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Community Resistance and Educating in an Authoritarian Climate

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Rasquache Care as a Pedagogy of Resistance in Texas Higher Education

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Abstract

This manuscript examines how educational support is reorganized under authoritarian retrenchment in U.S. public higher education. Drawing on ethnographic research with two first-generation student support programs at a public Hispanic-Serving Institution in South Texas, I argue that carework persists through rasquache practices of support under political, institutional, and material constraints. Even as anti-DEI legislation and administrative scrutiny narrowed what could be publicly said and formally sanctioned, staff and students sustained care through improvised instruction and mentoring, less visible relational support, and creative uses of limited resources. I describe these practices as *rasquache care*: forms of educational care rooted in Chicane and Mexican American traditions of making life possible with limited means while preserving dignity, trust, and collective possibility. Rasquache care shows that support is not simply and wholly suppressed by authoritarian conditions; it is reorganized through practices that are deeply ethical, material, and political. By theorizing educational care through rasquachismo and pedagogies of resistance, I contribute to scholarship on responses to authoritarianism in education, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and the political economy of public higher education.

Keywords: *First-generation college students, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, pedagogies of resistance, higher education politics, institutional care*

Rasquache Care as a Pedagogy of Resistance in Texas Higher Education

In June 2023, Texas passed Senate Bill 17, codified in Texas Education Code §51.3525, restricting a range of activities associated with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in public higher education. Soon after, the University of Texas System adopted UTS 197 to align institutional policy with the new statute. Together, these measures prohibited DEI offices, programs, trainings, hiring practices, and other initiatives associated with race- or identity-conscious equity work. More recent legislation, including Senate Bill 37, has extended state intervention into questions of curriculum, governance, and faculty authority, further intensifying struggles over ideology, communication, and power on campus. Taken together, these developments reflect more than isolated policy changes. They mark a broader authoritarian reordering of higher education in which the capacity of universities to define their missions, cultivate critical inquiry, and support historically marginalized communities is increasingly constrained (Nuñez-Janes et al., 2025; Soto-Vásquez, 2025).

The consequences of this retrenchment are both practical and symbolic. Practically, anti-DEI policy has disrupted offices, programs, and everyday institutional processes that many students relied upon for guidance, advocacy, and belonging. Symbolically, it has signaled that certain histories, identities, and forms of support are politically suspect. These effects are especially significant for first-generation college students, low-income students, immigrant students, and racially minoritized students, whose educational pathways often depend not only on formal instruction but on access to trusted relationships, informal mentoring, and navigational support within complex institutions (Leo, 2021). In this sense, what is being contested is not simply administrative structure. It is the question of what universities are for, whom they are obligated to serve, and what forms of life they help make possible.

This article examines those questions through ethnographic research with two first-generation student support programs at a public Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in South Texas. Student success work in these spaces included advising, mentoring, resource-sharing, emotional support, political discussion, and the cultivation of environments where students felt recognized and accompanied. I approach these practices as forms of care: relational and material labors through which educational life is made more possible. Yet in the context of shrinking resources, bureaucratic limits, and political scrutiny, such care rarely appeared as

stable institutional provision. Instead, it was often improvised through recycled materials, informal redistribution, coded language, mutual teaching, and the creation of welcoming spaces from what was available.

To theorize these practices, I introduce the concept of rasquache care. Rasquachismo, as theorized by Ybarra-Frausto (1989), names the aesthetic, practical, and cultural traditions of resourceful working-class Mexican and Chicane¹ communities. In the context of higher education, rasquache care is the collection of improvised, relational, and resistant practices through which educational communities sustain dignity, belonging, and possibility under conditions of scarcity and surveillance. In the programs I studied, care became rasquache when staff and students made resources stretch, quietly continued support work through less visible channels, learned from one another across formal hierarchies, and transformed ordinary office space into a site of refuge and connection. More than compensatory responses to institutional absence, these practices are active forms of pedagogical and political creativity cultivated through long histories of survival and struggle. Rasquache care is therefore a community-generated practice that enters the university through students, staff, and mentors whose ways of supporting one another are shaped by broader Chicane, Mexican American, borderlands, and first-generation histories. In this sense, the practices documented here operate within the institution while exceeding it, drawing on communal traditions of survival, mutuality, and resistance that higher education may rely on while withholding full recognition.

Following scholars who caution against nostalgic returns to liberal “normalcy,” I do not argue for the restoration of a prior DEI order as if it had been sufficient or transformative in itself (Ali, 2017; Brayboy, 2003). DEI often functioned as a partial and vulnerable institutional language for care, one that could be bureaucratized, neoliberalized, and legislated away (Arciniega, 2019; Aydarova, 2021; Urciuoli, 2016). The practices documented here suggest a different horizon. They show that educational communities have long generated forms of support that exceed official permission and that may offer more generative possibilities if recognized, protected, and materially supported (Bernal, 2002; Yosso, 2005). I argue that under contemporary authoritarian conditions in South Texas, care does not disappear; it is

¹ I use Chicane as a gender-expansive term whose -e ending is easily pronounced in Spanish and avoids a reproduction of binary gender. In terms of meaning, Chicane names a particular cultural and political formation shaped by Mexican American history and descent, family histories of migration from Mexico, bilingual schooling, and life in the South Texas borderlands.

reorganized through rasquache practices of making do, strategic discretion, reciprocal pedagogy, and space-making that illuminate how higher education might learn from traditions it has too often marginalized.

Conceptual Framing

Chicana-Feminist Perspective

My work is grounded in a Chicana-feminist theoretical perspective that centers forms of knowledge, pedagogy, and social insight often marginalized within mainstream educational research. Chicana-feminist scholars have long challenged the assumption that legitimate knowledge is produced primarily through dominant institutional channels, Eurocentric epistemologies, or formally sanctioned expertise. Instead, they direct attention to the ways historically subordinated communities generate theory through everyday life, collective struggle, embodied experience, and practices of survival. Such a perspective is especially useful in educational contexts, where the histories, languages, and lived realities of Students of Color have frequently been devalued, misrecognized, or excluded from what counts as academic knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

A Chicana-feminist orientation also expands where we look for pedagogy and who we understand as pedagogical actors. Teaching and learning do not occur only in classrooms, syllabi, or official curricula. They also emerge in homes, workplaces, community spaces, advising offices, student lounges, and informal conversations where people share strategies, interpret power, and cultivate one another's capacities (Bernal, et al., 2006). Pérez Huber (2017), drawing on a Chicana-feminist framework, argues that such an approach opens alternative sites of knowledge production and makes visible the pedagogies developed through the survival and subversion of patriarchy, poverty, racism, and exclusion. This reframing is particularly important for understanding student support programs, where staff, peer mentors, and students themselves routinely engage in acts of explanation, translation, affirmation, political reflection, and mutual guidance that are pedagogical in substance even when not recognized as such. This perspective therefore allows the everyday practices examined in this article to be read not as peripheral "services," but as meaningful forms of educational labor shaped by histories of inequality and by communities' own traditions of care, resistance, and world-making.

Pedagogies of Resistance

Pedagogies of resistance are the theoretical and material strategies educators use to confront structural inequities and disrupt the systems of power that sustain them (Pérez Huber, 2017). From a Chicana-feminist perspective, however, the meaning of resistance extends beyond formal critical instruction or oppositional classroom practice. It also includes the personal, collective, spiritual, and survivalist undertakings through which marginalized communities teach one another how to endure, interpret, and transform oppressive conditions (Pérez Huber, 2017).

This expanded understanding is especially relevant in the current political moment. Chicane and Mexican American struggles have long treated education as a central terrain of contestation because schools and universities are deeply implicated in the reproduction of hierarchy as well as the possibility of social transformation (Elenes, 1997). Contemporary attacks on higher education, curricular autonomy, and equity initiatives underscore that education remains a crucial site in which power is organized and challenged. What is under dispute is not only policy, but whose histories matter, whose knowledge counts, and what kinds of futures educational institutions, such as HSIs, should cultivate.

Pedagogies of resistance do not refer only to explicitly activist curricula or dramatic acts of protest. They also include the quieter and more ordinary practices through which people create critical dialogue, circulate practical knowledge, affirm marginalized identities, and make room for more livable possibilities within constrained institutions. I further explore these practices in later sections and conceptualize them as *rasquache care*.

Politics of Care

Across philosophy, anthropology, geography, and education, care is an analytic tool for understanding how people sustain one another, especially in unstable and unequal conditions (Manzi et al., 2024; Noddings, 2012). I approach care as the relational and material labor through which people create the conditions that make life and learning possible (Tronto, 1993; Woodly et al., 2021). Educational care includes the ordinary practices of listening, mentoring, advising, checking in, sharing resources, explaining institutional processes, and accompanying others through moments of uncertainty (Acevedo & Madrigal-García, 2018). Such practices are indispensable to student persistence, wellbeing, and the capacity to act.

Anthropological studies have shown how care is experimental, contingent, and shaped by changing needs, institutional arrangements, and material realities (Cook & Trundle, 2020; Mol et al., 2010). Care does not simply respond to preexisting problems; it also produces relations, values, and possibilities. In student support spaces, staff and peer mentors help students meet institutional benchmarks, while defining what education should provide, what kinds of people students might become, and what forms of belonging should be possible within the university.

A politics-of-care framework also requires attention to the limits of liberal and neoliberal educational logics. Critical care ethics begins from human interdependence and the conditions necessary for collective flourishing, whereas liberal traditions often privilege autonomy, independence, and abstract individuality (Bourgault & FitzGerald, 2024; Slote, 2007). In higher education, these assumptions are intensified by neoliberal ideals of merit, self-management, and individualized achievement—similar to what scholars have found in K-12 schools (Valenzuela, 1999). Support programs can thus be framed less as infrastructures of relation and accompaniment than as tools for producing self-sufficient subjects. Care ethics is valuable in part because it exposes these assumptions and reorients attention toward the dependencies, inequalities, and sustained labor that educational success actually requires.

If care is always enacted within unequal institutional conditions, the question is not simply whether care exists, but how it is reorganized when institutions provide too little material support, too little political protection, or too narrow a language for naming what care requires.

Rasquachismo

One conceptual resource for answering that question is *rasquachismo*. Associated with working-class Mexican and Chicane cultural life, *rasquachismo* names a sensibility and practice of making something from little, creating value from what is available, and refusing deficit interpretations of life under constraint. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (1989) expanded the term *rasquache*, a pejorative for lower class Mexicans, to coin *rasquachismo*, an underdog perspective rooted in resourcefulness, adaptability, and style “de abajo”:

In an environment always on the edge of coming apart (the car, the job, the toilet) things are held together with spit, grit, and *movidas*. *Movidas* are whatever coping

strategies you use to gain time, to make options to retain hope. Rasquachismo is a compendium of all the movidas deployed in immediate, day- to- day living. Resilience and resourcefulness spring from making do with what's at hand (*hacer rendir las cosas*). This utilization of available resources makes for hybridization, juxtaposition, and integration. Rasquachismo is a sensibility attuned to mixtures and confluence. Communion is preferred over purity (p. 86).

Rasquachismo emerges where resources are scarce, institutional support is unreliable, and people must rely on ingenuity, recombination, humor, and collective effort to make life workable. It is a creative mode of world-making forged in relation to material circumstance. What appears from dominant perspectives as lack or disorder may instead reflect strategy, aesthetic expression, and ethical commitment under unequal conditions. Recent scholarship extends this insight by theorizing rasquache resistance as a broader set of practices through which marginalized communities navigate exclusion, create space for themselves, and generate possibilities not anticipated by dominant institutions (Mendoza Aviña 2016; Mendoza Aviña & Morales, 2024).

In South Texas, this history of “Juan Crow” contextualizes present attacks on Chicane education. Juan Crow was a racialized educational order in which Mexican American students’ language, presence, and belonging were disciplined through segregation, curricular stratification, and the treatment of Spanish as deficiency (Delaney, 2023). In such contexts, continuing to speak Spanish in educational spaces could itself be understood as a fugitive educational act. In the present context, where the borders of acceptable American identity and cultural membership are ever dependent on ethnoracial markers (Flores-Gonzalez, 2017), the fugitive practices of campus actors within South Texas HSIs reflect a living history of achieving political belonging through a legacy of persistence.

I build on these traditions through the concept of rasquache care. Rasquache care names care practices shaped by scarcity, improvisation, reuse, redistribution, and culturally grounded relational labor under conditions of institutional abandonment or constraint. It directs attention to how educational support is often sustained not through ideal infrastructures, but through making do with what is at hand: stretching budgets, repurposing materials, informally sharing resources, creating welcoming atmospheres from modest means, and mobilizing collective knowledge where formal systems fall short. Rasquache care is both

material and moral. It concerns how people assemble the resources necessary to support one another while refusing the idea that educational care requires institutional or state design, sponsorship, and legitimacy.

Methods

This article draws from ethnographic research with two first-generation student support programs at a public HSI in South Texas during a period of political retrenchment, institutional uncertainty, and intensifying debates over equity in higher education. The broader project examines how care practices within public universities mediate shifting political-economic pressures and shape the experiences, identities, and possibilities available to first-generation college students. The analysis presented here focuses specifically on how care was reorganized under conditions of scarcity, surveillance, and policy hostility. All identifying details related to specific offices, programs, and individuals are omitted.

Positionality

My analysis is shaped by my positionality as an alumna of a public four-year HSI in a Mexican American cultural center in Texas, as well as a second-generation immigrant and college student from the Texas borderlands. I approached this work as a “marginal native” (Mir, 2009), or a part-insider, part-outsider who negotiates the responsibilities of researcher, educator, mentor, community member, and friend while remaining attentive to the differences among my experiences and those of the students, peer mentors, and staff whose practices I analyze.

Data and Analysis

My findings draw from two primary sources of qualitative data. First, I conducted participant observation within the shared office and lounge space used by the two programs, where I observed everyday interactions among students, peer mentors, and staff. This space functioned simultaneously as a workplace, advising site, social environment, and informal learning setting. Second, I draw from approximately 10 pláticas with student workers and staff affiliated with the case study programs, including both facilitated 45-minute conversations semi-guided by three to five major questions and spontaneous office-based discussions that emerged organically during participant observation. Pláticas are collaborative, conversational discussions

organized around one or more guiding themes in which participants shape the direction of dialogue, and the researcher participates relationally rather than maintaining rigid distance. During pláticas, my role shifted between observer, listener, and participant as dialogue progressed, with particular attention to reciprocal vulnerability when participants shared personal and politically risky reflections. As a Chicana-feminist methodological practice, plática treats knowledge as co-constructed through dialogue, experience, and mutual reflection rather than extracted from participants as static information (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Ayala Chávez, 2025). These methods are particularly appropriate for studying rasquache care because the analyzed practices are informal, relational, and embedded in ordinary and everyday routines. Fieldnotes and plática transcripts were analyzed using initial and emergent codes (Elliot 2018). In the following sections, I describe three dimensions of rasquache care: making do, fugitive and reciprocal pedagogies, and space-making.

Findings

Making Do

The clearest examples of rasquache care in the fieldsite were instances where staff and students would *hacer rendir las cosas*—make limited resources stretch farther than they were designed to go. In the programs I studied, support work regularly depended on modest budgets, uncertain funding streams, donated materials, leftovers from past initiatives, and the willingness of staff and student workers to creatively redistribute what was available. Rather than accepting scarcity as a reason care could not be offered, participants repeatedly treated scarcity as a problem to be worked on collectively. This is a central feature of *rasquachismo*: not the celebration of deprivation itself, but the refusal to let deprivation determine the limits of care (Ybarra-Frausto, 1989; Mendoza Aviña & Morales, 2024).

One of the clearest examples that emerged during preparations for orientation for one of the scholarship programs was peer mentors wanting to assemble welcome backpacks for incoming first-gen students filled with swag, supplies, and information. The problem was that the office did not possess enough of any one thing. There were too few matching backpacks, uneven quantities of shirts, pens, pencils, notepads, and flyers, and no central reserve from which to draw a full set of materials. What followed was effectively a “scavenger hunt” across campus. Staff and peer mentors searched their own office for usable leftovers, walked the

hallways asking other departments for extra pens and flyers, and relied on a personal connection to an inventory employee to locate the final two backpacks needed to complete the set. In the end, the incoming students received gifts that were equal but mosaic: the same amount and type of items, but not the same exact brands, colors, or combinations. Some had different shirts, some differently colored flyers, some differently branded pens or notebooks. However, each student received a recognizable welcome gift that signaled they had been anticipated and were worthy of care.

The assembled gifts were pieced together from institutional leftovers and informal networks, yet they were not experienced by participants as embarrassing substitutes for the “real” thing. Rather, the process of assembling them became part of the care itself. Peer mentors discussed what first-year students would need, which flyers were important, which offices might have useful extras, and how to ensure that every student received something balanced and welcoming. In that sense, the backpacks were both material objects and condensed forms of relational labor. They made visible a practical ethic of “making do” that refused to let institutional insufficiency become the measure of what first-gen students deserved.

Importantly, these practices should not be romanticized as evidence that scarcity is productive or that underfunding can be solved through goodwill. Rasquache care emerges because formal infrastructures are insufficient, not because insufficiency is desirable. Yet the presence of such practices reveals capacities bureaucratic institutions often overlook: practicality, flexibility, and collective commitment generated from below. What dominant managerial frameworks might classify as informal workarounds or inefficiencies can also be understood as educational labor that maintains dignity and possibility.

Fugitive, Reciprocal Pedagogies

Rasquache care also operated through fugitive strategies: covert, adaptive, and strategically invisible practices in response to political surveillance (Caldas, 2021; Givens, 2021). In the wake of anti-DEI legislation and related institutional uncertainty, faculty and staff lamented not only the loss of positions, projects, funding or language, but a heightened sense that certain topics, commitments, or forms of advocacy had become risky to name directly.

Under such conditions, care was reorganized through discretion requiring trust and reciprocity. Within the semi-private, semi-public office shared by the two first-generation programs, this often took shape through routine pláticas among students, peer mentors, and, at times, full-time staff. Some were formally facilitated discussions aligned with Chicana-feminist methodological commitments to dialogic and co-constructed knowledge (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Ayala Chávez, 2025). Most, however, emerged organically during participant observation. For example, someone mentioned a new policy, a national headline, or a campus rumor, and conversation unfolded immediately. Participants jokingly referred to these exchanges as therapy sessions, planning meetings, and podcasts. Beneath the humor, these conversations functioned as collective sensemaking spaces where participants interpreted shifting political developments, checked one another's understanding, shared affective responses, and considered what might still be possible in their own lives and in the world around them.

The peer mentor training process offers a particularly clear example. All peer mentors within my case study programs, as well as other student workers across the institution, complete this training at least once a year. I observed the emergence of an 'official' and 'unofficial' peer mentor training. Following SBI7, official trainings were sterilized to remove explicit references to DEI or identity, especially racioethnic identity. Any discussions of the diversity within student categories such as "first-generation" were removed, leaving loud silences in the training that students received on how to form enduring and effective relationships with students of various backgrounds. However, the disappearance of formal language did not mean the disappearance of the underlying commitments. Instead, they moved to semi-private office pláticas, where staff and peer mentors discussed topics the formal curriculum could no longer name: the issues of politics, race, language, and identity that they must be prepared to confront within the bounds of their role as peer mentors and student staff at an HSI. For example, one plática focused on the social meanings attached to terms such as *Hispanic*, *Latina/o*, *Latine*, *Latinx*, *Mexican American*, and *Chicana/o*. Knowledge moved both ways within this exchange, with older students explaining their identification as Chicanas to their supervisor, and their supervisor explaining to younger students why he rejected the label 'Hispanic' yet still believed in the purpose of HSIs.

The emergence of these unofficial trainings in the form of office pláticas is an example of how pedagogical resistance is both defensive and productive. When one route closed, participants built others. Care remained even if its pedagogical and discursive forms shifted. Rather than treating students as passive recipients of knowledge, these exchanges positioned them as holders and creators of knowledge (Bernal, 2002) whose experiences and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) were essential to preparing one another for mentorship-care work. Unofficial training was therefore a form of reciprocal pedagogy, where learning moved laterally rather than only vertically.

Another plática in June 2025 further demonstrates these dynamics. Seated together in the shared office were three student workers and their supervisor. What began as discussion of national politics widened into conversation about colonialism, religion, racism, masculinity, gender, and the fragility of their own futures. At one point, their supervisor expressed discomfort with generalizing uses of the term ‘patriarchy.’ A senior peer mentor asked to “stay” on that topic and began referencing ideas she was reading in *Hood Feminism* by Mikki Kendall (2021). The conversation shifted into discussion of how patriarchal expectations harm women and men alike, how gender roles are socially enforced, and how all those present had navigated those pressures in their own lives. At one point, a junior peer mentor remarked, “It’s always nicer having these conversations with you guys...I can’t have these conversations with anyone else.”

Several features of this plática are analytically significant. First, teaching moved in all directions across experience and expertise. Their supervisor offered historical framing and language clarification, but students also introduced theoretical concepts, challenged assumptions, and redirected the conversation. Second, structural critique and intimate life experience were treated as inseparable. National politics, romance, race, and masculinity were not separate domains but interconnected terrains requiring collective sensemaking. Third, the conversation itself functioned as care. Participants were not only exchanging ideas; they were creating a space where anxiety, frustration, and vulnerability could be held communally. Diego’s closing comment that it felt like “a great therapy session” captured this fusion of reflection and emotional support.

Pláticas as adaptive fugitive acts show how educational actors improvise in order to preserve commitments they understood as ethically nonnegotiable. Although staff and student

workers often recognized and critiqued these strategies as forms of overcompliance forced by the political moment, they also reaffirmed their necessity. What hostile political actors might interpret as impermissible DEI training or instruction was experienced internally as care, reflection, and practical strategy. A conversation that began with collective frustration could end with someone joking, “Well, that was a great therapy session,” while another ended with plans to carpool on the way to vote. In these moments, *pláticas* carried commitments further than formal institutional language could. They preserved trust, strengthened relationships, and transformed ordinary conversation into a resource for action under constraint.

Space-Making and Belonging

Finally, peer mentors enacted *rasquache* care by creating a sense of home in the office through decoration, hosting, and collective making. This was especially pronounced during the holiday season, when the office became a site where first-year students—many of them away from home for the first time—could gather, study, eat, and participate in seasonal rituals. Much of this environment was built from what might otherwise be dismissed as old, tacky, or disposable. Decorations for Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas were often years or decades old. They were in classic colors rather than the annually changing aesthetics of retail stores. Items were reused repeatedly, supplemented with things brought from home, and combined with low-cost or handmade additions.

When I began fieldwork in January 2024, a Christmas tree was still standing in the office. The office supervisor had purchased an artificial tree at the peer mentors’ request, and they had decorated it, placed Secret Santa gifts beneath it, and hosted potlucks and group study events around it. The tree remained up for months because students, peer mentors, and their supervisor liked what its presence did for the room. Especially for first-year students, it made the office feel less like a bureaucratic campus unit and more like a place one could linger, gather, and belong. Eventually, however, a campus administrator noticed the tree through the office window, came upstairs, and told the supervisor that it was too late in the year to have it up, that it looked tacky and lazy, and that it poorly represented the college. The tree was taken down that year, but the episode lingered. Peer mentors took the criticism personally. In subsequent holiday seasons, they displayed the tree again anyway, jokingly asking whether their decorations were tacky and “*chafas*” (cheap).

By the following Christmas, the peer mentors expanded these efforts by deciding that the office should also have a fireplace. None of them, all from South Texas and most from the Rio Grande Valley, came from homes that required a fireplace in winter, but the fireplace signaled something they associated with holiday warmth and domestic festivity. They fashioned one from cardboard boxes, old cotton webbing left over from Halloween decorations, colored paper, and glitter. When they realized they needed more cardboard, they asked their supervisor if he had boxes. After being scolded for having recently thrown some away, he promised to find more by asking another office on campus. I left for a conference one Wednesday, and when I returned on Monday, a full cardboard fireplace was displayed on the wall. The cardboard had been carved and colored to resemble brick. The cotton webbing had been glittered into a makeshift snow. One student brought in small red stockings. We dug out gold tacky glue—which quickly became “chafas glue”—and staff and students passing through the office wrote their names on stockings before a peer mentor attached them to the fireplace. The result was bright, cartoony, handmade, and, for all intents and purposes, perfect.

These scenes reveal creativity under scarcity as well as pride in forms that others might dismiss as cheap, excessive, messy, or unsophisticated. These were not polished or institutional aesthetics. They were what might be called scrappy, haphazard, excessive. However, they created a sense of home and agency, and students were protective of that. When an administrator visited the office to criticize their decorations as “tacky,” the critique was not just about style. It was about whose aesthetics and place-making count as legitimate. By continuing to decorate, reuse, and create, all the while making light of unwelcome critiques, the students asserted an alternative standard of value. Although physically and fiscally marginal within the institution, they maintain a space of their own. Therefore, more than just improvisation, *rasquache* care is a political-aesthetic practice in which people transform “not enough” into “good enough.” It refuses the idea that limited resources determine the limits of care. It refuses the idea that caring is about cures and not experimenting, crafting, and sustaining what one can.

Discussion

Anti-DEI legislation, intensified state oversight, and broader political hostility have disrupted programs, narrowed institutional language, and generated chilling effects across higher education. I have detailed, through participant observation and *plática* data, how this led to

improvised, relational, and resistant forms of support that persisted through scarcity, state surveillance, and institutional marginality. Across the case study programs, staff and students “wiggled together,” to borrow Sara Ahmed’s (2014) metaphor, in order to create more room within their constraints. When escape from external pressure or oppression is unlikely or impossible, wiggling together illustrates the creation of livable possibilities within those conditions (Ahmed, 2014). In this case, wiggle room took the form of hallway scavenging, informal help-seeking, reliance on personal ties, and the collective assembly of enough materials to produce a meaningful welcome. The same is true of how the office was transformed into a site for alternative education, *pláticas*, home-making, and belonging. They all reflect disparate strategies through which minoritized subjects survive, confront, and transform the university as they know it. Rasquachismo names this particular mode of making room: one rooted in the racioethnic and classed sensibilities of South Texas, in Chicane and Mexican American traditions of making do, and in a first-gen program environment where belonging often must be built with whatever is available.

Such practices are deeply vernacular. In South Texas, educational care is shaped by longer histories of racialization, language policing, and material disenfranchisement, refracted through first-generation educational trajectories and the lived complexities of *Latinidad* in borderlands and Tejano contexts. Authoritarian backlash often works by flattening such histories into abstract, generic threats like “woke,” “radical,” “overly political,” or “controversial.” On the other hand, participants’ commitments were tied to historically specific experiences of moving through educational institutions as people whose language, histories and forms of belonging have long been treated as excessive, suspect or deficient. In this context, identity talk, regionally meaningful labels, and culturally grounded forms of mutual recognition acquired pedagogical significance. Rasquache care is therefore more than culturally specific support. Its practice depends on local histories and social relations, and it preserves collective memory, political intelligibility, and ways of relating that sanitized institutional categories cannot contain.

Rasquachismo provides a productive framework for understanding how educators respond to authoritarianism, as rasquache care directly counters the expectation that equity will simply disappear under authoritarianism. Instead, rasquache care practices are forms of relational and material resilience that persist beyond institutional authorization or ideal

resources. They emerge within and resist sociopolitical contradictions where Chicane students and staff are simultaneously celebrated as diverse subjects, targeted through policy and enforcement, relied upon for institutional legitimacy of the HSI, and now constrained in how they can exist and speak. Within these contradictions, fugitive and rasquache practices of care become ways of navigating, surviving, and reworking political life. We stitch together what is heterogeneous and messy, taking realities that stand at odds and making them work in the service of making life more bearable in the meantime. As survivalist practices, they are material, ethical, aesthetic, and politically rooted in practical life through style, creativity, and form, and shaped by relations of power.

This has important implications for how we understand ‘servingness’ within HSIs and related institutions. Servingness scholarship has pushed HSIs beyond enrollment-based designation, symbolic branding, and compliance frameworks toward attention to the organizational structures, practices, and outcomes through which institutions actually serve Latine and Chicane students (García et al., 2019). Understandings of servingness also emerge through the spaces, structures, and encounters of everyday campus life (García & Zaragoza, 2020). It is also racialized, shaped by institutional practices that can flatten Latine difference and reproduce exclusion even in spaces formally organized around Hispanic-serving missions (Vega et al., 2022). Rasquache care expands this conversation by showing that servingness is also enacted through informal, vernacular, and relational practices that may not appear in compliance frameworks but nevertheless sustain students’ belonging, agency, and political intelligibility. For HSIs in a post-DEI policy environment, the practical implication is that institutional mission cannot be measured only through designation, outcomes, or formal programs; it must also include whether institutions recognize and materially protect the community-rooted care practices through which many students are actually served. The volatility of recent years demonstrates the limits of relying solely on forms of legitimacy that can be legislated away. The urgent question for a post-DEI era is how institutions will recognize, protect, and materially support the decentralized practices that have long sustained marginalized students despite institutional neglect.

Conclusion

I have argued that educational support under contemporary authoritarian conditions is best understood through the language of care, pedagogies of resistance, and rasquache practice. At a public HSI in South Texas, anti-DEI retrenchment, austerity, and political pressure changed the conditions under which those commitments had to be enacted. I name these reorganized practices rasquache care: forms of support grounded in improvisation, redistribution, discretion, reciprocal pedagogy, and place-making. These practices emerged from students, staff, and mentors drawing on long histories of making life possible—and better—with limited means.

Rasquache care offers a way to think about the future of equity in higher education beyond vulnerable and non-transformative bureaucratic arrangements alone. Rather than focusing efforts on retrieving the failed framework of DEI, institutions, especially HSIs and other minority-serving institutions, should ask what they can learn from the practices that persist outside of institutional and state sanction. Through ongoing critical and interdisciplinary education research, the results might produce what Albán (2013) called re-existence, where legacies of improvisation inform genuine systemic transformation and turn surviving into thriving. Recognizing, protecting, and materially supporting these practices—rasquache caring practices—will be essential to surviving the current political moment and to developing more livable and more equitable educational futures.

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