

NAVIGATING EDUCATIONAL SPACES OF WHITENESS: LATINA/O STUDENT
EXPERIENCES AT PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

by

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Statement by Author

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Abstract

The alarming numbers of Latino/a students graduating from four year institutions continues to be low and while access has improved there still lies an issue in that the number of students graduating has not increased (Otero, Rivas & Rivera, 2007; Watkins, Labarrie & Appio, 2010; Jones, Castellanos & Cole, 2002) Latina/o undergraduate students are positioned in relation to the White dominant student population at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), which, in many ways silences their voices and thus maintains an educational space of Whiteness. The purpose of this study is to understand and highlight the experiences of Latina/os, particularly the ways in which they navigate through PWIs. *Testimonio*, a narrative of marginalization, has been recognized as a way to collect qualitative data from students. Through this genre and a Critical Race Theory and Latina/o Critical Race Theory framework, the author examines and shares student experiences to do what? (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012). *Testimonio* is used as a methodology to co-conduct a research process that engages the researcher, and 10 students as the participants to share educational experiences. Students positioned themselves as distant from the university and understood educational spaces of Whiteness to be spaces of financial access and white student serving. As such, Latina/o students navigate the spaces through community support and avoiding unwelcoming spaces throughout the larger institution.

Introduction

“You probably don’t even go here,” someone told my friends and I one night after having been out celebrating our accomplishment of being first generation Latinas about to graduate from a top ten university, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This comment stung, it pushed me to a state of anger, of frustration. Did this White girl even know what she was saying? Did she not think her comment could affect my friends and I? Because even as I made it to my last days at the University of Illinois, I was still perceived as being someone who did not belong on this campus, that my being was incapable of attending a university, much less graduating. This had not even been the first time I had heard someone say a comment like this before, but the fact that it had happened days before I walked on stage to receive my diploma made me question the campus I had walked through the last four years; how did I make it this far? How had I navigated these spaces that were not even made for me that constantly pushed students like me, out? How did I survive? These are some of the questions that follow me in my research on undergraduate Latina/o students at the University of Arizona (UA), a Predominately White Institution that reflects an educational space of Whiteness. This racial insult, intentional or not, communicated a hostile, derogatory and negative message that was an everyday encounter at the University of Illinois for my Latina/o friends and myself (Sue, 2010).

A comment questioning one’s position at a university is unsettling and after so many comments of “Where are you from?” “What are you?” and, “What kind of Latina are you?” this one had put me over the edge. Fortunately, though as a first generation Latina, I had my sister’s guidance through my first year, which assisted in my ability to navigate between spaces, people, and instances like the one I mentioned; and while I had discussed these comments with my sister

and friends, there was never really a space in which our stories were shared outside of these small relationship circles.

Growing up in in the suburbs of Chicago and attending predominately White K-12 schools, I often felt lost as a 3rd generation Chicana. I questioned the labels I had chosen to identify with and the ones society placed upon me including: Latina, *Mexicana*, White-washed and, sell out. These *identities* poked at me, belittled my own self-perception, and were difficult to make meaning of because they classified me as neither Mexican nor White, but somewhere in-between- I was in limbo. While I have grown up in predominately White spaces, I still find it difficult to navigate or understand my self-perception because of what society has viewed me as and other Chicanas.

Throughout my undergraduate career, I have often examined and reflected upon my identity as a suburban Chicana. It is important for me to recognize that it is the scrapes and scars from this navigation process, or strategies that I developed throughout my undergraduate career that supported my success to reach graduation. While at the same time this navigation process has continued to leave me frustrated of the inequalities that exist within educational spaces of Whiteness, yet optimistic of the possibilities to create change. Because of my personal experiences within Predominately White Institutions, I write this thesis for the sole purpose that students like me, may have their experiences validated. Like many Predominately White Institutions, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was made up of roughly 6% Latino, Students of Color in general making up less than 20% of the university during the time I attended, between 2010 and 2014 (University of Illinois, n.d).

In this thesis, I use the term educational spaces of Whiteness to refer to the ways in which “whiteness” is practices in the academic institution, such as, curriculum, faculty, student

representation, and overall “space”, physically and metaphorically. Within this study, I use educational spaces of Whiteness to refer to spaces that are predominately populated by those who identify as White and a space in which the dominant community is catered to (Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solorzano, 2009). More so, educational spaces of Whiteness refer to the spaces that Predominately White Institutions create and re-create Whiteness, in which the majority of students, faculty and staff population is White (Gusa, 2010).

Educational spaces of Whiteness focuses on a specific space of “whiteness”, in that educational spaces of Whiteness are different from other spaces of Whiteness like work space and/or community setting. This is not to say that these spaces cannot be educational spaces, however, educational spaces of Whiteness in this sense, refers to educational institution practices of institutional racism and color blindness. Color blindness, refers to the act of denying racial differences and experiences of people of color. It is, “an ideology by obscuring the institutional arrangements reproducing structural inequalities and does so in a way that justifies and defends the racial status quo” (Rodriquez, 2006, p. 645). I conceptualize educational spaces of whiteness as spaces that are created as a byproduct of society, which is historically colonized and white and has become instilled within the physical and metaphorical aspects of Predominately White Institutions.

PWIs are across the U.S. and depict a greater sense of how “whiteness” is represented in mainstream society. Using PWIs in this study allows for a deeper analysis of how Whiteness is not only represented but also created and re-created (Davila & de Bradley, 2010). I understand these spaces to depict inequality not only represented within the population, but the overall campus climate environment, curriculum and efforts to serve Students of Color on a greater scheme. An educational space of Whiteness also refers to a space like the University of Arizona

in which the student population is made up of over 53% White (University of Arizona, 2014-2015).

In order to theorize what a White space is means one must understand then how it is racialized, more specifically, how a physical space like a school is racialized (Barajas & Ronkvist, 2007). For example, educational spaces of Whiteness are not only physical but also metaphorical through meanings and ideologies that determine the relationship between social and academic experiences. In addition, spaces like Predominately White Institutions represent a space that “includes not only physical space but also the meanings and ideologies that mediate the relationship between social structures like the institution and members of society who attend and work in this space” (Barajas & Ronkvist, 2007, p. 1521).

The purpose of this study is to continue to understand the experiences of Latina/o students at the University of Arizona and highlight their voices and the ways in which they have navigated and continue to navigate through PWIs. Through *testimonio*, a personal narrative that involves a critical reflection of personal experiences, I argue that Latina/o students at the University of Arizona will be able voice their experiences of marginalization and create spaces that resist Whiteness, which will attest to the ways in which they navigate through educational spaces of Whiteness (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga & Flores Carmona, 2012). *Testimonio*, may then offer a metaphorical space in which their memories and experiences and other insights can depict the process and understanding of what it is like for a Latina/o to navigate or understand spaces of Whiteness. These *testimonios* will reflect on what it is like to be a student of color within a Predominately White Institution.

The thesis first lays out the literature on Latina/o students in higher education and the education pipeline and how educational spaces of Whiteness contribute to their educational

experience. I will then move into the theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Theory and Latina/o Critical Theory that have been used to discuss Latina/o educational experiences. I use *testimonio* as a methodology and critical tool to co-conduct a research process that engages myself as the researcher, and the students as the participants. Through this methodological approach, the co-conducted research is revealed through the educational narratives the students share. In this process, my research also works through a decolonial methodology which aims to push against the constraints of a Eurocentric research approach that exist within academia (Smith, 2012). A decolonial methodological approach to deconstruct the ways in which research has been carried out, which can also be depicted through *testimonio*. It is through this research process and the interactions with the students that critical conversations of navigation, spaces of Whiteness and *testimonio* are addressed. It should be noted that I use such theoretical frameworks for this study because they not only contribute to the literature that has already been done, but they each contribute to centralizing marginalized voices and experiences within higher education at Predominately White Institutions.

As such, my research questions guiding my inquiry are: How do Latina/o students narrate their educational experience at the University of Arizona? How do Latina/o students understand educational spaces of Whiteness? And, how do Latina/o students understand their memories and experiences within these educational spaces of Whiteness? These questions work towards an anticipated outcome of creating a support for students in recognizing that their stories are important within the educational confinements as a Latina/o student at the University of Arizona. I also hope that the *testimonios* may be used to work towards increasing retention rates within these institutions by understanding these students' experiences.

Within the literature review I will focus on the literature that supports the overall purpose

of my thesis; I will first discuss the current state of Latina/o students within the educational system, educational spaces of Whiteness and explore what an educational navigation process entails. I then discuss the common theoretical frameworks that are used; Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) are theoretical frameworks that derive from a social justice and critical law standpoint that has been situated to examine student of color experiences in education, among other topics. I use these theoretical frameworks to carry my research and co conduct a research process that situates the student voice at the center and to discuss the experiences of Latina/o students at the University of Arizona and their perceptions of educational spaces of Whiteness.

Literature Review

“From the time we were allowed to obtain an education in the same system as the dominant class and race, marginalized groups have been told that schools are vehicles to equal opportunity; schools have even been described as “the great equalizer.” The Latina/o population is by and large, you, and the erosion of equality in American schooling has hit it hard. However, the struggle for school equity for Latina/os has been coupled with a strong history of resistance rooted in community and grassroots organization” (Davila & de Bradley, 2010 p. 40).

Students of Color (e.g., African American, American Indian, Hispanic/Latino) continue to represent significantly lower numbers in retention and graduation rates within American universities and colleges. These numbers, as depicted through the Chicana/o educational pipeline which was first introduced by Daniel G. Solorzano (2005), has been used to understand and view the educational realities, patterns to ultimately create and transform experiences (Covarrubias, 2011). Though there has been progress in educational access over the last 40 years, Latinos continue to show graduation rates at a disproportionate level (Watkins, Labarrie & Appio, 2010; Jones, Castellanos & Cole, 2002). While students enter these University or College spaces, a majority of them will not graduate (Otero, Rivas & Rivera, 2007). It is evident that the “educational pipeline demonstrates that” Latina/o students “continue to be failed by American educational institutions at all levels” despite the progress in educational access by Students of Color (Covarrubias, 2011, p. 92).

To examine the educational pipeline it is necessary to explore this issue through specific student representation in academic trends of completion. Of 100 Latina/o students who enter elementary school, 10 will graduate with a Bachelor’s degree, 2 will earn a Graduate or Professional Degree and only 0.2 percent will graduate with a Doctoral degree (Covarrubias, 2011; Solorzano, Villalpando & Oseguera, 2005). This pipeline is depicted through a “2009 Supplement of the Current Population Survey” which continues to support that academic success

is an obstacle Latina/o students face, far beyond micro level issues.

Research suggests that Students of Color are not only “pushed out” of these spaces but that these educational institutions do not effectively support them. This act of institutionalized, systemic racism has the power to not be held accountable because it is practiced in many forms at PWIs, which more often than not, serve White students over the different students that make up the student population (Blair, 2008; Jones et al., 2002; Yosso et al., 2009). Scholars have researched and found that Students of Color face an array of challenges that impact not only their educational attainment but their well-being, this may be due to lack of support, space or campus climate, financial assistance among other issues which reflects the institutionalized racism that continues within Predominately White Institutions (Blume, Lavato, Thyken & Denny, 2012; Otero et al., 2007).

Although diversity is portrayed to be at the forefront for a positive educational experience and because institutions are not only encouraged but hold the responsibility of providing resources and services to all students, it is more than likely that these PWIs of higher education lack diversity in such aspects of not only representation of students but faculty, curriculum and cultural support as well (Jones et al., 2002; Yosso et al., 2009). As such, this exposes that institutions aim to create a climate space that “is conducive and reflective of the type of students needed to ethnically diversify higher education institutions” which overall serves the dominant student population (Jones et al., 2002, p. 20; Yosso et al., 2009).

Campus climate or the cultural, academic and overall environment of an institution affects the way in which students perceive themselves and are depicted by the institution itself (Yosso et al., 2009). Often, the racial environment also contributes to poor academic performance and high dropout rates for Students of Color. It becomes “a challenge that requires

managing and coping with psychological distress as they negotiate the campus milieu” (Jones et al., 2002, p. 20). Within these spaces, Students of Color often represent lower number of attendees while universities often proclaim that they are racially diverse and call for diversity. This adds to the racial environment that is depicted from afar as well as from student experiences. Predominately White Institutions or “historically White universities do not necessarily commit to providing equal access and opportunities for Students of Color” due to the continue practice of colonial roots that created the foundation of such universities (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 664).

Universities practice inclusion and diversity at some level, however, there is also an aspect that the greater university pushes back and does not support these efforts. If universities practiced what they claim, diversity, in every aspect (i.e., space, faculty, and students), then underrepresented and marginalized students would be treated as equals and supported equally the same as their White peers on their college campus (Yosso et al., 2009). However, due to the fact that this claim is often false as depicted through retention rates and student narratives, universities continue to practice diversity in all aspects to claim such an idea. PWIs are centered on serving the dominant White society that reflects “...whiteness is nowhere since it is unmarked and everywhere since it is the standard whereby other groups are judged” (Leonardo 2007, p. 263; Yosso et al., 2009). Whiteness in this sense is normalized, both hidden and reflected on a surface level within PWI’s.

Additional research suggests that Latina/o students face an array of challenges within University and College spaces in being classified with a minority status (Jones et al., 2002). Latino students within Predominately White Institutions experience “alienation, isolation, and stress” in relation to their White peers”(Del Pilar, 2009, pg. 266). These feelings contribute to an

understanding that these spaces were never meant for them as depicted through claims of “diversity”. In other words, these spaces were never created with the idea that people of color should or would receive an education, because of the racism that has been “embedded within a historical context of racial injustice and oppression” within Predominately White institutions (Watkins et al. 2010, pg. 26). Such acts and practices of inequality and injustices of discrimination and racism have thus been manifested within the institutions of higher education.

Educational Spaces of Whiteness

The University of Arizona represents an institutional presence within Tucson, Arizona, and at times falsely acts as if it is unaffected of impacts of race and racism. Sullivan (2006) argues, “space, race, and place are constituted transactionally such that space is raced and that bodies become raced through their lived spatiality” (p. 1). In other words, the UA uses its space to represent diversity and aims to distance itself from the impacts of race and racism. Further, Sullivan uses the idea of ontological expansiveness to describe the ways in which non-white, people of color live space in restricted ways, while white people tend to manifest spatiality in a different, racialized space that is unequal and non-reciprocal (Sullivan, 2006). Further, Sullivan (2006) looks at the racialization of space and spatiality through a term called ontological expansiveness, which argues that White people tend to overwhelmingly take over spaces in which they view as rightfully theirs.

Through an educational aspect, Gusa (2010) uses the term White institutional presence (WIP) to discuss the ways in which, within Predominately White Institutions, “white normative messages and practices are exchanged” and further express how the institution becomes a “fusion of White worldview, White supremacy, and White privilege” (p. 471). Gusa (2010) positions WIP within four aspects; White ascendancy, monoculturalism, White blindness, and

White estrangement. Each aspect refers to the behaviors, expectations and ideologies expressed in PWIs that create and maintain what Gusa names a WIP, “sources of hostile or chilly campus climates” or negative racial environment (p. 466). Both theoretical terms are important because each supports the understanding of an educational space of Whiteness.

From both Sullivan and Gusa’s argument, racialized spaces devalue and marginalize Students of Color through the participation and practices that these institutional spaces allow from within the institution that is continuously carried out and taught generation after generation (Sullivan, 2006; Gusa, 2010). It is through these theories that I conceptualize the term educational spaces of Whiteness, spaces that reveal the historical, physical, and metaphorical representations and manifestations of Whiteness within educational spaces.

Educational spaces of Whiteness portray the ideologies that have been created and recreated within history which overall aim to support the dominant White society (Davila & de Bradley, 2010; Yosso et al., 2009). In understanding that, spaces like PWI’s represent a space that includes physical spaces such as buildings and environment but also metaphorical ideologies and practices that in all reflect the relationship between social structures and institutions and, agents of society. A space of Whiteness is not only physical but also metaphorical. Campus climate for example is depicted through educational spaces of Whiteness because they are not only reflected through metaphorical space such as the history and everyday experiences of students who attend the university but also the physical space of location, building locations and overall spaces for Students of Color.

Because the dominant White society and its position within higher education, Whiteness is recreated because it is perceived as normal in these spaces. Cabrera states that Whiteness normalizing in education is depicted in the disproportionate high rates of representation of White

students who attend four-year higher education institutions (Cabrera, 2012). Overall, universities mirror the dominant society and work to educate students based on the ideologies and needs that better serve the dominant White class. In this aspect, not fitting into the dominant society places Students of Color as marginalized and invisible and hindered by oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Davila & de Bradley, 2010). It is not without understanding the exercise of power that one is able to understand the construction of Whiteness and its hold on higher education for Students of Color.

The United States in particular has resisted addressing racial issues and rather placed ‘band aids’ on them as to dismiss the discussion. Because Whiteness has become normalized, it has created a colorblind culture which challenges attempts to recognize and understand the different educational experiences Students of Color, which re-enforces existing inequalities (Blair, 2008). Whiteness signifies power and privilege; it is a social creation that “is an organizing principle which maintains the power or access to power and privilege of White people but is not necessarily” reflective of individual White people (Blair, 2008, p. 249). Thus, it should be understood that it is a social creation that has become integrated into different systems for example, the educational system. It is through these systems that policies and practices support and contribute to color blindness.

The color-blind ideology is a form of racism and institutional microaggression, and the act and practice of ignoring racial differences (Rodriquez, 2006) that perpetuates student identities as distant from their educational experience, however, they cannot be. One’s educational experience is made up of their identity and the different experiences they have coming into the institutional space and navigating it. This is related to understanding an educational space of Whiteness because the color-blind ideology does not recognize race, rather, the different

experiences that a student of color may have in such a space.

Educational spaces of Whiteness and Whiteness itself are depicted through campus climate as previously mentioned. Research has demonstrated that Students of Color are not completely included or considered within university curriculum, hiring of faculty of color, and campus spaces. In this respect, these practices continue to effect educational outcomes for students contributing to a lack of equal opportunity such as funding, inadequate mentorship, lack of cultural diversity and a non-inclusive campus climate (Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007), further supporting the notion that White students are at the forefront and priority of the university while Students of Color represent an added “sprinkle” of diversity. Other researchers, like Cabrera (2012) note that an institution’s stance on racism can include a centered and concentration of specific power represented through White administrators as well as the pedagogies practiced that neglect “teaching across racial differences” or that to even teach from such a “color-conscious” lens means understanding that race matters when understanding the experiences of Students of Color (Cabrera, 2012, p. 3; Leonardo, 2007, p. 272).

Yosso et. al., (2009) suggest that “the social construct of race shapes university structures, practices, and discourses from the perspectives of those injured by and fighting against institutional racism” (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 663). To recognize these structures, practices and discourses, it is then necessary to define the space, or campus climate that affects Students of Color. Latina/o students who attend PWIs in particular may experience a negative racial environment that has the potential to contribute to low academic performance, which then leads to high dropout rates (Yosso et al., 2009). A negative racial environment or hostile environment is created through the behaviors, practices and ideologies that are expressed and present in the campus climate.

A PWI, as a space of Whiteness creates a campus climate that is not welcoming to Students of Color and often, where forms of racism are confronted. Such a space continues to push students to experience feelings of isolation and underrepresentation (Del Pilar, 2009). Campus climate not only creates, but adds to the stress of not only being a student but a Student of Color for that matter because as a Student of Color, there is no escape from race and identity. “Specifically within PWIs, minority status stress may likely be the antithesis of White privilege within” a space of Whiteness. “Therefore, just as White privilege can be embodied in many shapes and forms, so too can minority status stress be experienced” further supporting that a Student of Color cannot be separate from their identity as a person of color (Jones et al., 2002, p. 23). Similarly, Cabrera (2012) notes that in order to move beyond tolerating racism through a color-blind ideology within the institution it is not only important but also necessary to recognize racism within the institution as systemic (Cabrera, 2012).

Navigating Educational Spaces of Whiteness

Within these educational spaces of Whiteness, students have learned to navigate individually or with the support of others (Yosso et al., 2009). Navigating can be understood to be a tool or a variety of strategies in which one is able to move and transform (Nayak, 1997). Navigating is a way Students of Color perform in order to make it through their day-to-day lives within a Predominately White Institution. These performances of navigation are similar to cultural memory in that they are linked to the memories of past experiences within these White spaces. Performance, as Taylor suggests functions “as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity” (Taylor, 2003, p. 2). Navigating in this sense works to support students’ memories and acts of navigation through Predominately White Institutions

through their personal interactions, peers or social networks, campus space, campus climate and classes.

Nayak (1997, p. 57) explores the negotiation and ‘practice’ of Whiteness and explores how Black students and teachers identify the normativity of Whiteness. By using a narrative method approach, Nayak explored how Black participants are positioned and negate the demands of White society. He states, “Black identities are inherently positioned in relation to White identities” thus pushing for individuals to respond to what is normalized in society, Whiteness (Nayak, 1997, p. 57). This can also be stated for those perceived and positioned as other[ed]. As described by Leonardo (2007), though Students of Color may participate in Whiteness, Whiteness benefits White students unconditionally (Leonardo 2007; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Research also suggests that within PWIs, there is a variety of support that further engages a Student of Color within such a space. Yosso et al. (2009), recognize that in order to survive, Latino students bring with them their cultural resources that allow students to create a bridge between White academia spaces and cultural knowledge. This allows students to navigate through educational spaces of Whiteness with the support of creating and building home-like spaces, relationships and a sense of community.

Within a study on “racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate for Latina/o undergrads,” Yosso et al., (2009) find that the navigation process does not begin without first going through different stages. These stages of “*rejection, community building, and critical navigation between multiple worlds*” further affect the Latina/o educational experience because of being other[ed] and could further be an explanation into why students retention and graduation rates are low (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 674). Latina/o students in this sense must learn a set of

survival strategies and skills to navigate between two worlds (academia and home) in order to overcome a variety of barriers.

Through this navigation process, there is a critical dynamic of resiliency created from the challenges that students endure at PWIs. Navigating through PWIs with the support of community, family, safe spaces and survival strategist, Latina/o students also gain resilience. As such, “interpersonal relationships and individual factors play a role in developing resiliency” (Cavazos, Johnson, Fielding, Cavazos, Castro, & Vela, 2010, p. 175). Resiliency, defined as a skill and one’s ability to survive adversity and overcome any challenging circumstances is part of one’s navigational process, which further supports students towards earning their degrees at PWIs (Cavazos et al., 2010).

Cultural Centers

Cultural centers are an example of a space that has been proven to provide support for students; they are spaces for students to build a sense of community (Yosso et al., 2009). Though not all PWIs have cultural centers, Jones et al., (2002) notes that though there may be a lack of support from the institution, cultural centers serve students in all aspects that are social, political, academic and any other needs the students may need at the university (Jones et al., 2002). Cultural centers, for many reasons, were fought for and developed from students’ academic, social and political experiences on campuses. Historically, these centers represent spaces of resistance and “paradoxically has been a site of Whiteness normalization and disruption” (Hefner, 2002; Cabrera, 2012, p. 2). As a cultural center on a PWI, it is a space for students to feel safe when the rest of the campus does not (Hefner, 2002). These centers assist in ensuring a sense of diversity for the University and thus, do not exist as a means to erase this idea that “whiteness” is non-existent (Hefner, 2002).

It is through these spaces, that dialogues of experiences are shared amongst the community of students and a sense of storytelling and *testimonio* emerges as another aspect of support. By hearing their own voices and those of others, the students become empowered participants within this shared community space (Yosso et al., 2009). Yosso (2005) has also written that this empowerment and space upholds what she calls ‘community cultural wealth’ which recognizes the knowledge that Students of Color contribute to educational spaces that come from their family, homes and culture (Yosso, 2005).

Theoretical Framework Guiding the Thesis

To examine marginalized experiences, scholars have used Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit). From these theoretical frameworks, scholars privilege the experiential knowledge of Students of Color as critical ways of knowing and recognizing them to also serve as a form of liberation (Fernandez, 2002). Both theories work together and are supportive of research and findings in the experiences of communities of color. Because these frameworks centralize marginalized voices and experiences, they challenge dominant narratives and ideologies of Whiteness, which like the White race is historically rooted in the idea of invention and practices of power (Allen, 1997).

Critical Race Theory is a theoretical framework that was created in the 1970’s; during a time when the civil rights movements were at their height and racial inequalities were discussed through various topics such as education, health care, employment access and community sanitation among others. From Critical Legal Studies and Radical Feminism, CRT was created to offer a different lens to look at the relationship between race, racism, and power, creating a broader perspective that looks into such topics of economics, history, context, group and self-interest, and even feeling and the unconscious (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 3). Though

initially, the Black and White binary was used, CRT eventually evolved into an umbrella in which branches were formed to focus on specific cultural and racial needs and differences. It is through these lenses that one is able to examine the complex and multiple ways that populations of color “experience, respond to, and resist racism and other forms of oppression” (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 662).

For my theoretical analysis within this thesis, I specifically draw on Critical Race Theory in Education because it provides conceptual tools to acknowledge, critique, and discuss educational experiences of Students of Color at PWIs. A CRT lens does more than look at the issues regarding education and inequalities among marginalized communities, it is also used to understand the social situation and transform it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Many scholars of color (Solorzano & Yosso 2001; Fernandez, 2002; Pérez Huber, 2009) have used this theoretical lens to examine Student of Color experiences within Predominately White Institutions and have continued to express the importance of the voices of Students of Color.

Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2012) discuss five elements of CRT as first, ordinariness to further explain the color-blind ideology, second, material determinism, third, social construction, fourth, differential racialization and lastly, the voice of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Similarly, Solorzano and Yosso (2001) use these 5 themes to form “perspective, research methods, and pedagogy or a critical race theory in education” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 472). To further examine CRT in education, Solorzano and Yosso (2001) focus on race and racism as a means to challenge the dominant ideology while maintaining a centrality to social justice and experiential knowledge to push for a transdisciplinary perspective.

1. The centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination
2. The challenge to dominant ideology

3. The commitment to social justice
4. The centrality of experiential knowledge
5. The transdisciplinary perspective

These themes are also reflected in the definition and goal of CRT which is,

“to develop a theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and pedagogical strategy that accounts for the role of race and racism in U.S. education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating other forms of subordination such as gender, class, and sexual orientation”. (Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado Bernal & Solorzano, 2001, p. 90)

Racism, as described by Delgado and Stefancic is more than an “unfavorable impression of members of other groups” rather, “for realists, racism is a means by which society allocates privilege and status” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 17). Thus, racism can be understood to be compared to or in relation to Whiteness, which is often understood to always be in flux based on race relations, which is reflective of societal and institutional power relations. Whiteness within U.S. society is depicted as not only valuable but always shifting (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Many CRT theorists believe that if racism is embedded within society and social structures then power and privilege become ordinary and normative, meaning that this works to “keep minorities in subordinate positions” within society routines, practices and institutions. In other words, “racism is pervasive, systemic and deeply ingrained” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p.89; Cabrera, 2012).

CRT sets out to not only understand these issues and challenges, but to transform them, CRT theorists believe that “only aggressive, color-conscious efforts to change the way things are will do much to” diminish inequalities because if not, we will continue to live in a society where “culture replicates itself forever and ineluctably (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 22; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p.89). In this respect, Leonardo (2007) argues that such consciousness first begins with the idea that race is important and matters (Leonardo, 2007). To recognize that race

matters is to also understand that the experiences of People of Color are important. In discussing these elements and the need they have to not only understand but also transform injustice.

Davila and de Bradley (2010) argue that LatCrit looks further into the social and legal positioning of Latina/os in the United States (Davila & de Bradley, 2010; Fernandez, 2002). Yosso et al., (2009) also argue that while focusing on the positioning of Latina/os, LatCrit accentuates on intersectionality of class, race, citizenship etc. (Yosso et al., 2009). While LatCrit was developed from CRT, it is important to note that the frameworks “are not separate from one another or “mutually exclusive”; rather, LatCrit builds as a “natural outgrowth of critical race theory” (Yosso et al., 2001, p. 99). Together they support and recognize the similar experiences of oppression and subordination while also recognizing how they are different (Davila & de Bradley, 2010).

Fernandez (2002) notes that LatCrit incorporates a set of four functions: “(a) the production of knowledge, (b) the advancement of transformation, (c) the expansion and connection of struggle (s), and (d) the cultivation of community and coalition” (Fernandez, 2002, p. 47). Though slightly different from the elements of CRT, LatCrit similarly serves to challenge, transform and examine how race and racism explicitly impact the structures, processes, and discourses that effect Latinos, in this aspect, educationally (Solorzano & Yosso, 2011, p. 479). Therefore, in specifically using CRT and LatCrit, student voices are centralized through their *testimonios*, or personal narratives.

Centralizing Student Voices through Testimonios

Because these theoretical frameworks challenging dominant ideologies and place value on Student of Color experiences, I use them to look at the student *testimonios* to express the ways in which their narratives have not been centralized within Predominately White Institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). *Testimonios* are personal narratives of marginalized voices, as

such, the educational experiences that the students have shared with me are their *testimonios*. Additionally, *testimonios* assist students to push against the margins, revealing resistance and resilience for social justice transformations and hopeful changes within the Latino community (Peréz Huber & Cueva, 2012). *Testimonio* further enhances theoretical frameworks like CRT and LatCrit in that they support and emphasize the Student of Color educational experience (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Fernandez, 2002). In this sense, *testimonio* can be used as methodology to allow Students of Color a space to recall memories that they have experienced within PWIs. They can be used to “reveal both the oppression that exists within educational institutions and the powerful efforts in which Students of Color engage to challenge and transform those spaces” (Peréz Huber & Cueva, 2012, p. 392). *Testimonio* can align these theoretical frameworks because of the value to emphasize Student of Color educational experiences through narrative and counterstories.

I specifically use the term *testimonio* over testimony or interview to give a sense of ownership and belonging to those who share their experiences with me. *Testimonio*, rather than testimony or interview is recognized as a personal story, experiences of individuals whose voices are often unheard, voices of the marginalized. As a graduate student, it is my privilege to be able to share these stories, these *testimonios* of Latina/o students at the University of Arizona who have experienced racism, exclusion, empowerment and resiliency within such space of Whiteness. It is my hope that through these *testimonios* students will reflect on their memories and experiences and other insights that can then assist myself, future researchers, community members and other Students of Color in understanding what it is like for a Latina/o student to navigate and understand spaces of Whiteness as well as express the ways in which these *testimonios* support students in these spaces.

This study is important because much of the research that looks at Latina/o students in higher education suggests that Latina/o students face an array of challenges within university and college spaces, more specifically Predominately White Institutions, yet their stories and experiences are not always accessible, visible and willing to be heard. To add to this literature and further create a metaphorical space for Latina/o students at the University of Arizona, I find this work important for the well-being, identity and overall educational experience of Latina/o students. Additionally, this work is not only important due to the current events that have sprung this year at PWIs (e.g., MIZZOU, White Student Unions, University of Arizona Student Demands, Illegal Pete's at U of A), but that these issues continue to be hidden and discussed only within the spaces Students of Color create. This thesis also aims to bring light the current and continued issues Latina/o students face at the University of Arizona in hopes that the administration and those in power may work to make changes to create safe and welcoming spaces for all student, and not just the dominant White student population.

In the following section I will describe the methodological framework that I use and the ways in which it supports this research. Through this section I unveil the lenses that further support *testimonio* as a methodology such as decolonializing methodologies, which aim to push away from Eurocentric research ideologies that separate themselves from those sharing their personal stories. Following the research design, I will then discuss the institution, the participants of the study, procedures and data analysis.

Methodology

Research Design

Testimonio is a genre that is deeply rooted in oral cultures and storytelling, which has been used to expose and centralize the voices of human rights struggles. Further, this genre aims to expose injustices, disrupt voices that are silenced, and build solidarity among Students of Color (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). In education, *testimonio* is used as an “activist approach to social justice,” which I have strived to create and recreate within this study (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 363). As such, *testimonio* offers a deeper understanding of the challenges students face at PWIs and situates them in relation to “collective experiences marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance” (p. 363).

Using *testimonio* as a methodology (Peréz Huber, 2009), I used qualitative research to emphasize and create a space for the voices and experiences of Latina/o students within a Predominately White Institution. This study seeks to validate and provide a space, figuratively, to those students whose stories; experiences and voices are often not heard. As such, I met with 10 undergraduate students and recorded their *testimonios* and experiences navigating educational spaces of Whiteness using *testimonio* as a methodology. The study successfully created a space for students to share and reflect on their identity as Latina/o students at a Predominately White Institution.

Testimonio as a methodology is a powerful tool used to document how institutions reflect the educational experiences of students (Peréz Huber, 2009). While I understand *testimonio* to be a powerful space of story of an individual’s experiences, I also agree with Peréz Huber’s definition (2009) as “a verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and

advocacy for a more humane present and future” (Peréz Huber, 2009, p. 644). It is this definition that I believe holds a significant piece in this research process as students share their educational narratives and feelings of what it like to be at the University of Arizona as a Latina/o student.

In using *testimonio* as the methodology for this study, I also reflect and value the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith. Within her book (2012), she “identifies research as a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other” (Smith, 2012, pg. 2). This thesis represents a bridge between the institution and Students of Color as it seeks to bring student experiences to the forefront when discussing educational spaces of Whiteness and PWIs. However, I also see my research study as being problematic in the sense that research is part of academia and I am still working under the confinements of the institution. As such, I also recognize that through this research, I have sought to work from a decolonized perspective by placing the voices of the marginalized at the center and use my study as an opportunity to work with the students who participated through the follow up interview.

Through this perspective, I believe that there is a ‘power of *testimonio*’, and power in story that is able to connect people in a way in which one is able “to bear witness to experiences and struggles of those beyond our own realities” (Peréz Huber, 2009, p. 648). These narratives are of the past and thus, powerful spaces that though may have been marginalized also have the potential to become spaces of hope and resistance (Smith, 2012). A space in which students are able to share, critique, and analyze the knowledge of how it is constructed and depicted within Predominately White Institutions (Smith, 2012). Therefore, this study is for the students who participated; it is a form “of ‘writing back’ or ‘talking back’” (Smith, 2012, p. 8). It works as a way for both the participants and myself to recover ourselves within this process of reflection

through *testimonios*. Using these theoretical frameworks of methodology, it is my responsibility to place the voices of these students at the center of analysis (Fernandez, 2002).

This study will highlight, expose, and illuminate Latina/o student experiences in higher education as a means to support other students who may be facing similar educational experiences at Predominately White Institutions. Focusing on Latina/o Student experiences in a space like the University of Arizona opens a door for conversation that has often been difficult to present outside of the student community. Such a thesis provides support for students and the University of Arizona to bridge the issues and injustices students face and express in hopes of addressing and eliminating them.

Institution Site

The University of Arizona is a Predominately White Institution. It is a 4-year institution that serves over 30,000 undergraduate students with about 8,000 identifying as “Hispanic” or Latina/o undergraduate students in the 2014-2015 school year. This past spring (2015) only 1,349 or 21% of students, who identified as Latino, were awarded undergraduate degrees of the 6,370 total. This number is problematic due to the fact that the University has made clear efforts of admitting Latina/o students but lacks the effort to retain and graduate them. Students of Color make up roughly 36% of the total undergraduate student population, further illustrating the University as a Predominately White Institution, for the purpose of this study, I focus on the total population of “Hispanic” or Latina/o students (University of Arizona, 2014-2015).

Participants

Participants were recruited through October- March 2016 from several spaces and networks across the U of A campus; the Guerrero Student Center (Latina/o Cultural Center), the United Sorority and Fraternity Council (USFC), and a list-serve through the Mexican American

Studies Department. Flyers were posted at the Guerrero Student Center and shared through the list-serve. In person announcements in spaces like the Guerrero center and USFC meetings were also given as a means to recruit participants. All announcements, flyers and emails included information regarding the study and its purpose, and invited Latina/o students interested in participating.

The students recruited in this study were based on the ways in which they personally identified, Latina/o, Hispanic, and Chican/o, as well as academic levels of Junior and Senior within the University of Arizona. A total of 10 students who identified as Latina/o, Chicana/o, and Hispanic participated in the study. These students fell between the ages of 18 to 24 years old and were enrolled in the University as Junior and or Senior standing. Four of the 10 participants were Juniors and the rest were Seniors.

Of the 10 students, 2 were male and were both first generation students, however, of the two, one student identified as a transfer student from a community college near Phoenix, Arizona. A total of 2 of the female students also identified as transfer students and ranged from 21 to 24 years old with one having Senior status and the other Junior. In all, majority of the students were first generation students. It should be noted that while these students carry different identities, I felt their *testimonios* to be important to share and that they all contribute knowledge and understanding. It should also be noted that of the students who participated, majority of them have taken classes in Mexican American Studies which further shapes the politicized nature to their reflections.

Procedures

Upon agreement to participate in the study, the students scheduled a time and date in which *testimonios* would be recorded; this was done in person and through email. Prior to the interviews, I offered students coffee from the local coffee shops of CeCe's and Starbucks on

campus, this allowed for time to talk and get to know one another, also creating a time in which I was able to share my personal experiences with them. This process set the tone for a transformational process that assisted in further developing a mentorship relationship with the students. *Testimonios* and follow-ups took place during the time of recruitment and thereafter, from October through the beginning of April. Prior to sharing their *testimonio*, I went over a written consent form with the students which outlined the specific needs of the research, what the research entailed, protection of their information as well as a section that explained withdrawal from study and what that would entail as far as their personal and *testimonio* information.

In an effort to not disclose my personal knowledge of specific terms, I gave each student a document with all of the questions. It was during this time that they were able to ask questions for any clarifications, some, showed preference to discuss them during the recorded *testimonio* which gave them added time to reflect on the questions. In addition to the process, if students did ask for clarifications I made sure to give as little of an answer as possible. As such, I gave responses that did not disclose my own personal understanding but rather the way in which literature has defined or used certain terms in a few words.

The *testimonios* were conducted in the private rooms that were reserved at the University Main Library and the Mexican American Studies Department conference room to ensure issues of confidentiality. Further, pseudonym's were used instead of their real names to keep their identities private. This allowed for the students to feel a sense of comfort and safety for sharing their experiences. The *testimonios* lasted anywhere from 25 to 70 minutes. With each student, I was able to then continue a conversation after the initial *testimonio* sharing and create an open space of sharing and empowering through stories and experiences. This added time further supported a mentoring relationship, which created a space of educational and cultural exchange.

By taking any extra time they had to talk with them on a personal level, before and after the initial *testimonio* sharing, I was able to build trust with them, which each of them shared after the entire process was over

After recording the *testimonio* and transcribing with Express Dictate, I emailed the students the transcription and gave them the opportunity to look over the transcript and add, delete or keep the *testimonio* the same. Upon reviewing the *testimonio*, I arranged a follow-up meeting to go over the transcription and to discuss any clarifications. This is a process of *testimoniando* or co-constructed process was used to maintain the student voices, in which their *testimonio* would not be understood, spoken and written for. This process offers an opportunity to co-construct knowledge with them (Peréz Huber, 2009). The *testimoniando* or follow-up took approximately 30 minutes to an hour based on the student.

There were no monetary costs for the students to participate; their time and willingness to share their stories were all that was asked. It took approximately 1-2 hours to finish the first *testimonio* and follow-up which occurred within the course of a month, or 4 weeks for each student. However, due to University closure, midterms and finals as well as other academic and extracurricular activities, some follow ups occurred after this time.

There were no risks exceeding minimal risk to the participants. The only possible risks were due to students sharing their personal narratives of their experiences, this was in the form of psychological and social risks. The probability and magnitude of these risks were low and were expected to develop within the process of the research time as the student shares their story and experiences that may or may not be traumatic to their understanding of their educational experience. As preventative step to minimize any psychological or social risks, I provided each

participant with a campus resource sheet that includes mental or psychological support available at the University of Arizona.

Data Analysis and Findings

Theme 1: Educational Spaces of Whiteness is the University of Arizona

“Ironically, very white. Very white, it’s like the white spot in a historically, traditionally Hispanic/ native area. It’s very structuralized and it’s only catered for a certain amount of students, and not even Arizona students, I feel like its not even catered to us. I don’t know who was joking says, ‘this is pretty much California’s dump, for like white rich kids’, so that’s how I see it as, it’s bad but yea.” – Flor

Educational spaces of Whiteness were perceived through a metaphorical ideology for the students who participated in my study. These spaces not only represent the University of Arizona but the educational system and what it has created within Predominately White Institutions. Students understood this space through its representation of everyday encounters and experiences, which they felt they did not identify with. For many of these students, this university is a different experience for Latina/o students compared to their White peers. It is a space that reflects hierarchal status and superiority, financial and class differences and as stated in the above quote by Flor, a false representation of the land and location it is in. Her statement not only speaks to the current state of the University but the historical and geographical reflections that the University maintains.

The students reflected upon their own experiences to understand what the University of Arizona meant within this context of an educational space of Whiteness. As a Latino, Marcos expressed educational spaces of Whiteness as spaces where other cultures were not accepted, understood or placed in the curricula. He takes this argument further when he discussed his academic experiences, “I guess certain or from what I heard or kinda what I experienced, certain professors are, kinda like play that superiority rule. That whites are dominant, that they’re best. It’s them above every skin color”. Similarly, Marisa views these spaces as a hierarchy and competitive, “... this weird competitive nature too like, ‘let me step on all these other people so I

can climb up this ivory tower.’ In this sense, the students’ experiences within academia greatly portray the hierarchal and superiority differences Latina/o students feel within these spaces.

From these experiences and understandings, educational spaces of Whiteness are very much represented within academic classroom spaces, curricula and institution. For both Marisa and Marcos, there is a sense that these spaces are also spaces in which behaviors and practices of hierarchy and White supremacy are displayed and are accepted as a part of the institutional infrastructure. It should be noted that though White supremacy is a belief that the white race is dominant, it is perpetuated through colorblindness (Leonardo 2004). In this respect, Monica and Mark’s experiences reflect an alarming statement about the University and its continued practices of Whiteness.

Another aspect students’ focused on as a means to define an educational space of Whiteness were financial and class differences. Noelia, a first generation student who comes from a low-income family spoke about her financial experiences in relation to the University, “... it has to do a lot with who can afford it and who can’t, who can be here, who doesn’t have to worry about it.” Who and who is able to afford to attend the University was perceived as a privilege when students like Noelia, felt that they had to “work twice as hard and they have to give up a lot more” because of not facing the same challenges of what one is able to afford being a student at the University. Thus, these spaces are identified as spaces of affordability and access to education. Of the Latina/o students that I interviewed, 90% were first generation students, who worked and involved in their communities and, similar to Noelia, came from predominately low-income families. However, as a university that values education through financial and White student access [a PWI], the University of Arizona is problematically located in a state that is 118 miles from the border of Mexico.

Located in Tucson, a Southern Arizona city, it is not much of a surprise to the students as it is frustrating, that the university should represent the population that it is surrounded by geographically. This aspect of representation in relation to geography is important to consider because it counter argues the idea that diversity is one of the University's values (<http://neversettle.arizona.edu/#url=mission>). Further arguing this standpoint, Juan notes that,

“In Arizona in particular, there is a very high population of Hispanic people, I know people who are definitely smarter than me, and they are not here...other schools, K-12 are primarily Hispanic [in Tucson] and they don't come for some issue or another, if the U of A is surrounded by Hispanics here but only let in white ones, its not the real majority, it's a false representation.”

Juan's understanding of the geographical location of the UA and the demographics of the university and surrounding area greatly expresses the hypocrisy that exists. His *testimonio* expressed a critical analysis of the institution because of his commitment and involvement within the Cultural Center and Latino community. From his statement, in addition to the remarks by Noelia and the other students, an educational space of Whiteness aims to support White students rather than the students and community it is surrounded by. Such a space reflects the idea that the majority is White and should be maintained as such in different aspects of representation, for example faculty, staff and students. As Latina/o students, many of them recognized and were able to distinguish the differences in representations across campus spaces. Emilia spoke of educational spaces of Whiteness from an academic standpoint noting the lack of student, faculty and staff of color representation,

“Well most of the professors here are white, most of the advisors, in a lot of the departments, especially the sciences, are white. I think also in like classes, you see most of the students are of like an Anglo decent of some kind. I think if you're not in like a smaller department, like MAS or any of the others, like African American Studies or like even Spanish, you don't see a lot of people of color in your classes.”

In the quote above, Emilia voices her awareness of the university campus and the lack of Color [people of] that exists. Through their experiences and definitions of educational spaces of Whiteness, the students' *testimonios*, highlighted metaphorical and physical understandings of what these spaces mean in relation to their being. Educational spaces of Whiteness are spaces that represent spaces of race and class differences, as perceived by the students. They are spaces that reflect status and the lack of representation that exists at an institution of higher education located 118 miles from the U.S.-Mexico border. In the following subsections, I use their *testimonios* to support the ways in which their understandings of educational spaces of Whiteness are examples of metaphorical and physical representations.

Metaphorical Representations of Whiteness

Though metaphorical representations of educational Spaces of Whiteness were reflected in various ways from the Latina/o students who shared their experiences, common themes were lack of representation, and access to knowledge in relation to ideologies and language. Each theme was reflected through academic and social experiences, which proved “the education here kinda caters to an immediate lack of other ethnicities and cultures” as Juan, stated. Further, as Adalia states, “everything is from a White perspective...the American perspective. Which we kind of understand to be just the White perspective”. In this sense, Adalia, like Juan, understand the University, as an educational Space of Whitesness to serve the dominant White student body. Which, further illustrates common educational experience for Latina/o students as not personal, but rather distant from their cultural and ethnic identities. Which, negatively assisted in some of the students expressing their educational narratives as difficult, “...difficult in the sense of feeling like I don't belong” as blatantly described by Noelia.

Representation is not only reflected within classroom settings but also through recruitment flyers that openly expose the student representation at the university. Because as Juan notes, “if you ever look at, like the pamphlets for the U of A, like official website pamphlets, stuff like that, very rarely do you [they]... they’ll make sure to show one person from a different minority or something, but what’s all around, its mostly white people”. Juan’s depiction of representation is reflected within his experiences to be conscious of the ways in which the university recruits. Latina/o students experienced this setting more frequently than not. For a few however, this was not an experience within academic spaces and classes taught by faculty in the Department of Mexican American Studies.

These experiences reflect the lack of cultural and identity representation are not only carried out within classroom settings and University recruitment material, but also within the continued ideologies of Whiteness that are taught and retaught as expressed by both Marcos and Juan, “...to me I guess it means that everybody has a wide variety of opinions, and... it just so happens that here, there’s more of an opinion of one view than other views”. Similar to Juan’s perspective, Marcos understands this to be a spectrum of whiteness where, “... this one spectrum of just you know, I guess whiteness that they [white people] don’t understand the struggles ...of Latinos and Latinas, African Americans, Native Americans”. Through these responses, it is evident that an educational space of Whiteness is perceived as ideological practices of Whiteness and a sense of erasure of the “other.”

As an institution of higher education, the university’s mission is to support all students, however, from the students’ *testimonios*, support was limited as discussed in their first experiences at the UA. As Marisa’s says,

“That language barrier is so, such an obstacle, it’s critical, and that goes back to my mom being here and I’ve had to translate for her a lot of times, and I think that’s were a lot of

that, how, why I was upset, like, are you kidding me? I'm coming to college and I'm still having to do that, and that shouldn't be a responsibility that falls on the children of Latino families, or you know, adolescents. And it's, again the institution kinda saying you don't belong here, or you have to work 3 times as hard just to be in this space."

Marisa's example of an educational space of Whiteness suggests the lack of support that the university practices when inviting and recruiting Latina/o Students and their families. Though it is the university's responsibility to ensure a sense of support and success for students, it is clear that the university is not upholding this. For students to feel distant from this space further expresses the challenges and the ways in which they feel excluded.

While an aspect of language is expressed through Maria's experience, language should also be accounted for in the classroom space and the ways in which it is used to teach and educate students. For Alondra, a senior in elementary education, she faced many experiences were words like "illegal" and "green card" were used to describe a family in a children's book. While she described these unfortunate experiences as common, they still triggered her emotionally. From these experiences, she stated "unfortunately they [the White students] don't see it as a problem". Even though there were a few instances where the professor was able to step in and note the problematic language, Alondra felt that not many professors do and thus words like "illegal" and "green card" become normalized, when in fact they are "dehumanizing".

Physical Spaces of Whiteness

"With the arch and the gates towards Old Main, it was just really strange seeing that, it was very intimidating. And then now, like when I walk towards the Union and seeing how commercial it is sometimes, and walking through the book store and seeing all these products for school spirit that I can't even afford and a lot of this consumerism going through ...its really strange..." - Marisa

For many students, the Student Union was a common site that represented class and race differences. In the quote above, physical space illustrates the literal financial costs of the university and for the students attending. The Student Union reflected the White student

representation in relation to class, as Emilia notes, "...most of the workers there are People of Color, it's not really like the White students that are using a work study and stuff like that". Additionally, Noelia, also recognized the difference in this space stating, "... I just don't feel like I belong there 'cause there's not a lot of people that look like me and there's not people I feel like I can approach". Thus, the students find a space, like the Student Union, which is a common, large building located in the middle of the mall, to be unwelcoming and uninviting in relation to their identities as women of color and experiencing financial differences compared to the White students they spoke of. It is through these *testimonios* that the university is represented as a physical space of financial access.

Physical spaces like the Student Union highlight the student representation that the students witnessed. This central space, located off of the mall of the university, showcases the imbalance Latina/o students feel. It is not only within the Union, but other university spaces that these differences are seen.

"The U of A is super huge. So even if you're not in the class your still in that entity of being in a class room space, or like an education space, it's still mainstream White students."

Marcos' perspective, for example, explicitly supports the argument that diversity, though apparent in official University statements, is not reflected on the actual campus. Flor also acknowledges this noting, "you only see one kind of majority group here". Diversity, physically, is more visible through the cultural centers. However, the spaces allocated for them are small and crowded. In reference to Latina/o students, Marisa states "... even the very little spaces that we have and resources for Latino students like, we're like barely making it". Within her *testimonio*, she discussed the lack of support from the university and that the support Students of Color receive is primarily from the cultural centers, a physical space that houses, cares, feeds and

supports students more than the University at many times. It is this physical space that makes all the difference in the University, so much that for when Marisa leaves the center she prepares, "...I don't know mentally, physically to leave this space, leave these doors and like leave this warmth and sense of belonging to the rest of the university" that she spoke of as unwelcoming. It is within and surrounding physical spaces of Whiteness that students like Marisa must prepare and navigate day to day as Latina/o students attending a PWI.

Theme 2: Navigating Educational Spaces of Whiteness

Guerrero Center and Community Support

Cultural centers are a site of support as perceived by the Latina/o students who participated in my research. In particular, the Guerrero Cultural Center is a space that students, like Juan continued to return to, stating, "I have made the majority of my friends through being there" and because of this strong connection, became a site of comfort. The Center, previously known as "Chicano/Hispano Affairs at the time. That's kinda where I found my little sense of home" as Marisa and other students noted. Support was made through the community built within this Center that reflected the cultural aspects of home, for example, language. As described by Evelyn, this space allowed for language to run freely, "walking around campus I hear English and at the cultural center you hear English, Spanish, Spanglish. It is a place to feel comfortable, [where you] don't see the difference as much". Navigating the university space, the Guerrero Center provided students shelter [physically and metaphorically] along their journey.

This site of "home", for many of the students is a space of inclusivity, by the end of her first year Noelia was introduced to the Guerrero Center. Though she noted feeling "excluded" within the University, she expressed that upon finding it that was the place she went. Now, as a senior, when she does come to campus, this is one of the first spaces she makes her way to,

noting that, “when I do come to campus like today, my first thing is to go to Chavez... its obviously because I feel safe there and I feel like I don’t feel the same way anywhere else”. The Cultural Center and the people there posed as a comfortable space for both Noelia and Mercedes and though the lack of support from the institution continued to fuel frustration they understood this space to be important. As an active student in the current student demands movement, Mercedes discussed the support that Cultural Centers give to students,

“That was like my biggest wakeup call that they [the University] don’t truly care about minority students. Because it’s like if you really did care you would realize these are the safe places. And this is where they go to study and what helps them continue on. Helps the retention rate, helps the graduation rate.”

As a center of empowerment and safety for Latina/o students, the Guerrero Center supports students individually and collectively through the student organizations that they serve. Latina/o Greek life and organizations like M.E.Ch.A (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) are like the Cultural Center, spaces where students feel emotionally supported and where the cultural center houses them. All of the students who shared their *testimonios* are a part of Latina/o organizations, which assist them in their process of navigation. Emilia, a member of a Latina Greek organization, spoke strongly about her relationship to her sisters and the community she has built through this experience. She states, “Joining my organization, let me have these friendships that make the UA a more comfortable space to be in for me”. For her, and many of the students, Latina/o student organizations built a community within small and large numbers and supported students across the Latin/o community at the UA.

It is through these relationships and “sense of community” as Flor says, that supports this process of navigation because there is “not as much diversity as there should be”. These spaces become home and families away from their prospective homes. While many have family support, many of the Latina/o students who shared their *testimonios* did not have family in

Tucson, further expressing the need of within safe campus spaces like the Guerrero center and cultural organizations.

Strategies of Survival

Community was a strong theme that motivated the students to navigate, challenge and resist the spaces that they did not define as a safe space. Community was defined in many aspects as family, professors of color, organizations and overall, welcome spaces. Navigating through the university was perceived in relation to their identities. As Marisa shares, navigating within the university is like fitting into a mold, its "...navigating two spaces...being a Chicana and a woman and all of that and umm, I think its like a continuum that I'm going to constantly have to face". Similarly, Noelia, references a similar theme stating, "...being a first generation Student but of Color was hard". In this respect, navigating for Latina/o students is in reference to academics, the institution space itself, ideologies and their identity and culture that they work to maintain and or shift within these challenging walls.

From these experiences and ideas of navigating different identities, many students like Noelia, developed strategies of survival by building community and avoiding spaces where they felt isolated an un-included. Marcos, for example expresses this feeling more so when in academic spaces saying,

"I've just been that person that's just in the space. I just trying like, let me go to class, let me do my work and just get out of it as soon as possible. It's kinda like almost you're looking at the clock and wishing it to like, hurry up and run out of time so you can get out of the area and kind of be somewhere where you're welcomed."

This feeling of exclusion, for many pushed them to think of their own family and community and how they would feel within this space. They expressed the frustration of navigating their identities, culture and language within an educational space of Whiteness and the fear they had for generations to come.

“I’ve always told myself like, “oh, I want to encourage you know, the rest of my family and community members to be here” but I’m also fearful, like you know, what are we getting them into, like it’s very scary and like how do we begin to have those conversations ... Do they [other Latina/o students] even realize how hard it is to get to [through] the college environment and space? I was pretty conscious of that early on like I was learning like, hey this is pretty hard like, and I was beginning to question like, why doesn’t my family know about this? Or like Why are my peers in the same situation? It wasn’t until being here that [I] learned that these things are *not* normal like they become normalized but that they are injustices and they are forms of marginalizing people, so yeah, that’s how I understand it here [at the University].”

As Marisa states above and within her *testimonio*, her family and educational space become a site of navigating two spaces. She continues in her story expressing frustration with wanting her family members and other Latina/o students to come here, but also her feelings of confliction because this has been an uneasy space.

Theme 3: Space, race, and education on the lines of marginality

“What do my experiences mean to the U of A?”

“Umm, I think they [her experiences] just mean that they [the University] don’t understand and won’t understand. They won’t understand what its like to not fit in and I feel that they’ll never take it into consideration unless we become the majority, unless we really voice what we need, what we want.” -Noelia

Similar to Noelia’s understanding of her experience as misunderstood, Flor commented on her realizations once coming to campus, “...I noticed some voices of being shut down like from the cultural centers, once I started to get involved on I started realizing it”. From both perspectives, it is clear that students need to voice their opinions to make changes, yet there is a disconnect in those voices actually being heard by the university. Within both of their *testimonios* they speak of the idea that their experiences are not important to the university unless they are a financial asset. When asked what their experiences mean to the UA, 90% of the students replied saying to them, like Juan, “they mean everything”, but to the University,

“...I don’t really think it matters as much, I guess. If I’m not like an all star or something, but it doesn’t really matter as much. Or, if my opinions are just too different, well they

just gotta like chop that off and go back to whatever ideal is and since this a predominately Caucasian institution they stick to the predominate collective ideal.”

As Juan notes above, his experiences and opinions are less valued in the university’s eyes compared to the “predominate collective [White] ideal”. Latina/o student experiences though important to them and their communities, seem un- important to the university that is supposed to serve all students stating, “...if you don’t make a name for yourself to the university, you’re a number” or “...we aren’t like as high of a number I guess, and I think sometimes, to the bigger institution itself, it’s more of these are the numbers, these, not necessarily like people, its just numbers” were common statements that students gave. Flor, for example related this understanding saying, “it’s all about money and politics and how many students they get to come in here, and how many students they get the money for it and funds”. So, to be recognized as “just a number” in reference to political and financial gains expresses the distance they feel in relation to the University.

Their understandings of their experiences thus reflect the ways in which the university maintains a sense of Whiteness in its many forms. As such, the majority of these students, they shared common experiences of racial issues and inequalities at the U of A.

“You know if you pull a Student of Color aside and ask him hay what do you think of the U of A? Or how do you see this institution? They’ll be like there’s a problem. There has been a problem and no one ever wants to talk about the problem. People who have tried to talk about the problem have always been shut down. You gotta find the right people to talk about it. People have tried but the U of A doesn’t want to listen.”

Marcos’ perspective, experiences and involvement within the Guerrero center and Latino community argue that the university is not listening. As Nancy states in the beginning of this section, they won’t listen, “unless we really voice what we need, what we want”. Within a matter of a few weeks, a list of student demands just happened to be released by the Cultural Centers at the University of Arizona, including the Guerrero Center. The University of Arizona, as an

educational space of Whiteness, is a space of constant navigation for these students. It was through their shared experiences that created the strength of activism for student demands. As Mercedes describes, her experience here has been a process of understanding her and her peers' experiences in relation to the institution,

“I’ve surrounded myself with people very like my culture, so like my memories and experiences are really positive for the most part. But I guess you can say things were very shocking. When I started realizing like how white this campus was because I really didn’t open my eyes. And to see how much racism still existed here and how they were accommodating the White students, but not admitting it. It was shocking that’s the one word I would use... And when I heard the experiences of some of my friends that’s not the way it is.”

These experiences continue to support an educational theme of struggle and resistance. Carrying a history of student activism, these Latina/o student experience express the sad reality that in the year 2016, Latina/o students and other marginalized students must continue to fight. As previously mentioned, many of the students feel like numbers and this specific interaction with the President, in Juan’s perspective is another example of that idea, saying, “President Hart, wants something ideal to her [in terms of the meeting], this meeting has to be ‘valid enough’ and have a sense of “emotional appeal because numbers are factual evidence [and student experiences are not]”. It is these feelings and experiences that have student like Marisa questioning, “How can I expect to be proud to be here when there’s so many injustices that happen?” How can they be in a space where they feel questioned in academic and social spaces that are not spaces like the Guerrero Center or organizations of color like, multicultural Greek life?

Like the *testimonios* shared at the beginning of this theme, Latina/o students understand their experiences to not be valid because of the lack of, as Juan states, “factual evidence”. Though this was stated throughout many *testimonios*, Latina/o students continue to challenge this

idea and have proved to the university that their voices and experiences matter through the recent activism on campus.

Discussion

I began this research with the intent that other students shared similar experiences to me, yet also felt alone and isolated from their university spaces that claimed to support them. As my research process continued, student activism continued to rise at PWI's. MIZZOU opened another public discussion about racism and discrimination that Black students in particular were facing. By the time the fall semester ended, student experiences from all cultural centers (Latina/o, African American, Asian American, Native American etc.) were being discussed between the faculty senate as a means to bridge the conversation between professors and students. This was then followed with the President of the university making an effort to meet with the students, however for only a half hour, per cultural center. As many students felt mixed emotions about this, this only encouraged students to make a statement and push for a list of demands. This 20 page list of demands from the various cultural centers speaks to not only the President and administration but professors, peers and the overall campus community (Jaquette, 2016).

However, as Emilia noted, "it's gonna keep falling back on the students to make sure changes happen". Sadly, this is the reality of student activism at higher institutions and Predominately White Institutions. Through the themes that developed, I examine the experiences as they relate to the University of Arizona as an educational space of Whiteness and the ways in which these Latina/o students navigate through this space.

Drawing from the theoretical tools of Sullivan (2006) and Gusa (2010), I argue that these spaces, like Whiteness, have been created and recreated through practices such as structural racist patterns, admission rates, curriculum, retention and graduation rates, along with campus climate, are consistent and sustained because of U.S. educational institutional practices over time (Gusa

2010). Educational spaces of whiteness are spaces in which White students are perceived as the dominant population and catered to both systemically and socially (Yosso et al., 2009). This term refers to the spaces that Predominately White Institutions create and re-create, metaphorically and physically, which ultimately benefit the majority of students, faculty and staff that are White (Jones et al., 2002, pg. 20; Yosso et al., 2009).

For the majority of the students in my study, the University of Arizona offers them a different experience compared to their White peers. This perspective, however, reflects an unsettling idea as to how Latina/o students view the university. The University of Arizona, through an educational space of Whiteness context is a space that reflects hierarchal status and superiority that is reflected through the ideologies of Whiteness in curriculum, class differences and false representation and a lack of representation of students, faculty and staff of color. Physically and metaphorically, the students shared their experiences at the university and the ways in which they understood their place within such a space.

For many of them, their experiences of hierarchal status and superiority could be reflected upon their first steps on campus. Though not necessarily interacting with peers, faculty or staff, they described the isolation they felt upon entering the university because of the physical structures, language, culture and ideologies expressed which overall reflects the superiority of a White dominant society. In many of these aspects, though the university does not blatantly practice White supremacy, color-blindness behavior and ideologies perpetuate it (Leonardo, 2004). In this respect, though White students, faculty and staff did not participate in slavery, they do however; recreate behaviors and ideologies of White supremacy daily (Leonardo, 2004).

As such, Latina/o student must navigate this hostile space. Reflected in the *testimonios*, navigating the University of Arizona was deeply rooted in self and cultural identity, community

and family support and safe spaces. These spaces offer students safety within the university that maintains deeply historical and traditional aspects of Whiteness. The problem remains that the PWIs like the University of Arizona continue to be a space that does not support Latina/o students and instead the available supportive system falls back on the underfunded cultural centers, which advocate for students at all levels, academically, culturally, socially, and professionally. These centers hold value to not only student success but university success as well because these centers strive to retain and graduate the students they serve and while the university is a space that holds many resources for students, Cultural Centers do so in a different manner that more so pertains to specific identities, cultures, languages and represents a space in which students are able to call home, all at the same time (Hefner, 2002).

Because these cultural centers offer social, political and academic support, networks are created that provide students the opportunity to engage in critical thinking and dialogues about self-identity and community as it pertains to them (Jones et al., 2002). The Guerrero Center in particular supports students through the different experiences and with the current political and infrastructure issues at the UA, students must also navigate student activism as a means to challenge the larger space that does not support them. It is through such support systems that assist these students in feeling safe and welcomed within this large university that Latina/o students must still practice a strategy of avoiding and navigating around spaces where they feel excluded, and in many aspects, these are large, common spaces on campus. Because majority of the students felt a sense of not belonging, it should be questioned, as to, is it so much that they do not belong here or that the university creates and recreates so many unbelonging space and does not want you to feel like you belong?

The *testimonios* shared in this study are deeply rooted in the oppression and discrimination they face at a PWI. Their truths are problematic in the sense that Latina/o students continue to face racial, class and identity issues in the year of 2016 because these experiences are real and affect the students in understanding their place within such an institution. Latina/o students navigate as a means of survival and self-care even without realizing it. Their *testimonios* express this realization and the power of narrative as it relates to Educational spaces of Whiteness.

These political *testimonios* reiterate the need to place the voices of the students marginalized at the center of discussing educational experiences at Predominately White Institutions. The students who shared their stories all had political and knowledge-full responses. As such, connecting space, race, and education through the term, educational space of Whiteness urges the need to recognize the consequence and outcomes created within and by Predominately White Institutions. Meaning, it is not only the historical aspect that contributes to an educational space of Whiteness, but the physical, “pictures, statues, texts, and even the names on the buildings” which more often than not, reflect the historical context and legacy of the institution (Gusa, 2010, p. 476). This historical aspect is not only displayed physically, but also through the metaphorical spaces created, for example freshman orientations that are primarily given in English, that express and create a feeling of isolation and of not belonging through institutional ideologies of Whiteness spoken and practiced. It is through educational spaces of Whiteness that student well-being is affected because these spaces become a site that “enforces racism and white privilege” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 16).

While not specifically mentioned, the well-being of the students was well expressed through their emotional telling of their *testimonios*. As mental health stigma in the Latino

community is very prominent, a few of the students shared their mental health challenges as they navigated through these educational spaces of Whiteness. Thus, these *testimonios* reflect the need to further examine the well-being of Latina/o students within Predominately White Institutions and the ways in which these metaphorical and physical representations of Whiteness affect them. These experiences and *testimonios* illustrate the realities of the Latina/o students attending the UA. These realities are of challenges, isolation, frustration, anger, community, activism and resistance. This PWI [UA] in particular, has pushed its limits with these students, as thus will receive consequences.

As the activism continues to rise and the students gain momentum, they are no longer remaining silent. After many of the *testimonios* shared, students expressed that they felt a sense of relief that this space allowed for a sense of empowerment and time for them to express so many memories and experiences they had never really said out loud. The space symbolized a therapy session in the sense that they were able to share, unapologetically, their experiences as Latina/o students attending the University of Arizona. Because, Latina/o Students are 23-25% of the population (depending on the semester, 90% of the students interviewed felt that the university does not care about their experiences or who they are. In their eyes [the University], they are a number and only recognized if they are heavily involved or highly representing the University of Arizona.

This study further illuminates the activism and voices of the students. In light of the activism that has continued at this university, it could be understood that safe spaces [cultural centers] are under attack. Further, students understand this momentum to be a wakeup call for the university. Through such experiences and inequalities it is perceived that this university continues to “endorse diversity to the extent that it serves White students, or the dominant

population (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 664). Thus, navigating educational spaces of Whiteness for Latina/o students, illustrate experiences at Predominately White Institutions and the continued need for these spaces to hear their voices. Until then, *la lucha sigue*, Latina/o students will continue to navigate these spaces and resist the challenging and oppressive spaces that they encounter through their *testimonios*.

Limitations

Due to the time period of being IRB approved (early November 2015) and student schedules with holidays (Fall, Winter, and Spring break), finals, and midterms I ran into scheduling issues with the students and had a difficult time recruiting students to being part of the actual study process. My recruitment goal was 15 students and while many students, well over the 15 student study goal were interested, I did not reach the goal of 15 student *testimonios* due to the lack of communication received by students upon meeting them and corresponding through email. Another challenge was due to the fact that I interviewed only 2 males compared to the 8 females, which could potentially alter some of the experiences the students shared in relation to their identity.

Many students, though seemed interested, were difficult to get in communication with after first contact. Two to three emails were sent to students; however I decided to discontinue communication when I did not receive any responses. While I met and talked to students who I knew through my Graduate Assistantship and through the Guerrero Center, reaching the maximum student *testimonios* was still difficult. Due to the time constraint, I decided to stop with interviews the last day of March in order to transcribe with sufficient time and to continue my writing process. Of the *testimonios* that were shared however, there was one student who seemed to counter my findings. It is not to say that this student's *testimonio* was not important

and not used, however, her experiences may have showed such difference because she was the only student who was not first generation to attend a university.

This student, who was not first generation, had a lighter complexion and the opportunity to, as she put it, “we came to the U.S. because my parents were like, “okay let’s go!””, kind of deal” which, expressed her educational experience at the university in a different manner than the other students. At an early age, because her father and many members of her family are educated, “my dad went to college, he did accounting. My uncle is a lawyer, a few cousins have done doctoral degrees, few masters, from both my mom and dad’s side, but mostly my dad’s,” she had access to education in the institutional aspect. She noted in her follow up interview that her perception of the UA could be because of her early access to educational spaces. So, her experiences were completely different than the other students who shared their *testimonios*. Though she recognized racism, I thought it was interesting how she was the only one of the 10 who did not hear about the list of student demands. The other 9 students happened to be involved in planning the list of demands and meeting with President Hart (University of Arizona President), as Greek, M.E.Ch.A and Guerrero community members.

Suggestions for improvement would be to begin the research process well over a year in advance to allow time to build rapport with the students sharing their *testimonios*, as well as to allow for time to transcribe. Through the process was challenging at times, I wish I had also allowed time to further prepare for a greater opportunity to present my research and give back to the students who shared their stories with me.

Future Research

While research similar to my study has been produced (Fernandez, 2002; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009), I believe there are still many avenues in which this research can go.

Though I did not have the time to consider mental health aspects of Latina/o student experiences, I believe that this is an area that could be greatly considered for future research.

To continue this work with a different and critical lens of CRT and Lat CRIT, future research should consider an examination of Latina/o mental health while also using *testimonio* as a methodology to understand the stories of Latina/os and the effects of being in an educational space of Whiteness in relation to their mental well-being. Some questions to consider are; how does the university support Latina/o students and their cultural identities? Though with this specific question it is important to focus on the ways in which this support does not fall on the cultural centers but the Campus Health centers, administration levels, and faculty to work towards a cultural competency practice. This practice is important and should be visible when working with marginalized Students of Color, Latina/o students. However, though it could be argued that it is currently being practiced and implemented and yet the current study findings provide many examples as proof that it is not practiced/implemented for the entire student body. My research for example, expressed student experiences and the distance they felt from the Campus Health center.

Other question to consider are, at a university, like the University of Arizona that has such a large percentage of Latina/o students and is not a recognized as a Hispanic-Serving institution, why is there a lack of Latina/o counselors, therapists and psychiatrists? Why has it taken so long for this university to alter its ideological practices of Whiteness to become more inclusive for the amount of students it supports?

Overall, mental health is an aspect that I am interested in and plan to continue researching, especially since, as a Latina/o student, I have personally experienced depression and anxiety with Predominately White Institutions. It is important for further research to consider

because it understands that dealing with mental health is also a large aspect of navigating through a Predominately White Institution as a Latina/o student. Because I have found so much research around Latina/o student experiences but as much in regard to mental health and *testimonio*, this is a topic that I hope to continue to research.

Conclusion

Latina/o student experiences continue to be an important aspect in Predominately White Institutions. They are “powerfully written stories and narratives” that support “a process of correction in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of our common humanity” (Delgado & Jean Stefancic, 2012). It is these *testimonios* that continue to highlight the struggles and resistance that these students face within an educational space of Whiteness. These stories and experiences provide evidence of the neglect of the university’s participation to hear and listen to the student voices that have been screaming outside their walls for so long. Now, as students continue to push for and demand safe spaces, more professors of color and representation, administration accountability and an increase in funding for the centers, the university has finally made an effort to listen. My research supports these voices and the value of the student experiences of Latina/o students at the University of Arizona. It is my hope that these voices never become silenced and always challenge the spaces that refuse to hear them.

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