s all on campus. So you get a home, a sense of belonging.”²²

“FACTS!! Flying to LA cost sooooo much!” Aurora smacked her lips.

“In the conversations that I’ve had with the students regarding our meetings, whether it be there or after, it’s just like home. That’s some of the things that some people have said, like, ‘Oh it’s just like home’ or ‘I feel at home,’ right? Because that’s how we hang out. And then the food is a plus.”²³ Martita looked over to the center of the room where all the snacks were.

Angelica, a Mexican American from the Bronx, New York, raised her hand without having to and shared: “I can also add to that. When I saw ¡Poder Xicanx!’s recruitment table, it looked homey and I liked the fact that ¡Poder Xicanx! had a lot of Mexican, not artifacts but objects with them like the blankets, backpacks, and what else . . . They had other stuff on the table and it just reminded me of home. And again, at the time I needed a place to feel like home. So, I decided to give it a try and just go because it felt so . . . I guess like an honest vibe, just a relaxed vibe from it so I tried it.”²⁴ The rest is history.”

Aurora sniffed the aroma of the burning sage and explained: “¡Poder Xicanx! gives me a space where I can act, I can speak, I can listen, I can appreciate things that I could in the same way that I do back home. And do it without judgment, and do it not alone, but I do it with other people. So, I think that it allows me to feel all those positive things in the same way that my dad used the color of my skin as a thing for me to tap into and appreciate, that’s how I feel that ¡Poder Xicanx! does it, as well. The culture, and the foundation, and characteristics, and values of our culture are what let us appreciate it, and tap into it.”²⁵

²¹ A few participants expressed this sentiment.

²² This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 21, 2018.

²³ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted October 29, 2018.

²⁴ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted October 29, 2018.

²⁵ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted February 1, 2019.

Tlacaelel shook his head up and down in agreement, “Doesn’t it, like, feel good to see people that understand what you understand and like what you like, without having to try?”²⁶

“Yeah,” Alberto answered for the whole group.

“Like, how easy is it to, like, put on a *Cumbia Norteña* or something like that, and let that shit play without having someone be like, ‘What is this country ass?’ You feel me?”²⁷ Tlacaelel asked, rhetorically. “We can speak Spanglish unapologetically with one another, and almost everyone could understand what we mean without having to explain it because we are all familiar with the language and culture. It definitely resembles a home away from home.”

All of a sudden, one by one, almost everyone in the room began to share memories of how ¡Poder Xicanx! reminded them of home.

Culturally Sustaining Counter-Space

Diego, a Mexican from Sarasota, Florida, reached over the table to grab a handful of Hot Cheetos. “I mean . . . ,” he started, before covering his mouth as he munched on a couple of Hot Cheetos. Diego continued, “¡Poder Xicanx! is pretty much the only way I get to practice my home culture. It’s seeing people that have grown up with similar things as me. It just makes you feel like you’re at home, I guess. It’s just people who talk like you. Hearing stories and hearing ideas that are similar to the stuff back home. Even when we bring snacks and stuff that reminds me of home . . . I haven’t ever seen anybody bring Hot Cheetos to any other organization. So, we bring things from home into ¡Poder Xicanx! spaces.²⁸ And that’s what makes ¡Poder Xicanx! so special.”

“Well, we should add that to our list then,” Kona recommended, excitedly.

“First *horchata*, now Hot Cheetos?” Alberto laughed at his own joke.

Kona shook her head, “No, not the Hot Cheetos!”

“Diego said that ¡Poder Xicanx! allows him to practice his home *cultura* on campus. We know that higher education itself doesn’t encourage us to retain our *cultura* (Rodriguez, 1983), so this gotta be unique to ¡Poder Xicanx! Something about practicing culture . . . ” Kona vocalized.

“In education, we always talk about the importance of cultural relevancy (Ladson-

²⁶ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 22, 2019.

²⁷ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 22, 2019.

²⁸ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted February 5, 2019.

Billings & Tate, 1995), which in the context of ¡Poder Xicanx!, it would mean that our meetings and conversations are relevant to our everyday cultural experiences on campus,” Alberto contributed to Kona’s point.

“Something like that . . .” Kona continued.

“Maybe like culturally responsive, meaning ¡Poder Xicanx! responds to our cultural needs through our collective cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives. When our conversations are situated within our own lived experiences and frames of reference, then they become more personally meaningful (Gay, 2000),” Alberto suggested once again.

“I guess that could work,” Kona said, unpersuaded by Alberto’s suggestions.

Right before she was going to write “culturally responsive” on the chalkboard, Alma had an idea: “Our conversations and get togethers as ¡Poder Xicanx! members are not only culturally relevant and culturally responsive, but they also culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012). Cultural sustainability requires more than being responsive of or relevant to our cultural experiences as Mexicans on this campus—it requires that we support one another in sustaining the cultural knowledges and ways of knowing of our own communities at a university where our cultural ways are absent (Paris, 2012).”

“There it is!” Kona’s face lit up. “Because cultural sustainability embodies cultural relevancy and responsiveness, then it’s our perfect word.”

Kona, already near the chalkboard, wrote “Cultural Sustainability.”

“¡Poder Xicanx! helps us sustain our *cultura* through food . . . The *champurrado* . . . The *carne asada*,”²⁹ Ximena interjected, building on the idea of “Cultural Sustainability.”

“I agree,” José, a Mexican American from the Lennox-Inglewood area in California, nodded his head as he smiled. He added: “I feel we are sustained heavily through food. Like Kona mentioned earlier, at a couple of our events we literally had *horchata*, which I felt was a good way to try to reach out to our community.”³⁰

“I think the Mexican culture is a lot about food, and I think when we would come together, whether it was Romé cooking their *flautas*, that just helped me stay connected to my *cultura*,”³¹ Luna said timidly.

²⁹ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted January 31, 2019.

³⁰ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 27, 2018.

³¹ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted June 2, 2018.

“Oh my goodness, the food Romé makes . . .” Antonio licked his lips. “Having *flautas* and rice *con frijoles* like that, dude. That makes a difference.³² That sustains us for sure.”

“Even when we can’t bring the food physically, which often we will try, whether it’s through candy, food, drinks, or deserts, we bring it in through *pláticas y chisme* in order to reminisce on certain foods. We would either bring in the culture socially through our conversation, or we would bring it in physically with *paletas con chile or mazapanes*,”³³ Sway elaborated, mesmerized by all the conversations about food.

Alma moved her index finger up and down quickly and agreed: “YOOO! So true. During our ¡Poder Xicanx! meetings, I can speak about *tamales* and *conchas* without someone being like, ‘What’s a *concha*?’ I never knew how hard it was to explain Mexican food to people who don’t know Mexican food. It’s so hard.”³⁴

Laughter followed Alma’s testimony.

“And in ¡Poder Xicanx! spaces, it’s the complete opposite,” B, a Xicana from North Houston, Texas, supplemented Alma’s point. “I feel like I can talk about anything from home and I don’t have to explain myself. You guys just know. I remember the first Fight that I went to, it was also on Mexican Independence Day and I wore my shirt, the one that I got from Mexico . . . I don’t know and it’s just something that I couldn’t do somewhere else. I could wear it but they’re going to be like ‘Oh, it’s just an ordinary shirt.’ Others on this campus wouldn’t know the significance of wearing it on that specific day.”³⁵

“And that’s why I stopped explaining my *cultura* to other people after my first year,” Alberto said, agreeing with Alma and B’s complaints. “Unlike other spaces on campus, in ¡Poder Xicanx! spaces, my identity is affirmed by this counter-space that we have co-created” (Carter, 2007).

“My *cultura* is sustained through ¡Poder Xicanx! for the exact reason why everyone comes to the meetings, which is because we want to play some fucking *lotería*, eat some Hot Cheetos, and listen to Chalino Sanchez . . . ”³⁶ Aurora stated unapologetically.

³² This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted February 6, 2019.

³³ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted May 10, 2018.

³⁴ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted January 24, 2019.

³⁵ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 29, 2019.

³⁶ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted February 1, 2019.

“Music, we play music. That’s another way ¡Poder Xicanx! allows us to sustain our *cultura*,”³⁷ Ximena reminded everyone.

“YES! I’m definitely more willing to listen to Spanish music around other people now. It’s like, I don’t know, I feel like I won’t be the odd one out, even if I’m not in the ¡Poder Xicanx! spaces,”³⁸ Antonio shared.

“I want to be mindful of the time. It’s 9:15 and I know most of us have homework, so I don’t want to keep us here too long,” Kona interrupted, respectfully. “We have ‘horCHATas/Counter-space,’ ‘Home away from home,’ and ‘Cultural Sustainability,’” Kona recounted.

“We should aim for an even four components. Can anyone think of one last component?” Kona asked, hoping to get more ideas.

Everyone remained quiet, contemplating another component silently to themselves.

Counter-Space as a Site for Critical Consciousness

“Well, I remember one time I came across somebody who showed up to one meeting, and after that he said that he didn’t want to come anymore because it was too political and stuff like that,”³⁹ Aurora recounted, trying to propose another component.

“Bruhhh . . . too political?! My presence alone on this campus is political!” Alma insisted in a high-pitched voice.

“Right,” Aurora agreed.

“What was too political?” Kona asked as she laughed at the absurdity.

“This person literally said ¡Poder Xicanx! was too political for them,”⁴⁰ Aurora clarified.

“He did?” Kona smiled, knowing that wasn’t far from the truth. “I guess some people might think that we’re a very radical group, especially those who come to our meetings because they thought it was just gonna be a group of Mexicans eating Hot Cheetos and goofing around, right? And it’s not like we don’t do that, right? But we are all here to do work. I guess the word radical would be good. No, not radical. Critical and validating would be some words that I felt

³⁹ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted February 1, 2019.

⁴⁰ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted February 1, 2019.

from the conversations we have.”⁴¹

“Exactly,” Aurora continued, animatedly, “He was probably expecting to just have it be a hangout spot where he could just kick it with other Mexican people, and bond, I guess, and that’s absolutely things that we do, but I do think that we also feel that it’s really vital to our collective identity as a group, and our individual being—our literal spirit—to be political because where else are we going to be able to do that? If this space ain’t safe, then what other space are we going to have? I understand that he didn’t want it to be that serious, but I understand more the need to have spaces that are unapologetically political and are unapologetically conscious, period . . .”⁴²

“Some people just ain’t about that life,” Alberto added, siding with Aurora’s assertion.

Aurora nodded her head, “I get it. But this space is a lot more sacred than people can appreciate, and that’s okay, too.”⁴³

“Our presence, our existence is resistance,”⁴⁴ Sway intervened. “¡Poder Xicanx! is a site of resistance. Every meeting that we get together, we resist. We resist by supporting one another. We resist by educating one another . . .”

“We resist by being happy,” Luna interrupted before Sway could finish their statement. “This university doesn’t want us to be happy, so when we are, we resist.”

Everyone’s face lit up, knowing that Luna was speaking nothing but the truth.

“¡Poder Xicanx! is a space for Xicanx students by Xicanx students. We strive for it to be a space where you can come in and talk about your past or what’s happening now. You can talk about your emotions, you can talk about critical discourse, you can talk about really whatever you want to through the lens of your lived experiences and yourself, but as well as putting on that new lens, a new pair of glasses of being Xicanx and what does that mean,”⁴⁵ Alejandra, a Mexican American from San Antonio, Texas, suggested, without necessarily proposing a new component.

“That’s a good point. To be honest, I feel like I’m not always so critical. I’m not always thinking very critically,”⁴⁶ Kona confessed aloud without shame. “And so that’s something that I

⁴¹ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted May 12, 2018.

⁴² This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted February 1, 2019.

⁴³ This response was paraphrased from an in-depth interview conducted February 1, 2019.

⁴⁴ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted May 10, 2018.

⁴⁵ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted May 9, 2018.

⁴⁶ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted May 12, 2018.

get from ¡Poder Xicanx! I'm surrounded by individuals who are seeing the world in a different view point than mine. I feel like I learn to be more critical in ¡Poder Xicanx! spaces."⁴⁷

"It's true. ¡Poder Xicanx! caused me to become more critically conscious, too,"⁴⁸ La Borinqueña, a Xicana from Albuquerque, New Mexico, testified while she looked over to Kona for affirmation. "We don't get to have these critical conversations elsewhere. Our conversations are background education, that's our education, bouncing ideas off each other about what it means to be Xicano, Xicana, that's our education. Telling stories, that's our education, that's our form of educating each other, that's our classroom."⁴⁹

"How about we add 'Critical Consciousness' (Freire, 1970, 1973) as our last component," Sway suggested with great confidence.

Sway walked over to the board and spelled out "Consciousness" slowly to ensure they spelled it correctly. "¡Poder Xicanx! makes us aware of social, economic and political systems that oppress our *gente* and, more times than not, this awareness leads to action against these oppressive systems to achieve social change (Freire, 1970, 1973)."

"Bet," Aurora said in agreement. "I think that the conversations we have are demanding of being critical, and of being conscious. And do I think that ¡Poder Xicanx! gives me a space, a place that I feel is safe, a safe space for me to practice that critical conscious. To either be aware of it, or to strengthen it."⁵⁰

"True. In my case, I think ¡Poder Xicanx! strengthened my critical consciousness to a point where it has really reinforced it,"⁵¹ Antonio said.

"Because of ¡Poder Xicanx!, I'm so much more . . . I hate saying woke, but I'm more critical and way more aware of when people say very problematic things. I catch even myself sometimes and I'm like, 'Yo, I can't be thinking like that because that type of thinking is being influenced by years of racism,'"⁵² Alma told everyone.

"So, before I wouldn't even blink twice at Afro-Latinx people,"⁵³ Ximena admitted openly. "I knew they existed but always felt they were 'other.' I didn't have to think about it.

⁴⁷ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted May 12, 2018.

⁴⁸ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted October 23, 2018.

⁴⁹ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted October 23, 2018.

⁵⁰ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted February 1, 2019.

⁵¹ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted February 6, 2019.

⁵² This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted January 24, 2019.

⁵³ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted January 31, 2019.

And now I think more about my own anti-Blackness that has been taught to me (Haywood, 2017). I just try to think more critically about the things I think, the things I say, the things I do.”⁵⁴

“Ahhh! I didn’t go to the anti-blackness *horCHATa*, but I know that it was probably a really important one to have just because a lot of people don’t want to criticize their own community. Their own culture. They don’t want to talk more about things that are happening. They’re just like, ‘No, like we’re not talking about that.’ People from our own communities deny our own prejudices toward other groups and I feel like just in general having ¡Poder Xicanx! to be able to have those conversations is really important because you can have other people learn that we’re a marginalized group on campus and we face discrimination, but we also can be oppressors in certain ways (Haywood, 2017),”⁵⁵ B explained.

Snaps filled the air with approval.

“As a group, through our *horCHATas*, there’s a lot of intellectual stimulation. In our spaces, we share diverse perspectives, we disagree, we exercise our intellectual muscles, we discuss important social issues, we raise awareness, and we bring in issues relevant to our own lives and interests (Grier-Reed et al., 2008),” Kona summarized in an attempt to capture everything that had been said.

B smiled in agreement, “Through ¡Poder Xicanx!, I feel like I have become more conscious of my own identity . . . it’s become more overt in who I am. I feel like literally just coming to this school has made me more overtly in my identity because my mom thinks I’m annoying now. My mom says, ‘B is suddenly all Mexican. She’s like Mexican this, Mexican that, Mexican this . . .’”⁵⁶

“No lies. I feel like ¡Poder Xicanx! definitely brought in my own viewpoint. It made me feel prouder of my *Mexicanidad*, not as a nationality. But proud to be part of a group that’s so resilient. It made me feel stronger in my *Mexicanidad* identity because of the different experiences that Mexican people come from.⁵⁷ Even as Mexican, Mexican American, Xicanx People, our individual experiences are so diverse. This is especially true given that many of us are raised in different regions of the U.S.,” Kona explained.

⁵⁴ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted January 31, 2019.

⁵⁵ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 29, 2019.

⁵⁶ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 29, 2019.

⁵⁷ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted May 12, 2018.

“Yeah! ¡Poder Xicanx! has taught me that the word Xicano doesn’t mean the same thing for every single person.⁵⁸ Because we come from different places, we are so diverse. So, we have different meanings of the word Xicanx,” La Borinqueña added.

“I kind of get what y’all mean. Okay. So, ¡Poder Xicanx! definitely opened up my eyes, my world, to a more specific subset of identity. So, I didn’t know that you could go further than Mexican American. I’ve only heard the word Xicano, but I never knew what it meant, what it fully entailed to be Xicano or Xicanx. So definitely, having these discussions helped realize where do I identify? If I ever do want to identify, what does it mean, and where can I fit in? Which one do I specifically belong to, so that when people ask, ‘Oh, I identify as this, this, and that.’ Now, I know with confidence which is me,”⁵⁹ Cesar elaborated.

Alejandra shook her head up and down, “Similarly, I think ¡Poder Xicanx! has made me think critically about how I identify, too. It really opened up the door I guess for a look into Xicanx or *Xicanismo*, like what is it, and it is there to be studied and learned and it is also inside of me.”⁶⁰

Other members nodded in agreement.

In a short span of time, it became obvious that ¡Poder Xicanx!, as a co-created space, allowed its members to further develop their critical consciousness in various aspects. Being critical of their own identities to liberate themselves and challenge their own ways of being became a recurring theme. The time to end the meeting was almost up, yet they hadn’t come up with a concrete mission statement for ¡Poder Xicanx!. Instead, they critically reflected on building critical consciousnesses and their experiences being in community with one another.

Kona pushed in her glasses, “It’s getting really late. Maybe we should all head out.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Ximena agreed.

“Remember . . . ” Kona paused to build suspense. “There’s no such thing as too much *horCHATa!*”

Discussion and Implications

Through their participation in this ethnic-based organization, MMAX students created a counter-space, where they were able to build a “community of resistance” in order to “process

⁵⁸ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted October 23, 2018.

⁵⁹ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 21, 2018.

⁶⁰ This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted May 9, 2018.

and respond to the rejection that they experience attending a historically white college” (Yosso & Lopez, 2010, p. 94). This counterstory highlighted three key findings. First, ethnic-based organizations like ¡Poder Xicanx! serve as a valuable space where MMAX students can affirm each other by creating a home away from home. Second, to combat a culturally depriving campus environment, MMAX students joined an ethnic-based organization and created a counter-space to practice and sustain their ties to their home cultures and traditions. Lastly, being in community with people with similar ethnic backgrounds and overlapping upbringings inspired MMAX students to challenge one another intellectually and collectively build critical consciousness (Morales, 2017). All three findings reveal how counter-spaces are vital in navigating and thriving in a racially hostile campus environment (Solórzano et al., 2000). More specifically, as noted by Yosso et al. (2009), through their participation in ¡Poder Xicanx!, these MMAX students “respond[ed] to the rejection they face from a negative campus racial climate by building communities that represent and reflect the cultural wealth of their home communities” (p. 680).

An important implication this counterstory offers is that it emphasizes the usefulness and necessity of storytelling in academic spaces and platforms. Through the utilization of CRT counterstorytelling in educational research, researchers challenge traditional Eurocentric epistemologies imbedded within and perpetuated by notions of white supremacy in higher education (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). Furthermore, counterstories in education advance the idea experiential knowledge is important and central to understanding the nature of reality; in particular, counterstories contribute to the knowledge base of those often pushed to the margins in education (Milner & Howard, 2013). In her book *Counterstory*, moreover, Martinez (2020) argues that counterstorytelling serves as an important pedagogical tool because stories simplify complex theories and decode academic jargon, making the material being discussed easily accessible to the reader. As such, counterstorytelling democratizes knowledge and bridges the gap between academic and non-academic communities.

This story also offers important implications for university staff, faculty, and administrators. There is a need for a more inclusive and supportive campus environment, so that MMAX students can unapologetically practice their home cultures on their campuses. To help eliminate alienation on campus, there must be concerted efforts to educate and train faculty, staff, and administrators, as well as other students, to be actively anti-racist. The

normalization of anti-racism on university campuses will create a welcoming environment for all students, regardless of ethnic or cultural backgrounds. This counterstory prompts university personnel to challenge any preconceived notions that perpetuate the idea that Latinxs exist as a monolithic category. As alluded to in this counterstory, MMAX students gravitated toward each other and established this space because of their ethnic-specific experiences that are different from other Latinx students. For example, *Cinco de Mayo*, which is often incorrectly celebrated as Mexican Independence Day (September 16), is an issue that impacts MMAX students differently than other Latinx students because of its specific ties to Mexican history. Thus, it is important that those who work with university Latinx students recognize that Latinxs have different histories and days of celebration.

Another implication that derives from this counterstory is the importance of creating classroom and university spaces that intentionally address issues of racism, heteronormativity, sexism, xenophobia, and other systems of oppression. MMAX students expressed that ¡Poder Xicanx! allowed them to discuss issues that are going on in today's world, and how it impacts them, and what they can do about it. Thus, staff, instructors, and professors must be persistent and very purposeful in discussing and assigning materials about social justice issues. While some may think these conversations are difficult, they are necessary, and it is a collective responsibility to normalize such conversations in order to address inequities on campus and as a society at large.

Ultimately, I argue that (multi)cultural and ethnic-based organizations such as ¡Poder Xicanx! play a pivotal role in reminding students who are marginalized that they do belong and are more than capable of thriving at their respective universities. It is crucial for universities to understand the importance of establishing ethnic-based organizations, and to support such efforts socially, ideologically, and financially. While there is a need for these spaces and organizations, it is also necessary to address the white supremacist beliefs engrained in university campuses, which are the reasons behind why such spaces and organizations are needed in the first place. To begin to disrupt and challenge the white supremacist beliefs engrained in university campuses, universities must hire more Faculty, Staff, and Administrators of Color whose mission, research, and interests are directly and explicitly connected to racial and social justice.

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