Differences within Difference: Everyday Praxis from Latinx Lived Experiences

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Latinx bodies challenge conventional historical, ideological, and institutional narratives that seek to fix, define, and render legible racial identities. These traditional accounts of race, racialization processes, and narratives imposed on Latinx student populations present a monolithic approach to difference. However, Latinx bodies confound simple narratives about race, community, and belonging: "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" (Blackwell et al. 129). By foregrounding this difference and specificity—what we call "differences within difference"—we seek to illuminate the degree to which focusing on a single narrative erases and silences diversity. By so doing, we underscore contextual complications to undermine the racial logics and static narratives about Latinx educational experiences. We engage with a recent article on Latinx responses to mentorship and belonging, where authors Christine Garcia, Les Hutchinson Campos, Genevieve Garcia de Müeller, and Christina V. Cedillo bear witness to their painful experiences of racial narratives and systemic racism. In particular, Garcia et al. describe the ways in which Latinx experiences are co-opted, exploited, and controlled by white mentors, who explicitly announce and embrace "anti-racist" predispositions. In response to this problem, the authors focus on deploying rhetorical practices that "more closely reflect our everyday praxes" an approach in which anti-racist theory and practice interact to produce a cycle of action and reflection that both supports and stays true to an antiracist agenda (56). We reflect on and augment this agenda with our own voices, sharing narratives of three sites of praxis: heritage language acquisition, journeys to educational attainment, and supporting differences in the classroom. Our narratives contribute to the "everyday praxes," by foregrounding lived experiences of individuals who are complex assemblages of difference.

Heritage Language Acquisition

A rise in English-only speakers in Latinx communities can be attributed not only to the privileging of standard-edited English in schools but also Mexican American parents and communities who want success, power, and social mobility for their children (Beckstead and Toribio). Structural inequalities, racialized ideologies, and personal histories combine to compel the inevitable heritage language loss for Latinx students, including Yvette and Victoria. This

loss, along with the psychic toll of consistent microaggressions, results from their (in)ability to speak Spanish at home and in academe. Regardless of the variety of Spanish, being able to speak one's heritage language becomes proof of authentic performances of racial identity. Heritage language acquisition provides a rich context for highlighting the value of everyday praxes and the dynamics of differences within difference.

Victoria: As a multiracial Latina, my experience with racial identity was tied to my experience with speaking Spanish. My father is Latino (Mexican), and my mother is Caucasian. My father was taught in public school that English was the language for success. He was even sent to summer school with other Mexican children to learn to speak English "properly," even though he already knew English. His experiences with this colonialist oppression moved generationally to me, as he spoke English at home with me and my siblings to protect us from experiencing the shame inflicted upon him through public education (see Vasquez-Tokos). While my inability to speak Spanish did not bother me at first, I experienced shame and sorrow over my inability to speak to my abuela, was made fun of for mispronouncing Spanish words, and I eventually shut my mouth to protect myself. To me, my lack of Spanish exacerbated my own perceived illegitimacy of Latinx identity. These feelings of shame are countered by my parents' unquestioning support and fervent encouragement. When my mom read my master's thesis, she expressed pride and love over the work I had done, reminding me, "You were never a quitter." As I started my Ph.D., my dad began calling me "Dr. Mija," an affectionate moniker he has continued to use. The love, pride, and support from my parents keep me tied to my Latina identity.

Yvette: Like Victoria, I am also Mexican-American and white. I grew up solely around the Mexican side of my family on a predominantly Mexican/Mexican-American side of San Antonio, Texas. My family ostracized and teased me for looking and being white (see Castillo Planas), and my abuela frequently lied to her friends that my father was half-Mexican to avoid being shamed. Although my mother and her siblings were fluent in Spanish, they risked being "paddled" at school if caught speaking it; therefore, in order to avoid what was believed to be the dangers of bilingualism, they did not pass the language on to my sibling, my cousins, and me. Paddling was still administered at our elementary school so, and while we dared to behave in other ways that might get us paddled, we dared not speak Spanish at school. Although we were not really encouraged to speak it inside the home, either. I still

managed to understand much of what our family said in Spanish, and much of what was written in my mom's Spanish-language *Cosmopolitan* magazines. And I spoke the taboo words and other choice phrases in secret with my cousins and friends, which prompted relentless teasing about how stupid I looked by speaking Spanish in my white skin. Eventually I stopped trying, and effectively stopped learning to speak Spanish.

Journeys to Educational Attainment

Societal views about Latinxs and other populations of color are based on widely held assumptions and master narratives about the value of education (Rendón et al.). Mentors, susceptible to these firmly entrenched narratives, may be influenced by a deficit model that frames *all* Latinx students as culturally deprived, at-risk marginal learners whose families do not value education. To counter this deficit model, Tara Yosso proposes a "community cultural wealth" model that reframes racialized master narratives to focus on the range of knowledge, skills, and abilities that communities of color bring to education (Yosso 77). Our narratives underscore the complexity and challenges of entering academe. For example, Yvette's experience echoes the deficit model while Victoria's familial and societal support underscores cultural wealth. Narratives of educational attainment provide a crucial site of everyday praxis that spotlight the specificity of differences within difference.

Yvette: In second grade, I declared I would be a writer when I grew up. The criticisms were swift and abundant. While my mom thought it was cute, my friends made fun of me for wanting to do something "white," and my cousins laughed at me so much that I had to hide my notebooks every time they came over. By fifth grade, all of my writing was done in secret. When college application time came around, I was too embarrassed to major in English. My mom who was terminally ill with brain cancer begged me not to go away. She asked me to settle down with my high school boyfriend so she would know I was safe when she died. My mom passed away in 2001 right before spring break of my senior year. A few weeks later, my college acceptance (and rejection) letters began coming in. My stepfather approved of me going to college because he was tired of dealing with me. But my abuela reminded me my mom did not want me to. She said it was selfish and asked what my boyfriend would think of it since he would be attending college in town. My uncle, who obtained a college degree while in the United States Army, wondered what would become of my younger sibling, who would be left without a mother figure. Meanwhile, my cousins

acted like I was trying to be better than them. The internalized *machismo* in my family's responses—shaming me for wanting to leave the domestic sphere for college while the men were encouraged to further their education—prompted my adoption of Chicana feminist pedagogical practices that encourage me to, as Torrez expresses, "merge… knowledge from the home with the community" (103). I draw on my Anzaldúan mestiza consciousness – the awareness of straddling two or more opposing cultures – against systemic structures, including machismo, that aim to block (primarily female) students from realizing their potential.

Victoria: My experience with education is different than scholarship tends to imagine for Latinx students. My mom homeschooled all five of us. She made the decision to homeschool us when she noticed my oldest sister learning to read quickly. My mom dedicated her life to our learning to ensure we had the best education she could provide. I took homeschooling for granted as a child, not realizing the social and cultural judgment my parents faced for doing so. Homeschooling the five siblings resulted in a strong familial connection so that not a day goes by that we do not speak to one another. Further, she and my dad provided a foundation that emphasized education was not marginalizing or oppressive. Thus, by the time I was sixteen, I had started taking dual-credit courses at the community college where my father taught, and I soon began tutoring other students in math and English. My early education at home with my mother inspired me to become a teacher; homeschooling enabled my academic success. In hindsight, I realized how much stigma my parents endured (from multiple communities) to educate me.

Supporting Differences in Our Classrooms

Current and future mentors engaging in antiracist pedagogy must avoid "white-washing," or "a deliberate erasure of the ontologies and epistemologies" of their students (Garcia et al. 8). Contributions to antiracist pedagogy might attend to the specificity of differences in classrooms. Informed by our experiences with struggling to acquire our heritage language and our journeys into academe, we seek to support and foreground the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of Latinx students specifically, and our minoritized and underserved populations more broadly. Narratives of lived experiences are the first step to enabling social engagement and challenging the racial logics that silence some facets of Latinxs' complex, contextual, ever-changing identity performances.

Victoria: To broaden awareness about the complexity of acquiring one's heritage language, I encourage my students to write Language Literacy Narratives that spotlight their experiences with their heritage languages. In particular, I focus on how multiracial/ethnic Latinx students bring diverse experiences that are a result of their communities, upbringing, and educational journeys. Additionally, through a qualitative study of students' multilingual literacy narratives, I have noticed students who are neither multiracial/ethnic nor Latinx also provide insight into the hybrid linguistic experiences of students at Hispanic Serving Institutions. Building on scholarship on translingualism which prioritizes "cross-language interactions and contact relationships," I encourage monolingual and multilingual students to embrace their cultural and linguistic hybridity in ways that I felt I lacked as a Latina who struggled to speak Spanish (Canagarajah 2). My praxis foregrounds the ways in which hybrid, Latinx identities enable students to embrace translingualism in their narratives so that their unique voices and experiences may be heard by others.

Yvette: Majoring in English as I see it, and have experienced it, is an act of resistance, and I treat it as such in my classroom. To drive this concept home, I assign work by writers like Gloria Anzaldua, Ariana Brown, and Ilan Stavans, who embrace Spanglish in their works, alongside linguists who spell out the legitimacy of AAVE and women in history who have created their own languages to survive. In my upper-division composition class, I ask my students, "When/How did you decide you wanted to major in English?" Interestingly, but not surprisingly, about half of my Latinx students express similar cognitive and emotional dissonance in their own responses. The other half tend not to mention anything about conflicting messages at all. Many, like me, cultivated a love for writing through creative pieces composed in hiding. To justify their choice of major, many choose "practical" pathways such as professional writing or teaching. As an instructor, I mentor my students on the effects that colonization, segregation, the patriarchy, and public school district zonings have had on literacy in the United States and how restricting access to reading and writing has often been a fairly successful method of oppression for immigrants, people of color, those living in poverty, and women. These topics, as part of my approach to antiracist pedagogy, help my students conceptualize possible reasons for their families' opposition to their majoring in English. It is likely they are under the impression that having, or aspiring to have, a high command over reading and writing makes one an oppressor. I explain

that this reaction is by design, and that as students of writing, rhetoric, and language, they are in a prime position to begin dismantling this racist practice.

Conclusion

Our voices, stories, and journeys testify to the urgency to pay attention to the differences within difference, countering erasure, silence, and marginalization imposed institutionally and communally. Totalizing categories that limit us to specific racial identities and roles as students, teachers, and mentors, can be countered with intentional acknowledgement of the specificity of difference. We encourage students to identify their own sites of lived experiences, thereby redefining themselves through their own narratives and with their own voices and in so doing enacting an everyday praxis. The foundation of antiracist pedagogy, this praxis provides opportunities for students to push against limiting definitions, define themselves, and find belonging even as they undermine those totalizing categories.

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