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### Counterstories of college persistence by undocumented Mexicana students: navigating race, class, gender, and legal status

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## Counterstories of college persistence by undocumented Mexicana students: navigating race, class, gender, and legal status

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This paper draws from four sets of four in-depth interviews and one subsequent focus group to examine how undocumented Mexicana students navigate identities and the meanings of race, gender, class, and legal status. We mobilize a critical race theory framework to center and explore the content of students' counterstories. While majoritarian stories perpetuate stereotypical narratives that portray communities of color as culturally deficient, counterstorytelling creates a space for exposing and resisting hegemonic narratives in the home, community, and college settings. We argue that, through counterstories, Mexicana students are able to develop a positive self-image that allows them to hang on to their academic aspirations, to persist in college, and to envision and pursue the possibility of success. We look at how undocumented Mexicana students' narratives also reproduce and/or reinscribe elements of oppressive discourses of race, class, and gender in the contemporary USA. We consider some implications of our discussion of counterstories for educational theory and policy.

**Keywords:** critical race theory; college persistence; counterstories; intersectionality; identities; racialization; gender; legal status

Early scholarship on college persistence was anchored on *assimilation/acculturation models* which defined Latino/as and other ethnoracial<sup>1</sup> minorities as poorly poised for success, emphasizing purported deficiencies within minority and poor households. Moreover, many student retention frameworks were initially geared toward predominately white, upper-middle class students from college-educated households (Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora 2000). Recent scholarship breaks away from such deficit thinking to account theoretically and empirically for the strengths, knowledges, and potentials that exist in minority households, and for how these contribute to student success (Brown and Souto-Manning 2008; García and Guerra 2004; González, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Yosso 2005). A host of studies have revealed the need for further research on how race, class, and gender impact retention of diverse populations (Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora 2000).

Critical race theory (CRT) provides a useful vantage point from which to ascertain the factors that contribute to college persistence among students of color. First, it allows us to foreground racialization<sup>2</sup> as a process which structures the college experience, and further, to explore how students of color respond to (resist or

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reinscribe) racialized institutional structures, expectations, and ideologies in order to succeed in college. Second, a CRT framework calls attention to the intersectionality of identities (what Godínez [2006] has named *trenzas de identidades multiples*) with implications for oppression, and for resistance and positive transformation in educational contexts. That is, a CRT framework brings into focus the ways in which race, class, and gender differently shape the experiences of students, and also differently affect the tools that enable them to succeed. Third, CRT calls on education scholars to listen to the stories of students of color in their own voices, as meaningful and informative, and as they capture experiences which have been unaccounted for, dismissed, or obliterated in dominant narratives within education. Indeed, a critical race theory perspective aims to facilitate the inclusion of marginalized stories and voices with the purpose of advancing educational research and pedagogy (Yosso 2006).

In this paper we engage a CRT perspective, as elaborated in Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit),<sup>3</sup> to include the ways in which language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, and phenotype also become intersecting markers of identities and inequality (Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal 2001; Valdés 1996; Villalpando 2004). We use such a framework to examine how undocumented Mexicana<sup>4</sup> students navigate expectations and institutional structures in ways that allow them to create positive self-identities (Hill Collins 1990) which facilitate their college persistence. We turn to students' narratives as they are reflective of navigational capital – a form of capital which individuals acquire as they challenge, resist, and transform dominant cultures, or their own cultural spaces, in order to gain resources and succeed in hegemonic institutions (Yosso 2005). Our empirical aim is to identify undocumented Mexicana students' counterstories, to examine their content and form, and the ways in which they subvert or reinscribe aspects of dominant narratives. Attending to undocumented Mexicana students' counterstories not only informs a critical perspective on college persistence, but it also brings to the fore the ways in which marginalized populations contest or reproduce the meanings of social categories and, thus, shape the ideological terrain in the contemporary USA.

### Theorizing college persistence among non-dominant student populations

Tinto has argued that 'persons of minority backgrounds and/or from very poor families, older adults, and persons from very small rural communities' are more likely to have difficulties during their college transition than students whose family members have experienced college (1988, 445). Further, Tinto (1987, 1993) asserts that for college students to succeed, they have to detach from their home communities, utilize campus resources and networks to assist them during the transition process, and incorporate new behaviors and memberships to fully fit into 'the college institutional culture'. In effect, Tinto's theory exemplifies the *assimilationist model* that has been pervasive in much sociological scholarship on education. Such a model presumes that, for Latinos/as and other ethnoracial minorities, college success hinges on assimilation into the dominant (white) culture. Giving up their own cultural values and group identities and embracing the dominant white culture and identity are presumed to be both inevitable and desirable paths to success for minority students (Barajas and Pierce 2001; Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996; Hurtado and Carter 1997; Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora 2000; Tierney 1992). In the book, *Reworking the Student Departure Puzzle*, critics suggest a new 'vision' for Tinto's model as it pertains to the measurable viability

of the academic integration construct for incorporating new economic, psychological, and sociological theoretical perspectives on college student departure. Specifically, researchers encourage veering away from Tinto's notion of conformity and introduce a myriad of cultural factors which further complicate the student departure decision (Kuh and Love 2000; Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora 2000). Further, the heterogeneity associated with cultural factors illustrates how students' cultural origins can impact their college experiences. It is important to acknowledge that while the research on Latino/a college persistence tries to address the individual experiences and needs of Latinos as a panethnic group, a multitude of factors including class, gender, language, phenotype, geographical location, and immigration status results in 'cultural layers' with implications for college persistence.

Yosso's (2006) model of college persistence shifts focus away from the dominant cultural perspective articulated in Tinto's model to a more culturally focused approach in which the cultural origins of Chicano/a students are central to their *critical navigation*<sup>5</sup> of multiple worlds. Such a focus allows for inclusion of the experiences and values of students of color and other non-dominant student populations in university contexts, and for analysis of how such experiences and values are integral to and formative of the college culture. Drawing from CRT, Yosso's work highlights how communities of color reproduce their own sets of skills, abilities, networks, and knowledges in order to survive and resist macro and micro forms of oppression. She specifically engages *critical race counterstories* to reflect on Chicana/o<sup>6</sup> students' stories of alienation, isolation, and discrimination as they were introduced to college life (Yosso 2006). Her findings indicate that, contrary to what Tinto's theory suggests, Chicana/o college students rely on and gain strength from their communities and families. For these students, building a sense of community enabled them to create *counterspaces* (academic and social spaces that fostered their learning at the university) and 'to nurture a supportive environment where their experiences were validated and viewed as important knowledge' (2006, 120). Yosso used counterstories to identify some such *counterspaces*, such as: study groups where students' social groups develop into academic support groups; centers where students receive tutoring or assistance with academic skills; or student organizations that enable students to give back to their communities.

In this paper we extend Yosso's work by engaging the critical race counterstories of undocumented Mexicana students. We draw from such counterstories to map the ways in which students navigate multiple identities and respond to hegemonic representations, expectations, and structures in ways that allow them to persist in the pursuit of their college education.

### The significance of counterstories

In her book *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, Hilde Lindermann-Nelson defines a counterstory as 'a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect' (2001, 6). In educational scholarship, the term counterstories has been used to refer to the stories told by those who are marginalized about their own experiences, stories which are not often told, acknowledged, or valued. The term has also been used to refer to a methodological approach which aims to expose, analyze, and challenge the stories of those in power – the dominant discourse, the 'majoritarian story' in education (Solórzano and Yosso 2001). Counterstories account for resistance in the struggle for equity, from the perspective of people of color. In this

sense, storytelling is a cultural practice through which groups affirm identities and resist oppressions.

However, marginalized groups do not always contest or resist dominant narratives. They might also reproduce and reinscribe majoritarian stories and master narratives. A CRT perspective necessitates that we attend to the relationality between power and resistance. That is, we must account for how, in the pursuit and navigation of identity projects (Hobbel and Chapman 2009), students of color might also internalize racist, sexist, and classist ideologies and reinscribe oppressive discourses.

### **Methodology and theoretical framework**

A case study approach (Creswell 1998; Merriam 1998; Stake 2005) was utilized in this research study in order to provide a contextual overview of the factors associated with college persistence for undocumented Mexican immigrant women. More specifically, an instrumental case study method was used ‘to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization’ (Stake 2005, 445) in hopes of honoring the voices and stories of the participants with the potential of developing policies in higher education to better meet the needs of these students.

### ***Sample***

The sample consisted of four undocumented Mexican-born female students between 20 and 23 years of age. Three are successfully completing their coursework and one recently graduated from Mountain West University.<sup>7</sup> Two students were initially identified through a first-year leadership program in which the researcher served as a mentor. These two students provided names and contact information for the other two participants whom they knew from Elksville, a rural Mountain West town. The participants were sent an email message, which informed them about the study and invited them to meet with the researcher to further discuss data collection plans. During the first contact meeting, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and provided participants with a consent form, which detailed confidentiality, risks, benefits, and participant rights. IRB approval was obtained prior to contact with the participants. Elena arrived in the USA when she was seven. Ana Mari when she was 12 and both Valeria and Sofi at the age of 15. All four participants arrived in Elksville as their first point of entry, although the parents of several of them had lived elsewhere in the USA (Idaho and California) before. The participants’ fathers worked in construction or at restaurants, while all the mothers worked in housekeeping for hotels or private homes.

Admittedly, the research we present here is based on a very small sample. Nonetheless, our methodological aim is not to make generalizations, but to bring to the fore alternative stories of race, gender, class, and legal status, as articulated by Mexicana immigrant students who attend college in a new Diaspora site. Anchored in a CRT/LatCrit framework, our goal is to facilitate inclusion of and engagement with these stories in ongoing conversations about Latino/as in higher education. These stories represent the perspectives of students who have managed to persist and succeed in college by navigating and strategizing to create safe academic spaces. Their stories provide a window into the perspectives and experiences of a population that has been seldom studied in the context of higher education.

### Data collection

Data were derived from in-depth interviews and a focus group. Four interviews were conducted with each of the four participants, for a total of 16 interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes, and focused on five themes: family, culture, prior schooling, immigration, and college experiences (see Table 1 for data collection process). Participants were given the choice of being interviewed in English or Spanish. Only one participant chose to be interviewed in Spanish; the others switched back and forth between English and Spanish during the discussions. Interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Questions aimed to encourage students to share their stories of race, gender, and class; specifically, how students saw themselves in dominant representations (i.e., how they thought they were seen by the dominant society and culture), how they constructed and defined their race, gender, and class identities, and how they interrogated and challenged (or reinscribed and reproduced) dominant representations. Questions also aimed to explore, from the perspective of the students, *how* the college experience is racialized, classed, and gendered, and how students navigate racism, sexism, and classism in order to develop positive self-identities that enable them to persist in college. Cultural intuition (Delgado-Bernal 1998) was an integral part of the research process.

Finally, a focus group was conducted with all participants. Preliminary analysis of the individual interviews was conducted to identify general categories or themes for the focus group. Five categories emerged: family, culture, school, immigration, and college experiences. Each category was written on a large, brightly colored note card and placed at the center of a round table. Additionally, subcategories were noted on the back of each card to stimulate discussion. For example, for the card with the category 'immigration', subthemes included 'hiding status' and 'dealing with stressors'. Participants were asked to share an experience or story about the subcategories. The point of the discussion was not to reach consensus, but to gain a deeper understanding

Table 1. Data collection process.

Data method	Constructs	Topics addressed in questions
First round of individual interviews	Family culture	Family characteristics, roles and expectations, support systems Cultural identity, experiences of inclusion and exclusion on campus, cultural capital
Second round of individual interviews	Schooling	Location experiences (USA and Mexico), parental involvement, and guidance toward college access
Third round of individual interviews	Immigration	Reasons for migrating, community of origin, individual and family transition to the USA, strengths, knowledge and tools gained by immigration experiences, and thoughts on policy issues in higher education
Fourth round of individual interviews	College experiences	Accomplishments, challenges, concerns, and influences to persist
Focus group	All emergent themes	Factors influencing college persistence

of the main topics discussed during the individual interviews. The focus group lasted three hours, was audiotaped, and was subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Questions concerning the participants' legal status were not asked until after the participants themselves revealed their status in the course of the interview process. Three of the participants revealed their undocumented status during the first or second interview. Elena did not disclose her undocumented status until the focus group.

A point regarding the positionality of the researcher and her interaction with study participants merits mention. While the researcher who conducted the interviews and focus groups is, like the study participants, a female who defines herself as a Mexican immigrant, speaks Spanish, and shares many cultural referents and experiences with the study participants, her 'insider status' was certainly incomplete. During the research interaction it became apparent that the study participants perceived the researcher as a Mexican American, and also perceived social distance among themselves and the researcher with regard to educational level. As scholars such as Kusow (2003) and Young (2004) have forcefully argued, the complex dynamics of insider/outsider remain an insufficiently explored yet central methodological question in contemporary immigration research, much of which is conducted by scholars who are themselves immigrants.

In the following text, we discuss the content of students' stories of race, class, gender, and legal status. Our discussion aims not only to describe the content of students' narratives, but also to place those narratives systemically and to reflect on their broader cultural and social significance and their implications for education.

### **Undocumented Mexicana students' counterstories of legal status**

In examining how undocumented Mexicana students' counterstories (re)frame or interrogate issues of legal status, our aim is to emphasize the meaning and consequences of the category of 'illegality' for them. De Genova (2002) cautions us that, all too often, researchers are complicit in reifying and naturalizing migrant illegality. We are interested in how illegality, understood as a social relation and as a political category related to citizenship, shapes the college environment for students in ways that may help or hinder their college persistence. By focusing on students' counterstories of legal status we aim to highlight not only the ways in which legal status becomes an axis for inclusion or exclusion in the college campus, but also the ways in which, for undocumented students, college persistence hinges in part on the interruption and interrogation of dominant narratives about illegality.

### ***Strategic usage of cultural translators***

For Latino/as, and in particular for Mexicans, the issue of legal status is inextricably tied to their racialization in a US context (Maldonado 2006, 2009). Legal status becomes an axis along which undocumented Mexicans are routinely stigmatized, criminalized, and exploited in the USA. Several of the stories shared by students indicate that they perceive that US citizens question their right to be on the college campus on the basis of their presumed illegality. They spoke about the constant need to conceal their undocumented status within the college context, where they feel scrutinized, where their presence is seen as suspect, or where they are seen as not belonging.

The stories they shared regarding the navigation of legal status show a tremendous sense of strategic planning as they navigate their surroundings and social situations. When Sofi tried to apply to community college she encountered questions about her status:

[W]hen I applied to the community college they asked me if I was an international student, I told them, 'No'. Then they asked me what my status is and I didn't say anything. I told them, 'Here you have to accept me because in the book [college catalog] you don't have to be anything.' I told them, 'I don't have a Social Security number so you can think whatever.'

Sofi had researched the community college admission policies before talking with the admissions staff. She also brought along to the meeting a friend who was a fluent speaker of both English and Spanish, for additional support. Knowing ahead of time that questions regarding their legal status would arise, Sofi was strategic about what resources she needed prior to her encounter with an admissions counselor in order for her to feel empowered. Interestingly, this is the same strategy that is practiced within their family structure. When a family member is in need of English translation, Sofi often plays the role of language/cultural broker. This strategy was particularly helpful when Sofi assisted her younger siblings with their homework.

### *A silenced 'outsider' within the college context*

Another counterstory that emerged in conversation with undocumented Mexicana students resisted their marking as outsiders, and the extent to which, by virtue of their undocumented status, they are framed as not belonging in the various US contexts in which they circulate. Students spoke about how their presence in the college campus and in the broader community is constantly interrogated, as if they did not belong, as if they should not be there. Sofi spoke about how she was read as an outsider by Americans, and how navigating the college context as an undocumented Mexicana often involved fielding questions about her origin:

Yeah, one time in this class they asked me, 'Where are you from,' so I said, 'From Elksville,' but they know that I have an accent so they are like, 'No you're not from Elksville,' so I tell them that I'm originally from Mexico but my family moved here when I was 15 and that's why I live in Elksville. I don't go further than that; I just stop there. But some people, they want to know everything so I tell them that I'm an international student so they stop asking.

These narratives suggest that, in college as in the broader sociocultural context, skin color and accent serve not just as markers of ethnoracial difference and of foreignness, they also are experienced by undocumented Mexicana students – relationally, in interaction with others in college – as markers of 'illegality' and deportability (De Genova 2002; Rosas 2006). This particular counterstory illustrates the interconnection of race, ethnicity, and legal status in the lived experience of Mexicana students. It also demonstrates resistance to a dominant discourse that positions these students as outsiders (e.g., Sofi's claiming Elksville as a place where she is from, where she belongs). Sofi's strategy of responding to questions about her origin by stating that she is an 'international student', and 'not going any further than that' accomplishes two things. First, she recognizes that her body and her accent are read by others as 'foreign'.



Second, through what she does not say, by not specifying her national origin, Sofi both rejects the essentializing of Mexicans as ‘illegal’, while neutralizing or discounting the very content of the notion of ‘illegality’ and its relevance in her pursuit of a college education. Sofi’s use of this strategy suggests that Coutin (cited in De Genova 2002) is right when he writes the following about the meaning of illegality from the perspective of undocumented people:

On a day-to-day basis, their illegality may be irrelevant to most of their activities, only becoming an issue in certain contexts... Much of the time they are undifferentiated from those around them, but suddenly... legal reality is superimposed on daily life. (De Genova 2002, 422)

The students, all of whom had undocumented status, spoke of several instances when they were caught off guard regarding their legal status, and of how scary those situations were. Typically, obtaining a student identification card is the first order of business for any new college student. This was an unforgettable experience for Ana Mari and Elena. Ana Mari shared:

It was just me and Elena. Then they [orientation staff] were like, ‘Are you international students?’ I was like yeah [laughter]. We knew that we can’t say that [our immigration status] to everybody so they sent us to the international office and they told us so many things to do, that we needed our passports [laughter]. Then I was answering her questions and said we didn’t bring our passports with us. We didn’t know we had to bring your ID. I was like ‘oh my God.’ I remembered [a multicultural affairs staff person], and I wanted to find someone who could help us. I didn’t know the school very well so we were in student services building, and we didn’t know where we were ... Elena was really scared and she didn’t say anything.

Elena explained her silence: ‘I knew that I would end up telling them, so I kept quiet ... We have to lie – that’s the only way.’ Ana Mari continued with her story:

So we learned about international student services, and they would ask us, ‘You guys are from Mexico. What is your name?’ And they just kept asking more questions, and it was so funny but we were scared. It was just us, and that day we tried to call Sofi and another friend, but nobody was home. We were so scared, so we found [a multicultural staff person] and we ended up in her office.

Prior to their arrival in the college campus, these students were introduced to a staff member from the multicultural affairs office, whom they considered to be a ‘safe’ individual. This person was the only university administrator who knew about their legal status. This person also provided academic and emotional support to Elena and Ana Mari. She was the contact person whenever they had questions about how to further navigate their legal status on campus. Her office was considered by the students a safe space and the only place on campus in which they could be open about their legal status.

Students also spoke of how they navigate the issue of legal status in classroom discussions about immigration. In this context, students’ strategy was to remain silent and invisible. As Ana Mari discussed in the focus group:

I took my political science class and they talked about immigrants and immigration. It was a huge class and sometimes I wouldn’t feel comfortable. In my English class, which was a smaller class, they would talk about [immigration issues] and I was freaking out.

I probably turned red, and I didn't feel comfortable. And you cannot argue with them [the rest of the class] because it's only you against 20 more people. I'm better off not saying anything and letting them express themselves.

All four women shared that there had been times when they disagreed or wanted to express their viewpoints on immigration issues, but simply could not. As Valeria noted: 'You disagree, but you don't know how to express that when you know you are going to be receiving so many answers and questions against you.' Sofi experienced this issue as well:

The other day I was in my accounting class and we were given examples of illegal immigrants working here. I was really mad, but I couldn't say anything. Yeah, I cannot express myself. I have it all in my mind and when I go to say it my mind goes blank. I'm like forget it, never mind, I don't have an opinion. That happens to me a lot.

All four students feared that taking part in classroom discussions about immigration would expose their undocumented status, or that the retaliation would be too hard to handle. Immigration is not just a discussion topic for them – it was who they are and the life that they were living. As García states:

It is crucial to interrogate emotion and pain in the face of racial and gender oppression that may underlie counterstories and the silences that surround them. Silence is often the result of oppression and the role that power and politics plays in the production of knowledge. (2005, 261)

One interesting dimension of the counterstories of undocumented Mexicana students involved the use of humor with regard to questions of legal status, and for dealing with the stress of their immigration experiences. Ana Mari explained:

[W]e make fun of those things that could happen to us. We're like, 'It's (deportation) just like a free trip back home.' We learned that from Carlos Mencia [a Mexican comedian]. Sometimes you don't have to feel so stressed all the time and think it's so difficult. You have to find humor.

Humor became the highlight of the focus group. At one point, Ana Mari was poking fun at Elena because Vice President Dick Cheney was a frequent visitor to the ranch where her family resides. Elena would roll her eyes as Ana Mari excitedly explained that Elena has autographed pictures of Vice President Cheney and President Bush all over her house. Elena quipped about selling the pictures on EBay® to pay for her college tuition. As Ana Mari continued to portray Elena and the Vice President as intimate friends, she ended the conversation with an offer, 'If you need to give a message to Cheney, give it to Elena, and she'll make sure he'll get the message [laughter].'

The stories told by undocumented Mexicana students reveal the ways in which they resist (or at least seek to neutralize) dominant narratives which define them as not belonging, and further, as 'illegal' and deportable. College persistence research (Attinasi 1989; Hurtado and Carter 1997) suggests that allowing the minority student to find his or her own niche or comfortable environment within the larger scale of the university helps with the transition into college. However, for undocumented college students, finding a sense of belonging requires them to hide their legal status and to keep silent when confronted with questions about immigration. In the present context of enhanced immigration enforcement, students devise ways to neutralize the dominant gaze which identifies them as illegal and not belonging.

### Undocumented Mexicana students' counterstories of race

The interviews and focus group revealed the counterstories through which undocumented Mexicanas routinely deconstruct and resist hegemonic racializations. They also revealed ways in which Mexicana students sometimes internalize, reinscribe, and reproduce dominant racial representations.

#### *Reading race*

Exploring the racial counterstories told by undocumented Mexicana students who are recent immigrants highlights the ways in which one central aspect of their transition to a US context involves reconciling the different ways of 'reading race' and the different ways of making sense of oneself as a racialized subject in Mexico and the USA. Further, students' narratives show the ways in which they negotiate ethn racial identities and their positionality in the US racial order, and how racialized meanings are a salient element of their lived experience within and outside the college campus.

The position of one group in a racial order is always defined in relation to those of other groups. Mexicana students' counterstories positioned them vis-à-vis other ethn racial groups and also negotiated racial meanings across national contexts. For example, Valeria contrasted the importance of skin color in the USA with what she perceived as the non-raciality of the Mexican context:

In this country, there is a lot of emphasis on skin color that it drives me crazy when I first got here; I can't stand it. They had African American, Mexican American, and Native American. Maybe this is because I come from a homogenous society, but I see that they are all American; why are there groups designated for African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans? Why are there labels for everyone? I just couldn't understand it, but that's just the way it is here.

Valeria's claim that she comes from a homogeneous society (Mexico) reflects her exposure to the ideology of nonracialism that is dominant in Mexico. This ideology is anchored in the belief that a process of *mestizaje* (racial mixing) has done away with racial categories and resolved racial inequities and racism (Carroll 1991; Vigil and Lopez 2004; Vinson and Vaughn 2004).<sup>8</sup> In Mexico, Valeria did not see race and did not think of herself as a racialized subject. But as she arrived in the USA, it became immediately apparent to her that she had entered a new, different racial order. She noticed how she and others like her were racialized differently and placed in a position of subordination. The counterstory she told rejected this categorization and also the subordination associated with it.

#### *Challenging Latina/o homogeneity*

Students also elaborated racial counterstories which challenged homogenizing narratives about Latino/as in the USA. In one such counterstory, they distinguished themselves from Mexicans who were born or grew up in the USA. While Latino/as are often 'lumped together' in dominant discourses and representations (Alcoff 2006; Maldonado and Licona 2007; Oboler 1995), Latino/as make racialized distinctions among themselves. National origin, accent, language, citizenship, and legal status are routinely part of such distinctions (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003). Valeria specifically distanced herself from US-born Mexicans with regard to knowledge of Mexican culture and ethnic identity. She stated:

There's a big difference [between recent immigrants from Mexico and Mexicans who were born or grew up in the US]. I was born in Mexico, and I went to school there, and lived a good part of my life there. When I came to the US, I knew where I came from, and I knew what my culture was about, and I had an identity. This is something that US-born Mexicans are not aware of because they don't learn it in school, and I did. They don't get the education about their culture in school; in fact, from what I saw they only learned the negative aspects of being Mexican, and they have a tendency to feel uncomfortable with the stereotypes. Therefore, they try to avoid being associated with being Mexican, and I think it's because of the lack of information. They often accept these negative stereotypes which are biased and diminishing at times ... I think it's just silly and very sad ... if he would have known the richness of the culture and the richness of being Mexican, then you wouldn't want to be called Spanish. But because of all this negativity that exists by identifying as Mexican I think a lot of people decide to go that way. ... It's just a lack of identity that they experience.

Valeria frames Mexicans who were born or grew up in the USA as lacking knowledge about their own (Mexican) history and culture, and as having internalized anti-Mexican racism, both of which she defines as outcomes of Mexican Americans' experience in US schools. This counterstory captures Valeria's understanding of how context shapes identity and also provides tools of resistance for Latino/as. It identifies differences between Mexicans and Mexicans who were born or grew up in the USA – in cultural repertoires, lived experiences, and in their interactions with institutions (schools). It also points to the practical repercussions of these differences, namely, how they affect the ability to develop a positive self-identity and an ability to identify and resist racist oppression in the US context. Similarly, Valeria's counterstory reclaims Mexican identity and culture (which she recognizes as obliterated or ignored by US educational institutions) as assets and valuable sources of knowledge.

Interestingly, while Valeria saw Mexicans and Mexicans who were born or grew up in the USA as culturally and experientially different, she also recognized their shared position as a subordinated group in the US racial order. She noted that both groups are positioned within a larger system that marginalizes both groups. She identified racist discrimination as a shared experience, while noting skin color as a defining marker in a US context:

I think we [Mexicans and Mexicans who were born or grew up in the US] share some of the injustices or discrimination, and it's most related to skin color. Mexicans who are light skin or White don't have to deal with that issue as much as dark-skinned Mexicans.

Mexicanas shared other counterstories that challenged the ways in which dominant US society defines or characterizes Mexicans. For example, Elena questioned stereotypes of Mexicans as criminals:

I feel that most Americans think that Mexicans are bad. If a Mexican does something bad, they automatically think that all Mexicans are like that. I don't like when they do that, because not all Mexicans are the same way. If an American were to commit murder, rape, or do something bad, everyone doesn't believe that ALL Americans are this way, but they would if it were a Mexican. I noticed this happening – there was a rape reported in Elkville, and another time was when a car was stolen.

### ***Minimization of racism***

Significantly, the interviews and focus group with undocumented Mexicana students showed that their agency in their own racialization is complex, and that it does not

always entail interrogating or resisting dominant discourses. In effect, students' narratives reproduced some elements of dominant discourses about race in the USA. For example, while their counterstories identified multiple racist discourses and practices that affect their educational experiences, when asked if they had experienced racism, these students tended to answer in the negative and spoke of racism as something that has not happened directly to them. That is, when responding to explicit questions about racism, Mexicana students engaged in what Bonilla-Silva (2006) has identified as the *minimization of racism*. The *minimization of racism* is one of the central frames of colorblindness, the dominant ideology which helps maintain racial inequality in the contemporary USA. Minimization entails a framing of discrimination as 'all-out racist behavior' mostly by individuals and ignores the institutional and systemic dimensions of racism. Consider the following story shared by Ana Mari:

- Ana Mari:** It was this year that they started racist things, and then the students would not like Mexicans. It was just one year from what I remember.
- Interviewer:** So, you remember some racism by teachers or by students?
- Ana Mari:** By students, by white students. I didn't really have to face it, because I never had problems where it involved racism, but I would see it toward other people. So, somehow it would affect me too, because I am the same type of person as him or her. If they offend them, they kind of offend me too at the same time, even though they didn't tell me to my face, it was the same thing.

In undocumented Mexicana students' racial stories, the minimization of racism hinged on multiple stylistic elements: individualism ('not everyone is like that'; racism only comes from a few prejudiced individuals), and the framing of racist incidents as exceptional occurrences ('it was just one year') and as distant experiences ('I never had problems where it involved racism').

One other way in which students' narratives challenged some elements of dominant representations while reproducing others is exemplified by Ana Mari's response when the researcher noted that the majority, if not all, of the housekeeping staff at the Elksville hotel where she stayed, the cooks at the restaurants, and the bulk of construction workers who were building houses in the town, were Mexican. She said:

A lot of people see us like that. Even the owner at the restaurant where I work at, he hires only Mexicans for the kitchen and for dishwasher jobs. You don't see *americanos* in the back, and he says, 'Americans are lazy, and they don't like to work as much as you guys (Mexicans) do, because Americans want to get huge pay checks ... That's why I love you guys [Mexican immigrants] because you guys do all the hard jobs for us.' I'm just like, okay. He kind of makes you feel better somehow. At that restaurant I'm the only Mexican waitress and host; I'm the only one; me and my brother, and he works as a waiter. But besides us, it's all American – the owner and the *meseros* [wait staff]. Sometimes it's kind of weird because you go in the back in the kitchen and you see *todo mexicano, la música, hablan y están allí cotorreando* [all Mexicans, the music, the talking, and gossiping], and *vas para el frente* [you go to the front] and you're like, 'Whoa ... I'm the only Mexican hanging out.'

This story, part counterstory, part 'context story' (Hobbel and Chapman 2009), exemplifies the intersectionality of race and class in students' experience. Ana Mari both seems to resent the representation of Mexicano/as as good for manual labor, but feels pride that she and her brother, unlike all the other Mexicans who work at the restaurant,

get to work as wait staff. She recognizes a racialized division of labor and a racially segregated and hierarchical workplace: (white) Americans *in the front* of the restaurant as owners and in the better paid positions and Mexicans *in the back* in the lowest paid jobs as dishwashers and cooks. She recognizes and celebrates her advantage in relation to other Mexican workers at the restaurant.

This process by which manual, low-wage jobs become ‘Mexicanized’, and which Ana Mari readily recognized, has been documented in the sociological literature. Employers characterize Latino/as as having a better work ethic than do white workers, but only specifically in the context of manual labor. The strong work ethic displayed by Latino/a workers, especially by those who are more recent immigrants, becomes a justification for their channeling into low-wage work (Maldonado 2006, 2009). Ana Mari recognizes that this dominant narrative defines her and others like her as cheap labor and as particularly fit for low-wage work. For the Mexicana students who participated in this study, attending college is a way in which they are resisting these racialized expectations. They adamantly expressed that they want something ‘more’ for themselves. They also conveyed that seeing their parents ‘locked’ into low-wage work prompted them to seek college as a way to improve their situation, not only for themselves, but for their families. Attending and persisting in college gives them a sense of control and the ability to disprove lingering stereotypes regarding Mexican immigrants. This concern with ‘proving them wrong’ has been shown to be a key impetus for the development of critical resistant navigational skills – an essential aspect of persistence for students of color (Yosso 2006).

Undocumented Mexicana students’ racial counterstories exemplify a discursive practice of resistance. They position Mexicana students, not as a marginalized population headed toward failure, but as resourceful and capable of success. Examination of these counterstories reveals that successful Mexicana students see themselves as possessing multiple strengths and knowledges. For example, they claim their first-hand knowledge of Mexican culture as a source of strength – it gives them an understanding of themselves which enables them to resist and refute racist stereotypes. Counterstories show that Mexicana students are aware of the workings of racism and of how they themselves are racialized in a US context. They also readily identify racist storylines that circulate about them (Mexicans as peons, criminals, outsiders) in college and in the broader sociocultural context. Students’ narratives also revealed that counterstories sometimes weave in elements of dominant narratives. Students spoke of pervasive stereotypes and practices while also minimizing the purview of racist incidents (it was just one year, or I’m not saying they’re all like that, or it hasn’t happened to me). Through counterstories, Mexicanas are able to develop a positive self-image that allows them to hang on to their academic aspirations, to persist in college and to envision the possibility of success. These stories also suggest that life and school experiences prior to college inform and affect college success.

### **Mexicana students’ counterstories of culture**

While scholars have often treated race and culture (ethnicity) as separate and distinct, recent sociological theorizing has called attention to the ways in which race and culture are mutually imbricated. That is to say, cultural elements such as language, accent, and religion become imbued with racial meanings and even become proxies for race (Aranda and Rebollo-Gil 2004). In this sense, as Grosfoguel (2004) notes, we

can speak of Latino/as as a *racialized ethnicity*. Undocumented Mexicana students' counterstories reveal the ways in which culture (ethnic identity) and racialization are bound in their lived experience and how the production of and contest over racial meanings is related to the production of and contest over cultural meanings.

### ***Fluidity within cultural spaces***

The navigation between cultural worlds (Mexican and US cultures) is a prominent feature in their narratives about how they are able to succeed in college. Students spoke not of two different cultures, but rather of a 'new culture' which incorporates American and Mexican elements. For example, Valeria said:

[I]t's difficult when you have both cultures and you try to mix them up, especially in Elksville, because we are all first generation immigrants. Our parents lived and grew up in Mexico so they have that Mexican mentality, and if they see you acting too American they are going to notice that, even if you are not aware of that or realize that you are doing it, because it comes out naturally for you, and sometimes they don't realize that it is different for them than it is for you, because you are living in it, you are growing up with it, and they had a different experience, and at the same American society criticizes you for being too Mexican even if you lived your entire life in the US.

Valeria rejects master narratives that attempt to place her squarely within one cultural context at the exclusion of the other. She denounces the criticism that she is too Mexican or too American. Her counterstory claims the cultural space in-between. She presents herself and enacts her cultural identity in different ways, depending on the context or situation. The discussion of 'cultural rules' by Mexicana students illustrates how they negotiate and enact identities depending on context. As Elena explained:

I am reminded of my culture on a daily basis because there are lots of cultural norms that I need to follow, but it's hard when you have friends from different cultures. But like me, I was raised in two different cultures and it's hard because you need to remember which culture you can do things in and which one you are not allowed to do. I personally like both cultures because they teach me the similarities and differences that each culture shares.

Elena's story indicates that she draws from different sets of 'cultural rules' depending on the setting and the people with whom she is interacting. She recognizes the prescriptive dimension of culture, the different norms she is expected to adhere to at home and in various situations in college. Ana Mari spoke about how she experienced culture in a similar way:

Sometimes, because I haven't seen a big population [of Mexicans] in school so you don't feel free to do the same things you would do if you were in Mexico. Or express yourself like you want to, because you don't know how people are going to react. It's hard to be yourself. Being with your family is going to be different than being in school. ... In your family you share the same culture and you know what's wrong and what's right, but when you go to the university ... you don't know if they are going to think ... 'Oh, she not doing something right,' or 'That's not appropriate.'

These stories suggest that, in order to 'fit in' in college, Mexicana students are careful not to enact their Mexican identities on campus. They recognize that Mexican culture is not deemed acceptable in or congruent with the college culture. And, thus, they delineate separate cultural spaces and draw from the cultural norms that are particular

to the context or situation. Gloria and Castellanos (2003) have called attention to this lack of cultural congruity experienced by students of color in higher education; specifically to the fact that campus climate, academic curriculum, campus population, and campus aesthetics are often not reflective of Latinas/os and other minority groups. This navigational strategy of moving between cultures depending on the situation and based on whom one is interacting with has also been documented by Wortham (2002) as linked to Latino/a student persistence among middle school students. Wortham found that Latinas employing similar accommodation strategies were able to navigate their home and school life more successfully. For the Mexicana students who took part in this study, learning to navigate the distinct cultural rules of Mexican and US cultures (and of family and the college campus) as separate and distinct cultural spaces is one of the ways in which Mexicana students are able to persist in college.

Elena also commented on how the absence of others who share her Mexican culture in various university contexts makes her aware of her own Mexicanness:

In class, because there is not that many people to relate to, my feelings about being the only one in my class is that I feel Mexican. I feel like everyone looks at me in a weird way. I dislike it in a way because I have no one to relate to. Sometimes I feel that I need someone who shares my culture and is more like me in my classes.

Mexicana students' counterstories interrogate essentialized cultural narratives which treat culture as rigid and unchangeable. They highlight the fluidity of cultural spaces and reveal that students perceive college as a space which is unwelcoming and weary of their Mexicanness. Mexicanas are able to preserve their sense of self and to construct identities at the very interstices of what is deemed American or Mexican. Existing research (e.g., Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora 2000) has called for the maintenance of individual cultural beliefs as minority students navigate the college world. The counterstories we explore here suggest that it is difficult for students to feel validated, in and outside the classroom setting, when cultures are differently represented and valued within the institution.

### **Mexicana students' counterstories of gender**

Until recently, the gendered dimensions of the immigrant experience were seldom addressed in immigration scholarship. In the context of education in particular, a nascent literature has begun to identify how gendered ideologies result in different conditions for male and female students from immigrant families (Williams, Alvarez, and Hauck 2002). Research has also shown that male and female students from immigrant households rely on different networks and pursue different strategies and paths toward educational success (see e.g., Barajas and Pierce 2001). In centering undocumented Mexicana students' counterstories of gender, we call attention to immigrant women's agency, specifically to the ways in which in the process of pursuing a college education and life in the USA, they interrogate and seek to transform the gendered content of their lives.

### ***Interrogating dominant notions of gender***

Baker (2004) calls attention to a *gender paradox* that characterizes the lived experience of Mexicana immigrant women. Drawing from her research in Iowa, she suggests we



ought to understand Mexican immigrant women: ‘not as blindly submissive to the dominant patriarchal and economic structures but as active agents carving a space for themselves in a rapidly changing social, political, and economic context’ (Baker 2004, 405). Mexicana students’ narratives reveal that gender inequality is an important issue in their experience, one that they constantly navigate and that is highly charged emotionally for them and their families. These women’s stories attribute their very presence in college to progressive thinking about gender issues on the part of their parents, who did not buy into the dominant notion (in the context of traditional gender ideologies and Mexican culture) that women should not be educated. They claimed that such progressive views of their parents opened up the opportunity for them to pursue a college education. However, they also told stories of gender inequality in their households, with repercussions for their sense of self as students and for their ability to persist and be successful in college. Specifically, the narratives of our study participants questioned what they saw as unequal expectations for male and female members of their households. They also questioned the expectation that, as females, they need to uphold traditional gender ideologies in the home. For example, Ana Mari described Mexican families as ‘old time’ if they did not allow their daughters to be educated:

I think it depends on your parents’ background. If they are thinking in the ‘old time’ culture from Mexico where they think education is not for women and it’s only for men. Even if you want to go to school you are still not going to have the opportunity because your parents are telling you that education is only for men. I notice that for all of us here [at this table] our parents feel that school is important to you and education is a big important value in your life. So, it depends on [what] your family background and beliefs are when you see the difference between men and women. If your family focuses on men, as some people do, then you get screwed.

Similarly, Elena spoke of gender dynamics at home:

I notice sometimes with my parents when my dad gets home and he is sitting at the couch and he wants a glass of water and he asks my mom, my sister, or me to get it for him. I’ve told my brothers that because our dad does it [it doesn’t mean] he has to do it too. We are kids [and] you can get yourself your own water; God gave you legs so you can get up and get it yourself. Just because I am the girl doesn’t mean that I have to do it, and I understand and my parents understand, but I’ve noticed that every time the girls have to wash the dishes and the guys, all they do is sit and eat.

Elena is not complacent with the expectations placed on her as a female. Her college experiences have shaped her gender identity in ways that make her interrogate gendered dynamics at home. On the one hand, her college experiences have provided her with newfound independence (González, Jovel, and Stoner 2004). On the other hand, her college accomplishments are minimized when she is confronted with ‘doméstica Latina’ (Williams, Alvarez, and Hauck 2002) obligations at home.

The task of balancing educational endeavors with family and cultural commitments, which often perpetuates an unequal gender ideology, is daunting. However, the women in this study view their college persistence as a form of resistance to these gender inequities.

### **Conclusions and implications**

The scant but growing literature on the experiences of undocumented immigrant students has expanded conversations in higher education scholarship by shifting focus

away from deficit models and highlighting stories of success and personal resilience. In this paper, we have sought to expand these conversations by attending to the ways in which students' narratives interrogate and also reproduce majoritarian stories in higher education. We have placed students' narratives within their broader social and political contexts, focusing on gender, race/ethnicity, class, and legal status – not simply as markers of identity for students, but also as broader social relations imbued with power within a US context. Our analysis has conceived of undocumented Mexicana students as active creators of knowledge, agents in their own learning and in the college experience, and also, notably, as active participants in the production of meanings about US race, ethnicity, class, and gender categories.

The counterstories of undocumented Mexicana college students that we have discussed here interrupt and expose the multifaceted 'controlling images' (Hill Collins 1990) which circulate about them on college campuses and in the broader community and society. They are relevant in college persistence scholarship because they serve as a discursive map to explore the processes by which students elaborate self-valuing identities, which allow them to envision themselves as successful participants within educational settings that are often chilly or closed to them.

The counterstories we have explored here suggest that institutional efforts to foster college persistence among Latino/a students must account for the heterogeneity that exists among them. Educators and administrators must acknowledge that race, ethnicity, class, gender, and the timing and dynamics of immigration shape the experiences of students in unique ways. Furthermore, our analyses, educational practices, and policies must also explicitly account for legal status as a power relation and dynamic which affects the potential for college persistence – gendered, racialized, and classed as it is.

Skeptics might argue that the type of change we call for is unrealistic. Undoubtedly, the types of proposals we put forth here are bound to be met with resistance. Many oppose opening the doors of higher education to undocumented students, and including such students as full participants in the college experience. The rationales behind such opposition are varied. They include concerns that undocumented students are 'illegal residents', that they (or their parents) have broken the law, concerns about the costs to states and taxpayers, and concerns that non-citizens might end up 'taking away' citizens' jobs. These concerns exist within the context of – and are certainly informed and fueled by – a climate of hostility toward immigrants that has become ubiquitous in the USA in recent years (see e.g., Hothouse 2009; Hsu 2009; Mock 2007; Ressler 2006).

While discussing at length the sociopolitical and legal dimensions of the immigration debate is beyond the scope of this paper, we must at the very least engage concerns that are specific to the inclusion of undocumented students in higher education. One key concern is, of course, that institutions of higher education must comply with federal and state laws. At the federal level, Section 505 of the IIRIRA (Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility) Act of 1996: 'prohibits states from providing a post secondary education benefit to an alien not lawfully present unless any citizen or national is eligible for such benefits' (Russell 2007, 2). The lack of specificity of this law and the absence of particular federal directives related to in-state tuition and admissions for undocumented immigrant students have resulted in multiple and disparate interpretations by state legislators and higher education administrators. Such interpretations and the extent to which they are more or less inclusive (or more or less exclusionary) of undocumented students are often

shaped by the broader sociopolitical climate in a particular state. In this way, one finds states such as Virginia and South Carolina, whose interpretation of federal law has resulted in exclusionary admission practices (they have barred undocumented students and legal residents who are children of undocumented parents) (Olivas 2008). In contrast, California and 10 other states have interpreted federal law in more inclusive ways, mandating that undocumented students be eligible for in-state tuition. In Texas, undocumented students are eligible for state funding. In a sense, this illustrates that higher education administrators have some agency in determining their courses of action and in building policies that are attentive to the needs of undocumented students. College and university administrators should work closely with political legislators and community advocacy organizations to devise policies which address the needs of undocumented students.

Regarding the concern about the costs to states and taxpayers of granting access to postsecondary education to undocumented students, we posit that states and taxpayers have already made a substantial investment in their K-12 education, following the federal court ruling of *Plyler v. Doe*. If the intention behind *Plyler v. Doe* was to curtail class discrepancies and sustain economic productivity as a result of education, then providing opportunities for higher education to undocumented immigrants should be considered as part of the Equal Protection Clause. We must also consider the social and financial costs that would accrue for states and localities by not providing access to postsecondary education to these students. By the time they finish high school, they have demonstrated aptitude, skills, and potential. The refusal to include them in higher education is a refusal to help them realize such potential, to the detriment of their aspirations and the broader community. In effect, we see it as a brain drain of sorts, with negative repercussions not only for the US economy, but also for the social and cultural development of communities. Having said this, part of what we seek to accomplish in our work is to interrupt and critically interrogate dominant narratives which instrumentalize undocumented people, as if they were valuable only in terms of what they can contribute to the economy. We see such narratives as implicated in the reproduction of assimilationist models, and further, in the reproduction of marginalizing and exploitative practices toward undocumented people.

The counterstories discussed in this paper suggest that undocumented students who manage to persist in college do so in part by staying 'below the radar', by mobilizing strategies of invisibility and silence. We posit that a sociocultural and educational context which fosters immigrant student invisibility and silence, marginalizes and excludes an important set of worldviews and experiences, thereby robbing all who participate in the college experience of crucial opportunities to pursue learning in its fullest and richest form. Bringing undocumented students 'out of the shadows' and including them as full participants in higher education requires a multifaceted approach. College administrators and faculty must cultivate a relationship with the US host communities of their immigrant student populations. This could be done in a variety of ways, for example, institutions of higher education can establish partnerships with key community individuals and high school personnel who specifically work with undocumented students. Similarly, universities must work to institutionalize task forces that are particularly responsive to the college access, persistence, and retention needs of undocumented students. These task forces must comprise student affairs administrators, faculty, and students and should be charged with formulating policy for admissions, financial aid, and student services.

Issues of legal status must be explicitly included among the issues addressed in diversity training, which all faculty and administrators should be required to complete.

The analysis of counterstories also brings into the limelight serious questions about how higher education might be implicated in the reproduction of dominant notions of illegality and in the marginalization of segments of immigrant populations. We posit that educators, in particular, have the responsibility to unpack 'illegality' as a social, legal, and political construct and to examine its repercussions for education and for the maintenance of inequality in the contemporary USA. As we have discussed, illegality is often inadvertently reproduced as a category of oppression in classrooms, by both teachers and students. We propose that colleges and universities create freshman seminars that center on social justice issues and that address the multiple dimensions of oppression within and without the college campus. Legal status must be explicitly included as one such dimension.

Undocumented Mexicanas navigate a college world which does not reflect their cultural values, identities, or experiences. They routinely resist and interrogate traditional gender ideologies at home, question ways of thinking about culture and the hierarchical valuing of cultural practices in college; they resist (and sometimes reproduce) racialized and classed representations, and interrogate the validity and relevance of illegality in relation to their educational pursuits. Their counterstories articulate different ways of seeing, thinking, and living which de-center the dominant narratives that define them in terms of deficits rather than potential. The process of 'telling' their stories for these women aided in their own self-validation and helped them connect with and find support in each other. College and university administrators should think about ways in which peer support can be further cultivated to provide encouragement, empowerment, and support. The growing literature on the experiences of undocumented students already provides some useful pointers. We know that such peer support strategies will likely need to be different for female and male students (e.g., Barajas and Pierce 2001).

If we are to enhance the quality of higher education for all, educators, administrators, community members, and policy-makers need to ensure inclusion of the experiences, perspectives, needs, and potentials of immigrant students as much as those of other students. This inclusion must seep into all aspects of higher education, from culture, to curricula, to classroom practices, to institutional structure and administrative practices. Similarly, in their pursuit of scholarship and policy, educators and administrators must attend to how the conditions and experiences of a diverse student body both shape and are shaped by contemporary configurations of inequality in the USA. A focus on the counterstories of students from marginalized populations can offer valuable and seldom explored insights to this end. Campus programs and policies should aim to facilitate mentorship, validation, and a sense of belonging for these students as much as for all other students. The inclusion of communities of color (in their heterogeneity) within the college culture is crucial. In congruence with a growing body of CRT/LatCrit scholarship, our analysis suggests that such inclusion cannot be obtained through a unidirectional assimilationist model (students from marginalized groups assimilating into the dominant college culture), but can be through a multidirectional transformation of the college experience. That is, the dominant culture and practices in higher education must be understood as such, and then challenged and transformed, informed by cultures, lived experiences, and practices from the margins.

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## Notes

1. We use the term 'ethnoracial' to allude to the ways in which ethnicity (culture) and race tend to be linked in the USA. Research suggests, for example, that Latino/as tend to be racialized on the basis of their presumed shared ethnicity (Grosfoguel 2004). Similarly, as Aranda and Rebollo-Gil (2004) show, cultural (ethnic) markers such as language and accent tend to be imbued with racial meanings. Further, in the contemporary USA, racial meanings are often coded in the language of cultural (ethnic) difference (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Maldonado 2006; Myers 2005).
2. Racialization refers to the production of, reproduction of and contest over racial meanings and the social structures in which such meanings become embedded.
3. A LatCrit of Education interrupts the discussion about race issues along the lines of a white-black binary to include and consider the experiences of racialized Latino/a populations in their specificity. Specifically, LatCrit constitutes an elaboration of CRT to include issues such as language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, and identity (see Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal 2001).
4. We use the label 'Mexicana' to refer to Mexican-born females who arrived in the USA as children or as adolescents.
5. Yosso defines *navigation* as distinct from *negotiation*. While negotiation assumes that students have to compromise part of themselves in order to fit into and be accepted by the university community, a focus on navigation emphasizes student agency, positioning students as 'drivers' of their own destinies, and also as social actors who actively shape the college environment.
6. Yosso uses the label Chicano/a to refer to students of Mexican descent who were born and raised in the USA.
7. Throughout this paper, pseudonyms are used for study participants and locations.
8. Interestingly, the denial of race and the denial of racism are also key components of *color-blindness*, which is the dominant racial ideology in the contemporary USA (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2001, 2006). In the US context, the denial of racism operates mostly, not through an emphasis on *mestizaje*, but through the claim that one does not see race, that one does not judge people by the color of their skin.

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