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# "It Snows Year-Round Here": A Counterstory about Mexican/Mexican American/Xicanx Students' Experiences with Racism at a Predominantly White University in the Northeast

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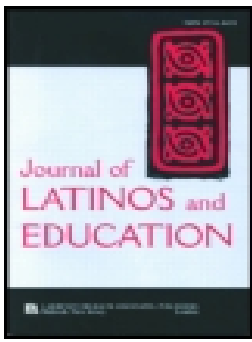
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# “It Snows Year-Round Here”: A Counterstory about Mexican/Mexican American/Xicanx Students’ Experiences with Racism at a Predominantly White University in the Northeast

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# “It Snows Year-Round Here”: A Counterstory about Mexican/Mexican American/Xicanx Students’ Experiences with Racism at a Predominantly White University in the Northeast

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## ABSTRACT

Using critical race theory counterstorytelling, I tell a story about the experiences of Mexican/Mexican American/Xicanx (MMAX) undergraduate students at a private, predominantly white university in the Northeast. Drawing on in-depth interviews, participant observations, pláticas, and document analyses, I highlight the various ways MMAX students experience discrimination on campus. More specifically, discrimination and unsettledness are experienced by MMAX students through the following ways: 1) Racist Name Calling and Racial Slurs; 2) Discrimination by Professors; and 3) Class Discussions as Microaggressions. Through counterstories like this one, I argue that we can shed light on injustices while staying true to our ancestral ways of knowing and make our research accessible to communities historically excluded from academia.

## KEYWORDS

Counterstorytelling; racial microaggressions; Mexican students; critical race methodology; racism in higher education

Latinx students find themselves navigating a foreign space when attending a predominantly white university and they experience racism and other forms of discrimination because of their identities (Yosso et al., 2009). For instance, González (2002) found that there was a lack of Latinx representations within the social, physical, and epistemological worlds of a predominantly white campus environment, which resulted in cultural deprivation, isolation, and alienation for Latinx students. Such finding is not surprising if you take into consideration that many universities were established and have historically remained accessible exclusively for whites only (Wilder, 2014). Thus, universities’ hegemonic structures, practices, and ideologies help reproduce white students’ privileged status while reaffirming the subordinate statuses of Students of Color (Cabrera, 2014; González, 2002; Gusa, 2010; Muñoz, 2009).<sup>1</sup> In this way, Latinx students find themselves constantly battling for space at their respective universities (Andrade, 2018).

Studies have shown that Latinx students have negative perceptions of the campus racial climate at predominantly white universities because they are more likely to experience prejudicial treatment than other white students (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). Moreover, the transition to a university is extremely difficult for Latinx students because they suffer severely from climate-related minority status stressors (Hurtado et al., 1996). Latinx students in higher education must navigate racially hostile educational spaces and experience various climate stressors such as “racial microaggressions” (Pierce, 1970), or preconscious degradations and putdowns – many of which are not gross and overt toward People of Color; rather, they are subtle and take a heavy toll on the lives of

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this manuscript, I use Students of Color interchangeably with Mexican/Mexican American/Xicanx (MMAX) students because MMAX students fall under the broader category of Students of Color, and the participants in this study also referred to themselves as Students of Color. While this study focuses exclusively on the experiences of MMAX students, other Students of Color – specifically Black and non-MMAX Latinx students – expressed to me similar concerns about racism on campus throughout the data collection process, but I did not collect those responses for this project.

victims, which ultimately result in emotional, mental, and physical strain (Yosso et al., 2009). In the past two decades, various studies have carefully documented how Latinx students experience racial micro-aggressions and navigate racism at their respective predominantly white universities (Harwood et al., 2012; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Solórzano et al., 2002; Yosso et al., 2009).

Undeniably, Latinx students experience additional complications often having to do with their race, which are emotionally and physically draining, what Smith (2004) refers to as “racial battle fatigue.” For example, Harwood et al. (2012) discovered that even in residential halls at universities, Latinx students, along with other Students of Color, 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. Furthermore, Solórzano and Villalpando (1998) found that Latinx students experience a plethora of discriminatory occurrences in an academic setting. Ultimately, they discovered three forms of racial and gender microaggressions Students of Color suffer from: (1) a sense of feeling out of places because of race/gender; (2) professors having lower expectations of them; (3) accounts of both subtle and not so subtle sexist and racist incidents. Additionally, Minikel-Lacocque (2013) also found similar results in her study where Latinx students experienced the following at their respective predominantly white university: getting stared at and feeling isolated, online hatred, ignored at bus stop and angry bus driver, stereotyping, and insensitivity and ignorance. Unfortunately, the experiences of the Latinx participants in this study add to the aforementioned literature on racism in higher education.

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.<sup>2</sup> Informed by critical race theory counterstorytelling, I created a composite story about MMAX students at a carne asada gathering where they have an in-depth conversation about how they make sense the racially hostile campus environment at their respective university. Specifically, in this story, I illustrate how MMAX students experienced discrimination and feelings of alienation that resulted from the variety of injustices they encountered on campus such as, hearing or witnessing racist name calling and racial slurs, experiencing discrimination by professors, and being part of class discussions that disregarded their lived experiences and culture. Ultimately, the purpose of my study was to provide a better understanding of how racism and white supremacy impact the experiences of MMAX students on a historically and predominantly white university. Drawing from previous studies on racial microaggressions and racism on predominantly university campuses (Harwood et al., 2012; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Solórzano et al., 2002; Yosso et al., 2009), this research project was guided by the following questions: How is a historically and predominantly white university experienced by MMAX students? What types of forms of discrimination do MMAX students experience at a historically and predominantly white university?

## 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.<sup>3</sup> Out of the total undergraduate student population of 15,226 students, 56.9% of SCU’s students are white. Latinx/

<sup>2</sup>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 wanted to use that identification, and Latinx is too broad and doesn’t consider the unique ethnic-based experiences of being MMAX. Nevertheless, MMAX falls under the broader “Latinx” category, so at times, I use MMAX and Latinx interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup>All names included in this manuscript are pseudonyms. Participant names were selected by participants.

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. Although the selection of this university was made because of convenience (since it was the nearest university to me while I was collecting data for my dissertation), I felt that this time and place was fitting. Because I was also navigating a racially hostile university campus environment, I wanted to support and be in solidarity with Latinx students and other Students of Color while learning more about their experiences to make sure that their stories are documented and told.

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 effect 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 analyses 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!,<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> This organization was very fluid in participation; however, core 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.

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<sup>4</sup>Pseudonym for name of organization.

<sup>5</sup>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 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.

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 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). My positionality as a first-generation, low-income Xicano student from Oxnard, CA, a predominantly Latinx community, definitely informed my decision to work specifically with MMAX students through a collaborative research approach and to use counterstorytelling as a research method. I attended and used my own experiences navigating a private, historically and predominantly white university far from home to help interpret the participant responses and to piece together this story.

### ***Critical race theory, LatCrit, and counterstorytelling***

To better understand whether MMAX experience any form of discrimination on their respective university campus, 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 under-represented, marginalized communities. Thus, CRT is a framework that will not only allow for close examination of race and racism, but also works toward 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 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. This is important because we need to deconstruct the Black/white binary as it applies to discussions about racism (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). 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).

Critical Race Theory (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, and that these counterstories are grounded in experiential knowledge and other forms of data (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Therefore, rather than dismissing this counterstory as self-indulgent, I urge the reader to consider it as a medium of resistance and as a counterdiscourse to challenge scholarly standards of objectivity and neutrality (Espino, 2012). While this counterstory is loosely based on several experiences, conversations, and observations, I use a composite story and characters, which I created in order to humanize the research data and ultimately recount my experiences as a first-generation Xicano student navigating a doctoral program (Cook & Dixson, 2013; Griffin et al., 2014; Martinez, 2014; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Further, Martinez (2014) argues that composite counterstorytelling “differs from fictional storytelling by critically examining theoretical concepts and humanizing empirical data while also deriving material for counterstory’s discourse, setting, and characters from sources” (p. 37). 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). That said, the composite story that follows is comprised of responses from participants and a systematic analysis of literature (books, peer-reviewed articles, reports, etc.) related to Students of Color in higher education, and I supplemented this story with my experiences and cultural intuition as a Xicano (Delgado Bernal, 1998).

## The counterstory

At the beginning of every Fall Semester around early September before the snow storms arrive at Snow City University in Upstate New York, ¡Poder Xicanx!, the Mexican American student organization, hosts its well-attended carne asada fiesta. More than just tacos y salsa, this get-together offered an invaluable opportunity for MMAX students to converse and socialize with one another. To laugh at Mexican memes and jokes. To dance cumbias. To sing Selena. To play lotería con frijoles. To speak Spanish without shame. To practice their home culturas hundreds of miles away from home. Because the carne asada itself attracted MMAX university students from all ages and grades, there was always a variety of experiences and knowledge in the space. That being said, mentorship occurred naturally. ¡Poder Xicanx! members, along with other MMAX university students, who have made their rounds provided genuine responses and powerful insights to the first-year students who have only been on campus for less than a month and are worried about what the future has to bring. While the carne asada y cebollitas sizzled on the charcoal BBQ grill in the backyard, memories were created and mentorship was fulfilled.

This year's carne asada was one for the books, literally. Not because someone made a pot of their mom's famous, 2-bowl minimum pozole verde de pollo. No. It was more food for thought than anything else. This year's carne asada fiesta gave rise to an entirely different way of thinking about college.

As soon as everyone got their food and made themselves comfortable in the living room, Hector, a first-year undergraduate student from Houston, TX, pointed to the TV and said, "Look!"

Everyone's heads turned to the TV in a perfect synchronized form.

"The Snow City University channel is giving us tips and tricks on how to deal with the winter," Hector stated as he walked to the TV to unmute it.

The TV's news headline read, "For First-years: How to Survive a Snow City University Winter."<sup>6</sup>

A white woman student-reporter broadcasted, "We will all soon remember that living on the inside of a snow globe has a number of downsides – namely, frozen nostril hairs. No one will be spared. For those of you who are new to the area, you might be thinking about how strong-willed you are. We have blacked out every winter that came before this, because otherwise we would have transferred by now. For the good of the [University], we had to block it out. For new and old, the [Snow City University] winter is a season that needs serious preparation. Allow me, a girl from New Jersey who catches a cold every other week, to tell you how to properly bundle up in order to make it to May."<sup>7</sup>

"¡Chale! with this whole winter situation! I hate the cold. This is what I'm most scared of. If I don't make it through college it's not because I ain't smart enough, it's because it's too cold here," Hector confessed, then raised the volume up and everyone else laughed at him.

The news screen had a long list of tips, including wearing undergarments, scarfs, mittens, multiple layers of pants, socks, and shirts, good boots, weather resistant jackets, and so on.

The reporter summarized the tips, "Save impressing people for when you move away from here after graduation. We are college students – who are we trying to impress anyway? You know what is impressive? Survival. There is a sense of Darwinism in all of us that values the ability to survive in a potential mate. So toss that crop top and cover up."<sup>8</sup>

"Y'all heard the lady," Hector continued jokingly, "If I look all raggedy on campus, it ain't 'cuz I don't have swag, it's because I'm trying to survive out here. Not only are these streets mean, but they're also cold."

Again, everyone was entertained by Hector's humor.

<sup>6</sup>This article was taken directly from Snow City University's student newspaper published on November, 2016.

<sup>7</sup>This quote was taken directly from Snow City University's student newspaper published on November, 2016.

<sup>8</sup>This quote was taken directly from Snow City University's student newspaper published on November, 2016.



### **“It snows year-round here”**

“Bro, you’re on the late train. Look outside. It’s already snowing!” Cesar, a graduating senior from Brooklyn, NY, told Hector.

Hector frowned at Cesar in confusion. Everyone else made a similar confused face. It was barely September. When everyone arrived to the carne asada fiesta, the sun was out and the air was humid, so everyone was completely confused, unsure of what exactly Cesar was talking about.

“Yeah. It snows year-round here at Snow City University,”<sup>9</sup> Cesar repeated his absurd statement.

Hector immediately ran to window and opened up the curtains, “Snow?!! There ain’t no snow out there! You’re trippin’ big time! You need some carne asada in your stomach fast! You’re seeing things, brotha!”

“Look carefully. It’s there, I can see it from here,” Cesar stated confidently.

Again, Hector looked out the window, “Nahhh. All I see is college students out there playing frisbee and beer pong.”

“Let’s be specific, you see WHITE college students playing frisbee and beer pong,” Cesar insisted. “That’s the real snow you have to deal with.”

Everyone in the living quickly laughed before pausing in complete silence, listening carefully. ¡Poder Xicanx! members knew where the conversation was going because of their previous experiences navigating a predominantly white university as Brown students. However, Hector, along with the other first-year students, was dumbfounded. Speechless. He was at a loss for words.

“It snows year-round at Snow City University?”<sup>10</sup> Hector said underneath his breath, trying to figure out what exactly Cesar meant. After a few silent seconds, he asked, “What do you mean by that? Where did you get that from?”<sup>11</sup>

Cesar crossed his leg and leaned back in his seat, “So it was towards the end of my Summer Start six weeks, a summer program for first-year students to help them transition into the university. It was towards the end of it, and I was meeting with my college advisor. I was in the school of engineering at the time, so I had to meet up with him, and he was just asking me, ‘Do you think you’re ready? Do you think you’re prepared for the new school year?’ And I was just like, ‘I think so. I think I can handle it, in terms of the workload, the course load.’ And he was like, ‘Are you ready for it to snow?’ I’m just thinking, literally, where Snow City University is located is a very snowy city. So I was like, ‘Yeah, sure, ’cause it’s a lot of snow.’”<sup>12</sup>

Cesar dipped his chip in his salsa, took a bite, and then continued, “Well, no, what he had said was it’s going to snow next week. Mind you, it’s August, so I’m thinking, it snows here that early? And then I looked at him with a puzzled face, and I was like, ‘What do you mean, it’s going to snow next week?’ And he’s just, like, ‘Well, yeah, man. All the white people are going to show up on campus.’ And I was just like, ‘Oh. In that way, no, I don’t think I’m ready for the snow, man. I’m not.’ I knew it was going to be a lot of it, but I underestimated how much . . .”<sup>13</sup>

Alberto, a Xicano doctoral student from Oxnard, CA, looked over to Alma, “Alma, I was super cracking up when I saw your Instagram and how you were in the snow and then you tagged white oppression. Is that why you did that?”<sup>14</sup>

Alma, a second-year Xicana from Chicago, IL, pushed up her glasses with her index finger, “Yeah. Because it’s true and that is what snow reminds me of . . . I took that picture while I was on the Students of Color retreat and I love going there because there’s no white people and it’s not like we white-bash. We just keep it real with each other. So many people there have so many experiences, as in we all connected on how different the world works on this campus. I remember my friend took that

<sup>9</sup>This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 21, 2018.

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

<sup>11</sup>This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 21, 2018.

<sup>12</sup>This entire response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 21, 2018.

<sup>13</sup>This entire response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 21, 2018.

<sup>14</sup>This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted January 24, 2019.

picture and I was like, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to tag white oppression for the snow. I thought it was good metaphor, because what does snow do? It slows you down when you're walking. I remember we had to hike through that snow to get to these rope courses to zip line and stuff, and I remember just being mad. I think that's white oppression, it slows us down."<sup>15</sup>

All the seasoned upper-class students in the living room shook their heads up and down in agreement, while the first-year students listened quietly.

"For sure! In your head, you think of a college campus on TV. It's like, all right, things are going to be like that. But when you are in the thick of it, it's like, whoa. It snows a lot,"<sup>16</sup> Cesar added.

"Yeah . . . Universities ain't what they seem like on TV!" Alberto chimed in, "The college choice process for Students of Color is very complicated. We gotta constantly think about serious dilemmas and major struggles not generally faced by white Americans (Feagin et al., 1996, p. 48). Choosing and attending a college is not the same for everyone, especially for People of Color!"

Kona, who is from Houston, TX, intervened respectfully, "Very true! In most university brochures, college represents a time of optimism, exciting challenges, and fun opportunities. Few students would anticipate that their university experience might be negatively impacted by racism, sexism, classism, and other isms" (Yosso et al., 2009).

She ripped off a juicy piece of carne asada from her plate, wrapped it in a corn tortilla and took a bite, "Take a second and think about it. University recruitment brochures would not advertise a campus climate wherein whites enjoy a sense of entitlement, while Students of Color face charges of being unqualified and 'out of place' (Yosso et al., 2009, pp. 659–660). Even though we know it's true, they can't be that honest. It will look bad for them. Remember, they want to be 'inclusive and diverse.'"

"The university's diversity efforts are straight trash!" Alma suggested unapologetically.

"Technically speaking, they are. Students of Color, specifically Latinx students, continue to face racial barriers in higher education on a daily basis (Yosso et al., 2009). After reading so many reports and books, I learned that scholars continue to examine what positive and negative factors influence the overall climate on campus (Ford & Malaney, 2012; Jones et al., 2002)," Alberto stated eloquently, trying to sound smart.

Alberto looked over to Hector, along with the other first-year students. "Basically, what these studies show is what we already know through our own experiences – which is that the transition to college has been shown to be extremely difficult for Latinx students. Trip out tho . . ."

Alberto took a sip of his drink as suspense filled the air. "The transition to college for Latinx students is difficult REGARDLESS if they are judged to have high potential for success upon entering college (Hurtado et al., 1996). Even the best of the best of our gente are struggling out here."

Again, the experienced students who have been at Snow City University knew why, while first-year students wondered in silence.

"It's all the snow, huh?" guessed Denise, a first-year Xicanx undergraduate student from San Diego, CA.

"Yup!" Alberto agreed. "Everyone in this room who has been at this school for more than six months will tell you that the snow ain't no joke! Research articles will tell you what most of us already know – that Latinx students suffer severely from climate-related minority status stressors. These various forms of racial discrimination, whether overt or covert, have a depressing effect on Latinx students' adjustment in the academic and social arenas, attachment to the institution, and personal-emotional adjustment (Hurtado et al., 1996)."

Hector, along with other first-year students, slowly nodded their heads up and down as if they understood what Alberto was saying.

"YESSS," Aurora jumped in the conversation, "Students of Color at SCU experience various climate stressors such as 'racial micro-aggressions'" (Pierce, 1970).

"Racial mi-cro . . . aggre . . . s . . . si . . . ons . . ." Denise stuttered, trying to pronounce it correctly.

<sup>15</sup>This entire response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted January 24, 2019.

<sup>16</sup>This response was taken directly from an in-depth interview conducted April 21, 2018.

“Yeah. Racial micro-aggressions. They’re low-key insults and putdowns” (Pierce, 1970), Kona responded, quick as a flash.

“They’re hella low-key. Many of these putdowns are not gross or overt toward People of Color. Nope. Instead, these insults are hella subtle, yet they take a heavy toll on the lives of victims (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015),” Alma added.

“Not that this matters, but there are a handful of research studies that have proven Latinx students at predominantly white universities experience ‘racial micro-aggressions’ (Harwood et al., 2012; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2002; Villalpando, 2003; Yosso et al., 2009),” Alberto insisted.

“You see! Even the research proves it,” Aurora contended, proudly. “All this snow piled up at this university year-round is bound to give rise to racial-microaggressions. And who are those mainly affected by this toxic campus climate? Students of Color. Like us. I’m telling you, racism at its finest.”

The room was silent until Aurora casually raised the volume of the stereo, “This is my jam!”

“Cómo Te Voy A Olvidar” by Los Ángeles Azules alleviated the thick air that was seemingly tense.

“Amor, amor, amor . . . Amor, amor, amor . . . Quiero que me vuelvan a mirar tus ojos . . .” Aurora sang carelessly, while others sang along as back-up singers.

As everyone sang or scattered to get another plate, Denise walked over to Kona and asked innocently, “I really appreciated the snow metaphor. It really got me thinking. How do you know if you have experienced a racial micro-aggression? What do racial micro-aggressions sound or look like? Have people at this party experienced this racism Aurora keeps talking about?”

Kona gave Denise a heartfelt hug, rubbed her back, and said, “All Latinx students experience this campus differently. These racial micro-aggressions look and feel differently for everyone. As soon as people get their second plates, I’ll bring everyone together and we can have a quick plática about this ‘snow.’ That’s what ¡Poder Xicanx! is all about. To share our experiences in order to help others alike.”

Denise smiled at Kona and hurried to the kitchen to get a plate.

Before anyone could get to the aux cord and play another song, Kona lowered the volume, “¿Cómo están? How’s the carne asada?”

Everyone grubbed loudly, indirectly answering the question.

“This snow conversation is a good one! As soon as everyone gets settled, we should have a plática on our experiences dealing with snow. By snow, I mean white people on campus. Y’all down?”

Aurora answered immediately, “Foo, you know I’m always down for the get down.”

Kona laughed, “Yeah . . . We all know you’re Brown and always down . . . But what about everyone else? Are y’all down?”

No one in the living room complained. Social justice-oriented pláticas are an ordinary part of ¡Poder Xicanx! meetings. For the organization’s members, it was business as usual. For the first-year students, it was a lecture waiting to happen.

Kona looked over to Alberto, “Alberto, we know you’ve been studying racism in higher education for a minute now. Your doctoral training specializes in this topic. Could you please facilitate this plática?”

“No doubt. I got you!” Alberto agreed. “Aight y’all. I don’t have a script, but I’m going to freestyle. Thank you so much for coming. I know it’s super nice outside. We don’t want to be here, but then we do. I have to remind you that this is 100% voluntary. You can take off if you don’t feel comfortable. This conversation can get tense, so we want to make sure everyone is well. Please feel free to step out if you need a break.”<sup>17</sup>

Alberto scanned the living room for quejas, and then continued, “If I really wanted to, I can think of some questions, but I don’t want to use them because I want this conversation to be as organic as possible. As we heard earlier, Cesar said that his advisor told him it snows here in August, which it obviously doesn’t, right? It doesn’t literally snow, but there are a lot of white people. This creates

<sup>17</sup>This response was paraphrased from a plática conducted April 19, 2019.

a perfect pathway to talk about how do we deal with whiteness at a predominantly white university as Mexican, Mexican American, Xicanx folks.”<sup>18</sup>

“Look at you. All professional . . . ” Kona mocked Alberto.

Alberto smiled, “Well, you asked for me to facilitate, and I’m going to deliver.”

He continued, “I think a good starting point would be to talk about my own experiences. I come from what is known as a ‘Hispanic serving institution,’ where you see a lot of Faculty of Color and a lot of Students of Color. My transition to this university has been pretty drastic. There was a lot of culture shock. For instance, even just being in a class where I’m the only Xicano or the only Latino was something that just threw me off because at my previous university, most of us were Brown. It was rare to see a white person in my classes. It was almost the complete opposite as here.”<sup>19</sup>

“Culturally . . . ” Aurora raised her voice. “Being here isn’t really . . . it isn’t really a culture shock because of my educational history and just this being what I had to be used to since fourth grade. Although I grew up in the hood, I come from this private white school . . . I think I’m just really over it at this point. I’m like, wow. I would’ve loved for it to be a culture shock because that would’ve been something different, but instead I’m stuck here being frustrated and angry in the same ways that I’ve been frustrated and angry since I was 12.”<sup>20</sup>

### Racist name calling and racial slurs

“Sis, you’ve been dealing with snow since you were 12?!” Alma exclaimed loudly. “Bless your heart. I’ve only been on this campus for 1 year and I’m already angry AF. I’m mad just thinking about it. I still recall the time someone called me a Spic when we were protesting after the racist fraternity incident.”<sup>21</sup>

“Liessss,” Aurora said ironically, knowing that Alma was telling the truth.

“Swear. I was walking down with a friend and I had my yellow Mexican pancho. Someone rolled down in their car, it was a group of white guys, and they yelled Spic,”<sup>22</sup> Alma recounted.

Everyone stared at Alma for more information. The experienced students in the room weren’t as entertained by this experience as the first-year students. They have had heard of incidents like this far too many times. On the other hand, some of the first-year students’ jaws dropped in disbelief.

Alma continued, “To be honest with y’all, I didn’t know the word Spic until I came on campus because back in Chicago, if you wanted to offend Mexicans, you wouldn’t say Spic. No one would say Spic. Instead, people would say something like, ‘beaner’ or ‘wet back’ or any of those. I never knew Spic was a thing. But when someone told explained to me what Spic meant, I was like, ‘Get out the car.’”<sup>23</sup>

Alma raised her fists to her chin and shadow boxed the air like a professional boxer ready to defend a boxing title.

“Ding ding ding,” Antonio, a Xicano from Homestead, FL, yelled to simulate a boxing match atmosphere.

“You already know, G,” Alma winked at Antonio.

“Real talk, racial slurs shouldn’t be surprising. I’ve seen explicit racism on campus.” Antonio said. “A few houses down and across the street, so maybe like three, four houses down, from me there were these white kids. It was beginning of the year last semester. They were drinking, day drinking, whatever. It was maybe like 4:00pm or 5:00pm on a Sunday, and I was on my porch. I was chilling, cooling, and they had their music playing. That song with Chris Brown and Lil Dicky came on. You know which one I’m talking about?”<sup>24</sup>

“Oh, no!” Luna put her hand on her forehead, already knowing what the song was about.

<sup>18</sup>This response was paraphrased from a plática conducted April 19, 2019.

<sup>19</sup>This response was taken directly from a plática conducted April 19, 2019.

<sup>20</sup>This entire response was taken directly from a plática conducted April 19, 2019.

<sup>21</sup>This sentence was taken directly from an interview conducted January 24, 2019.

<sup>22</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted January 24, 2019.

<sup>23</sup>This entire response was taken directly from an interview conducted January 24, 2019.

<sup>24</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted February 6, 2019.

“I know,” Antonio shook his head, “So in the song, Chris Brown says the N word maybe like four or five times in a row, like, ‘I’m that . . . do, do, do, do, do, right?’ So, these are all white kids by the way. As soon as that part comes on, they turn it up and they start screaming the N-Word at the top of their lungs, hard E-R though.”<sup>25</sup>

“SMH!” Alma stated. “The song doesn’t even say it with a hard E-R. That’s terrible.”

“I know! It was some scary shit,” Antonio maintained with a serious look on his face.

“Along those lines, there was an incident that happened on Yik Yak my junior year,”<sup>26</sup> Kona added.

Noticing that some of the people frowned in confusion, Kona explained, “So Yik Yak is an anonymous microblogging app.”

“People be posting some racist ass shit on Yik Yak,” Aurora insisted.

Kona nodded, “Yeah they do. There was that Multicultural Greek Stomp The Yard thing on campus and people were posting on Yik Yak like, ‘Why are these Monkeys dancing on the quad’ or something. Stuff like that.”<sup>27</sup>

“Well, my roommate put me down as ‘Mexican drug Lord’ in his phone contacts as soon as he found out I was Mexican,”<sup>28</sup> Enrique, a white-passing Mexican from Plainview, TX, stated in an attempt to build on Alma’s statement.

“This reminds me of something that happens to me frequently,” Alejandra, a Mexican American from San Antonio, TX, said immediately after Enrique, in an attempt to disrupt any potential silence. “When I say I’m Mexican, people will be like, ‘Oh, so you have family in the cartel, right?’ or ‘You’re Mexican, right? You smoke weed,’ and I’m like, ‘Okay. Think about what you’re asking me and why.’ They could have just asked me if I smoke weed. They don’t have to be like, ‘You’re Mexican so you smoke weed,’ or, ‘Oh she’s Mexican, she loves Tequila.’ People here can be terrible people.”<sup>29</sup>

“That has happened to me, too!” Kona, shared willingly. “The minute that I tell someone that I am Mexican, POC or white, they’re like . . . ‘okay,’ but the minute they hear me speak Spanish, they ask what I was racially/ethnically, and I’m like ‘Mexican,’ and then the minute they find out I’m Mexican they’re like ‘Where’s your Chihuahua, where’s your sombrero, where’s your Tequila?’ like, you know . . .”<sup>30</sup>

“Oh God,” La Borinqueña, a fourth-year Xicana/Puerto Rican from Albuquerque, NM, sighed as she put her curly brown hair in a bun. “My first negative experience was going into the dining hall one day and seeing the decorations that they had for Latino, Hispanic Heritage Month or whatever. Sombreros and all that, and the imagery. And I felt so overwhelmed because it was so caricatured and just kind of cartoon and it’s just, you know, the take on my food that they kind of threw in there and just, you know how I feel about food, and about cooking. And so I had, that was probably the first really, really bad experience that I had. And I was blessed to have a Mexican American as my RA and I went to her and I was like, what is this shit?”<sup>31</sup>

“Yeah, I mean . . . even just Cinco de Mayo in general. It’s just something that happens on this campus . . . people who would just say rude stuff to you here and there. Discrimination just happens,”<sup>32</sup> Diana, a Mexican American from NYC, said emotionally.

“For reals!” Kona responded agitatedly. “I don’t remember what year it was but during the university’s annual big concert there were white students and they knew I was Mexican, but I was hanging out with my friend, chillin’ and minding our own business. This white student was wearing a sombrero first of all, and like, she saw me and she stopped and she went out of her way and into the common room where I was and she was like, ‘Hey, it’s Cinco de Mayo!’ And I didn’t even know it was

<sup>25</sup>This entire response was taken directly from an interview conducted February 6, 2019.

<sup>26</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted May 12, 2018.

<sup>27</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted May 12, 2018.

<sup>28</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted May 9, 2018.

<sup>29</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted May 9, 2018.

<sup>30</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted May 12, 2018.

<sup>31</sup>This entire response was taken directly from an interview conducted October 23, 2018.

<sup>32</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted May 18, 2018.

Cinco de Mayo, right. And I was like ‘Oh it is, you’re right,’ and she’s like ‘Where’s your Tequila!’ And I was like ‘do you have some?’ I didn’t realize what she was saying.”<sup>33</sup>

“You didn’t realize how messed up it was?”<sup>34</sup> Alberto asked.

“I didn’t. Until my friend told me, ‘Yo that’s fucked up,’ and I was like ‘what do you mean?’ And then she explained it to me, and I was like ‘oh!’”<sup>35</sup> Kona confessed.

“Wow.” Alberto scratched his head in disdain. “That’s terrible in so many ways. One, Cinco de Mayo is celebrated for the wrong reasons. Everyone thinks it’s Mexican Independence Day, but it ain’t.”

“Yeah! Mexican Independence Day is actually September 16<sup>th</sup>,” Aurora added.

“Exactly,” Alberto nodded in agreement, “And two, she was appropriating a Mexican sombrero. And three, she went out of your way to insult you. I bet she didn’t even think it was a big deal. This insult was probably downplayed or unnoticed by her” (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998).

“And fourth, she automatically assumed that because you’re Mexican, you would have Tequila. SMH!” Alma interjected.

“I know. I know. It’s really bad,” Kona put her hand on her forehead.

### Discrimination by professors

“Well I feel like just being in a predominately white college affects a lot of Latinx students because I feel they don’t usually feel accepted,”<sup>36</sup> Mila, a second-year Mexican American from Spanish Harlem, NYC, stated in a soft voice.

She continued awkwardly, “There’s this girl on campus that I know about . . . she was saying that she was taking a class with a white professor and the professor asked her if she speaks Aztec because the girl’s from Mexico, so the professor assumed . . . well the professor didn’t even know that she was from Mexico, she just assumed that.”<sup>37</sup>

“The professor assumed that she was Mexican?”<sup>38</sup> Just by looking at her,” Alberto asked Mila to clarify.

“Yeah. And the professor was like do you speak Aztec and the girl got offended because how do you just assume that . . . that’s not even a language so it’s like . . .”<sup>39</sup> Mila shrugged her shoulders in frustration.

“It would be Nahuatl if anything!” Kona responded happily.

“That’s what I’m saying,” Mila agreed.

La Borinqueña waited patiently before she contributed, “And then sometimes professors’ assumptions hurt us academically. The professors in the classes I took assumed that all students had the same educational opportunities and during their lectures they would just be going and going and going because they got the impression that all the students who came in were already at a certain level, but I wasn’t at that same level. So, I was like, wow. I felt completely lost like I was just speaking a completely different language.”<sup>40</sup>

“Just in terms of having your guard up with your professors? Y’all see me often. I look like a bitch and I look like I’m angry in class because I am literally. How am I supposed to make a relationship with these professors who, I can’t even explain . . .”<sup>41</sup> Aurora sighed out of frustration.

She gathered her thoughts, and then continued, “In my business class, it’s so gross to see the female professors not just flirt, but they just automatically give the upper hand to the white male students.

<sup>33</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted May 12, 2018.

<sup>34</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted May 12, 2018.

<sup>35</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted May 12, 2018.

<sup>36</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 18, 2019.

<sup>37</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 18, 2019.

<sup>38</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 18, 2019.

<sup>39</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 18, 2019.

<sup>40</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted October 23, 2018.

<sup>41</sup>This response was taken directly from a plática conducted April 9, 2017.

That's all that's in our fucking our School of Business is all white male students. They'll use them for examples even if they're all the way in the back of the room and I'm sitting right there in front of them, ready to be called on. They'll use Colin and Cole in the back of the room as examples in law, in my accounting class."<sup>42</sup>

"Terrible," Alberto acknowledged Aurora's statement.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to build a relationship with you if you call me 'Aaron' instead of 'Aurora.' After having me for six fucking months in your class, you're going to call me 'Aaron,'"<sup>43</sup> Aurora said angrily.

"They call you Aaron?"<sup>44</sup> Alma fake-laughed at the absurdity of the instance.

"Like literally called me 'Aaron.'"<sup>45</sup> Aurora clarified. "She was passing out the exams and so everybody was there. She said, 'Aa-aa-ron?' 'Aaron?' I was like, 'Aurora.' I literally snatched it out of her hand and walked out of the classroom. I was like, 'Are you fucking kidding me?' I was so upset. Now, I have this wall up. How am I supposed to make those networking connections with you when you don't give a shit to actually hear what I give a shit about? All they see is your grade and apparently not my name because they don't know that shit, either. There aren't that many students in your class. There's like 40 students but, we're seeing each other two, three times a week. I talk during class, I'm doing well in your class, but three months into the class, the professor still can't get my name right. This happened not once, but multiple times in front of the whole class as she's passing back exams that I have a 95 on. I'm one of your best students and you can't say my name?"<sup>46</sup>

Alma sucked her teeth, "Professors not knowing your name is some racial micro-aggression shit (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). Then you wonder why people end up Americanizing their names for the sake of comfort. People assimilate and damn near change their whole lives for others. Shake My Head."

"Nah. But for reals I feel you on that one," Mila added. "My name for non-Spanish speakers is very hard to pronounce. That's why I shortened it . . . well I didn't shorten it, but when I introduce myself to non-Spanish speakers I usually say my real name, but I tell them they can call me 'Mila' because I know they're not going to be able to pronounce my real name."<sup>47</sup>

"Don't professors see your real name on the roll call? Do they try to call you by your real name?" Alberto wondered.

"They don't even say my name,"<sup>48</sup> Mila answered.

"What do they say?"<sup>49</sup> Aurora asked.

Mila looked over to Aurora without any emotion. "They don't say anything."<sup>50</sup>

Alberto squinted his eyes in confusion. "So . . . how do they communicate with you?"<sup>51</sup>

"Okay, so my TA for last semester for my diversity class didn't even know my name. He just handed me papers. He would be like, 'Here you go.' He wouldn't say Mila or anything like that, he would just be like 'here you go, here's your paper.' That's how he communicated. Putting it right in front of my face. So yeah,"<sup>52</sup> Mila giggled innocently.

Aurora shook her head. "But would he say other people's names?"<sup>53</sup>

<sup>42</sup>This response was taken directly from a plática conducted April 9, 2017.

<sup>43</sup>This response was taken directly from a plática conducted April 9, 2017.

<sup>44</sup>This response was taken directly from a plática conducted April 9, 2017.

<sup>45</sup>This response was taken directly from a plática conducted April 9, 2017.

<sup>46</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted February 1, 2019.

<sup>47</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 18, 2019.

<sup>48</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 18, 2019.

<sup>49</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 18, 2019.

<sup>50</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 18, 2019.

<sup>51</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 18, 2019.

<sup>52</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 18, 2019.

<sup>53</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 18, 2019.

“He would, yeah,” Mila recounted. “So I felt that was pretty messed up. I felt like damn, you could at least ask me, if you don’t know how to pronounce my name at least try and be like ‘Am I pronouncing it correctly? Or do you have a nickname?’ or something like that but he never asked.”<sup>54</sup>

“I feel like we’ve all had our fair share with white professors on this campus,” Luna stated, agreeing with the previously shared testimonies. “There was a professor when I told him I was Mexican, he told me, ‘Oh, your English is really good.’ And I was thinking to myself, ‘wait, I was born here, of course my English is good.’ And then I still had to stand there and do my presentation, and I was just like, ‘Fuck, this is my grade right now, I can’t argue with this teacher,’ and stuff. That experience really hurt me, and I was like, ‘What the heck, don’t talk to me like that.’ I don’t know . . .”<sup>55</sup>

“Trashhhhh.” Aurora stated unapologetically.

## Class discussions as microaggressions

“I know what you mean about all this trash,” Angelica looked at Aurora, “In some of the conversations that we had as students, there were Caucasian males just discussing stuff and I was like, ‘What are you talking about?’ I felt so pissed off because I wanted to say something but then I didn’t because I was like, am I just gonna be shut down by the teacher in the sense that I feel acknowledged that I said it but she won’t keep going further with the topic.”<sup>56</sup>

“YES!” Sway replied happily, knowing he wasn’t the only one who had gone through that.

“I think it was in a Western Civilization class where discussions came up of leaders and whatnot. But yeah, some of the things people said sometimes pissed me off just because they were ridiculous. And then people were just like they didn’t even give a shit about it. In my head I’m like, ‘You’ve stolen this water and yet you don’t give a shit about where it needs to go, what it pertains to.’ And people were just so . . . they were like, ‘Yeah, we did that, that’s a bad thing we did,’ but they never really got how frustrating that is to feel that they did that to us. Or that they did it to a country that I belong to,”<sup>57</sup> Angelica elaborated in frustration.

“But it is what it is,”<sup>58</sup> Tlacaelel, a graduating Xicano from St. Louis, MO, joined the conversation out of nowhere. “I remember this one time, in class, I was trying to explain the severity of immigrants transitioning from one location to another, and how the amount of people who are dying in transitioning is very serious. And I remember, this Jewish girl kind of brushed it off by bringing up genocide.”<sup>59</sup>

Alberto raised his eyebrows, “Like the Holocaust and stuff?”<sup>60</sup>

“Yeah, shit like that bro,” Tlacaelel responded. “So that’s when the stuff from the Mexica Movement was really hitting on me. The Mexica Movement taught me that our people, the Indigenous Peoples, were about the first people to experience genocide on this land, and stuff like that.”<sup>61</sup> But people on this campus aren’t ready to engage in that conversation, and that’s wack!”

“Honestly, I go back to my time as an art and design student when it was really hard for me to be in a class where I even had some white peers appropriating Mexican culture right in front of me sometimes, and I was like, ‘This isn’t your culture, this is exactly what I’m trying to bring. I’m a Mexican designer trying to bring awareness of my culture,’ and it just really hurt to see another white kid get credit for it,”<sup>62</sup> Luna’s voice cracked.

Immediately after Luna finished, Diana jumped back into the conversation, “My whole major, Citizenship and Civic Engagement (CCE), is just white. If you see the learning community of CCE, it’s

<sup>54</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 18, 2019.

<sup>55</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted June 02, 2018.

<sup>56</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted October 29, 2018.

<sup>57</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted October 29, 2018.

<sup>58</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 22, 2019.

<sup>59</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 22, 2019.

<sup>60</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 22, 2019.

<sup>61</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 22, 2019.

<sup>62</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted June 2, 2018.



all white students. One of their required readings is by Sam Huntington called ‘Clash of Civilizations,’ which is horrible. We read ‘The Hispanic Challenge,’ which is basically saying that Mexicans are the worst people in the world. It’s a required reading for these white students. Being the only Mexican in these classes, it’s pretty tough because you have to say, ‘No, this is not true (Tatum, 2007).’<sup>63</sup>

A few people snapped in agreement since they’ve also been in that position before.

Diana continued emotionally with her point, “It’s just constantly being angry, constantly debating. You can’t even have dialogue with these people. I don’t even consider them allies. I just feel like they’re just pretending because they want to look like they’re activists or they want to get that recognition that they’re intersectional. People just say intersectionality. They just put it out there just so they don’t get attacked anymore. I just can’t stand these people in my major . . .”<sup>64</sup>

“I feel y’all big time,” B, a Xicana from North Houston, TX, said empathically, agreeing with everyone who had shared a testimony. B continued: “Like in the classrooms. Say you’re in a classroom of like 30 students, you’re the only one who speaks a certain way, who is different from everybody else. You’re not going to feel welcome there. You’re not going to feel like your opinions are validated even if they are. You’re not going to feel like you’re welcomed there just because everything’s so different and you’re going to second guess yourself and be like, ‘Oh, is this really the right answer?’ Even though it is . . . I feel like that’s something that really affects a lot of Students of Color out here.”<sup>65</sup>

“Well, just in terms of experiencing discrimination on campus, I mean, there’s probably been a few remarks, a few subtle things, I feel maybe white students didn’t even realize (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998), but it was definitely something that was maybe discriminatory and that was very, almost alienating. You know, saying remarks about me being the only Latino in a white space. Just, stuff like that. I don’t actually have an example. But, I’ve definitely experienced something like that,”<sup>66</sup> Diego recounted, trying to connect his experience to B’s.

“These white foos just don’t know how to act sometimes,” Tlacaoel exclaimed matter-of-factly.

“Sounds like a super racist campus . . . But y’all don’t believe me,” Aurora reminded everyone.

“You right, tho,” Alberto agreed. “There is certainly a serious predicament at play – Students of Color are admitted to this university, yet they are not given the same opportunities as their white counterparts to enjoy the campus environment due to additional campus climate stressors, such as all this toxic snow. This conversation, including everyone’s powerful testimonies, speaks directly to what Aurora has been saying this whole time that racism is experienced at this white university through social interactions. Without a doubt, dealing with this snow is a form of racial microaggression (Solórzano, 1998; Yosso et al., 2009).”

“But how exactly do we deal with this ‘white people’ snow?” Denise asked firmly, demanding a straightforward answer.

“I guess the first thing to do is to acknowledge that this additional snow exists. Some people can’t even do that,” Kona responded compassionately.

“Umm-mmm,” Denise affirmed.

“Maybe next week we can do a plática on ways we have dealt with and navigated this ‘white people’ snow,” Kona suggested and looked over to Alberto.

“That would be dope!” Alma shouted.

“If need be, I can help facilitate that plática, too,” Alberto offered.

Aurora stood up and drank the rest of her drink. She walked over to the kitchen, opened the fridge to get a refill, and then came back to the living room, “I’m tired of being angry, but I’m fucking angry all the time. I walk around this campus angry. If you see me sometimes, if I run into one of y’all, that’s the one time I smile the whole day. If I give you my little smile and my little wave, that’s as much as I’m

<sup>63</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted May 18, 2018.

<sup>64</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted May 18, 2018.

<sup>65</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted April 29, 2019.

<sup>66</sup>This response was taken directly from an interview conducted February 5, 2019.

going to smile in a day.<sup>67</sup> I love y'all, but I don't love this university. Let's enjoy the time we have together."

Aurora walked over to the stereo, plugged in the aux chord into her phone, selected Juan Gabriel's "El Sinaloense," fast-forwarded to her favorite part, raised the volume, and then started zapateando freely like she would at a Quinceañera in her hometown, Lennox, CA.

"Soy del mero Sinaloa, Donde se rompen las olas, Y busco una que ande sola, Y que no tenga marido, Pa' no estar comprometido, Cuando resulte la boda . . . Ay, ay, ay . . . Mamá por Dios . . ."

Immediately after Aurora started zapateando, everyone else danced along.

"This is one way we deal with all this additional snow," Kona smiled at Denise.

## Discussion

This counterstory highlighted three key findings. First, MMAX students at SCU experienced racial microaggressions through explicit and implicit insults such as racial jokes and slurs, some of which were downplayed or unnoticed by white students (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). Second, rather than receiving mentorship and guidance, MMAX students were put down, ignored, or presumed to be incompetent by some of their professors. Lastly, classroom discussions resulted in microaggressions for MMAX students because they had classmates and instructors who were culturally insensitive and further marginalized them. All three findings debunk myths that blame MMAX students for unequal educational outcomes and redirects our focus toward historical patterns of institutional neglect and systemic racist practices (Valencia, 2002; Yosso, 2006).

Furthermore, by adding to the existing literature on racial microaggressions experienced by Latinx students in higher education (Yosso et al., 2009), I shed light on how MMAX students make sense of their experiences navigating racism and other forms of discrimination. Even if not given structural support, MMAX students build community with one another and find ways to cope and manage a hostile campus environment (Delgado Bernal, 2001; Flores & Garcia, 2009; Gonzalez, 2022; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). But despite showing how MMAX students survive and navigate higher education, it needs to be noted that the onus shouldn't be placed solely on them. Instead, universities must be accountable to create and sustain a culturally enhancing campus climate environment for MMAX students (Garcia, 2019). Thus, this story creates a sense of urgency in that it pinpoints the fact that everyday exposure to a racially hostile environment via racial microaggressions results in emotional, mental, and physical strain and that these racial microaggressions are cumulative and keep People of Color "in their place" (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015; Torres et al., 2010).

This story urges us to demand that universities hire more Faculty, Staff, and Administrators of Color whose work and interests is directly and explicitly connected to racial and social justice. Research has shown that Faculty of Color were more likely and able to provide support and mentorship for Students of Color (Ceja & Rivas, 2010; Cole & Barber, 2003). Additionally, a recent study showed that graduation rates for underrepresented minority students of all races/ethnicities are positively affected by increased diversity of their faculty (Stout et al., 2018). Therefore, one can assume that the absence of Faculty of Color could lead to students feeling less supported than if the situation would be otherwise. It's true that not every Faculty or Staff of Color could mentor or even relate to Students of Color, but studies have indicated that Latinx students' relationships with Latinx faculty enabled them to connect on a racial, cultural, linguistic, gendered, and social level that was not always found with white faculty (Ceja & Rivas, 2010, p. 90). Faculty of Color create a comfortable environment and provide support and mentoring for Students of Color (Umbach, 2006), which according to the participants was absent at their university.

Moreover, indigenous scholar Brayboy (2005) reminds us that "Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory" (p. 430) and that our stories serve as lessons for our communities.

<sup>67</sup>This response was taken directly from a plática conducted April 9, 2017.

Through counterstories like this one, we are informing theory, staying true to our ancestral ways of knowing and making our research accessible to communities historically excluded from academia. Stories about race and racism have always proved to be powerful engines of social and cultural reproduction and resistance; in this way, counterstorytelling should be seriously considered as a revolutionary act (Baszile, 2015). Undeniably, counterstorytelling in social science research raises awareness of issues affecting the access, retention, and success of Latinxs in higher education while also motivating a discussion of strategies that more effectively serve students from non-traditional backgrounds in various spaces and practices (Martinez, 2014, p. 52). Aside from serving as an instrument of illumination of readily suppressed voices and not often told experiences, counterstorytelling as a research method challenges traditional forms of knowledge production (Baszile, 2015; Milner & Howard, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). To this end, we need to continue problematizing traditional forms of research, which have historically degraded and misrepresented marginalized Communities of Color.

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