



**JOTERÍA IDENTITY AND CONSCIOUSNESS:  
PLÁTICAS OF CO-CREATION WITH  
UNDERGRADUATE QUEER LATINX  
STUDENTS**



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### SERGIO A. GONZALEZ

Sergio Gonzalez is a Research Associate at the Rutgers Center for Minority Serving Institutions and the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity, and Justice. He is also a Ph.D. student in the School of Educational

Studies Program at Claremont Graduate University (CGU). Sergio earned his M.Ed in Postsecondary Administration and Student Affairs from the University of Southern California (USC) and his B.A. in Communication Studies from Manhattanville College. Prior to his return to education, he worked at College Track as a College Success Fellow, where he advised and supported students from marginalized communities as they transitioned from high school and into college. Sergio's research interests focus around Jotería pedagogy, education equity, social justice, undocumented/DACAmented students and Queer Latinx students in higher education.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

### JULIO SALGADO

Julio Salgado is the co-founder of DreamersAdrift and the Migrant Storytelling Manager for The Center for Cultural Power. His status as an undocumented, queer activist has fueled the contents of his visual art, which depict key individuals and moments of the DREAM Act and the migrant rights movement. Undocumented students, organizers and allies across the country have used Salgado's artwork to call attention to the migrant rights movement.

Salgado is the co-creator of The Disruptors Fellowship, an inaugural fellowship for emerging television writers of color who identify as trans/ and or non-binary, disabled, undocumented and/or formerly undocumented immigrants. His work has been displayed at the Oakland Museum, SFMOMA and Smithsonian. To see more of his work, go to [juliosalgadoart.com](http://juliosalgadoart.com).

Queer Theory claims to include intersectional analysis, but Jotería emerges from intersectional analysis. The logic of 'starting' with queer studies is premised on an additive model, not an intersectional one. To be 'queer' implies difference and separation from the 'norm,' but Jotería doesn't begin with the norm and look for difference. It begins with life and looks for possibilities (Hames-Garcia, 2020).

My experiences being raised in a mixed-status home as a first-generation, joto, Latinx individual have influenced how I understand, conceptualize, and theorize Jotería identity and consciousness in education. When I defied the odds and made it to college, I became aware of the complexities within the concept of identity. I learned how identity is shaped by individual characteristics, family background, dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts (Tatum, 1997; Stewart et al., 2019). I also learned how limited academic literature is when it comes to scholarship regarding queer people of color and furthermore queer Latinx students in higher education. If there is no access to these counterstories, no discussion of these experiences, no documentation of queer Latinx history, and no understanding of where Sense of Belonging lies, how are we supposed to be visible?

"While Latinx political history is well-documented in extant literature, it is not discussed or studied in the U.S. educational curriculum, unless presented through ethnic studies or Latinx/a/o and Chicanx/a/o studies" (Salinas, 2017, p. 749). Research on Latinx/a/o has established that specific aspects of the transition to college are important to different dimensions of adjustment to college, including, but not limited to, academic and social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and feelings of attachment to the institution (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Moreover, ethnographic explorations of gay college student experiences and identities were an important conceptual and methodological bridge from the earlier psychological, stage-based research to more recent contextual-based work (Renn, 2010). Research also suggests it is worth noting that few of these studies focus on the diversity of race, ability, or social class within LGBT identities or communities; White, able-bodied, and middle-class are assumed the norm (Renn, 2010).

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to understand how Sense of Belonging influences the identity development of queer Latinx students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The research questions that guided this study were (1) How do queer, Latinx students define and perceive Sense of Belonging

at a PWI? (2) How does Sense of Belonging influence the identity development of queer, Latinx students at PWIs? I have three goals for this exploratory work: 1) To conduct a qualitative study to better understand the experiences of five queer Latinx students, 2) To publish these findings, and most importantly 3) To engage in transformative research that is not defined by the confines of traditional social science research allowing for the co-creation through authentic pláticas. The use of pláticas brings a cultural perspective, allowing a space to nurture co-creation of stories to provide agency to participants. Similarly, this study provided a platform to learn to use and understand pláticas as I engaged with my participants. According to Krathwohl (2009), researchers should conduct pilot studies with smaller samples to test instruments in order to determine potential problems before intended use for larger studies. The findings will be used to strengthen my research design and measurement tools for my future dissertation.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

This study is significant for several reasons. “Too often, queer Latina/os/x and Chicana/os/x and other queer communities of color are pushed aside to the margins of society” (Tijerina Revilla & Santillana, 2014, p. 172). As Duran et al. (2020) argue, “To investigate the lives of queer Latinx/a/o collegians without using explicitly queer Latinx/a/o theories, for instance, can lead to crises of representation and continue the Whiteness, heteronormativity, and/or trans oppression that has defined queer and trans postsecondary research” (p. 68). Second, silenced, queer, Latinx student experiences, both inside of the classroom, and within the larger college community, lead to a lack of what Strayhorn (2019) describes as a Sense of Belonging. Sense of Belonging is described as the student’s perception of affiliation and identification with their institution’s community (Strayhorn, 2019). Finally, “homophobia, patriarchy, and White supremacy are deeply embedded in academia and our communities; consequently, there is a lack of literature that speaks to the collective experiences” that speaks to *Jotería*<sup>1</sup>, queer people of color, and Latinx students (Tijerina Revilla & Santillana, 2014, p.172).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### SENSE OF BELONGING

Latinx students have traditionally found a college-going culture finely tuned to the needs and interests of a historically White student body, faculty, and staff (Duran et al., 2020, Naynaha, 2016). Upon enrollment, they are faced with purchased placement tests that are calibrated for a White student body, aimed at the efficient sorting and labeling of students as either “college-ready” or “developmental” (Naynaha, 2016). Hurtado and Carter (1997) suggest that “it is necessary to assess the effectiveness of various measures of students’ participation in a wide range of activities and memberships in multiple communities in the college environment to understand which activities contribute to an overall Sense of Belonging or cohesion among diverse students” (p. 328), and in this case, queer Latinx students at PWIs. Furthermore, “A Sense of Belonging contains both cognitive and affective elements in that the individual’s cognitive evaluation of his or her [or their] role in relation to the group results in an affective response” (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 328).

The research on Sense of Belonging or “rather, it’s nature in which students talk about Sense of Belonging that underscores its significance to the college student experience” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 6), usually pertains to the experiences of queer, White college students in higher education rather than on the experiences of queer, college students of color (Duran et al., 2020). More specifically, when searching for queer and Latinx students in higher education, the lack of representation and visibility becomes apparent. Strayhorn (2019) describes how we as people function better in contexts (i.e., settings, environments) where feelings of isolation and intimidation are removed, and our belonging needs are satisfied. Early research on Sense of Belonging suggests its importance as a basic human need and motivation for behavior (Strayhorn, 2019). As Duran et al. (2020) argue, “the dearth of research and the increasing number of queer, Latinx students pursuing college degrees warrants an increase in literature that can honor their voices and provide visibility” (p. 78).

### JOTERÍA IDENTITY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Tijerina Revilla and Santillana (2014) feel it is important to begin with your personal testimonies before sharing research and a vision of a collective Jotería Identity and Consciousness (p. 167). Telling our queerstories as “counterstories” in the Critical Race Theory tradition positions us and illustrates the direct connection between who we are as individuals and how we participate in an

<sup>1</sup> The term *jotería* derives from the colloquial Spanish-language term *joto* (sissy, faggot), one of the three pejorative terms (others being *puto* and *maricon*) for gay men in Mexico and in Mexico and Chicanx (a gender-neutral version of Chicano/a; also, Latinx) communities in the United States. (Alvarez & Estrada, 2019).

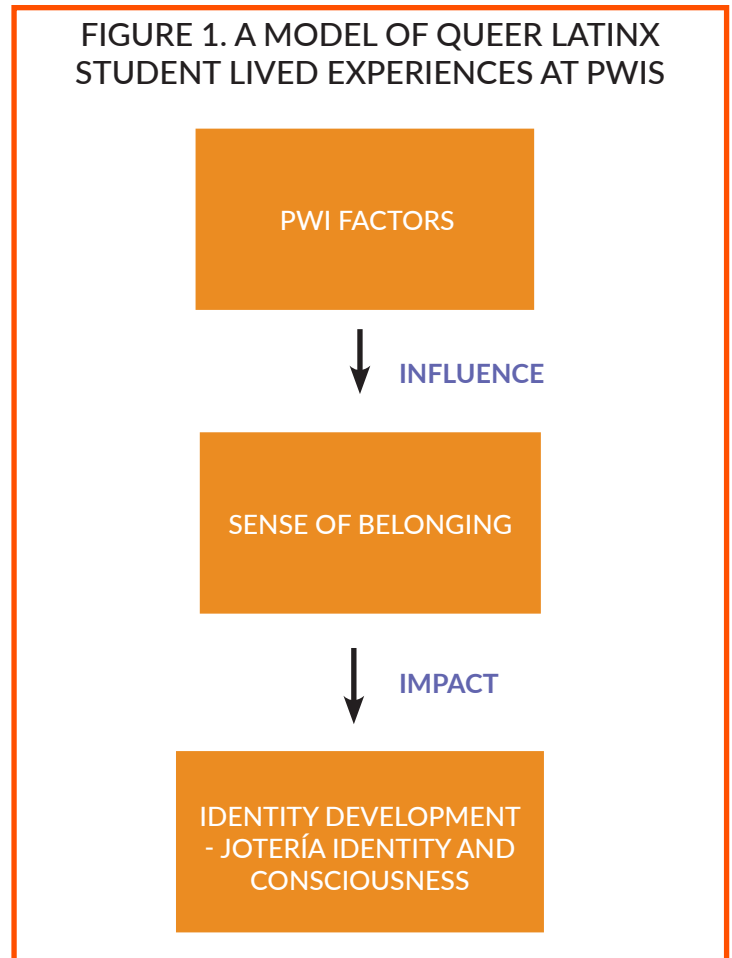


academic community of queer Latinx people (Tijerina Revilla & Santillana, 2014). Terms such as *Jota-historia*, *Joto-historia*, and *Joteria-historia*, or queer histories, are used intentionally to indicate the absence of queer history from traditional academic spaces (Tijerina Revilla & Santillana, 2014). Jotería Identity and Consciousness come from a collective space that speaks to the different experiences in queer journeys. Tijerina Revilla and Santillana (2014) explain that “by documenting Jotería, we can begin to uncover queer-stories that have been systemically silenced and oppressed” (p. 172), much like those of queer Latinx students. Jotería Identity and Consciousness incorporate a “human connection, essential to Jotería studies and the possibilities it offers within academia” (Tijerina Revilla and Santillana, 2014, p. 173). Furthermore, the benefit of Latinx or Chicanx and other related words (e.g., *ixs*) is to gender neutralize the terms, while also providing a term for those who are trans-gender and/or queer. These are important considerations given that Spanish and other romance languages are gendered through standard language conventions, particularly nouns, articles, indirect objects, and groups of people (M. de Onis, 2017).

## THEORETICAL RATIONALE

In order to fully conceptualize the power and use of Tijerina Revilla and Santillana’s theory (2014) of Jotería Identity and Consciousness, I found it essential to incorporate Sense of Belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019) in this study. Jotería Identity and Consciousness can be defined as “A politic of social transformation simultaneously rooted in resistance against oppression and jotx/queer triumph, joy and healing” (Tijerina Revilla, Nuñez, Santillana & Gonzalez, in press). As shown in Figure 1, the theoretical frameworks fit the topic as it centers queer Latinx students’ queerstories as “counterstories” in the Critical Race Theory (CRT) tradition in order to illustrate who they are as individuals. Using Jotería Identity and Consciousness and Sense of Belonging provides a holistic look at queer, Latinx students’ experiences within institutions of higher education. Furthermore, I intentionally incorporated the concept of a pláticas methodology as opposed to traditional interviews “because they are reciprocal exchanges in which participants are co-collaborators and co-creators in the production of knowledge and the research process” (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Garcia & Mireles-Rios, 2019). By referring to a process of reclaiming and documenting personal testimonies and experiences, this study aimed to provide a better understanding of how queer Latinx students at PWIs make sense of their belonging and understand their identity development within these institutions.

FIGURE 1. A MODEL OF QUEER LATINX STUDENT LIVED EXPERIENCES AT PWIS



To explain how Jotería Identity and Consciousness can be used to explore a Sense of Belonging for queer Latinx students at PWIs, I first describe a theoretical understanding of Sense of Belonging. Furthermore, I explain what Jotería Identity and Consciousness looks like and how it can be used in higher education research. After exploring this literature, I detail my positionality and explain what inspired me to use and work with a Jotería framework. Finally, incorporating the pláticas of queer Latinx students, I explore how and in what ways they find a Sense of Belonging at their respective PWI through a Jotería Identity and Consciousness framework. Together we co-created narratives that depicted their existence and how they navigated the oppressive structures known as academia.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

Deriving from Critical Race Theory in education (Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1997), Chicana Feminist Epistemology (Bernal, 1998) and building on Revilla’s (2004) Muxerista framework, Tijerina Revilla & Santillana (2014) describe Jotería Identity and Consciousness with the following terms and characteristics or tenets: (p. 178).

## TERMS

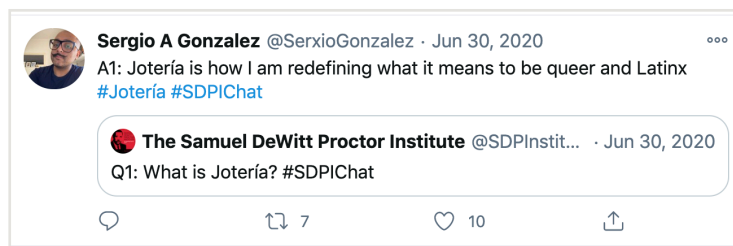
1. *Counterstories* are told from the perspective of marginalized people, as opposed to stories told by the dominant mainstream.
2. *Queer* is an umbrella term used to refer to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people
3. *Latina/o/x* refers to people of Mexican, Caribbean, and South and Central American origin. The term *Chicana/o/x* refers to people of Mexican descent living in the United States.
4. *Jotería* is also an umbrella term for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual expressions. It refers, however, to queer Latina/os/x and Chicana/os/x and gender-nonconforming individuals.
5. The term *queerstory* makes note of the fact that conventional historical accounts continue to be male-dominant, patriarch-centered, and heteronormative.

## CHARACTERISTICS

1. Is rooted in fun, laughter, and radical queer love,
2. Is embedded in a Mexican, Latin American, Indigenous, and African diasporic past and present,
3. Is derived from the terms *Jota/o/x* and has been reclaimed as an identity/consciousness of empowerment,
4. Is based on queer Latinx/a/o and Chicax/a/o and gender-nonconforming realities or lived experiences,
5. Is committed to multidimensional social justice and activism,
6. Values gender and sexual fluidity and expressions,
7. Values the exploration of identities individually and collectively,
8. Rejects homophobia, heteronormativity, racism, patriarchy, xenophobia, gender discrimination, classism, colonization, citizenism, and any other forms of subordination,
9. Claims and is aligned with feminist/muxerista pedagogy and praxis,
10. Claims an immigrant and working-class background/origin,
11. Claims a queer Latinx/a/o and Chicax/a/o ancestry, and
12. Supports community members and family in their efforts to avoid and heal from multidimensional battle fatigue.

The terms and characteristics mentioned above are necessary to highlight as they reinforce empowerment, are intentionally radical, decolonial, and personify an oppositional consciousness (Perez, 2014, p. 144). *Jotería* Identity and Consciousness challenge Latinx/a/o and others on their heteronormative, racist, xenophobic, sexist, and homophobic attitudes through a process of self-education, self-acceptance, self-empowerment, and healing (Tijerina Revilla & Santillana, 2014, p. 175).

## POSITIONALITY



My statement of positionality, as outlined in my previous publication (Duran et al, 2020), remains consistent. In that publication I asserted, “My understanding of *Jotería* has and continues to be an ever-evolving process that allows me to explore my past, to make meaning of my present, and guide my future.” *Jotería* is how I am redefining what it means to be queer and Latinx/a/o. I have come to realize that my *Joto-historia*, or *queerstory*, is a counternarrative not fully embraced by the traditional form of queer theory. My existence within the walls of academia in my brown queer skin has become my resistance. Through Tijerina Revilla & Santillana’s (2014) framework of *Jotería* Identity and Consciousness, I am able to understand what it means to be living, loving and surviving in a space like higher education (Tijerina Revilla & Santillana, 2014). Whether I am teaching a class or working with cultural centers, *Jotería* creates a space to innovate and build community interchangeably. Additionally, I see *Jotería* and its pedagogy, informing the ways that I conduct research, trying to push back on normative qualitative methods and instead embrace a praxis grounded in *comunidad* (Duran, Orozco, & Gonzalez, 2020).

Because *Jotería* sets itself apart from the “White” gaze present in queer studies, now is a critical time to create scholarship intentionally situated within a *Jotería* framework. Why does this matter?

*One need only to peruse the work of writers as diverse as Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Ricardo Bracho and Essex Hemphill, among others, to see firsthand how resistance and enfranchisement have often been nurtured through narratives where identity and politics are written about from perspectives of queers of color (Martinez, 2011, p. 266).*

*Jotería* positions itself as a tool that transforms silence into language and as a result, is an act of self-revelation for Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC) individuals (Lorde, 2007, p. 42).



## METHODOLOGY

### STUDY DESIGN

The purpose of this exploratory study was to understand how Sense of Belonging influences queer, Latinx students at PWIs. The study used a qualitative research design that employed semi-structured, one-on-one pláticas as a methodological tool that investigated the lived experiences of queer Latinx students at these institutions. The pláticas aimed to address the main research questions proposed. Sample plática questions were: (1) What do queer Latinx students say about their experiences at a PWI? and (2) What is it like being queer and Latinx on your campus? As part of my plática protocol, this study also collected demographic information about the co-creators. Accordingly, pláticas allowed for an innovative and familial way to engage with my co-creators. Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) described how, “Family pláticas allow us to witness shared memories, experiences, stories, ambiguities, and interpretations that impact us with knowledge connected to personal, familial, and cultural history” (p. 99) and “Create a culturally congruent and innovative way to engage with queer Latinx/a/o people” (Orozco et al., in press). As mentioned before, the current literature on Sense of Belonging does not dive into the particular experiences, identities, and knowledge production of queer Latinx college students. This reinforced the dire need to use pláticas in order to make meaning of and understand the lived experiences of queer Latinx college students at PWIs.

### OVERVIEW OF CO-CREATORS

The sample consisted of five queer, Latinx identifying students from multiple PWIs located throughout the United States. PWIs are post-secondary four-year non-profit institutions that have a population of 50% or more White students and faculty. This data was extracted from a larger study sample but due to Covid-19, I was only able to analyze five pláticas. These specific pláticas were selected as the co-creators were able to respond and co-sign on the development of this work and where it was going. Co-creators were recruited through (1) e-mails sent to a few university Queer Resource Centers list serves, (2) social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), and (3) purposive and snowball sampling methods. I used purposive and snowball sampling to gain co-creators as it better informed me as the researcher regarding the current focus of investigation (Krathwohl, 2009). The criteria for eligibility in this study were as follows: co-creators must (1) be current college undergraduates at a PWI, (2) self-identify as Latinx, (3) self-identify as queer, and (4) consent to a semi-structured one-on-one plática. Recruitment efforts included a brief summary of the study, participation criteria, and co-creators (my) contact information. Once eligibility criteria were met, co-creators received an email to schedule a time and location to have a plática. To add another layer of confidentiality, co-creators offered an alias for both their name and university.

The co-creators of this study attended PWIs located within the U.S. My first co-creator, Daniel (he/him/his), is a cisgender queer/gay male who also identifies as Latinx, Mexican, and Mexican American. He is 19 years old and is a first-year college student at Gay University or Gay U. Born



and raised in Northern California, Daniel is far from home as Gay U is located on the east coast. Gay U is a private research university with a student body of over 13,000 students from all 50 U.S. states and 141 countries. My second co-creator, Miss Brandy (he/him), is a gay Latino male who also identifies as Mexican. He is 21 years old and is a fourth-year college student at North Shore University or North Shore. Born and raised in Southern California, Miss Brandy is relatively far from home, about 400 miles away, as North Shore is located on the west coast. North Shore is a public research university with a student body of over 31,000 students. My third co-creator, Sebastian (he/him/his), is a queer/gay male who also identifies as Latinx, Mexican, and Salvadoran. He is 22 years old and is a fourth-year college student at Barden University or Barden. Born and raised in Southern California, Sebastian is relatively close to home as Barden is located in California. Barden University is a public research university with a student body of over 31,000 students. My fourth co-creator, Nebulas (he/him/they), is a transgender queer male who also identifies as Latinx, Mexican American and Alaskan Native. He is 32 years old and is a fourth-year college student at Cardinal University. Born and raised in Alaska, Nebulas is far from home as Cardinal University is located in California. Cardinal University is a private research university with a student body of over 17,000 students. My fifth co-creator, Rue (they/them/theirs), is non-binary and also identifies as Latinx, Columbian. They are 19 years old and a second-year college student at Midwest College. Rue was born in Colombia and raised in the Midwest region of the United States, close to Midwest College. Midwest College is a private institution located in a suburban area of the Midwest.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In order to assure that my methods maintained participant confidentiality, I refrained from including identifying information in transcripts and memos that could be traced back to the co-creators themselves. This is important to highlight as the co-creators shared the gift of intimate stories that placed them in very vulnerable spaces. Each of these pláticas were conducted in different formats, some were done by phone with a built-in audio recorder application, others were done on Zoom, and one was done in person at the desired location of the co-creator. All plática data were audio-recorded and transcribed through Rev, an online transcription service, and sent out to co-creators for review. I was intentional with this approach as my goal was to ensure my co-creators had agency and felt validated throughout the process of sharing their lived experiences. I explained in our pláticas and over email that I wanted them to have a first look at the transcripts and let me know what to edit, remove, etc., and once they

respond with approval, I would move forward with their transcript.

Next, I individually read through the transcripts two times, once to be thematically analyzed, and second to be coded into categories and placed into overarching themes. This data analysis method, known as open coding, allowed patterns to emerge that may otherwise be overlooked (Creswell, 2018). Below, data will be presented in descriptive and narrative form. Plática data underwent unconventional triangulation as follows: (1) coded and analyzed through open coding thematic analysis, and (2) transcripts were presented to co-creators for approval and review. In order to decenter my perspective and biases, I documented reflections after pláticas and throughout the study.

## FINDINGS

Through this exploratory qualitative study, there were three themes that emerged from the semi-structured pláticas. The themes were: Do I belong? Radical Queer Love, and Critical Consciousness/Jotería Identity. Framed within these three themes, each co-creator shares their experiences at their PWI. The narratives below are revised up for clarity, but to intentionally center the voices of my co-creators, I have left the pláticas as they were recorded during our time together.

### DO I BELONG?

For my co-creators, trying to understand what it meant to belong to their institution emerged as a central theme. Although Daniel, Miss Brandy, Sebastian, Nebulas, and Rue were in five separate locations, the questioning of their existence both in and out of their institution was apparent. It was reinforced in the ways they described navigating these spaces and how they exist in these spaces.

When asked what it was like being queer and Latinx at school, Daniel, a queer Latinx student at Gay University (GU) states,

*Being queer and Latinx, Gay U is interesting 'cause, there's a relatively large gay queer population at my school. Like, Gay U, we call it GU for short, but a lot of people call it Gay U because there [are] so many queer students at this school. But in my experience, I feel like a lot of the queer students are kind of like... a lot don't understand that like, you know, the fight, having won marginalization [white queer students]. Like, is so all the privilege of being a white man, which is the most privilege that you can have in our society.*

Daniel describes how although there are many students who identify as queer at Gay U, there is a difference

between being a queer white student as opposed to a queer student of color. He explains how many of the queer white students do not understand the complexity and difference in being queer and of color at his institution. Similar to what Strayhorn found in (2019), queer Latinx students attending PWIs struggle with their Sense of Belonging. Some of the factors are due to the majority of White staff and faculty at their institutions. Daniel highlighted this as he mentioned,

*The staff sometimes can also be very white. Like no shocker there. I feel more comfortable speaking on my own experience and not on the experience of others, just 'cause you know, like eventually we all have such unique experiences. And I guess, although being queer and being Latinx and being a queer Latinx person is something that's very important to me, I don't really have that community at GU.*

Miss Brandy, on the other hand, had a very different experience when discussing belonging. When asked about their Sense of Belonging on campus, Miss Brandy compartmentalizes personal Sense of Belonging from the actual institution:

*Um, no, but I take it upon myself to not care [about belonging to the university]. And the reason I say that is because obviously I don't even belong in this country, 'cause I don't fit the white male heteronormative norm that this country is used to. And also, the wealthy norm, 'cause that's the biggest factor in this country. So I just... I feel like as a queer person of color at this university, I've just given [up] hope in feeling a Sense of Belonging at this university, feeling like I'm part of this culture, I'm a part of this campus. It's like, No, whatever. I'm here getting an education and a degree, and that's all that matters. And, my Sense of Belonging was not closely tied to this university.*

The tone in which Miss Brandy explained himself was very assertive. As he unpacked what it meant to not belong to North Shore University, there was a sense of power and assurance in his conviction. Furthermore, it is important to note how he centered himself within the confines of North Shore instead of the other way around. Intrigued by what I saw as confidence, I asked him to elaborate more on the part where he described to take it upon himself to not care. Miss Brandy asserts:

*It's just, I guess, something that I grew up with. Like, to give an example, my mom would always tell me... it doesn't matter if people don't like you, you just have to like yourself and move on. Like, you can't please everyone.*

It is important to highlight that Miss Brandy was in his fourth year of college, unlike Daniel who was in his first year of college and transitioning from high school. This

is significant as Miss Brandy draws upon his experiences and time at North Shore, approximately four years, which have impacted his sense of knowing and understanding. Additionally, Sebastian was also a fourth-year college student during the time of our pláticas.

When I asked Sebastian whether he felt he had a Sense of Belonging at school and if he belonged in general, he responded with,

*I feel I belong at school, but my Sense of Belonging isn't defined by the physical structures, I don't know, like the buildings at school. When I think about my school, I think about the people that make up or that contribute to the emotions that I feel, like the friends that I have, the circle of friends, my roommate, it's more so like a feeling instead of a physical state. I think that's my Sense of Belonging. And that's what's really, really hard traversing higher ed as a first-generation student. Because not only are you already physically distant from your family being in higher ed and almost feeling guilty for it, but it's also just realizing that if you're distant from your family back home, it's almost as if you don't have anyone. You don't have anyone in higher ed. So that's why we're forced to carve spaces out for us.*

Sebastian described the disconnect that exists for him pursuing education in relation to his family ties. Moreover, he expressed how distant he felt from the campus community overall, and the need to create space for himself was deemed necessary. For Nebulas, on the other hand, coming in as a transfer student, identifying as transgender and being a veteran, revealed a unique Sense of Belonging. Nebulas conveys,

*I think that I'm especially different because I'm older, I'm transgender and I started transitioning here not even a year ago. I still haven't had top surgery. So it's a lot of microaggressions and a lot of weird looks and weird interactions and it's, you know, them not being exposed from kindergarten to middle school to high school, to now college. They've [the students] only ever been around people that are their age, that look like them and talk like them... and it's just like, here I am. I feel like the odd man out or the weird one because they've never been exposed to someone like me.*

As Nebulas responded to this question, he reiterated how it was quite difficult to be his authentic self at Cardinal University. He was aware how being older, being trans and part of the military ostracized him from his classmates in more ways than one. Furthermore, the location of my co-creators played a role in how they saw themselves as queer and Latinx in academic spaces. Rue describes this as they explain,



*So like I mentioned before my school is predominantly white. The only Latinx people I really talk to are the people in the cafeteria, because they are the only ones I speak Spanish too. And even then they're a little bit resistant to speak Spanish to me...In terms of courses and what is being taught in courses, it's limited. There's one class that I am comfortable expressing my thoughts, and one professor. Being out and queer. It's not something I really talk about with my professors, which is unfortunate because I wish other queer people had that opportunity. Especially when I'm writing papers, I have to limit some of that, because I have to have it read by professors that I don't know their politics, how they view me.*

Rue embellished how the notion of identity politics existed for them as they grappled with how much of themselves they could reveal in the classroom even when it came to their writing. They shared how in the back of their mind they had to think about their safety at all times as they walked through the halls of Midwest College.

Although all five of my co-creators shared distinct recollections of their Sense of Belonging as it pertained to their institutions, the sense of not belonging to their institution was evident for all five of them. The notion of not belonging emerged as a theme for Daniel, Miss Brandy, Sebastian, Nebulas, and Rue. In order to survive, creating a counterspace to exist came up in the development of physical spaces, whether they were on campus at a specific resource center, residence hall, etc. or off-campus at a residence, local hangout, etc. Additionally, this showed up in our pláticas through their cultivation of friendships and chosen family.

### **RADICAL QUEER LOVE**

Throughout our pláticas, I noticed myself affirming Daniel, Miss Brandy, Sebastian, Nebulas, and Rue in subtle ways that demonstrated a sense of *radical queer love*. Additionally, as I went over our pláticas, Daniel, Miss Brandy, Sebastian, Nebulas and Rue affirmed me as well. While it was not my intention to purposefully or intentionally affirm them, I came to the realization we were creating moments of microaffirmations. Solorzano, Perez Huber & Huber-Verjan (2019) describe microaffirmations as “the everyday forms of affirmation and validation People of Color engage with each other in a variety of public and private settings—those nods, smiles, embraces, use of language, etc.—that express acknowledgment and affirm self-worth” (p.187).

During my plática with Daniel, we diverted to a conversation about our own privileges within academic spaces. He described how he made meaning of his white-passing privilege in comparison to his brothers. He



understood what that meant for him and how it reflected in society to navigate time and space with this white-passing privilege. My response to his perception of privilege and how he was processing was,

*So, my attitude is acknowledge it. Name it. That's the first step, and then move forward with how you make moves with that. But, you're, that's amazing that you're 19 years old and that you're being very critical about that... So, so thank you for that.*

To my surprise, we continued to share moments like this over the phone throughout our plática. His humor came out as the conversations flowed and we dived deeper into his story.

When connecting with Miss Brandy, our plática shifted in a new direction when I asked a question that came about in the moment. I asked if he could see a difference in himself between his first year and now (his fourth year). He laughed as he responded and recollected his time at North Shore University. When he finished his thought, I responded with the following,

*That's awesome. So it-it's a positive. It might have been a... it might have been a roller coaster of a ride, but you're on your way out. You're about to graduate...that's pretty awesome that you're doing it in four years.*

Miss Brandy said “Yea” a few times in what seemed like disbelief. It is important to note that Miss Brandy and I have an established relationship prior to this plática. We are both connected through Greek life and are fraternity brothers. While this may be discouraged in traditional social science research as it can sway the “objectivity” of how the participant engages etc., In terms of feminist research practices, our preexisting relationship added to the authenticity of the plática.

My plática with Sebastian also consisted of many affirmations between us both. There were moments I would reflect on his process and describe what I had just heard him speak to me across the table of a dining hall. I would remind him about his dedication to succeed and move forward and reiterate how admirable it was to see him advocating for himself at his institution. His experiences and his approaches were all signs of his resiliency at his PWI. He was very aware of his existence at his institution and the power and oppression dynamics that he faced. As we were wrapping up our plática, I asked if he had any feedback for me, Sebastian replied,

*No, I think that's [it], I don't know. I thought you really fostered a good... a very comfortable, welcoming, plática. It was really... I don't know, I felt validated. I felt heard, and that's what I was hoping to get from this. And I did.*

I remember smiling at that moment and thanked him for his time, for the gift of his story and voice during our plática. Additionally, Sebastian and I are also connected through Greek life, although we had never met until this plática.

As I reflected with Rue during our plática, I found myself in moments of awe. As they spoke, I would respond with affirming words such as “Wow” and “That’s powerful”. Rue responded to my reflection about why I was doing this work with,

*Yeah, because like I said, I appreciate that, just having a plática and not just [having it] be research. Because I've done the community listening session and those have been great. So compared to just interviews, it just feels a lot more comfortable... and I'm fully comfortable with you.*

I appreciated Rue for their wisdom and sharing their experiences with me. Their comfort with our plática and with me validated the use of this methodological approach. Moreover, during my plática with Nebulas, he shared the traumatic experience he had applying to Cardinal University. He described how his college counselor would actively discourage him from applying to many schools. The counselor went on to assure Nebulas he would not be accepted to such elite institutions including Cardinal University. I immediately reacted to his story with,

*I'm sorry you had to go through that with your counselor. The unfortunate part is that this is actually really common for people like us. Counselors can play such an integral role in whether students decide to apply or not apply to certain schools. That was the case with my guidance counselor when I was in high school. She tried to put me in vocational courses while I was enrolled in AP courses, trying to convince me this would be the best choice for me and ultimately make me ineligible to apply to college.*



Nebulas and I became very vulnerable as we shared the similarities in our educational experiences. By validating his experience and relating to it, I could hear the relief in his voice as he thanked me for sharing a piece of my story.

The use of pláticas allowed for all five of my co-creators to bring themselves fully into our conversations and share stories of happiness, of pain, and of survival. As I reflect on our pláticas, I think about how the microaffirmations towards each other resulted as a response to building on a Jotería Identity and Consciousness. As mentioned before, I was unaware of these microaffirmations until I met with my co-creators, Gilda Ochoa and Jenelle, and critically reflected on the experiences I was having with Daniel, Miss Brandy, Sebastian, Nebulas, and Rue. This furthermore leads me to believe that “The concept of microaffirmations are more than a response [but rather] can stand alone conceptually because its existence lies in the agency of Communities of Color” (Solorzano et al., 2019, p. 202) and in the case of this pilot study, queer Latinx undergraduate students at PWIs.

### CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS/JOTERÍA IDENTITY

Finally, the third theme that was prevalent in our pláticas was *critical consciousness/jotería identity*. As Paulo Freire described, to be in a state of critical consciousness is to achieve an in-depth understanding of the world around you thus allowing for the perception and exposure of social and political contradictions (Freire, 2000). Additionally, a Jotería identity emerges for each of my co-creators as they reflect on their identity development throughout their lived experiences. Daniel demonstrates this level of understanding as he states,

*I didn't start going by my actual given name, like Daniel [pronounced in Spanish], until I was maybe 16, 15 years old. Because I was like, you know what, I'm tired of my, [name] Daniel [pronounced in English]. This isn't my name. This is the Anglo version of the name. And I'm, I don't identify as white, and I shouldn't have to conform to a society who is finding an easier way out and doesn't actually learn the way my name is actually pronounced.*

The firmness in Daniel's tone during this portion of our plática affirmed his confidence and reclaiming of his identity. While Daniel disclosed he has not come out to his family back home, He has been in the process of reclaiming aspects of his identity, being queer and Latinx at GU. Additionally, at a critical point in our plática, Miss Brandy describes how he challenged himself, his internalized homophobia as he talks about his community at North Shore University,

*For me, it was, my identity development, and them [my friends] being there regardless of whatever I was going through. There was times that I had really bad internalized homophobia and I was afraid to be seen with some of my friends who are also queer, or just, even, pretending that I was straight in the presence of other straight people. And just, having them be there for me regardless is, what made me realize like, Okay. This is my community. These are my people. These are who are... who are gonna be there for me.*

Miss Brandy's community propelled him to question and challenge his ideas around identity development and more specifically his internalized homophobia. His critical consciousness came up for him as he learned to accept himself for who he was holistically.

Moreover, Sebastian describes how he came into his own agency and identity as he decolonizes the structures of his world when he asserts,

*So I would say I am a product of the patriarchy. Product of a single mother household. I identify as queer, gay, Latinx, I'm low-income. I'm a scholar from a low-income community. My identities are certainly marginalized. My identities... Us being here is a counternarrative.*

As he spoke, it was evident he understood the power of his jotería identity, reclaiming aspects of his identity and how he came to be as a "product of the patriarchy". Nebulas depicts his understanding of his critical consciousness as he questions the forced campus culture of "being positive" at Cardinal University on a daily basis. He asserts,

*Why do I have to hide my pain? Why do I have to hide the genocide? Why do I have to hide my pain so you don't feel uncomfortable? Why do I have to hide the fucking truth, so you don't have any guilt? That's your own fault. You feel guilty, that's your fucking own problem.*

He laughs afterward and sarcastically explains how these questions have become his response when asked to "check his attitude" on campus. As one of the few queer students of color and more specifically, Trans, Native and Latinx students at Cardinal University, he inadvertently demonstrates what self-love and respect means as he

pushes back on assimilating to the dominant narrative. Finally, Rue steps into their critical consciousness as they illustrate how they conceptualize their identity. Rue states,

*So I'm non-binary, I'm not really aligned with a certain gender. I present pretty androgynous, and I feel as if my mindset doesn't really have a gender either...Yeah and I think my biggest inspiration was Gloria Anzaldua. Borderlands, The New Mestiza, that book literally changed my entire perspective on gender and how I presented as a queer person. It [the book] literally just, I felt like I remember this connect, that I'm ok being Latinx and I don't have to be the skinny, white androgynous person.*

I can see their excitement through the screen as their eyes lit up with joy. They started to apologize for deviating from the question when I asked them to please continue as our plática was meant to center their voice and story.

Each of the co-creators shared and revealed their critical consciousness in so many ways, whether it was through the telling of their coming out stories, the pain they have endured from their institutions, or the accomplishments of overcoming adversity, the development of their Jotería was quite profound.

## DISCUSSION

This research encapsulates how a Sense of Belonging together with Jotería identity and consciousness, has for research on queer Latinx students in higher education. Initially, I set out to do 10 to 15 pláticas, but due to Covid 19 and other extreme factors affecting so many of us currently, I was only able to employ the use of five pláticas for this study. The use of these two frameworks presented a more in-depth view of the co-creators' lived experiences. Without the use of a culturally humble methodology like pláticas, there would have been a lack of a human account of the realities these queer Latinx students endured. Moreover, situating a Sense of Belonging as a framework and a question embellished their experiences in a way we could understand each other as co-creators and storytellers of our truths. Additionally, I was intentional about using an asset-based framework, Jotería Identity and Consciousness, to explore and understand how Daniel, Miss Brandy, Sebastian, Nebulas, and Rue define and perceive Sense of Belonging at their PWI. Ultimately, it was the disconnect and lack of feeling that they belonged to their institutions that influenced their identity development as proud queer Latinx students in these spaces as they "carved out their counterspaces".



## IMPLICATIONS

The pláticas my co-creators engaged in for this study offer implications for the field of higher education and specifically for those working at PWIs. Pláticas offer a transformative methodology, and through the narratives of the co-creators, it is evident that this is not simply research but also a pathway to healing for queer Latinx college students. As Tijerina Revilla & Santillana (2014) argued, queer Latinx students are pushed to the margins of the queer community as research focuses on white queer able-bodied individuals in higher education. One way to address this disconnect is for research to focus and center queer Latinx students in higher education settings. I conducted an exploratory study focusing on this student population at PWIs but there are different institution types such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), etc., to name a few. Different settings and social locations will provide unique context to someone's lived experience. The experiences of queer Latinx students and queer and trans students of color overall need to be honored, heard, and seen in research and practice.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this exploratory study was to further develop this research into a dissertation with future publications and presentations. By taking an independent study course with the guidance of my co-creators Gilda Ochoa and Jenelle Nila, throughout the Spring and Summer of 2020, I had an opportunity to pilot this study and develop my methods further. The focus of this exploratory study was to demonstrate how and in what ways queer, Latinx students find their Sense of Belonging at PWIs. The study looked into understanding the identities of queer, Latinx students through their lived experiences. There is a dire need for agency and voice representing queer and trans people of color in academia. As Saldaña (2014) explains, critical thinking examines the status quo from multiple lenses, filters, and angles to ask how come, what if, and why not. By engaging in critical semi-structured pláticas through this study about the influence Sense of Belonging has on queer Latinx student identity development and identity politics, this critical research will be able to shed light on how much of what we think we know is incomplete and misleading.

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