

**The Chicana/o/x Promise:
Testimonios of Educational Empowerment through the Enactment of
La Facultad among First-Generation College Students**

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Abstract

This article explores how Chicana/o/x¹ first-generation college students navigate through the educational realm that is built upon coloniality. Drawing on four *testimonios*, we show how multiplicative forms of marginalization to which Chicana/o/x college students are subject inform their academic trajectory and empowerment. The article focuses on four main sources of oppression—class (capitalism), familial immigrant documentation status (racist nativism), disability (ableism), and sexuality (heteronormativity)—and how Chicana/o/x students turn them into sources of self- and community- empowerment. Employing Chicana feminist perspectives and intersectional approaches further allows us to reveal sociopolitical and cultural processes that limits Chicana/o/x students' access to resources and opportunities and how these processes inform the ways in which these individuals proactively achieve and represent the *Chicana/o/x Promise* of hope, resistance, and success.

Keywords: *Chicana/o/x education, first-generation college students, testimonios, Chicana feminism*

Testimonio – a verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future (Pérez Huber, 2009, p. 644).

Narrative of the ‘dispossessed’—the criminal, the queer, a child, a woman who has experienced sexual violence, a community that has organized and talked back to a history of substandard educational opportunities, an African American, the indigenous, a migrant, or a narrator who is illiterate. It is a story of a subject who has experienced or witnessed great trauma, oppression, forced migration, or violence, or of a subject who has participated in a political movement for social justice (Cruz, 2012, p. 461).

Educational institutions are presumed to employ seemingly race-, gender-, and class- neutral socio-political discourses in their curricula in cultivating knowledge in today’s youth (Conchas, 2006; Rios, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999). However, studies have shown that the contemporary American educational system is built upon coloniality (Acevedo-Gil, 2019; Garcia, 2018; Patel, 2015), and do not adequately capture or even accommodate histories and lived experiences of minoritized groups. Especially, Chicana/o/x students’ histories, cultures, and language have been neglected and erased from the U.S. public educational system since the late 18th century (Alemán, 2013; González, 1999). Yet, coloniality and marginality do not affect members of the Chicana/o/x community in the same manner. Intersectionality scholars have previously argued for the multiplicative nature of social marginalization (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall 2005). More specifically, an intersectional analysis acknowledges the manner multiple forms of inequality, along various axis of the social world, affect individuals’ experiences and perceptions of the world around them (Crenshaw, 1991).

Employing an intersectional approach, this article presents an overview of Chicana/o/x educational experiences and how their experiences vary due to different forms of marginality. Utilizing four *testimonios*—a first-person narrative of the sociopolitical inequality, oppression, and marginalities one experiences (Zimmerman, 2011)—we center the voices of Chicana/o/x first-generation college students in our analysis. An intersectional analysis allows us to examine the manner in which Chicana/o/x discuss their experiences with their various unique identities interacting simultaneously and manifest in their material realities (i.e., family dynamics, education, peers) as scholars navigating higher education. While Crenshaw (1991) presented intersectionality in relation to the intersection of race and gender for Black women, she noted that the “concept can and should be expanded by factoring in issues such as class, sexual orientation, age, and color” (p. 1244-1245). As such, we examine the way Chicana/o/x students describe the interactions of systems of marginalization in regards to their race, gender, disability, citizenship status and sexuality in shaping their educational opportunities and journeys. In doing so, we aim to reveal the ways in which these individuals enact *la facultad*, the ability to see beyond surface phenomena into the meaning of deeper realities (Anzaldúa, 1999), to persist when faced with adversities and proactively assert their belongingness in the educational system.

Intersectional Overview of Chicana/o/x Educational Experience

Chicana/o/x youth make up the largest share of young U.S. Latinx population: about two-thirds of Latinx Millennials are of Mexican origin, and nearly 70% of U.S. Latinx younger than

18 years in age are Mexicans (Patten, 2016). With the median age of 26 among Mexican Americans (compared to 37 years of the U.S. population and 28 of all U.S. Latinx), many Chicana/o/x students are currently enrolled in primary, secondary, and post-secondary educational institutions. Despite their overrepresentation among U.S. Latinx, only about 10% of Chicanas/os/x ages 25 and older have at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 14% among all U.S. Latinx and 30% of the entire U.S. population (Lopéz, 2015). Even though studies have found similar levels of educational aspirations among Chicana/o/x students as other ethnoracial minorities (Kao & Thompson, 2003), their unequal educational experiences compared to Asian and white students are well documented in the scholarship (Conchas, 2006; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Flores, 2011). This body of scholarship highlights the complexity of seemingly neutral social political discourses of education and reveals that various structural factors, as impacted by a myriad of identities and sites of oppressions, impact the social outcomes of Chicana/o/x students. Even though we acknowledge a multitude of factors, such as racism and capitalism, we will focus on sexism, nativism, heteronormativity, and ableism for the purpose of this article.

Gendered Experiences. Chicana feminists have written extensively on Latina students and posit they are holders and creators of knowledge because they engage in formal (academic) and informal knowledge (home/community) (Delgado Bernal, 2002, 2006). Delgado Bernal (2006) proposes, “pedagogies of the home” places cultural knowledge at the forefront to understand lessons from local communities and homes spaces. Chicana college students use pedagogical formations such as the communication practices and learning that occur in the home as a tool for survival and resistance to multiple axis of domination (Villenas, et al., 2006). Due to their ethnoracial minoritized status and gender, girls of color are often put in vocational tracks and/or directed towards feminized professions such as clerical positions, nursing, and teaching (Flores & Hondangeu-Sotelo, 2014). However, the teaching and learning that occurs in the home and communities allows Latinas to draw upon their cultures to resist sites of oppression based on gender, race, class and sexual orientation (Delgado Bernal, 2006). Indeed, we view Chicanas’ *testimonios* as a source of knowledge in refining current understandings of how various identities intersect with gender and how they manifest in the material realities of Chicana first-generation college students.

In alignment with Chicana feminist agenda, which posits that strides toward social justice requires the inclusion of everyone, we believe that the inclusion of male Chicano students will provide a more comprehensive representation that informs the ways in which Chicano students achieve and represent the Chicana/o/x promise of hope, resistance, and school success. Historically, urban youth, specifically Black and Chicano/Latinx male students have been depicted as deviant students prone to criminal behavior (Conchas and Vigil, 2012). Katz (1997), for instance, argues that schools contribute to the criminalization of Latinos. Men of color attending public schools are subject to policing by school personnel (Rios, 2011). Some scholars attribute behavioral problems as rooted in cultural gender socialization of Chicano/Latino boys through *machismo* (Baca Zinn, 1980), characterized by exaggerated male characteristics and rejection of any potentially feminine behaviors. Hurtado and Sinha (2016) unravel how Latino college students come to acquire a framework that exceeds *machismo* and how their intersectional identities – race, sexuality, ethnicity, and gender—impact the manner they formulate their views on inequality and feminism. That is, through the exposure of college (i.e. ethnic study courses, women’s studies courses,) and seeing women in their lives experience inequality, college men shift their conceptualizations of feminism that transcends toxic *machismo*. However, *machismo* is part of the

larger umbrella of patriarchy that the U.S. has used to marginalize women; thus, Chicano/Latino students have overlapping expectations of *machismo* and patriarchy.

Family and Student Citizenship Status. Numerous studies have found that undocumented status among Chicana/o/x parents can lead to their children's discursive ostracization in American society as "anchor babies." Chavez (2017) argues that the labeling of "anchor babies" entail that US-born children of undocumented parents, who are still birthright citizens, are not "real" citizens, but part of an alleged conspiracy to take advantage of the United States. This framing not only leads U.S.-born citizens to become targets of anti-immigrant discourses and policies, but also constructs a binary of deserving and undeserving citizens (Chavez, 2017). Additionally, it has adverse psychological effects on U.S.-born Chicana/o/x youth (Chavez, 2017) and affects how mixed-status families (families with both documented and undocumented members) perceive inequalities and opportunities for their children and navigate through the larger society (Mangual Figueuroa, 2012).

Furthermore, students' own documentation status influences their educational and career trajectories due to blocked opportunities for social mobility (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011; Enriquez, 2011). There are governmental programs and policies that address document status-related socio-legal barriers, adversities, and stress for undocumented youth who immigrated to the U.S. as young children. For example, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is an immigration policy that allows undocumented individuals who are brought to the United States as children to obtain a work permit and two-year period of deferred action from deportation, as long as they do not have any felonies or serious misdemeanors on their records (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services). The California DREAM Act allows undocumented children brought into the United States under the age of 16 to be eligible for in-state tuition and student financial aid benefits (California Student Aid Commission) However, these programs do not provide paths to citizenship, causing eventual blocked mobility for many undocumented individuals (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011).

Sexual Identity Status. Sexual minority status similarly leads Chicana/o/x students to experience social and educational marginalization. In general, heterosexual gender norms are policed and reinforced in school settings (Blackburn, 2007; Pascoe, 2007), and queer students often encounter hostile school and social environments (Khayatt, 1995). At home, the enactment of non-heterosexual identity or behaviors is often policed (Acosta, 2008) and ethnoracially specific cultural norms and socialization regarding gender, sexuality, and family often hinders Latinx sexual minorities from disclosing their sexual identity and/or orientation (Pastrana, 2015). Even though ethnoracial minority student organization provide queer-friendly environments (Revilla 2010) and the need to acknowledge of queer students of color's cultural capital has been identified as important (Pennell, 2016), such support and resources are not available to all queer students of color. Queer students face specific experiences that are impacted by their sexuality, which can impact their experiences in educational spaces and social outcomes.

(Dis)ability Status Identity. Likewise, disabled students of color have unequal access to quality education that facilitates their academic success. Historically, African American and Latinx children were often "dumped" into special education classrooms, referred to as mental retardation programs, due to issues related to Spanish language dominance and lower IQ scores, both of which were due to racist exams manipulating familial socioeconomic and immigrant status (Mercer, 1973; Prasse & Reschly, 1986). Artiles and colleagues (2002) identify several social forces driving the placement of Students of Color in special education courses such as poverty, structural factors, instructional and assessment issues, and the cultural discontinuity between teachers. More

recently, Dávila (2015) found that disabled Latinx students experience disability-specific microaggressions of low expectations, disregard, and bullying that leaves students disengaged and/or resistant to academic services. In this sense, disability has been another way in which coloniality was reproduced and reinforced in the educational domain.

Although Chicana/o/x students face socioeconomic, political, and discursive obstacles in their educational experiences, some still successfully obtain a Bachelor's degree and achieve upward social mobility. Scholars have identified immigrant optimism, trustful mentors and role models, and familial, institutional, and community support and engagement as the driving factors behind Chicana/Latinx students' eventual success (Conchas, 2001; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Flores, 2011). We build on the work of scholars who examine the experiences of Chicana/o/x-Latina/o/x students by using an Anzaldúan lens (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Chang, 2013; Muñoz, 2018) to bring clarity about how Chicana/o/x students themselves make sense of their experiences. We contribute to the literature by centering our analyses on the *testimonios* of Chicana/o/x students to examine how they respond to and subvert systems of coloniality and oppression in the U.S. educational system to achieve success.

Chicana/o/x Empowerment through the Enactment of *La Facultad*

Chicana/o/x youth occupy a uniquely and multiplicatively marginalized position in the larger society. Building on the work of Anzaldúa, Chang (2014) explained that:

atravesados/as, in its Spanish meaning, refers to people who are irreverently bold, crossing the lines of social normativity, making others feel uncomfortable, even slighted. However, this term also possesses an element of unapologetic courageousness, referring to a person who dares to live outside normative parameters and to be different (p. 27).

Informed by Chang (2014) and Acevedo-Gil (2019), we conceptualize Chicana/o/x students as *atravesados*—people who embody identities (i.e., language, race, disability, sexuality, documentation status) that are meant to be silent but dare to be bold, resist, and occupy space as they confront and navigate colonial U.S. institutions. We, further, agree that American educational systems, in particular, label *atravesados* as deviant transgressors who do not deserve nor belong in such spaces of privilege and knowledge production (Acevedo-Gil, 2019; Chang, 2014). As *atravesados*, Chicana/o/x students have the possibility of enacting *la facultad* to subvert cultural discourses of the existing colonial systems and persist. *La facultad* refers to the ability for individuals to see structures below the surface, with their sixth sense of awareness, to confront “anything that tears the fabric of our everyday mode of consciousness” and develop increased awareness (Anzaldúa 1999, p. 39). Chicana feminist Anzaldúa (1999) further argues that *la facultad* is most likely to be activated and used by individuals marginalized in the society as a survival tactic, because marginalized individuals are “forced to develop this faculty so that we’ll know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away” (p. 39). Thus, the enactment of *la facultad* is a response to larger societal inequalities labeling Chicana/o/x individuals as *atravesados*.

More importantly, Chicanas/os/x' enactment of *la facultad* shows that marginality does not necessarily undermine or erase individual agency. Rather, agency becomes even more important for multiply marginalized subjects as it allow individuals to reject (colonial) subjugation and assert one's personhood as legitimate and belonging in the larger society. Especially in the educational realm, the enactment of *la facultad* becomes even more critical as Chicana/o/x students anticipate post-secondary obstacles related to their multiplicative marginalities (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Muñoz, 2018). *La facultad* allows Chicana/o/x students to navigate coloniality by turning adversities into

“positive aspects, into skills, into learning how to cope with stress and oppression” (Keating, 2009, p. 80) and produce knowledge that is rooted in their lived experiences (Delgado Bernal, 2001; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

The (overused) term of success is used to represent the abilities of *nepantleras* to use *la facultad* as they navigate conflicting spaces in pursuit of higher education with the end-goal of building bridges that the next generation can use. The interdisciplinary frameworks serve to provide a road map toward fostering institutional opportunities and academic success for Chicana/o/x college students. Chicana/o/x students find empowerment through their lived experience, which is represented by the concept of *nepantleras* (Anzaldúa, 2002). *Nepantleras* straddle and navigate through various social worlds and marginalization, thus they have the ability to assist others with similar experiences of marginalization to also see beyond immediate surface realities. Hence, it is through the enactment of *la facultad* that knowledge and sources of empowerment emerge from students’ lived experiences and become *nepantleras*.

In this article, we highlight the ways in which four Chicana/o/x first-generation college students enact *la facultad* to reject the colonial *atravesado* designation and become *nepantleros* who not only propel their own success, but also become leaders who represent and instill the Chicana/o/x promise of hope, resistance, and success in the educational borderlands. In so doing, we focus on four main sources of oppression—socioeconomic disadvantages (capitalism), familial immigrant documentations status (racist nativism), disability (ableism), and sexuality (heteronormativity)—and how Chicana/o/x individuals turn them into sources of self- and community- empowerment by enacting *la facultad*.

***Testimonio* as Method**

Testimonios have accumulated attention in education research, as it can be a powerful tool to reveal how oppression operates in the lives of Chicana/Latina students (Delgado Bernal, Alemán, & Garavito, 2009; Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012). *Testimonio* is a unique form of knowledge “[with] voice[s] and perspective[s] [that] has been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalize[d]” (Delgado, 1989, pg. 2412), and have often been neglected in order to align with dominant tropes of what counts as knowledge. *Testimonios* have been employed as a methodological tool for disrupting “apartheid of knowledge,” challenging distinctions between what is or what is not considered legitimate knowledge (Pérez Huber, 2009). Further, this approach responds to the call for methodologies that emerge from the lives of Latina people because *testimonios* consider how various identities shape identity (Pérez Huber, 2009). Because these four Chicana/o/x students have first-hand experience with oppression, as influenced by their multiple identities, *testimonio* is an appropriate methodology to address questions that might otherwise overlook how various identities manifest in the experiences of first-generation Chicana/o/x college students. *Testimonios* are also appropriate for looking at complex intersectional issues that provide examples of the intersections of racism of multiple oppressions that go beyond class (Pérez Huber, 2010). Lastly, *testimonios* are a distinct qualitative method with intentions of a call for action through social justice (Reyes & Rodríguez, 2012). The four Chicana/o/x students in this article provide compelling statements geared towards social justice, describing their *sueños* [dreams] of utilizing their experiential knowledge to give back to younger scholars of color that hail from low-income neighborhoods. This article embraces this research methodology and engenders new conceptualizations of people and communities coming together to plan and enact acts of resistance to forces that perpetuate inequality.

This study is derived from a larger comparative case study that ascertains the factors that 226 White (43), Chinese (40), Korean (41), Vietnamese (48), and Mexican American (54) first-generation college students identify as contributing to inequality and opportunity in the U.S.—during 2014-2016 at a selective public research-intensive university in southern California. Based on these findings, the research team contacted a sub-sample of the 226 students to conduct more in-depth life *testimonios* to uncover the how and why of their perceptions and experiences. This was especially important to capture for many research reasons, but most importantly because the first set of interviews were conducted before the election of Donald J. Trump.

A total of 68 *testimonios* were completed among the five original groups under study during 2016-2018 and 18 *testimonios* were specifically conducted with Chicana/o/x young adults, 8 Chicanos and 10 Chicanas. For purposes of this article, the voices of four Chicana/o/x first-generation college students, based on the four dominant patterns among the larger sample of 18, are presented in this article. The *testimonio* interview process was exploratory and asked broad enough questions to allow the freedom for student's unique perspectives growing up and how their experiences in and out-of-school relate to their sense of social mobility in their lives—the findings, therefore, emerged organically between the researchers and the college students.

We utilize *testimonios* as a methodological approach to unravel how the unique identities of four scholars shape their lived experiences as first-generation college students navigating higher education. The *testimonios* in this article, therefore, reflect verbal journals of young adults who speak about oppression (capitalism, racism, patriarchy, nativism, heteronormativity, and ableism) and opportunity (healing, empowerment, educational engagement, and agency for social justice) in communities, schools, and society. As such, we are able to understand how Chicana/o/x students respond to, heal, and draw upon their oppressive experience to mobilize academic and personal achievement. In alignment with feminist methodology agenda, their voices are the key sources of knowledge guiding this article. Their *testimonios* rebuke deficit narratives of Chicana/Latina students as *atrevisados* in the face of myriad obstacles, all the while becoming *nepantleros* that assert their belongingness in the unequal and colonial educational realm.

Findings as the Knowledge Emerging from *Testimonios*

Rosa's² DACA Experiences: A Proud, Unafraid, and Undocumented Immigrant Combating Racist Nativism

Rosa is a 20-year-old first-generation college student who migrated from Mexico with her family at a young age. Rosa's father decided to cross the border without proper documentation in 1997, when Rosa was only a few months old. Rosa was able to obtain DACA—Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival program that offers temporary relief from deportation to undocumented immigrant youth—status in 2012 and this eased her apprehensions. Further, her DACA status allowed her to pursue higher education without worrying about deportation or paying out-of-state tuition. The additional bureaucratic steps required for DACA students like Rosa made her feel as if the higher education system was not designed for immigrants like herself; that *atravesadas* like Rosa were not welcome:

When I was filling out my college applications I was also shocked because I would have to pay a much higher tuition compared to an American citizen. I would almost have to pay double if it weren't for an extra form called AB 540 that I had to fill out, which would grant me California in state tuition.

Rosa's high school did not provide the needed institutional support and college guidance to navigate through the complicated college application processes as a DACA and AB 540 student,

but persisted to overcome these obstacles. After enrolling in a prestigious public four-year university, Rosa was pleasantly surprised by the diverse and welcoming environment of college. Rosa's parents put tremendous emphasis on the value of education and Rosa herself was aware of the opportunities she could obtain through education. Rosa persisted in college, driven by her parents' love, support, and sacrifices that led her to college:

Something that my dad says to me every chance he gets is to work hard, so I don't end up like them, working in the blazing 120-degree heat in the desert sun doing something that I am not passionate about... In a way, I value education much more because my parents help me feel like it's not just a step in my life that I need to put all of my efforts into.

Parental sacrifices, support, and love led to Rosa's enactment of *la facultad*. Experiences of illegality led Rosa to see how the systems of coloniality across various institutional domains—from immigration policies to educational opportunity structures—make Mexican immigrants like herself feel like criminals, who do not belong in the United States or deserve equal access to resources and opportunities. The same experiences of marginality also allow her to see clearly that, despite everything, she is still more privileged than her parents who did not have access to a college degree. This realization further drives Rosa to succeed in the United States, against all odds, to benefit not only her parents, but others, too.

Rosa saw it as her responsibility to help her parents and other undocumented immigrants who were going through similar experiences as her family did:

I experienced a lot of hardships when applying to scholarships with DACA; I want to help those who are covered by it by finding a scholarship which would help them pay for school, books, food, and a place to live because it is hard to obtain the money to cover all of these costs. This has always been one of my major goals because I did not get any help or scholarships; I know how discouraging it can be to see those who didn't take advantage of their education receive financial aid and those who do left to fend for themselves.

In this sense, her enactment of *la facultad* not only allowed Rosa to achieve academic success that would further assist her and her family's upward social mobility, but also led Rosa to become a *nepantlera*, who navigates through unequal systems of coloniality and fosters bridges for others. More specifically, Rosa's *atravesada* experiences propel not only her own enactment of *la facultad*, but also allow her to see beyond each individual fragmented realities of multiple marginalities and coloniality. She understands that economic precariousness, immigrant documentation status, and the unequal opportunity structure interact simultaneously and hinder chances at success. As a *nepantlera*, she is inspired to help others see how various sites of oppression interact and become a bridge that connects undocumented and marginalized individuals to resources and opportunities in the larger society.

Esteban's Fourth Generation Chicano Story: Lessons Learned from (Dis)ability in Combating Ableism

Esteban is a fourth generation Chicano, whose great-grandparents immigrated from Mexico to California over a hundred years ago. Even though such latter generational status makes him an American indubitably, his journey to higher education still largely mirrors that of other poor, first- and second-generation Chicanos, who have to persist against all odds. More specifically, Esteban experienced extreme hardships and uncertainty due to poverty and (dis)ability. Right after Esteban was born, he was diagnosed with a rare neurological disease called Lyme Disease that attacks his nervous system. With Lyme came many involuntary jerking of muscles, pain, learning disabilities, and other complications.

He was an exceptionally gifted student, testing at twelfth grade level when he was only in sixth grade, and was able to take advantage of programs like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Individualized Education Program (IEP). Despite such academic success, Esteban's transition into adulthood was not as easy as he had anticipated. On the contrary, this period of his life is marked by various *atravesado* experiences. First, his Social Security Income/Disability (SSI) support from the government checks stopped coming without warning when he turned 18, because of the bureaucratic loophole in the system assumes that children's disabilities suddenly "disappear" upon turning 18:

We had to fight my case which took a long time as they wanted doctors' notes, visit reports, scans, images, and much more from the time "I became disabled," which was right after birth. I was required to fax every single page to multiple different departments. I was expected to pay for every paper faxed while I had no source of income even though it was over 10,000 pages. It took a total of two years to reach the final decision.

Then came economic instability, followed by more health problems. Esteban experiences how his socio-economic status and (dis)ability interact and created multiple forms of oppression. With the additional income unavailable, Esteban got a part-time as a sales associate at Walmart, but his medical conditions soon began to worsen due to the physically demanding nature of work. Between his job and additional visits to the doctor's office, Esteban's identity as a student was also impacted because his academic performance at the community college suffered, too. Fortunately, he had a network of social support and capital available through his mother and a few understanding and helpful institutional gatekeepers, such as doctors, nurses, teachers, and community college deans. Central to his determination was his mother's unwavering faith in his potential as a student and in education as a way of achieving upward mobility. Esteban's single mother was engaged in and supportive of her children's educational development and pursuits from when her children were very young:

She ensured we were on track for a good academic career. My mother is an amazing person for successfully raising five children while being a low-income, uneducated, divorced parent who did not want us to struggle like she did...My mother wanted us to get out of the low-income apartments and live in our own home without being bound by strict rules or having to 'watch our backs' 24/7 due to the bad neighborhood.

The personal and institutional support Esteban was able to access through his mother, his participation in the IDEA and IEP, and various medical and educational agents he encountered throughout his life eventually led to his enactment of *la facultad*. Despite continuously worsening health conditions, Esteban decided to put medical procedures aside to focus on academic career and prospered with his mother's and institutional gatekeeper's support.

When he doubted himself, he utilized various forms of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) such as his social capital to learn how to maneuver various institutions, and aspirational capital from those around him who exhibited exceptional work ethnics, preparation and determination for a better future. He did not see his (dis)ability as limiting, but as his identity—the one that is not necessarily restricting and oppressed, but characterized by resilience, resistance, and persistence. These experiences further fueled his aspiration to become a social worker who could support and guide the next generation of marginalized youth:

I want to be a youth social worker who positively influences children who are placed at risk. I know what opportunity looks like and I want to make sure every child can see it too.

I want to show the next generation there is a chance to grow no matter where you come

from. The opportunity to grow from a low-class environment is always there, students just need the scaffold along the way.

This ability to see the overlapping, but unequal worlds of the larger society and marginalized communities show Esteban's projected transformation into a *nepantlero*. Esteban understands that resources that marginalized people are entitled to do not necessarily become easily available from first hand experiences. As a *nepantlero*, he would be the bridge these disadvantaged students need to see beyond limitations and enact their own *la facultad* to resist oppression and eventually, achieve positive educational experiences and outcomes to succeed in larger society.

Christina's Queer Chicana Identity: Community As A Form of Resistance in Combating Heteronormativity

Christina is a third generation Chicana and first-generation college student whose parents are of Mexican heritage, but born in the United States. She self-identifies as a "beautiful, fat, queer, Mexican woman." Even though her parents, children of Mexican immigrants, experienced relative success that is typical for middle-class families in the United States, Christina grew up under less privileged circumstances. As Christina explained, her parents were young adults in the U.S.—her father was a high school graduate and her mother a high school dropout. While Christina's family enjoyed a comfortable life for a while with her paternal grandparents' financial assistance, this all changed when the 2009 recession began; Christina's dad lost his job and her mother's health started deteriorating quickly:

I was only seven, but suddenly I was responsible for even more. I had to make sure I got myself and my brother to school on time. I had to make him feel better about what was going on. I had to be an adult. When you have a sick mom, you're usually prepared for these types of things. You tell your teachers in advance, you make sure you'll be able to get extra time for the homework, but with everything going on at once, it all felt impossible.

Despite their native-born status, Christina's family was effectively ostracized from any institutional support regarding her family members' health and wellbeing due to their low socioeconomic status.

In such environment, school was an outlet, a solace of some sort for Christina that allowed her to ignore and forget about her unstable home life. Concerns about her family's financial stability and economic livelihood kept worrying young Christina, even though she was passionate about learning. Cristina poignantly notes that she was subject to bullying because her various identities, including her sexuality, deviated from social norms. Consequently, Christina's only outlet, school, became a place of suffering instead of an escape:

As a fat queer Chicana, I was subjected to a lot of bullying as a kid, but going to high school made it worse. Even the thought of walking to school made me anxious. Every night before I went to bed, I made a very specific plan about my route to school. I took the longer path, trying to avoid intersections so that I was visible to less people. The thought of going to school exacerbated my anxiety, gave me panic attacks and made me sick all the time. This wasn't even about the demand I faced for work; this was solely based on the action of going to school.

Despite feeling out-of-place for being different, Christina was able to persist with the help of her parents and other adult figures. Especially, Christina's mother was determined to push her daughter's educational pursuit further. Additionally, understanding teachers who were aware of Christina's hectic home situation not only made sure she performs well academically, but also provided her with food and emotional support as needed. With the support and encouragement from her parents and teachers, Christina was able to access valuable social and cultural capital.

One of the most crucial moments of accruing such capital to assist her academic success came just in time, right before she began applying for colleges. Christina recalls:

I was also given the opportunity to participate in UC's Early Academic Outreach Program. This program was designed for first-generation, low-income students who wanted to go to college. When they contacted me and told me to apply, I was so excited. I came home from school and immediately told my mom. They took us to visit colleges, let us stay on the UC campus, gave us advice, and helped us with our applications. I was able to meet UC's admissions officers to go over my personal statements and get feedback. This was so valuable to me, and their willingness to help made me feel like college was actually attainable.

Even in college, despite the continuing financial struggles and feeling isolated, Christina was able to persist and be successful due to the support she had from her parents and the communities in which she grew up. These experiences led to her enactment of *la facultad*: rather than passively accepting her fate as a minoritized student with limited resources, Christina actively sought out role models.

She explained that her parental sacrifices, the social and cultural capital she accessed with the help of her teachers, and community members gave her hope and the drive to build a better future for herself as well as others:

I know that there are very real barriers in place to prevent the students in my community from making these changes, but I want to help bring an understanding so they can fight too. I am constantly in limbo between these choices. They're all interconnected, but they all are very different paths. While I know that hope alone will not fix anything, it is something that is driving me work to make things better. I believe that eventually I can do for someone what so many of my teachers and other caring adults did for me...Despite poverty, I came from a strong and loving family and community. The emergence of the community as a form of resistance reminded me of my community's work to ensure that despite my high school's lack of funding, we still had opportunities. Parents and teachers came together to make sure that students had food before AP testing, that they didn't need to buy calculators, and that students weren't taken out of class for insignificant interruptions—importance of the community in making sure a school district was responsible for implementing a model of restorative justice in schools.

As Christina accurately and succinctly put it, her existence and the existence of her community was a form of resistance for *astravasadas* like her. Social and cultural capital and community resources led her to such conclusion and fueled her enactment of *la facultad*, to subvert her marginality to empower not only herself, but other similarly marginalized people. Christina's "pay-it-forward" mentality, where she is prepared and willing to extend the help and support she has benefited from to other members of her community, represents her personal growth as a *nepantlera*, ultimately contributing to the emergence of the community as a form of resistance. As an educator and a *nepantlera*, Christina will be the agent of change, resistance, and hope, who is aware of and sees beyond the overlapping forms of oppression and coloniality and bring resources and opportunities to others.

Miguel's Faith Story: Not Defined by Mistakes of the Past in Combating Capitalism

Miguel is a first-generation college student at the University of California, majoring in history and sociology. As he explained, he dresses well, has good posture, and has a decent vocabulary, because that is what is expected of a successful college student. Miguel hails from a low-income community and is the son of undocumented immigrant parents from Mexico. His

educational journey has been marked by his status as an *atravesado*, where important institutional actors, such as teachers, expressed disinterest, low expectations, and assumed deviance in their students. In his testimonio, he reflected on his middle school experiences:

Although there were instructors that were helpful and had high hopes for students; the majority did not see to go beyond their comfort zones to inspire and express that one can be more than they are told. They would simply teach class, tell students that they needed to ask one another if they were confused, which no one ever did, and left campus as soon as the end of the day bell rung.

Despite such school environment characterized by uninspiring school curricula and disengaged teachers, Miguel found a few teachers who cared for his academic success and volunteered to tutor him outside of school hours. Miguel's parents, despite not being formally educated, instilled the values of hard work and education in him from a very young age:

If it was not for my mother I can honestly say that I would not be in the spot that I am today. She is the one who inspired me to obtain more than the basic high school diploma, the one who always tried to help me with any school assignment even if she had no background knowledge of the topic, and the one who consistently reminded me that my education was going to be the only way out of the low socioeconomic status that we had to consistently face.

In addition to Miguel's biological parents' continuous sacrifices and support, Miguel benefited from a local gang leader's protection. Seeing Miguel's potential early on, this gang leader, whom Miguel refers to as his second father, barred his gang from initiating him and repeatedly told Miguel that he had a bright future ahead:

I was raised by [a local gang leader] since my parents were always at work and my grandmother had to take care of my grandfather and I would always be outside and hanging out with his girlfriend and himself. Despite obtaining a firsthand look at how he managed the gang, he told me that I had a bright future ahead of me and forbid that I be initiated...Despite going down the wrong path early on, it was my instructors' motivation to keep pushing and their willingness to listen to my struggles, my parents constant work ethic, and my second father's value toward me that made me come back with a better view towards education.

As Miguel's account shows, the social and emotional capital he accessed via his teacher, parents, and his second father allowed him to enact *la facultad* and pursue academic success beyond high school. Whenever he encountered institutional gatekeepers who doubted his potential and treated him as an *atravesado* who was on his way to either the prison or death, Miguel saw beyond this surface reality and kept strong faith in his chances at success. Moreover, having experienced the violence and lack of expectations that other Chicana/o/x *atravesados* encounter, Miguel was able to understand that his parents were victims of cultural and structural forces that oppress and limit minoritized individuals' pursuit of opportunities. Miguel learned that asking for help was not a sign of weakness, but something that could assist and propel his achievement. This realization was especially profound for Miguel, who had struggled with the Mexican cultural notion and norms of *machismo*—coupled with the western hegemonic notion of patriarchy and masculinity—which influenced his father and grandfather to become absent, hard-to-approach breadwinners of the family.

Understanding my grandfather's way of being with his children allows me to ease my views as to why my father decided to plant a seed within my head that constantly put the notion that working and earning money was more important than obtaining education, the

thought that men do not need to cry or seek help when facing issues on a daily basis, and the notion that we are no better than what others say we are... I will not accept the fact that my father is the way he is with my family and I for the simple reason that his father was like that with him.

This represented another example of Miguel's enactment of *la facultad*—he was able to see beyond the stoic, emotionless day-to-day expressions of his father and grandfather and understand that capitalism, patriarchy, coloniality, and the lack of economic opportunities have shaped their worldviews and the ways in which they interact with others.

With his understanding of the struggles of his poor, undocumented parents contextualized by his own experiences and *la facultad*, Miguel joined his UC campus's chapter of Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o/x de Aztlan (MEChA), a historic organization created around the Civil Rights Movement to bring awareness of social and political issues that the Chicana/o/x and Latinx community face in this society, once he enrolled in a University of California school. His participation in MEChA, coupled with his previous experiences, his parental sacrifices, and the social, cultural resources that he obtained through college curricula, drove Miguel's aspirations to help the next generation of Chicana/Latinx youth as a *nepantlero*:

Understanding the struggles and witnessing firsthand the hardships that can present themselves at any time I have made it my goal to give back to the younger generations with MEChA... For this reason I have made it my mission to reach out to the younger Latinx generations with the goal of exposing them to the vast opportunities that are out there willing to be discovered by them... I will pass along my knowledge to others that follow.

Miguel's dedication to the next generation of disadvantaged Latinx youth is exemplary of the role *nepantleros* play in marginalized communities. As a Chicano who has struggled with the cultural gender socialization norms of *machismo* and patriarchy—which led him to question his father and grandfather's relationship with the family and nearly become another troubled Boy of Color with delinquency problems—allowed him to make sense of the overlapping worlds of Mexican culture and American institutions. This unique *nepantlero* perspective allowed Miguel to understand how Chicana/o/x youth could be caught between these two worlds, doubting their own abilities. In addition, seeing that undocumented status could further impede not only an immigrant's economic chances, but also those of their children, Miguel was now determined to pass along the knowledge he has obtained through his enactment of *la facultad* to the next generation of youth.

Discussion, Limitations, and Implications

Rosa, Esteban, Christina, and Miguel's *testimonios* provide valuable insights into how coloniality shapes marginalized persons' experiences in the mainstream educational realm and beyond. More importantly, the four Chicana/o/x students found ways to make sense of their marginalized positions while simultaneously empowering themselves by turning adversities into opportunities in their pursuits of academic achievement and success. Thus, their accounts provide powerful vernacular forms of how individuals subjected to coloniality move beyond realities surrounding them to perceive positivity, potential, and success in their present and future selves, despite institutional and cultural barriers and precariousness.

Miguel, Esteban's and Christina's experiences shows the gendered process through which Chicana/o/x individuals make sense of their *atravesado* status, enact *la facultad*, and become *nepantleros*. For instance, the uniquely Chicano cultural gender socialization through *machismo*/patriarchy led Miguel to understand social worlds around him (and that of his fathers

and grandfathers by extension), while simultaneously enabling him to reject *machismo* as a transgressive socio-cultural discourse. This realization has been especially important for Miguel and Esteban, as they were able to see beyond the restrictive definitions of masculinity. Similar to recent research (Ballysingh, 2019), Miguel and Esteban's mothers were salient sources of aspirational capital from which these students draw from as a source of empowerment. The *testimonios* contribute to the field by highlighting that seeing their mothers, who were not formally educated, propelled them into a critical consciousness that transcended dominant ideologies of *machismo*/patriarchy and enter a space where their dreams are attainable. In other words, their mothers' rendering of love propels Chicano/Latinos to enact *la facultad* as a resistance strategy to dream beyond what is deemed possible and attain the Chicana/o/x promise. Similarly, one of the most important driving forces of Christina's success was her mother's determination. Thus, Christina, Esteban and Miguel's enactments of *la facultad* grounded in critical understandings of gendered realities provide evidence in support of how ethnic cultures—both its negative and positive aspects—provide unique tools to Chicana/o/x students to interpret the social worlds around them and modify existing ethnic cultural discourses to further empower themselves (Delgado Bernal 2001, 2002, 2006).

Similarly, Rosa, Esteban, Christina, and Miguel benefited from resources and assistance in their communities, often via a few helpful adult figures and institutional actors. For instance, all four students report at least one helpful and engaged teacher inspiring them; in Miguel's case, the protection and guidance a local gang leader provided him the aspiration to pursue higher education. Communities and resources also led Chicana/o/x students to access extracurricular involvements, whether it is in a student organization or external internship program, which widened their social networks and helped them accessing social and cultural capitals—such as work and networking opportunities, direct involvement in social movements, etc.—they could not have accessed otherwise. Such deepened awareness and consciousness allowed Rosa, Esteban, Christina, and Miguel to not only anticipate difficulties in their post-secondary educational pursuits, but to proactively respond to and resist such difficulties.

This study illuminates the experiences of a small group of Chicana/o/x first-generation students navigating college, thus it presents limitations that prevent us to generalize the findings. This study cannot necessarily be generalized to the entire population of Chicana/o/x students who are navigating higher education or aspire to attain higher education. In addition, the four *testimonios* were derived from a larger group set of 18 *testimonios* from 10 Chicanas and 8 Chicanos, which limits our understanding of how other Chicana/o/x students who share or do not share identities with the students in this article experience education and society. Further, not all identities were discussed in this article, which is a pivotal concern in order to unpack how students' identities impact the manner they experience the world. For example, all students in this study identified as either as women or men, which does not include other gender identities (ie. gender fluid, non-binary). Despite these shortcomings, we believe that the site and time of this study presents the complex experiences of Chicana/o/x students in education structures and broader society. The Chicana/o/x students reside in California, where the largest growing ethnic group is Latinx individuals. Additionally, the time of this study had a historical impact on the students, particularly because the discussion of Latinx migration proliferated during Trump's pre-election. Thus, the importance here is not in generalizability but for the participants to reflect on their lived experiences and for the researchers to expand up exiting theoretical propositions about Latinx education rooted in structural inequality.

Given the findings of this study and the manner Chicana/o/x students conceptualized their lived realities as *atrevesados* and enact *la facultad* to become *nepantleros*, it is pivotal that educators and school personnel view the voices of young Scholars of Color as a source of knowledge. These *testimonios* evince the cultural wealth that communities of color hold, which are often rendered invisible in classroom spaces. For example, Miguel's second father challenges dominant stereotypes of what a mentor relationship looks like. Similarly, Christina's and Esteban's *testimonios* are deeply telling of how mothers, despite not being formally educated, are powerful sources of aspiration and knowledge. Moreover, community members are actively looking for ways to protect and provide in order for students to excel in society—they dream alongside the students.

Conclusion

What is apparent in these four Chicana/o/x life histories of overcoming adversities is that their enactment of *la facultad* leads them to become agents of change for others. In so doing, they are contributing to the emergence of communities as a form of resistance. Such a phenomenon represents more than these four individuals' personal growth; it captures that the enactment of *la facultad*, along with institutional and community resources, can lead individuals to become *nepantleros*, who understand overlapping social worlds of minoritized groups and (white dominant) mainstream institutions that shape the larger, societal systems of inequality and coloniality. Thus, the enactment of *la facultad* allows them to become agents of change and resistance who could bridge the mainstream and minoritized social realms to inspire others and help provide social and cultural capital one may need in their own pursuits of success. This transformation from *atavesados* to *nepantleros* shown in the four *testimonios* represent *The Chicana/o/x Promise*—persisting in the American educational landscapes that is characterized by its coloniality and achieving hope, resistance, and school success.

Notes

¹Throughout this article, the authors intentionally employ the term Chicana/o/x in an effort to support inclusivity of all Mexican ethnic-identified peoples regardless of gender identity or expression.

² Pseudonyms are used to protect the confidentiality of the respondents.

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