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**Latinx Education Policy and Resistance in the Trump Era**

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**Cap(tioning) Resistance on Stage: Chicana/Latina Graduation Caps and  
StoryBoarding as Syncretic Testimonio**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the recent tradition of decorating and re-fashioning graduation caps, also known as mortarboards, by Chicana/Latinx graduates. We describe this practice as StoryBoarding, a form of micro-storytelling tales of Chicana/Latina agency and resistance that counter, expose, and challenge institutionalized forms of racism. Many instances of StoryBoarding take place in the context of Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), specifically during the Chicana/Latinx graduation commencement ceremonies held at many campuses. While these events are celebratory, these past few years, alongside the celebrations, the ceremonies have also become spaces of critique and proclamation of the graduates' views towards the current administration's policies aimed at undocumented immigrants and people of Mexican and Latin American descent.

*Keywords:* College graduation, activism

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## Introduction

Shortly after Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2017, a Chicanx/Latinx<sup>1</sup> graduation at a large Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in California took place, hosting approximately 1,000 Chicanx/Latinx graduates and their 10,000 family members, friends, and former teachers and mentors. A committee consisting of faculty members, staff, and student volunteers was responsible for planning, coordinating, and fundraising for the graduation ceremony. It was a community gathering resulting in a sold-out event, leaving many families and friends waiting outside the event center. As faculty at this institution who regularly attend the event, we have observed the grad caps over the years, noticing their running themes and the trends of the time that they mirrored. Even though there were decorative caps before this particular ceremony in 2017, the shift in the themes presented by the graduates at this event was evident. We argue that the political context sparked by Donald Trump's anti-immigrant sentiments (immigrants as thieves, lazy, rapists, and "bad hombres") impelled the change in narratives presented on the grad caps. The politicized nature of the caps was not new, as prior to Trump's presidency, graduates displayed messages that expressed solidarity with DREAMers and the pro-immigrant hunger; but while the awareness of anti-immigrant attitudes was apparent on previous caps, it was evident that the election caused a spark in the more politicized and creative voicing of these more recent perspectives.

The cap decorating phenomenon has captured the attention of local and national media outlets, many of which emphasize the caps' inspirational messages. In a recent article in a local Central Valley online newspaper, *Vida en el Valle* (Ortiz-Briones, 2018), the caps are highlighted and celebrated for sending a variety of cultural and political messages. Describing the importance of the use of both English and Spanish, the article emphasizes the graduates' displays of pride in their families and community. The caps align with the previous years' consistent messaging around pride, connection to their families, and a sense of overcoming obstacles. Even though these are the dominant messages, the celebratory event, consistent with similar celebrations across the country, also brought out critiques of current events.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms Chicanx and Latinx are being increasingly adopted by institutions and people who believe terms that end in "a/o" exclude those who do not identify with the gender binary. Though not all commencement ceremonies for Chicanx/Latinx graduates utilize this ending, we choose to use it because it is part of the dominant hashtag that was used to categorize and share the caps.

In our review of 100 graduation caps worn by Chicana/Latina graduates, we examine what we identify as three overarching themes: the current political landscape of anti-immigrant sentiments and policies; feminist themes and “refashionings” of Latina identity; and expressions of family pride and community belonging. Through these themes, the caps make politically charged and subversive statements that speak to what it means to be Latinx/Chicanx in the current climate, and engage in “a process of becoming conscious ‘historical actors (Espinoza, 2003) who invoke the past in order to re-mediate it so that it becomes a resource for current and future action” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p.154). Beyond celebrating their college graduation, these graduates capitalize on their momentary high-visibility to make public their political views, thereby challenging the traditional decorum of the graduation ceremony.

### **Researcher Subjectivity: Bearing Witness to Resistance**

This project is two years in the making. As faculty participants and name-readers for our university’s yearly Chicana/Latinx graduation, the largest ethnic-themed graduation ceremony in the country, we were struck by the creativity and political messaging of many of the decorated caps. Because we noticed several politically-charged and subversive messages in 2016, the year we began photographing the caps, we decided to work together at the intersections of our disciplines in Education in Language, Literacy and Culture, Women’s Studies, and Chicano and Latin American Studies on this collaborative project. As Chicana colleagues and good friends who have collaborated on other projects as well, we were excited about exploring our research synergies within the context of the study of graduation caps. Importantly, as we have worked on this project, an interest among Latinx academics in documenting and critically examining these caps as texts and forms of resistance has grown, though none have produced such scholarship to date. We anticipate that as scholars take on this work, future research will incorporate interviews with graduates, as well.

### **StoryBoarding as Syncretic Testimonio**

*Testimonios* are “narrative accounts situated in the subjectivity particularity, and sociocultural and historical reality in which people co-construct their understanding of their social world and of themselves” (Jaramillo, 2007). Based on this definition, syncretic testimonio, proposed by Cindy Cruz and conceptualized by Kris Gutiérrez, is “a hybrid text, a sociopolitical narrative shared orally and witnessed in and intimate respectful learning community and, at the

same time, written using the traditional conventions of academic texts and editorial assistance of peers and instructors to develop students' new understandings about themselves and their relations to the immediate and social world" (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 149).

Gutiérrez (2008) argues that syncretic learning "reorganizes every day and school-based literacy practices and can help support the development of powerful literacies and challenge current models of academic literacy" (p.149) We observed the caps' messages as a new literacy emerging, one that draws on the graduates' social locations and histories, and that is in direct opposition to the "accepted" forms of literacy in P-12 and conceptualizations and expectations of literacy in higher education. In addition, we see these caps as examples of what scholar Dolores Delgado Bernal (2002) defines as a form of knowledge that "elucidates Latinas/Latinos' multidimensional identities and can address the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression" (p. 108).

This work is also inspired by Ghiso and Low's (2012) work on micronarratives in which they describe how students use forms of multimodal literacies, such as comics, to draw upon their own histories, knowledges, and experiences of immigration to expand traditional forms of reading and writing. We agree with Ghiso and Low (2012) in that because schooling for children of immigrant backgrounds promotes experiences of Americanization practices, there are few spaces where children or young adults can freely express their ethnic/cultural identities. Accordingly, "schooling in the United State has entailed negotiating their identities along a preconceived model of what it means to be American including the message that success requires shedding their ethnic identities and smoothing over their struggles" (Ghiso and Low, 2012, p. 26). Through this lens, graduates' caps present more meaningful, relevant, and critical views of their social worlds in a creative way which until recently has not been used as a form of creative and political messaging.

### **Historicizing the current political context/landscape**

It is critical to understand some of the more recent anti-immigrant legislation that has shaped attitudes and tone today, particularly in California. In 1994, then-California Governor Pete Wilson put forth the "Save our State" voter initiative, or Proposition 187, which implemented a screening system to prohibit undocumented children and families from receiving health care, public education, and other services in California, while at the same time

criminalizing any persons aiding undocumented communities. On the heels of momentous demographic shifts and census projections, many saw this as an attack against a growing minoritized population, namely Chicano/Latino communities. Proposition 187 would later be deemed unconstitutional but not before igniting a nativist firestorm and hostile political climate against communities of Color. This climate was expressed in Proposition 227, a second voter initiative restricting the use of bilingual education in public schools. In the years following, other states began following the nativist, anti-immigrant policy in California by adopting similar restrictions to the use of the languages other than English in public schools.

Despite early efforts in California to prevent undocumented families from access to health care and an education, today much of the state espouses a pro-immigrant stance by establishing itself as a sanctuary state—a move that the Trump administration has publicly condemned. In his infamous June 2015 speech announcing his presidential bid, Donald Trump said the following:

It's true, and these are the best and the finest. When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” (Trump, 2016)

These declarations sparked outrage across the nation as many viewed these comments as promoting xenophobic attitudes towards Mexican immigrants. The response to this statement was overwhelmingly negative as the public questioned his descriptions and generalizations of Mexican immigrants. However, though many voiced their discontent, others supported his assertion, prompting this rhetoric to take on many forms.

Though the administration shared these views in an open manner, many of the attitudes were already evident across the nation and manifested in policy in states such as Alabama and Arizona. The anti-immigrant camp was further validated and emboldened when, shortly after Arpaio was convicted of police misconduct, Donald Trump pardoned him of all wrongdoing. The anti-immigrant discourse, existing in states such as Alabama and Arizona, consequently became much more evident and accepted with promoting a scapegoat mentality. In his much-anticipated immigration speech, Donald Trump stated,

Let me tell you who it does not serve. It does not serve you the American people. Doesn't serve you. When politicians talk about immigration reform, they usually mean the following: amnesty, open borders, lower wages. Immigration reform should mean something else entirely. It should mean improvements to our laws and policies to make life better for American citizens.” (Trump, 2016)

The proposed wall between the U.S. and Mexico also implies that the wall will protect Americans from crime, drugs, and violence. Trump’s (2016) paternalistic rhetoric turns into fear mongering through the following assertions,

Then there is the issue of security. Countless innocent American lives have been stolen because our politicians have failed in their duty to secure our borders and enforce our laws like they have to be enforced. I have met with many of the great parents who lost their children to sanctuary cities and open borders.

Shortly after Trump’s statements, recognizing their visibility in a large public venue, graduates seized the opportunity to decorate their caps in response and opposition to the administration and supporters of anti-immigrant and anti-Latino sentiments. By narrating alternative views of their immigrant experiences, graduates presented their families with more affirming and realistic descriptions of their experiences.

We draw from the concept of micronarratives to advance our own notion of StoryBoarding<sup>2</sup>. Playing on the technical term of “mortorboards,” informally known as graduation caps, we propose reading the messages and decorations on the caps as a form of multimodal storytelling in which graduates critique their political climate and anti-immigrant policies, express pride in family histories, and declare Chicana/Latina feminist sensibilities. We argue that this StoryBoarding functions as testimonios of agency, resistance, political statements, and an honoring of family histories and community relations. Borrowing from Gutiérrez’s theory of sociocritical literacy (2008), which underscores students’ literacies of their social context as they are shaped by their histories and knowledges from every day, lived experience, we suggest that the act of decorating caps and donning them during a specific time of year--college graduation--functions as a new type of literacy mode and practice of

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<sup>2</sup> Storyboarding is used in advertising and cartoon making and provides a graphic or text representation on how your story will unfold. Unlike storyboarding, our concept of StoryBoarding captures a form of storytelling that encompasses the past, present, and future.  
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StoryBoarding that communicates Chicana/Latina college graduates' views of identity and provides critical commentary on the current political landscape that has waged war on brown and black bodies through historical racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies.

## **Methods**

### **Capturing Images and Stories**

The collecting of images of Chicana/Latina grad caps or as some call, mortarboards, began in May 2016 during the 2016 Chicana/Latina graduation at a large California State University campus. The process included taking photographic images of the graduates as they were lining up in the event center. A student assistant collected consent forms and documented and photographed each image with a tablet. In addition to these photographs, we were able to use photographs of caps from a faculty member who was documenting the caps,<sup>3</sup> as well.

Since then, we have continued to collect these images at the graduation ceremony (2017 and 2018) but have expanded our efforts by using images from other sources to trace national trends. Hence, we viewed caps from various websites such as Remezcla, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, and other Latinx themed websites. Many caps were tagged with the hashtag #LatinxGradCaps, which facilitated our efforts to find the caps. To this date we have reviewed hundreds of caps, but for this project we are focusing on a representative sample of 100 Latinx grad caps that reflected the dominant themes that emerged in our research of caps over the past two years. Though we used the hashtag #LatinxGradCaps to find the images, caps by women constituted over 90% of the images. Thus, we decided to limit our analysis to women to strengthen the discussion of our themes. For the purpose of this article we focused on three themes that best represented the graduates' responses to Trump's presidential campaign and election and the general political landscape.

## **Results**

### **“Undocumented and unafraid”: Stories of Im/migration and Borderless Dreams**

In review of the caps within the political landscape theme, six caps best represent the graduates' response to the current rhetoric. The caps in this category reflected an overall sentiment of being “undocumented and unafraid,” a rallying cry among DREAMers pushing for

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<sup>3</sup> We thank our colleague, Professor Adela Santana, and student, Polet Campos-Melchor, for photographing the caps and sharing images with us.



the DREAM Act. Within the context of the dominant anti-immigrant discourse, the graduates re-fashioned their caps to create a counternarrative to the views towards immigrants and their families. In a photograph documented by “Popsugar Latina,” (Verdugo, 2018) a beautifully adorned cap reads “Dreams Bigger Than Your Borders,” featuring the Favianna Rodríguez “Migration is Beautiful” butterfly. This particular cap references the experience of immigration to convey persistence and determination. By depicting Rodríguez’s butterfly, the graduate presents a highly politicized symbol of the immigrant movement in California. Rodríguez, a Bay area artist, developed the migration butterfly in response to hateful depictions of immigrants. CultureStrike, the artist’s collective’s website, reads:

A perfect example of how art intervenes playfully and politically, the Migration is Beautiful butterfly proposes a new way to think about migration, rooted in movement, transformation, and captivating grace...the butterfly image and tagline quickly emerged as an approachable way to reimagine borders as permeable rather than militarized, reinvigorating a metaphor that many migrants have looked to for generations (CultureStrike).

The Migration is Beautiful butterfly developed under former President Obama’s presidency was used to call attention to inhumane immigrant policies; it has since then become a highly-recognized symbol for migration. The butterfly itself is available on the CultureStrike website, easily downloaded for a wide audience to use to promote immigrant rights.

A “Dreams without Borders” depicting the United States and Mexican flag and a “Gracias a mi mamá y papá” phrase on the cap by a Twitter site @WeAreBoldLatinas demonstrates a similar tone of perseverance and tenacity despite the steady tone of the enforcement of borders and creation of walls. The imagining of a borderless world mirrors the dreams of recent graduates. Many recent graduates leave undergraduate studies with high aspirations and dreams towards upward mobility. The dreams without borders cap reflects a sense of limitless possibilities.

In addition to caps of perseverance and hope, some displayed tones of re-appropriation of phrases that invoke the myth that immigrants take jobs from American workers. A cap shown on the Twitter @monicapargam reads, “My parents crossed the border so I could cross the stage,” shows how the stage and the border are compared to each other as potential

obstacles. Another from Refinery 29 (2018) proudly reads “Job stealing immigrant.” In a humorous tone, graduates claim some of those identities imposed on immigrants and subversively profess pride in phrases such as one shown on Pinterest saved by i.pinimg.com: “Ask me for my papers, and I’ll show you my diploma.” This cap, although humorous, references the current ICE raids occurring in states across United States. In this case, the graduate responds that not only does she have her papers, but she has another form of papers— a college degree.

Graduates who responded specifically to anti-immigrant sentiments were also critiquing, challenging, and describing a sense of hope. By presenting an “undocumented and unafraid” message, graduates are also asserting that despite the views towards immigrants, they will not be prevented from moving forward, thereby countering the media’s prominent portrayal of immigrants as “in the shadows.”

Finally, speaking to the process of collective conscientization and political progression, one cap by Instagram user @beatrizvf09 represented on Univision’s coverage of grad caps expresses, “Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore” (Liendo, 2017). This quote by United Farm Worker union leader Cesar Chavez signifies the overall sentiment of the caps.

### **Honoring Family, Histories of Migration, and Community**

Latinx education scholars have noted the ways in which Eurocentric models of literacy negatively impact Latinx family structures in primary school settings (Torres and Hurtado-Vivas, 2011; Delgado Gaitán, 2012). Within these Eurocentric models, Latinx families have been unfairly stereotyped as “low-achieving,” not caring about education, and not valuing reading and writing, for example (Torres and Hurtado-Vivas, 2011; Delgado Gaitán, 2012). As evidenced by the current political climate (and historically, to be sure), these stereotypes of Latinx families as inherently dysfunctional, abusive, and violent reach beyond the educational settings. But Chicana/Latina graduation caps confront head-on these harmful stereotypes by honoring their family members, particularly mothers, as models for their academic achievement. Caps point to familial sacrifice, collective success, and achievement that uphold Latinx families as major sources of knowledge, rich histories, and pride. Many of the messages are written in Spanish or English, or a combination of the two, denoting the graduates’ multilingual heritages. The choice

of using Spanish only, we claim, positions the graduates' parents as the intended audience and recipient of these messages, which creates an insider community within the typically formal confines of the graduation ceremony.

Adopting the well-known Mexican proverb, "*nos quieren enterrar pero olvidan que somos semillas*" (they wanted to bury us, but they forgot we were seeds), one photograph in a Pinterest post featuring a cap by a 2016 Latina graduate (S. Roman, n.d.), shows this phrase in white lettering. Along with the proverb, there are a number of images the graduate glued on the cap that reflect Chicana/Latina culture. The first image is that of a Mexican woman, particularly the historic "Adelita", a female soldier who fought alongside men during the Mexican Revolution of 1910. The bullets that drape across her chest are a hallmark of the Adelita rebel who protested the oppressive Mexican government. Although the Adelita is wearing a traditional Mexican dress embroidered in the Mexican flag's national colors of red, green, and white, her flexed bicep harks back to another emblematic wartime mythic figure, Rosie the Riveter, who was used as a patriotic image during World War II to encourage women to enter the labor force while American men fought overseas. In the graduate's cap, however, this woman's brown skin and confident facial expression are used as a distinctly Chicana/Latina role model, honoring the brown female worker whose muscles are formed as a result of intense physical labor. Alongside Adelita's raised bicep are two yellow flowers that are displayed near Mexican cacti, or *nopales*. Although not stated explicitly, the *nopales* hint at another well-known, often humorous Mexican expression to "*tener el nopal en la frente*," which literally translates to, "have a cactus on one's forehead," a symbol of Mexican racial identity. This graduate proudly dons the symbols of her cultural heritage.

The honoring of immigrant parents is a recurring message on the graduation caps. In another 2016 photo from the website, Mitú, a Latina's cap says in white cursive writing, "*Cuando me vean volar recuerden que ustedes me pintaron las alas. Lo logramos mamá y papá*" (when you see me flying, remember that you painted my wings. We did it, mom and dad) (Rodríguez-Jiménez, 2016). Two monarch butterflies sit atop pink flowers. The butterflies, long a symbol of migration, point to the Latina graduate's immigrant parents, who sacrificed so that their daughter could achieve a college education. For this graduate, her college diploma is not solely an individual achievement. She views her parents as having also earned the diploma

through their sacrifices and nurturance. Significantly, this insistence on recognizing the collective efforts of family so that one daughter could graduate, is a confrontation of the mythic American Dream that values individualism and one person's hard work.

Invoking themes of familial immigration and labor, a 2018 photo from the same website, Mitú, features a Latina's cap with the statement, "*Hija Orgullosa de Inmigrantes*" (proud daughter of immigrants) (Mesa, 2018). Hand-painted red roses and white tulips flank the words. Although the statement is relatively short in comparison to other Latina caps, this seemingly simple statement is provocative in its refusal to erase her family's history of migration in favor of assimilation. As a proud daughter of immigrants, we know this graduate is a United States citizen, but in her deliberate choice of words, she privileges her parents' status over hers. She is *their* daughter, and her diploma is as much due to *their* migration as it is her own hard work. The tone does not denote a false idealization of her parents as migrants or a recycling of the archaic "rags to riches" mythos. Her pride is not in herself for achieving a college education; rather, she is proud of them, and her diploma is a symbolic gift for them from her.

At our institution's 2016 Chicana/Latina graduation ceremony, the largest of its kind, one Chicana graduate showed us her cap with the phrase, "THEY MIGRATED SO I GRADUATED." Between these letters are two names, that of her parents, "Paula" and "David." Above their names resides a small clipping of a Mexican flag, in addition to three red roses. By identifying the country of her parents' birth, she pays homage to her family's homeland. Like the graduate we reference in the paragraph above, this Chicana similarly chooses to name Mexico, rather than the United States, as a point of origin and place of cultural memory.

The following year's Chicana/Latina graduation ceremony featured similar themes. One Latina graduate's cap read, "My Parents crossed the border, so I can cross this stage." Rhinestones and glitter form the only borders, a subtle critique of the actual, physical border her parents crossed. Particularly compelling in this cap's message is the suggestion of crossing literal and metaphorical borders, an allusion to the Anzaldúa concept of the New Mestiza's daily border crossings (Anzaldúa, 1987). This first-generation Latina finds common ground with her parents' story of migration and struggle. In walking the stage, she is enacting her own type of border-crossing. As a site of racial and economic privilege, the graduation stage and formal

graduation etiquette, such as handshakes, are critiqued in her deliberate use of the language of border-crossing. As a college graduate, she is trespassing those elite spaces that were not designed for people of color. Further, her parents metaphorically join her on this elite stage, breaking down those borders that attempt to keep them out.

In a 2017 photo from the website, Remezcla, one graduate wrote, “the [rose] that grew from concrete is a product of immigrants” (Simón, 2017). Red roses cover most of the cap, including one that is a visual replacement for the word “rose” in the statement. Indeed, floral images are also used in caps that reflect pride in family migration stories. But in a different manner, this graduate hints at her individual hardships alongside her parents’ migration. The reference to concrete suggests someone who has been stepped on or looked over, much as we typically pay little to no attention to the ground that holds us up as we walk. If this Latina graduate has been rendered invisible due to interlocking systems of oppression, this cap heightens her visibility, forcing us to look at her, to recognize her (and her parents’) hard work and sacrifice. In yet another critique of the American Dream, this graduate acknowledges that she is a “product” of immigrant parents. While she does allude to her own hard work, the recognition of her parents combats the simplistic ideal that hard work alone is enough.

In a lighthearted yet critical acknowledgement of familial sacrifice, one 2017 Remezcla graduation photo features the words, “I’ve been dreaming of you...para Mi Familia” on the graduate’s cap (Simón, 2017). Lest we forget that the words are taken from the late Tejano music superstar Selena Quintanilla’s song, “Dreaming of You,” her image is emblazoned on the cap. Taken from a well-known photo of Selena holding her Grammy Award, the graduate replaces the Grammy; Selena is instead holding a squared scrap of paper that reads “Diploma.” As with the graduate who identifies the Mexican Adelita, here, too, Selena is used as a Chicana role model of resilience and history. Selena’s fashion sense, her business-savviness, and unmatched talent are all invoked in the image the graduate uses. Like Selena, whose family remained a source of inspiration and collaboration, this graduate acknowledges her parents and entire family for their important role in her graduation achievement.

### **Feminist Re/fashionings of Chicana/Latina Identity**

Though #Latinxgradcaps was an attempt by the founders of Latina Rebels to create a space on social media for sharing and curating caps by Latinxs across the gender spectrum,

women dominate the images tagged with the grad cap hashtag. While Latino men decorate their caps, as well, the dominant representation of Latinas aligns with feminized social media practices, such as that of taking “selfies,” an act of self-representation in which the person taking the photo is also the subject. Though the graduation caps are the subjects of these photos, the caps function as products and representations of the women, and their photographs are captured or commissioned by the women themselves. The use of “I,” “Yo,” “Mi,” “Us,” and other similar pronouns in the caps’ text emphasizes that the women are speaking through their caps--often in response to patriarchal and racist constructions of Latina womanhood that have vilified Latinas and their bodies (Chávez, 2004; Gutiérrez, 2009). Through the caps, Latinas challenge patriarchal constructions of Latina womanhood and re/fashion their identities in ways that incorporate their new status as “educated” into their identities.

Brown immigrant women have long been vilified through anti-immigrant discourse as hypersexual, abusers of social welfare, and threats to national security as “incubators” of terrorists (Chávez, 2004; Gutiérrez, 2009; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2014), but the 2016 Trump presidential campaign emboldened anti-immigrant activists to renew and strengthen their attacks. Though Chicana and Latina feminists have engaged in political resistance to these ideas for decades, the election of Trump to the presidency reignited mainstream feminist activity around immigrant women and women of color. The phrase “Nevertheless, she persisted,” in recognition of Senator Elizabeth Warren’s insistent to be heard during a senate hearing, also became a ubiquitous slogan of the movement to highlight the efforts women have had to make to be visible, to be heard, and to create change. The influence of this feminist rallying cry can be seen in a cap shared by Paola Pérez Moreno, a recent graduate of the University of Connecticut, on which she inscribed “*Sin embargo, ella persistió*” (@paolaprezmoreno), a direct translation of “Nevertheless, she persisted.” Though the women’s marches were heavily critiqued by feminists of color, many Latinas have been able to strategically draw from and engage with mainstream forms of activism in ways that are meaningful to them.

Nonetheless, amidst the resurgence of mainstream feminist activism, Latinas continue to draw from their own activist histories. Harkening to the Chicana feminist movement of the

1960s and 70s, one of the most dominant graduation cap messages is “Chicana Power,” a short but effective proclamation of power and identity that is usually accompanied by an image of a raised fist. On many caps, the variation “Xicana” is used to denote indigenous identification and resistance; Xicana feminist writer Cherríe Moraga explains that she “spells *Xicana* and *Xicano* (Chicana and Chicano) with an X (the Nahuatl spelling of the ‘ch’ sound) to indicate a re-emerging política, especially among young people, grounded in Indigenous American belief systems and identities (Moraga, 2011, p. xxi). In an Instagram post, account user @annita\_x shares her pink cap with the phrase “Xicana Power” (2017) displayed prominently on top; in fact, the pre-cut letters are so wide that the words flow over the border of the cap. The cap also features a cactus beneath the phrase with a bright yellow cactus flower as the “o” in “Power.” The cactus, a plant that is known for its ability to withstand a harsh desert climate and to store water for long periods of time, can be read as a symbol of resistance and resilience under hostile conditions--much like the Chicana feminists who experienced hostility within both the Chicano and feminist movements.

Through the caps, graduates also appear to negotiate and reconcile competing identities, such as being pretty and educated. One of the more unexpected trends was the use of the words “*bonita*” and “*chula*” (both forms of “pretty”) as identifiers. These words are boldly juxtaposed with words with more negative connotations, such as “*cabrona*” (which can mean “hard-headed” or “stubborn”) and “*chingona*” (which can mean an “aggressive” woman or, in a more positive sense, a “badass”); *bonita* and *chula* are also juxtaposed with words that are not typically associated with prettiness, such as “*educada*” (educated). The association of being educated, or smart, with looking unattractive is not just a U.S. construct, but is evident in Latin American telenovelas such as “*Betty La Fea*,” where the anti-hero, Betty, is ambitious and smart but has exaggerated “ugly” looks. For instance, Instagram user @chiquillachillona’s cap reads “*Educada te ves mas bonita*” (Educated, you look prettier). Similarly, a cap reposted by @yarel\_ramos, originally photographed by @malulani\_, reads, “*Con diploma te ves más bonita*” (With a diploma you look prettier). Rather than reject their “*chula*” looks, which have been exploited through the hypersexualization of Latina bodies by white supremacy, the Latina graduates engage in a third space refashioning of the self through the reconciliation of their “*chula*” and “*educada*” identities.

As noted previously, gendered epithets such as *cabrona* and *chingona* also became opportunities for subverting their negative connotations and using them to reimagine the self. *Cabrona*, a term like many others whose meaning depends on context, can be used to describe a girl or woman who is hard-headed or stubborn, and in a more extreme sense, a brat, a “dumbass,” or a bitch. While the term is used as an insult for women, it is often used to acknowledge an ostentatious display of masculinity and can function as a compliment for men.

In her Instagram post, Magdalena, Instagram user @iwasputthereforareason, photographs her mother holding her decorated cap which reads, “*Mama tu hija cabrona lo hico*” (sic) (Mom, your stubborn daughter did it) (2018). In her caption Magdalena writes,

mom we have had so many bad and so many good memories even tho you were not always there I know u always loved me I know I have given you so many problems I know I have put you through so much hell ... but I promise mom I'm trying. Ima be so successful just watch I know u just think I'm the cabrona but ima take care of u too. I know I only pay one of ur bills too mom but ima take care of you I promise just wait and see, love you mom(@iwasputthereforareason)

Here, Magdalena provides context for her *cabrona* identity, describing herself as a defiant and troublesome daughter. Insisting that she is trying to become successful, Magdalena suggests that there is more to her than her *cabrona* identity and that one day she will be taking care of her mother. The repeated promising further speaks to her stubbornness--her unrelenting persistence and assurance that she will become a success. While being *cabrona* has been the source of strife between Magdalena and her mother, Magdalena reimagines the quality as a motivation and formula for her success.

In response to her daughter's post, her mother, Instagram user @Gonzalez\_n66, comments, “No baby girl I'm already and have been so proud of you. Only by being who you are and what you have become is all I ask from you my little *Cabrona*. You did it.” Here, the mother affirms her daughter's *cabrona* identity while citing it as the source of her success.

An expression found on several hats, such as on one by @disastrous\_mess (2017), reads “*Chingona, cabrona, y con diploma.*” This expression uses not just one, but two epithets. Like *cabrona*, *chingona* is sometimes used as an insult for women who are perceived to be too aggressive or masculine. However, recently Latinas have reclaimed the word to describe those



who challenge norms, assert autonomy, are fearless, are powerful, or who satisfy their own definition of “badass” (Rojas, 2018). In “How I Define My *Chingona* Fire” (2017) Chicana feminist poet Angela Aguirre writes,

A chingona is any woman who chooses to live life on her own terms. PERIOD.

She is the scholar AND the hoe. At the same damn time. OR she is neither.

The point is: she gets to choose. And whatever choice she makes, is the right one (Aguirre, 2017).

The *chingona* identity aligns with third wave feminist conceptions of identity as contradictory and multiplicitous (Heywood & Drake, 1997). Listing the insults along with “diploma,” the cap’s owner Jyssika, Instagram account user @disastrous\_mess, presents herself as a triple threat—stubborn, powerful, and educated—a threat to any regime that expects brown women to be passive, disempowered, and uneducated. Here Jyssika invokes Gutiérrez’s (2008) articulation of a sociocritical Third Space to name and reconstruct herself at the intersections of tensions embodied by the *cabrona*, *chingona*, and educated identifiers.

### Conclusion

We view StoryBoarding graduates as “agents of knowledge who participate in intellectual discourse that links experience, research, community, and social change” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 113). The text on the caps leverages the graduates’ linguistic repertoire and challenges the monolingual views of bilingualism. Such expansive views of bilingualism and emergent bilinguals as being able to balance various language practices challenge hierarchies of linguistic repertoires in the classroom (García and Wei, 2014). The graduates’ use of Spanish and English on the caps also propose a plurilingual view of language use amongst the graduates. Aligned with Gutiérrez’s work of observing children as they create syncretic texts, the graduates extend the use of testimonio by situating their reflections of their experiences within the context of today’s anti-immigrant climate, thereby foregrounding the social context and historicized experiences of immigrants in the United States.

In the analysis of the caps at the graduation, we found that the caps provided a window, often critical, to their experiences or that of their families’ as immigrants in this country. The caps reflected, as Gutiérrez explains, “a coproduction” between the graduate, their families, and communities, and the current political context, in which “the text and its production are at

once personal, socially mediated, and, hence, heteroglossic—situated both locally and historically” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 150). We argue that these caps are examples of resistance, syncretic testimonios, developed in response to the dominant discourse.

As a result of this work, we have plans to extend the work to include interviews with Chicana graduates in order to add more personal stories to this research and understand better their own personal stories in relation to the caps. But on the ground, we call for universities who include Chicana/Latina graduations to acknowledge and recognize the mortarboards crossing the stage. While the speeches by administrators, honored graduates, and dignitaries, establish the stage as a space for dialogue, within traditional ceremonies, the actual graduates crossing the stage are not included in the dialogue. In fact, many institutions have “rules” that discipline graduates’ bodies, clothing, and on-stage celebrations. Nonetheless, whether or not they are allowed to speak, the graduates’ caps function as forms of speech that play at the ceremony, the graduates’ identities and histories, and the current political moment. The caps are ruptures in the dominant celebratory messages during graduation that celebrate American rugged individualism and success. They reveal the silences (Parini, 2012) around immigrant histories, the importance of family in higher education, and Chicana/Latina feminist resistance, and provide critical bridges of connection between their families and the institution. While our HSI institution supports this graduation ceremony, as evidenced by the traditional attendance of the university president and other high-ranking administrators, we recognize that not all HSI’s hold these ceremonies.

We call on HSI’s to consider organizing these celebrations as a welcoming ceremony for parents and community members who may otherwise not be comfortable in traditional graduation ceremonies that do not account for linguistic and cultural diversities. Thus, we ask for institutions to create spaces for engaging in critical dialogue around graduation and identity, and to encourage inclusivity within a normally traditional ceremony by expanding graduation protocol and “etiquette” to allow for and encourage StoryBoarding and other forms of communication on sashes and graduation gowns. As many of the caps indicate, graduation is often a collective achievement involving family, community, and ancestors. When graduates tell their stories on their caps, they are not only making a fashion statement but are insisting on the visibility of their families and histories in their educational journey and in the institution--a space

that historically has not welcomed people of color. Making family and history visible is critical in a political context in which the graduates may not feel that they have control over the anti-immigrant and anti-Latinx discourse being used to dehumanize them and their families. Decorating their caps, however, is one way of reclaiming their right to self-define.

As Chicana/Latinx commencement ceremonies continue to take place, we anticipate that the stories told on the mortarboards will continue to express critique, resistance, gratitude, and hope. We also anticipate that this work will lay the foundation for future examinations of other themes we observed, such as spirituality, gratitude, and humorous reflections on the economy and their personal finances. Finally, as Chicana researchers and faculty, we look forward to continuing to be on the privileged end of receiving these visual testimonios, created with glue guns and sequins, but born out of struggle, resilience, and collective determination.

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