

**SONOMA
STATE
UNIVERSITY**

**CHICANO
& LATINO
STUDIES**

Refusing to Just Survive: Xicana's in Higher Education

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Cultivating Spaces of Belonging and Harvesting Radical Joy & Healing

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COPLAC Metamorphosis Undergraduate Journal

“Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente.”

“Forty years later, as universities have become beholden to profit-driven motives and cooperation with governmental agencies, students are fighting to preserve human rights-based activism as well as ethnic studies departments across the United States. However, access to higher education for poor people and people of color is rapidly evaporating as tuition prices—even for “public” universities—skyrocket.”

(In Our Power, U.S. Students Organize for Justice in Palestine, Nora Barrows- Friedman. 2014.)

~~History~~ *Herstory* of nurturing with love and healing
institutional traumas, where joy is radical.

Abstract:

My research focuses on the experiences of undergraduate Chicanas at a predominantly white university. I document their work in instilling systems of healing through student-led activist diversity initiatives. Our identities as scholars are not objective, they are shaped by the politics and culture we reside in. I document the institutional barriers and exclusion experienced by first generation Chicana students. The Chicana student experiences vary depending on their income, gender, sexuality, cultural identity, and immigration status, factors that impact the retention, graduation, and continuation of Chicanas in higher education. This project recounts, Chicana Scholars' experience of endured physical, psychological, and emotional burnout. The oral histories and open-ended semi structured interviews that comprise this research center their perceptions of the colonizing university institution as well as their efforts of carving space for institutional healing, joy, and emotional fulfillment given their experiences of unbelonging and exclusion in the higher education academic sector.

This research explores the questions,

What do the experiences of the Xicana¹ Activists convey regarding the social ambient of the university? What were their motives for organizing at a Northern California predominately white institution during the 2016-2019, under the Trump presidential Administration? How do their experiences add to the discourse and interpretations of student activist movements within higher education university institutions?

Introduction:

This paper centers the experiences of Xicana students in higher education through the experiences of Xicana scholar activistas². I explore how their activism and experience in the university has developed their consciousness [i.e: perception of self, and the collective under the lens of the university] and has in turn shaped their lives and careers. We recount their experiences to demonstrate the institutional inequities faced by Latinas³ in higher education. I seek to magnify the experiences of Chicana/ Xicana, scholar activistas, advocating and acting for change within the realms of the university. This research utilizes the narratives of three Xicana activistas to address and center Xicana experiences at a Northern California PWI (Predominantly White Institution). , which was granted a HSI (Hispanic Serving Institute)⁴ Status in February of 2017. The Xicanas activist experiences highlight the university's failure to provide a fulfilling and sustainable undergraduate experience for Chicanas and the BIPOC student collective.

Causes of Action: Student Bodies at the Frontlines.

Students' educational experiences are shaped by a series of macrosocial and microsocial factors. Macrosocial factors include, political, social, cultural, environmental, factors out of the

¹ **Xicana/ Chicanas:** although typically accounting for Mexican American Women, this term expands and encompasses those who identify as Chicanas not from Mexican descent. For purposes of identifying the research participants, Xicana represents the Mexican American Women where the X in Chicana is to identify and acknowledge the indigenous ancestry and roots of the Chicana and Chicana Identity.

² **Activistas:** (ENG. Translation) Activist, in spanish to highlight the intersection of identities

³ **Latinas:** Under institutional labeling Xicanas/ Chicanas fall into the wider category of latinas, this is not to generalize the experience, but rather to acknowledge the melting pot framework of the institution that consequently aids and harms marginalized populations of students in the academy.

⁴ **HSI Status:** February 2017: California State University – Becomes the 21st CSU Campus to be Designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution.” Calstate.edu

control or autonomy of the student. Microsocial factors are results of macrosocial conditions such as a student experiencing mental health distress as a result of navigating the social systems being low income, immigrant, first generation, women, queer, etc. Often, these microsocial factors are the catalyst for student movements. Historically student activism demonstrates that activist actions primarily originate as a result of political, social, and economic factors that disrupt students educational trajectories. Student academic experiences are contingent on political and social rhetoric, institutional policies, and economic cycles. “Student activism on University campuses such as protests and student demonstrations arise from students demanding power, control, and freedom in the institutions of higher education which shape and control their lives.” (1975, Albertson, Dean. 79) More distinctively student activist efforts in part by women of color stem from the experiences of increased hostility, inequality, and alienation within higher education as well as means of self preservation and survival in and through the academy.

Institutional Reaction: [Domination of the Marginalized.](#)

Institutions have historically developed various tactics to deter student activism and the mobilization of the student body across educational campuses. Through acts of financial suppression, structural isolation, and systematic policing of students or faculty sympathetic to social political activism, academic institutions have invested themselves in actively deterring student activism. Among the means of deterring student activist efforts, the dismissal of professors and faculty sympathetic to student activism, is one of the tactics used by institutions of higher education as means of disrupting the networks of knowledge. These forms of institutional intervention demonstrate how university institutions have invested themselves in controlling the power of marginalized communities and further perpetuating exclusion within academic spaces. “That is, universities reproduce inequality among their faculty and students through exclusionary acts that both promote “diversity and inclusion” and at the same time ensure that the people who make the university diverse, experience violence, exclusion, and unbelonging .” (2022, Peña, Garcia Lorgia. 36) This is especially evident when it comes to institutional policies and administrative decisions, including limits to free speech on campus. Institutional interventions disrupt the networks of knowledge that students need to organize, and develop identity and social consciousness. It makes it increasingly difficult for students to educate themselves in order to counter structural violence within the university and society.

A Colonial Legacy: [There is Power in Knowledge & Weaponized Ignorance.](#)

The American university is a direct reflection of developing social and political rhetoric. A direct example of the impacts of the social political culture in how it impacts the students academic trajectory can be noted in following the election of Former President Donald J. Trump. We find how the prominent xenophobic and racist administration significantly impacted the culture of student advocacy within university institutions. It is important to note that, “The University is a central location for establishing knowledge as a discourse of power, where the power to decide what is considered truth or not, is tied to the power to legitimize that truth (or untruth)” (1994, Córdova Teresa. 17) U.S. Academic institutions have in turn been institutions that inherently weaponize the existing racial and class structures aiding to further perpetuate hegemonic structures of power and privilege through legitimizing knowledge and knowledge systems. As a result, higher education institutions serve as the prominent force that influences student identity development and consequently contributes to the indoctrination of members of American society.

American academic institutions have historically been weaponized against marginalized groups of racial and ethnic identities. One deplorable example of educational practices that perpetuate white supremacy was the creation of “Indian boarding” schools which resulted in the cultural genocide and ethnic cleansing of Indigenous peoples, in the American quest to “Kill the Indian and Save the Man”. “Most U.S. citizens do not even know of the existence of these genocidal boarding schools, let alone that they have had lasting effects on the health and well-being of Native American communities. We cannot have reconciliation before healing. In order to have healing, we must reveal the truth.”⁵ (2020. [BoardingSchoolHealing.org](https://www.boardingschoolhealing.org)) In 2023, the American education system continues to perpetuate modern forms of ethnic cleansing and assimilation. The attacks on Critical Race Theory, Queer and Ethnic Studies curriculum, academic programs, and book bannings, illustrate the degree to which academic institutions are shaped by legislative and political decisions. Policies such as Florida’s Senate Bill 266⁶ which calls for the banning of Women and Gender Studies and Ethnic Studies majors throughout Florida colleges and universities, weaponizes academic curriculum by imposing boundaries determining social acceptance of behaviors of marginalized communities within American Society. (2023, HRC Staff. [hrc.org](https://www.hrc.org))

Educational institutions enact policies and practices that perpetuate white settler colonial structures and continue to impose violence primarily upon communities of racially and ethnically diverse students. Whether that is a direct implication of the federal legislation or local legislation the American academic institution has increasingly demonstrated to be malleable and adaptive to the codes of power and domination. Academic institutions have consequently utilized the power of knowledge and weaponized ignorance to indoctrinate students into social norms and hence perpetuate the colonial structures of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. The American values system upheld by U.S. education institutions demonstrates the prominent role the academy serves in reinforcing the codes of power and violent systems of oppression. Academic institutions today still serve to preserve the legacies of whiteness. The American education system has ultimately managed to sell the image of presumed liberal institutions while continuing to perpetuate narratives of exclusion, in which students result to establishing student power as means of influencing and shaping the academy to fit their needs.

Academic Socialization: I am a Product of the Institution.

The strict socialization of students within higher education has often resulted in the reproduction of dominant social ideologies and oppressive systems, in which students experience domination, alienation, and privilege depending on their bodies. The academy serves as a prominent force that continues to perpetuate settler colonial notions influencing the identities of students from marginalized racial and ethnic groups. Often student organizations and student activism provide spaces of peer support where students are able to embody all aspects of themselves, validate their experiences in the institution, and build a sense of belonging and connection to their academic environments. Due in part to the inequitable and alienating experiences that BIPOC⁷ students encounter, they have turned to carving their own spaces within

⁵ For more on U.S. Boarding Schools visit: [The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition](https://www.boardingschoolhealing.org)

⁶ For more on Florida’s Senate Bill 266 visit: [HumanRightsCampaign.org](https://www.humanrightscampaign.org)

⁷ **BIPOC**: Black, Indigenous, People of Color

the academy. These spaces often arise from activist actions that bring awareness to external and internal forces impacting their academic careers.

Student Support Systems: [Cultivating Belonging to Counter the Legacy of Exclusion.](#)

Students have organized campus groups, such as student governance organizations, affinity clubs, fraternities and sororities, intramural sports, and academic clubs that often serve as foundations for integrating first year and newly admitted transfer students to the university. Peer support groups serve as a place of solidarity and community building in which students foster connections that enable them to further navigate their personal interests via university academic relationships or external community networks. Communities of support are important contributors to the development and success of first generation college students. Through these involvements students develop social capital that provide them with knowledge to better navigate their academic journey's. Lastly through active involvement and participation within student organizations, students develop impactful relationships with faculty, advisors, & mentors, enabling them to build a foundation of support in the pursuits of education, and various career and occupational opportunities.

Historically for BIPOC communities, centering Chican@/e/x communities, educational environments have been a site of hostility and exclusion where the social definitions and categorizations of race and ethnicity have determined access to quality education. Noting the historically fluctuating definition of Mexican Americans as White and Non White, the segregation of education more pressingly impacted Mexican American, Chican@/e/x, students in the early 1900s. However Black and Indigenous students have primarily been and continue to be at the frontline of limited access to quality education and experience increased hostility and exclusion in schooling. Through the structural and historical legacy of exclusion that limits the access of BIPOC communities, we note the social political culture that dictates access and quality of education for BIPOC communities. The 1946 Mendez vs. Westminster Supreme Court case illustrates the segregation experienced by Mexican- Americans and Chican@/e/x students in California that paved the way for federal school desegregation. "In 1947, the parents of Californian Mexican- American children, presented a federal case that stated the harm of segregated schools. This was the first successful school desegregation court decision prior to Brown vs. Board of Education, 1954." (Constitutional Rights Foundation, Teach Democracy 2007) Segregation is a primary example of how educational institutions have historically restricted access to quality of education for Chican@/x and the collective of students of color.

During the 1990s, Latin@/x students continued to lack access to quality and fulfilling educational experiences. Latin@s in the educational system must adapt and manage their experiences around a multitude of circumstances that often dictate their likelihood of attaining graduation and a higher level education. Latino Critical Studies researchers have noted the lack of institutional support and resulting impacts on the retention and academic success of Latin@/x students. Furthermore, at the core, student of color activists seek to influence institutional policies and actions that impact their educational endeavors. "What marks all our institutions beneath their calm surfaces of control, is that their subjects are tense with gathered stresses and unmet needs, and are full of pains and angers, which they rarely express openly and are mostly unconscious of." (1975, Albertson, Dean. 88) Students who feel unwelcome, underrepresented and undervalued in their academic environments, rely on peer support groups, clubs, and

organizations, as means of succeeding in academia. Often these student based groups serve as a bridge between the students and the academic institution, influencing their participation, organizing efforts and advocacy within the university and their communities.

The Women of Color Experience: A taste of a Concoction of Painful and Empowering Remembrances.

The participants of the research include former Xicana femtors that were actively involved in various levels of the campus organizing process, during the 2017- 2019 time period. The organizing that took place during this time was primarily a reACTion⁸ of the developing campus, national, social, and political rhetoric. Through coordinated and facilitated, community centered spaces, the Mujeres⁹ cultivated spaces of belonging in an environment of exclusion serving to establish a community of support for Chican@/e/x's & BIPOC Mujeres on campus. The Mujeres cultivated spaces for the acknowledgement of the complexity of the university experience. A primary way in which they established these communities of support was through leading platicas¹⁰ and workshops centered in healing and acknowledging the vulnerabilities and intimacies that come with the first generation university experience. Through events like platicas, convivios¹¹, and more widely coordinated & organized events like community workshops, women centered conferences, and event fundraisers for academic scholarships, the mujeres reflected their values of cultivating a fulfilling and culturally connected university experience. By leading student activist demonstrations they reflected the diversity of experiences in the navigation of various social structures in relation to university life. The Mujeres showcase the culture of resistance and resilience that in turn not only served to fortify their existence but foster a community of belonging within their university careers demonstrating to others through their active engagement, that Chican@/e/x's on campus belong in the spaces of higher education despite the socially fabricated message of exclusion.

I utilized the platica style interview methodology for open space and to create a less structured interview feel where the Mujeres dictate the themes of the conversation. The platica allowed for space for the Mujeres to collectively explore the intricacies of their experiences. Within the Chican@/x Studies discipline, scholars utilize and described Platicas as,

“A traditional practice in which we engage in conversation with family, friends and community to gather knowledge or context to their experiences and lives. Platica poses opportunities to co-construct spaces and to explore important issues as we work on getting to know each other. The way our parents taught us, platica was not typically used to fix issues but to learn about them, as we learn about ourselves and about each other. Platica spaces are co-constructions, where conditions are manifested as collaborative and independent.” (Dr. Francisco Guajardo & Dr. Miguel Guajardo 161) “In addition

⁸ **reACTion:** to bring attention to not only the emotional or physiological reaction to the surrounding environment but to highlight the ACT of cultivating a counter narrative to the dominant dialogue and unchallenged structures. Where a reaction is and can be active or passive a reACTion is the active labor of addressing the structures that imply the reaction and actively engaging in a response.

⁹ **The Mujeres:** (ENG. Translation) “The Women” written in spanish to more accurately depict the intersection of identities and cultural influences of navigating the borderlands of the university structure as Latina, Xicana women of color

¹⁰ **Platicas:** (ENG. Translation) Talks

¹¹ **Convivios:** (ENG. Translation) Gatherings, or more specifically to engage in a collective action typically in reference to potlucks, conversations/ storytelling and coexistence, *being in community*, *conviviendo*.

platicando¹² has been a pivotal and necessary component of traversing academic spaces that has allowed us to weave the personal and academic.” (Cindy O. Fierros & Dolores Delgado Bernal 99)

Platicas focus on recentering the personal, in which the co-creation practices of interviewing or platicando serve to counter the traditional forms of the objective research, disrupting the dynamics of control between the interviewee and interviewer. Platicas serve to further amplify and uplift the narrative of Mujeres, navigating the structures of patriarchy and racial capitalism that silences and objectifies their experiences.

I utilized a Chicana Feminist epistemological lens to deconstruct the experiences of Xicana Activist Scholars. By gathering their oral history testimonios through open-ended semi structured interviews, I capture their experiences of dolor¹³, rabia¹⁴ and moments of critical decision making and healing under the oppressive colonizing structure of the university. The Mujeres opened the space for the collective acknowledgment of their shared experiences of systemic struggle, and alienation in higher education. They spoke of feeling out of place, in relation to the political, cultural, and socioeconomic ambient of the university. Their responses contribute to the ongoing discourse of student solidarity and coalitional activism. Through the experiences of Xicana first generation students at a predominantly white institution of higher education, I depict the reality of the issues confronted by the collective of BIPOC student body at Uva University¹⁵. I document the student power and resistance of rebel changemakers refusing to just survive through the navigation of their undergraduate careers.

The platica centers events that occurred as a reACTion to primarily the on campus environments, events, and experiences, however they remain strongly in correlation with local, nation, and transnational developing social rhetoric, legislation, and democratic policy. This is to say that their experiences as Xicana Scholars became entrenched with the complexities of the multiverse of colonial structures embedded to uphold and keep the operating university system. Their narratives address the intricacies of their personhood in the university giving voice to their experiences as a single mother, first generation college students, formerly undocumented, low income students, members of mixed status families, and as queer Chicanas navigating the university.

My interviews capture the experiences of three chicana activists scholars: La Femtor, la Xicana, and la Mujerista. These interviews were conducted in two separate sessions. The first session was a platica style format in which La femtor and La Xicana discussed their experiences during a two hour Zoom session. In this platica, the interviewees validated each other's experiences and acknowledged and opened space for righteous rage. They laughed, cried, and thanked each other for withstanding and supporting each other's presence in the university. Additionally, the Mujeres shared gratitude to one another for enabling each other's personal growth and consciousness development. Lastly, the Mujeres expressed gratitude for the space

¹² **Platicando:** (ENG. Translation) To talk, to engage in conversation/s

¹³ **Dolor:** (ENG. Translation) Pain/s

¹⁴ **Rabia:** (ENG. Translation) Rage

¹⁵ **Uva University:** pseudonym for a Northern California State institution established in 1961, earning its pseudonym upon the local agriculture drive of the cultivation of wine

offered to share their experience as they endured their “painfully reflections” of the laborious and emotional journey of their educational activism.

The second session was an individual semi structured interview where we engaged in *chisme*¹⁶ about the present campus environment and the disruptive effect of COVID on both institutional memory of past activist groups and developing the culture of activism. The interview with La Mujerista was centered around her experience of activism in relation to understanding and empowering her personhood. She spotlights the importance of community building and solidarity communities in relation to the personal wellbeing of students. She reflected on the development of her personal identities, centering her queerness and the internal and external struggle of finding communities of belonging and empowerment. She illuminates her activist *comunidad*¹⁷ as her chosen family providing her more than an on campus community but as a *familia*¹⁸ that served and serves to empower and uplift her spirit. La Mujerista shares and centers the importance of centering the undocumented immigrant student experience in the realm of higher education at a time of prominent xenophobic narratives.

We refuse to be Complacent: We are not your diversity tokens!

I focus my research on events following the certification of Uva University as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in 2017. During this period the institution prioritized the recruitment and admission of Latinxs/es to diversify their student body population. Uva University also adopted diversity and inclusion initiatives that centered and primarily served first year, newly admitted students. Through these initiatives Uva University promoted and cultivated an image of inclusion and belonging. It is important to note, after their first year at Uva University, students are left to navigate the landscape of the university for themselves. Unless strongly advised and or connected to university networks that provide knowledge systems of programs that aid and further their academic pursuits or career interest, the students are left to fend for themselves to cultivate and find the networks of knowledge that provide an inner scope of the university structure. Finding knowledge networks is especially important for students of color, especially those who are first generation students. It is pivotal for students to connect with advisors and mentors that understand the complexity of social factors that embed themselves in the students' university experience.

In fact, often, practices adopted by university institutions to promote diversity and inclusion neglect the needs of continuing students. Because of this, student of color activists have historically constructed demands that address the quality of their education, cost of university tuition/fees, and the lack of services and resources needed to sustain their academic careers and personhoods. Student of color activists have continued to demonstrate values of receiving a quality education and culturally relevant resources and services to have a fulfilling college experience that best support and uplift their efforts as young developing professionals.

¹⁶ **Chisme:** commonly understood as its direct english translation, *gossip*, however for purposes of survival in academia we refer to *chisme* as institutional knowledge or memory of how current and past students have navigated the university environment. *Chisme Saves Lives*.

¹⁷ **Comunidad:** (ENG. Translation) Community, written in spanish to more accurately depict the intersectional community of support

¹⁸ **Familia:** (ENG. Translation) Family

Collective injustice, collective rage, collective power: [We deserve better!](#)

Consequently, while the universities focused on admitting students and creating a more diverse campus environment, the existing BIPOC students are left to fend for themselves in the realms of university life. An example of student activist demands that demonstrate the necessity of student services and resources include the 2017 Student Demands by the Black Student Union¹⁹ which address the hostile campus environment and the lack of culturally comprehensive services and resources. In 2017, while Uva University had recently become a HSI campus we find how students of color, specifically Black and Latinx students continued to experience campus hostility, where this collective experience of alienation and marginality, strengthened their collective organizing to address the needs of vulnerable student populations.

Through this multicultural coalition between the Black Student Union, and various multicultural campus organizations (such as, Students for Quality Education, Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social, UndocuScholars Coalition, and Movimiento Estudiantil Chicax de Aztlán,) students sought to incite a change in the campus community. Through this solidarity activism, the resulting network and community of support demonstrates the overarching structures that impact BIPOC students at predominantly white institutions. Through this mobilization effort, we find how Activism leads to co-creation of communities networks of support (as WOC, First Generation, Activists) both within the wider campus community building solidarity between students of color and multicultural communities and subgroup populations of students such as Xicanas and Women of Color in academia.

Despite the complex history of the Black and Latin@/x identity, both peoples endure the violent systems of colonialism where violence is endured in similar ways. Within the field of higher education these experiences narrate the dominating forces of the structure of exclusion. Our experiences of alienation, isolation and exclusion vary vastly yet, reflect the common narrative of hostility in higher education. This shared experience of hostility has served as a foundation in organizing efforts and solidarity communities. Often, through these shared experiences, BIPOC and identity diverse groups join to advocate for resources and services that serve to provide support in the curating of their college experience. Student activist solidarity in turn becomes a driving force fueling institutional change.

First Generation Scholars: [We are the Rebel Changemakers!](#)

As students of color continue to acclimate to university life, they begin to identify their needs for success, not only are they left to figure out their career path but equally identify the gaps and cultivate systems of support that bridge the gaps in their college experience while constructing a fulfilling university experience. First generation students of color, in particular, are often left to figure out the ropes of the university structure on their own and advocate for their presence in the institution. La Xicana reflects upon her experience as a first generation undergraduate student where she mentions the continuous gaslighting of her experiences. She mentions how cultivating these systems of support demonstrated to her and others the

¹⁹ **2017 Student Demands by the Black Student Union:** Where the black student union primarily advocated for Black Therapist, a Black Student Housing Community, and a Black Studies Major. Present day Dec. 2023 students now have the Black student housing community [V.I.B.E.S](#) but **we still do not have** a Black Therapist, and Black Studies Major/ Minor. [See BSU Demands, Afrikan Black Coalition](#)

overarching structural deficiencies of the university to adequately serve Latin@/x first generation students. She shares,

“I sacrificed so much to be here. Like, why would I have a miserable time while I'm here? Like that never made sense. And now [being in these spaces] we were sharing each other's terrible experiences and like, seeing more of a whole picture of what was happening because it wasn't just me. And we were always kind of questioning ourselves [as first generation scholars] like, why is this like this and why isn't it better? Like why aren't- haven't they been teaching, admitting students and all of that stuff for years? Like why haven't they gotten all of these things down? Like, it made no sense to me of like, why are they- were so inefficient at their just their main duty [to serve students], right?.” (2023 Platica 1, 24 Mins)

Her words encapsulate the necessity for Xicana's to find and build comunidad to validate and hold each other's experiences of navigating the university. La Xicana reflects on the experiences of cultivating spaces that served to validate and counter the harmful structure of the university. She speaks to the necessity of these spaces to thrive and further students educational aspirations, breaking from the cycle of survivals that are imposed by racial capitalism upon our immigrant families. She reflected upon the value of education in gaining social mobility away from a life of poverty and survival. The interviewees speak to the importance of creating and nurturing counterspaces to the dominant culture of the university. The interviewees reflect on sentiments of support, solidarity, unión²⁰, exhaustion, and frustration. Collectively, they showcase the university's diversity agenda.

Although La Femtor was staff during the 2017- 2019 time period, she draws from her experiences as a first generation undergraduate at Uva University in the early 2000s. Her experience builds the institutional memory of the university in relation to the hostility and treatment of Xican@ students. She describes the physical appearance of Xican@s during this time and how this became a marker of both social alienation and solidarity.

“Like straight like when you looked in the 90s, you know you look at *Stand and Deliver*²¹ and you look at that look, there was guys that dress like that, walk like that around the university, maybe like two or three right, but by themselves but being who they were, they were rebelling against the system. Right. Um and I was going to school like that, you know, barely having any eyebrows, my hair like that **points to her chongo*^{22*} most likely, right, my red lipstick because that was the fashion right, in my time. But it was a sense of rebelling.-- So I was going to school where no *habíamos mucho pero los poquitos que habíamos*²³ was scary because we were like a problem because we were that like that fly in the milk. Like they couldn't get rid of us and half of us were angry. We weren't like happy go lucky kids going there. We were like, oh shit, we're stuck here. And now we're like, let's you know, **nervous laughter with a gesture of interlocking and holding of hands towards the heart** hang out together because this is just gonna kill us if we don't.” (2023 Platica 1, 18 mins.)

²⁰ **Unión:** (ENG. Translation) In union or Unity

²¹ **Stand and Deliver:** 1988 Chicano Film, American drama film directed by Ramón Menéndez, written by Menéndez and Tom Musca, based on the true story of a high school mathematics teacher, Jaime Escalante.

²² **Chongo:** (ENG. Translation) hair bun

²³ **No *habíamos mucho pero los poquitos que habíamos*..:** (ENG. Translation) We weren't many but the few that were there...

Throughout the conversation, the interviewees build on each other's experiences, while continuing to validate each other's existence and resistance through their journey at Uva University and their current positions in Student Services. La femtor addresses the social ambients that influenced the sentiments and actions in part by Xican@s. She noted the more prominent structures of class within her experience and noted the more prominent structural inequities of being served & service by the university during La Xicana's time at Uva University. The institutional memory of hostility among the Xicana's differ upon the racial and class social ambients and how this has engulfed itself into the university dynamics and consequently their undergraduate experience. Furthermore, La Xicana and La Mujerista reflect on their experience in relation to the prominent xenophobic, hyper racial social climate, upon the presidential administration of former president Donald J. Trump.

Righteous Rage: Channeling Furia²⁴ for Change!

Women of Color face a unique experience of marginality and subordination in the academy. Tainted with the colors and the richness of culture, gender, and diversity of identity, it is an integral for women of color to build and find communities of belonging that serve in providing support structures and social capital to gain the inner world understanding of the dynamics of the academy. In a discussion by Women of Color activist scholars, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Angela Davis, and Lorgia Garcia Pena, where they discuss "Community as Rebellion: Surviving Academia as a Woman of Color" a book by Lorgia García-Peña; where she mentions, "My proposal with this book is to think of community as an alternative to death, to the death sentence that is this individualistic racial capitalistic society that we live in." (YouTube, Pena, [00:11:18](#) mins.)

Peña centers the cultivation of spaces of belonging within the university as a system that offers an alternative to the structure that when originally designed did not account for women of color in higher education and therefore is structurally blind to the diversity and complexity of the women of color experience in the university. Within the book talk, conversation, the Scholars add, "The university is killing us. Our bodies are being sacrificed at the service of their "essential" project of diversity and inclusion. Beyond tenure, another hurdle scholars of color in academia particularly in the work in ethnic studies fields, is the assumption that if our work focuses on minoritized communities we happen to be part of (as Latinx scholars who are in Latinx studies), we are perceived as less serious and less scholarly." (2022, Peña 40)

The social discourse that discredits and devalues ethnic studies scholarship also influences and shapes the structural support of the discipline. In the interviews, La Xicana echoed the institutional positionality of the Chicax Latinx Studies discipline in relation to the Business major. She reflects upon the visible inequities in how the institution supports and uplifts the efforts of the various departments at the university. La Xicana mentions,

"-I grew up in Wine County, I saw what the rich kids were given. I went to school with them and because I was in the Business classes, I saw everything that they had. I was like, *wow, that must be nice, you know, having everything laid out for you to be successful.* Everything catered to them. And then, I would look at our CALS (Chicax and Latinx Studies) classes. And I was like what the fuck? You know, like we have shitty

²⁴ **Furia:** (ENG. Translation) Fury/ Rage

classrooms. We have shitty tech. We have some professors that are not prepared to serve us, to actually be advocates for us.” (2023 Platica 1, 37 mins.)

La Xicana draws between the differences among the disciplines and how that has influenced the perception of her pursuits and consequently influences the agenda of her activism. Demanding a quality education was incredibly motivated but the sentiments of being undervalued and underserved. As a matter of fact, La Xicana’s experience demonstrates how the university consequently imposes a definition and legitimacy of majors through the support and visibility given to the departments and scholar’s pursuits.

Community is integral to our survival as Women of Color in the Academy. Resilience and resistance comes at a cost, mental health, physical health, emotional wellbeing. Though these Mujeres carry a fire and fuerza ancestral²⁵ that lights their path and provides them with strength, through their experiences we understand the cost of fighting the battle. The Mujeres speak to the alienation experienced through their activist participation/ activism. La Xicana shares,

"Your qualities of being rebellious are not good because again, it comes with the baggage of the aftermath of people always wanting to push you away. Because you're bringing reality you want accountability and not everybody wants that. Not everybody is okay with that [activism or speaking against injustice] and some people are okay with tolerating shitty workplaces, shitty education experiences, you know, like they don't care. They've completely become complacent [stuck in a cycle of survival]." (2023 Platica, 41 mins.)

La Xicana echoes the reaction of the university in regards to the prominent force of activism. Similarly in Peñas book she shares the culture of complicity within the university and the weight carried by women of color scholar activists. Although Peña centers her discourse on women of color tenure and tenure track scholars, we find how these experiences are shared among students and professionals demonstrating the critical role of intergenerational communities of support and healing demonstrating the consequences of navigating the realm of higher education as first generation latina scholars.

Identity Consciousness: Cultivating Community and Self Love.

It is important to note how the relationship to the pursuits of the Xicana’s Scholarship impacts their self identity and developing consciousness. Through the Xicana’s experience we learn of the pressing motives to incite change and advocate for a quality education and academic opportunities. As a result she founded a MALCS Chapter²⁶, that focused on carving space in the university to acknowledge the experiences of women of color in the academy, building connections with networks of knowledge and serving to further their academic achievements.

Furthermore the experience of La Mujerista, connects to the development of student identity consciousness in reference to their student activist communities of support. Within her experience at Uva University La Mujerista centers her immigrant and queer identities. She

²⁵ **Fuerza:** (ENG. Translation) Ancestral Strength

²⁶ **MALCS:** Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (MALCS) is a professional organization for self-identified Chicana, Latina, Native American / indígena mujeres and gender non-conforming academics, students, and activists. Visit [MALCS.org](https://www.malcs.org) for more!

defines the ample necessity to build the visibility and the voice of the undocumented immigrant students in the university. During a time of prominent anti-immigrant, xenophobic policies, discourse, and sentiments, the importance of centering the undocumented immigrant student experience served to counter the national narrative of immigrant populations. Additionally to spotlight and bring to light the experiences of undocumented college students not only counters the national discourse, but centers the needs of undocumented students on campus. Undocumented student activism demonstrates the importance of identifying the complexity of the student identity. This serves to gain a better understanding of the social structures impacting their university experience and life of a scholar.

In the interview's the Mujeres acknowledge and center their parents experiences as immigrants and how they shaped their efforts in the university. They increasingly highlight the injustice upon the cost of their parents' sacrifices to endure a voyage that ensures their children a better, more fulfilling future. Refusing to survive through their "shitty [educational] experience" but rather cultivating their joy breaking cycle of survival. The Xicanas reflect on their struggle, and through their communities of support validate their resistance and fuel each other's resilience. Serving to expand on the complexity of the student experience, la Mujerista reflects on her experience as a queer chicana, bringing to light how the varying environments that a student navigates are not only tied to the university environment but also connected to the family structures. She reflects on the overwhelming, sickening environment of academia. In the course of her undergraduate career, she developed anxiety, leading her to contemplate leaving the university. When I asked La Mujerista, about the components that contributed to her taking action and she mentioned,

"After my first year I was given the choice to go back home, And so my parents, we're like 'Que si tanto like te esta haciendo daño'²⁷ like just come back home. We got you.' you know, so like I could've easily complied and stayed in that cycle [of survival]. And I left home for a reason. I knew I was Queer. I knew I was Gay. And I just knew I couldn't be gay at home. And so like i- I think that was the rage part that I always dismissed. Like why did I stay and fight? You know. Why did I add more fuel to that fire? And it's because I knew that if I went back home I was taking ten steps back and I was never going to be able to step into myself. You know. That part of letting myself into myself. And so I think that was a big component. Like *I can go back, I can choose to fight here, or I can choose to let this battle swallow me up.*" (2023 Platica 2, 16mins.)

La Mujerista describes the endured collective domination experienced by queer chicanas navigating the borderlands of identity. She describes the importance of communities of support and belonging to endure the social conditions. Having the opportunity to return home in the course of her undergraduate career, she chose to stay and remain connected to her network of support despite the debilitating university environment. She demonstrates her resilience and determination to complete her undergraduate career, in a moment of queer spirit connection and feeling the same traumas of navigating our circles of support, she mentions the toll of being resilient.

"I hear you and I see you and it's definitely a beautiful process [going through the motions of making a choice], I think like I wouldn't change anything about it. It's definitely made me who I am today but it's that resilient aspect that I hate, that people say

²⁷Que si tanto like te esta haciendo daño..: (ENG. Translation) If it's [school] harming you that much...

'oh you were so resilient during that stuff- time' and it's like no, I didn't have to fight so hard. Neither should you. Neither should many other people on the same boat. Why do we exhaust so much energy in just having to fight these systems? And it's that familial system, cultural system, the institution itself like, it's overwhelming and it's taking us out at a faster rate. And you know it was my students, it was myself, it was that rage that I had within myself. That I also hated myself during this time." (2023 Platica 2, 18 mins.)

La Mujerista speaks to the internalization of the violent systems within the university and social environments. She explains the socially programmed self hate, homophobia, in connection to religious conservatism she connects this with how it impacted her experience navigating the university and connecting with Activistas. She shines light on the internal struggle and the crucial role of finding and carving spaces of belonging.

"I always questioned myself, at that point in time I was like 'what am I doing? Why am I like this?' You know? And very- I grew up in a catholic household, always going to church and I would always be trying to pray my gayness away. – Being in higher Ed. and sharing that experience of praying my gayness away, it hits home because it's you know. It was myself. It was my students. It was some of my friends in like my inner circle that I hadn't–, most of us were queer, but I think we were all closeted, and I think that's what kept us together. Was knowing that we all felt the same feeling of alienation, and discrimination and not feeling like we belonged anywhere. Ni de aquí ni de allá²⁸, you know, we learn so much about the borderlands you know, and knowing that we don't belong at home, and we don't belong at school but we belong in this little house that we made, up here. [La Xicana and La Mujerista living together in a house with other Activistas] and that's where we felt the truest to ourselves, there was nothing to hide, there were no layers, it was just truly us just existing." (2023, Platica 2, 19 mins)

In her interview, La Mujerista centers her queer identity. Though she was not outspokenly queer at the time, she identifies the activist circles she had connected with either across campus/ campuses as her networks of support. She explains how within these activist communities, she felt empowered to live and fight for her authentic self.

" [In these spaces,] folks spoke about the *beauty of organizing and also the beauty of joy*. And that's something I didn't know. I can organize and be so angry but also experience joy. –It was seeing that there were these badass queer people organizing and finding a space for themselves on their campus. We know that everyday is a fight for us but we also know that we have that opportunity of the radical experience of joy. You know it was that aspect of reclaiming, and just knowing that I can also exist as a queer person on campus and just finding my own way to do it. Although I wasn't out I was finding ways to include those components. *How can we be mindful of inclusivity? How can we show solidarity without being out?*" (2023, Platica 2, 22 mins)

La Mujerista centers the radical joy and learnings that came from being involved in these activist communities. Her experience demonstrates how these activist networks are not limited to navigating the university but these communities expand further. These activist spaces are not only carving a space for themselves within the realms of the university but by nurturing that support system, they're carving that space for themselves in society.

²⁸ Ni de aquí ni de allá: (ENG. Translation) Not from here, or from there.

Radical Hope: Now, let's pay it forward!

It is an integral for women of color to build and find communities of belonging that serve in providing support systems and social capital to gain the inner world understanding of the dynamics of university. Together the Xicanas built on each other's experiences painting a picture of the campus climate that led to their activist work in establishing a MALCS Chapter and hosting a 5k fundraiser for scholarships, where they created their own spaces of belonging. Through their work they brought attention to the underrepresented and underserved student communities on campus. As a result, they cultivated a sense of belonging by countering the narrative that silence and downplay their existence. Through their loud activist voices, and reACTions the Xicana demonstrate *que aquí estamos y no nos vamos*²⁹. We refuse to just live in cycles of survival and just survive through the college experience, but instead we will cultivate a fulfilling one.

During her book talk Peña shares, "The goal of the book is not just to name and make visible this violence and to expose the university for what it is, a colonizing white supremacist elite institution of exclusion, I mostly write about possibilities about the ways that our collective intentional existence can indeed lead to revolution, to abolition and to rebirth." (YouTube, Peña, [00:12:30](#)) Furthermore, this research adds to the discourse by following the experiences of three Xicana Activist Scholars who depict first generation college experiences giving light to the environment of Uva University. We find how the legacy of exclusion has adapted to the ever changing social political environments continuing to impact the academic experiences of Xicanas, Latinas in higher education.

Due to institutional inability to adequately serve them, these Chicana Activistas took on roles to further nurture each other to flourish and thrive. Through carving spaces in the university, the Xicanas exposed their collective experiences of enduring colonial legacies of exclusion, traumas, and burnout imposed by the institution. Currently, all three Xicanas work in student service positions in higher education public institutions, in their interviews they point out how their present work is a product of their experiences as students navigating higher education. Their experiences of alienation and being underserved have given them a wider scope of understanding students' needs. Collectively the Xicana's experiences speak to the nurturing that takes place within the activist communities. Nurtured by professors, university faculty, staff, peers, community members they address how these activist communities serve to nurture more than their survival through their academic journey but helped foster their success. They nurture, you excel, you thrive and you bring people with you, you pay it forward.

In the interviews they reflected on their collective responses and actions noting that the consequences of not reACTing will always be worse than not acting at all. Refusing to settle with their painful, exhausting, and violent experiences, the Mujeres nurtured spaces of resistance fueled by radical hope for change and to gain a greater quality of life for themselves and generations to come. Following pursuits in student services building on their activist legacies and experiences, they internally support and uplift the experiences of students of marginalized backgrounds navigating higher education. Although this research focuses on a time period in which the hostility of the social political environment was fueled and encouraged by a racist, xenophobic, ableist presidential administration, the experiences of institutional exclusion in

²⁹ **que aquí estamos y no nos vamos:** (*ENG Translation*) that we are here and we're not going anywhere

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higher education continue to be fueled by the ever changing social political climate and legacy of the American Education system that has historically been structured to exclude low income, immigrant, Black, Indigenous, Students of Color.

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