

Chicana/Latina *Testimonios* on Effects and Responses to Microaggressions

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Testimonio in educational research can reveal both the oppression that exists within educational institutions and the powerful efforts in which students of color¹ engage to challenge and transform those spaces. We utilize *testimonio* as a methodological approach to understand how undocumented and U.S.-born Chicana/Latina students experience the effects of and responses to a systemic, subtle, and cumulative form of racism, racist nativist microaggressions. We draw from critical race and Chicana feminist frameworks to understand the effects of microaggressions as embodied systemic oppression (Cruz, 2006; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002b). Our analysis reveals that the students engaged and created counterspaces within K-12 institutions that challenged oppression and sought to transform the educational spaces that marginalized them. Throughout these findings, we explore the process of *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa, 2002) that allowed the women to engage in reflection, healing, and celebration of their resiliency.

Testimonio has been critical in movements for liberation in Latin America, offering an artistic form and methodology to create politicized understandings of identity and community. . . . Similarly, many Latinas participated in the important political praxis of feminist consciousness-raising. . . . Drawing from these various experiences, *testimonio* can be a powerful method for feminist research and praxis. (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 3)

Within the field of education, *testimonio* continues to develop as a powerful methodological approach that uncovers systemic subordination of Chicanas/Latinas. *Testimonio* also serves as a feminist research method that repositions Chicanas/Latinas as central to the analysis and reassigns agency to the oppressed (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). At the same time, *testimonio* reveals the resistance, resilience, and hope we engage in our research to challenge and transform that subordination to collectively move toward social justice (Burciaga, 2007; Burciaga & Tavares, 2006; Cruz, 2006; Delgado Bernal, Flores Carmona, Alemán, Galas, & Garza, 2009; Espino, Muñoz, & Marquez Kiyama, 2010; Flores Carmona, 2010; N. González, 2006; Gutiérrez, 2008; Pérez Huber, 2009a, 2009b). *Testimonio* is used in our research as a collective strategy that deconstructs

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the apartheid of knowledge that exists in the academy and allows Chicana/Latina researchers and participants to enter ourselves—our knowledge, positionalities, and experiences—into the process of theorizing, researching, teaching, and reflecting.² Additionally, *testimonio* allows Chicana/Latina researchers to document and inscribe into existence a social witness account reflective of collective experiences, political injustices, and human struggles that are often erased by dominant discourses.

Chicana/Latina feminists have built on Latin American social movements like Freire's (2001) process of *conscientização* (a critical consciousness, *conscientización*) where oppressed communities construct self-reflective movements to mobilize through critical pedagogies of empowerment and praxis. Through this process, the subaltern assumes agency by engaging a shared knowledge of oppression to resist and humanize our experiences. For example, Delgado Bernal (2002) asserts that "If we believe in the 'wisdom of our ancient knowledge,' as Ana Castillo suggests, then the knowledge that is passed from one generation to the next can help us survive in everyday life" (p. 113, citations omitted). Documenting *testimonios*, then, becomes a part of this process—passing down knowledge from one generation of scholars to the next.

In this study, we utilize *testimonio* as a methodological approach to understand how undocumented and U.S.-born Chicana/Latina³ students experience the effects of and responses to a systemic, subtle and cumulative form of racism, racist nativist microaggressions.⁴ We draw from critical race and Chicana feminist frameworks to understand the effects of systematic oppression on the Chicana/Latina body and analyze how the women respond to this oppression to heal, to resist, and to become empowered.

We first outline the overarching theoretical frameworks that guide this work—LatCrit and Chicana feminisms. We then explain the conceptual tools that have emerged from each of these theories that help us understand the experiences of the Chicana/Latina students in this study. These include racist nativism and racist nativist microaggressions as conceptual tools developed from a LatCrit framework, and theory in the flesh and *conocimiento* (critical awakenings)—tools located within Chicana feminisms. Following the theoretical discussion, we explain *testimonio* as our methodological approach, and finally, we present the findings on the effects and responses to racist nativist microaggressions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: LATINA/O CRITICAL THEORY (LATCRIT) AND CHICANA FEMINISMS

Latina/o Critical Theory

One of the overarching theoretical frameworks for this study is Latina/o critical theory (LatCrit), a branch of critical race theory (CRT) in education. CRT draws from multiple disciplines to challenge dominant ideologies embedded in educational theory and practice, which shapes the way researchers understand the educational experiences, conditions, and outcomes of people of color (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002; Yosso, 2006). CRT builds from the knowledge of communities of color to reveal the ways that race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression mediate educational trajectories. Moreover, it is committed to deconstructing these oppressive conditions and empowering communities of color to work toward social and racial justice (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). LatCrit evolved as a challenge to the black-white binary that often guides racial discourse, providing a more focused lens for researchers to examine the experiences of Latina/o communities. LatCrit extends the efforts of CRT and acknowledges issues specific to the ways

Latinas/os are confronted with subordination due to immigration status, language, culture, ethnicity, and phenotype (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Racist Nativism

CRT allows us to focus the research lens on communities of color; LatCrit narrows that lens to focus on Latina/o communities. Refining our focus even further, racist nativism has emerged from LatCrit as a conceptual tool to examine the specific intersection of race and immigration status in the lives of Latinas/os (Pérez Huber, Benavides López, Malagon, Velez, & Solórzano, 2008). The concept of racist nativism helps researchers understand how race and immigration status are intricately tied in a historical and contemporary process of racialization and colonialism of Latinas/os. For example, scholarship on nativism has examined how various groups of immigrants have been excluded from the white “American” national identity and how that national identity has constructed a fear and acute animosity of the racialized “foreigner.” In turn, immigrants of color and those racialized as immigrant (regardless of actual nativity) are perceived as non-native and thus not belonging in the U.S. (Higham, 1955; Saito, 1997). Racist nativism is thus a form of racism that (a) occurs within a historical and contemporary context, (b) intersects with other forms of oppression, and (c) is based on real and perceived immigration status.⁵

Racist nativism provides a lens to examine how perceived racial differences construct Latinas/os as “non-native” to the U.S. and, thus, not belonging to an “American” identity that has historically been tied to social constructions of whiteness (De Genova, 2005; Johnson, 1997; Ngai, 2004; Pérez Huber et al., 2008; Roberts, 1997; Saito, 1997; Sánchez, 1997). Racist nativism allows us to see how the ideological beliefs of Latina/o inferiority manifest in education (Galindo & Vigil, 2006; Pérez Huber, 2009a, 2010; Velez, 2008).

Racist Nativist Microaggressions

Yet another important conceptual tool that has been further developed from CRT is racial microaggressions. According to Solórzano (2010) racial microaggressions are one form of a systemic everyday racism that are subtle, layered, and cumulative verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward people of color that are committed automatically and unconsciously. Solórzano describes a model for understanding racial microaggressions that includes:

1. Types of racial microaggressions—how one is targeted by microaggressions, which can be based on race, gender, class, language, sexuality, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname
2. Context of racial microaggressions—how and where the microaggressions occur
3. Effects of racial microaggressions—the physical, emotional, and psychological consequences of microaggressions
4. Responses to racial microaggressions—how the individual responds to inter-personal and institutional racist acts and behaviors

This model provides researchers with a tool to expose, understand, and challenge subtle forms of racism that occur in education and can have negative, lasting impacts on students.⁶ A study conducted by Pérez Huber (2011) found racist nativist microaggressions are a type of racial microaggression experienced by undocumented and U.S.-born Chicana/Latina students within

the context of public K-12 education in California. Thus, racist nativist microaggressions are systemic, everyday forms of racist nativism that take the form of subtle, layered, and cumulative verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward people of color that are committed automatically and unconsciously (Pérez Huber, 2011).

As described earlier, racist nativism inserts a discussion of immigration status and colonialism into racial discourses to acknowledge a history of subordination that informs how Latinas/os experience contemporary racism.⁷ Furthermore, this form of racism can intersect with other forms of oppression (e.g., sexism, classism). Thus, racist nativist microaggressions help identify the subtle, everyday acts of larger systemic oppression faced by Latinas/os. Specifically, our work here provides findings on the latter elements of Solórzano's (2010) model—the effects of these racist nativist microaggressions on the women who experienced them, and the responses they had to them.

Chicana Feminisms

Chicana feminisms have developed from stages of historical specificity, including the Chicano Movement, the Women's Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement that challenged such issues as racism, sexism, patriarchy, socioeconomic inequities, and power (de la Torre & Pesquera, 1993). Additionally, from this body of work, a critical feminist analysis of racialized intersectionalities, pedagogies of praxis, and empowerment emerged. Chicana feminisms have transformed over time and inscribe into history counternarratives, *testimonios*, and *autohistorias* (autobiographies) that preserve and document experiential knowledge of Chicanas/Latinas that have been erased by imperial, colonial, and hegemonic feminist discourses (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Chicana feminist scholars theorize from lived experience as a knowledge base to understand, critique, and challenge systemic oppression and theorize identity, sexuality, the body, resistance, healing, transformation, and empowerment (Castillo, 1994; Fregoso, 2003; Hurtado, 1998; Pérez, 1999; Sandoval, 2000). Moreover, Chicana feminist scholars assert that it is important to create feminist-oriented research practices that critique oppression within a history of colonialism, patriarchy, and white privilege (Alarcón, 1990; Anzaldúa, 1999; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002a, 2002b).

Theory in the Flesh

Chicana feminist scholars Moraga and Anzaldúa (2002a) offer theory in the flesh as a conceptual tool that allows for an explicitly racialized feminist approach to constructing knowledge from the body, lived experience, and Chicana subjectivities. Theory in the flesh refers to how “the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (p. 21). It is a tool that allows us to theorize from our intersectionalities or, the “physical realities” we inhabit, our experiential knowledge, and our bodies as discursive sites of knowledge construction that is created from a need to challenge and inscribe ourselves into dominant discourses (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002a).

Theory in the flesh asserts that knowledge is produced through our bodies, as trauma and pain are imbedded within us through memories. This concept allows us, as Chicana scholars, to recognize the role of our own body, mind, and spirit in the creation of a unique knowledge base from which we theorize and use to guide our work (Lara, 2002). Theory in the flesh, then, serves as a foundation for a larger body of Chicana feminist scholarship. Theory in the flesh challenges

Western racialized, patriarchal, heteronormative processes of female subordination by providing a conceptual tool that allows us to strategically theorize from the body and flesh. It allows us to inscribe into history and preserve the voices of racialized women by documenting our *testimonios*. From these *testimonios*, we are able to reflect, analyze, and theorize discursive assaults on the body, such as microaggressions. Theory in the flesh provides a lens to understand the psychological and physiological effects of oppression, as we explore in this study. Additionally, theory in the flesh allows us to understand the coping mechanisms Chicanas/Latinas develop to respond to microaggressions, such as the social and academic counterspaces we will also explore.

Conocimiento

Chicana feminisms offer an additional conceptual tool that helps us understand how Chicana/Latina students respond to the systemic oppression they encounter within schooling institutions. *Conocimiento*, developed by Anzaldúa (2002), outlines seven interconnected stages that invoke our ancestral wisdom, lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and resilience in a process that allows us to heal from the effects of race-based trauma and other forms of oppression as we strategically navigate within and outside of hostile educational environments. Thus, *conocimiento* is intricately tied to theory in the flesh as a tool that allows us to engage in a process of theorizing from our bodily knowledge. These conceptual tools urge us to recognize the vital connections between the body, mind, and spirit in understanding the psychological and physiological effects of the race-based trauma we experience as a result of systemic oppression (Lara, 2002). *Conocimiento* extends this understanding by allowing us to theorize healing from microaggressions in a holistic (body, mind, and spirit) way through a process of critical reflection that emphasizes social advocacy and well-being (Anzaldúa, 2002).

Collectively, these frameworks and conceptual tools allow us to name the forms of oppression encountered by the Chicana/Latina students included in this study and how they respond to them. LatCrit, racist nativism, and microaggressions provide the tools to understand how we experience systemic forms of racism and how that racism can manifest within our daily experiences. Chicana feminisms, theory in the flesh, and *conocimiento* allow us to understand how we respond and heal from those oppressive experiences, by calling attention to the complex processes we encounter as we engage our agency in resistance. These theories and tools provide the theoretical scaffolding to build knowledge from an explicitly critical race-gendered epistemological stance, grounded in our lived realities as Chicanas/Latinas (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Moreover, they allow for a more explicit, holistic analysis of microaggressions as an embodied experience that must be theorized from a process of critical reflection. Thus, *testimonio* plays a critical role in this process as a methodological tool that supports critical reflection, healing, and collective memory through the act of *testimoniando* (providing one's *testimonio*, to testify).

TESTIMONIO AS METHODOLOGY

Testimonio as a methodological approach was employed to provide the participants with a space to reveal and reflect on their educational experiences as mediated by race, immigration status, class, and gender. This methodological approach builds from the work of academics—namely women of color scholars—in and outside of education who use *testimonio* to document experiences of struggle, survival, and resistance within the context of oppressive institutional structures and

interpersonal events (Benmayor, 1988, 2008; Brabeck, 2001, 2003; Burciaga, 2007; Burciaga & Tavares, 2006; Cruz, 2006; Delgado Bernal et al., 2009; Espino et al., 2010; Flores Carmona, 2010; N. González, 2006; Gutiérrez, 2008; Latina Feminist Group 2001; Pérez Huber, 2009b). We use *testimonio* as a methodological tool that allows us to tell a collective narrative that reveals these complex relationships as they emerge in education. Moreover, Anzaldúa (1990) reminds us that *testimonio* is used as a collective, political act of resistance. Thus, it is a methodology informed by a Chicana feminist stance, used by us and for us.

Contemporary Chicana feminist scholars like Cruz (2006), Delgado Bernal and co-authors (2009), and the Latina Feminist Group (2001) utilize *testimonios* to theorize from the intersections of Chicana subjectivities that are linked to a Freirian process of *conscientización* (a critical consciousness of oppression). Such scholars utilize this method to shift discursive power to Chicanas/Latinas in constructing knowledge from our lived realities, positioned within a decolonial framework that challenges larger social inequities. Furthermore, the Latina Feminist Group explains that *testimonios* re-assign agency to Chicana/Latina scholars through the telling of one's history as part of a larger collective memory.

In this study, *testimonios* serve as important counternarratives that challenge deficit educational discourse about Chicana/Latina students. Furthermore, *testimonio* allows us to theorize and document these experiences from an explicitly Chicana/Latina feminist perspective. Finally, *testimonio* is connected to *conocimiento*, as it allows one to enter the process of healing through reflecting, recounting, and remembering the past. In our research, we engage *testimonio* as a methodological process by drawing from our Chicana/Latina feminist epistemological positions and, specifically, the forms of knowledge we have gained from our personal, professional, and academic experiences—what Delgado Bernal (1998) terms cultural intuition.

Cultural intuition informed the analysis process of this study by allowing for an open and reiterative process of bridging and building theory from lived experiences of our participants and ourselves. Engaging our own cultural intuition, we were able to draw from our experiences with microaggressions as Chicana students in the educational pipeline. We reflected on the ways that our minds, bodies, and spirits have been and continue to be affected by low expectations, doubts in our academic and professional abilities, and the consistent challenges we face as scholars who position our work in critical race-gendered epistemologies. In her work on an epistemology of a brown body, Cruz (2006) describes how we have embodied the systematic oppression we have faced through a range of psychological and physiological consequences. However, also similar to our participants, we have found and have created collective spaces of resistance and healing to recover and move forward in our work and in our lives.

We drew from 40 *testimonios* conducted with 20 students (each participant provided a series of two *testimonios*). Ten of these students were undocumented and ten were U.S.-born. At the time of data collection, each of the participants was attending one University of California (UC) campus. Using a network sampling method, participants were identified who met several criteria to participate in the study. Each of these students at the time of data collection were (a) either undocumented or U.S.-born, (b) female, (c) of Mexican descent, and (d) from a low-income family. The majority of the participants in this study self-identified as either Chicana or Latina. In addition to the *testimonios*, we also drew from data collected in two focus groups with these participants, each consisting of six to eight students.⁸ Although we use the term “focus group” to describe these interviews, the purpose of these groups was to provide a space for participants to engage in collaborative data analysis through reflection and theorizing their experiences.

For this study, *testimonio* was a continuous process of reflection. We shared our experiences and engaged in discussions about how to better understand them. The focus groups played a critical role in this reflection. During these meetings, the women were asked to reflect on excerpts from their *testimonios*. From these reflections, we engaged in discussions about representation, contradictions, similarities, and differences in our experiences. These discussions were used to build our analysis and theorize from our lived realities. We also discussed the women's reflections on engaging in *testimonio* for this study and offer some of their descriptions in our conclusion.

In the following sections, we provide the findings that emerged from this methodology. Within each section, we present representative examples of our major themes—effects of and responses to racist nativist microaggressions. Following these examples, we provide a context to understand better how these effects and responses occurred in the participants' educational experiences. Finally, we provide an analysis informed by our theoretical frameworks and conceptual tools.

FINDINGS: EFFECTS OF RACIST NATIVIST MICROAGGRESSIONS

The findings extend previous work that examined how the same Chicana/Latina students were subordinated by teacher practices of English dominance in public California K-12 schools (Pérez Huber, 2011). For example, teachers held perceived deficiencies and academic inferiority of participants based on their status as English Learner (EL) students. These practices were supported by restrictive language policies in the state that enforce English immersion for EL students in public schools.⁹ The findings provided here reveal how these students were affected by these microaggressions.

Throughout their *testimonios*, the women described a sense of academic self-doubt; they questioned their own abilities. For example, Silvia was an undocumented student born in Jalisco, México and arrived to the U.S. when she was seven years old. In elementary school, she was bussed to a predominately white public school a few miles away from her home where she was placed in an English Language Learner (ELL) program. In middle school, she was placed in English-only instruction classes. She described the transition from her elementary school as an ELL student, to her first year of middle school.

Sixth grade was just really hard for me. I just hated it. I didn't want to be there, and I was doing really bad in science. I think I got a C . . . I think in English too. I just felt like, "I hope nobody notices I'm at a disadvantage here." I had one-year experience in English language grammar, so I did feel like . . . "I can't handle this. I shouldn't be here." I felt like I wasn't gonna measure up to other kids . . . They were all really smart.

Silvia explained that unlike her predominately Latina/o classes in elementary school, her middle school peers were now predominately white and Asian students. She described being self-conscious, hoping that other students did not notice that she was bilingual. As a result, she felt that she would not perform on the same level as her peers, who she perceived were "smarter" than her. Silvia felt that she was at a "disadvantage" having had less exposure to reading and writing in English. However, neither her teacher nor the classroom environment allowed Silvia to see her own strengths as a fluently bilingual speaker, reader, and writer.

Lourdes shared a similar experience in her transition from her ELL program to English instruction classes. Lourdes was an undocumented student born in Jalisco, México and arrived in California at the age of two. She attended her local public schools from kindergarten through

12th grade. Her elementary school was predominately Latina/o, and her middle and high schools were more racially diverse. She explained that by third grade, she developed enough language skills to be in English-only instruction classes. She made the transition in the middle of the third grade.

I was in third grade. In the first trimester I was in the bilingual class. In the second [trimester] I was in all-English, and then the third [trimester], they put me in all-English too . . . I remember Mr. Roberts¹⁰ was the bilingual teacher, and then Ms. Olsen, that was the all-English [teacher] . . . I remember I was really excited when they put me in Ms. Olsen's class . . . and then they were like, "Oh you're not good enough to be here." I guess it also brought down my self-esteem a little bit because I had always considered myself smart . . . I was a straight-A student, and always getting awards . . . since kindergarten. So once they put me [back], it kind of brought down my self-esteem a little bit. So I was just like, "Ok, maybe I'm just working hard, but I'm not really smart," and like, "Maybe I don't belong here." I don't know, I guess at that point I doubted myself . . . so then I remember I was going down like, in my grades.

Lourdes explained that she was placed in the English instruction class for several months (with Ms. Olsen) then removed and re-placed in the ELL class. When asked why Lourdes thought she was removed from Ms. Olsen's class, she responded, "The teacher thought I had no place in that class." As a third grader, Lourdes sensed the perceptions of academic inferiority held by her teacher. She explained how this experience negatively affected her self-esteem and made her feel like she was not intelligent, even though she had always done well in school.

Similar to Silvia, Lourdes internalized the perceptions that English-dominant students were more intelligent than Spanish-dominant students like her. Other students described the cumulative effects of the racist nativist microaggressions that followed them into their higher education. For example, Lorena was born in the U.S., grew up in South Los Angeles, and was a monolingual Spanish speaker until she entered school. She was in ELL classes throughout her elementary and middle school years and described the same feeling of "not being smart enough" as Silvia and Lorena. Lorena explained how racist nativist microaggressions in early K-12 affected her as a college student.¹¹

In high school, Lorena's top college choice was Pacific University,¹² an elite, private, research institution in California. She applied but was not accepted. Instead of choosing to attend another university where she was accepted, she decided to attend community college and later transfer to Pacific. When she applied to transfer, she was denied admittance again. Lorena had to wait another year to apply to other schools because she had only applied to Pacific. The following year, she explained how her own self-doubt caused her nearly to miss the opportunity to apply to other UC campuses because she felt she was not a competitive candidate. She described completing the online applications for transfer:

To be honest, I wasn't going to pick [the UC campus in which she is currently enrolled]. I don't know if it was because I just felt, I didn't feel confident after [Pacific University] said no twice . . . I felt, "Wow, am I not good enough? Am I not smart enough, or what's going on?" It really depressed me a little not getting accepted after two years at community college. One counselor said, "Just go to a [state college] and you'll finish there." And I was like, "Okay, I'll just do that." And then I met another counselor who was Latino. His name was Mr. Laso. He said, "Just apply . . . you never know." And I said, "Eh, I don't know," and he said, "You don't have to do anything extra, it's the same package, everything, *nada mas que* [nothing but], one little click extra." So he made me feel like, "Ok, that's

true.” So I clicked it. So if it wasn’t for him, I don’t think I would have clicked it. He pushed me a lot, because I had given up hope, like, “Oh my god, I’m not good enough.”

Lorena explained how she became discouraged by not being accepted to the university that she had such high hopes to attend. Instead of questioning the schooling process that did not prepare her to be a successful applicant, she blamed herself for not being “smart enough,” a feeling she has held since she entered public school as an ELL student.

Consequently, Lorena felt academically inferior, which deterred her from applying to highly competitive UC campuses. She explained that one community college counselor advised her to attend the less-competitive public state universities. However, with the encouragement of another Latino counselor, she applied and was later accepted to a top UC institution. Lorena’s experience demonstrates how she developed internalized beliefs that she was not “smart enough” and how those internalizations mediated her college choice process. A critical (and fortunate) moment with a supportive counselor changed that choice process, which could have ultimately altered her educational trajectory and life opportunities.

Similarly, Alicia shared feelings of academic inferiority as a college student. Alicia was an undocumented student who experienced multiple racist nativist microaggressions throughout K-12 as an ELL student. The accumulation of those experiences led Alicia to feel a deep sadness.

Poli sci classes can be intimidating sometimes because I would say 90 percent are white students, like male, white students. It’s really intimidating when the professor asks you a question, and you’re expected to know, and you’re supposed to be really articulate. For me, I was actually a little bit sad this week because I don’t feel like I’m very, I don’t know, it’s kinda sad to say, but I think I have problems with my speech. Sometimes [the professor] wants us to argue in class and make good points and like this girl that was sitting in back of me . . . and she was bringing some good arguments, I mean, words I never even heard of, like from a Poli Sci dictionary. And I was like, “Damn, why can’t I do that?” I can’t be argumentative like that and articulate. And I got really sad . . . like, “Why can’t I have good speech like that?” I don’t know if you understand [what] I’m trying to tell you . . . They bring out these smart words in like every sentence, and I’m like, “Wow! I don’t even know what that word was.” So I feel intimidated a lot.

Alicia told this story with great pain in her voice. She explained that she felt she was not able to articulate herself as well as her white peers, and this made her feel “intimidated.” Additionally, she felt that there was something psychologically “wrong” with her. Throughout K-12, Alicia described experiences with racist nativist microaggressions that resulted in her feelings of academic inferiority. Alicia’s experience reflects the long-term, cumulative effects of racist nativist microaggressions over time in which she has internalized that inferiority and believed she suffered from “speech impairment,” as a form of disability.

Cruz (2006) articulates the process of embodiment from theory in the flesh. Cruz poses the question, “How does a regime in a given society become inscribed into the bodies of our youth?” (p. 68). She explains how the body becomes a discursive site of oppression and colonialism where the racism that Chicanas/os (and other people of color) encounter becomes inscribed upon the brown body.¹³ Alicia and Lorena gave us examples of this embodiment when, in their *testimonios*, they described the deep sadness and depression they experienced. Cruz’s articulation of the process of embodiment illustrates how the microaggressions that the students encounter remain deeply embedded in the bodies, minds, and spirits of Chicanas/Latinas navigating through the educational pipeline. In the process of critical reflection afforded by *conocimiento* and the

process of *testimonio*, we see how the Chicana/Latina body becomes a discursive site where effects of racist nativist microaggressions emerge.

Anzaldúa's (2002) concept of *conocimiento* teaches us that these painful and traumatic experiences are part of a process that leads us to reflect, heal, and transcend the oppression we encounter. The *testimonios* presented here illustrate several stages of *conocimiento*. In these excerpts, the women describe their transitions into English-dominant spaces where their sense of not-belonging or not being "good enough" leads them to internalize such negative perceptions. Anzaldúa may describe this experience as the first stage of *conocimiento*, "*el arrebato . . . [the] rupture, fragmentation*" of our reality where racism manifests to show that "something is lacking" (p. 546). As a result, we feel a painful vulnerability as we are removed from the spaces that were once familiar to us. Moreover, these new classroom environments can be described by the second stage of *conocimiento*, what Anzaldúa calls "*nepantla*," the "liminal space" where we become caught in "*remolinos*" (whirlwinds) between the world we know—our families, our homes, our communities, and the unfamiliar (p. 548). Their examples also manifest the third stage of *conocimiento*, the "*Coatlicue* state," where our internalized oppression emerges in what Anzaldúa calls our "shadow-beasts" (p. 553). However, the "*Coatlicue* state" is also a stage of *conocimiento* that leads us to resist our shadow-beasts and the systemic oppression we have internalized as a result, moving us toward healing and transformation. In the following section, we provide further examples and discussion of this resistance.

The findings clearly support that the effects of racist nativist microaggressions have resulted in negative consequences to the body, mind, and spirit that theory in the flesh and *conocimiento* have helped us understand. The women's internalized feelings of academic inferiority, their "shadow-beasts," resulted in feelings of deep sadness and depression they experienced in the "*Coatlicue* state" of *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa, 2002). Theory in the flesh reveals how the body remembers the pain and trauma of racist nativist microaggressions over time. Thus, the findings also highlight the *cumulative* aspect of microaggressions at the K-12 level that shape higher education trajectories and experiences.¹⁴

Chicana feminist scholars suggest that research is needed to identify the strategies Chicanas/Latinas use to navigate racialized and gendered experiences; forming our own categories, methods, and theories created from the inequities we uncover (Alarcón, 1990; Anzaldúa, 2002). In the following section we explore some of the strategies the participants in this study used to navigate through educational institutions and respond to the microaggressions they encountered. Through the women's *testimonios*, these strategies emerged as counterspaces.

RESPONSES TO RACIST NATIVIST MICROAGGRESSIONS: K-12 COUNTERSPACES

A final component to Solórzano's (2010) model of racial microaggressions is how students respond to them. This next component highlights the ways that students counter, challenge, and heal from these experiences. Past research has identified social and academic counterspaces as places inside and outside of the classroom where students find healing, empowerment, and sense of community (Grier-Reed, 2010; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Yosso, 2006; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Yosso et al. describe counterspaces as places that "enable Latina/o students to develop skills of critical navigation through multiple

worlds (e.g., home and school communities) and ultimately to survive and succeed in the face of racism” (p. 678). While counterspaces have mostly been explored in higher education, the students in this study describe engaging in counterspaces in their K-12 education. Beginning in middle school, participants described acknowledging spaces where they found a sense of community, empowerment, and healing from their daily experiences with racist nativist microaggressions.

Earlier, Lourdes described the effects of the English dominance that she experienced as an elementary school student. Throughout her K-12 education, she shared many instances of racist nativist microaggressions. In middle school, Lourdes participated in a college preparation program open to all students in high academic standing. Lourdes described the program as a place where she found encouragement and validation in her academic pursuits, despite experiences with teachers and peers who perceived her to be academically inferior. Lourdes described the program, called EXCEED¹⁵ and one of her program teachers in particular:

I remember Ms. Chavez . . . I would say she’s one of the greatest teachers I’ve ever had. She was just very motivating . . . she saw everything in everybody. She saw the people that were stronger in areas, and then she would help out others, and she . . . motivated me. I remember when I told you that they didn’t want to take us to the competitions and then I was kind of like, “Well, maybe I shouldn’t be in EXCEED,” and she was like, “No! You have the knowledge. You should be part of it. You should be recognized as one of those [EXCEED] students! . . . EXCEED was divided into two classes, two groups. I [was] in the group with Ms. Chavez, and then the ones that would travel more, the ones that go to more competitions, they were in Mr. Howard’s group . . . It was predominantly white and Asian . . . and then in my class with Ms. Chavez, all of us were Latinos.

Lourdes explained that the EXCEED program was composed of two eighth grade cohorts, each assigned one teacher. One cohort was mostly white and Asian students, led by a white male teacher, Mr. Howard. Lourdes’s cohort was mostly Latina/o students, led by a Latina teacher, Ms. Chavez. Even though both cohorts of students were in equal academic standing, Lourdes explained that Mr. Howard’s cohort would be given more opportunities to travel and participate in school competitions and that her (mostly Latina/o) cohort were perceived as less capable than their white and Asian EXCEED peers. Lourdes remained in the program because of the support and encouragement she felt from her teacher and peers. This program was a place where Lourdes felt encouraged and that her college aspirations were attainable. Lourdes suggests that the EXCEED program was a counterspace where she challenged the perceptions of her teachers and peers and continued to work toward preparing for higher education.

Yadira, was a first-year, undeclared major and undocumented student who emigrated to the U.S. when she was 12 years old. Yadira entered seventh grade in a Los Angeles middle school where her first experiences with racist nativist microaggressions began. In her *testimonio*, she described her “ESL” (English as a Second Language, same as ELL) classroom as a place where she felt a sense of community, something she did not feel outside of this space.

My class, it was ESL 1 . . . my teacher . . . she never wanted to speak Spanish unless you *really* didn’t understand. She always wanted us to use dictionaries and write whatever we wanted to say in Spanish, and then translate it word by word in English . . . What many [students] did was that they already knew how to translate, so they would, like, learn how to pronounce [the words] and then just give the information to the new students. Many other students enrolled in the class after I got there, so when I learned how to say, “Can I go to the restroom?” or “May I use a pencil?” I would share the information with other students that didn’t know because I was in that situation too. It was

a very emotional learning experience because it wasn't just Mexicans. It was a whole bunch of us, mostly girls, from other Mexican states, and Central America. That's when I first met students from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Colombia. It was so cool because they spoke different, you know, a different accent, so I learned so much! I learned how to dance *punta*, how to dance *merengue*, how to cook Salvadorian dishes. It was so emotional for me because I was so happy. It was one of the few times I felt that I really belonged! We would share our stories . . . There was a lot of experiences that we shared, and we felt that we belonged there.

In this excerpt, Yadira explained that her seventh grade ESL class was a space where she connected with other Latina/o immigrant students who had shared similar experiences coming to the U.S. as young adolescent women. They would help each other learn the English language and taught each other about their unique cultural customs. They shared their stories of emigrating, of their home countries, and of their difficult experiences living in an unfamiliar place. This was a counterspace, in a new country where she was constantly reminded that she was an outsider, where Yadira felt like she belonged.

Beatriz was a fourth-year sociology major and undocumented student who arrived in the U.S. when she was nine years old. She entered fourth grade as a monolingual Spanish speaker at a public elementary school in Anaheim, California. Beatriz shared a similar account of a counterspace. In seventh grade, Beatriz began participating in a *baile folklórico* dance class. In this class, students were taught traditional Mexican dances from various regions in México. Several times a year, the class would perform at school events.

I was in *baile folklórico*, I started when I was 13 years old and . . . it was just so great. The teacher, she's one woman I admire so much because not only did she want us to be good dancers, but she wanted us to know and appreciate the culture of México. The class was in Spanish. She once told us, "People are going to say a lot of things [about] you, but remember that wherever you go, you represent yourself, you represent your family, and you represent your culture, where you come from." I think that always stayed with me. She really wanted us to be great dancers but also great students. It was just great to go after school every Thursday and have my dance classes . . . It just gave me a sense of love [for] my culture. It really allowed me to . . . escape for one hour, to not be at home, not to be in school and not doing homework. It was *my* hour to do something fun just for me. And so I really liked that . . . to be in front of the whole school . . . and just be very proud . . . people think México is just one little thing, but it's so complex, and it's so many beautiful things.

Beatriz explained that in this *baile folklórico* program, she could be proud of who she was. Her dance teacher was well aware of the subordination her students experienced as Latina/o immigrant students. As a result, the teacher encouraged a form of resiliency and resistance through dance. Thus, the *folklórico* class was a counterspace where Beatriz and her peers learned strategies of resilience, and challenged racist nativist perceptions of themselves and their home country through an empowering form of artistic performance.

Each of these counterspaces provided a sense of belonging and empowerment where students demonstrated resilience to the subordination they faced in schools. By collectively engaging in these spaces, they found encouragement to continue to hold on to their high aspirations. The academic counterspaces Lourdes and Yadira described provided them with "critical navigational skills" that allowed them to persist and succeed in school (Yosso et al., 2009). Social counterspaces—such as Beatriz's *folklórico* class—are places where students represent the community cultural wealth (cultural resources and assets) of their home communities (Yosso

et al., 2009). Indeed, the K-12 counterspaces the students described were sites of resistance and resilience to the subordination they encountered in public school as Spanish-dominant Chicana/Latina students.

Conocimiento further sheds light on how students engaged in these counterspaces. In Beatriz's *folklórico* class as counterspace, we see the fifth stage of *conocimiento*, a stage of (re)creating ourselves and co-constructing a collective discourse that locates our lived realities. Anzaldúa (2002) explains this stage is one where we "examine the description of the world, picking holes in the paradigms currently constructing reality" (p. 560). Beatriz and Yadira both explained that they utilized their counterspaces to challenge dominant deficit perspectives of immigrant Chicana/Latina students and to create a collective counternarrative of themselves and each other where their academic and cultural strengths could be reinforced and celebrated. Counterspaces served as sites to engage in a process of reflection as Chicanas/Latinas, students, immigrants, daughters, and other identities they held. It was also a site to engage in healing through building collective networks of support and community.

We see the final stage of *conocimiento*, transformation, in these counterspaces as well. For example, Yadira mentions that her ESL peers were "mostly girls," and that the class served as an important gender-specific space of support and community. In this space, they developed counter-strategies to engage in a dialogical process of teaching and learning language skills to use when the teacher refused to assist. Yadira and her peers transformed the very space (schools) that marginalized them to create a space (ELL classroom) of resistance to move forward in their educational trajectories. Students developed strategies in this counterspace, to support each other and found a place to (re)connect the spirit through empowerment. In turn, they became more resilient to challenge injustice they faced as young Chicana/Latina immigrant girls. Through sharing their unique cultural practices, stories of migration, and experiences as immigrant students, they developed a broader understanding of their educational journeys as connected to a collective struggle of Chicana/Latina immigrant communities.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have used a model of racial microaggressions (Solórzano, 2010) to explore the effects of and responses to racist nativist microaggressions in the educational experiences of Chicana/Latina students. We presented multiple frameworks and conceptual tools that bridge critical race and Chicana feminist scholarship that revealed the complexities of these experiences and allowed us to incorporate an analysis of the body in relation to oppression. While CRT allowed us to identify microaggressions, theory in the flesh provided a framework to further theorize the process of embodiment and healing from them. We considered Anzaldúa's (2002) process of *conocimiento* as a pathway to understanding and healing from microaggressions and other forms of race-based trauma Chicana/Latina students experience in education. It allows us to consider a process of critical reflection and healing from painful and traumatic experiences caused by oppression that have the ability to impair our health and lives. Moreover, *conocimiento* enables us to confront what Anzaldúa (2002) calls the *remolinos*, or "whirlwinds," we experience as a result of subordination—the psychological and physiological effects on our bodies, minds, and spirits (p. 548). In turn, the process of *conocimiento* is also transformative—enabling us to heal from traumatic experiences caused by oppression through empowerment and social

advocacy. Anzaldúa argues that this advocacy challenges us to seek social justice for others, moving us toward dismantling the institutional systems of power that causes oppression and injustice—central goals of LatCrit and Chicana feminist frameworks.

As Chicana feminist scholars in education have argued before us, the bridging of these bodies of work provides a powerful “looking prism” (F. González, 2001, p. 643) to analyze and further theorize those complexities we discover in Chicana/o and Latina/o student experiences (Cueva, 2010; Delgado Bernal, 2002; F. González, 2001; Malagon, 2010; Malagon & Alvarez, 2010). Through our “looking prism” the *testimonios* revealed the serious and negative physiological effects of racist nativist microaggressions on the women’s overall well-being. Our analysis highlights the importance and connection of microaggressions to the Chicana/Latina body, mind, and spirit in education. Further, our prism sheds light on the academic and social counterspaces that served as collective sites of empowerment, resistance, and *conocimiento* as the students sought to combat hostile K-12 academic spaces. A clear relationship emerged between structural oppression as manifested in educational policy and students’ experiences with microaggressions that have serious consequences on their overall health and well-being.¹⁶ However, despite these experiences they engaged in resilient counter-strategies to navigate, resist, reflect, and transform spaces of structural oppression. While past research on counterspaces in education have focused on college students, these findings provide important insight into the powerful ways young Chicana/Latina students identify and respond to racist nativism through K-12 counterspaces. Finally, our study illustrates the cumulative aspect of microaggressions as these students continued to struggle with its traumatic effects.

The process of *testimonio* played a critical role in developing our “looking prism” and our findings. Hearing the ways the students described the process of *testimonio* prompted us to consider the connection with theory in the flesh and *conocimiento*. We provide the following examples from the focus groups conducted with the women, where they were asked to reflect on the process of *testimonio* in this study. Lourdes explains that her *testimonio* allowed her to critically reflect on her experiences:¹⁷

I saw it [the *testimonio*] as kind of a reflection; because I know things that I lived through. I ignored them at the moment, but then thinking about them, like when I told you everything, I was just like, “Wow! I have been through a lot!” And it hadn’t hit me because I just keep thinking, ok, another day, another day, another day, but then if you think back on all of it, it’s like wow! I’m sure it’s like that for all of us . . . because we go through so many things daily and we don’t think about [it] . . . And it’s like, “Wow! And I’m still here!” So it gets me thinking about stuff.

Lourdes explained how engaging in the process of *testimonio* allowed her to reflect and come to a realization about her own resiliency to the multiple forms of racism she experienced, which she shared in her *testimonio*. Beatriz also shared her thoughts on the process.

Just to have a space where I could start from the beginning [laughs]. Not everyone has . . . many hours to do both interviews. A lot of my close friends know a lot about me and my own history . . . my hopes and my faith and they know the struggle, but I think having this type of step where you let enough space for us to say our stories, I feel like I was not rushed so it gave me freedom to say much more. I think in a way it also scratched *heridas que* [pause] I guess I have to say . . . because sometimes I was not able to say everything with such detail, so it hurt at the end. It was healing as well, because . . . just to be able to say everything with detail and not holding back, it’s just like, having someone having enough time [to listen].

Here, Beatriz explains that her *testimonio* allowed her the space and time to fully explain her experiences in ways that she had not been able to previously, “to start from the beginning.” She explained feeling “hurt” when she was not able to tell her story completely—perhaps from the telling of her story without time to reflect. She explained that sharing her experiences “scatched *heridas*” (scratched wounds), a feeling that prompted her to share her story more fully.¹⁸ In this description, Beatriz alludes to an embodiment that takes place for her in the telling of her experiences with subordination as an undocumented Chicana/Latina immigrant student—an experience theory in the flesh allows us to understand. However, in both descriptions we also see stages of *conocimiento* present, particularly in how they describe *testimonio* as reflective and healing. Indeed, these examples illustrate the powerfully positive impact that *testimonio* has on those who engage in them.

We argue that the process of *testimonio* allowed us to see a more complete picture of the systemic oppression the women experienced in schools. They described the *remolinos* caused by these experiences—the psychological and physiological effects caused to their bodies, minds, and spirits. The students also challenged that oppression by engaging in counterspaces. Our analysis demonstrates that in collectively sharing *testimonios* we engage in a process of *conocimiento*. One student explained that the *testimonios* she and other participants gave were important “because other people are gonna read this and see what we have to go through.” Their stories spoke to a collective struggle to which readers would bear witness. *Testimonio* provided a means to reflect, engage, and theorize. It allowed us a space to be vulnerable—to share the pain of oppression and to rejoice in our struggles to overcome. Through this work, we engage in social advocacy by revealing the effects of and responses to racist nativist microaggressions to disrupt the educational practices and policies that enable such oppression. In this process of *conocimiento*, we become active agents of social change, freeing ourselves from the effects of microaggressions to heal and celebrate our empowerment, hope, and resiliency in education.

NOTES

1. Typically in our work, we intentionally capitalize the term “Students of Color” to reject the standard grammatical norm. Capitalization is used as a means of empowerment and represents a grammatical move toward social justice. We typically use this rule to apply to “People, Immigrants, Women and Communities of Color” in our writing. However, we understand the policies this journal has established to maintain consistency in the use of capitalization and the potential to exclude other oppressed groups in this grammatical practice (i.e., Queer, Persons with Disabilities, etc.).
2. Delgado Bernal and Villalpando (2002) argue that an apartheid of knowledge exists in academia where racial divisions are created between Eurocentric epistemologies and other epistemological stances, producing an ideological divide between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” forms of knowledge. This apartheid maintains white superiority through a narrowly defined knowledge production process that devalues and delegitimizes the forms of knowledge that exists within communities of color.
3. The majority of women in this study self-identified as either Chicana or Latina. Thus, we use the term Chicana/Latina to describe this group of participants. All ten of the undocumented participants were born in México. In addition, all ten of the U.S.-born participants’ parents were born in México. The salience of racial identification varied in the lives of the participants. Some women were very committed to the political dimensions of a Chicana/Latina identity, while others explained using the term Latina because it was more of a collective identity. Others used terms like Mexican American, American Mexican, Mexican, and Hispanic to describe themselves.
4. This work extends a previous study that explored how the women experienced racist nativist microaggressions in California public K-12 schools (Pérez Huber, 2011).

5. The original definition of racist nativism can be found in Pérez Huber et al. (2008). We would like to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Daniel Solórzano in crafting a brief version of this definition as provided here.
6. The concept of racial microaggression was first developed by psychiatrist Dr. Chester Pierce (1969) to explain the subtle, yet powerfully harmful “offensive mechanisms” directed by Whites toward African Americans (p. 303). CRT scholars have built upon this conceptual tool within critical race scholarship in education and have found that this concept can be used to explain how Latina/o and African American students are targeted by low expectations, racist and sexist stereotypes, and racially hostile college campus environments (Greir-Reed, 2010; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2006; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, Solórzano, 2009). Racist nativist microaggressions as a type of racial microaggression have been theorized from a LatCrit lens that has allowed researchers to examine the role of immigration status in the way microaggressions are experienced (Pérez Huber, 2011).
7. See Pérez Huber et al. (2008) for a discussion of the historical subordination of Latinas/os in the U.S., specifically through immigration and educational policies.
8. These focus groups included undocumented and U.S.-born students.
9. In this previous study, Pérez Huber (2011) discusses the current law guiding language policies in California public K-12 schools, Proposition 227 (Prop 227). Prop 227 restricted bilingual education in schools and mandated EL students into structured English immersion programs. She explains that this law targeted Spanish-speaking Latina/o students who comprised the majority of English Learner students at the time the law was passed in 1998. She argues that such restrictive language policies support and encourage teacher practices of English dominance over Latina/o students in these schools.
10. All names provided in this article are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the students and confidentiality of their *testimonios*.
11. Our analysis of microaggressions uncovers the subordination the women experienced as a result of being labeled English Language Learners in K-12 schools. However, we feel it is also important to acknowledge that being bilingual was also a source of strength that provided the students with a skill-set they utilized to navigate educational institutions. In a previous study, Pérez Huber (2009a) explains how these bilingual skills can be considered a form of linguistic capital within a community cultural wealth framework.
12. Pseudonym
13. Cueva (2012) has found other examples of embodiment. Her data (46 *testimonio* interviews) on Chicana and Native American doctoral students highlights the various types of racialized and gendered microaggressions women encounter in higher education that impair their bodies, health, and overall quality of life. Some of the symptoms include: depression, anxiety, dissociative disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, insomnia, fatigue, high blood pressure, diabetes, irritable bowel syndrome, anxiety/panic attacks, sweats, weight gain, weight loss, low sugar levels, migraine headaches, chronic pain, contemplation of suicide, as well as reproductive issues (e.g., missed periods, miscarriages, stopped ovulation, heavy bleeding/cramping, extreme PMS, pelvic pain).
14. Both undocumented and U.S.-born students experienced the effects of racist nativist microaggressions in similar ways. However, we feel it is important to highlight the heightened negative effects of microaggressions experienced by the undocumented women in the study, such as Alicia’s symptoms of depression. Future research should further theorize the relationship between the body, mind, spirit, and traumatic experiences that undocumented Chicanas/Latinas encounter as a result of racist nativism, sexism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression.
15. Pseudonym
16. Here, we consider the findings of Pérez Huber (2011) on restrictive language policies as institutional oppression that results in the young women’s experiences with microaggressions.
17. The two excerpts provided here have been previously published in a different analysis focused on method to illustrate how the women described the process of *testimonio* as reflective and healing and how participants’ descriptions were incorporated into the conceptualization of *testimonio* as a methodological process (see Pérez Huber, 2010).
18. The direct English translation of *herida* is “wound.” However, the way Beatriz uses this word is more of an expression that lacks a direct translation. Similar to this expression of *herida*, we see Anzaldúa’s (1999) use of the term in her concept of *la herida abierta*, “the open wound” of the social world created by the

oppressive physical and symbolic borders imposed by neocolonialism (e.g., racism, patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism).

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