

# INSTITUTIONAL ACADEMIC VIOLENCE: Racial and Gendered Microaggressions in Higher Education

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*This work is based on two women—a Chicana and a Native American—from twenty-one women’s testimonios of self-identified low-income or working class women who are pursuing doctorate degrees in the humanities, social sciences, forestry, and education. To better understand women’s racial and gendered educational experiences as “U.S. Women of Color;”<sup>3</sup> I critically examine articulation of their experiences navigating through institutional violence via racial and gendered microaggressions in higher education and within everyday racism, white privilege, and complex power relations.*

**Key Words:** *critical race theory (CRT), theory in the flesh, microaggressions, racial battle fatigue, Pedagogy of Poverty, U.S. Women of Color, Chicana feminism*

The women in this study identified as growing up in poverty or coming from low-income and working-class socioeconomic backgrounds. Educational theorist Angelica V. Hernandez asserts that “basic governmental or historical categories equate poverty with an objective and measurable lack of food, clothing, shelter, and ability to meet basic needs” (2012, 51). However, she argues that what is missing from this particular definition of poverty is a nuanced unearthing of women’s experiences and how U.S. Women of Color draw strengths from their lived socioeconomic struggles, which Hernandez has coined as a “Pedagogy of Poverty” (51–52). Ultimately, I aim to illustrate that for U.S. Women of Color,<sup>1</sup> what counts as theory is shaped by our experiences, material conditions, cultural/experiential knowledge, interdisciplinary feminist approaches, and the presence of a commitment to social justice.

These women have experienced unequal educational access to resources in higher education; this type of injustice for underserved racialized communities of the capitalist political system reinforces systematic forms of oppression throughout the educational pipeline. For U.S. Women of Color, this is evident through institutional racism, white privilege, socioeconomic inequities, sexism, and complex power relations within hostile and intolerant educational arenas. For example, Chicana theorist Gloria E. Anzaldúa asserts:

Racism is especially rampant in places and people that produce knowledge.... Racism sucks out the life blood from our bodies, our souls. As survivors of Racism, women-of-color suffer chronic stress and continual 'post-traumatic stress syndrome' (suffered by survivors of war).... The psychological effects of Racism have been greatly underestimated. (1990, xix)

She boldly argues that racism exists within educational systems and has psychological implications, such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), that impact U.S. Women of Color's bodies, minds, and spirits. Furthermore, in a groundbreaking study by Kimberly Troung, "Racism and Racial Trauma in Doctoral Study: How Students of Color Experience and Negotiate the Political Complexities of Racial Encounters," high levels of psychological and physiological trauma from racism and race-based distress within predominantly white universities have been reported (2010). Race-based trauma endured by U.S. Women of Color in the academy represents real and detrimental psychological ramifications. In this essay, I highlight how two women navigated systematic racism in predominantly hostile and intolerant institutional spaces. More importantly, I illustrate the ways in which their testimonios teach us how to overcome systematic injustices by providing counternarratives to violence grounded in advocacy. Through them, we learn about the ways they encountered

and overcame various types of racial and gendered microaggressions, thus creating vital strategies to not only to survive, but to thrive.

Here, I examine the types, contexts, effects, and responses women strategically use to navigate institutional violence and microaggressions within predominantly white, hostile public universities and academic spaces. Institutional violence is a type of microaggressions relating to the effects of racism and race-based trauma that produces psychological and physiological consequences—particularly to women’s bodies, minds, health, and quality of life in the academy. According to Daniel Solórzano, racial microaggressions are a form of systematic racism used to keep racialized communities in subordinate positions. Racial microaggressions emerge through: 1) subtle verbal and nonverbal assaults directed toward People of Color, often carried out automatically or unconsciously; 2) layered assaults, based on an individual’s race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, immigration status, accent, surname, or phenotypes, and 3) cumulative emotional racial assaults taking a psychological or physiological toll on People of Color within predominantly white universities (1998, 121–136).

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Theoretical foundations in this manuscript include critical race theory (CRT), Chicana feminisms, and a qualitative method of testimonio to better understand the educational experiences of Chicanas and Native American women in higher education. Following is an overview of the theories:

#### **1. Critical Race Theory**

CRT promotes an interdisciplinary perspective to examine how racism, white privilege, and complex power relations impact/impair women’s educational experiences. According to Solórzano, critical race theory “challenges the

dominant discourse of race and racism, as they relate to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups in education” (1998, 122). Critical race theory consists of the following five tenets: 1) centralizes race, racism, and additional intersectionalities in the analysis; 2) provides an interdisciplinary framework; 3) centers the lived experiences of People of Color in the analysis; 4) challenges traditional ideologies and dominant discourses; 5) moves us beyond rhetoric and offers a grounded approach linked to advocacy (122–123).

## **2. Chicana Feminisms: Entering the Lives of Others and Theory in the Flesh**

The first theoretical framework includes Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga’s “Entering the Lives of Others,” which defines “Theory in the Flesh” as “the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longing—all fuse[d] to create a politic born out of necessity,” and our call for revolution and rebellion begins at home (2002, 21). It is a bold and resistant theory that represents an early articulation of Chicana feminism, moving U.S. Women of Color from the margins to the center of a feminist analysis. Both theorists are defiant and refuse to accept silence or apathy to justify any form of subordination or domination.

Chicana researchers use this feminist method to strategically subvert hegemonic feminism by capturing experiential and cultural knowledge produced by U.S. Women of Color. It is a theory rooted in human experiences and does not allow us to separate “the fibers of experience” as struggling people (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2002, 21). I use theory in the flesh to connect women’s experiences and their physical bodies to the analysis. Theory in the flesh focalizes the racialized and gendered political narratives reflected in the women’s testimonios.

In addition, I use Chicana feminism to strategically shift discursive agency, thus centering the racialized subjectivity of Chicanas/Latinas. I argue that

Anzaldúa and Moraga have created feminist-oriented research practices that analyze oppression within a history of colonialism, patriarchy, cultural nationalism, power, and white privilege. Chicana feminism also allows researchers to create knowledge from alternative sources, such as women's bodies, memories/traumas, experiential knowledge, ancestral wisdom, and cultural intuition. Dolores Delgado Bernal posits that cultural intuition implicates personal, academic, and professional experiences, as well as our Chicana feminist oriented research practices (1998). Therefore, our lived experiences and ability to use our experiential knowledge serves as a critical tool in utilizing our political narratives as methods of resistance, empowerment, and survival in academia. Chicana feminism is fluid, theoretically innovative, interdisciplinary, and a politically-transformative body of knowledge that allows theorization from the intersections, as well as the interstices found within connections of the body, mind, and spirit—making connections where knowledge is also created.

### **3. Testimonio Methodology**

I used testimonio because it provides a format to document and better understand the effects of racism and race-based trauma by capturing the psychological and physiological consequences to women's bodies, minds, and health in higher education. Testimonios allow us to understand how institutional violence affects Chicana and Native American women in the educational pipeline. I use testimonio as a qualitative method to preserve and document the political narrative of women through the power of memory, remembering, pain/trauma, and recollection. Testimonios document and inscribe into existence a social witness account of narratives based on experiences, political persecutions, and human struggles often erased or appropriated through Western imperial discourses. Testimonio allows researchers to reveal important politicized witness accounts of resistance, survival, and hope while setting a standard for

emancipatory feminist research that advocates change through a grounded and organic research process. With this approach, the women in the study are also better able to reflect, reveal, and theorize the discursive assaults to their bodies, minds, and overall quality of life inside the academy. The women also assume agency by sharing various navigational strategies utilized to overcome hostile and intolerant academic environments.

More importantly, this methodology allows the witness and the researcher to name and expose the discursive assaults experienced by institutional, social, and political injustices occurring in higher education. Most notably, this manuscript contributes to creating a critical gendered space to better understand how Chicana and Native American women resist, survive, and create navigational strategies and thus respond to racial and gendered microaggressions at the professoriate level.

### **The Implications of Racism and Race-Based Trauma**

According to Robert T. Carter and J.M. Forsyth, current definitions of racism do not offer ways to connect specific acts of racism to emotional and psychological reactions (2009). They argue that in understanding acts of racism, what is missing are clear definitions that allow us to link racist acts to the victim's emotional and psychological responses. Moreover, they assert the imperative to reexamine the relationship between racist acts and the victim's psychological and physiological state of health. They posit that traditional fields—and psychology in general—disregarded microaggressions, thus omitting race-based trauma and prolonged exposure to racism in conventional clinical diagnoses for People of Color.

For example, in a study conducted by Robert T. Carter titled “Racism and Psychological and Emotional Injury: Recognizing and Assessing Race-Based Trauma” (2007), he asserts that racism and its associative trauma have been

excluded in diagnosing stress, trauma, and injury in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV* (or the DSM-IV-TR). As the official diagnostic system for mental health disorders in the United States, it is imperative that the DSM-IV-TR reconceptualizes its diagnostic manual so as not to exclude racism and race-based trauma in clinical diagnoses for People of Color, as racism continues to manifest in everyday interactions of people.

William A. Smith, Walter R. Allen, and Lynette L. Danley propose and assert the term *racial battle fatigue* (RBF) and argue that RBF appears through prolonged exposure to racism by People of Color in predominantly white institutions through psychological and physiological effects (2007). They argue that continued race-based distress triggers racial battle fatigue through one's "flight or fight" psychological response system. For example, in one of the first case studies conducted by Smith he documents the implications of racism for this group of racialized men, such as the notion that prolonged racism also develops racial battle fatigue. Some of the symptoms associated with RBF include elevated blood pressure, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, acute stress, rapid heart palpitations, nausea, insomnia, suppressed immunity, increased sickness, tension headaches, trembling, and chronic pain. Additional symptoms relating to anticipated racial conflict include: diarrhea, upset stomach, constant anxiety, rapid mood swings, difficulty thinking or speaking coherently, and emotional or social withdrawal. We can conclude that race-based stress aggravates the factors that increase the risk of long-term health disparities for People of Color. If untreated, prolonged racial battle fatigue may also lead to health conditions such as depression, anxiety disorder, insomnia, social withdrawal, and post-traumatic stress.

These conditions activate the human response system, and if unchecked can lead to a collapsed psychological state or chronic conditions that

debilitate one's health and quality of life. However, what is missing from leading race-based trauma literature is a critical race and gendered analysis of associated symptoms and effects on U. S. Women of Color. To date, few feminists have done educational scholarship pertaining to the implications of racism and racial battle fatigue with regards to U.S. Women of Color in higher education.

Furthermore, findings from race-based studies reveal that the frequently ignored effects of racism can cause deeper implications of racial battle fatigue for marginalized groups subjected to prolonged microaggressions. Undeniable parallels exist between racial battle fatigue and PTSD. Although clinically diagnosed, PTSD is a psychological disability in trauma survivors and veterans of war. This national case study addresses and responds to this profound gap in research inquiry and seeks to illuminate these discursive gaps in the literature in order to shed light on the crippling aftermath of race-based discrimination of Chicana and Native American women at the doctorate stage. Systematic racism continually and consistently manifests in different periods of history into the twenty-first century, albeit in new and unexpected forms. For instance, previous forms of racial hatred were overt, direct, and often intentional. They have increasingly morphed into contemporary, subtle, indirect, and often disguised forms. Derald, W. Sue et al. offer that, "The new manifestation of covert racism is like carbon monoxide: invisible, but potentially lethal" (2007, 72). To describe this form of racism that occurs in the daily lives of People of Color, some researchers prefer to use the term *racial microaggressions*.

Still racism remains institutionalized throughout U.S. society, policy, and educational systems. Solórzano suggests that the new manifestations



of racism are evident in racialized/gendered microaggressions within educational systems. Thus, the amorphous nature of race-based discrimination facilitates its continued use against People of Color to inflict fear, oppression, and domination.

### **Racial Microaggressions and Challenging White Privilege in Academia**

According to educational researchers William Smith, Tara J. Yosso, and Solórzano (2007), racism exists through institutional systems where white privilege, economic injustice, and power justify the inferiority of racialized groups. Researchers assert that racial hierarchies function through white privilege and white supremacy by maintaining a system of racial domination and exploitation where resources privilege whites and continuously oppress People of Color. In other words, within the American social landscape, white privilege and supremacy serve to strategically position whites as entitled beneficiaries of privilege, status, and dominance.

Moreover, Smith et al. argue that the present day effects of racism in higher education are related to issues of “structural segregation,” evident in the racial prejudices of white supremacy in the 21st century. The authors suggest that structural segregation of People of Color becomes highly evident in educational institutions that are not free of hostile climates that have historically subordinated racial and gender groups in higher education. Similarly, in “Challenging Racial Battle Fatigue on Historically White Campuses: A Critical Race Examination of Race-Related Stress” (2007), Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano argue that negative ideologies and racially-hostile behaviors on white campuses create a tense and isolating atmosphere for People of Color. They liken the hostile academic climate to a “war-like battleground” that precipitates

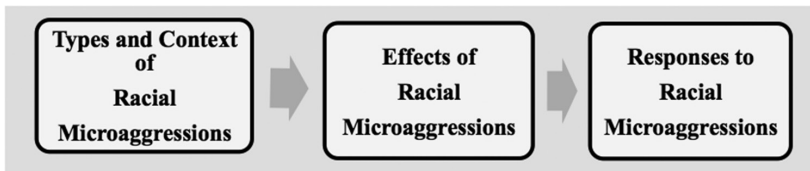
psychological and physiological strains and impairs the health and quality of life of People of Color. According to these researchers, for racialized communities in the academy, racial battle fatigue is “like being alone on the front lines of a racial war.” It appears in the form of elevated stress levels, activated physiologically through “unavoidable front-line racial battles”—combating, confronting, and navigating through systematic racism in predominantly white, hostile institutions. Consequently, People of Color who endure and navigate through continuous exposure to racism and race-based trauma equate their experiences in higher education to a “psychological warfare game played every day just to survive” (Smith, Yosso, Solórzano, 314–315). Furthermore, there is a strong connection that links racism and race-based stress to mental health disparities for People of Color operating within predominantly white institutions. In particular, white privilege in the classroom becomes physically and emotionally damaging and draining for racialized communities. Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano suggest that People of Color must learn to navigate through psychological and physiological racism while simultaneously living and working under constant emotional distress, thereby learning to function in ever-present racially-hostile climates. In other words, it is imperative that People of Color learn to strategically navigate through chronically stressful situations every day to survive racial and gendered microaggressions that, simply stated, white populations do not experience in the academy due to their privilege.

Guided by Solórzano and Lindsay Pérez-Huber’s “Model for Data Collection and Analysis of Racial Microaggressions,” I study racial and gender microaggressions (2012). I do this with the aim of understanding the types and contexts, as well as the effects and responses, of Chicanas and Native American women within predominantly white public universities.

The model reveals four central areas pertaining to racial microaggressions that occur within educational systems, listed here in detail:

*Figure 1: A Model for Data Collection and Analysis of Racial Microaggressions*

Source: Daniel Solórzano and Lindsay Pérez-Huber; 2012



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

### **Introduction of the Women**

For this report, I rely on testimonios provided by Amelia and Rainy Dawn to examine the effects of racial microaggressions as they strategically navigated their doctoral studies. Through these testimonios I highlight institutional violence in higher education as both Amelia and Rainy Dawn pursue their PhDs. I reflect upon issues of invisibility, isolation, and agency, in order to expose the consequences of the microaggressions they experienced. For them, it was a conscious choice to break the silences associated with various injustices as they strategically navigate systemic racism, white privilege, complex power relations, and institutional violence.

### **Testimonios: Political Narratives**

From feminist perspectives, testimonio preserve stories, memories, and lived experiences.

Each of the selected testimonios highlights the types, contexts, effects, and responses of racialized and gendered microaggressions—institutional forms of violence—shared by Amelia and Rainy Dawn.

### **Amelia's Testimonio: Fetishizing the Queer Chicana Body**

Amelia, identifying as both Mexicana and Chicana, was born in Mexico and sees herself as working-class. She is currently pursuing her doctorate degree in a predominantly white university in the Midwest. Her feminist research includes cultures of resistance practiced within queer migrant communities and Women of Color feminisms.

Amelia states:

I have faced racism because white faculty and students perceive me...as inferior to them. They have treated me and other women of color, very poorly. For example, white colleagues have yelled at me

in front of the entire class. They did this when I calmly explained why it is troubling that white, middle-class women conduct research on Black and Chicana sexualities. [Regularly] I have felt tokenized because white students have invited me to social events and asked me questions about my thoughts on social issues only to appropriate my words and pretend that they have always had...knowledge of the lived experiences of queer People of Color. White women who claimed to be feminists repeated comments I made in class verbatim. They never...acknowledged any of my contributions to intellectual dialogue. Being the only Chicana in the graduate classroom is another form of racism and tokenization. Every contribution that I made while in the classroom was highly scrutinized and questioned. Most of my comments, as I said earlier, were accepted and appropriated, but I never felt that any comment coming from me would be accepted as truth. As a result, I worked hard to provide evidence for every little statement I wanted to convey.

My program prides itself in being a queer-friendly place. This is a very limited view imposed by those who are white, middle-class, thin, and able-bodied. The program is itself populated by very normative bodies that claim to be sex positive.... The problem with this is that brown working-class bodies of queer people are exploited in the name of sex positive academic spaces. I felt a lot of sexism when white colleagues expected me to be as free with my body. I heard conversations about my sexuality constantly. Colleagues wanted to know who I was sleeping with. As a queer woman of color, I felt that my body was under high scrutiny while they expected me to perform and move like the majority of queer white middle class bodies. I was different because I was not sleeping with any of

them and I was eventually excluded from social events. However, I would have been invited to the social functions hosted by white queer academics, if I had acted like them and assumed a sex positive attitude. But, I never trusted them and my body felt tense when I was around them.

I have felt anxiety, insecurity, depression, and pain in the hips. I have experienced insomnia. I have spent many sleepless nights wondering if I was doing something wrong in the classroom or if my voice was being heard and understood. I did much self-blaming when others did not understand my position as a Woman of Color. During the time I took doctoral classes, my anxiety and self-doubt increased dramatically...I could not “feel” or “see” my accomplishments. I would cry almost every night after getting home from the university campus. The emotional pain became physical pain and it was in this painful stage that I claimed my spirituality. By spirituality, I mean my sense of knowing and seeing beyond what is obvious to the naked eye, and my gut feeling and sixth sense formed part of my spirituality. I began to dig deep into my psyche and figure out what was true and real about me—I have a very strong will and a deep sense of social justice. No matter what happens during the doctoral program, I know I will finish. I honestly don’t know if completing the PhD is worth the damage to my body and soul, but I know I will complete it.<sup>4</sup>

Amelia’s testimonio provides an account of what many U.S. Women of Color endure in predominantly white, hostile spaces controlled by Western feminist thought. Amelia states that “gendered oppression amongst women in her department created a hostile and academically violent environment” that

made her feel sick and at times powerless, as white women used their privilege in intrusive ways pertaining to her sexuality, which she associates with her identity as a Chicana. However, Amelia responded by challenging the intrusive behavior that “erotized her brown body” by using her voice to create a healthy boundary with her white peers and faculty.

The effects of microaggressions would make her feel “disconnected from her body,” as a defense mechanism to cope with the raw emotions such as anger, pain, and trauma when they felt entitled to scrutinize her sexuality. Amelia responded to the blatant microaggressions by informing her peers that her sexuality and/or activities were “none of their concern, thus not open to public scrutiny.” She also sought out supportive colleagues that were predominantly composed of Women of Color and created counter-spaces within her department to navigate through the blatant racialized and gendered microaggressions. Amelia enacted agency by asserting her voice and enforcing a boundary pertaining to information shared in her predominantly white feminist department. Moreover, Amelia explained how female Faculty of Color recreated oppressive academic spaces for Women of Color in her department by reinforcing hegemony and an “individualistic academic climate” that did not create and/or nurture a supportive academic environment.<sup>5</sup> Instead, it promoted an isolating and competitive atmosphere that lacked support from faculty and students. Further, Amelia stated that these prolonged racialized/gendered microaggressions affected her body, mind, health, and quality of life during her PhD studies.

The psychological and physiological effects that Amelia reported include depression, PTSD, low self-esteem, clenching teeth/grinding teeth, tension, pain in her body, difficulty breathing, weight gain—approximately seventeen to twenty pounds—anger, exhaustion, chronic anxiety, acute stress, trauma, rapid aging, chronic fatigue, insomnia, isolation, dissociative disorder, high

cholesterol, exhaustion, and a taxed immune system leading to continuous viral infections. Amelia also reported various changes to her body and menstrual cycle. For example, she had irregular periods, extreme pelvic pain, and chronic PMS.

### **Responses Used to Challenge Institutional Racialized and Gendered Microaggressions**

Amelia responded to the microaggressions by creating community outside of her department, as well as counter-spaces via collective third space feminist circles that consisted of politically progressive social justice educators. These counter-spaces created a safe, supportive, and “protected academic environment” for Amelia to strategically navigate the institutional violence, as documented in her testimonio in relation to hostile feminist politics within her department.

The navigational strategies Amelia relied on to survive her PhD appear below. Without placing any of these in ranking order, she:

- established healthy “boundaries” during graduate school;
- sought out progressive Women of Color in her department and created a counter-space for support and long-term survival;
- became cautious around female Faculty of Color who were oppressive to Women of Color in her department, seeking out an advisor who she could trust;
- developed a strong friendship with a Mexicana colleague also living in the Midwest, and this friendship became a main source of strength, support, and inspiration;
- sought out politically-conscious Women of Color<sup>5</sup> to have dialogues and openly discuss racism and isolation via microaggressions at the university;



- made it a priority to practice “critical reflection” each day, to figure out what exactly was hurting her through the hostile interactions, and to come up with navigational strategies to take care of her health, energies, and body;
- relied on the love and support of her family, especially her mother who gave her a healing and safe space to talk or to simply exist;
- took time to laugh and unwind; laughing on the phone with her mother was healing, inspirational, and gave her strength to keep going; and
- learned how to ask for help especially in navigating a hostile academic environment. She also became more open to support networks like therapy to help her talk about her concerns and needs.

Amelia’s testimonio critically reminds us of the significance of taking time daily to heal from institutional violence. It is vital to create critical race and gendered counter-spaces to strategically navigate through microaggressions. Anzaldúa calls for “survival” as an integral component of being proactive and preserving and enacting our creativity, abilities, and gifts through our political works. She reminds us that our political activism is a creative and conscious act; we must move forward and continue writing, resisting, speaking, healing, and surviving to create change. Her testimonio is an important assertion to strategically navigate racism, white privilege, and complex power relations in a hostile department.

### **Testimonio of Rainy Dawn: Navigating Institutional Violence**

Rainy Dawn, a Luiseño tribe member who grew up in poverty, informs us of the prolonged effects of racialized and gendered microaggressions she endured during her studies. Rainy Dawn’s story displays resistance, advocacy, and careful navigation used to complete a PhD within a predominantly white, hostile Women’s Studies department. Rainy Dawn asserts:

While in graduate school, I developed chronic depression, PTSD, high blood pressure, fatigue, insomnia, panic attacks, nausea, teeth grinding, irregular periods, and a painful miscarriage. Still healing from deep traumas that impaired body, mind, and spirit.... issues that were not “normal stressors” of graduate school.... Like slow poison that cripples you from within, symptoms evolved over time. Throughout my studies, I experienced isolation, hostile persecution, and continuous racism from white female faculty who abused their power in the university.... I was often put into a room in attempts to silence me as our grad chair yelled at me for reporting a white tenured professor for her racist comments in class. I was verbally assaulted by our angry white chair, for filing a grievance and reporting the department...I wouldn't leave.... But, I had no other choice, than to “speak up” or else it would be easier for them to get rid of me.... The hostile climate literally took a toll. Day after day, I lived in a dysfunctional academic climate, but did all in my power to keep myself grounded through faith and family.... I started to “disconnect from my body” to tolerate their racist assaults, hatred, isolation, and character assassination, but it was difficult. I had sacrificed so much to be here, so in heart and spirit I refused to leave without a fight! I would often go into combat mode while on campus, as my fragmentation was my invisible protective armor for the long battles. I also documented every act of racial hatred, unethical conduct, segregation, and public humiliation occurring in private venues inside my department.

The following year, I was labeled a “trouble maker” for reporting my department...navigating the bureaucracy was exhausting. For

me, it was not a university, but a combat zone...I never had the privilege of just being a PhD student; it was always about survival and tactical planning against political injustices...The deep anger and rage motivated me to survive. I used my voice to challenge the department's attempts to push me out quietly. However, I would not leave, I knew that for sure...After every battle, I had to learn to quickly navigate the next round of battles...This was my experience in higher education and it felt like I was a combatant in a war zone. I reported my department to various university agencies, as well as filed official discriminatory grievances, which infuriated them. I was not leaving without my PhD and I was prepared to take legal action, if necessary.

In graduate school, I was asked if I wanted to be hospitalized for exhaustion by my medical doctor and that really scared me! I could feel the slow debilitating effects to my body, as I engaged each battle, as I became plagued with infections like bronchitis, nasal colds...It was an overwhelming sense of feeling tired all the time from the prolonged exposure to hostile academic climate, and I found myself struggling with day-to-day necessities, as waves of depression took over. The pain, body aches, and fatigue manifesting in my body...I slipped into a dark place, as a deep depression settled in, so I sought help and resources to navigate through the cumulative impact of microaggressions. I continued to report my department and decided to go public after consulting with an attorney...There was no way I was going to leave or quit, despite the additional hurdles my department placed before me—no advisor, no funding, no equal educational access, yet I was determined to finish with the love and support of my family throughout the process.

In time, I slowly regained my health. I never made a full recovery, but I remain determined to heal. I am learning how to manage my conditions with human dignity, compassion, and patience as I continue to recover. In retrospect, I believe Creator has a plan for all of us, and I am determined to use these painful educational experiences to help others....

Rainy Dawn's testimonio exposes the ways in which systematic racism interconnects to intolerance, hatred, and systematic violence. She informs us about the significance of reporting serious violations of the Civil Rights Act to both inner and outside agencies to better assist in issues of violations of federal and state laws. She bravely assumed agency by documenting the discriminatory microaggressions and reported her department to the Whistleblower Hotline, Ombud's Office, Dean of Students, Graduate Division, and external agencies such as the Civil Rights Office.

Rainy Dawn documented various psychological and physiological effects from overt racialized/gendered microaggressions in a hostile academic climate. The physiological symptoms she experienced include chronic depression, PTSD, chronic anxiety, chronic stress, fatigue, insomnia, disassociate disorder, weight gain—approximately forty to fifty pounds—chronic pain, diarrhea, nausea, nightmares, and high blood pressure. According to her medical doctor, the reproductive issues could have been caused by extreme “distress,” but the cause of a miscarriage could not be determined. Rainy Dawn shared this personal part of her testimonio in hopes that it would help other Women of Color heal from this type of loss, pain, and sacrifice. Her testimonio also reveals the ways in which implications to women's bodies, minds, and spirit become invisible when reproductive issues such as miscarriages remain in the shadows of hegemonic

graduate school experiences. Hence, it is vital to recognize the institutional violence associated with traversing higher education. We must make time to reflect, rest, heal, and seek support in such spaces as prayer circles, therapy, and family throughout the process of graduate school.

Rainy Dawn responded to the microaggressions by rebelliously refusing to leave or quit her doctoral studies; instead, she responded with defiance and resistance, and thus made a political decision to remain and challenge the push-out process that takes place behind closed doors. She strategically met with university administrators and diligently documented the push-out process. In addition, she consulted with an attorney who advised her to file an official discrimination grievance and to send copies to external agencies like the Civil Rights Office, which is not associated with the university. In addition, Rainy Dawn reported her department to a Whistleblower Hotline and the University of California Regents for segregation, unequal educational access, retaliatory treatment, racism, isolation, privacy violations, unethical conduct, persecution, violations of federal/state laws, and discriminatory/differential treatment based on her race/ethnicity, class, gender, and age. Her political strategy was effective in publicly exposing her department's unethical conduct, as university officials intervened on her behalf. However, the process of intervention was slow and caused additional harm to her health, as university officials engaged a protracted response.

Rainy Dawn's testimonio reveals institutional contexts of microaggressions. For instance, she experienced isolation, character assassination, discriminatory/differential treatment, racism, retaliations, bullying, intentional harm, educational inequities, privacy violations of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), violations of university policies, as well as violations of Federal/State laws—Civil Rights Act and

Title IX—by her predominantly white department. However, she also made a choice to remain in school and fought back using the resources that institutions provide, as well as external resources for accountability.

### **Responses Engaged to Contest Racial and Gendered Microaggressions**

Rainy Dawn stated that, “leaving [her] PhD was not an option, and [she] refused to leave or quit!” She responded with acts of resistance and defiance; her goal was to complete her PhD as well as navigate through the hostile politics. The responses and strategies she used to challenge the overt and prolonged microaggressions causing racial battle fatigue during the push-out process further reveals her commitment to surviving and thriving. More importantly, she employed *testimonio* as a political narrative, sharing her experiences with other women as a counter-story to call for accountability, responsibility, and ethical practices within universities that continue to practice institutional forms of racial and gendered microaggressions. To contest these attacks, Rainy Dawn:

- utilized internal university resources to report violations of the Civil Rights Act and filed an official grievance of differential/discriminatory treatment based on her race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and age in a public university;
- documented accounts of systematic racism, unethical conduct, segregation, intentional harm, verbal abuse, and privacy violations, and then reported her department to internal and external agencies (her strategy was to expose the violations and seek protections to complete her PhD);
- lobbied support from faculty and university administrators, even when some administrators sent her in “endless administrative circles” without protections from retaliations that caused greater

- harm to her health in the form of physical exhaustion, chronic fatigue, anxiety, racial battle fatigue, and high blood pressure;
- consulted with an attorney to guide her through the internal university grievance process—a one-sided procedure set up to protect the interests of the university, and by doing so also prepared for legal action outside the university;
  - gained family support for her decision to remain at the university and helped her heal in body, mind, and spirit to “fight back” as she built communal support networks in the form of family, prayer circles, and friends, outside the university;
  - sought supportive faculty that she could trust through the push-out process, as a tactic to move forward and remain in her PhD studies;
  - used activism to organize resources for support, guidance, and assistance to contend with hostile educational experiences;
  - relied on acupuncture, a nutritionist, exercise, meditation, a therapist, healing, prayers, and sweat lodges to survive the toxic academic climate and to rejuvenate her body, mind, and spirit; and
  - used her lived experiences and painful memories to help others by exposing the racism, white privilege, and the push-out process.

In summary, Rainy Dawn’s testimonio informs us that she used various navigational strategies to successfully respond to the racialized/gendered microaggressions in her program. She concluded her testimonio by stating that she “survived these painful educational experiences because [her] family never allowed [her] to give up!” She also stated that she felt an ethical obligation and human responsibility to expose the educational injustices occurring in her department. Rainy Dawn’s testimonio informs us of how she strategically navigated through the aggressive push-out process by using acts of resistance, resilience, faith/hope, and grounded activism. She continues

to use these types of “painful educational experiences” to seek healthier and tolerant academic environments for others in the academy. In the end, no one pushed out Rainy Dawn. She refused to leave. Instead, she successfully completed her doctoral degree. She currently teaches at a college near her reservation and remains committed to using her insights to humanize academic spaces for Women of Color.

### **Conclusion**

These two testimonios reveal various psychological and physiological effects of racialized and gendered microaggressions. Both describe microaggressions ranging from prolonged, cumulative exposure spanning in intensity from subtle to overt types of racialized and gendered microaggressions. Also, both women developed chronic conditions, increased illness, depressed immune systems, and racial battle fatigue while pursuing their doctoral studies as a result of prolonged exposure.

The case study informs us of the psychological and physiological implications of racialized and gendered microaggressions to women’s bodies, minds, spirit, and quality of life. The women revealed physiological changes to their bodies, including changes in their menstrual cycles and reproductive experiences. From these two women, we learned about the serious psychological and physiological changes to Chicana and Native American women’s bodies and health during their professorial pursuits. Their testimonios provide us with vital information pertaining to the body/mind/spirit connection—insights that are of critical importance for the future protection of our bodies and quality of life in relation to high stress institutions that practice violence. Moreover, they make a case for creating healthy and positive academic environments throughout the educational pipeline for underserved U.S. Women of Color.



From the women in this study, we have learned that it is imperative to make time to heal, mend our wounds, and again rise up armed with navigational strategies, determination, and faith to continue to end human degradation and aid those that struggle in silence. Survival and regaining our creative abilities—to teach, write, create, protest, rebel, heal, love, exist, and to seek justice—is imperative as we continue to strive for emancipatory changes as conscious, political, and ethical feminists in a world that literally remains in conflict, war, and turmoil. Through their stories, Amelia and Rainy Dawn provide us with vital strategies to successfully combat microaggressions and thus navigate through racism, complex power relations, and white privilege. The significance of creating safe counter-spaces that foster healthy and positive outcomes to challenge institutional violence in higher education cannot be underestimated and merits serious attention and future feminist research.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I use the term “U.S. Women of Color” as a fluid term that includes a historical analysis of racialized struggles that were excluded from the white feminist movement of the 1960s. The term is used as a political term to capture racialized women’s struggle within the geographic context of the United States. For instance, the term includes Native American, Chicanas/Latinas, African American, and Asian American women.

<sup>2</sup> The Native American tribes in the study include Mandan, Hidatsa, Sioux, Gabrieliño (Tongva), Muskogee Creek, Flandreau, Santee Sioux, Ojibwa-Cree, Luiseño, Poarch Band of Creek Indians, and Navajo.

<sup>3</sup> I invoke the self-identifier, “Chicana,” as a politicized term that theorizes from a site of consciousness-raising, resistance, and praxis that engages in social advocacy. The term is reflective of a history with Mexico and critical of U.S. imperialism.

<sup>4</sup> Narratives culled from testimonios collected throughout 2012.

<sup>5</sup> In the study, women were highly critical of female faculty of color that also abused their power and authority within their institutions, thus faculty of color are also accountable and responsible for recreating hostile academic spaces for U.S. Women of Color.

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