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Cihuātocameh (Spiderwomen) Weaving Twenty Years of Transformative Justice Work in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

While the student population in higher education has become more ethnically diverse the professoriate in universities remain predominantly of European descent. Reflecting this disparity of representation within the context of higher education in the United States, women faculty of color continue to experience tokenization, among other dissolutions. Within this inequitable context, we continue to find ways to resist these moments of fragmentation. We draw upon an analogy of spider weaving as a way to re-member the fragmented parts of being Women of Color scholar activists in the academy. In this paper, two Xicana Indigenous scholars highlight moments of resistance and transformation in the past 20 years of engagement with higher education. We begin with an undergraduate summer research experience and continue to the present moment as assistant professors. We share the context, our narratives of growth and resilience to unveil effects of the lived realities for Women of Color invested in social transformative justice. We offer a reflective opportunity for those who enter and continue struggling to survive and thrive within academia while navigating the shoals of privilege and marginalization. This awareness can offer a starting point for further discussions focused on the recruitment and retention of Women of Color faculty in the academy.

Introduction

We begin our paper by introducing *Cihuātocameh* (Spiderwomen in Nahuatl) and how we, two Xicana Indigenous scholars, embody some of Spiderwomen's attributes. Ancestral teachings, including art murals, often illustrate the goddess "Teotihuacan Spider Woman" with open arms and in the process of giving gifts. She was also the protector of the city's inhabitants. In that spirit, we situate our paper as our *ofrenda*¹ to future scholars in the academy who wish to transform the world to one where many worlds fit. Inspired by Teotihuacan's Spider Woman and Patrisia Gonzáles's (2012) *Red Medicine*, we give of our lived experiences, vulnerabilities, and testimonios in the cultural work we engage in as mothers, partners, femmetors² and academicians. Establishing ecologies where transformative justice is possible is one way in which we see our responsibility to maintain a blossoming context where future Indigenous women

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scholars can integrate their epistemologies as well as a space for us to be femmetors for student transformation and achievement.

Previous research has highlighted problematic aspects of U.S. higher education that are often overlooked (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020; Ryu, 2010). For instance, while college students are more racially and ethnically diverse the majority of the professoriate continue to be of European descent. Nearly three-quarters (73.2%) of full-time faculty are of European descent in stark contrast to the composition of the rest of faculty: 4.7% “Hispanic”³, 5.7% Black and 0.4% “American Indian” (Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, & Chessman, 2019). As first-generation Women of Color in academia, we face a conundrum within these disparities of representation. We are pulled in multiple directions that benefit the university’s diversity and inclusion efforts (see Toro-Morn, 2013), while at the same time presumed and treated as incompetent (Gutierrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012). Within the context of higher education in the U.S., faculty of color, particularly women faculty of color with critical transformative justice agendas (that intentionally question the status quo), continue to experience Eurocentric ways of learning through various interactions, including tokenization, defragmentation, lower salaries (Ferrara, 2020; Independent Equity Committee at the University of Texas at Austin, 2019), and (routine) denial of tenure. For example, despite her publication record at Harvard, Dr. Lorgia García-Peña was denied tenure (African American Intellectual History Society (AAIHS), 2019). Students and supporters rallied to support her tenure petition process, calling out the “old boys club” protocols applied to determine tenure. This is an example of the differential between evaluation applied to faculty of color and evaluation applied to white faculty (Matthew, 2016), and where entrenched hierarchical systems of power do not serve co-liberation purposes.

Higher education institutions are traditionally havens for white privilege to proliferate. The pervasiveness of white supremacy on college campuses across the U.S. has become more visibly present on college campuses nationwide. The Anti-Defamation League (2019) reports white supremacists are more active on campus than ever before. This power differential is often unregulated and the labor of Women of Color scholars with a transformative justice agenda is neither acknowledged nor promoted. Women of Color faculty with a critical social justice background and research agenda are rare in the academy. We use the term “Women of Color” as an intentional umbrella term to include some of the common experiences across various identities (i.e., “strategic essentialism,” Spivak, 1990). We acknowledge that Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color (BIWOC) have different experiences with academia based on the intersections of historical contexts and contemporary factors affecting their communities.

We define “transformative justice” as intentionally centering the intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical health of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) (Rendón, 2012), and a decolonial approach highlighting the possibilities to dismantle dominant systems that promote a hierarchical master narrative in the academy (Love, 2019). Our transformative justice agendas, rooted in the fifty-year struggle of Ethnic Studies, create possibilities for BIPOC holistic wellness in institutions that were not initially intended to promote healthy spaces for the people and by the people. This work may be challenging in social institutions that have oppressed certain social groups and

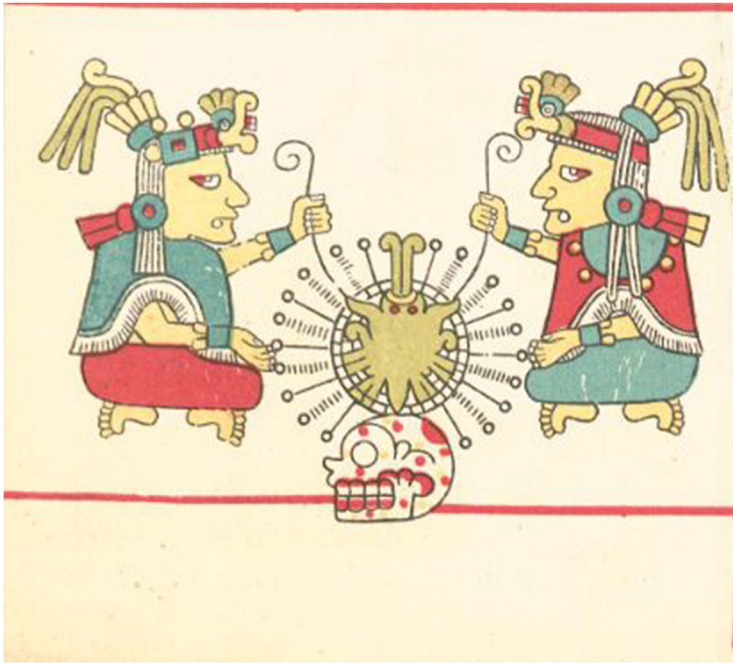


Figure 1. Women holding butterfly/spider in spiderweb, Fejérváry-Mayer 25 (as seen in Gonzáles, 2012, p. 195). Courtesy of Ancient Americas at LACMA (ancientamericas.org).

oftentimes benefited directly from the oppression; we recognize these actions are laborious yet we consider them necessary.

We offer the spider weaving metaphor as a way of imagining the consistent mending of the dehumanizing processes that we have experienced. Spider weaving activates the understanding that knowledge is connected to body, heart, mind and spirit, and that the tending of relationships helps us navigate places that are not meant for us to thrive (Rendón, 2012).

Like the two women in Figure 1 holding a butterfly/spider in spiderweb, weaving the web of life, we share our process of weaving our 20-year journey from undergraduate to tenure-track faculty as Xicana Indigneous scholars in higher education. We identify as Xicanas using the spelling with an “X” because this Nahuatl phoneme *x* in one of our Indigenous languages, includes “an emerging política, ... grounded in Indigenous [American omitted] belief systems and identities” (Moraga, 2011, p. xxi). Our parents journeyed to California, one pair from Michoacán and one pair from Zacatecas, Mexico, bridging multiple worlds for us born on the north side of the U.S.-Mexico (imaginary) border. Our ancestral roots guide our compass as we navigate the academy from our positionalities. Our relationship has been a source of radical love and support as friends, sisters, coMadres, and colleagues over the last two decades. We have, between us, navigated the Eurocentric pillars of ten higher education institutions during this 20-year span.

This essay is written as a decolonial feminist community practice (Boonzaier & Van Niekerk, 2019; Wijsman & Feagan, 2019) that aims toward uprooting systems of oppression and planting seeds of hope (Moreno Sandoval, 2019) for other Women of Color in

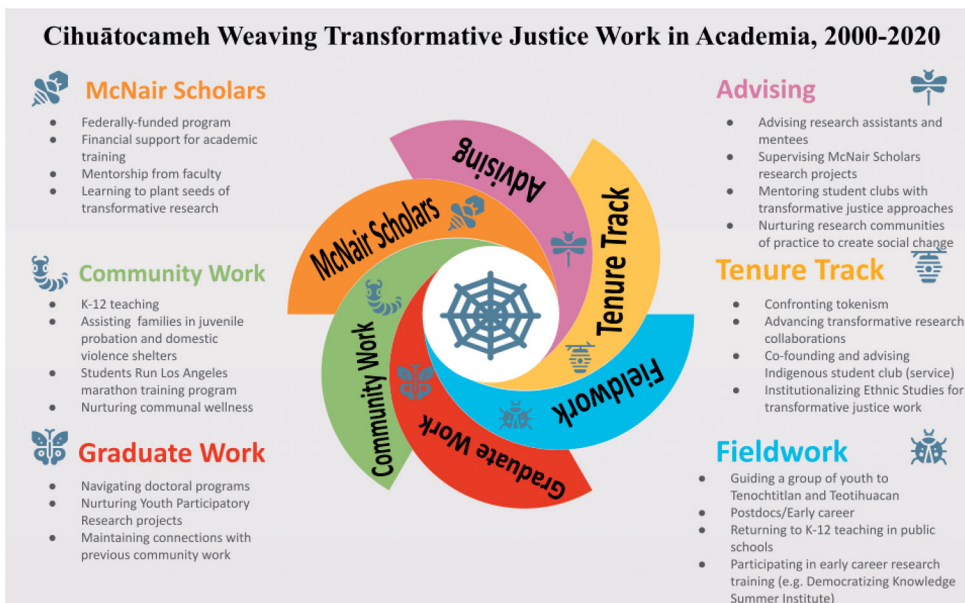


Figure 2. Weaving transformative justice work in academia.

the academy. We begin by centering decolonial research methodologies (Smith, 1999) to illustrate how our subjective realities intersect with privilege, power and oppression. We also acknowledge the theoretical contributions of Emma Pérez' decolonial imaginary (1999) as a way to uncover the hidden voices of Chicanas throughout Chicanx history. We speak in the first and third person interchangeably to bring our voices closer to the reader's dialogic imagination. In Figure 2 we illustrate the 20 years we have shared in praxis within and beyond schooling institutions. Our parents reiterated the importance of taking care of our health and doing well in education because they understood that an education, while preserving one's health, would offer us opportunities (such as the McNair Scholars Program) that they did not receive. "*Primero Diosito y luego la escuela*,"⁴ Cueponcaxochitl's mother would say to her, prioritizing spiritual health first and intellectual health as important for one's formation.

A network of silken thread: The McNair scholars program

As *cihuatoameh* with relationality as a foundation to make sense of the world, we nurtured our relationship within the walls of an unfamiliar academic setting from the beginning. We met in the summer of 2000 as college undergraduate juniors participants in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program (McNair Program) at Claremont Graduate University (CGU). The McNair Program aims to increase the number of low-income, first generation, and underrepresented students continuing their post-secondary education into graduate school (Federal TRIO Programs, 2005). The program also provides various services to enrolled students including mentoring, research experience, seminars, and assistance with graduate school and financial aid applications (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2007). While our experiences in the McNair Program are a highlight of our relationship and ways in which Women of

Color students are supported in the academy, describing our experiences are not within the scope of this paper. However, the program served as a foundation to validate ourselves as Xicana scholars who can (and should) contribute to knowledge production. We utilized the mentorship and social networking to challenge the structural inequalities and expand the possibilities for coalitions and transformative collaborations.

A decolonizing research framework

We foreground our cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998) as part of our theoretical framing. Hence, we incorporate Native/Indigenous feminisms to usher this work. Indigenous feminist epistemologies (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013; Grande, 2008; John, 2015; Ross, 2009; Smith, 2008) help us to intentionally explore the relationality embedded in nurturing long-term academic relationships. We are reminded by Cutcha Risling Baldy (2018) that it is through Native feminisms that we can maintain our traditional cultures as foundational to revitalize and shape the future with our past.

Indigenous feminisms draw on core Indigenous cultural elements—specifically, the connection to land and Indigenous sovereignty, and “relationships framed as a sacred responsibility” that affirm reciprocity and definitive culture and identity (Greene, 2017, p. 5). Indigenous feminisms are debated because there is an assumption that Native women cannot be feminist since the “white” feminism space often reifies racism and other forms of oppression that continue to marginalize Indigenous voices. Luana Ross (2009) reminds us that because of these tensions, her “indigenous/feminism privileges storytelling as a way to decolonize and empower our communities” (p. 50). Therefore, we center our narratives as part of our decolonial practices.

We draw from Xicana and Indigenous epistemologies—(Lucchesi, 2019; Moreno Sandoval, Mojica Lagunas, Montelongo, & Díaz, 2016); Wilson, 2008) as a methodology that nurtures the relationalities we live with each other and all that surrounds us as ceremony. These practices include “self-reflexive work exploring how ceremony, protocol, and cultural cosmologies can be integrated into research” (Lucchesi, 2019, p. 2). As such, our *comadrisimo* and chosen sisterhood builds possibilities in our imaginaries, describing our experiences as we *feel* our stories as well as theorize them (Rendón, 2012; Soto, Cervantes-Soon, Villarreal, & Campos, 2009). We both believe that Ethnic Studies is medicine especially for first generation college students who are/were often erased from their previous educational curriculum (K-12). Yet there are ongoing struggles to maintain Ethnic Studies programs in the curriculum and getting institutional support may also be limited. Ethnic Studies was born from the longest student-led strike in U.S. history. This struggle centers community organizing and keeping the institutions of schooling accountable to foment non-Eurocentric approaches to learning and being in the world. Chicana feminist scholars, such as Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981), have also shaped this conversation to ensure that the Ethnic Studies’ struggles do not deny a shared political voice for Women of Color. Why would deep-seated dominant ideologies resist Ethnic Studies programming when research has shown that Ethnic Studies works (Cuauhtin, 2016; Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, 2014; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020)?

When we look deeply at Indigenous-centered values, we learn that relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) requires us to be accountable to each other and our ancestors. We also place ourselves in the contexts that have shaped our relationships and cultivated our theoretical engagement. We socially position ourselves as new mothers, daughters, sisters, partners, scholars, activists and women faculty-of-color in public universities. We are in Social Work (Miriam) and Ethnic Studies disciplines (Cueponcaxochitl) respectively. We have nurtured and witnessed each other's physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual health as we navigate systems of oppression. In doing so, we dignify our experiences as mothers and scholars in the academy by using ancestral knowledge systems to fortify our beings.

We share our story via dialogic testimonio narratives that highlight three stages of our academic processes/journeys (undergraduate, doctoral studies and tenure-track professorship) by considering the following questions:

1. What was a defining moment during your academic formation that highlights the struggle(s) you faced?
2. What were the effects of this defining moment?
3. How was the moment resolved or interrupted? How did this experience inform your current (or future) engagements in the academy?

By posing/raising these questions, we are not trying to provide absolute conclusions or resolutions. This query provides space to share our academic experiences and to bring our two stories into reflexive dialogue to expand Xicana Indigenous epistemologies. It is our hope that these narratives will also go beyond sustaining us, moving into a space to decolonize the academy and our intentions to stay accountable so that this assists us in seeing an alterNATIVE space (including a connection to ancestors and ancestral homelands, nurture sovereign peoplehood) become a reality for future generations of scholars. We also carry forward the Indigenous viewpoint that Cherrie Moraga (2015, p. 3) expressed, that of "a people holding onto the fundamental values of living in an interdependent relationship with land and its elements and our human relations here and past."

Methodology

Our methodology for this paper draws upon testimonios (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012) that are grounded in Chicana feminisms (Anzaldúa, 2007; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Saavedra & Pérez, 2012). Testimonio, rooted in Latin American liberation struggles, has historically been used to decry injustices and record the experiences of oppressed groups (Beverly, 1992, 2005). Testimonios are guided by the narrator's consent to divulge events that are significant for them to recount the gravity of the circumstances (Yudice, 1991). Some examples documenting collective trauma and loss in literary form have included the human rights violations that Indigenous people in Guatemala faced under abusive military dictatorships (Menchú & Burgos-Debray, 1984) and the 1937 Haiti massacre ordered by dictator Trujillo in the Dominican Republic to annihilate an entire group of people of

African descent (Danticat, 1998). Testimonio can be a compelling tool to build a solidarity discourse with people who have experienced state terrorism or other forms of injustices.

Recently, testimonio has been situated as a critical race methodology (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Pérez Huber, 2009). Hence, Women of Color have utilized testimonio as a tool to theorize oppression, resistance, and subjectivity. This includes Delgado Bernal (2002) influential scholarship acknowledging students of color as “holders and creators of knowledge.” Our accounts demonstrate a focus on a “collectively experienced reality” (Brabeck, 2003, p. 253) and add to previous scholarship that incorporates testimonio to illustrate how colleagues have confronted and navigated similar situations but also found support, strength, and wisdom through their friendships in academia (e.g., Castillo-Montoya & Torres-Guzmán, 2012; Espino, Muñoz, & Marquez Kiyama, 2010; Espino, Vega, Rendón, Ranero, & Muñiz, 2012; Pérez Huber, 2009; Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012).

We analyze our testimonio narratives to expose the injustices we have experienced in the academy in a call to action to raise consciousness about these circumstances. Together, we started this project as part of our ongoing efforts to publish experiences that democratize and decolonize knowledge. These efforts have been a component of our pedagogical and theoretical training as early career scholars. We wrote our testimonios with the questions we listed in the introduction through a process of reflective journaling and sharing with one another for a six-month time period. We have had similar conversations throughout our 20-plus years of friendship; however, this is the first attempt to collaboratively chronicle our journeys. Although we have found ourselves living in different geographic locations after the McNair Scholars Program, we have continued our relationship to the lands in which we inhabit and we share these relationships in our *pláticas* with each other.

While preparing the narratives, we were attentive to the instances when we faced obstacles as well as moments of hope and connection. Through *pláticas* (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) we critically reflected on our journal entries and offered feedback as we revised and edited the testimonios. Our intents and motives in sharing these testimonio narratives are purposeful. We made a prudent choice to center these stories to: (1) build solidarity with other Women of Color in the academy particularly including those who are pursuing or considering doctoral studies and (2) speak about the ways in which we want to change and interrupt the barriers we experienced throughout the doctoral process and into our early career years.

Sharing these testimonios rooted in story-telling is significant for our cultural survival. Although there are no distinct demarcations, for sake of clarity, the narrative that follows is presented in six general phases of our journey. These phases are: (1) embarking into the undergraduate experience; (2) centering community work; (3) navigating doctoral programs; (4) continuing community-centered fieldwork; (5) our journey as tenure-track assistant professors and (6) ongoing advising and community work. In addition, we draw upon the image of *Cihuātocameh* (Spiderwomen) as a metaphor to weave these different and yet complementary strands of our journey together (see Figure 2 for illustration). The previous section has set the basic (singular, anchoring)

strands of the spider web. The following sections place the interlocking spirals linking the strands and strengthening the web.

The first spiral: Embarking into the undergraduate experience

For first-generation students, beginning their college education may bring a host of first-timer experiences that include confusion, barriers, and struggles. It may also be a time for infinite possibilities with so much novelty and exposure to different realities and lived experiences as students meet classmates and faculty members. In the section below, we describe our interactions with the McNair Program at a private university.

Cueponcaxochitl: When I was admitted to the McNair program, I experienced a bit of imposter syndrome because I was still experiencing the cultural shock and sense of inadequacy in a Eurocentric elite institution. Meeting Miriam and others provided me with a sense of comfort and relief connecting to others who had similar experiences. The nurturing community gatherings and *convivencia*⁵ we experienced in the dorms enriched my experience as a first-in-the-family academic who was pursuing a doctoral degree. The program offered financial support for the doctoral application process as well as travel funds for research presentations at conferences.

However, even while these support systems were appreciated, it felt like a band-aid temporarily applied to cover the deep wounds of erasure from the academy's legacy of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 2009). This colonial force is expressed as continuous institutional violence toward non-European and non-Eurocentric students and faculty. Examples include incessant microaggressions that (un)consciously presume Eurocentric standards as the desired goal. For example, during the McNair program, I felt the pressure to write in a Eurocentric voice that I interpreted as THE academic voice I needed to incarnate and reproduce. My writing always felt choppy and forced because the language that my parents taught me was and is not considered "academic."

Miriam: The McNair program was pivotal to considering the possibility of graduate school. I admit that before the program, I really did not know what a PhD program entailed or even that I could obtain such a degree. The first week of the summer program I got strep throat; the stress I was feeling was manifesting through the illness. Thankfully, the staff of the program were supportive and understood that for someone like myself, being away from home for the first time, needed additional support to continue rather than quit the program. This feeling of community was also present amongst my classmates and as Cueponcaxochitl mentioned, the bonding time was priceless because it reminded me that I was not alone.

The social capital we created was also important for me because I experienced a lot of "firsts": first time living in the dorms on campus; first time going to a Japanese restaurant and eating sushi; first time visiting art museums in Los Angeles; and first time openly navigating tokenism from my peers. We produced a video in my elective class and I ended up playing "*la criada*" (the housekeeper) and a lighter-skin Chicana played "*la dueña de la casa*"- (the woman of the house). One of our classmates pointed out this racialized representation as we were editing the film that was going to be shared in a community show. Thinking back, I wonder why the professor of the course did not

bring this to our attention as we were writing the script. Our group was able to have these honest conversations to process how we are socialized and how we may internalize certain aspects of a character because of the media influence and exposure throughout our childhood and adulthood years. The group's processing helped us figure out what unintentionally happened (tokenism).

The second spiral: Centering community work

After graduating from college, Women of Color with a transformative justice agenda often continue community-centered work. We define “community work” as work that is centered on dismantling systems of oppression for and by BIPOC. Sometimes the weight of this passion can be so heavy that our health can be compromised, so the constant consideration is: how can we optimize our efforts to change systems of oppression while nurturing communal health and wellness within and outside of the academy? In Cueponcaxochitl's case, as a middle school educator, she was invited to train for and run a marathon with her teacher friends. She later found the value of starting this same approach to training and running a marathon for her middle school community on campus by signing her school up for a Students Run Los Angeles program in 2004. The student-teacher-parent running community formed outside of classroom demands enabled a deep sense of belonging and relationality. To date, the marathon-training program continues, even after Cueponcaxochitl left the middle school for graduate school in 2007.

Miriam: Honestly, for some years after I completed my Masters degree in Psychology, I told myself I would *not* return to graduate school. The stress of writing a Masters thesis and navigating the complicated politics of graduate school were experiences I could not see myself enduring again. After several low-paying and stressful jobs in the non-profit sector, I started working full time in a county-level job in Texas, overseeing research and program evaluation in juvenile probation. I was often reminded by my coworkers that this was the job that you see through retirement. However, after a couple years, it became evident that regardless of how detailed my reports were to the courts and the state-level administrators, the absence of a PhD behind my name was limiting the reach of these findings.

Even though we were navigating educational trajectories, we were always connected to the community. When Cueponcaxochitl trained her students to run marathons in the middle school in which she taught, her bumping in with the administration regarding transforming her middle school business as usual to one that responded to students' needs became the impetus for her to return to graduate school. Similarly, Miriam saw the need to pursue a PhD when the administrators she worked with did not value her contributions to community nourishment. Both of us felt trapped in systems that were not meant for our students and clients to question the status quo and thrive.

The third spiral: Navigating doctoral programs

Applying to doctoral programs is an arduous process. Anyone who has had to go through the application process knows that the process begins even before you start

developing your personal statement for the applications. Because of the McNair program, we knew that campus visits, reaching out to faculty members at the schools we wanted to attend, and talking to alumni of these programs was imperative to make a more informed decision about where to apply. We supported each other through this arduous process.

Miriam: As hard as it was to consider graduate school, I knew that it needed to be the next step if I was going to have the impact I wanted to have 20 years into the future. I applied to 15 doctoral programs all over the United States because I had been mentored to cast a wide net due to the competitive process (and as a McNair scholar, I received assistance to pay application fees). I was accepted to five of the fifteen programs. Two of the schools offered a campus visit to inform my decision. One of the schools in California offered this option, so I was very excited because it would mean I could be close to my family and return to California. However, the recruitment experience at this school was so degrading and disappointing that I made the decision to attend the program in Washington (in retrospect, it was a blessing in disguise).

The incident that deterred me from accepting the offer in California involved a senior Latino faculty member who asked me to say something in Spanish at an evening gathering with all the other recruits (I was the only Xicana in the group). When I refused to follow along, he mimicked Speedy Gonzalez and said “*ándale, ándale, ándale.*” It was evident that people around us became uncomfortable as a few awkward laughs proceeded the conversation, but no one interrupted the moment or approached me afterwards to say anything about the interaction. I excused myself from the conversation. The next day I had a private conversation with the PhD program director at the school and informed him about this interaction. This experience was a part of my decision to bypass their program (especially because this professor would be assigned as my first-year advisor). As uncomfortable and difficult as this decision was at the time, I know that by refusing to accept this behavior as normal (or excuse this person’s inappropriate jokes), I was setting boundaries of what I would *not* accept as part of an already challenging doctoral experience. The heartbreak came when I had to announce to my family that I was not going back to California to be closer to them. My parents could not understand why I had to leave for Seattle, Washington when there were options closer to home.

Cueponcaxochitl: I decided to return to graduate school after experiencing a harsh reality in the aforementioned public middle school teaching. In 2006, when HR4437—a bill targeting undocumented peoples and their sanctuaries—was up for a vote in the senate, students and their families expressed fears of being impacted by this bill, so they joined thousands of students throughout the southwest and walked out of school to demonstrate this concern. The administration at my school decided to punitively punish the students who walked out. There was no education or opportunity to teach literacy on the topic following a critical pedagogy approach that I learned in graduate school. Instead we were forced to locked classrooms and exposed to police officers in riot gear. This was the turning point for my decision to return to graduate school with the hopes of continuing community work at a larger scale. While in graduate school, it is of crucial importance that relationships with doctoral program advisors be transformational

and of utmost importance for the development of the advisee. I struggled with finding this transformative relationship.

I experienced survivor's guilt about making it to graduate school within my own family while pursuing a doctorate degree. I was exposed to so much information that I had to process on my own. My family, especially my parents and siblings who did not have the same experiences, could not understand. Even when I would tell them about my experiences in graduate school, it was not the same as having experienced it. Expanding my consciousness in graduate school afforded me with opportunities to travel, for example, which were not available to the rest of my family. As I learned more about colonization and the ways in which these systems of oppression deeply impacted identities and ways of being, I made some gradual shifts like deepening my ancestral identity and moving away from my family's religious practices. These two things combined were the center of tension within my family interactions. Eventually, they would reject anything that had to do with my ancestral identity and the distances among us would grow. It did not matter how I described my experiences, in their eyes, the fact that I moved away from the religion and changed my name was enough to deepen the wounds of our childhood. Through a deep labor of love, and sisterhood support from Miriam and others, I completed the doctoral program to honor my ancestors, communities and family, even when it hurt.

Miriam: One of the beautiful pieces of this journey is to see how we both were able to reclaim space by bringing our WHOLE selves to these spaces. How badass of a moment is it to say that we were both speakers at our PhD graduation ceremonies?! Talk about a moment to reclaim space! Cueponcaxochitl graduated four years before me and seeing the video from her graduation speech and her beautiful song honoring her *abuelita* gave me the courage the following years to accept the nomination I received from my peers to be the keynote speaker for my graduating class. I also chose to sing a song and being on that stage sharing the joys that we keep close to our hearts was magical even when we know that our doctoral journeys also included pain, sweat, and tears. It is the transformational moments of growth and beauty that we will remember the most as a way to say, we belong. We do not have to give up our spirits and the teachings of our ancestors to survive and thrive in these spaces.

The fourth spiral: Continuing community-centered fieldwork

We have had the sincere honor to participate in two life-changing programs: the first is a 2011 educational pilgrimage to Tenochtitlán and Teotihuacán, Mexico with teachers, elders and high school youth to learn more about our ancestral identities and stories (see Moreno Sandoval, Valdovinos, Contreras, & López Andrade, [In Press](#)). The second is participation in the Democratizing Knowledge Institute at Syracuse University⁶ to collaborate with other scholars interested in transformational justice in and beyond the academy. In addition, Cueponcaxochitl completed a post-doc assignment and decided to teach kindergarten because it was more dignifying than the painful experiences she lived in academia years prior. We acknowledge these experiences here because sharing our narratives in our spiral [Figure 2](#) reminded us that these community-centered moments are possible because of the networks and relationships we have nurtured

throughout the years. Similar to the second spiral, we are deeply motivated to continue the cultural work that we engage in on a daily basis within contexts that will help us influence future generations of educators and social workers. Centering decolonial praxis is crucial to the development of our personhood and our decisions to pursue a professorship position in the academy.

The fifth spiral: Our journey as tenure-track assistant professors

Achieving a tenure-track position involves another level of competitiveness we are told we will need to tackle if remaining in the academy is what we chose to do. There are other ways that we can engage with academia but it often means a liminal space where your labor is disposable, often low-paying and temporary, especially for Women of Color with a transformative justice agenda. Securing a tenure-track position can involve multiple attempts and multiple rejections, even when you are one of the top five candidates in your area of expertise.

Miriam: I consider myself very lucky that my job-seeking experience for a tenure-track position has not been as burdensome as it has been for some of my colleagues and friends. Even though some people may emphasize having multiple competitive offers, I had one job offer when I graduated with my PhD; one was enough for me. The offer symbolized triumph after navigating the doctoral studies journey. It also meant I had to move even further away from my family because the job was located in the east coast of the U.S. It was a joyous moment that turned into a heart-breaking moment when I was told I was a “token hire.” I would be replacing a Latina faculty member who had recently left the department. The person who shared this information with me was someone whom I thought was supportive of my successes. I received this message before I could even enjoy the victory of getting a job! I walked in with this view that I was a replacement, not that I was being hired because I would contribute unique insights as a scholar: my blood still boils remembering this moment! This introduction to the tenure-track hiring process is a reminder of how vicious these spaces can be even amongst those whom we believe are advocates for us.

I have survived thus far and I bring my authentic self to the conversations. It is evident that *I did not replace anyone* where I started my tenure-track career. I brought with me the struggles of my communities while also being an accomplice with other minoritized communities. I am now at my second tenure-track assistant professor position. My process applying for my current job was different; I have been reminded by femmentors that I obtained this job because my scholarship matters and because my writing contributions will shape my specialization. Now I understand how important it is that I continue to be a part of the academy even with all its complexities.

Cueponcaxochitl:

That’s why we added you to this committee; so you can bring the social justice piece.

– European Canadian woman

It is everyone’s responsibility to do social justice work in the academy, not just Women of Color with a transformative justice agenda who are often stretched thin with heavy cultural taxation loads. In doing this transformative justice work, I am the first

tenure-track Native American Studies (NAS) professor at the 58-year old university in which I work. This is deplorable. I heard that advocating for a tenure-track position in NAS was a serious struggle from the beginning. The argument for not granting a tenure line in NAS was that the university did not have the “numbers” to justify a position. Based on the Chancellor’s Office data reporting, students who identify as “Hispanic” are identified as Hispanic first. There is no “two or more” category for those who choose Hispanic and American Indian (or any other ethnicity/race). If a student selects Hispanic, American Indian, and Asian, that student will always be classified as Hispanic. Suppose a student selects White, Black, American Indian, and Asian. In that case, that student will be classified as “two or more.” Our current American Indian (Native American) state-supported student count for Fall 2020 is 18. If we were to include all the “two or more” categories that include American Indians and those who chose “Hispanic” first and American Indian second, then the count rises to 329. What I inherited was a serious case of Indigenous erasure. It is devastating that this is the norm. The making of “Hispanics” historically was used to maintain white supremacy (Mora, 2014).

Because the need to uplift a NAS presence on campus was so high, one of the highlights of my assistant professorship is co-organizing annual Indigenous Peoples Days (IPD) events on campus with the newly created Indigenous Students in Activism (ISA) club on campus. We purposefully pluralize Days because Indigenous Peoples Days is every day. Organizing these programs is a counterpoint to the historic coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000). In my current position as Ethnic Studies faculty, white supremacists have directed paraphernalia toward Indigenous peoples in a flyer that read: “Happy Indigenous Peoples Day” depicting what looked like pilgrim girls dancing in a circle. These posters were found on campus shortly after the 3rd Annual Indigenous Peoples Day event was hosted by the Ethnic Studies (ETHS) program. In the eyes of the Indigenous Students in Activism club and Ethnic Studies faculty, campuses and universities nationwide must do more to dignify the experiences of Indigenous students and faculty on campuses. We (ISA and ETHS) hope to recruit and retain more Indigenous students and faculty, but the “budgets” remain an ongoing challenge for not moving forward with these hopes. Could it be that not prioritizing Native American Studies, even while adopting a Native Land Acknowledgement is part of upholding white supremacy? Sustained programming and support must be normalized with funding priorities and an ethic of care that is transparent.

The sixth spiral: Ongoing advising and community work

As we grow into our relatively new positions in academia, we are finding ways to strengthen connections with students and their families through mentorship and community work. For example, Cueponcaxochitl initiated a *son jarocho* community on campus. *Son jarocho* is an Afro-Mexican Indigenous musical genre of Veracruz, Mexico that centers communal artistic expressions that promote kinesthetic learning of theories and praxis for the co-liberation of all forms of life, including Mother Earth, BIPOC and the oppressors. Learning *son jarocho* in Ethnic Studies is a research project that Cueponcaxochitl creates with students and other faculty. In addition, Cueponcaxochitl

uses Indigenous epistemologies to femmetor students, particularly Indigenous parenting (González, 2012) for first-time mothers. This guidance on Indigenous parenting goes beyond the traditional academic relationship of an adviser. Furthermore, Miriam has provided mentorship for graduate students who are focused on social impact and transformative change as part of their dissertation research projects. Both of us have provided research support and mentorship for undergraduate McNair Scholars; hence, the spirals of our work continue to inform future relationships.

Weaving the spirals: Conclusion

Our testimonios align with the ways in which we live our lives as daily ceremonies, calling on our ancestors in us to guide our decisions and remind us of the strength we share with the world, even when this world of academia was not created for people like us to survive, let alone thrive. If we did not draw from research as ceremony to equip us with the tools to speak on our experiences (Valdovinos, Rodriguez-Coss, & Parekh, 2020), if we divorced ourselves from the feelings we experienced in the academy and numb away the pain, we would have likely taken leave of the academy long ago or experienced a sickness that ate us alive. Instead, we turn toward each other as *compromiso*, a gentle way of accountability, while taking care of ourselves and each other along the way. We weave the spirals of the web in our daily practice to make a beautiful tapestry that can resist some heavy storms of white supremacist culture. We try our best to dismantle these systems of oppression for the next seven generations.

Reflecting on our experiences as first-generation-Xicana-Indigenous scholars, we see that the process of considering graduate school begins when you are an undergrad because research practice and experiences are relational (McCabe, 2019; Patel, 2015; Wilson, 2008). Furthermore, previous research has demonstrated the relational ways in which educational opportunities, such as the McNair Scholars Program, offer enriching and long-lasting experiences (Gittens, 2014). Below, we expand on the considerations that our testimonio narratives raised for us and that we believe can be incorporated into institutional, community, and individual support with the intention that these things will help recruit and retain current and future Women of Color scholars and BIPOC students in the academy.

Institutional

Support is needed to offer programs like McNair and other opportunities (e.g., TRIO programs⁷) for first-generation college students. For example, it is imperative to consider the additional hours that are invested by research mentors to facilitate learning experiences for students who may be relatively inexperienced with the more formal research experience. The institutional support provides access to opportunities that serve as bridges for graduate school enrollment and completion. Greene (2007) explored the perceptions of McNair scholar alumni who recommended providing more assistance with how to interview prospective faculty mentors, how to obtain financial assistance, and how to stay abreast of resources that would increase the number of McNair scholars enrolling in graduate school and completing a graduate degree. Further, our earlier

experiences with higher education demonstrate that the building blocks to a career in academia require relational investment before we even complete college as undergraduates. The institution's investment in people is needed if incoming students are to engage with women faculty of color who often provide mentorship beyond the students' undergraduate careers (as demonstrated in our narratives).

Federally funded TRIO programs have helped U.S. students from low-income and first-generation college backgrounds prepare for and earn their college degrees, often-times helping to stop the cycle of poverty (Jean, 2011). Unfortunately, these federal programs are only funded to serve about 10% of the eligible population, and the funding cuts continue. There is a necessity and obligation of the academy to sustain and nurture these spaces of possibility.

We encourage administrators and decision makers to trust in the process of adopting another way of thinking to handle protocols and procedures. For example, when Women of Color, especially with transformative justice agendas, have ideas about institutional activities, writ large, trust in the process of trial and error, support leadership positions with salary increases and funding for research and creative activities. When active shooter trainings are scheduled, couple them with professional development on institutionalized racism and intersectionality experiences by Queer African American and Indigenous women combined; start there and work your way to the varied experiences felt by all.

If there are few faculty lines available, include requirements for social justice initiatives in that specific discipline, and require years of experience doing people-of-color-led initiatives successfully. Reflect the demographics of the local communities in leadership positions. Serve the surrounding counties and do so with horizontal vs hierarchical approaches to making decisions, shared governance. In addition, provide support systems for bureaucratic processes such as paperwork to institutionalize a student club, etc. This needs to be considered especially if we know that four in 10 American Indian or Alaska Native full-time faculty are instructors, lecturers, and in faculty positions with no academic rank (40.3 percent)—the highest of any group. Furthermore, one-third of Latinx faculty (34.9 percent) and Black faculty (32.3 percent) hold these positions (Espinoza et al., 2019).

Community

We acknowledge the previous generations of Chicana scholars (Cuadraz, 2005) who have paved the way for those of us who are now engaging with the academic process. We continue to expand the community that is built in these spaces while also realizing that community encompasses scholars at different college campuses across the United States and the globe as well as healers, philosophers, and thinkers in our communities surrounding the academic institution. The McNair Program can also be described as a community to offer these opportunities. Previous research reported that the McNair Program has provided a space where the students are able to form a scholar identity. This identity acts as an anchor as they face the new challenges that await in higher education (Keopuhiwa, 2012).

As we reflect on our experiences and community, we encourage each other to support and offer mentorship to Women of Color across the university in the various stages of the process because we all benefit from these moments of connection. As we are writing this paper, we are both preparing for the new academic term which will require us to connect with colleagues and students across our respective campuses. We continue to be sought out to be present at community events and gatherings, committees, curricular activities, etc., so the efforts never end. We build in critical self-reflection so that we do not perpetuate the issues that we experienced in our own trajectories and relationships. This requires us to center communal healing rather than only focusing on individualistic self-care frameworks.

Individual

Self-awareness that is cultivated by self and the reflection of our contributions to teaching and scholarship (a way to sidestep the imposter syndrome or other forms of marginalization) is necessary. This includes institutional support for mental and spiritual health, and a healthy life/work balance. For example, institutions must value and support mothering by providing equitable lactation rooms, equitable and culturally sustaining child care, breaks and support. As new mothers, it is paramount to receive this support as oftentimes academia uproots us from our homelands where our extended family can help support our children. When we move to a new place to pursue the academic position, it can take time to build community. As individuals we can continue to build solidarity for these issues to be included in faculty meetings and to continue raising awareness for administrators across our campuses. It takes a village to ensure our realities are neither erased nor ignored.

This dialogic process also gave us the opportunity to learn more about ourselves and gain greater insight about our journeys in academia and how these journeys have interwoven other important parts about ourselves. What narrative do we reproduce when we share these stories and how do we move away from essentializing experiences of our own? Even when family does not understand the process, are there ways we can find to incorporate them in the journey? How might institutions of higher education be held accountable to offer safe places for learning and growing for Women of Color faculty and students?

We hope that academia may find its way to overcome its deeply rooted challenges and instead become a welcoming space that is able to affirm our ancestors' stories and our families' lineages as well as supporting the preparation of BIPOC scholars. We honor our traditional ways, our voices, dreams, memories, and visions of a re-imagined space, one that we leave better than we found it. We resist by reclaiming space where we belong, nurturing community in this space, and leaving a space that no longer serves us. We share these stories to weave in the narration of these moments as lessons learned for future scholars and relations.

Notes

1. Translation: offering.
2. We use femmetors as opposed to mentors as a way to highlight the feminist epistemologies that we embody in our daily lives.

3. We include “Hispanic” in quotations to subvert its use to describe people. This categorization of identity has been imposed to capitalize on populations to maintain white supremacy and profit from capital gain. See “Making Hispanics” by Cristina G. Mora (2014).
4. Translation: “First God and then school.”
5. Translation- Sharing with community.
6. More information at- <https://democratizingknowledge.syr.edu/>
7. See <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html>

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