

“If We Don’t Do It, Nobody Is Going to Talk About It”: Indigenous Students Disrupting Latinidad at Hispanic-Serving Institutions

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Hispanic and Latinx are terms that conflate ethnicity, race, and nationality and complicate our ability to generalize what it means for Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) to serve such a diverse student population. Latinidad has also privileged mestizo narratives that obscure enduring colonialities of power and perpetuate the invisibility of Indigenous Peoples. Conceptually framed by Critical Latinx Indigeneities, this study documents the testimonios of 10 Indigenous Mixtec/Nuu Savi, Zapotec, and Nahuatl students at HSIs in California. I highlight issues of racialization and Indigenous misrepresentation within Latinx-centered curricula and programming and the ways participants engaged in fugitive acts of learning to claim new forms of visibility on campus. The findings raise important implications for HSIs, including Latinx programming that disrupts colonial perspectives and creates more nuanced understandings of diasporic Indigeneity within Latinx communities.

Keywords: Colonialism, Critical Latinx Indigeneities, higher education, Hispanic education, in-depth interviewing, Indigenous Peoples, Latino/a, or see Hispanic, qualitative research

HISPANIC-SERVING institutions (HSIs) serve as key access points to higher education for Latinx¹ students. HSIs enroll 66% of all Latinx undergraduates (Excelencia in Education, 2017), making these institutions influential on the postsecondary experiences of Latinx students (Herrera et al., 2018). Growing literature on HSIs identifies culturally relevant curriculum, cultural programming, and representation of Latinx faculty and administrators as effective strategies for enhancing Latinx student “servingness” (García, 2020; García et al., 2019; Natividad, 2015; Serrano, 2020). Still, there is a need to expose the complex nuances of Latinidad. The “H” in HSI as well as “Latinx” are terms that conflate ethnicity, race, and nationality and complicate our ability to generalize what it means to serve such a diverse student population. While pan-Latinx and Hispanic labels have led to some positive implications for political organizing in the United States including the construction of HSIs, these collective labels historically privilege mestizo² narratives and subsequently, perpetuate enduring colonialities that obscure Indigenous and Black histories, knowledges, and lived realities (Calderón & Urrieta, 2019; Chacón, 2017; Urrieta, 2012). This outcome is deeply linked to Latin America’s colonial legacy, which is reproduced among Latinx communities in the United States (Calderón & Urrieta, 2019; Kovats Sánchez, 2019; Stephen, 2007).

Relying on the essentialized U.S.-based construct of Latinidad/Hispanidad has also limited the ways HSIs account for the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of their Latinx students. For instance, identifying Spanish-language programs or regionally specific Mexican mestizo cultural

traditions as all-encompassing strategies for the retention of Latinx students excludes students who speak Indigenous languages or practice distinct traditions. Similarly, the selective understanding of Indigenous ancestry and the borrowing of Nahuatl words and concepts in HSI programming often fail to address how Indigenous students are specifically served. Additionally, conceptualizations about race and categorization in U.S. college applications impose an additional layer of complexity to existing Latin American and Caribbean ethnoracial and national identities. Self-reported race and ethnicity categories often limit or omit nuanced understandings of Indigeneity that extend beyond *mestizaje* and Native American identity. Consequently, HSI research and practice has reified a false perception of a monolithic Hispanic/Latinx identity, which has ignored the experiences and needs of diasporic Indigenous students.

I use the term *diasporic Indigenous students* to include the lived realities of diverse Indigenous students living in the United States with familial, relational, and transnational ties to Indigenous communities and *pueblos originarios*³ in Abya Yala.⁴ Expanding on the critical work of Blackwell et al. (2017) on Critical Latinx Indigeneities (CLI), I recognize that Indigenous Peoples in Abya Yala have unique and distinct experiences that fall outside broader panethnic Latinx and mestizo/a/x labels. Moreover, diasporic Indigenous Peoples continue to be racialized and exposed to the structures of colonialism and anti-Indigenous domination transplanted from Abya Yala to the United States (Blackwell et al., 2017; Gutiérrez Nájera & Maldonado, 2017; Stephen, 2007).



Thus, this article includes the testimonios of 10 diasporic Indigenous students at eight different HSIs in California—specifically Indigenous Mixtec/Ñuu Savi,⁵ Zapotec, and Nahuatl students with communal ties to Oaxaca and Guerrero, Mexico. Through their testimonios, I explore validating and invalidating experiences on campus and how they disrupted dominant mestizo narratives at their respective HSIs. While the findings are focused on Indigenous Ñuu Savi, Zapotec, and Nahuatl students, the implications from this work urge HSIs to acknowledge Indigenous Peoples across Abya Yala.

Literature Review

Hispanic-Serving Institutions

Currently, there is no literature on HSIs that applies a specific lens to the experiences of diasporic Indigenous students. Nevertheless, scholarship on HSIs reminds us that these institutions are incredibly diverse (Cuellar, 2019) and this extreme difference complicates our ability to generalize what it means to serve Latinx students. Indicators and structures of servingness at HSIs include academic outcomes like GPA, retention, and graduation rates of Latinx students as well as nonacademic outcomes like increased racial and ethnic identity salience, academic self-concept, and leadership development (Cuellar, 2012, 2014; García et al., 2019). Additionally, faculty, administrators, and staff can ultimately influence the experiences and outcomes of students (Espinoza & Espinoza, 2012; García & Ramirez, 2018; Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2010). García et al. (2019) divide these experiences into validating and racialized experiences. Validating experiences include supportive faculty–student relationships, recognizable Latinx cultural heritage on campus, a critical mass of Latinxs on campus, and cultural validation. Alternatively, racialized experiences include encounters with racism, discrimination, and microaggression.

Research has also shown that culturally sustaining curriculum, programming, and pedagogies enhance Latinx student experiences and outcomes (García & Okhidoi, 2015; Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2015). García and Okhidoi’s (2015) single-institution study found that the Chicana Studies department was essential in shaping the HSIs organizational structure. The HSI took steps to institutionalize the enrollment of students into an introductory Chicana Studies course. Although the study did not specify the ethnic breakdown of the HSI’s Latinx students, they argued that the Chicana Studies course allowed students to make connections to their own cultural identity. Natividad (2015) outlined the effective implementation of the Nepantla Program at an HSI that used “Latinx cultural icons,” “lotería,” and “lucha libre” symbolism, imagery, and messages to promote college-going among first-generation Latinx college students. The author argued that this culturally relevant curriculum helped students develop their cultural capital while disrupting the negative and harmful narratives and

social expectations about “Latinxs in the United States.” This study, like the previous one, did not specify the ethnic breakdown of the Latinx students participating in the Nepantla Program. While both García and Okhidoi (2015) and Natividad’s (2015) studies outlined successful strategies for supporting the retention of Latinx students, they equated Latinx servingness with very specific Mexican and Chicana cultural references and fields of study without actually stating the ethnic composition of each HSI’s Latinx student population. This also leaves open the question as to how practitioners and administrators may borrow Indigenous words and concepts like *nepantla* for HSI programming but fail to address how Indigenous students are served.

Other studies highlight the racialized experiences of Latinx and other students of color at HSIs. Serrano (2020) found that Black and Latino male students sought “academic homeplaces” within the Pan-African Studies department and Latin American Studies program to cope with the harmful campus racial climate at their HSI. Although the intersections of Blackness and Latinidad were not necessarily explored in this study, Serrano (2020) did identify the potential of both academic homeplaces in enhancing HSIs and moving toward what García et al. (2019) refer to as a “Latinx-enhancing organizational identity” that incorporates social justice curriculum, cultural programming, services, and resources. Desai and Abeita (2017) examined institutional microaggressions at an HSI that involved the commodification of Native art and cultural projects and the centering of colonial history through official university seals and campus murals. The study documented a Diné student’s efforts to discontinue the university seal and the microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations she faced in the process. The authors urge higher education institutions to become more aware of how microaggressions operate at an institution level and how HSIs must recognize that such designation requires critical self-reflection and a commitment to address issues of tokenization, commodification, and exploitation of Native culture.

Along these same lines, Abrica et al. (2020) explored anti-Blackness experienced by Black male students at an HSI community college. Participants’ intellectual abilities were frequently questioned by peers and faculty; they also experienced invisibility and hypervisibility as the only Black males in their classes. Rather than reinforcing the narrative that calls for the recognition of the plight of Black males, the authors argue that there is a critical need to recognize the “institutionalized and transactional treatment of Black bodies and denial of Black humanity” (p. 68). García (2018) urges HSI scholars and practitioners, through a decolonizing framework, to recognize the coloniality of power that has subjugated Latinx students in education.

Latinidad, Mestizaje, and Indigeneity

García’s (2018) work on decolonizing HSIs highlights an important aspect of Latinx identity specific to mestizo

students who grapple with the impact of colonization and severed Indigenous ties. Still, it is important to point out that the term “Raza” like “Latinx” relies on the dominant logics that shape our colonial understanding of mestizo identity (Calderón & Urrieta, 2019). Focusing on students with residual Indigenous roots, while very true for a subset of Latinxs, does not account for Indigenous students who maintain direct ties to their languages, cultures, and communities of origin. This identification is also historically tied to the concept of *mestizaje*—the racial mixture of Indigenous and Spanish heritages (Bartolomé, 2005; Bonfil Batalla, 1989; Gutiérrez, 1999; Lomnitz-Adler, 1992). While *mestizaje* theoretically implies a unification and synthesis of Indigenous ancestry and western European heritage, it is also emblematic of Latin America’s violent history of colonization. Moreover, the construction of *mestizaje* is associated with imperialist attempts across Latin America to establish a singular ethnoracial identity and tool of exclusion designed to sever people’s direct ties to their Indigenous heritages, languages, and traditions (Forbes, 2005; Urrieta, 2017). Urrieta (2012) posits that the mestizo identity is more of a “historical claim to whiteness and at best, implicit, rejection or escape out of Indianness” (p. 323). The conceptualization of *mestizaje* has shaped entire Latin American countries to associate their Indigenous heritage as an exclusively ancestral and residual component of their collective national identity.

Furthermore, Blackwell et al. (2017) argue that these structures of colonialism and anti-Indigenous domination are transplanted when Indigenous people migrate from Latin America to the United States. The racial hierarchies of Latin America hybridize with racial hierarchies of the United States to shape the identities of Indigenous migrants and their children in the United States. Accordingly, several scholars problematize Latinidad as a hegemonic narrative rooted in nationalist ethnoracial structures of *mestizaje* and Indigeneity (Alberto, 2016, 2017; Chacón, 2017; Urrieta, 2017). While in many ways mestizos engage with *mestizaje* as a way to challenge their colonial legacies (García, 2018), Chacón (2017) urges us to think beyond the racial discourse in the United States and consider the differences between *mestizaje* in the United States and Latin America. The U.S. context also brings forth the political imaginary of Chicana consciousness (Chacón, 2017) and other forms of Indigeneity that are constructed in the diaspora (Urrieta, 2017). Chicana feminist epistemology has further conceptualized and built on Anzaldúa’s (1987) “new mestiza consciousness” to address colonial legacies and bridge Indigeneity and Mexican migrants in the United States (Hernández, 2018). Still, what *mestizaje* represents for U.S. Chicanxs is different from how it is interpreted by diasporic Indigenous Peoples. The efforts to uplift mestizo identities (particularly among Chicanxs) have also homogenized “a rich multiplicity of languages and peoples in Mesoamerica in favor of a generic Indianness” (Chacón, 2017, p. 185) that privileges a U.S. brand of Latinidad. Ultimately, Chacón argues that the use of

mestizaje in the United States is more about Chicana and Latinx disenfranchisement from White Americans than it is about the solidarity and horizontal relationships with Indigenous communities of the south. What is more, Urrieta (2017) argues that mestizos contribute “to the erasure and denial of Indigeneity for people who live Indigenous realities on an everyday basis” through their claims of distant Indigenous ancestry and folkloric consumption of Indigeneity (p. 256). While this analysis is not specific to an HSI context, these scholars remind us of the importance of interrogating Latinidad in the United States and the use of broad categories of identification that draw only from a selective and monolithic understanding of Indigenous ancestry.

Diasporic Indigenous Students in the United States

A growing number of studies focus on the educational experiences of diasporic Indigenous youth growing up in the United States (Baquedano-López, 2021; Barillas-Chón, 2010; Casanova, 2012; Casanova et al., 2016; Casanova et al., 2021; Equipo de Cronistas Oaxaqueños, 2013; González, 2016; Kovats, 2010; Martínez Morales, 2012; Mesinas & Pérez, 2016; Nicolás, 2012, 2017, 2021; Pérez et al., 2016; Vásquez, 2012). Diasporic Indigenous students often speak languages other than Spanish and maintain cultural practices unique to their communities of origin. Still, they are commonly assumed part of a larger homogeneous Latinx grouping even though their experiences do not always align with “Mexican” or “Latinx” narratives (Urrieta et al., 2019). Diasporic Indigenous migrants and subsequent generations negotiate their identities against the backdrop of not only a U.S. settler colonial identity but also a dominant mestizo Latinx identity (Kovats Sánchez, 2020). It is important to point out that extant literature is focused on diasporic Indigenous students with ties to Mexico, particularly Nuu Savi, Zapotec, Yucatec, Maya students. An emerging body of work is focusing on diasporic Indigenous youth from Central and South America (Barillas-Chón, 2021; Pentón Herrera, 2020, 2021).

A handful of studies document the experiences of diasporic Indigenous students (primarily with ties to Mexico) within higher education (Kovats Sánchez, 2019, 2020; Martínez Morales, 2012; Nicolás, 2012, 2017). Their collective findings parallel research on the ethnic identity development of college students of color. Access to alternative histories and courses that validated Indigenous students’ home communities proved to be powerful contexts for them to elevate their consciousness and ethnic pride. Nicolás (2012), for instance, drew attention to the importance of college courses in fostering pride among Zapotec college students. Learning about the sociopolitical history of Indigenous communities in Latin America helped develop the participants’ ethnic consciousness (Nicolás, 2012). Comparably, access to courses in Latin American studies exposed Nuu Savi students to alternative histories that validated their experiences as learners and knowers of rich culture and

history that, before college, were undervalued and unnoticed by their teachers and peers (Kovats, 2010; Kovats Sánchez, 2020). In addition to culturally validating college courses, college students created their own epistemological spaces in college and the community to uplift Indigenous identities (Equipo de Cronistas Oaxaqueños, 2013; Kovats, 2010; Kovats Sánchez, 2020; Mesinas & Pérez, 2016).

Collectively, studies suggest that epistemological spaces are metaphysical spaces where students of color explore, exchange, and validate their cultural knowledge—positively influence ethnic identity development (Equipo de Cronistas Oaxaqueños, 2013; Pérez et al., 2016; Prieto & Villenas, 2012; Villalpando, 2003). These spaces support ideologies, knowledges, and experiences that fall outside the dominant White narrative and provide students of color with the validation they need to feel connected not only to their college but also to their home community. Pérez et al. (2016) acknowledge that many Indigenous youth are finding ways to express pride in their Indigenous identities and languages through culturally validating spaces that influence other youth to “take steps to reclaim their heritage” (p. 264).

Conceptual Framework

Critical Latinx Indigenities

Considering the legacy of colonialism and its role in essentializing diverse groups into broader and exclusionary categories (e.g., Indigenous/Native, Black, Latinx), I approach this study through the lens of CLI (Blackwell et al., 2017; Calderón & Urrieta, 2019; Urrieta et al., 2019). The participants’ experiences cannot be examined without accounting for the long-term effects of Latin America’s colonial history and its implication on Indigenous migrants in the United States. CLI is an interdisciplinary analytical lens that “understands the co-constitutive relationship of multiple contexts of power and multiple colonialities” (Blackwell et al., 2017, p. 127). Although Chicana/Latinx Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Latin American Studies are typically perceived as distinct disciplines, CLI scholars urge for an intervention in these fields that reimagines transnational meanings of race, place, and Indigeneity. This includes exposing complex and intersectional nuances about Indigenous Latinxs in diaspora, intergroup oppression, and enduring colonialities of power, including the interrogation of the Mexican state’s Indigenista projects and the origins of the Chicano movement. Finally, the CLI perspective draws from the personal stories, ways of knowing, and ways of being of Indigenous Latinxs in the United States as an attempt to destabilize essentialist notions of both Latinx and Indigenous categories of identification that critique global forms of colonial legacies (Blackwell et al., 2017). Recognizing the transnational complexity of Indigeneity within diverse Latinx communities, this work aims to interrogate representations of Indigeneity that regularly romanticize notions of cultural purity (Urrieta, 2017) and are subsequently, manifested at HSI.

Within the framework of CLI, studies documented the ways diasporic Indigenous Peoples practice communal belonging across generations in the United States (Casanova et al., 2021; Nicolás, 2021; Urrieta et al., 2019; Urrieta & Martínez, 2011). Urrieta and Martínez (2011) refer to this practice as diasporic community *saberes* or Indigenous ways of knowing and ways of being that are transmitted through practices inherited by community members. Through traditional everyday Indigenous practices of *comunalidad*, diasporic Indigenous communities reinforce Indigenous belonging and identity far from their homeland (Nicolás, 2021; Urrieta & Martínez, 2011). Zapotec first, 1.5, and second generations in Southern California, for instance, participate in various cultural organizations and events like playing in philharmonic bands and assuming political cargos linked to their hometowns in Oaxaca (Casanova et al., 2021; Nicolás, 2021). Through the maintenance of *comunalidad*, Nicolás (2021) argues that Indigenous generations are bringing Zapotec ways of knowing, understanding, and reimagining communal life into both local and transborder contexts.

Fugitive Acts of Learning

Within this framework of *comunalidad* and the active resistance, preservation, and maintenance of Indigenous *saberes* within diaspora, I also draw from Patel’s (2016, 2019) conceptualization of fugitive acts of learning. Fugitive acts of learning emerge in direct defiance of what is offered in oppressive learning environments, making them unyielding to the “settler project of the colonization of the mind” (Patel, 2019, p. 257). Although schooling is a site of social reproduction and socialization, Patel (2016) argues that it is not a consistent site for learning. Unlike schooling, learning exists in and out of the formal classroom. Lessons from home, social movements, and self-determined education have the potential to challenge and even disrupt Eurocentric curricula and inaccurate histories reflected in schools and universities. Patel (2016) elaborates,

Learning is, at its core, a fundamentally fugitive act, underscored with deeper fugitivity in societies where the dangerous, agentic act of learning is constricted with punishing precision. Learning as fugitivity exists as a dialectic to the stratifying cultures of formal education that insist on contingent possibilities for well-being for some and unmitigated safety for others. The oft-noted achievement gap displays these contingent relationships. Against this backdrop of stratified life, learning exists in direct defiance of the rhetoric of achievement. It is around us and part of many of our histories, as are requisite histories of access to and foreclosure from school-based achievement. (p. 397)

Fugitive acts of learning offer people of color different opportunities to learn and live that exist beyond formal schooling structures. Desai and Abeita (2017) also define Patel’s fugitive acts of learning as a sanctuary for critical thought and a shield against microaggressions. These acts

offer insight into how oppression, microaggressions, and microinvalidations operate within higher education and the responses enacted by participants.

Methods

Positionality

This research stems from my long-term collaboration with Indigenous Nuu Savi communities and grassroots organizations. Commitment to this work has required a deep engagement with my own relationship to coloniality. Similar to Patel's (2014) conceptualization of her positionality on anticolonial research, my history as a (me)Xicana and my continual negotiation of multiple identities as a biracial, bicultural, and bilingual woman of color affect how I understand myself in relationship to colonization. Growing up in both Acapulco, Guerrero and Merced, California, I have experienced both the spoils and subjugation of the settler colonial project as a person of color but also a mestiza with distant ties to my Indigenous ancestry. Thus, part of this work includes articulating what it means to acknowledge my Indigenous heritage without promoting the erasure of contemporary Indigenous Peoples from and across Abya Yala.

Participants

This article draws from a broader study that explored educational experiences and community-based activism of 12 Indigenous college students and graduates. This particular study focused on 10 of the 12 participants to take a closer account of the students that attended HSIs in California. All 10 participants (five women, four men, one nonbinary participant) self-identified as Nuu Savi, Zapotec, or Nahuatl with ties to communities of origin in Oaxaca and Guerrero, Mexico. In Table 1, I document the specific labels the participants used to identify themselves. Most utilized a variation of labels like Indigenous, Native, and more specific terms like Nuu Savi/Mixtec or Zapotec. Several students identified with the state of Oaxaca, using the demonym of Oaxacan or Oaxaqueñ/a/x—which is a common marker of Indigenous identity within Mexican communities. Others used a demonym affiliated with their families' specific hometown or pueblo originario in Oaxaca or Guerrero. It is important to point out that all the participants explicitly distinguished themselves from Mexican mestizo, Mexican American, and Chicana identities, centering their Indigenous identities rather than affiliating with a national or broader pan-Latinx label. All participants spoke English and Spanish, and five spoke their respective Indigenous languages. The majority (seven of 10) were born and raised in the United States with the remaining three migrating to the United States before the age of 12 years.

The participants attended and graduated from eight different HSIs (two participants attended the same HSI). All

HSIs are located in California. Five HSIs are public 4-year universities with Latinx student populations ranging from 26% to 56%. One is a private 4-year university with 25% Latinx student population and the final two are 2-year community colleges with 78% and 56% Latinx student populations.

Data Collection and Analysis

Given the importance of listening, learning, and building reciprocity with Indigenous community members, I used testimonio as a praxis grounded in the community relationships I have established with Indigenous communities in Southern California over the past 15 years. Testimonio is a critical Latin American oral tradition and anti-imperial methodology (Flores Carmona et al., 2018; Pérez Huber, 2009; Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). As a methodological practice, it “asks the reader to position herself as a listener and witness” (Cruz, 2012, p. 461), allowing the speaker to share their lived knowledge and personal histories as a representative of a collective memory and identity (Yúdice, 1991). Testimonio also serves as radical storytelling that uplifts resilience and histories of resistance (Alarcón et al., 2011).

In this manner, I gathered the testimonios by initiating recruitment at the community-based organization where I volunteer and expanded my relations through network sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The participants' testimonios emerged through *pláticas* or “informal conversations that take place in one-on-one or group spaces (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 117). In my one-on-one *pláticas*, participants shared, interrogated, and reflected on their experiences in the language(s) they felt most comfortable (English, Spanish, and primarily Spanglish). In bearing witness to the participants' testimonios, I was able to engage in open and vulnerable reflections alongside them—strengthening our friendship and connection well beyond the purposes of the study. Our *pláticas* were digitally recorded and after transcribing them, I shared the transcriptions with the participants for review and feedback. I used open coding to find salient themes and emerging patterns across the testimonios. I also used concept mapping to make sense of the participants' experiences and find theoretical connections and relationships (Rosas & Kane, 2012), particularly related to CLI and their responses to both validating and invalidating experiences at their HSIs. Theoretically driven queries were run in NVivo to determine intersections between themes and attributes with attentiveness to participants' responses to oppression as forms of resistance and the fluidity of their identities within private and public domains (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012).

Findings

The findings from this study are divided into two parts: (1) participants' validating and racialized experiences at

TABLE 1
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Self-identification	Languages	HSI type
Ánima	Indigenous, Ñuu Savi, Oaxaqueña, Mixteca	Tu'un Savi, Spanish, English	4-Year public university
BitterQueer	Queer nonbinary Indigenous person, Ñuu Savi, Oaxacan, Mixtec	Spanish, English	4-Year public university
Chris	Family's hometown demonym, Oaxaqueño, Zapoteco	Spanish, English	4-Year public university
Joy	Indigenous Zapoteco, family's hometown demonym, Oaxaqueña	Spanish, English	4-Year public university
Libi	Mixteca, Ñuu Savi	Tu'un Savi, Spanish, English	4-Year public university
María	Demonym from pueblo, Nahuatl	Nahuatl, Spanish, English	4-Year public university
N'dii Kanu	Mixteco, Native, Ñuu Savi, pueblo originario	Tu'un Savi, Spanish, English	2-Year community college
Vicki	Mixteca, Oaxacan, Oaxaqueña	Spanish, English	4-Year private university
Ocho Movimiento	Mixteco, Ñuu Savi, family's hometown demonym	Spanish, English	2-Year community college
Santiago	Oaxaqueño, Zapoteco	Zapoteco, Spanish, English	4-Year public university

their respective HSIs and (2) their responses to these experiences through fugitive acts of learning.

(In)validating Experiences at HSIs

Overall, participants discussed a combination of validating and invalidating experiences. While some Latinx-centered spaces provided students with an alternative curriculum that highlighted Indigenous histories, students also faced Indigenous reductionism and microinvalidations in these same spaces. Taking courses specifically in anthropology, Latin American Studies, and Chicana Studies was the first time most participants ever saw their Indigenous histories represented in an academic setting. BitterQueer and Anima, who attended the same HSI spoke about the importance of their first anthropology course, which explored the pre-Columbian Ñuu Savi codices. BitterQueer credited the professor of this course for encouraging them to proudly embrace their Ñuu Savi/Mixtec identity. Anima also explained,

The professor then started talking about the community, Oaxaqueños, and that was the first time I had seen or heard my culture being mentioned within that type of space so I felt interested in knowing more about it and being part of that group so I stayed for quite some time within the anthropology department.

Along these same lines, during her sophomore year, Joy came across a course listing for an anthropology course on Mesoamerican Oaxaca, “It had Oaxaca in the title! I was like what?! It was an upper division anthropology class. I was like, what is this? This is really interesting!” Despite the course being upper-division, Joy was supported by an academic advisor who waived the introductory course requirement. Ocho Movimiento, Ñuu Savi/Mixtec college student, spoke very fondly of his community college Chicana Studies

professor who taught a course on the history of Indigenous social movements in Mexico.

These testimonios align with the importance of culturally validating and relevant curriculum at HSIs that enhance Latinx student experiences and outcomes (García & Okhidoi, 2015; Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2015). Nevertheless, these positive experiences were limited in comparison with the microaggressions and microinvalidations participants faced at their HSIs. Principally, participants discussed the problematic portrayal of Indigenous Peoples in their courses, campus programming, and even institutional imagery. While there were some courses available to them on Indigenous histories, the biggest critique among all participants was that these focused solely on pre-Columbian histories. Ocho Movimiento expressed his disappointment with several of his courses on Latinx history and culture that omitted Indigenous narratives:

Porque la manera en que se cuenta la historia siempre ha sido para borrar al indio, a la persona indígena. Aparte de que se le borra lo indígena, se le da una imagen negativa. Y pues sí, he estado en clases donde se niega por completo la existencia de las comunidades indígenas. [The way that the history is told has always meant to erase the Indian, the Indigenous person. In addition to erasing Indigenous Peoples, they are portrayed in negative way. I have been in classes where the entire existence of Indigenous communities is completely denied.]

The same course on Oaxaca that Joy identified as exciting and validating became a source of frustration. While she did learn about the Zapotec sociopolitical and economic center of Monte Albán, she was left yearning for more information. She explained that this “Oaxacan” history course mainly focused on pre-Columbian Aztec/Mexica and Mayan history: “But it just sucks that out of the billions of courses it was only that one [about Oaxaca].”

Several participants also expressed frustrations about Latinx-centered spaces on campus. Similar to her childhood experiences, Joy had difficulty connecting to the broader Latinx community on campus, mainly because she felt these spaces catered to Chicane mestizo students:

I was never really part of anything just because I never really identified with anything like that, like the Chicano movement. I respect it and I understand the movement but that was a movement that we Indigenous people were not a part of. We are still discriminated from that movement.

Despite sharing several similarities with her peers, she could not identify as Latinx or Chicane given the exclusion of present-day Indigenous communities she witnessed among these spaces on campus. Moreover, the idea of feeling different from her mestizo Latinx peers during her childhood continued to play a prominent role in college as she attempted to interact with Chicanes and Latinxs. It was for this same reason that Joy decided not to live in her university's Latinx-themed residential hall because she knew as an Indigenous person she would "feel out of place" in a predominantly mestizo space.

Eager to find connections on campus, Vicki sought community at the Latinx/Chicane resource center at her university, whose mission claimed to provide students the opportunity to explore Chicane and Latinx culture, history, and traditions. Vicki, however, experienced several microaggressions that further amplified for her the differences between her Indigenous identity and that of her Chicane/mestizo peers. On one occasion, Vicki was invited by the resource center to take part in a student leadership retreat organized by the diversity, equity, and inclusion division at her university. During this retreat, students spoke about the issues faced in their respective communities on campus. This led to a moment of realization for Vicki:

I think that's when the light . . . when the switch finally happened when they were talking about the Native community [. . .] during that retreat I cried a lot because it was just like a revealing moment where the reason that I have not been able to fit into the [Latinx campus community] ever was because my complete identity, I think, was never reflected.

This realization was magnified by an interaction with a Latina participant during the retreat:

I was still microaggressed by this Latina girl who came up to me and said, "Wow I wish that I was like you. I wish that I knew where my family was from. I wish that I was an Indian so that . . . I wish that I was an "india" so I also knew where my family was coming from." I think at that moment I didn't know how to process that but I don't know what prompted her to tell me that but I felt very nasty. I don't know if she understood what she was telling me because it really hurt, it was just really nasty and I felt really poorly after that because my whole life I'd gone not feeling like I had belonged anywhere and even then, she was making it seem, I don't know, it was really weird. After that I realized that in the [Latinx campus community] that I

was never going to have the voice that I wanted to or impact that I wanted to have for my community.

This student's comment, although possibly well-intentioned, disregarded Vicki's distinct experience and struggles as a contemporary Indigenous Nuu Savi/Mixtec person. The oversimplification of Indigenous heritage as knowing "where you are from" dismissed the historical and colonial implications faced by Indigenous Peoples who continually have to resist to maintain their languages, knowledges, and traditions. As a result, Vicki stopped participating in the resource center's programs. She expressed frustrations with trying to build relationships with Latinx mestizo peers that dismissed present-day Indigenous struggles but simultaneously coveted and romanticized her Indigenous identity. She realized: "I was never going to have the voice that I wanted to or the impact that I wanted to have for my community."

María also expressed disappointment in her university's monolithic representation of Indigeneity, which was directly tied to its problematic Indigenous mascot and reverence for colonial history through its institutional imagery and mission architecture. As a "self-proclaimed proud Latinx serving institution," María argued that the mascot brought no honor to present-day Nahua communities like her own. María joined a collective student effort to call for the removal of the mascot but in this fight faced significant discrimination from university administrators, faculty, and student leaders. María was subjected to numerous attacks from university administrators and student organizations during associated student council meetings. She explained,

I was in the student council and to be surrounded with all these representatives, student organizations who didn't see how discriminatory and how hurtful that was for people who they did not put a face to or even acknowledge us as living. When I was there, I can't say I represented all the communities but being aware that people who still possess that identity and that direct connection can't come over here and speak up because again they're busy trying to survive. Nonetheless, it's not an image that brings any honor to them even as it is still currently with all the historical accuracy that's been done to correct it. At the end of the day, it's still a human who is being depicted as a mascot so this again it's very troubling [. . .] It was very painful to sit in those [meetings] and feel directly attacked for all of this.

It is important to point out that a significant portion of the mascot rhetoric hinged on the idea that the mascot represented the ancestral and Indigenous heritage of many Mexican American and Chicanes students and alumni. María explained that the university went as far as to claim that their classification as an HSI situated on the United States/Mexico border justified the use of the mascot as a way to educate students about Indigenous People.

At a certain point, María felt overwhelmed by the pushback she was receiving. She expressed, "it became painful to be who I am publicly with the whole mascot issue." The university's continued reverence for the Indigenous mascot

ultimately created an unwelcoming and hostile learning environment for María. Additionally, she felt significant pressure from her peers to be the face of the fight against the mascot as a Nahua student. The tokenization of her Indigeneity took a toll on María: “I’m aware of the history of how Indigenous communities have been used in the past both in Mexico and the United States and I decided to stay away from it. I had to take care of myself.” María, consequently, removed herself from the antimascot student committee to avoid further harm to her spirit and well-being.

Fugitive Acts of Learning

Despite these invalidating experiences, several participants engaged in fugitive acts of learning (Patel, 2016) that allowed them to center their histories and identities in their coursework and foster awareness about Indigenous Peoples on campus. After the negative experiences with her university’s Chicax/Latinx resource center, Vicki took steps to educate her mestizo and non-Indigenous peers as a residential advisor. Vicki used her platform to create greater awareness within her residential community:

I was able to bring in narratives about Oaxacan people and Indigenous people from all of southern Mexico and Guatemala and be able to talk about them openly without feeling like I was imposing. I think that I got really good reception from the community but people also, they don’t understand that when you grow up within a Mexican community that there is very active anti-Indigenous sentiment when oaxaquita or indio and all these terms are used as a derogatory term.

With the ability to develop residential programming, Vicki shed light on contemporary Indigenous issues across Abya Yala and anti-Indigenous discrimination within Latinx communities. Joy also decided to serve as a residential advisor in the Latinx-themed residential hall she originally avoided in her first year of college. It was during this experience that she realized the important role she held in building a network of support for Indigenous Oaxacan students within Latinx spaces on campus.

The exclusion of contemporary Indigenous representation in his classes prompted Ocho Movimiento to consciously incorporate that discussion into his academic work. For his senior thesis, Ocho Movimiento wrote about the migration patterns of Indigenous Oaxacan communities in the United States. Similarly, María’s frustrations with pre-Columbian Indigenous representations motivated her to become more vocal about her Indigenous Nahua heritage, in both her Chicax Studies and Anthropology courses. In an attempt to educate her peers, she became intentional about centering her Nahua community in class assignments. Furthermore, María began to associate the pursuit of higher education with a responsibility to her Nahua community.

As a music major, Joy initially kept her “music worlds apart.” She had not informed her teachers that she was in a traditional Zapotec philharmonic band because she feared “the Western world wouldn’t accept my Indigenous music or see it as a high caliber thing.” At a certain point in her college journey, however, Joy could not keep her musical worlds separate. Again, the lack of recognition for her traditional Zapotec music pushed her to become more vocal in her college classes:

At some point I started realizing that if we don’t or if others don’t come in to talk about it, nobody is going to talk about it so then at some point when I started identifying as Indigenous because it happened in my undergrad years, I had that opportunity to at least expose our music world to the quote-end-quote Western music. So that’s what I started doing in my courses. Whenever we had a project or research projects I would veer away from the Western music and focus on our music.

Subsequently, Joy’s senior recital displayed her Zapotec musical traditions—the first of its kind at her university, which became a public celebration of her Zapotec community.

Ultimately, the participants’ fugitive acts of learning were communal acts of agency rather than individual ones. Tailoring course assignments and creating campus workshops and events were opportunities for the participants to showcase not just themselves, but more importantly, the communities they belong to. As Ocho Movimiento eloquently described,

Aquí es donde agarramos valor y donde sea que vamos ahora siempre es lo indígena por enfrente. Entonces siempre diciendo que somos mixtecos [Here is where we gather courage and wherever we go the Indigenous is in front always. So, we are always saying we are Mixtecos].

These fugitive acts of learning gave way to new ways of affirming Indigeneity within Latinx-centered contexts.

Discussion

The participants’ invalidating experiences at HSIs reflect the enduring and homogenizing impact of Latinidad that relegates Indigeneity to the past and centers mestizaje (Calderón & Urrieta, 2019). As framed by CLI, the overrepresentation of mestizos and exclusion of contemporary Indigenous Peoples within courses and Latinx-centered spaces on campus expose the complex and intersectional nuances about intergroup oppression and enduring colonialities of power that are manifested at HSIs. Romanticized notions of Indigenous ancestry as witnessed by Vicki and the exclusive representation of pre-Columbian Indigeneity in Latinx-centered courses and programs are reminiscent of the ways mestizos have contributed “to the erasure and denial of Indigeneity for people who live Indigenous realities on an everyday basis” (Urrieta, 2017, p. 259).

Similarly, the Indigenous mascot at María's HSI further complicates the university's claims about proudly serving Latinx students. For María, a diasporic Nahua student, the mascot represented a caricature of her identity and community. María's frustrations with the mascot align with extensive research on the psychosocial impact of Native American mascots. Native mascots are harmful not only because they are often negative, but because they remind Indigenous peoples of the limited ways others see them (Fryberg et al., 2008). Collectively, researchers argue that Native mascots create unwelcoming and hostile learning environments for Indigenous students and undermine the educational experiences of all communities, especially those who have had little or no contact with Indigenous Peoples (Davis-Delano et al., 2020; Fryberg et al., 2008; Fryberg et al., 2020; Leavitt et al., 2015). What is more, the institution's reliance on its HSI designation as justification for maintaining their Indigenous mascot demonstrates how multiple colonial frames of race, racialization, and Indigeneity from both the United States and Mexico come together to give deference to mestizo voices and simultaneously ignore contemporary Indigenous voices who openly and bravely critique the mascot. The persistent use of prequest and terminal narratives about Indigeneity, through the use of an Indigenous mascot, continues to dismiss contemporary Indigenous experiences and knowledges (Calderón & Urrieta, 2019; Urrieta, 2017).

The participants' fugitive acts of learning demonstrate the ways personal stories, ways of knowing, and being can "destabilize essentialist notions of both Latinx and Indigenous categories of identification and critique global forms of colonial legacies" (Blackwell et al., 2017, pp. 134–135). Rumbaut (2008) describes "reactive ethnicity" as a response to "perceived threats, persecution, discrimination, and exclusion" (p. 110) that often leads to ethnic group solidarity and political mobilization. Similarly, the participants' responses emerged because of microaggressions and microinvalidations on campus. Through their fugitive acts of learning, participants claimed new forms of visibility that went beyond the mestizo imaginary of Indigenous ancestral heritage. Patel (2019) suggests that those that engage in fugitive acts of learning have "never yielded fully to this settler project of the colonization of the mind" (p. 257). The participants' actions were direct defiance against continued colonial oppression. To this point, Urrieta (2017) reminds us that the survival of Indigenous people "in all of our many and creative reinventions, innovations, and resurgence" is a testament to the incompleteness of colonialism (p. 259).

Finally, rather than individual acts, the participants' fugitive acts of learning were collective efforts to uplift their respective communities. Alberto (2017) contends that,

when a Latinx speaks their Indigeneity, it becomes a means of critiquing race and ethnicity as formulated by dominant Eurocentric culture but also these declarations become a powerful tool to

unsettle mainstream Chicana and other Latinx cultures that have their own hegemonic power. (p. 252)

The maintenance of *comunalidad* is reflected in the participants' fugitive acts of learning and the ways diasporic Indigenous college students are reimagining communal life within the context of higher education. These fugitive acts give way for public affirmations of their Indigeneity that not only benefit their Latinx and non-Indigenous peers but also their communities—establishing a legacy and sense of belonging for a growing diasporic Indigenous student body.

Implications and Recommendations

The participants' experiences at HSIs and their subsequent fugitive acts of learning allow us to imagine new definitions that "can better serve the institution in helping students maneuver the academic environment" (Torres, 2004, p. 458). Recognizing that HSIs serve as key access points to higher education for diverse Latinx students, the findings from this study raise important implications for HSI practice, policy, and research HSIs.

First, as we develop new HSI initiatives, we must also take a critical look at how we design culturally relevant curricula and programming for Latinx students. In our efforts to foster "racial and cultural ways of knowing of Latinx students" (García, 2019, p. 73), it is important to interrogate which Latinx culture we are centering and who may be inadvertently excluding. What does it mean to uncritically embrace mestizo narratives in our curricula and programming? This includes contemporary representation of Indigenous Peoples. Rather than acknowledging Indigeneity as a sign of residual Latinx ancestry, Alberto (2016) reminds us that we must account for the dominant culture attached to actual Indigenous villages, places, and people. Otherwise, we inadvertently contribute to the idea that Indigenous histories and narratives are terminal.

Second, I encourage HSI practitioners and Latinx-based resource centers to establish relational ties with Native and Indigenous spaces and organizations on and off campus. These relational ties should include collaborative discussions and programming. These collaborations can disrupt preexisting silos across campus and garner greater awareness among staff about Indigenous diversity on campus. In my own work, several diasporic Indigenous students expressed a greater sense of belonging in Native American spaces on campus (Kovats Sánchez, 2019). Establishing collaborative relationships with Indigenous entities on campus can create opportunities to support a broader range of students and address the intersectionality that exists between Indigeneity and Latinidad.

Third, I recommend the disaggregation of Hispanic/Latinx student enrollment data and the reimagining of demographic categories that account for Latinx racial, cultural, and linguistic variability, particularly in relationship to

Indigeneity. Currently, diasporic Indigenous students are limited in their options for identification, with Native American or Alaska Native being the typical categories for self-identification. Similar to the U.S. census integration of “Latin American Indian,” several California universities have integrated this subcategory into their college application within the categorization of Native American. Nevertheless, students are unable to name their specific communal affiliation or pueblo originario, limiting the opportunities for HSIs to identify which diasporic Indigenous students are represented on campus.

Fourth, HSIs must discontinue the use of offensive Indigenous symbols and mascots. As previously mentioned, collective studies over the past decade identify ethnic salience, academic self-concept, and leadership development as important indicators of servingness at HSIs (Cuellar, 2014, 2015; García et al., 2019; García & Okhidoi, 2015; Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2015). As HSIs strive to uplift the racial and cultural history, language, and epistemologies of Latinx and all other students, there is no justification for the use of Indigenous mascots. Similar to Desai and Abeita’s (2017) call to discontinue the commodification of Native art and cultural projects through official university seals and murals on campus, María’s testimonio urges HSIs to become aware of the intersection between Latinidad and Indigeneity and the ways microaggressions operate at an institutional level through symbols and mascots. Not only do Indigenous mascots obscure the present-day realities of Indigenous Peoples across this hemisphere, but they also obscure the history and realities of the original stewards of the land on which HSIs occupy.

Finally, as researchers continue to challenge the “H” in HSIs, it is essential to integrate more studies on Indigenous Peoples across Abya Yala. Current research is concentrated on Indigenous students with ties to Mexico. Recognizing that Indigenous Peoples are not monolithic, a growing emphasis on Indigenous students with ties to Central and South America and the Caribbean is necessary in understanding how we can better address students’ needs and create an inclusive environment at HSIs.

Conclusion

Chacón (2017) suggests that the rise of contemporary Indigenous Peoples from Mesoamerica into the United States has already led to a reconfiguring of Chicanx and Latinx mestizo understandings of Indigeneity and as such, HSIs must be conscious of this demographic shift. The participants’ testimonios remind us of the complexity of Latinidad and the issues of a dominant mestizo narrative that obscures the uniquely different experiences of Indigenous Peoples in the United States. The participants’ put these complexities into question as they grappled with spaces in higher education that celebrated Latinidad at

HSIs but simultaneously dismissed their Indigeneity. While some participants found validation through courses, the majority described their discontent with the misrepresentation and invalidation of Indigenous Peoples at their HSI, which prompted participants to engage in fugitive acts of learning that uplifted their unique experiences within dominant mestizo settings. These fugitive and communal acts of learning offer possibilities for the future that urge HSI scholars and practitioners to challenge the homogenizing effects of Latinidad and reimagine what it means to serve diverse students at HSI.

Open Practices

The data files for this article can be found at <https://www.openicpsr.org/openicpsr/project/152762/version/V1/view>

Notes

1. Latinx serves as a gender-neutral term that challenges the gender binary: “Latinx reflects the shifting terrain of identification and the ongoing commitment to building unity through embracing the diversity of Latinidad by not erasing difference and specificity. Further, the term Latinx is an important tool to signal the colonial nature of the imposition of gender binaries and opens up the possibility for recognizing the diversity of Indigenous sex gender systems in the Americas, many of which included more than two genders” (Blackwell et al., 2017, p. 129).

2. Mestizo is used in several Latin American countries, including Mexico, to describe a person of mixed Indigenous and Spanish heritage (see Bonfil Batalla, 1989; Forbes, 2005; Gutiérrez, 1999).

3. Pueblos originarios (original Peoples in English) is a term more commonly used and growing in preference by communities and nations in Abya Yala as a conceptual shift from the colonial implications of the term “Indigenous” (Redacción, 2017; Semo, 2017).

4. Abya Yala, meaning land in its full maturity, is a term employed by the Kuna of Panamá to refer to the American continents. I use Abya Yala in this document to refer to Latin America and the Caribbean (see Juncosa, 1987).

5. The word Mixtec/o is derived from the Nahuatl language. After the conquest of the Aztec empire, Spanish authorities and missionaries utilized Nahuatl to name other Native communities. This is why most Indigenous groups in Mexico are commonly referred to by their name in Nahuatl (Kovats Sánchez, 2019). To divest from colonial terminology and honor Nuu Savi culture, language, and resistance, I use the term “Nuu Savi” in place of Mixtec/o.

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